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Disclaimer: I do not support the idea that angels of light need to be redeemed, nor can fallen angels be redeemed. This book is a work of fiction, and should be taken that way.

Chas Funderburg

PREFACE

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.” *Even angels long to look into these things.* (1st Peter 1: 10-12 NIV)

Although angels never separate from the Father in Heaven, this story examines what might happen if one did. For an angel, being in the good graces and presence of the father is taken for granted. But one angel, Ever Vigilant became curious what redemption might be like. What she doesn't realize is that redemption requires that you are human, and must partake of the grace and mercy of the Father and voluntarily ask Jesus to be your Lord and Savior. (John 3:16-18). It is this very fact that keeps her from realizing her own redemption. She must undergo much frustration and sadness before she is broken and realizes what she must do to gain redemption.

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ONE

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7TH, 2007, EARTH TIME

Nefarious Liar smiled with delight as he convinced the poor man that he should kill himself. “After all,” he said, “you’ve been caught embezzling from the company you’ve worked for over twenty years. Worse, your wife found out that you have engaged in several affairs with younger women.” The man hung his head, and pulled a gun out of the desk drawer.

However, A creature of The Light approached, her glory brightening up the unseen world in the dark, winter night. He looked up, snarled as she closed in on him. “You need to stay out of my business, accursed creature of The Light, or I’ll take pleasure in watching you die,” he said, brandishing his sword. Ever Vigilant just watched: no expression on her face, not blinking, saying nothing. As the demon got within striking distance, the demon’s sword rose, ready to strike. Before the demon’s sword had moved an inch, a sliver blur flashed and cut him in pieces from top to

bottom, his remains turning into a bubbling green goo, and eventually disintegrating into smoke, which soon disappeared. "Shame, really," she said, foe vanquished. "It would be nice to be challenged every once in a while."

Turning to the man, she appeared as a woman, and said, "Taking your life won't solve anything. You're taking a permanent solution to temporary problem. Take your punishment...you'll be better off in the long run. You might even be touched by The Lord of Life."

"Who are you?" the man asked, incredulous.

"Just a friend," she answered, and disappeared from sight.

She entered Operations Central with all eyes fixed upon her, strides confident, back ramrod straight. The Colonel approached, looked directly in her eyes, which stared dispassionately back into his. He saluted smartly. "General Ever Vigilant, Ma'am: To Lord Yehovah be the Glory."

A salute answered his, followed by, "For ever and ever," then she walked away. He did not move his hand or his body until she had walked past him. Out of sight of the junior officer, she smiled to herself. Michael had always drilled it into her. Keep them on their toes at all times. Demand their respect. They didn't call her 'Steely Blue-Eyes' for nothing.

The swords on her sides gleamed as she walked into a training room where some plebeian angels practiced their defensive moves. Unnoticed, two plebes suddenly found two silver blurs ripping their swords out of both of their hands. The plebes' swords flew out of their hands before they knew what had hit them, and stuck in the

ceiling. They turned around to see their attacker, but before they could get a meaningful glimpse, two hands and two feet knocked the wind out of them, and pinned them to the floor – one with each foot. Astride the both of them: one male and one female, and confident they wouldn't move again, she carefully stepped off them, put her swords back in their sheaths, and said, "Always be on your guard, plebes. The minions of Lucifer don't fight fair." Never once did a smile appear on her face.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8TH, EARTH TIME

The Holy Spirit told Evie news of an upcoming military operation to murder a group of saints in Bamaru, near Kabul, Afghanistan. This called for an investigation of the perpetrators of this brutality. Flying to the military compound, she landed in the commanding officer's office, listening, but not speaking. The commander, Colonel Al-Hosaam stared out the window into the central courtyard of the small military compound in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Troops of the Holy Jihad strolled towards their various destinations, dressed in the green and grey Camo worn by such soldiers in this region. Most of the higher-ranking officers or non-commissioned officers wore the forest-green berets of the Afghan National Army.

Watching both with curiosity and revulsion, she observed the conversation between the commanding officer and his soon arriving junior officer. Captain Akbar hastily walked to his commanding officer's office, and reported in. Standing at attention with his hand over his heart, he shouted, "May the holy war prevail!" The commander returned the

salute, and beckoned him towards the chair facing his desk. "Praise be to Allah for the Holy War. Yes. Come in and sit down."

The junior officer obeyed.

"Captain Akbar. Are all the prisoners fed their daily ration of bread and water?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have we been keeping an eye out for enemy troops infiltrating our country, to attack our soldiers?"

"Sir, we have been patrolling all the borders, and have dispatched several men in every major city. No enemy troops to account for, thus far."

So, tell me Captain, what have you and your surveillance team discovered?"

He got right to the point. "Colonel Al-Hosaam, sir, it is as we have suspected. A group of religious insurrectionists hold meetings every week on the night of Al-Khamis at the house of their leader, a certain Yusuf Gholam. They have adopted the western religion of Christianity. We must deal with this uprising swiftly and decisively. I only await your order, Colonel."

The cold, calculated malice in the hearts of these men made her cringe. Blind anger towards all who didn't agree with their ideology emanated strongly from both men. She felt her righteous indignation arise in her; it took everything in her not to slash both of these men and the demons watching them to pieces.

A small blood vessel ticked underneath the commander's left eye; his face turned purple, then contorted as he rose to his feet, shaking his fists at the air. "We must crush these infidels!" The commander's gaze turned to his subordinate officer.

"First, gather the names and addresses of every member of this group. Then, put together a team of your best commandos, make an early morning raid on every member

of these vermin and have them eliminated. Not one...I repeat, not one of them must escape death; the Jihad must prevail. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes sir; very clear, sir."

"You are dismissed, Captain. Do not fail me."

Akbar quickly got up from his chair, put his right fist over his heart, and said, "May the Holy War prevail."

Heels turned Akbar's body towards the door, and carried him out of the office. Having heard enough, Evie flew back towards New Jerusalem, anger aroused, all the more determined to put an end the evil that emanated from this men.

As she sat in her room, she pondered recent events. The state of evil and the hell in the world was rampant. It hadn't really changed over the millennia, and to her, nothing was new with the human condition. Now, somehow, it overwhelmed her, and the heaviness and sadness she felt continued to weigh down on her. It dragged her down to such an emotional low, she started crying, which eventually turned to sobs. So heavy was her sadness that her tears continued for a long while.

Finally, rubbing the tears from her eyes and face, she came to herself, and stopped. In spite of the sadness that the evil in the world caused her, she realized that the Father had always had a plan to intervene in his good world, and set humans free from the effects of the hell that ran rampant throughout humanity.

"The love of Lord Yehovah is in them, and it's obvious that Lord Yehovah loves them. Even though they are imperfect creatures, He forgives them for their iniquities and allows them to learn from them, like the perfect Father that He is."

Resting her chin upon her hand, more thoughts of the human condition percolated in her head. “I wonder what it’s like to be loved like that: as though you were a fragile, delicate creature who has the privilege of learning about the love of the Father. It would be very interesting to experience that first hand.”

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9TH

Evie received a message from the Holy Spirit —Ruache Ha Kodesh El — having her send out a small unit to an urgent situation involving a small group of saints who were under imminent attack. As she processed what the Holy Spirit had spoken to her, she recognized that it was Yusuf Gholam and his group of faithful saints. Turning in Faroh’s direction, she said, “This should be relatively easy: no real enemy troops to worry about; just a few minor demons of lower status.”

Michael walked through the door and joined them at their conference table, smiling at the enthusiasm with which Evie always attacked her assignments.

All the necessary logistics ensued: requesting troops, briefings and disseminating intelligence took place quickly; there was little time to waste. The troops, including herself, Fierce Warrior, and eighteen other lower ranking angels gathered on the Main floor of Operations Central. Looking over them all, Ever Vigilant gave a curt and smart command. “Prepare to depart, warriors of The Lord Most High, His name be praised!” One by one, the angels departed for their destination.

The small unit from Heaven descended onto the scene. Demons flew in terror as they recognized members of Heaven's elite. Each member of the meeting that took place on the fifth night of the week suddenly had an angel with a flaming sword standing in front of his or her house. Fierce Warrior stood firmly at his post.

Ever Vigilant did the standard roll call in angel-speak. "All units report in."

Fierce Warrior replied first. "On post and ready to proceed." The other members of the angelic squadron reported in turn.

Fierce Warrior's eyes riveted themselves to one of the soldiers approaching his assigned house, maintaining a position of stealth. The soldier's Russian AEK-918 jutted out in front of him, poised and ready to shoot. A piece of paper came out of the soldier's shirt pocket, and he carefully reviewed the instructions.

"Let's see '14'...'16'...and here should be..." the soldier said to himself. He arrived at Siraq's house, and stopped in his tracks. Before him stood a very tall and brilliantly shining being, glowing like Klieg lights, with swords drawn and pointed. The bright being's voice, loud and clear, carried with it the angelic authority that demons and evil men feared.

"Take one more step, Lieutenant Khuli, and your life will be in peril," said Fierce Warrior. "You will not carry out your evil intentions against this child of the Most High. You must choose: either forsake your intentions and live, or pursue them and meet your eternal judgment."

A moment passed. "What manner of being are you, and how do you know my

name? Why should I care if I lose my life? I will be in paradise sooner to get my reward.”

“You need only know that I stand in the way of your evil intentions, and you will be in Hell, not paradise. If you don't believe me, take another step.”

Khuli did not come any closer: his fierce stare faded. He hesitated, and then cursed as he turned tail and ran.

Fierce Warrior smiled, and went to rendezvous with the others.

She stood in front of the house, invisible to the human eye. When Akbar stood a half-meter from the front door, Ever Vigilant took on human form, and appeared to Akbar covered from head to toe, including a hijab. “Lord Yehovah...I pray that you open Akbar's eyes and show him the truth.”

He startled. Then, looking at her more closely, he said, “You're a woman, and a tall one at that!”

“Yes, my lord. I am a woman.” She bowed in deference to their customs, and said nothing more. She stood her ground and did not move.

“What you are,” Akbar added, “is in my way. Do you not understand your place, woman? Women are to serve men, and meet their every need. According to Sharia Law, I could have you stoned for this, but at the moment, I have matters that are more pressing. Now move before I make you move. Step aside or I will finish you now.” His machine gun rose until its muzzle pointed right between her eyes.

“I cannot step aside, my lord, or I would be disobeying my Lord.”

His trigger finger twitched against the trigger. Without a thought, she performed a tactic she practiced as an angel regularly. The trigger moved no more than a half of a millimeter when, in a blur of movement, she, in angelic form, jumped up, flipped over, and drove her sword right down the middle of his machine gun, severing the entire thing in two: barrel, stock, magazine, and even the bullets, leaving his finger and hands intact. She returned to her spot on the porch as the woman that had first appeared.

At first, he registered shock, as his gun fell from his hands, severed in half. Recovering, he charged at her, hands outstretched. Within two centimeters of her, she head butted him hard enough to throw him backwards from the impact. His entire body wobbled back and forth.

“You would be wise not to advance against this house and those in it.” Her face registered no emotion: just matter-of-factness and calm. *Some men just don't learn.*

He moved towards her again, jaw clenched tighter, eyebrows tightly furrowed. “Get out of my way, you insubordinate female. This is military business, and you are interfering.”

She didn't budge. Her hand pushed against his chest and held him there.

“Let me by, woman. Do you not know your place?”

“What I will do is stand in your way. My place is to stand before God Almighty without blame or fear, and to be sure you don't get away with your mission to kill these innocent people. My Lord is the One who tells me my place.”

He continued to push against her. “Move, I tell you. Let me by, woman.”

“You obviously won't listen to me. Oh well, some men only learn the hard way.” As he came within reach, her now visible sword struck his leg. He howled and cursed as he fell to the ground, holding he leg, a big knot forming in his right thigh.

“Mark my words: you overestimate your ability against mine. Your next move will ultimately result in your death.” Visions of Colonel Al-Hosaam's rage against a failed mission played vividly in her mind.

His face contorted. “I do not care. My death will be to my glory, and I will get my reward, including many concubines.”

Holy resolve filled her voice. “What you'll find, if you take one more step, is an angel who will stand in your way. So, go ahead, Akbar; I'd be more than glad to have you try to stop me. And as for your death and your glory, the only thing that will happen after you die is being thrown into the fires of Hell.”

“Angels and Hell are what you infidel creatures make up to torment the faithful. I don't believe in your Hell, nor do I believe in angels. What I do believe is that I will go to my reward should I die in battle.”

Ever Vigilant just smiled. “Very well, then. May the Lord rebuke you; you will find out now whether or not you will see your ‘reward.’ Don't take my word for it; God created you and Hell. I guess you'll just find out earlier than usual what eternal agony is really like.” She moved deliberately towards Akbar, and with angelic precision and speed, struck him on the top of his head with the broad side of her sword. This time his eyes rolled back into his head, and with an *‘unnnngh...’* he crumpled to the ground, unconscious. She sighed sadly. “Men like him should know the love of the Father. But blind hatred and years of learning that hatred stops them.” With that, she turned back into an angel, and caught up with Fierce Warrior and the rest of the team. “Okay, guys, let's head back to Operations Central for a debriefing.”

TWO

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH, EARTH TIME

Alone in her room, pondering matters in the quiet peace of her sanctum, Evie thought of humankind and how the Lord loved them greatly. All it took was to put their faith in the goodness of the Father. Such love just baffled her: the amazing grace and mercy offered to humankind perplexed her. No error was found in her, but she wondered what it would be like to be able to fail, and yet be forgiven. The idea percolated in her heart, and the longer she thought about it, the more she wanted to experience such redemption.

Evie could take it no more. She walked deliberately to the throne room, where the magnificence of Lord Yehovah made itself known in the bright colors of precious jewels and peals of thunder followed by flashes of lightening. The twenty-four elders sat on their thrones around him.

The seven spirits of God, represented as seven torches stood in front of the throne. The floor before the throne resembled a sea of glass made of crystal. The four living creatures who surrounded Lord Yehovah chanted, "Holy, holy, holy, is the

Yehovah God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" In the presence of the Holy One, she showed her deference and respect by bowing before Him. "May your servant speak, my Lord?" Immediately after, she looked the Lord directly in the face, because there was no sin in her.

"You may speak," said the Father.

"My Lord, I will fight Lucifer and his minions forever knowing that You and the Saints who love you will be victorious at the end of the Great Battle; but the devastation they cause, and the souls they mislead into Hell...well, it hurts; it has broken the heart of The Lamb and you, Father. I remember the Lamb saying to the early Jewish nation in Jerusalem, particularly the Scribes and the Pharisees:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

"The blindness of men obviously broke His heart then and does now, and it breaks mine. I know I serve you, my Lord, and you are and will be victorious forever, to the ultimate destruction of Lucifer's evil; but there are times when I just can't get the pain, suffering, and wickedness that currently infest the Earth out of my mind. Most of the souls there will end up in Hell, and that is discouraging. However, since those who have given their hearts to the Lamb will overcome, I am curious to know the redemption that is theirs, as I, being a servant of yours, have never known such a thing." Turning to the Lamb, she said, "I want to be loved as they are, even though they are flawed."

"This is an unusual matter," said The Lamb, who turned to the Father. "Excuse us while we confer with one another."

She stood in silence outside the inner Sanctum as the Holy Trinity discussed the matter.

Inside the Holy of Holies, Father and Son talked animatedly of this angel with an unusual heart. Lord Yehovah stood up and faced the other two members of the Holy Trinity.

“We must not let Ever Vigilant succumb to desiring a false god. She cannot go on coveting human nature.”

The Lamb nodded and Ruache Ha-Kodesh glowed with agreement. After a few moments, the Father spoke. “It would be better for her sake, to let her see that, as the Sons’ of Adam saying goes, ‘the grass is not always greener on the other side of the hill.’”

“I would suggest that we let her will be done,” said the Lamb. “I know the human condition best. She only sees the end-result of salvation when saints come home to heaven. She is blind to the long and painful process that leads there, and the decisions they must make in their hearts along the way. There are many things that try the souls of saints even after we have been invited to live in their hearts.”

Lord Yehovah nodded. “Yes, my Son, in whom I am well pleased, O firstborn of all the redeemed; she must know the choice, and she must see the need to make it. Only then will she know the gratefulness of the redeemed first hand; only then will she truly appreciate why your name means He Is Salvation, my son.”

Finally, as the Holy Trinity returned, The Father faced her and called her in a voice gentle, sweet, full of love, yet firm, resonating with the authority and holiness of the One making it. He smiled at her, and beckoned her to approach.

“I come, My Lord.”

Love shone from his eyes, which bore into hers – into her very soul. “I must deal directly with the issue at hand.” He spoke tenderly, a father speaking to a precious and much-loved daughter. “I have heard the desires of your heart, my child. They are a bit unusual, I must admit; but they are expected. In fact, I was wondering, since the fall of Lucifer, when one of you would be overtaken by the thoughts that have been in your heart.”

Evie's brows furrowed, and she blinked involuntarily. “Have I harbored evil in my heart against you, my Lord? If I have, I wasn't aware of it, and I truly repent.” Her tender heart swelled in her. *Boy...some warrior I am...I've blown it and let the Father down.* An angel like herself had to be strong and always aware of what went on. She hated the thought of letting the Father down. Her tears started to flow, and she buried her face in her hands. The Father held her gently in His arms.

She felt the love only a Holy Father would give.

“Do not be hard on yourself, Evie,” he told her, reassuringly. “I have found no sin in you.” ‘Evie?’ My Lord, You never address me with the name my companions call me. I must confess that I am surprised. I...I don't understand.”

“My child, you are as a daughter to me, and I love you as a Father. I also know every thought of yours, and your thoughts of late have been of your human brothers and sisters and their redemption. Since you want to know such things, I will give you

the desire of your heart, although I promise it will be full of hardship and pain. From this point forward, you will be among the humans you think about. You will not be as my son, who was at once God and Man, or will you be an angel; no, you will be completely human, and subject to all that goes along with it.”

Her feelings alternated between joy and anxiety. When her anxiety and fears subsided, she wiped the tears from her eyes. The arms of her Father comforted her, but this extraordinary turn of events perplexed her. The Father spoke bittersweet words. He had just granted her heart's desire, yet she sensed it came at a high price. She bowed before The Lord.

“I am thankful for this opportunity to discover human nature and forgiveness, and that you have found me worthy to be involved in such an undertaking. I only hope I please you in all that I do.”

The Lord did not answer, rather, just looked at her with a sober smile.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 18th, EARTH DATE

A summons also went out to Michael to come to the throne in the Holy of Holies, as soon as Evie had left. He also bowed low, in respect to the One to whom he spoke. “What do you require of your servant, my Lord?”

“Your mission, General of my Angelic Army, is to escort Evie to the Earth. You must brief her as to what it entails, and make preparations for after her arrival.”

“As my Lord bids, so shall I do.” Bowing deferentially, he flew immediately towards Evie's apartment as Lord Yehovah has requested to escort her to her new family. When he arrived at her quarters, he found The Lamb there.

“My Lord!” said Michael as he approached. Bowing respectfully, he asked, “What brings you here, if I may ask?”

A warm light shone in the eyes of The Lamb. “I have given my life for those who love me and want to be my bride forever.” His voice resonated firmly, but gently. “I wanted to encourage her before she embarks on her mission. She will know difficult times, but my love for her will guide her.” The Lamb smiled, then turned away and returned to the Throne Room.

Michael, like Gabriel, didn't totally understand why an angel would want to leave Heaven voluntarily, but obviously, Lord Yehovah, Ruache Ha-Kodesh El and The Lamb approved this, so he resigned himself to carry out his duty. Arriving at Evie's door, he knocked, awaiting her answer.

“I'll be out in a moment.” A moment later, Evie came out, and greeted him with a hug and a smile. “Good to see you, big brother.”

“Are you ready to go, little sister?” He smiled mischievously, his eyes twinkling. “I hear you want awfully bad to be demoted. Have you decided to do some slumming on a rather long-term basis?”

She laughed at him, and socked him playfully in the arm. Then her smile faded. “Michael, the enormity of this undertaking is hitting me hard. It's filled with unknowns, and I'm scared. Nothing has ever scared me before, not even the mightiest of Lucifer's demons. But this is very different” She burst into tears.

“Goodness.” This turn of events took him aback. “What in Heaven's name is going on? Didn't you volunteer for this assignment? You did volunteer, didn't you?”

Tears filled her eyes. “I've never felt this way in all my time.” Her face rested on his chest, while holding on to him.

He just held her. Evie stopped crying, wiped her eyes, and dried her nose. “I didn’t really volunteer as much as I obeyed the Father,” she said. “He knows my thoughts, and I guess He has, in a way, called my bluff. I’ve wanted to know about redemption, and now the Father is giving me a chance to experience it. Truth is, I’ve never done this before. It doesn’t seem too bad, but I’m sort of dreading what I know nothing about. I mean, yes, I have seen and observed humans a lot, but—”

“You’ve never experienced humanity first hand?” he said, finishing her thought. “Well, take courage, little sister. Truth is, most of us angels often wonder about redemption. Guess we just never had the courage to pursue that line of thinking. I’ll give you that. You’re either very brave to do such a thing or very crazy. I haven’t decided which, yet.” A warm smile went out to his little sister angel, full of love for her. “Nonetheless, our duty lies before us. We must press on.”

“I don’t even know what to think or how I’ll act. Do you have any idea what it will be like for me when I’m down there?” Evie asked.

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. You and I know a lot about humans, but I’ve never been one. If I could, I’d tell you, but I’m at a total loss.”

Discouragement darkened Evie’s features, and made Michael hurt all the more for her. “You must feel like you’re jumping off a ledge into a great black abyss. Just remember that you’ll do well at this, but you must always trust in the goodness of the Father.”

“Well, thank you for being there for me, anyway. At least I can take comfort in that.”

“I would do nothing less,” he said, holding her hands. His fingers snapped as he remembered what came to her for to begin with. “Actually, I must brief you before we go.”

Motioning her to sit down, he took a seat himself.

“You see...you're about to become human. You will remember all you have learned and known as an angel, including all your memories. However, you will have a human heart, which is subject to the curse. You'll probably find yourself thinking and acting very differently than an angel would.”

“How? And more importantly, why?”

“That, I honestly can't tell you. I've never been human nor had a human heart. I just know your heart will be human, and by inference, subject to the evil that all other human hearts are.”

“Subject to evil? I don't want to do evil, Michael. I abhor it.”

“You do now,” he said, “but you must become human to know redemption, and you must take all that comes along with being human.”

He cringed as her countenance fell yet again. “I didn't promise you this would be easy; but the Father provided a way to redemption for you in the book given to humans called ‘The Bible.’ And even when you have found this redemption, you will still live in the fallen world.”

“Sounds like a very troubled life.”

Michael blinked back tears of his own. “It is. The Lamb told humans that their lives would be filled with trouble and strife.”

“Oh Michael. I've made a big mistake. Is there no way I can back out of this ‘experience’?”

“All I know is that the Father has ordained it. You dare not disobey Him.”

His heart broke as she started crying again. It promised to be difficult for her, but

there was nothing else either of them could say or do. His strong arms held her while she cried, and her tears ran their course. "I have a few more details I need to discuss with you," he said.

"Okay," Focusing all her attention on him, hardening her face, wiping away her tears, Evie paid careful attention to what he was about to say.

"You have no history as a human, so you are going to need a few things to help you get started. First, I've set up a bank account for you to use. It's in your human name: 'Evelyn Anne Chen'. We'll have you sign all the appropriate papers when we get to Washington, D.C. I'll make sure all the appropriate parties get them. There will be \$50,000.00 in the account."

"Fifty thousand dollars? Why will I need that much money?"

"Well, you have no credit nor credit history, until you get more established you'll need to be able to buy things for yourself."

"Like what?"

"Well you'll need spending money, of course. You'll also need to be able to buy a car, which you'll have to pay cash for."

Evie winced. "A car? Must I drive? I've seen way too many accidents and deaths in those things."

Another reassuring smile went her way; strong, battle-worn hands gently held hers. "Don't worry. You'll be a good driver. I'm sure your angelic sense will come into play there."

"I'm not worried about my angelic sense; it's the other human drivers that worry me," she said, smiling dryly.

"You'll do just fine. Just ask the Lord to protect you from harm. Not to mention," he continued, "you'll need to buy some clothes. Some will be provided for

you, of course.” He smiled broadly. “I hear that women really like to buy clothes.”

“Hey now! Watch that. I’m going to be a woman, humanly speaking, that is.” A small smile re-appeared on her face, replacing a little of the apprehension and sadness.

“I see that makes you feel a little better.” His countenance brightened with hers, but it wouldn’t stay that way for long. Any misgivings remained unspoken, so as not to discourage her even more.

“I also have a list of interviews I have set up for you. I summarized your skills into a C.V., and sent them, via the agency I set up, to some places in D.C. where you’ll have a good chance of finding employment.”

“Thank you, Michael. I don’t think I would have had the patience or the ability to do all these things.”

“You’re very welcome. It’s the least your brother could do.” “I love you,” she said, holding him, and starting to tremble.

“I love you too. Now buck up, sister. You’ll be alright, I promise you.” A moment later, his fingers snapped again: another detail remembered. “One more thing. I said you’d need some spending change.” He pulled out five ten-dollar bills, and ten five-dollar bills. “This should hold you for a week or so.”

“I guess we have to go now?”

“Yes. We should get started,” he answered, gently.

“One final thing.” What he knew he must say made him wince, knowing it would hit her hard. “I’m going to have to take your swords.”

She gasped. “My swords? Not my swords! Michael, no, *please!*” Her body froze where she stood. “M...Michael,” she choked out. “My swords almost define who I am...”

The enormity of what she was going to do got to him. He swallowed hard, and held out his hand. "Yes, your swords. I'm sorry, but you're no longer an active warrior so you must relinquish them."

Her buckler slowly unfastened, and its contents went gingerly to him. "Will you at least promise to keep them in a safe place?" She paused, looking wistfully at it. "They've been like constant companions to me."

"I will, I promise." He turned and called out. "Faroh!" Faroh ran up to them, face emotionless and business-like.

"Take Evie's swords and put them in the storage room in Operations Central."

"Will do, Michael." Faroh took the swords and walked off, waving to Evie as he left.

Her hand in his, they left New Jerusalem. Evie's earthly belongings and Faroh followed closely behind. Washington D.C. slowly but surely came into view.

THREE

The darkness of the second heavens pervaded, but a wry smile brightened up the mood of the otherwise dismal surroundings. At the throne-room where he sat, in the bowels of the land devoid of light and life, Lucifer watched the proceedings with keen interest. This turn of events interested him very much indeed. Not since Lord Yehovah banished him from Heaven were he and his minions so glad to see another angel leave Heaven. He made a visit to the First Heavens, and approached the throne of the Holy One who had once been his master. "I demand words with Lord Yehovah," he intoned, coolly.

"Let him in," came a deep, resonant voice from a much different throne room than Lucifer had just left. A condescending smile greeted all around him, while his eyes looked down at them with thinly veiled contempt.

"Very well. Say what is on your mind." Lord Yehovah spoke solemnly.

"I have tested the faith of some of your followers on earth, and they managed to come through for you, but only after I put them through extreme torment. I have

noticed one of your own wants to learn of salvation. Well, I say, when she feels the pain of emotional abandonment, she will curse you. I will see to it that she fails miserably.”

Lord Yehovah replied, “You only are allowed to do what I allow, and you have permission to test Evie. But I assure you, she will find her way.”

Lord Yehovah's eyes bored holes into his, but his arrogance ignored the warning. “Hah!” he began, “Your angel will find that she cannot overcome a formidable opponent like me. I always win against flesh—”

Lord Yehovah held up his hands and Lucifer's boasting mouth was shut. The holy power of Lord Yehovah greatly overshadowed his bravado, and challenging Him proved futile. His ultimate lot was eternal torment, but he wasn't stupid enough to tempt his fate and have it start earlier; and the Lord of Heaven and Earth was capable. Curses! I know He has authority over me...I just wish he would at least once acknowledge my strength.

“Your thoughts are selfish and arrogant, per usual, Lucifer.”

Nothing else could be done but to slink away, involuntarily holding his tongue and his thoughts.

Lucifer called for the Prince of the D.C area, one of the senior deceiver demons named Politically Correct.

“You called, Lord?” asked Politically Correct, feigning obsequiousness. He bowed, showing respect for the executive demon.

“I have a special mission for you. It seems that a certain angel of light has voluntarily decided to become part of our realm on earth. We must put forth a concerted effort into this case, and make an example of any angel stupid enough to want to find out about salvation. She must fail. See to it that she does. I want to be sure we ruin this angel.”

Gabriel hadn't done a mission like this since the announcement to Mary of the birth of the Savior. He had been told by the Holy Spirit to announce the arrival of Evie to an Asian American family in the Washington, D.C area named the Chens. Lord Yehovah treated this with equally high priority, so he obeyed. Scratching his head, the implications of this undertaking astounded him. “I've never done anything quite like this, before. I've seen Adam and Eve at The Fall; I've spoken to Daniel in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, and I've seen many battles in the Heavens and on Earth. But I've never seen an angel sent to the earth to become one of them.”

His shoulders shrugged. “You always know what you're doing, my Lord. Questioning your actions and motives is futile. Far be it from me to question what you do.”

Gracie Chen pushed herself back from the table after finishing the Sunday

dinner at her parents' house in Bethesda, a family tradition observed since she and her brother were children. Her father, Frank, her mother Sue, and her brother sat at the table with her. "Kind of miss Peter," she said, sighing, "but it's only fair to let him spend some time with his family tonight."

Her eyes wandered towards the living room. "Mom; are we done in here? We can do the dishes later, can't we?"

"Sure, honey, we can go to the living room to relax now," Sue said. "I'm all for that," Tony said.

The entire family congregated in the living room, and made comfortable conversation while the fire crackled in the fireplace and soft lights provided a warm, gently glowing ambience. A bright light in the early evening sky caught her attention. At first glance, it appeared to be a sparkling star, shining through the living room window. However, it came closer, right for their house. "Mom!

Dad! Tony! Look at this!"

She pointed out the living room window. "Do you see what I'm seeing?"

"Yes, honey, I do. It looks like a star is moving right toward us," her mother said. "I'm glad you see it too. I was worried I was seeing things."

A few moments later, a very tall, blindingly luminous being entered their living room. His presence unnerved the entire Chen family: all shook visibly and could do nothing but stare at this brilliant creature in awe, mouths agape.

"Greetings. I am Gabriel," the angel said. "Do not be afraid. I have come to bring you good news: you are to have a new daughter and sister, not a baby born to you as a member of the Chen family, but, as you say among yourselves, 'adopted.' She will appear to you in a few minutes, after your dinner. She has always been an angel, but

you will have the gracious privilege of helping her to understand humanity. She wants to understand what it means to know redemption through the Lamb of God, whom you know as Jesus the Christ. You will call her Evelyn Anne Chen, the family name being yours. Welcome her into your family.”

Gracie shook harder as he looked directly at her. “She will live with you as your roommate, so you will be primarily responsible for teaching her to be a woman who lives a life of grace and favor among human-kind.” Her mother and father just stood there, mouths agape, making no sound, still shaking and holding onto each other. Her excitement grew as she acclimated to the angel's presence. Getting up the nerve to speak, she said, “I know angels have appeared to people before, but these days, it rarely happens. This is awesome.” Curiosity getting the better of her, she rattled off questions machine-gun style. “When will she arrive? How old is she? What does she look like?

And—”

Gabriel held up his hand, smiling, and said, “Peace child. All will be revealed in good time.” He immediately left.

The appearance of the unusual visitor and his surprising news gave her pause, as she sat down hard on the couch and digested the preceding events for a few moments, while her mother and father held her close. “Wow, what do you make of that?” she asked. Her mom and dad just looked at each other, then her, and then shrugged. “I'm sure there is more to this wonderful revelation, but God will make known His purposes at the appropriate moment,” her father said.

“Tony said “Dude! Check it out: not only are we going to have a new sister, an angel announced it. Now, that's wassup!”

Thoughts turned to having a new sister made her smile. “This is awesome! I've always wanted a sister, but have had to put up with my brother all these years.” She

looked at Tony and smirked. "It will be nice to finally have the Chen women outnumber the Chen men."

"Hey. Don't be a hater. You know I've always got your back."

She hugged her brother and smiled. "Don't worry. You know I'll always love you."

Her rational self told her that she and her new sister were going to have a great time, and that she would feel very protective of her sister. Her emotional self finally understood the answer to a long unfulfilled longing in her heart, and the happiness overwhelmed her. Not able to hold back her emotions any longer, tears of joy started to run down her face.

"What's wrong honey?" her father asked.

Memories of all those times in her life when he had comforted her before rushed into her mind: when she fell off her bike at six; when she lost her favorite pet hamster at ten; and when she got her heart broken by her first crush at thirteen by a stuck-up boy.

"I don't know, daddy. That was an extraordinary announcement: maybe it just overwhelmed me. I guess I just realized how much I've always wanted a sister..." Her chin quivered but she forced herself to stop crying. "I'm very happy; it's like a big hole in me has been filled."

Her mother hugged her. "Honey, I know you're excited. You told me when you were just a little girl that you wanted a sister. Now you have something to hope for. In fact, we all do. This is a very exciting turn of events in our lives." A special bond that only a mother and daughter knew flowed between them: one that her father and brother would never experience, at least not with the same depth.

Evie arrived with Michael in a government building where the CIA kept their fleet of cars.

Michael had changed to human form. Before her now stood a young “agent” in his early thirties with a serious ‘all business’ demeanor. He wore a dark suit, and stood about 6’4” tall, his curly golden locks combed back. Dark designer sunglasses wrapped around his eyes, concealing them from view.

The requisite earpiece protruded from his ear; a weapon required of any operative assigned to a dignitary, or in her case, a person under government protection, rested firmly in the holster that hung around his shoulders.

They went to the dispatch office at the end of a long hall on the first floor.

Michael spoke to the agent in a curt, efficient manner. “Agent Angelo, processing out the witness protection case.”

The dispatch officer looked up briefly, acknowledging the request of a Senior Agent, then turned back to his computer, and issued a command to print the orders for her release.

Michael carefully perused the bank of mailboxes behind the dispatch officer’s desk. “I have an envelope in 1421.”

The dispatcher got up, moved slowly but with practiced precision, retrieved his envelope from the box, and handed it to him.

“Okay, these are the papers I told you you’d need to sign.”

He handed them to her. “Just sign next to the red ‘X’s’ I have marked.”

She signed the papers, put them back in the envelope, and handed it back to

him. "Thanks. I'll get these taken care of."

She blushed, as Michael looked at her, sizing her up as though she were one of those pretty, human women that human men ogled. Then she blushed even harder, when she realized that this was her big brother about whom she had just thought such things.

"Well, apparently you are a young woman of Asian descent. You have the requisite jet-black hair and almond-shaped eyes. The only thing unusual is that they are blue-green, instead of the normal brown, and that at 6'2", you're much taller than most Asian women. But that's alright: you're an unusual woman." A small smile appeared as his eyes twinkled.

She wore a very business-like dark blue skirt suit, with matching navy pumps, heels and all, looking like one conducting government business. "Thanks for the nice suit, Michael. At least I look smart and very businesslike." Sunglasses adorned her eyes, not only to make her appear a CIA agent, but more importantly to hide her still-red eyes from the tears she had cried; not to mention the distinct possibility she might break into tears again. Calling upon her military training, her back went ramrod straight, her throat cleared, and she walked tall next to Michael, not allowing her emotions to get the better of her again.

Michael walked up to the dispatch desk. The dispatcher shoved the papers in front of Michael. "Just sign here and you're clear to go," he said, not looking up from his work. Michael made short work of signing all the papers where his signature was needed.

Evie followed Michael into the garage. They walked down a long row of Government Issue black cars of several makes. Eventually Michael stopped in front of

an unmarked, black Ford Crown Victoria, and perused the license plate. "Yes. This would be the one. Let's get your belongings put in and be on our way." Her luggage stowed in the trunk, she climbed into the back seat, as Michael drove out of the garage, took a left at 17th street and headed north, eventually ending up on Wisconsin Avenue.

Being human felt...well, rather finite, for lack of a better word. Although she had seen and touched before as an angel, her five senses now perceived in an entirely different way. Earthly smells were distinctly different from anything one might experience in heaven: rustic and heavy, but not altogether bad. Even through her tinted windows, the late afternoon sunlight felt bright and warm through the car windows. She rolled down the windows to get some fresh air in the car and counter the car's suffocating stuffiness.

November in D.C. produced cool, crisp days and even cooler evenings. She could feel the chill in the breeze, even under the overcoat. Although she had seen many different places on the earth, including Washington, she experienced everything with a newfound wonder; like a child, she took in all the sights around her with awe.

Almost immediately, the once nearby presence of the Holy Trinity seemed far away. The feeling was barely perceptible, like a small hole in her heart, as though she just lost all who were dear to her, like an abandoned orphan. Heaven had just left her on someone else's doorstep.

Evie continued to take in the world from human eyes as Michael proceeded up Wisconsin Avenue. After travelling through a few neighborhood streets, they arrived at Frank and Susan Chen's house in Bethesda, Maryland. Evie got out, took a deep

breath, fought back her nervousness and walked to the door. Michael followed behind her with her bags. Arriving at the front steps, Michael put the bags down and waited by the car. Walking up to the front door, she knocked, waiting for someone to answer. A few seconds later, a young woman opened the door, smiled at her, and put her out her hand in greeting.

“Hi, Evelyn,” she said. “Welcome to our family. It’s great to meet you in person. I’m Gracie Chen. Let me take you into the house while Tony gets your luggage.”

“I guess Tony’s your brother?” she asked.

“Yes, he is. But don’t let that discourage you.” Gracie grinned, while her eyes wandered in the direction of Michael. “Who is *he*?” An approving stare, and a friendly wave were proffered in the direction of Evie’s angel commander, followed by a whisper in Evie’s ear. “He’s hot!”

Gracie’s expression puzzled her. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure I understand what you mean. I’m not sure how someone can be hot on a cold November day.”

“He’s cute.” Gracie spoke so as not to be overheard.

As Gracie’s face turned red, she turned her glance in Michael’s direction, not understanding why Gracie found him attractive. “Michael?” She smiled, soon understanding Gracie’s interest. “I guess I’ve never thought of him that way. He’s like a brother to me, and his job was to bring me here – oh, and call me Evie.”

“Michael?” Gracie said, questioning. “I do remember an angel appearing to us a couple of days ago named Gabriel. He blew me away; angels like him don’t show up at your doorstep every day. Wait...He’s not...*the* Michael...you know, the *archangel* Michael?”

No answer came from Evie; instead, Gracie got a knowing smile, eyes twinkling. She chuckled softly as she watched Gracie trying desperately to save face in front of the archangel she had just met. Michael waved amiably at Gracie. Gracie waved back and muttered under her breath. "Oh my gracious; this is embarrassing on a cosmic scale; literally."

Michael turned to leave. "It was nice meeting you, Gracie. Give my regards to your family. I don't mean to be rude, but I have pressing business."

As the enormity of what she was about to undergo hit her, Evie ran to Michael and held onto him. "Michael," she sobbed, "please take me back home...this is all a terrible mistake." Convulsions of sadness and fear made her cry, shaking, shoulders heaving. Michael continued holding her until her emotions subsided.

"Take courage, my intrepid human sister. You'll do fine. Just buck up and attack this as you would have attacked any mission set before you." He gave Evie a brotherly kiss on the forehead. "The Lord be with you!"

Evie summoned all her strength and, determined not to cry again, managed a smile. "...and with you as well!" Michael drove away in the Crown Vic, and disappeared around a corner. All her suitcases firmly in hand, Tony brought up the rear following her as she and her new brother and sister walked up to the house, enormous by angelic standards. It and all the other residences on the street in this neighborhood were far larger than any abode in New Jerusalem.

Sue Chen, Gracie's mother walked towards her and held her. "Sweetheart, I know this must be difficult for you: I can't even imagine what I'd do if I were in your shoes. But just know that we love you and are always here for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Chen. I need comforting right now."

"You have it," said Sue. "And call me Mom." Smiling, Sue walked back into

the house.

From the corner of her eye, Gracie approached. "Mom, Dad and Tony are cleaning up after our Sunday dinner. I was elected to be your tour guide."

"Thank you, Gracie. I wanted to look around, anyway. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Follow me, and I'll give you the fifty cent tour."

"Sure: I'd like it if you showed me around."

"Now, I haven't lived here in a while, but lots of my childhood belongings are still here." Grace led her to a bedroom. "This is my old bedroom." Gracie looked thoughtful. "This brings back memories. I've spent many of my twenty-seven years in this room. Boy does time fly!"

Pictures on the walls of the bedroom showed Gracie and her family over the span of several years. As she looked at Gracie's old bed, what looked like a small animal, only lifeless, lay there. "What's that?" she said, pointing to the toy.

"Oh, that's my old stuffed animal, 'Bertie' the bear. I've had him since I was a little girl. It's sort of a sentimental keepsake. I guess you don't have any such things in Heaven, do you?"

"No, I don't." Evie thought it rather unusual, even odd – but interesting to keep a small, anthropomorphism of a bear as a keepsake. She had never really had a childhood, so Gracie's human-like bear seemed something only a child could appreciate. "When I was a new angel, I had to learn the protocol of angelic duty: regular worship of Lord Yehovah, and since I'm...err, *was* a warrior, combat tactics. But nothing like what human children do." She felt wistfully sad as she realized that she was never young and full of innocent wonder. "Were you happy as a child?"

"Yes, for the most part. I certainly was when I first got old Bertie here." Gracie

picked up the toy, and held it, smiling happily. Playfully manipulating the bear, she held it in her hands, pretending to make it walk. "This brings back many happy childhood memories, Evie. I sort of miss those days..." Her voice trailed off.

"I imagine it must have been nice to be a child with no worries or stress, and imaginary friends like your Bertie." A forlorn expression darkened her features.

"Are you all right?" Gracie asked.

"I...I'm fine," Evie managed to get out. "It's another thing that makes me sad: being human and starting at a later point in life. I regret what I've missed." She stopped and smiled at Gracie. "I'm okay now. Let's keep going. This is actually quite interesting."

The family dinner dishes finished, Sue Chen led her to the living room, focusing her eyes on Evie. Well, Evelyn...or do you prefer 'Evie'?"

"Evie will be just fine, seeing as how you are my family now." She smiled graciously.

Sue returned her smile. "Oh good: I like 'Evie;' it sounds much friendlier. Anyway, another tradition in the Chen family, aside from our Sunday gatherings, is to give all family members a Chinese name. We need to come up with one for you."

"I could help you with that," she said, happy to contribute to her new family. "I am fluent in every language, Chinese being one of them."

"My, that's incredible. How'd you manage that?"

Evie tried to be matter-of-fact. "I've learned them over the course of human history. I can speak in any language that suits the purpose, and do it very well, including, of course, English."

"It'll come in handy, especially here in D.C. where there are many people from all over the world. Let me see, we need a name meaning 'Blessed One.' Ideas,

anyone?"

Evie spoke up right away, almost out of reflex. "That would be 'Tian Tang Zhi Ai'" or 'Tian Ai' for short: they literally mean 'Heavenly Loved.' The significance of those words hit her almost as soon as the words had left her lips. Her throat tightened, and she fought back the sadness.

"Are you okay, Evie?" Gracie asked.

She fought to compose herself. "Yes...yes. Guess I was just feeling a little homesick."

"I know, sweetie, I know. After what you have been through, I don't blame you at all. But the name is lovely: very touching and appropriate."

Evie appreciated Gracie's understanding of her plight. However, she still couldn't keep the doubts and fears she felt from showing on her face. Her new mother's gentle smile consoled her somewhat.

"The next thing we need to do is get you settled in Gracie's condominium in D.C. She needs a roommate and -- well, God has graciously sent you."

Gracie enthusiastically added, "You'll like living in the District: it's right in the middle of the action, and you're never far from something interesting to do. I have your room all set up. I think you'll like it. 'Course, you can always change it if you have other preferences."

"Oh, I think I'll trust your good judgment." She was unsure if she had any preferences. She certainly didn't know what "good taste" was, exactly; at least not like humans perceived it. Her condominium in Heaven was typical of all angels' abodes: lots of room to sit and talk with other angels and saints, and minimal decorations. Sure, it was beautiful, but in a simple way. The Father had made them from precious mineral

and gems, yet they were uncluttered and functional, which suited her just fine.

The first evening with her new family ended well. The real adventure of living on earth would soon begin: she would live with her new adopted sister. Having always lived by herself, the thought made her a little claustrophobic, but she held her feelings inside, not wanting to offend Gracie on the first day they met. She followed Gracie with her suitcases, and they piled into Gracie's new Honda Accord to head downtown to the condominium.

As the Metro View complex grew near, Gracie touched the remote on her visor and the gate to the garage opened up, leading them up to the second level, where the car came to rest in its designated spot. Her suitcases came swiftly out of Gracie's trunk, and they took the elevator up the sixth floor. She followed Gracie down a long hallway, and they finally stopped in front of a door with '618' on it.

"This is my apartment. Come on in." Gracie beamed as she followed her inside.

She had to admit she had never seen such a layout. "Gracie, this is a really nice condo. I think I'll enjoy living here."

"I'm glad you like it. At least I've made a favorable first impression on you."

"You have. I'm really impressed at your flair for decorating a house."

"Well, it's home, and I'm glad you're my new roommate. This will be fun."

The girls rounded up Evie's things, and took them to her bedroom. Her very enthusiastic sister required a great deal of acclimation on her part. A bit overly enthusiastic, but she would learn how to cope with all the determination she could muster.

“Say, Gracie, do you have something for a headache?”

“Sure. Are you all right?”

“Yes. I think I'm in sensory overload. I'm experiencing many new things, and I'm trying to absorb them without my head exploding. Unfortunately, I'm not doing well in that department.”

FOUR

Evie finished unpacking her new belongings, and lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. The cool, darkness of the room and the quiet soothed. Aching temples throbbed; relief only came from closing her eyes and hoping no further stimulation or conversations would occur.

As Grace walked towards her room, she didn't give her sister eye contact, hoping she would take the hint and leave her alone.

Gracie's altogether too perky voice shattered the quiet. "Hey. There you are,"

She could feel her headache returning, but steeled herself and graciously looked up.

Gracie plopped herself down on the bed next to her. "Hi...hey, move over so I can join you."

Sighing, she obliged.

"Now, excuse my getting real personal all at once, but I'm really perplexed...why would you, being an angel, who stands before the throne of God, and

even sees Jesus face to face, want to become human?"

Gracie's question contained no malice, but the words touched raw emotions. Evie felt them rising again. Tears started falling, and all the pain she had kept at bay returned. "I'm not going to lie to you, Gracie." Her chin began to quiver. "I think I've made a big mistake. I'm scared. I feel like the Father and the Holy Spirit have left me to fend for myself." Her voice choked as she faced heavenward. "I thought you loved me. How could you abandon me like this, Father?" Her words accused the One who had just recently hugged her and held her in His arms. "I feel so empty...so alone. I don't understand..." Words stopped as tears continued to fall down her face.

"Oh, Evie," Gracie said, coming over to her and hugging her gently. "I can only imagine how scared you must feel. I don't understand why you wanted to live among humans so badly, but I do remember Gabriel saying that you wanted to find out what 'redemption' means."

Gracie's compassion helped her to find her composure. "Yes. My curiosity about redemption started this crazy journey. I wanted to know what it's like to experience it for myself, firsthand. I guess I should be careful for what I wish." She managed a weak smile.

"Well, my dearest sister Evelyn Anne Chen — I suspect you'll find out soon enough. I will say, however, that the thing that makes our redemption necessary is our hearts. Jeremiah said, *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?'* Even those of us with the best of intentions constantly find ourselves needing to ask for forgiveness. I understand all too well what Paul meant when he said he felt like a living contradiction. He wanted to do what is good, but his heart was full of evil."

She had to let that one sink in a little bit before she answered with a sigh. "Oh dear. That sounds a little scary. Now I'm really afraid of going through with this. I'm not sure where I stand with The Father, The Lamb or Ruache Ha-Kodesh -- whom I think you call the 'Holy Spirit.' I don't know how the Lamb expects me to be thankful when He ignores me. It hurts my feelings. What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, I guess you'll just have to trust that God and Jesus really do love you."

The nagging thoughts in her mind needed to stop. Gracie had just deflected all the doubts she had raised, and her answers all came from the Letter to Mankind. Being human was frustrating enough: she found it a little maddening to feel like she didn't quite measure up somehow. The humanity she had observed for a long time, now intimidated her. Since Gracie had mentioned how wicked the human heart could be, she asked, "Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you did the wrong thing?"

"Oh my, yes. I've done many things I'm not proud of." Her new sister's visage turned sad as her voice trailed off. "Boy...you just brought up some painful memories from my past." Gracie paused a few moments, looked down and became quiet. "I didn't exactly act like a saint in college. Let's just say my relationships with guys weren't motivated by the best of intentions. I was mostly an angry young woman then; I didn't really care much about the guys I met. I just...slept with most of them. They were mostly just an evening's enjoyment...maybe more, in some cases."

Gracie's eyes glassed over. The conversation stopped for a few moments. "I'm not proud of what I did, but I can't change the past: it's my reality," she said, blinking back tears. "Don't sell yourself cheap like that, Evie. You'll bear the scars for the rest of your life. Even now anger hinders my relationships."

"Oh dear. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to cause you pain. Are you all right?"

“Yes. I’m okay. I just need to gather myself.” Gracie collected herself, and once again turned her eyes to Evie.

“No offense, but I certainly hope I won’t do anything like that. It makes my skin crawl to think of someone using me.” She paused, trying carefully to choose her next words. “So, what made you want to sleep with boys like that?”

Gracie’s sad eyes turned down again. “I tried to make boys the answer to my problems: I thought I was ugly, nerdy, and dorky -- you name it. I was the obedient older daughter, who always did what her parents expected of her. I guess I sort of rebelled -- a lot.”

This perplexed her. “I’m not sure I understand. I thought being obedient and responsible is what we should do.” Her remark caused Gracie to look away for a moment, blinking back more tears. She felt a little guilty, although she wasn’t exactly sure why.

Gracie emotionally continued. “It is a good thing; there’s nothing wrong with obedience or being responsible at all. I, unfortunately, had to find that out the hard way. I tried to be what I really wasn’t, and it bit me. Bad.”

“Did some guy hurt you, Gracie?” It was her turn to feel compassion, realizing her questions dug up pain for Gracie, whose eyes welled with tears, and whose arms hung limply. Righteous indignation again arose in the one who abhorred evil. The poor thing looked helpless, like her. *See? Your situation can’t be that bad.* Tender arms held Gracie, and hugged her gently, while Gracie’s tears fell on her blouse.

Gracie’s words choked. “Boy. I guess sometimes, it hits you hard, like it was yesterday. I haven’t thought about Brian in a while.” Gracie sat still and silent, while tears fell. Gracie’s emotions eventually subsided. “He and I dated for a year,” Gracie

finally said. "I thought we had a serious relationship, only to find him sleeping with someone else; no explanation, no reason. He just cast me aside like an afterthought. I guess what hurts the worst is that he acted like what we had meant absolutely nothing."

Gracie's hurt expression bothered her. People using each other appalled her, and made her angry for her sister's sake. Her angelic warrior sensibilities aroused. "Why do men do things like that? It's so cold-blooded; so...so callous." Her hands instinctively reached to her side for her swords, then stopped abruptly when she realized they were no longer there.

"What are you doing?"

She smiled sheepishly. "I was reaching for my swords. I guess I instinctively feel the need for them when I hear of people doing awful things like that. I guess I was going after your Brian like I would have when I was...well, in my former life."

"Oh. You still feel your angelic instincts?"

"Yes. Sorry." It reminded her of her former self and her current state. She fought off the sadness.

"Oh, no. I'm sorry. I know you're still adjusting to being human." Gracie held her hands after wiping the tears from her eyes. "Buck up, kiddo; I know it will take some adjusting, but you'll do well, I'm sure."

"Thanks."

Gracie's countenance brightened. "You'll soon meet my boyfriend, Peter. He is everything I've always wanted: a gentleman who is kind and supportive; he lets me 'be me.' He's worth all the pain and the loneliness I went through."

"So when do I get to meet your Prince Charming?" she said, grinning.

Gracie laughed. "You'll meet Peter shortly. In the meantime, I'll be here to guide you through life's ups and downs." Grinning wryly, she added, "You may find

that to be both a blessing and a curse.”

“Why a curse? You wouldn't purposefully make my life miserable, would you?” She involuntarily pulled away, crossing her arms in front of her.

Gracie laughed again. “Oh no, sweetie. I won't willingly make your life difficult; but in case you hadn't guessed by now, I'm not perfect either. I'm sure your journey won't be easy for either of us. But hey: I'm looking forward to it. Are you with me, sis?”

“Well, at least with you as my new sister I won't be entirely alone on this journey. That's comforting, considering what I've been through today.”

“By the way; how old are you?”

“Michael told me I am twenty-five years old, by human standards. And my birthday is November 14th,” since it's the day I was called to join humanity.

“I'm twenty-seven. In fact, I just had my birthday November 2nd.”

“Oh. Really? Well, happy belated birthday.”

“Thank you. Anyway, this is going to be fun. Now I'll have someone to go shopping and girl-talk with. My...our brother Tony is nice and all, but he's a guy. You'll understand soon enough how guys and girls differ. I'll leave that to you as your homework.”

The clock on the wall in the kitchen chimed eleven times. “Wow. Tomorrow is a workday.

I've got to go to bed.”

“Yes, and I've got to get a job. I definitely want to pay my way.”

“Yep, we both have busy days tomorrow.” Gracie, headed for her bedroom, and turned around just before her door. “I'll leave you to getting yourself organized.

Towels and linens are in the linen closet in your bathroom. If you need anything, just holler. I'll leave my cell phone number on the island in the kitchen, in case you need to get hold of me. Good night, Evie, and welcome to the family. I love you, and am glad you're my sister...couldn't have asked for better."

A hug from her new sister made her feel better. "Good night, Gracie," she said, and went to her bedroom, alone with her thoughts. Sitting alone in her new room, she pondered the recent turn of events. She was now human and it scared her. She was away from the direct presence of the holy Trinity, and subject to the curse that had been pronounced on the world. Soon thereafter, she heard a gunshot in the street below, and jumped, immediately looking out the window. "Oh my...this is bad..." She left her bedroom to investigate. As she walked towards the door, Gracie's eyes peered out from her room, and asked, "Where are you going at this time of night?"

"I heard a gunshot, and I want to find out what's going on."

"Oh...that happens quite often: I've kinda gotten used to it."

Evie's eyes shot open wide. "You've gotten used to it? A person has probably been murdered and you're 'used to it'?" She said no more, but turned and ran out of the apartment and into the street, where lights from police cars and EMT vans blinked and flashed. She ran up to an officer just outside the crime scene and asked, "Was anyone injured?"

"The victim is dead, ma'am," the officer replied. "...died almost immediately from internal bleeding. The perp has been arrested and is being taken to headquarters for arraignment."

Looking at the nearby ambulance, a stretcher contained the still body of the victim, whose eyes had been closed. The person's spirit had obviously left. Seeing death up close and personally, and realizing she was just as human, started to shake

without being able to control it, immediately followed by a sick feeling in her stomach. The queasiness soon caused her to vomit.

Overwhelmed, she started crying, and ran back to the apartment. Once inside the door, Grace asked her, "Are you alright, honey?"

"No, I'm not. I'm sickened by the sight of what I just saw."

"I'm sure it was gruesome, but unfortunately, it happens all the time."

"I don't like being human. Life is a precarious thing. You can die, and possibly go to Hell at any moment."

"I know honey; I know. But you'll see that you can't always prevent such things. But you can know the Lord, and even if you die a violent death, you'll be with the Lord."

Shaking, and tears streaming down her face, she spat out, "I don't want to die a violent death. I want to be an angel again," then ran to her room. "Abba, please...take me back. This is very frightening, and I've never seen it before with human eyes. I'm scared." But no answer came, and her tears continued to flow. Finally exhausted, the lights on her nightstand went off, and she got up, and changed into her nightclothes. Yawning in spite of herself, she lay down on the bed, and finally fell asleep.

The dark spirit observed all that had transpired, grinning with malevolence. "Oh, yes, earthbound angel. Soon this will be your fate." The demon slithered away, tentacles undulating on her head, greenish gray skin covered in tentacles shimmering as she walked. Her razor-sharp claws on both hands and feet, would have ripped the

cement apart wherever they landed, but she floated, higher and higher and headed back to the realm of the second heavens, where darkness and evil permeated all and everything that dwelt there.

FIVE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15TH

Adnan “Andy” Farooqi walked down the corridor toward the chief’s office. In front of the door, he knocked and a voice beckoned him in. As he poked his head in the door, he answered, deadpan. “Hello sir. To what do I owe the pleasure of your summons?”

Chief Brent Wilders a CIA veteran of 25 years, with the last five in Internal Affairs Division, rolled his eyes. I.A.D. was not a popular job, but Wilders showed the same grit and determination at this job as he had in all his other posts. Whatever this case may entail, Wilders would handle it efficiently and with aplomb.

“Sit down, Andy. And by the way, you don’t have to kiss up with me.” He grinned, and then gestured toward the chair on the other side of his desk. “We seem to

have a problem with a rogue agent. No one is sure of his name, but he usually goes by 'Angelo.'

Wilders shifted in his chair, took a sip of his coffee, and continued. "He has no record with us or any other agency -- sort of a mystery man. The problem is we can't have someone in the Agency operating on his own. He could be a real security breach. We've had visual sightings of him in several countries, including here in D.C., but he never registers on any video camera. No one has been able to decipher this. To make a long story short, we need you to head up a special ops team to smoke this Angelo out. We gotta rein him in before he causes some major damage to the security of our operations, and probably throughout the world."

"I'll put together some of the best investigative staff we have available, and get right on this, sir," he said.

"Good. Intel tells me that he was last seen escorting a witness protection case to a family in Bethesda: An 'Evelyn Chen.' We've had her under surveillance since then. We're setting you up for a clandestine interview with her and her adoptive sister, Grace Chen tomorrow. This 'Evelyn Chen' was the last one to know of his whereabouts. See if you can't get her to divulge some info, even if means bringing her in for questioning."

Farooqi jotted down some notes, and looked up at his superior officer. "This sounds like that case I've heard about for a few years. How much latitude do I have in this op?"

Wilders replied tersely. "Just do whatever you need to do. Angelo is a security threat."

Michael watched the entire silly affair and laughed to himself. “Humans are so clever, yet they haven’t a clue. They will do all they can to ‘rescue me from myself’ but it is they who really need the rescuing. O foolish sons of man – if you would only seek after truth and righteousness.” With that, he crossed back through the gates into New Jerusalem.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19TH

Evie woke up the next morning at seven. Covers flew off her, legs flew over the side of the bed while her mouth yawned and her body stretched. Shivering from the chill in the air and the cold, hard floor, she put on a bathrobe and some slippers and ambled into the kitchen area.

Gracie ate some cereal, yogurt, and orange juice for breakfast, seated on one of the kitchen stools. “Good morning! How are you feeling today? Is your headache better? Are you okay about the shooting?”

The day’s previous events had proven emotionally exhausting, and she had just slept as if she someone had drugged her. It struck her as odd that she slept as she did. She had never slept before. She stretched again, trying to loosen the effects of slumber. “My headache is gone, but the shooting still bothers me,” she answered groggily. “I guess I’ll just have to process living in this evil world.” Looking back at Gracie, she asked, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Gracie replied.

“Well, I have an interview at the International Language Institute later this morning, so I’ll need to take the subway to the DuPont Circle station. She looked towards the heavens. “Michael – thank you, big brother – set it up, and gave me some spending change. He set up a few more interviews as well, so I’ll need to do my homework, and figure out where all these places are on one of those map sites on the Internet.”

“Hey! I have an idea,” Gracie said. “Why don’t we meet for lunch when you’re done with your interview: say about 12:30?”

“Sounds good,” she answered.

At 12:30, Evie walked up to the Kramer Books and Afterward Café. The menu on the window next to the door looked full of tasty dishes. The menu’s fare made her stomach rumble, so she walked in and perused the premises for her sister, who sat in a corner to her left. As she approached the table, her sister got up, gave her a hug, and they both sat down. Feeling a little less overwhelmed than yesterday, she started the conversation. “Hi. How’s it going?”

“Good. Here’s the menu. Take a look and see what you want to order.”

As she perused the menu, Gracie inquired, “So...how’d the job interview go?”

“It went real well. They were impressed with the fact that I know so many languages, and that I can act as a translator as well. Interestingly enough, there’s a position they were trying to fill.

Someone left a month ago, and the Institute needed desperately to fill the position. I seem to have come at just the right time. They want me to start tomorrow.”

“That’s great...nothing short of a miracle. God is really looking out for you!”

This revelation upset her. On one level, she knew Gracie was right; but The Father still felt distant, like a famous personality that everyone knows about, but only a few have access too. She smiled gamely and answered, "Yeah."

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20TH

Evie walked out of her last class, and blew out a long, slow breath. "This has been an interesting day," she thought to herself. She walked to the break room, and looked around. Not yet knowing anyone who worked her except for the Director of the Institute, and the HR person, who blathered on for a long time about benefits, she went to a table in the corner, where an older woman sat, dressed very properly, having a dignified air. The woman looked friendly enough, so she asked, "May I sit here?"

"Sure. Make yourself at home." "Thanks."

Evie sat and tried to make conversation. She held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Evie. What's your name?"

The woman took her hand and replied, "I'm Velma. Is this your first day here?" "Yes. How long have you worked here?"

"Gosh...going on twenty years; but I still love it."

"Really?" Evie said, popping a cracker into her mouth. "What do you love about it?"

"Oh, the satisfaction of knowing that someone is learning to be a part of a new society, and learning the language is the first step."

Evie pondered those words for a moment. "They do seem real eager to learn; in

fact, most of them are very bright. I admire them for being willing to adapt to a whole new way of life, starting with learning another language.” The irony hit her hard. Quietly, she looked down at her crackers, feeling the burning in her eyes as the homesickness hit her again. She forced the tears back down, and calmed herself.

“You okay, Evie?”

She looked up at Velma, and forced a smile. “Yes. I’m fine. I think I understand how they feel. I’ve only been here in D.C. a couple of days myself; I feel just as much an outsider as my students. I’m learning like they are about this new city and culture.”

“Well, if you’re from another country, you don’t speak with an accent.”

Evie thought fast, not wanting to slip up and talk about her past as an angel.

“Well, I was born in America, and my Father was American, so I learned English as my first language. My parents were missionaries to China, so I have spoken English and Chinese nearly all my life.”

“And you came to this country to teach English? I would think you would be teaching Mandarin.”

Evie managed a smile. “Ironic, isn’t it?” She let the conversation with Velma lag as she finished her crackers. Turning to Velma, smiling, she said, “Nice meeting you Velma. Hope to see you again.” She got up, went back to her office to gather up her belongings and leave for the day.

Velma looked at Evie with contempt as she walked away. She had been at the institute for twenty years, and done well. Yet, these young things with their looks and

their wiles seem to want to run us older teachers over. “I’ll make sure to be in her way before she gets a chance to cozy up with the boss, and take away my job. I can just hear it now: ‘Velma, you’ve done an outstanding job here at the Institute, but we must make room for others who want to make this their career.’” She could just imagine the spiel about severance pay, and ‘golden parachutes,’ and the pleasure of being retired. “I don’t want to retire until I’m ready. Well, Miss Evie: you’ve met your match. You’d better step real carefully, ‘cause Velma Quarantillo will not roll over and play dead.”

As she headed for the Metro station, she tried not to let the life that was now laid out before her overwhelm her. Father, help me in this journey I am undertaking. I know it won’t be easy, but at least hold me while I walk. Let me know you are there...*please.*”

Some very attentive ears were listening in the Throne Room. “I can certainly see to that,” Lord Yehovah said. “It is good she sees the need for some help. Now I am waiting for her to recognize the deeper need.”

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 21ST

Carlo sat in the break room, sipping on green tea, and munching a huge blueberry muffin. He looked up from his muffin and his papers and took in this drop-dead gorgeous Asian woman: tall and shapely, with long, jet-black hair cascading down her entire back.

“May I join you?” she asked, smiling engagingly.

Those blue-green eyes really caught his attention. They really stood out against her raven hair. His rational mind abandoned him for a few moments. The realization hit that he had been staring at her and broke him out of his stupor; she smiled at him in a charming sort of way.

“May I sit at this table?” she asked again, grinning. The realization hit him that she had just asked him a question, and he was too busy ogling her to notice.

“Oh...uhh...Hi...uhh...sure.

Please...have a seat,” he managed to stammer out. *Rats!* He felt like he was in junior high again, at that awkward stage where you just learned you liked girls. Whoever she was, she caught him totally off guard. It also didn't help that most of the female teachers at the institute were mostly your plain- Jane brainiacs who, although professionally dressed and coiffed, and pleasant and friendly, didn't exactly make him take a second look -- until now. He put out his hand, offering a handshake.

“I'm Carlo...Carlo Bocelli” he said, gaining enough composure to introduce himself. “And you?”

She took his hand. “Evelyn Chen...but call me Evie. What do you do here at the Institute?” “I'm a teacher and member of the Administrative Staff. I not only teach some of the classes, but I make up the curriculum, and help define and refine school policy. It can be tedious, but I enjoy it. How 'bout you?”

She smiled. "I just started as a teacher yesterday. I teach several ESOL classes."

She paused, looking thoughtful. "'Carlo'...is that Italian?"

"Yes. My father is third generation Italian American. Mom is French by way of Argentina, where her family moved shortly after World War II. She grew up speaking not only French, but Spanish, and a little German, since there were many German refugees there from the war as well." Not wanting to prattle endlessly, his focus returned to those captivating blue-green eyes. "What's your family's background?"

"My family is similar. My father is American and my mother is French and Chinese." The conversation went on effortlessly for the entire lunch break. "Oh dear. My lunch hour is over. In fact, I'm late," Evie noted, looking at her watch.

"You're right; I need to be getting back, too," he said. "See you later...and nice meeting you. I've enjoyed talking to you!" He watched her walk away, admiring the view. That was the bonus; she was very easy to talk to as well. *This job is definitely looking up.*

SIX

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23RD

Her first Thanksgiving with her family at her parents' house on Thursday done, Evie arose at an insanely early hour, joined the throngs of other crazy shoppers, and sniffed out sales and bargains like any red-blooded American woman on 'Black Friday'. Once she finished her Christmas shopping, she wrapped all her presents and put them away for the upcoming Holiday.

Finished putting the final present deep in the back of her closet, she walked over to her bed, plopped herself down, and stared blankly at the walls. The challenge and the newness of her experiences in humanity were wearing off. She sighed heavily as she turned to face the wall. "There must be more than this. This is almost discouraging. One day turns into another and another and another..." The lump in her throat became tighter. She couldn't shake the melancholy, which slowly enveloped her like a fog, and pressed in until she almost couldn't breathe.

Dinner done, and the last dish put away, Evie joined her sister in the living room. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

"First, I want to say I really appreciate your helping me buy new clothes"

"Oh you're welcome."

"They're all really cool, and you've rescued me from my lack of fashion sense."

She grinned. "You all are a really neat family."

"Honey, we're honored to have been chosen to be your human family. Now come here and give me a hug."

She complied happily, and enjoyed the warmth of their embrace. "But what was the question you wanted to ask me?" Gracie asked.

"Well, human life seems a bit mundane so far. I mean, you go to work and come home, eat dinner, perhaps hang out with friends, and start the whole process over every day." Evie sighed with frustration as her shoulders shrugged. "And you try to cram as much activity as you can on the weekends: chores, errands, and perhaps some time with friends." She chuckled at the irony. "Then you start it all over the next week."

"Yes, that's our life, pretty much." Gracie paused a few moments, and then locked eyes with hers. "There are things we do for fun, but the cruel reality of this life is that it's mostly a mind-numbingly boring, day-to-day grind. It's just one of the hazards of living on this fallen planet."

"I'm sure you're right. I just wish I didn't feel so restless." She stared into space as if trying to catch sight of something exciting to do. "When I was in Heaven, I

was a warrior who fought the enemy and served the Lord. I'm used to an intense life. This is a big adjustment for me. It has its moments, but I'm beginning to go stir crazy."

"Sorry, but I can't make your life any more interesting or exciting. It is as it is; and you *did* volunteer for this, didn't you?"

Her frustration vented unprompted. "Yes, I did, and I want to go home. I can't take this anymore."

"But Evie, you just got here, and I love you. You're hurting my feelings."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry, but I'm not here for you. I'm here to learn a lesson," she said, bitterly. "And apparently you're part of that lesson."

"Hey! Come on!" Gracie said, her face turning emotionless, starting to get upset. "Don't make me responsible for your happiness, or any decisions you made while you were an angel. I'm your sister, not God."

Now she felt bad. "I'm sorry. I'm whining like a big baby, instead of making the best of it."

"Yes, you are. And being mean to me about it only makes it worse." Gracie's terse look shot back at her.

Evie looked down in shame and shook her head sadly. "I...I'm giving up too easily on the Father. I know He trusted me with this undertaking because He knew I could handle it."

"Yes, He did. He knew you could handle it and so do I. But don't whine; it discourages me."

Evie felt even worse. Being discouraged was bad enough, but disheartening Gracie added guilt to her already bleak mood. "I'm being very selfish, Gracie, and it's not fair to you. Please forgive me." Shame filled her last words. "I'm trying to adjust to

this life, but it's hard sometimes.”

“It's okay, Evie. Don't beat yourself up. You'll get better at it, I promise you.”

“I believe you.” she replied, smiling weakly.

“Now, I promised you we'd go car shopping, so what do you say we go first thing tomorrow?”

“Sure. That sounds great!”

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29TH

Virtue Destroyer watched her charge, this plebe human and former angel struggling with her humanity, and was pleased with the results thus far. “Yes...she is bored, so I suggested she read romance novels. That should take her eyes off her precious Lord Yehovah. If you're going to get taken off track, the best way is to get you false notions of what love really means.”

But for a dark pall that hung over her like a thunder cloud that no wind moved, she had the attributes of an attractive woman, albeit in a tarty way. Her overexposed body resembled that of a street-walker; a tube top that was very short, undersized pants that climbed too far up her legs, and a bare midriff; by the standards of the testosterone-driven of our species, attractive. Ironically, her body now bore a grayish pallor, shriveled and tinged with sickly green undertones. Her dark, sunken eyes reflected the evil that had consumed them for so long. Even her voice sounded coarse and raspy, eaten away over the years by the venom of hatred that flowed throughout her icy veins. But the greyish pallor to her skin brought home the reality that this member of the feminine gender did not lead souls astray appealing to men or sleeping with them,

although she had indulged a few times. Sons of Adam were good for some temporary pleasure; she got more satisfaction twisting their thoughts and minds.

Her eyes, closed to slits, burned with hatred for their subject; they sneered at the former angel. Cackling to herself, she looked on with satisfaction at Evie's subtle undoing. "Hah! Your resolve is slipping and your pride is doing well to undo you, I see. I'll make sure you keep thinking that a relationship with Lord Yehovah is what you already have, and you have no need to making the Lamb your Lord. Oh yes, girlie. I'd be more than willing to show you what it feels like to think that the only thing worthwhile on this accursed planet is the pursuit of pleasure, status, money and happiness. She licked her lips, her black heart beating with anticipation of undoing Evie.

"Also, I'll do my best to lie to you and your sister about a real relationship with Lord Yehovah, especially since you're so susceptible to suggestion. I'll convince you that you need not pray about the troubles you're going through, and that Lord Yehovah doesn't really care. And believe you me, I'm going to make sure you think like every other young person these days." Another twisted thought went through her mind. "Yes...yes-s-s-s. Perhaps you should find your sister's boyfriend Peter attractive. Now wouldn't that be delicious? Oh yes. I'll have to work on that..."

Satisfied with her work, Virtue Destroyer -- VD to her fellow dark angels -- turned heel and sashayed away, grinning with malevolence, and cackling to herself

A few days later, Evie sat in the living room with Gracie, who was reading a

romance novel; it only made her want to find out about romance for herself. She stared off into space, thoughts of some handsome man coming into her life and becoming enamored of her. She absent-mindedly drummed her fingers on the side table while she thought.

Gracie looked up from her book, eyebrows furrowed. "Evie! Goodness, girl. Will you stop tapping your fingers on the table? Can you find something to do that's not so distracting?"

"Oh. Sorry." She smiled nervously, and turned her head away from her sister. She tried to think of something else to do. "I've got it," she thought to herself. She went to her room, took out the two Samurai swords she had bought earlier as a reminder of her warrior days. She practiced some of her old warrior moves, feinting, spinning and thrusting.

"Evie!"

She stopped, and saw Gracie standing in her doorway, shaking her head, holding her hands to her heart. "You could run someone through with those swords. Don't you think using those things in the house is dangerous? Someone could get hurt...like me."

Evie sighed. "I don't know what else to do with myself. I've got all sorts of energy, and nothing to do with it."

"Why don't you go out and meet some of your friends. Just go out and do something." She paused, pleading with her eyes. "Just get out of the house and burn off some of your nervous energy. I swear you're about to explode."

She thought for a moment. "Yeah, I s'pose I could call Carlo." She went to her bedroom, picked up her cell phone and began dialing.

"Hey, Carlo. You want to hang out or something?"

"Sorry Evie. I'd really like to, but I have to get some curriculum finished

tonight. Can I take a rain check, though?"

Evie looked at the floor, disappointed. "Sure Carlo. That'd be fun. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She wasn't keen on hanging out with her brother Tony. He was nice and all, but she wasn't as much into the hip-hop scene as he was. She shuddered at the thought of trying to keep up with his strange vernacular. She liked it, but she didn't understand it. Honestly, he acted a bit young for her tastes. All chances of human interaction exhausted, she finally decided to take her laptop and head down to the coffee shop on the first floor of the condominium complex. The various things one could do in D.C. all came up on a website that presented the reader with all the options. The only thing that interested her was an ad for dancing lessons. However, in order to dance, she would need a partner, and she had none right now, so sighing, she decided to walk to the small bohemian restaurant at the bottom of the building, and grab a nosh and a drink of tea.

Unbeknownst to her, a tall man of Middle Eastern persuasion came in and sat discreetly at a table a little way away from her. He started taking notes, and cast an occasional glance her way.

Oblivious to her observer, and done with her nosh, she finished reading some of the political literature in the bookstore and headed back to the apartment. She walked into the kitchen to make herself another cup of tea. A book named, 'My Summer Flirtation' sat in Gracie's lap, who sat on the couch.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"Oh, just a romance novel. I'm a sucker for them. One of my guilty pleasures, you might say."

Evie blinked in disbelief. "Why would you want to read about romance, when

you are already involved in one with your boyfriend, Peter?"

"Oh, Peter and I are fine. I just like reading about lovers being romantic."

"Well, I still don't understand, but if it satisfies you to do so, then do what you must."

Michael smiled at the efforts of Agent Farooqi watching Evie. "It's almost unfair. I greatly outwit him, and can overpower him at any time. Not to mention I'm not bound by time and space." He studied Agent Farooqi keeping surveillance on Evie, watching her go to her condominium, and recording something into his digital recorder, then turned and walked in his direction.

After only a few feet, Michael took on human form and stood directly in front of him, saying nothing, but observing him closely. He wore dark clothing and a trench coat. Agent Farooqi stopped just before he bumped into him. "Do you really want to know more about Evie and her sister Gracie?"

"Who are you?"

"Agent Angelo. The one you've been trying to find."

"Where'd you come from? I don't remember seeing you come here."

"Don't worry about that. You haven't answered my question."

"What I want is to apprehend you. You've eluded us for a long time, and I need to bring you in: you're a threat to National, if not International Security. We haven't been able to see you on surveillance cameras, but that is not an obstacle: I'm still bringing you in for questioning." He reached for his phone.

Michael grinned at him. As if reading his thoughts, he said, "You know: calling

your office isn't necessary. I can give you any information about me you'd like, but only on one condition."

"What's that?"

He had his attention now. "Meet me at Christ Community Church this coming Sunday, a week from today."

"But..." Farooqi started to protest, but Michael had disappeared before his eyes. "How does he keep doing that? He disappears at will." Sighing, he walked towards his car.

Michael chuckled at the hapless agent, and returned to New Jerusalem.

SEVEN

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1ST

Samurai swords flashed as her body twisted and turned, a highly synchronized dance of a warrior angel. This continued for about fifteen minutes, then came to an abrupt end.

“This is boring. I need to get out of this house or I will go stir-crazy.”

She thought hard for a few moments, then decided to visit a local night-club on K street. Her swords went back on the wall; an evening outfit adorned her body, including heels on her feet.

Walking out the door, Gracie said, “Where are you going at this time of night?”

“I thought I’d go to a nightclub. It’s something to do where I can meet people, and I’m going stir crazy in this house. I can only practice my warrior moves so much before it becomes tedious.”

“Are you sure you want to go to a night club? Most young people who attend those places are not believers, and exercise pure hedonism. I’ve heard that most clubs

these days can charge you large amounts of money for table service. Do you want to spend that kind of money?"

"No. I'll just get something from the bar."

"Do you like alcohol?"

"No...it disagrees with me. I'll just order something non-alcoholic."

"Well, suit yourself. I'm not sure you'll find it an edifying experience."

"I could always stay here and work on my warrior moves with my samurai swords," she said, grinning.

"No...go ahead. Enjoy yourself."

"Besides...I'll be out of your hair."

"Oh, Evie. You don't bother me, as long as you close your door when you swing those swords around."

"No problem. Well...I'm gonna go now." "Bye."

"See you later."

Dressed, she descended on the elevator to the lobby, and hailed a ride from a transportation network cab, and about ten minutes later, arrived at her destination. Walking in, sets of bright lights that hung on the ceiling assaulted her eyes as they undulated and turned the beams all over the dance floor. Heavy drum beats and subsonic sounds pounded on her ears, and a large crowd of young people either danced or milled around with alcoholic drinks in their hands. Not having done much dancing, she walked over to the bar. Alcohol disagreed with her, so she ordered a cranberry juice with soda water. The price of such a drink astounded her: juice and soda water set her back \$10.50. She sat at the bar, nose-bombing the clientele. A short while later, a young man came up to her and sat at the bar next to her. "Do you like to dance?" he

inquired.

“I don't mind.”

“May I have the pleasure?”

“Sure. I'm Evie; what's your name?”

“I'm Calvin.” He took her hand, and led her to the dance floor. Not being familiar with the latest dance steps, she observed the other women, and imitated their steps with flawless grace.

“You dance well,” he observed. “Would you like to join my friends and I? We have table service going on.”

“Okay, Calvin.”

They walked to a table where five young people sat.

“Everyone, this is Evie.”

“Hi, Evie,” they all said in turn.

“Is this your first time here?” asked a woman named Beatrice.

“Yes. This place sure is full of energy.”

“We have vodka for our table service drink. May I get you a drink?”

“Thank you, but I'm fine with my juice and soda.”

All the eyes at the table stared at her in turn.

“Really?” said another girl named Patty. “I didn't know they served non-alcoholic drinks in this place.”

“Yes, they do, but only at the bar.”

The night went on, and several dances and juices and waters later, she decided to call it a night, seeing as it was 3:30 a.m. She picked up her purse, and said “Good bye” to all assembled. “It's been fun, but I need to go home.”

“Can I call you some time?” asked Calvin.

“Thanks, but I’d rather not. I’ve enjoyed meeting everyone, but I’m not sure I’ll repeat this experience.”

The disappointment in Calvin’s eyes made her feel self-conscious, but she turned and walked out the door.

Poisonous watched Evie coming towards the front door of the club. With great delight, she noticed a man lurking in the alley, realizing that he was the serial killer who had already stabbed five young women to death, and had not been found by the police. Walking up to him, she whispered in his ear, “There’s another pretty young woman coming out of the club. What a prize it would be if you could claim her as your next victim.”

A smile widened on the man’s face and he picked himself up and walked towards the front door of the club.

“Now there’s a good boy,” she said, licking her lips hungrily. “I want that ex-angel to be dead.” Turning toward the club, she added, “You make me ill, you follower of the Light. Your decision to become human was a foolish one, and now you’ll pay.”

She called another network cab on her cell phone, and waited in front of the club for it to arrive. Moments later, a feeling of imminent danger overcame her. From insider her, E.V. said, “I think someone is approaching you, and he has bad intentions.”

Evie looked at the alley that led to the parking garage and noticed a young man, probably in his early thirties approaching. Her eyes riveted on the man, and noticed him reaching into his pants pocket. He was five feet away, when he pulled out a knife, and ran towards her, knife in a raised hand, ready to attack.

Her warrior instincts kicked in, and when the man was close enough to strike her, she grabbed his hand, twisted his arm backwards until his shoulder popped out of joint. A wail of agony pierced the air. She rammed the now immobile arm into the side of the wall of the club, forcing him to drop the knife. Before he could recover and try something else, she kicked him hard in the groin three times, and he fell to the driveway in great pain. Then, she kicked the knife ten feet away, so he couldn't try to use it again.

"I'll get you, you whore!" he shouted out, with great effort.

Before he could change position, she kicked him hard in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. He lay still, writhing in much pain. Dialing 911 on her cell phone, she told the dispatcher, "There's an assailant here who tried to stab me. I've neutralized him, but you'd better come quickly, before he tries again to murder me."

"What's your location," asked the dispatcher. "I'm at the Soundcheck club, 1420 K St NW."

"I'll have a unit dispatched to your location in a couple of minutes."

Her cell phone went back in her purse, and she breathed a sigh of relief and tried to get her adrenaline to abate. Moments later, a D.C. Police unit approached, and a man and a woman jumped out.

"Is this the perp?" the woman asked.

"Yes. His knife is over there," she said, pointing at the weapon.

The man quickly handcuffed the attacker, drug him to the car and pushed him

into the back seat. Then the unit sped away, sirens blasting.

“That was incredible,” said a patron of the club. “How’d you do that?”

“I have military training,” she said, her expression neutral.

“Boy, you’re good.”

“Thanks. Here’s my cab. Gotta go.”

Poisonous stood by, not believing what just happened. Then she started shaking with fury. “Curse you worthless cur! You have the audacity to foil my plans. Well, you may have escaped this time, but there is always a next time, mark my words...”

“What are you ranting about now,” asked VD, who had just joined her partner in evil. “Oh, shut up, you worthless soft hearted excuse for a demon. You don’t have it in you to murder someone. Just leave that sort of thing to me.”

“Whatever,” said VD. “I’ve got my eyes on a son of Adam who’s quite handsome. I think I shall pay him a visit. We could have a nice tryst.”

“Get out of my sight, will you? Go do your silliness, while I take care of more serious business.”

“Bye,” said VD as she walked away, smirking. “Have fun...”

“Be raped and tossed aside, whore...”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5TH

The sun shone bright on this December day, warming up the temperature a bit, yet unable to compensate for the chill in the air that kept the temperature low, and the wind from causing a windchill to almost freezing. Regardless, Evie luxuriated in the warmth of the early morning sun hitting her face, and headed into the Institute with a smile, humming an old familiar song. She walked into the foyer, and turned to the receptionist, a young person and recent college graduate. "Hi, Ashleigh. How are you doing today?"

"I'm fine," Ashleigh said. "How are you?"

"Just enjoying the fact that it's a sunny day outside."

"Too cold for me," said Ashleigh, a slight Texas twang in her voice. "I'm from Texas, and we don't have this kind of weather there. I'm still getting used to D.C. weather. This is the coldest winter I have been in."

"You'll get used to it," she said, smiling amicably. "Anyway, have a great day."

"Thanks, you too."

As she walked away, a familiar odor wafted into her nostrils. She had smelled it before as an angel, and recognized it as cannabis. This was not good: one form of drug use usually led to the use of stronger drugs. A feeling of unease settled over her as she walked to her office. She decided to keep her antenna up on Ashleigh.

THAT NIGHT

"Well, hi, guys!" Evie hugged Tony, his girlfriend Jinx, his friend Anthony "T" Harper and "T's" girlfriend Raji as they all introduced themselves.

"We were in the area and decided to pay a visit," said Tony. "You okay, sis?"

You look a little nervous.”

“I am. I’m still getting used to meeting new people.”

“Oh, it’s okay. We won’t bite. I promise you.” He chuckled.

Her Shining blue eyes rolled.

Anthony “T” Harper, a butterscotch-colored African American, with pale greenish-brown eyes, took her hand and kissed it in a very chivalrous manner. “Hi, Evie. Good to meet you. Tony and I go back to our school days at Virginia Tech. Now, he does his architect thing, and I practice engineering as my trade.” Unexpectedly, he broke out in a big grin and turned to Tony. “And just so you’ll know, I can out-spit your brother any day of the week, 24/7.”

“In your dreams, young...I am the master, and you’re a wannabe,” Tony countered.

Their words perplexed her. “Umm, ‘scuse me, guys, but why would you want to spit at each other? Wouldn’t that be rather disgusting to say the least?”

Anthony and Tony exchanged amused looks. A few seconds later, laughter erupted. Her brother came to her rescue. “Evie...we like to ‘rap’ or make rhyme to a rhythmical beat. ‘Spitting’ is just a slang term for rapping. We don’t actually spit at each other...you know, of the saliva variety.”

Evie swallowed her embarrassment, and put on her best *I-knew-that* face.

“Oh...yeah, that’s right.”

“T” seated himself into the comfortable couch in the living room area. “Into” was the more appropriate word; big, soft, and plush cushions you literally sank into. “Say, Evie...you and your new sis got yourselves a nice crib. This is definitely the real deal.”

Rajinda "Raji" Bhindapuri, 'T's girlfriend and a second generation Indian American walked up to Evie and extended her hand. "Hi, Evie. I'm Raji."

"Good to meet you."

"I agree with Anthony: I really like your condominium too. I'm impressed."

"Thank you." A brief pause; "So what kind of work do you do?"

"I do a lot of programming in artificial intelligence."

Anthony's eyes glowed with admiration for Raji's prowess. "Actually, Evie, Raji is being modest. She could write a soul for a robot and make it work. She is killer at programming. I don't even ask her about what she is doing anymore. Girl can work wonders with software." Anthony beamed.

Evie tried her best to keep up with the conversation. She shook her head at appropriate moments, and interjected a 'huh' or a 'uh-huh' but had no idea what they talked about. She still did understand this phenomenon called 'computer programming' and artificial intelligence: too mechanical for her liking.

"Oh, good grief..." Gracie groaned, smiling, and came to her rescue. "Alright Raji...Anthony: no talking shop here. Any excursions of that kind will result in both of you being doused with cold water, until your fervor cools off."

Everyone laughed.

Evie shot Gracie an appreciative look. She mouthed a *'Thank you.'*

She excused herself and headed for her bathroom. As she walked down the hall, something snagged her foot, and before she could catch herself, she fell flat on her face on the floor. . "Ow-w- w-w! Gracie!"

Very un-angel like words came out of her mouth under her breath.

Gracie ran up to her quickly. "Are you alright?"

Evie got up slowly, rubbing her elbow and her knee. Not succeeding in hiding

her annoyance, she answered, tight-lipped, “Yeah. I’ll be all right. Just got a couple of bruises; nothing major.” After limping back into the living room; her mishap now aroused the curiosity of everyone there.

“What happened?” Jinx asked.

Frustration with her sister reached its boiling point. “I tripped on a pair of Gracie’s shoes, and fell over and almost broke my neck.”

Gracie’s eyes glinted at Evie with a not very happy *‘Thanks-a-lot’* written sharply on her features. Evie pressed on, undaunted, ignoring her sister’s discomfort. “My sister may seem to have it all together, but let me tell you. She and her constant disorganization are going to hurt somebody one day.” She made a point not to look in Gracie’s direction. “What’s worse, she tries to cover it up every week by trying to clean up and re-organize so she can re-gain that sense or peace and calm she wants. She becomes a ‘woman on a mission.’” A *take-that* look shot directly in Gracie’s direction. It felt good to take her frustrations with Gracie off her chest.

Gracie did a slow simmer across the room, her eyes burning holes in her every time their vision crossed paths. Gracie was obviously upset, but she didn’t care. Truth-be-told, she needed to point her pain and loneliness in another direction besides her own heart. Guilt, however, nipped at her conscience, and wouldn’t let her go. She had to swallow her pride and apologize.

As if to stay the execution, Tony interrupted the dueling sisters. “Yo, sis...may I borrow your facilities?”

“Sure, Tony. Help yourself.” Gracie’s eyes immediately honed back in on hers.

Evie couldn’t avoid Gracie’s laser gaze, which burned more intently every time their eyes met. As Tony disappeared into the bathroom, she pictured Gracie’s

bathroom: undergarments, socks and a few assorted t-shirts on and in the sink. She grinned, waiting for Tony to comment on the chaotic state of affairs in there.

Comments had been made before. "You should try to be neater." Gracie would inevitably deflect her advice with, "Okay honey, I'll get to it." Of course, she never did, leaving Evie even more frustrated. As an angel, she had always been organized, neat and efficient. Gracie's messiness grated on her angelic sensibilities.

"What are these undergarments doing in the sink...are they clean, dirty...or do they need to brush their teeth?" Tony quipped, loud enough for all to hear.

"Tony!" Gracie yelled back. She shot angry eyes back at Tony, who returned and just ignored Gracie's embarrassment, laughed and went about his business.

Evie thought about it for a moment, and then chuckled. Then she broke out into laughter until tears rolled down her face. "Looks like someone other than me has noticed your not-so-organized habits."

Gracie's face darkened, but she soon regained her composure. A few moments later, she had to laugh at herself as well. "I think my little sis is catching on...perhaps a little too well. Oh my gracious...do you think she my secrets have been found out? What am I to do; become neat? Perish the thought!"

Everyone laughed at that.

Evie knew Gracie was just trying to save face, but the hurt in her eyes clouded her demeanor.

She felt bad she had hurt her feelings, but she also felt resentful about having to measure up to Gracie: it wasn't that Gracie was mean, or mean-spirited. She just always seemed to want to give her advice. She felt like...well, a mother. It made her feel like a child, and she resented it. Gracie always made comments like:

"Are you sure you want to do that, Evie?"

“Are you sure that’s the best thing to do?”

The words reverberated in her head. Well of course I want to do it. Why would I have done it otherwise?” Evie’s glum face reflected her frustration. Jaxincta “Jinx” Middleton, whom Tony had met through his sister Gracie at Christ Community Church of Washington walked over to Evie, and sat down beside her. “Evie; are you alright?”

At first, Evie didn’t answer. Finally, she turned to Jinx with a perfunctory smile. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s nothing. Really.”

“C’mon, baby; tell me what’s on your mind. You remind me of your sister when she was back in college, and unhappy also. We talked a lot during her senior year.”

Evie exhaled a long, slow rush of exasperation. “It’s hard getting adjusted to this new life. I’m still adjusting. I’m going through culture shock, and I’m overwhelmed from time to time. My sister is really nice, but…” Her words trailed off.

Jinx smiled at her, and held her hands in hers. “Does she seem a bit intimidating...maybe even demanding, sometimes?”

She fought to maintain composure. “Well...yes. I guess you could say that. I feel like I’m her daughter, to whom she is constantly giving motherly advice.” She held back the frustration rising in her. “I’m used to making my own decisions, Jinx. This is hard for me.” Her face faced the floor, avoiding Jinx’s direct gaze. “The worst part is that she’s right most of the time.”

Jinx gave her a warm hug, and just held her for a while. She hugged Jinx back. After a few moments, Jinx said, “You know, Evie; you don’t have to measure up to

Gracie's expectation of you. I'm sure if you tell her to let you learn some of life's lesson on your own, she might listen."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. Just be you, okay? We all have to work at figuring out where we fit in this crazy life."

She sighed. "I know. I just feel like I've started from way behind, and I'm trying to catch up on a lot that I've missed in a very short time."

Jinx hugged her again, and smiled reassuringly at her. "Just relax and enjoy the process. You can't hurry life. It just has to occur in its own good time."

Jinx's understanding lessened some of the pressure. "Thanks Jinx. You've made me feel a little better. I can see why you and Gracie are such good friends."

It could be avoided no longer. All their friends had left for the evening. Her sister walked up to her quietly, eyes boring into hers. "You know, I realize I am not the neatest person in the world, but you didn't have to be so blunt about it, especially in front of everyone. You hurt my feelings and embarrassed me."

"I know. I'm sorry. What I did was mean. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed and it was a way to vent my frustrations. I live among humans whom I'm very unlike in every way. I have no human past, and I feel disjointed sometimes. It's discouraging."

Gracie let out a sigh, shook her head, and put her arms around Evie. "I know Evie, but just hang in there. It'll get better, I promise you."

"Yes, but at least you have been human all your life: you've always had a father, mother, and a brother. You were a child, full of wonder and innocence, and you

experienced growing up.” Her eyes mournfully regarded Gracie. “I’ve always been an angel serving the Father in Heaven, and faithfully fighting the minions of Lucifer; I’m not like you humans.”

Gracie turned sharply and stared right into her eyes. “Evie, wake up! This life isn’t easy for any of us. Just because you were an angel who never grew up from a child into the woman you are now won’t change that fact. It’s part of being an adult. Deal with it!”

The bluntness in Gracie’s words made her flinch. She understood what they meant, but it didn’t mitigate the fact that she felt like a young child in a situation she was ill prepared to handle. She looked pleadingly at Gracie. “Please don’t be angry with me. I’m learning, and I’ll get it right one day” Her emotions, still raw, bordered on tears.

Gracie’s face softened. “I forgive you honey; I love you.”

“Thank you. I really need for you to love me right now.” She hugged her older sister, her tightly shut eyes willing some reassurance from the hug that all was going to be all right.

EIGHT*SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9TH*

The night air was chilly, and strong, gusty wind blew hard against her as she walked towards where her car was parked. Velma climbed into her car, slammed the door shut, and quickly turned the ignition key to start the car. As the engine came to life, she took note of the time. It was 11:30 p.m. No one in her neighborhood was outside, and all the houses save a few were completely dark.

Satisfied that she was unnoticed, she drove towards the Institute, and parked in the garage when she arrived. She went into the building from the garage entrance, making sure no one would see her, and headed for the computer room, where the servers resided.

Pulling up a chair, she sat in front of the server that housed the Ratings database. A long tenure at the Institute made her aware of logins and password. Entering the name she wanted, the records came up. "Now, Miss Evie. Let's see what we can do to ruin your ratings." All of Evie's scores were reduced by at least forty

points, to the point that they looked dismal. Done, she cracked a derisive smile and left.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10TH

Another sunny December put Evie in a good mood. She walked happily into the Institute, and came to Ashleigh's desk. "Hi, Ashleigh," she said.

"Hey, Evie! I'm just great. By the way could you pull down the blinds on the front door? The light is hurting my eyes."

This was odd: it had never bothered her before to have the blinds open on the front door.

Evie's radar went up several notches, as she eyed Ashleigh; curious, yet discreet.

"Is something wrong?" Ashleigh asked. "You're staring at me. Is there something you need?"

"Umm...no, Ashleigh. I'm fine. Have a great day."

"You too. I'm happy to help, and I'm really beginning to love my job."

Evie walked away, puzzling over Ashleigh's behavior. She seemed a little too perky, for someone who had made a dramatic change in location and was adjusting to being in the work world and a new job. But Evie just continued toward her office. As Evie walked down the hall, she passed by Velma's office, poked her head in the door, and said, "Hi, Velma. How are you?"

Velma didn't even bother to look up at her but just said, "I'm fine and I'd appreciate it if you minded your own business."

Taken aback, Evie stared at her in shock. Gathering her wits a few moments later, she said, "Alright, Velma. I'll see you later." As Evie sat at her desk, puzzled and frowning, she said, "I can't believe she is acting so rudely towards me. I was just trying to be friendly. It's horrible...just horrible."

The end of the day had come, and the staff filed out of the Institute, one by one. Velma watched as Evie left for home, muttered to herself. "Young, pretty upstarts. I hate them all, but especially her since she is getting in good with Mr. Bocelli. Well, I won't be pushed aside by these wet behind the ears young people. She won't get the better of me. I'll make sure of it: I'll ruin her career at the Institute."

Velma used discretion as she watched Evie straighten her desk, put on her coat and muffler, and leave. Her classes over, she finished her paperwork, printed another copy of her lesson plans, and took them to Evie's desk, where Evie's lesson plans sat neatly in an inbox.

She walked towards Evie's desk, and looked at her lesson plans. She took them up, headed back towards her office and printed out hers.

She took Evie's lesson plans, replaced them with hers, and turned to walk away. Standing in the door was a fellow teacher, Roberta Walker.

"Why are you leaving things on Evie's desk, Velma?"

"Oh, Evie asked me to show her some of my old lesson plans as examples of teaching foreigners with little English how to speak our language."

Roberta eyed her suspiciously, and said, "Why would you take her lesson plans

off her desk and replace them with yours? Seems to me she had already planned her curriculum for tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Velma answered quickly. “She told me to take her plans, review them and critique them. She thought it would prove valuable to learn from a more experienced teacher like me.”

Roberta still eyed her with suspicion. “I don’t remember you and she having such a conversation…”

“We do it at our lunch break,” she answered. “Gives us a chance to clear our minds and discuss things away from our desks.”

Roberta said nothing for a few moments, then finally, “Okay, Velma,” and walked away. “Phew, that was close, thought Velma. It’s a good thing my name isn’t on those lesson plans or this jig would be up.” On her way out, she noticed that Carlo Bocelli was still at work.

“Hey, Velma. You’re leaving late. Everything alright?”

“Yes, Carlo. I’m fine. Just had some work to catch up on.”

She packed her bag, got her coat on and left.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18TH

Evie walked into her office the next morning, and noticed the lesson plans looked different than the ones she had printed out before. “What is going on?” she wondered, growing tired of this ridiculous turn of events. “I don’t understand why my lesson plans have been replaced with someone else’s.” Frustrated, she walked to

Carlo's office and stood in front of his desk. "Carlo, have you seen someone go into my office after I left. When I left, my lesson plans were on my desk in their usual place. Now, they look like they've been replaced by someone else's."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Evie, but I left early yesterday for a doctor's appointment. I wouldn't know if someone went into your office or not."

She sighed and said, "Well; thanks anyway. This is starting to get annoying." "Sorry I can't help, Evie. Wish I knew more."

"That's okay. Thanks anyway." She walked back to her desk and printed out her lesson plans again.

Agent Angelo made his next appearance very businesslike, in a governmental sort of way, and stood waiting patiently for Agent Farooqi. Within a few minutes, Agent Farooqi walked up to him just outside of Christ Community Church. "You are a man of your word," Michael observed. "This is a good character quality."

"I'm mostly here to keep an eye on you," answered Farooqi. "I only agreed to meet you here, because you said you'd be here, and it was worth the chance."

"You'll learn that I'm a man of my word, Agent Farooqi. I promise you that I'll always do as I say. Now, if you and your associates would be so kind as to follow me, I believe you might find what's going on today to be worth your time."

Michael led Farooqi and his two partners into the church, and had them sit in the back.

Michael saw Evie towards the front of the congregation, and pointed her out to

Farooqi.

“I’m a friend of Ms. Chen,” he pointed out. She and her family don’t know I’m here today, because I chose to talk to you directly. So, you may find that dealing with me directly is more beneficial than harassing Evie and the rest of the Chen family, wouldn’t you agree, gentlemen?”

He knew they were doggedly determined to frequently interview and harass the Chens, but if he made a habit of going to them, he could at least minimize the hounding of the Chens.

“I’m not averse to exploring all avenues of acquiring any and all information I can get about you. I can’t promise that I won’t explore more than one means to that end,” stated Farooqi dispassionately.

“I knew that before I said my piece earlier, Agent Farooqi. But you can’t blame a guy for trying, now can you?” He smiled smugly, because irritating Farooqi no end gave him immense satisfaction. “Well, gentlemen, I believe Pastor Wright has some things to say that you will find quite interesting. Shall we be seated?”

They all agreed, and sat at the back of the church.

The congregation functioned more like one, big happy family. They appeared to be of many and disparate ethnicities and ages. Evie recognized friend and family, and introduced herself to the pastor and his family. Social niceties over, she sat down next to her sister, and joined with her new family.

The program guide listed today’s subject as Salvation, so she listened intently, hoping to glean any pertinent advice she could on getting back into her Father’s good

graces. She tried to personalize what he was saying about having a personal relationship with Christ via the sacrificial death on the cross, and placing your faith in Him. At the end of the service, as is customary in most churches, he gave the customary 'altar call.'

"Anyone feeling the Holy Spirit impressing upon their heart the need to make themselves right with God is invited to come up front to receive ministry. I will pray with you for you to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

The realization hit that she may never have actually prayed in her brief tenure among humankind, except for a quick 'note' to the Father every now and then.

"Have you ever prayed before? Gracie asked.

Boy, she even reads my mind. "I've always talked to the Father or Jesus directly. I've never thought about praying like you do; it seems rather round-about."

"Well, we can't always hear Him in an audible voice, but He hears us and answers our prayers."

"How do you know?"

Gracie smiled confidently. "He answers by working in our lives; not always the way we want Him to, but certainly the way we need Him to."

In her mind, she was back in her warrior days. She had always known the Father, Lord Yehovah, and His Son, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. She thought she had a personal relationship with God. At least she hoped so; but she couldn't shake that alienated, *far-away-from-God-and-anyone-in-Heaven* feeling that started when she left Heaven. She wished there were some way to make it go away, but it never seemed to.

Father, why won't you talk to me anymore? I'm beginning to think you don't

love me.

Michael and the agents walked out the doors and towards their car. "So, gentlemen," Michael said as the service was over, "What did you think of the service? Was it meaningful to you?"

"I was brought up a Muslim," Farooqi said. "I don't really practice much of my own religion, never mind that of Western Christians. It sounded all nice and soothing, but religion has no practical place in my life, Agent Angelo."

He had to chuckle at the spiritual blindness of Farooqi.

"You see, Agent Farooqi, God doesn't want a religion, he wants a relationship between you and Him: no rules, no regulations, no good deeds. He wants you to be a member of his family. Being a righteous judge, your imperfection, which causes you to sin, would demand death. Instead, He sent his Son to pay that price. No church organization can ever give that to you; it is something you have to want for yourself."

"Well, Agent Angelo, I'm glad that you have a nice relationship with your God. I, on the other hand am comfortable with my life just the way it is. I will let you know if I should decide to explore your views further."

"That's just fine. I'd be glad to introduce you to my God. You might realize what an awesome person He really is. So, until that day, eh?" Michael patted Farooqi on his shoulder.

"Well, Agent Angelo, religion aside, I'd like to ask you some questions. I need you to cooperate and step into the car; we can make this short and painless for everyone involved," said Farooqi. "Further, we believe that one Evelyn Anne Chen is

in this country illegally; we have no background on her.”

“We’ll solve that in due time, Agent Farooqi; but for now, I must go.”

The angel walked towards the sun, so that its intense light blinded Farooqi and his colleagues. Before their eyes could adjust to the bright light, he immediately became invisible to them. “Where did he go this time?” demanded an angry Farooqi. “I don’t understand how he keeps disappearing.”

“Dunno, boss,” said Smith. “He was there one minute and gone the next.”

“Do me a favor, and don’t lose him like that the next time. It’s embarrassing to have to explain to the boss that we keep losing Angelo.”

SUNDAY DECEMBER 9TH, THAT AFTERNOON

Gracie watched Evie shiver slightly. The chill of the cold December day permeated the condo with a brisk coolness that even made Gracie wear her shawl. The heating unit put warm air into the apartment, and the tea warmed her and her hands. She mused over many things, mostly on the message on Salvation Pastor Wright’s sermon on Salvation. She couldn’t help being perplexed that her roommate didn’t understand the concept, as she had been before God for millennia. The approach of her new sister interrupted her thoughts.

“Gracie?”

“Yes?”

“Why is it that relationships are treated so casually these days? I’ve noticed that young people live together, share the same living quarters, and even have sex with each

other. Don't they see that they are using each other for their own convenience, and are replacing a spiritual connection for a moment's pleasure?"

Gracie just looked at her for a moment, not saying anything. "I can't really tell you. It seems like it's become only a thing of pleasure, like going out and having pizza together.

"Well, I've done some thinking about it, and I'm saddened to know that they treat such a gift from my Father like there were no consequences."

Well..." Gracie had to gather her wits to explain this one, especially since she had done this very thing when she was younger, and didn't want to sound hypocritical. "You see, sex certainly feels good, and it's easy to want it when you like the guy you're with; even if you've only made arrangements to live together."

"Yes, I see that. If a man and a woman truly care about each other, why can they not wait until they make a commitment to each other in marriage? That way, neither one is intentionally hurting or using the other. Makes more sense to have The Father honor your commitment to each other and bless not only the act, but the marriage as well."

Grace again paused before she spoke. "I would agree. It means a lot more to have the Lord honor your physical intimacy, and thereby your marriage."

"Even the Romance Novels you read, and I started to read, had nothing to do with love; they portray love as sexual attraction. They cheapen the whole idea of relationships and marriage. You have sex with more than just your body. You're sharing your soul with the person as well. It's a very intimate sharing of all of you: body, soul, and spirit."

At length, Gracie finally said, "Well...it's hard to explain it, but I suppose that young people these days are very self-centered, and want all the benefits of a relationship

but no commitment. It's a matter of personal gratification."

"You're right." Evie's face contorted in anger. "The way young people these days treat relationships saddens me. Have you ever had sex before without being married?" Noting that Gracie looked uncomfortable with the question, she smiled. "Don't worry, I'm not condemning you, but just want to know; and if so, what was the outcome?"

Gracie looked down at the couch, and was silent for a few moments. When she finally looked up at Evie, she quietly answered, "Yes; back in college. I regret it now. I gave away my virginity, and I did it to rebel, because I wanted approval -- the wrong way."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Neither the guys nor I really cared about each other. We were using each other. I've already told you about Brian. He hurt me bad. Turns out he was no different."

"Wait! You were using each other? I thought guys used women."

"Mostly; but both of us were involved. Each one has a say in what takes place, except in cases of rape, where it's forced upon you."

Evie shuddered. "Oh gracious: rape is very disturbing. Let's move back to the original subject." Calmed, she continued. "Okay. I'm sort of following what you're saying." She thought a moment. "But wouldn't waiting until you're married make sex better?"

"Honestly, Evie, I've never experienced it, I've heard from some of my newly-married Christian friends that when you wait, there's something very unique and supernatural about marital intimacy."

“So, will your not being a virgin when you get married take something away from your love making?”

“I...” Gracie’s voice caught for a moment. “I can’t totally answer that. I’m sure the Lord will bless Peter and me, but I still regret that I’ll never be able to give him my virginity.”

“Wow, Gracie. I wish there was something I could do to for you.”

Gracie smiled wanly. “The best thing you can do is to learn from my mistakes. Don’t do as I’ve done, Evie. Your virginity is something you can only give away once.”

“I understand about losing your virginity, but most young people these days think nothing of it.”

Gracie replied sadly. “You’re right.” Then her countenance turned serious. “You and I need to really stay in prayer about this. It seems hard to stay pure when everyone around you doesn’t seem to care about such things.”

“That sounds like a good start sis. Even things like how you dress can influence the outcome.”

“Yes; absolutely.” Gracie went on to explain the pitfalls of the hedonistic bent of most young people, and how their view of morality had changed drastically from days past.

In her room, later, Evie thought what Gracie said seemed perfectly reasonable, but she still couldn’t understand why young people did not see how they harmed themselves with sexual impurity. “Seems to me that immorality and an ever increasing

lack of a moral compass must be fueling the behavior of all people, she reasoned.

Everything she saw on TV, the movies, and in magazines seemed to make selfishness attractive. She looked heavenward. "Father, this truly is a fallen world, and it's easy to get caught up in the pervasive world view. Help me to discern the lies in it."

NINE

SUNDAY DECEMBER 9TH, THE CONDO

"I can't wait to meet Peter." Evie smiled broadly, tapping her feet in anticipation.

Gracie eyed her warily. "Umm...remember: he's *my* boyfriend." A steely stare underscored her words.

Caught off guard, she curbed her enthusiasm. "Of course. I understand."

"He should be here any minute."

There was a knock on the door, and Gracie jumped up and walked to the door, letting Peter in. "Hi, baby." They hugged and gave each other a peck on the lips.

"Honey, I'd like you to meet my new sister, Evie."

Evie swallowed hard. His chiseled good looks and gentle manner took her breath away for a brief instant. She forced herself to regain her composure. She stood up and put out her hand. "Hi; nice to meet you Peter. I've heard you're quite a Prince Charming." Evie looked at Gracie mischievously.

Gracie gave her a *'Watch out'* look.

Peter walked up to her and firmly held her hand in his. "Well I've heard a lot about you, and I must admit; it is nice to meet you in person." He turned to Gracie and grinned. "And Gracie has been a wonderful Cinderella. She's beautiful no matter how she's dressed."

"Aww, honey...you're so sweet," Gracie gushed.

She liked watching this handsome man interact with her sister. Gracie's contented smile made evident a very real love for her suitor. However, she still felt herself staring at Peter in unguarded moments. Peter DeKuyper was about her height, and looked directly at her with his pale blue eyes. "I'm a comptroller by trade, but don't let that fool you: I actually have social skills." His smile contained a subtle mirthfulness, which made his handsome face even more appealing. Warmth and kindness comprised his manner. He was charming, but didn't flatter her. He made her feel good about herself, just by hearing what he had to say. He seemed as nice as Carlo at work.

They all retired to the living room. Gracie and Peter sat next to each other on the couch and she sat down on the love seat.

"So Evie," began Peter, "I've heard you came over from China. What do you think of this country so far?"

Evie replied honestly. "Well, I must admit I'm a little homesick, but I find that no matter the country, it's always makes it better to have a family. Mom, Dad, Tony,

and of course, my roomie and sister Gracie have made me feel like I've been in their lives forever."

"Was it difficult being an orphan, and not having any real permanent family when you were growing up?"

"You know, being an orphan was very frightening for me. I've missed many of those things most children take for granted. I don't wish it on anyone. I've had to figure out this life by myself, and it's scary and lonely."

Peter's insightful questions dug up the pain buried in her heart. The realization hit harder: she was indeed an angel without a country; an orphan, even with a family around her.

After Peter had left, Gracie turned and asked her, "Do you still feel like an orphan?"

"Honestly, yes. I know your family loves me, and I don't want to sound like I'm complaining, but having to figure out my place in this world is hard sometimes. And the worst is -- I'm homesick." She stared pleadingly at Gracie. "I really need a hug."

"Oh, sweetie, you bet I will" She embraced warmly. "I'm here any time you need me." "Thanks, Gracie. I'm sorry I seem like such a big baby."

"Don't you worry about it," Gracie said. Her smile consoled her. "Tell you what: talk to the Father tonight, and ask Him for help when you feel down."

"Okay. I will. Thanks."

A time of relaxation, then she and her older sister went to bed.

As Evie lay in bed, she thought of what Gracie had said. "Father...I hope you're listening, because I'm struggling. I'm getting real discouraged. Please tell me you love me, and will help me with this strange journey." Even as she said the words, her aching heart weighed heavily on her. Hot tears formed in her eyes, and she gave in again, almost ashamed for feeling so helpless and sad, which seemed like all the time. As she cried, she felt a still, quiet voice speak to her.

I do love you Evie. Come back to me, so I can hug you again. I really want to very badly.

"Really? Do you Abba?"

Yes. Truly.

Tears of happiness flowed freely now. "Thank you, Abba. Thank you."

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10TH

It was just another day at work: lesson plans for the next day completed, classes done well. As soon as she finished with her last class, a call came from the Director of the Institute.

"Ms. Chen, could you report to my office?"

"Yes, Mr. Rundström; I'll be right there." This was unusual turn of events; the Director of the Institute had never called her before. The few times she had heard him speak were for company- wide *rah-rah* meetings. "What would he want to speak to me for?" she wondered. Making the trip down the main hall and to his office, she finally

arrived at his door. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Mr. Rundström?"

"Yes, Ms. Chen. Have a seat, please."

She did as she was told.

"Ms. Chen, a few grave matters have come to my attention. Firstly, it seems you have been appropriating Ms. Quarantillo's lesson plans..."

She wanted to object, but the look on his face warned her that this was serious, and she had better not interrupt him.

"Further, Ms. Chen, I have reviewed your class ratings, and they have taken a considerable dip lately, to the tune of an average rating of fifty percent or below."

"But, my ratings have always been good. I don't understand why they would suddenly drop so low. All my students thank me profusely for helping them in the classroom. This must be a mistake..."

"I'm afraid that the records don't lie, Ms. Chen. It is right here in the Performance database.

Being the more senior instructor, Ms. Quarantillo pointed this out to me."

Anger rose in her, especially at Velma, who she had a sneaking suspicion for a long time, was up to no good. She wanted to shout about the unfairness of this situation, but she did know that when Mr. Rundström had made up his mind, there was no changing it. No amount of protesting or pleading her innocence would change his mind.

"I'm afraid, Ms. Chen, that these matters are of dire consequence. The result of these facts warrants a dismissal. I'm afraid, that your tenure with the Institute is hereby terminated."

Gathering all her strength, she fought back the tears, and simply said, "Thank

you for the opportunity to work for the Institute. I've learned a lot." Which included the fact that some women could be very petty, and back-stabbing. On her way out, she passed by Velma's desk, and stared at her for a while. Velma looked up and said, "Sorry to hear what happened. I wish you well in your future endeavors."

The anger could not be held back any further. "Yeah right, you jerk. This was all your doing, and I'll never forgive you for it." Before Velma could say another word, she walked quickly to her desk, gathered her personal belongings, and left the building as fast as she could. The emotions inside her had grown so strong that she stopped in Kramer Books and Afterwards, went to the Ladies' Room, and the floodgate of her emotions poured out in her tears.

Finally, she washed her face off, gathered up her courage and walked towards the DuPont Circle Metro Station.

The dark demon, who more resembled a reptile with tentacles undulating from her head, snarled at her with disgust. Anger filled her as she observed the ex-angel, hearing about salvation. So far, as luck would have it, her partner, Virtue Destroyer, had kept her from realizing the truth. But this was not good enough. "If I'm going to be sentenced to Hell for eternity, she must be as well." Her anger vented, she managed a smile. "Oh no, ex-angel. You and your angel spirit will know what Hell is like. You will burn along with the rest of us. I won't just destroy your virtue. I'll destroy both your body and your spirit. You'll wish you'd never become flesh." Cackling loudly, she walked towards the man in the car about to make a right turn from Connecticut Avenue onto 19th Street. As soon as she saw Evie in the street, she shouted to the man,

who only heard her in his thoughts, "Go! Turn now!"

The walk to the train station at Dupont Circle from Kramer Books would only take her a couple of minutes. She walked at a slow pace this time, as thoughts of her flirting filled her head. The bile rose in her to the point where she felt she would be sick, so she tried to think of something else. But all she could think of was the loneliness she felt from not being directly in the presence of her fellow angels and The Father, which only added to her misery. The Chens made her feel loved, but she missed the love of her Heavenly Father and The Lamb. At least it was nice to have spent some time with Michael.

She reached a light, and started to cross over 19th Street when a car making a right turn bore down on her. Hearing the engine of the car as it got closer, she looked up in time to see the car just a few feet from her. Horrified, she screamed, closing her eyes before the car hit her. The next thing she knew some strong arms picked her up and deposited her in front of a bank on the West side of Connecticut Avenue. A familiar voice said, "You should be more careful before you cross the street. That car almost ran into you."

A familiar figure stood in front of her. "Michael!" She hugged him hard, and then started shaking. "I could have died... Oh Father in Heaven, I could have died." Tears ran down her eyes as her voice choked. "Michael, I could have died, and I don't know that the Father and I are on good terms." Shuddering hard, tears ran down her face. "I don't want to be subject to the second death! Why oh why did I volunteer to do

this crazy thing?” She looked directly at her best friend and mentor. “Please Michael,” she said, starting to cry. “Take me home. This has been a horrible day: I’ve just been fired; but mostly I’m scared of being human, and not knowing where I stand with the Father.”

Strong, reassuring arms enveloped her. “I made sure you didn’t meet with an untimely death at the hand of a careless driver. Further, I know the answer to your relationship with the Father lies in his book to the Sons of Men. It says you must make The Lamb your Lord and Savior.”

“But The Lamb is my Lord — always has been; and what does He need to save me from? I’ve done nothing wrong — have I?”

“Your humanness demands you establish a relationship with the Father through His Son. You inhabit a human body, which is subject to the curse. It demands the redemption you wanted to experience.”

Sighing, she said, “Okay. You’re right. I don’t understand, but you’re right. It doesn’t make any sense to me, but I know you know what I need.” Hugging him again, she added, “...and thank you, Michael, for saving me from my making a costly mistake.” She gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek and said, “I love you, big brother.”

“Love you too, sis. Now be careful.” The twinkle in his eye belied the seriousness of his warning. Then he flew away.

THAT NIGHT

Evie heard Gracie come into the apartment from work. As Gracie put her coat away, she looked at her and said, “You look like you’re upset about something. Are

you all right?"

"No; I'm not," she answered.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"That awful Velma got me fired, and I did nothing wrong. At first, she seemed nice, but lately she's been up to some questionable stuff. I'm sure she tampered with my ratings in the Performance Database. She sabotaged my job, and made sure the Director would notice. The Director had made up his mind to fire me at that point, and I couldn't even defend myself. May that witch who worships Lucifer be sent to Hell, and burn for eternity. Curses be upon her. I hate you, Velma!" Tears once again fell from her eyes.

"Evie! I'm sorry that such a terrible thing happened to you. May I give you a hug?"

"Yes," she choked.

"Sweetie, I know you're angry, but it's not wise to pronounce a curse on someone, especially for one who was an angel. I'm sure Velma hates you because she's insecure and doesn't know the Lord."

"I'm not an angel anymore: I'm human," she said. "I wish I could go back to Heaven and be an angel. Velma's terrible," she said. "I thought she was my friend. I found out too late that she had it out for me, and I don't even know why."

"Well, just remember: the precious Lamb of God told us "...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. If you only love those who love you, what reward do you have?"

"I know...I know. She just makes me so upset."

"Well, like Jesus said, pray for her."

Evie knew her sister was right, so she mustered up her strength, and prayed, “Abba, let me learn to love like you do, without judgement. I lift up Velma to you, and ask that you minister to her heart, for she obviously has been hurt. Please forgive me for saying such awful things about her.” A sense of relief overcame her, and she quieted.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12TH

That night Peter visited Gracie, and sat in the living room, dashing and handsome as ever. Her eyes riveted to him; she walked over and sat down. Far enough away for propriety's sake, but close enough so she could see those eyes, and that amazing smile. Her heart skipped a beat, and she had to fight to control the urge to gush all over him.

“So what's new, Peter?” She found it odd that Gracie hadn't yet made an appearance. “And where's Gracie?”

“Oh, she went out on a quick errand. She'll be back in a little while. How are you?”

“I'm doing pretty well. You know, work is good, and becoming easier; just trying to make friends. Say...I'm really sorry to hear about losing your job.”

“Thank you, but I'll be fine. I've done a lot of thinking, and I think I'll try to join the military, probably the U.S. Air Force.” Engrossed in the conversation with Peter, she didn't notice Gracie enter the front door.

“Hey guys! How's everybody?” said Gracie.

Evie startled and visibly jerked. At first, she didn't look at Gracie. She felt guilty. She had only been talking to Peter, but she felt attracted to him, and honestly hoped Gracie didn't see it.

“Evie? Are you all right? Did I startle you?”

“Oh...uh, no. I...um...was just talking to Peter. I guess I didn't hear you come in.”

Gracie didn't respond right away, but stared at her like she had been caught her red-handed.

She turned towards the television, pretending to be interested in the show that was on, dreading Gracie knowing what she had really thought.

Gracie slowly turned her focus to Peter. “Okay. I guess I'll go ahead and get started on dinner.

Peter – you want to give me a hand?”

“Sure, honey.” Peter turned towards her, and she involuntary flushed. “Nice talking to you Evie.” He got up and left, as blood rushed to her face, making her appear a bright red. Afraid to raise her sister's suspicions any further, her face turned away from Gracie's indicting stare. She yelled after them. “Call me if you need anything.”

The evening felt like it would never end. Every time she stared at Peter, she tried not to look to long for fear of seeming too interested. Gracie hawk-eyes fastened onto her. She made her best effort to carry on a conversation as though nothing was bothering her, but it was an effort.

Mercifully, the evening ended.

“Well, girls, I've really enjoyed myself, but it's getting late, and it's a work night. You know the drill.”

“Okay honey.” Gracie kissed Peter before he walked out the door.

Gracie went to sit on the couch. Evie didn't exactly know what to do next. So she sat down next to Gracie, and decided to take the offensive. “So. Did you enjoy your evening?”

Grace answered in an even tone. “Yes. I did.”

“Well, good.”

Another pregnant pause: “Evie. Is something bothering you? You've acted kind of strange all night.”

“No: not at all. Why?”

“I swear you've been avoiding me all night long. Something seems to be bothering you, although I can't put my finger on it.”

“Oh, don't be silly. I'm perfectly fine,” she lied; another thing added to her list of peccadillos. She thought it best to excuse herself. “But I *am* tired. I think I'll try reading a good book. That ought to help me relax. It's certainly helped before.”

She got up, and kissed her sister on the forehead. “I certainly enjoyed the dinner, and the company.”

Gracie eyed her suspiciously. “Good night, Evie.”

Evie smiled sweetly, and headed for her bedroom, not looking back once.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13TH

From habit, Evie woke up at 06:30 and ate breakfast while watching the sun rise. Since she had no job to go to, Evie looked up the U.S. Air Force site on the

Internet, and researched how to join. "I've been a warrior all my life, and this would probably suit me best. It also involves flying, which I'm...or at least *was* good at." As a graduate of the Military Academy of New Jerusalem, she just needed to contact the recruiter, and be assigned to Undergraduate Pilot Training, which would last a year. Realizing that she would be away from all she loved, loneliness overcame her. But she pressed on, because in the end, she would be much happier being a warrior than just teaching school. Her application finished, she dropped it off at the local recruiter in Crystal City.

Having nothing in particular to do except domestic duties around the house, Evie grew impatient to hear something about her application. Later that afternoon, a call came in.

"Is a Ms. Evelyn Chen available?" asked a male voice.

"This is she."

"Hello, Ms. Chen. This is Sergeant Williams calling from the Air Force Recruiters Office in Crystal City. I was wondering if you could come in tomorrow for an interview."

"Absolutely. What time should I come in?"

"How about ten o'clock?" he asked.

"That would be just fine. Thank you."

"See you then."

A large smile graced her face, as she looked forward to the interview the next

morning.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14TH

The interview went well. The recruiter was impressed with her aptitude, attitude and abilities.

Evie had to stretch the truth about being trained in combat, not wanting to have to reveal anything about her having been an angel. She said she had been overseas for a while, and had not been assigned a commission to be a fighter pilot.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Chen. I’ll have you take the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test, and we can use that to get you assigned to Undergraduate Pilot Training.

A short while later, finished with the test, he gave her the test results: she scored a perfect 25 on the pilot portion and a perfect combined score of 50 on the pilot-navigator portions. “With your scores, you could do just about anything and anywhere you want.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a pilot,” she said, with an air of matter-of-factness.

“You are well on your way. The next step is to process you into the Undergraduate Pilot Training program, which lasts for a little over a year. You will begin with the Introductory Flight Screening program in Pueblo, Colorado, and then move on to the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training (ENJJPT) in Shepherd Air Force Base, near Wichita Falls, Texas. When you graduate from this program as an officer, you will receive Silver Wings and are awarded the aeronautical rating of pilot. From there, you will attend follow-on training in your assigned aircraft at various bases

known as Formal Training Units (FTUs) around the country. After you graduate from that, you'll be assigned to a base where you'll fly the aircraft you choose. Did you have any questions?"

She wanted to ask him if she could commute between the training bases and D.C., but she would have to work that out on her own. "No, sir. No further questions."

The recruitment officer ended with, "You will be shipping out to Colorado in about nine weeks, or approximately February 15th of next year."

"Thank you, Sergeant Williams. I'll see you next Thursday for Physical Training."

"Don't forget to exercise every day, including running four miles per day."

"No problem, sir," she answered, and got up and left. In the meantime, she had to find a way to pay her way until she left for Boot Camp. She thought about it on the way home in the Metro train. On the way to the condo complex, she picked up a newspaper. Once in her room, she perused the newspaper for jobs that involved teaching or training. While looking over the jobs, her cell phone interrupted her efforts. "Hello?"

"Evie. It's Carlo. You need to come to the Institute right away. The Director wants to hire you again."

"Are you sure? He seemed pretty intent on firing me Monday."

"Yes, I'm sure. We caught Velma on tape, putting her lesson plans on your desk, and tampering with the performance database. Can you make it here quickly?"

"I'll be right there," she said, putting on her coat.

"Ms. Chen. Please have a seat," said Mr. Rundström. She sat down in front of her boss's chair.

“Ms. Chen, it seems that I’ve been wrong in my judgement of you. After Mr. Bocelli pointed out that he had reviewed the security tapes, and found that Ms. Quarantillo had been up to some disturbing behavior. She put her lesson plans on your desk, and was also seen tampering with the Performance Database, changing your scores. Needless to say, she has since been relieved of her duties. If you’d like to have your job back, it’s available to you.”

“Yes, Mr. Rundström; I appreciate your offer very much.”

“Can you be here starting Monday morning?”

“I’ll be here.”

As they walked out of the building, Evie turned to Carlo and said, “Carlo, I’ve made a very serious decision. I’m going into the United States Air Force.” Carlo stopped and looked at her, the shock of what she said hitting him hard in the gut, and leaving him momentarily speechless.

“Are you serious?” he finally said.

“Yes...I’m very serious,” she answered. “I guess having been fired from the Institute made me think hard about what I want to do with my life. I’ve always been someone who will fight for what I believe is right, so this seemed like the perfect thing to do.”

After standing silent for a while, Carlo finally said, “When will all this take place? When do you have to report for duty?”

“I’ll leave for Basic Training February the 15th,” she said. “The whole program to become a pilot will take about a year.” She looked at him sadly and said, “I’m already missing you.”

“I don’t know what to say, Evie. I’m still in shock. This is some hard-hitting news. Will I be able to keep in touch with you? Can I call you, or am I reduced to writing

you letters? If you haven't guessed by now, I really like you...a lot."

"I like you too, baby." She leaned into him and gave him a warm, gentle kiss. "You won't be able to call me during Basic Training, except once for about two minutes, but you can write me letters telling me how special I am to you," she said, grinning playfully.

"Okay..." he said. "I'm not really crazy 'bout this turn of events, but I won't hold you back from chasing your dreams.

"It won't be easy on me, either, baby," she said, a little sad. "But it feels right, and I'll probably regret it for the rest of my life if I don't. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Yes, Evie. I really can. I wish you all the best."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." Sighing, she said, "Could you at least accompany me home?"

"You couldn't stop me," he said.

THAT NIGHT

"Hi, Peter! How're you?" Evie gave him a friendly hug as he walked in the door.

"I'm doing well," he answered. "I hear you've decided to join the Air Force. I must say, that seems like a good thing to do."

"Yeah. I told Gracie, and she wasn't real happy about it, but she wishes me well."

“Good, Evie. I believe you’ll do well.”

“Thanks.”

Gracie came out from her bedroom, and showed her new outfit and hair do.

“Gracie. You look nice. I like your outfit...shows your eyes off well,” she said.

“Thank you.” Gracie looked at Peter. “Notice anything different about me?”

“Only that you look ravishing per usual. What else can I say?”

“I got my hair cut. Didn’t you notice it?”

“Oh...I see you’ve got one of those inverted bobs.”

“Yes.” Gracie looked away from Peter, pursed her lips, walked to the coat closet, and pulled out her coat.

“Are you coming, Peter?”

“Are you all right? You seem upset at something.

“It kind of hurts my feelings that you didn’t notice my new haircut. I had to point it out to you. I’d have thought you would have engaged enough in what’s going on around you to notice. Little things like this are important to me.”

“I’m sorry Gracie. It really looks nice.”

“Thank you, but you’re a little late with the compliment. It takes away from its sincerity.”

Peter just stood there, saying nothing.

Evie stared at her sister, appalled. How could her sister be so petty? Sure, he didn’t notice her hair right away, but was that the end of the world? Why didn’t she just get over it? After all, why ruin a nice evening over something so small? She offered an understanding smile to Peter, who noticed, but turned and faced the door, opening it for Gracie.

Gracie quietly said, “Thanks.” She didn’t look at Peter – she just walked out the

door ahead of him.

Evie arose, walked to the door, and yelled, "Have a good time."

Peter turned around and said, "Thanks." She proffered a sympathetic smile. For a moment, his eyes reached down into her soul. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she felt more attracted to him.

Gracie just walked ahead of him towards the elevator, turned around, and gave him a cold stare. "Are you coming?"

"Yes, Gracie. I'll be there in a second." His tone was clipped and short. As the elevator opened, she walked in ahead of him, forcing him to follow her again.

Later that evening, Gracie came in, with Peter pulling up the rear yet again. She walked through the door of the den to the entrance to the front hallway. Gracie stared coolly at Peter. "Good night, Peter." It sounded more like "Good bye, Peter...and don't bother calling me." The anger in Gracie's tone made her bristle. She forced herself to sound civil. "So...how was your date with Peter?"

"I'm waiting for a date to be nice for a change, instead of feeling like a chore." "What went wrong?" The defensiveness rose in her, but her tone remained neutral.

"It hurt my feelings, Evie. We've been dating for six months now, and I would think that would be plenty of time for him to get a clue as to what things are special to me. It ruined my whole evening." Gracie looked at the door, as if Peter were still there. "Thanks for nothing, Peter. Thanks a *lot*."

"Gracie! Listen to yourself. I think you're being very selfish. Yes, he didn't notice your hair right away, but was it worth making a federal case of it? Was it worth ruining your whole evening for?"

"You obviously don't understand what it means to be appreciated."

Evie could feel the blood rising to her head. She started shaking. Her words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. "You know...I'm not buying that. Michael appreciates me. The Lamb appreciates me."

"That's all well and good, but I'm talking about a guy appreciating you. You know...a *human* guy."

"Listen. You were just plain mean to him. All night long, I'm sure. I don't know how he puts up with you sometimes."

Gracie's face contorted with fury. Her finger shot straight at her, five inches away from her nose. "Don't you tell *me* about being fair: this is *my* relationship, not yours. You have no right to interfere. And I'd appreciate your keeping your opinions to yourself until you know how to have a relationship of your own."

"You're so stubborn. I'm done. Be angry by yourself. I'm out of it." She turned and walked down the hall towards her room.

"Yeah walk away. You're nothing but a coward."

Her palm faced Gracie. "Talk to the hand." She walked into her room and slammed the door shut behind her.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17TH THAT NIGHT.

The next day, Gracie asked Peter to come to the Condo. "We need to talk about last night." "Okay, Gracie."

A few minutes later, Peter walked in, and Gracie turned to Peter. "What do you have to say to me?"

Peter sat up, and faced her directly. “The truth is, I don’t like how angry you can be, and how mean you can act over matters that are trivial, at best. For instance: your hair. I can appreciate the work you went through to look nice – and you did – but I’m sure I would have commented on it before the night was through. I could have, but you took that chance away from me.”

Fury rose within her. Her face contorted into a huge frown. She looked back and forth between the two of them. “Now let me be perfectly clear about this...” She faced Evie and pointed an accusing finger at her. “You had better keep your nose out of my business. It’s none of yours unless I choose to make it that way. You’re on my angry list...”

Evie didn’t respond, but just stared at her coolly, face expressionless.

This only added to her ire. “You have nothing to say? Aren’t you at least woman enough to admit you did the wrong thing?”

“I’ll only admit that I don’t like the way your anger destroys your relationships with people.”

She walked over to Evie, and stood right next to her. “Why don’t you just leave, then? Find your own apartment.”

“I’d be glad to, but right now, I’m going to my room. My name is still on the lease, and I don’t have to leave unless I choose to.” Evie walked down the front corridor, and into her bedroom.

She turned back to Peter. “You know, I consider it just another blow to our relationship when you do things like this. You show me no respect. Maybe you ought to engage in this relationship more, and I wouldn’t be so angry. You should be ashamed.”

Peter got up slowly, and looked directly at her. "What shames me, Gracie is how badly you treat me and your sister. I think it indecent that I let you belittle me, and let your anger make me feel like a fool. The only thing wrong is that I've let it go on this long."

He stared hard at her, catching her off guard. He'd never stood up to her like this.

"Well, then maybe you should consider treating me right. Just be a man, and do the right thing."

"What I'll do, is leave. I'm not going to spend any more time being the brunt of your vituperation and venom."

"Then just leave." Tears pooled in her eyes. "You obviously think very little of me. Go...I doubt you'll do better elsewhere. You're a coward, Peter."

"Frankly, Gracie...I just don't care anymore. And whether I can do better or not is no longer your concern." He turned away from her and walked down the hallway to the front door. "I'll see my way out," he yelled, not turning back.

She trembled as tears fell down her cheeks. She walked deliberately down the front hallway, and pounded on Evie's door. "I want to talk to you."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Evie. Let me in or I'll break this door down." She visibly shook as she stood there. Her fists remained tightly clenched.

"You'll do no such thing. Remember that I was a warrior. If you threaten violence, I'll defend myself. What you'd better do is go and cool off, and come back to me when you can think more rationally."

"I hate you," she seethed, as Evie added to her humiliation. Running to her room, she fell on her bed, and burst into tears.

The next thing Gracie knew, the time on the clock read 11:15 pm. She realized she had cried herself to sleep. The tumultuous events of the evening rolled back through her mind like a bad nightmare. Only it was true. Peter had walked out on her. To make matters worse, she had pushed him away from herself. Why do I sabotage all my relationships? Why can't I just be normal, like everyone else, and quit trying to control everything? She had not exactly endeared herself to Evie, either. Whether she liked it or not, she was going to have to eat crow, and admit she had blown it with her younger sister.

She pulled herself out of her bed, and started that long trip across the condo to her sister's room. She found Evie reading a book. "May I come in? I promise I'm saner now."

"Come in."

"I blew it, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Are you surprised that Peter left you?"

She shook her head, and her eyes glassed over. "No," she said quietly. "I pretty much forced him out of my life. I told you when you first came here that I was apt to blow it. Well, I have. Badly. I really wish I could take back all the mean things I've said over the last six months."

"May I speak honestly with you?"

"Yes...please."

"I'm not sure what exactly you're so angry about, but it obviously had its start a long time ago, when you were young. Your anger and need for control are a habit with you. The littlest thing sets you off, and you say the meanest things..."

"You're right. I do exactly that. I don't understand why, either. It's like I know

what I'm doing is unfair, but something in me won't let it go."

"I'm not a psychologist or a counselor, but I think this may require you getting some help. It's literally destroying you, and I hurt for you, Gracie. I can't stand to see you sabotaging your life and your happiness this way."

She stared at the bed, not saying anything. Her mind played back events from over the years: the boys in middle school that made fun of her for being such a geek, awkward and shy; all the boys that practically ignored her during her high school years. No boy had even asked her on a date, never mind to the proms and the dances. Her heart constricted as sadness swelled in her.

"So what are you going to do now?" asked Evie.

"I don't know. I don't know if Peter will want to get back together with me. I guess I can only hope. I don't have the courage to call him and apologize." She got up, and paced the floor of Evie's room. "I'm really scared he'll tell me to leave him alone, and I'll be crushed. I don't think I could take any more rejection."

"Well, my only suggestion is that you pray about it in the meantime. I'm struggling with my relationship with the Father, but yours seems secure, so maybe you should talk to Him about it."

That hit her. Hard. The one thing she knew she really needed to do, she had neglected. In fact, it occurred to her that she hadn't really spent much time communing with the Lord at all lately. Now guilt added itself to everything else. "I suppose you're right, Evie. I haven't let the Lord help me."

"I hope for your sake he gives you another chance," Evie said. "But like you said, he's a grown man, and neither of us can tell him what to do."

Defeated, she said 'Good night' to Evie and walked to her room. There was not much else she could do; at least, not tonight. But cry.

As Gracie cried, two dark beings watched, satisfied with their work. VD, the tartlet from Hell high-fived her partner Poisonous.

Poisonous said, "Was I not right about the effect of the romance novels with Gracie, and Evie's loneliness? Gracie was easy: she has always been angry, and it worked right into my plans."

"Well, sweetie, that's what we're here for. I'm sure you'll think of a way. My expertise lies in leading relationships astray; and I've scored a major coup with Peter breaking up with Gracie. Also, have you noticed that Evie is full of advice, yet cannot figure out her redemption? I've kept her pride keep her from seeing the truth. Tell me I'm not good."

"You're good, VD. You're good. I, however, want a chance to add misfortune into the equation. This situation is ripe for it."

"Well, there is this rakishly handsome playboy we both happen to know, that my partner seems to have a major crush on..." Peals of fiendish laughter rolled out of her.

"Oh, stop. I won't deny that he's very handsome, but I don't want that kind of relationship with him."

"Hmmm...I think you're afraid of having your heart broken."

"You need to stop: I don't think of him that way..."

"Yeah, right." She smirked as her partner squirmed uncomfortably.

"Hmmm...well, we can wreak havoc on humans, and that's what we need to

concentrate on,” Poisonous said, as she mulled thoughts over in her mind. “Hmmm. I know one jilted young woman and a certain womanizer that need to meet each other.”

TEN

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21ST

Evie, as was her habit of late, lay on her bed and read the Bible. It was full of what she already knew about, but in her case, it seemed rather pointless. “Why do I not understand the need for redemption? I have always known The Lamb and the Father as my Lords. As for being my Savior, I’m not sure what I need to be saved from.” As she changed positions on her bed, the thoughts of the implications of redemption rolled around in her brain like moths around a flame. “Abba, this is very confusing. I need your wisdom: I know I came to earth as a daughter of Eve to find redemption, but I’m not sure what is required for redemption.” Sighing, she put the Bible down on the night stand, rolled over, and fell asleep.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15TH, THAT MORNING

Evie rose out of bed at a luxuriously late hour. Saturday mornings provided a respite from the long workweek, a weekly opportunity to relax. Her body stretched and tightened as she worked the kinks out.

“Hey Evie!” her sister yelled across the condo.

“Hold on. I'll be right there.”

Her sister, Gracie, in a better mood of late, had finally called a truce. She walked into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee. “What's up?”

“What do you say we go and hang out for coffee, and perhaps do some shopping today?”

“Sure. Sounds like fun.”

Faroh sat inside the restaurant near the Farragut North Subway Stop reading a newspaper, and drinking some coffee. He watched Evie and Gracie make an entrance. His paper put aside, he struck up a conversation. “How are you ladies doing today?” His manner was very friendly, and put them immediately at ease.

“Umm, we're fine, sir...how about you?” Gracie answered, returning his friendly greeting.

He smiled and said, “I'm doing just fine.” Evie's thoughtful silence said all he needed to know about her current situation. Deep in thought about something, which he suspected to be her relationship with Lord Yehovah and the Lamb, her eyes and demeanor put her in her own world. He also knew that recognition would hit her at any minute, but for now, she didn't say a word. “What are your names, if I may be so

bold?"

"I'm Gracie, and this is my sister, Evie."

"I'm Faroh O'Dell," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Faroh."

Evie smiled perfunctorily and murmured a small "Hi."

His attention returned to Gracie. "So what brings you ladies here today?"

"Oh, we just thought we'd take a girls day out...you know, a little brunch, a little coffee, and then on to our favorite hobby: shopping."

"Well. That sounds like fun. Hope you ladies enjoy your day."

Evie's silence hung before him like an impenetrable wall. He stared into her very soul, a very penetrating direct stare. Evie remained guarded and silent, not giving him eye contact or moving a muscle, her hands crossed in front of her.

Faroh's voice was gentle and calm. "It seems to me you're searching for answers, Evie. I know that God will show you those answers. Just be aware that you'll find the way filled with potholes. But don't worry, people are praying for you."

He turned his eyes toward Gracie. "I'm sure that includes your sister Gracie."

"You can count on that, Faroh," she said.

The conversation continued, mostly between Faroh and Gracie. Faroh let Evie continue in her thoughtful reverie, not wanting to make her uncomfortable: she needed to acclimate to a lot of human customs and practices. Even to him, this would be a lot to deal with, so he ended the conversation.

"Well, you ladies enjoy your day."

"We will," said Gracie.

Evie turned and walked away, not even bothering to look at him or say good-bye. Gracie followed behind her. Outside the coffee shop, a strong sense of déjà-vu

came over her. Wait a minute! She stopped, and looked back inside. "Excuse me a second. I'll be right back."

"No problem," said Gracie, who regarded at her with a questioning look. I need to call daddy anyway."

She marched back into the coffee shop. "Faroh! I thought that was you. What are you doing here? I haven't heard from you since I left New Jerusalem. What's going on?" Her eyes glinted.

"Hey. Easy, girl, I'm not here to make your life difficult" He frowned defensively. "Michael and I were just worried about you...that's all. We thought we'd see how you were doing."

The glibness of the remark only added to her resentment.

"Yeah right. I know you guys better than that; are you spying on me, or something? And why the sudden '*treat Evie like a stranger*' thing: you're hurting my feelings." Her chin started to quiver. "I thought you were a good friend, Faroh. Give me a break here -- what's going on?" She paused, fighting back the tears; her voice filled with emotion. "And besides, if Michael wants to see me, I'm right here. He doesn't need an invitation."

"Evie, you know Michael and I love you -- very much. Yes, even me, the stoic bachelor angel." He grinned. "We also know that you volunteered -- well, more or less -- to check out the humanity thing."

Faroh's honest answer softened her frustration. "Yeah and I've been regretting it since, trust me."

"Evie. Come here, girl." She slowly walked over to him. His strong arms engulfed her, pulling her towards him. He gave her a warm, friendly hug. "Look, I

won't pretend to understand what you're going through, but I do know this..."

Evie looked into his eyes, wanting some news she that would give her hope.

"The Father loves you," he said, "but you have a human heart, and you're going to need to figure out where your relationship with Him stands. What I said in the coffee shop was directly from Ruache Ha-Kodesh. You've got to find your way back to The Father on your own."

Her eyes narrowed in exasperation. "But how, Faroh? How? I've never been apart from the Father before. I don't have a clue what to do. Would it be asking too much for you to at least give me a hint?"

"All I can tell you is that you have the same book that Gracie does with all the answers in there. Humans call it The Bible. Read it and ask Ruache Ha-Kodesh to help you understand."

His words gently consoled her; he spoke as only a good friend would, but her discouragement wouldn't abate. "Yeah...that's it. I'm just as lost, but now I have a complicated roadmap...oh joy..." Evie sighed, mostly out of frustration, but she smiled walked over to him and hugged him hard.

"I will say that it's at least good to see you again, Faroh. I didn't realize just how much I've missed you and Michael. I've really missed you both! So please don't you two be such strangers, okay? Promise me?"

"I promise, Evie."

"And Faroh?"

"Yeah, Evie?"

"Give Michael my love and tell him I miss him dearly, will you?"

"You got it, Evie." He returned to New Jerusalem.

Suddenly, she remembered the words of her Father, who had told her He

wanted her to come back to him. He must have sent Faroh, to remind me of how much He loves me. She smiled brightly as Faroh walked away. Thank you, Abba.

Michael sat at his desk behind the situation room, going over angelic strategies for involvement in the lives of humankind, and against the hordes of Lucifer. Through the window to his office, he saw Faroh approach in the distance.

Rising, he met Faroh in the situation room. "Hi, Faroh."

"Hey, Michael. The visit to see how Evie and Gracie and how their interactions as new sisters are doing went well."

"I know you're in the habit of reporting your findings to me as your commander, the high ranking angel. Normal protocol would not allow this kind of mission, but the circumstances were a bit unusual. Michael tapped on the desk, looking at him. "So what's going on with Evie, Faroh?"

"She's still searching, Michael. Her sister and family are praying for her, and I believe my visit encouraged her. I even heard her thank Lord Yehovah."

Michael's eyebrows furrowed deeply. "Really? That's good, but we need to keep people praying for her. I'll do all I can for my sister."

Michael paused, got up, and walked towards the presentation board at the front of the room. "She may not be an angel anymore, but we still consider her part of our family, and a family looks out for those they care about."

Faroh smiled. "You can count on that, Michael; you can count on that. By the way, Evie sends her love."

Michael stared down at Washington, D.C. “Right back at you, sis.”

ELEVEN

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16TH

Evie drove Gracie to the Chen family Sunday dinner. She and Peter had decided he had better lay low until some time had passed, so he agreed not to come. They walked into the front foyer, where Aunt Florrie and Uncle Eddy talked. A few minutes later, her brother Tony and Jinx knocked on the door, and Evie let them in.

“Hey guys. How’s everything?”

Jinx gave her a warm hug. “We’re doing fine, honey. Good to see you.”

“Hey sis. Waddit do?” asked Tony.

“Tony!” Jinx gave him a hard stare.

“Umm...okay, how about, ‘How’re ya doin’, sis?’” he said.

“Oh, fine thanks. I swear: you and your Ebonics,” she said.

“Ignore him Evie. He’s just showing off,” Jinx said.

“Yes, I know.”

“Auntie Flo! What up wicha?” Tony asked, turning to his aunt.

“Oh just keepin’ it real; dealin’ on the daily,” Aunt Florrie answered, grinning.

“I swear,” she said, baffled by their unusual way of talking, as she had witnessed before at the condominium. It didn’t escape her notice that this kind of nutty behavior from her new brother frustrated his girlfriend Jinx. Confirming her thoughts, Jinx said, “I think I’m going to the den, and leave ‘MC Chopstick’ and ‘Flava Flo’ to do their thing. Good to see you again, Auntie Flo and Uncle Eddie.” She turned to Evie, still shaking her head. “Girl, you are on your own, you hear me?”

Evie had to admit that Aunt Florrie was a bit eccentric. She could live that one down: matters more important than Auntie Flo’s eccentricity weighed heavily on her mind now.

Uncle Eddie turned towards the voices in the living room. “Excuse me guys. I’m going to go join the others.”

“Alright, honey. I’ll catch up with you later.” Aunt Florrie answered.

Aunt Florrie shook her head, as a mother would to an errant child. “Evie, I have known Ms. Jaxincta Rochelle Middleton since she was five years old, and she was a prude even then. Isn’t that right, Tony?”

“Um...I’m going to plead the fifth, Auntie,” said Tony. “I have to deal with her later, seeing as how she’s my baby girl – my shorty.” His face remained determinedly neutral.

Evie came to Jinx’s defense. “Oh, I don’t know, Aunt Flo. Jinx is actually a very nice girl. I like her, in spite of her liking my brother.” She gave Tony an *I-dare-you-to-say-it* look, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Tony didn’t say anything. In her opinion, that was very wise of him.

“So. How’s my favorite nephew?” Auntie Flo asked, eyes twinkling. “I hear

you're doing well at your architectural firm, dropping some madd skills. You're making your Auntie proud."

They gave each other the requisite acknowledgements, their hands smacking and bumping each other's. Evie began to see why Jinx had left the room.

Tony answered, "You know how it is, Auntie. I'm just trying to stack my paper a little higher."

"Oh, give me some love, child" smiled Florrie. "You'll be so well-off that you'll rival your father one day."

They gave each other a big hug. Auntie Flo sighed. "Well, if we're going to join the others, especially Jinx, I guess we'll have to go back to being boughie."

She wasn't quite sure of that one. "'Boughie?' What exactly does that mean?"

Auntie Flo answered without missing a beat. "It means putting on airs, honey; acting like you're superior."

"Oh." That seemed odd to her. "Auntie Flo, none of the rest of my family acts superior, or puts on airs. Why would you say that?"

Auntie Flo smiled. "Baby, we're just having fun. We just can't do this around your family.

That's why Tony and I have to be alone sometimes – away from everyone else."

Tony took Aunt Florrie's hand in his arm, and escorted her to the den to join the rest of the family, chuckling along the way.

She laughed. This crazy family didn't take themselves too seriously. Just before she went into the living room, Aunt Florrie turned to her and called to Tony. "Baby: go on ahead. I'll catch up with you in a bit."

Aunt Florrie turned and walked back towards her. "Evie, honey, I have something I need to share with you."

"Please tell me, Aunt Florrie. I could use any helpful advice you can give."

"Baby, the Lord gave me a vision about you, just before you arrived. I saw an angel, voluntarily leaving heaven to find out about salvation, and Jesus' ransom sacrifice." Aunt Florrie paused a minute, choosing her next words carefully. "You feel estranged from the Heavenly Father, don't you, child?"

Evie could feel the pain returning; the wound re-opened afresh. "Yes. I desperately miss the Father and the Lamb, and Ruache Ha-Kodesh; if I could only figure out how to get back in their good graces." Her eyes pooled with tears. "I'm so scared and alone, even with this wonderful family here that loves me."

Aunt Florrie wiped her tears. "There, there, baby. I understand." Wisdom gained by many years of life and learning shone in those dark brown eyes. "You must trust the Father and make the redemption of The Lamb your own."

"But how?" More frustration filled her. "I was always in His presence before. I don't know how to make that redemption mine."

"It's as simple as asking, honey. Just ask Him for Jesus' redemption." Florrie hugged her.

"I will, I promise, Aunt Florrie. You've really helped me feel better." She managed a weak smile, and hugged Aunt Florrie tightly. She and Aunt Florrie joined the others in the living room. In her mind, she saw the door to the Throne Room open a crack. A glimmer of bright light shone through as hope seeped into her dry and weary soul.

Father, please show me how to make the salvation of the Lamb my own. And Abba, I want you to hug me again.

Michael heard the summons in the midst of a battle with Lucifer's best soldiers in the Middle East. Turning to his subordinate generals, he said, "I'm leaving this to you Squadron Commanders. I have to make an appearance at the Throne Room." His face turned to New Jerusalem, and he took flight.

As he approached the throne room, the twenty-four elders, the seven blazing lamps and the four living creatures came into view. The four living creatures busily chanted their continual refrain, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." The twenty-four elders added to the worship. The Lamb was sitting on the right of Lord IAM, and the Holy Spirit of God sat to His left.

Lord Yehovah spoke first. "Approach, faithful servant and commander of your Lord's armies; we have unusual matters to discuss."

Michael followed the proper protocol, and bowed low. "What do you require of your servant, my Lord?"

"You see, Michael, we have a situation here. We have sent one of your fellow angels to join the humans, and this is without precedent. We can't give her any special preference; we don't with any other human man or woman." He gestured towards the rest of New Jerusalem. "Evie shares a curiosity with many other angels here in Heaven, and this is natural, but I would not want them to mistake having a human heart for anything other than what it really is: troubled and corrupted by a fallen world in a fallen state since the fall of the first man and woman. Salvation comes at a great cost." Lord Yehovah turned towards the Lamb. "Wouldn't you agree my firstborn among many, and only begotten?"

The Lamb answered solemnly, "Yes, Father. Salvation has a cost for all involved. I paid that cost."

"Therefore," Lord Yehovah continued, "I want you to be my eyes and ears on Evie, and report your intelligence back to Operations Central, where there will be a daily update on the progress of the human apprentice. My Spirit will disseminate it to all the inhabitants of New Jerusalem, no matter how repulsive it may seem."

He bowed low. "Yes, of course, my Lord. She was always one of my more faithful commanders. I have a great desire to learn from her experience myself. I'm sure I wouldn't do much better if I were in her shoes." He knew that he couldn't. Nevertheless, he made up his mind to keep a very close eye on Evie. The image of the pain he had seen Evie go through made him pause. He could not feel what she did, since his situation was not like Evie's, but he could see the pain that the separation from the Father had caused her, and it sobered him a great deal. In spite of it all, he admired his sister. She was still braver than he would ever be, and was a hero to him. You've given up a lot to gain something we'll never totally understand, but take great joy in: salvation.

Lucifer, being the arrogant creature that he was, didn't wear a robe like other angels: he wore an expensive suit, shoes, tie, and jewelry. His self-importance showed in not only in his manner, but also in his presentation. He had been watching these developments from the beginning. "Yes...yes...another to be lured into an eternity of Hell...and this one was an angel of the Light; all the more delicious!" He would never have thought the opportunity to bring down one of the ranks of heaven could be his. He

summoned his principality of North America, Atlantic Coast Division.

“Indulgence, you must send soldiers from the Insecurity unit, the Rebellion unit, and the Self Pity unit; they must be assigned to this young angel turned daughter of Eve immediately.” There was no mistaking the seriousness in his tone.

Indulgence replied, “At once, your Evilness.” He immediately turned on his heels and flew away to summon the necessary troops to be dispatched to Evie within a few thoughts worth.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22TH EARTH TIME

The Lamb spoke very pointedly to The Father. “You know, Father, this may be a battle for the soul of our dauntless warrior-turned human, but I don't intend to stand idly by and just let Lucifer and his minions have a free hand with Evie. I intend to work on the hearts to the two dark angels directly assigned to her.”

Lord Yehovah turned to him and frowned. “Don't you think that is interfering, son?”

“Oh, no. The prayers of the saints go up for her, and I can respond to them as best suits the situation. In this case, two dark souls are going to feel my work, mark my words.”

“I don't doubt your words, but I don't understand why you would take a special interest in these two workers of evil.”

He turned to the Father and faced him directly. “You see, Righteous Father: there is no protocol that dictates how I influence the lives of those two dark angels. I

call to mind Saul as an example. I intervened in his situation as well. They have rebelled, to be sure, but they are not beyond my power to change things.” He paused, and walked towards his Father. “I remember when VD was Virtue Seeker. She was a very tender-hearted angel, who loved others without reservation.” He smiled warmly. “You see, Father: I still see that same tenderness in her dark heart. I want to encourage that tenderness to return.”

“Again, I understand, but why?”

He smiled as his glory shone forth even brighter, which usually happened as a plan he designed got underway. “Because, my Father, Ever Vigilant is not the only angel who will find out about salvation.”

VD followed as Evie walked home, bouncing with each step from the effect of wearing seven-inch platform stiletto heels. “Oh boy, am I enjoying ruining your life. In fact I can’t wait to do more; Velma worked nicely into my plans.” She sneered derisively and rubbed her hands together with anticipation. Stopping briefly, she found herself reflecting on her former days. “I once was called Virtue Seeker, and knew the same favor as you: I was a holy angel.” A smile reflected her once happy state, but she quickly suppressed the smile and her gentle thoughts of an era gone by, returning to her rant.

“But I listened to Lucifer, and my lot has been one of a second class citizen ever since.” For a microsecond, regret and sadness passed through her wretched soul; but she regained control, and her countenance once more took on the pitch-black emptiness of the dead soul behind it. “And you, you stupid angel: you’re going to discover what it

means to be cast out of Lord Yehovah's good graces."

A glare of contempt burned at Evie. "Bah! You may have once been a mighty warrior, but you wanted to be like these pitiful cockroaches called humans." She cackled loud and long. "Watch your step, sweetie. No one falls into my clutches and gets out of them unscathed."

Then, ostensibly resting, she sat down and took some time to think. Virtue Destroyer's thoughts returned to her time as Virtue Seeker, a very beautiful angelic being who wore a pure white robe, had a bright and shining countenance, and loved unconditionally with a tender heart. The beauty of the thought overwhelmed her. Tears filled her eyes against her will. Her chin quivered, and she started crying, many epochs of deeply hidden pain finding its way out of her.

Suddenly, she gasped, jerked herself up, cursed and wiped her eyes. "Curse these thoughts!"

The images in her head made her shudder, no matter how hard she willed them away. Now, as Virtue Destroyer, she preferred her alluring look. All her human charges fell into the dark prison of her deception, and she did her job well, even if her victims never saw her; except for those occasions where she took on human appearance, and had a brief dalliance with a Son of Adam. Turning back in Evie's direction, she said, "You see, sweetie, I'm going to use everything I've got to bring you down." Her hands rose up slowly and wrapped around her chest, followed by her aiming her index finger directly at Evie's heart. "And I will bring you down." She nodded to herself. "Oh yes, cursed angel, by all that is evil...I will bring you down." Then, sad and guilty thoughts overwhelmed her.

She ran to an alley, hid behind a dumpster, and slumped down. Then she buried

her head in her hands and sobbed bitterly. What she hadn't noticed was that the Son of the Heavenly Father had been in her presence, pricking at her heart.

The Lamb walked behind VD, silently, effortlessly; his whole being glowing with a pure radiance that only One so holy could produce. He hid his glory from VD, but smiled with satisfaction at the effect he achieved by putting hope in the dark heart of this evil angel unaware.

TWELVE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24TH

Lying in bed that night, she thought of her eldest brother in New Jerusalem and among humankind. “Lamb of God, you said you were proud of me when I left. You said your love would guide me. Do you still love me?”

I do, Evie. Come back to me.

“I want to, Eldest Brother. But how?”

I will show you. You must trust me.

His answer frustrated her; she had also heard it before from the Father. It still made her sad and discouraged. Although she tried to understand, she felt the tears run down her face. Only after a long time of fighting the sadness did she finally fall asleep.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 26TH

Having enjoyed celebrating Christmas with her new family, some time at the *Après Café* appealed to Evie: she needed time to think. Walking in the door to the *Après Café*, two familiar men came into view. Apparently, Michael and Faroh were 'slumming' it in the *Après Café*. "Michael? Faroh?" She couldn't contain herself. She ran towards them with all her might.

They both looked up in time to see her coming directly towards Michael. She gave him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Michael. Oh my gracious. You have no idea how much I've missed you."

Michael just smiled. "Let's face it sis, I can't stay away from you very long, or I'll miss having someone tease me."

"Well, thanks a lot!" She gave him a mock hard stare. "Look here, you brat. You're not going to get away with that. I'm allowed to miss you: I'm your sister."

"Okay, I'll admit it. I've missed you too," said Michael. "So...how are things?"

"Things are okay, I guess. I'm still struggling with how to obtain redemption. I'm sure the answer is simple, but for now it escapes me." She turned to Michael, who studied her seriously. "What's wrong, Michael?"

"Take courage, sister. We may not be around a lot, but you can be sure we will always love you, and want the best for you. Keep looking for the Father, and you'll find Him. Honestly."

"Really?" She dared be hopeful. "Gosh, Michael. I miss Him so badly, I could cry." In fact, her eyes glassed over even as she spoke.

Michael hugged her gently. "You'll find him. I can at least promise that."

"Thanks, Michael. That means a lot to me. I don't know if I would've made it this far without you and Faroh."

“That’s what big brothers are for, dear sister.”

Faroh smiled. “Take care Evie.”

“I’m trying, guys. Pray for me.”

“You can count on it” Michael assured her. With that, the two angelic visitors returned to New Jerusalem.

Evie couldn’t help but feel a little better about things. Maybe she would figure out how to get back to the Father’s good graces after all. She walked home smiling and singing a happy song to herself.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28TH

“So...have you heard anything from Peter, anyway?”

She didn’t answer right away. She usually tried to avoid this loaded subject “I wouldn’t know, Gracie. I haven’t seen him lately.” She needed to change this subject quickly. Gracie frowned, lines creasing her forehead, and her chin started quivering.

She didn’t want her to break down again. The last time this happened, it had been a nightmare.

TWO DAYS EARLIER

Evie walked into the living room, and found Gracie on the couch, crying. She knew what it was about, but she figured she’d better at least humor her a little.

“What’s wrong, Gracie?”

“I miss him.”

How was she going to answer that question. *Abba, please give me wisdom.*

“Gracie, I don’t have a quick answer for that. All I can say is that you’ll have to figure out what to do with your relationship with Peter. You might want to do some soul searching, and try to learn from this.”

Gracie just started crying more. “Yes, I know,” she choked, “I have to learn to control my anger, which comes from being insecure. It’s hard Evie. I’m trying, but in the meantime, I feel like there’s a big hole in me without Peter in my life.”

“Seems to me, you need to fill that hole with the love of The Father; only he can truly give you what you need,”

“You’re right, Evie. Thanks. It’s hard, but I know I need to do it.”

Evie walked back towards her bedroom, and asked The Father to heal her new sister’s heart.

She hummed her way back into the condo. She had spent a nice evening with Carlo and some of her colleagues at the Language Institute, although Velma was conspicuously absent. She couldn’t figure out why Velma seemed so cold to her: they had had such a wonderful conversation when they first met. Her coat returned to its usual place in the closet, and she walked into her room. The clip in her hair went back to its place on the vanity, and the familiar, insecure voice started again.

“So how’d it go?”

The whine in Gracie’s voice made annoyance rise in her. “It was very nice. We

had a wonderful time.”

Gracie smiled wistfully. “I remember when I used to have wonderful times.”

Her patience had reached an end. “Gracie. Look. You and Peter aren’t dating any more. You need to get that into your head, and quit coming to me and moping about how rosy everything used to be. Move on with your life!”

Gracie reddened. “I think you put the thoughts in his head. I noticed you eyeing him as though you wanted him.”

She really lost it now. “Look. For your information, Peter broke up with you of his own free will. You blew it, Gracie. Face it. Why don’t you just learn from it and do better next time?”

Gracie’s chin quivered. “Thanks a lot. You’ve made my life miserable.” She ran back to her bedroom, slamming the door behind herself.

Evie let it go. Prolonging the pity party Gracie threw for herself always proved a disaster. Instead, she put on her pajamas, went to bed and smiled thinking of the night’s events.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 1ST 2008

The opening night of Frank Chen’s new restaurant, *Le Chateau Bleu*, had finally arrived. He walked in and surveyed the scene, eyes honing in on two attractive Asian women, stunning in their shiny, elegant evening dresses. A young man, apparently related to them, didn’t look too shabby in his tuxedo. His eyes re-focused on the women, especially the older one. *Oh my. Things are looking up: attractive woman on the horizon.*

This portends some serious sack time in the future. It's been a while, and I intend to make the best of this.

The two women walked to a sushi bar to sample some of the wares there, chatting with each other. He was sure he had caught their attention when the shorter one looked at him first. These kinds of affairs offered opportunities to impress people, and he intended to do just that. He had cultivated the best looks and appearance that money could buy. A silk suit and tie adorned his form, and Gucci loafers his feet. A Cartier watch glimmered on his wrist, and perfectly straight and white teeth flashed a thousand watt smile. Eyebrows trimmed just so, nails perfectly shaped and buffed to shine with a highly polished gloss acted as his accessories. Coiffed hair to the tune of \$125.00 covered his head, and not a single hair was out of place.

As he got closer to the two women, he heard the shorter one say to the taller one, "Don't look now, but there is a gorgeous specimen walking our way."

The taller one started reprimanding the shorter one. "You are such an incorrigible flirt! I must admit, though: this guy *is* seriously hot. But ought to be ashamed of yourself, big sister."

The shorter one punched the taller sister playfully in the arm. "Hey. I recognize the kind: all charm and not substance. He'd be nothing but a heart break. What's more, I'm not sure he's a believer, either."

He approached, concealing the fact that he had heard their banter with him as the subject. Turning on his characteristic charm, he said, "Hello. How are you lovely ladies this evening? I must say, you're both very easy on the eyes." He paused for effect. "My name is Shane...Shane Logan. And you?"

The taller one spoke first. "Hi, Shane. Lovely to meet you, I'm sure. I'm Evelyn Chen, and this is my sister, Grace Chen. We were just enduring all of the boring

conversations about investments, office politics and hostile takeovers. You know: the normal business drone...seems like our evening may have just become more interesting with a break from all the drone about business.”

Shane turned up the charm, smiling broadly. “I believe the pleasure is truly mine. What finds you here, other than enduring office politics?”

Grace seemed interested. He wanted nothing more than to oblige her. His eyes feasted on her features, and drank her in thirstily. He had already pictured tasting more of her charms in his mind; so he made it his goal to get in Gracie's good graces, and from the look on her face, they shared the same sentiment.

Grace spoke now. “Daddy is the owner of this restaurant, and we thought we'd come here for moral support, not to mention the fact the we were dying of curiosity to see not only the restaurant, but what kind of people would come. Now the politics may be boring, but the people certainly aren't – present company notwithstanding.”

Grace's flirtation bode well for things to come.

“It seems like everyone here has something interesting we could use to blackmail them, should we be so inclined,” she observed.

He continued the pursuit, following her lead. “Oh dear!” He put his hand over his mouth in mock horror. “I guess I'd better be on my best behavior or the next thing I know, I'll be on the front page of one of those gossip rags, involved in some huge scandal.” The act continued with mock seriousness. “I can just see it now: *'Young up and coming businessman put under arrest by two gorgeous sisters, for being indiscrete.'* I might also add that you two look a formidable duo. I guess I'd better watch my step -- for now.” A sly smile followed his remarks.

“You sir, are incorrigible,” Gracie said, grinning.

Shane smiled. "I meant no harm." Putting out his hand to shake Gracie's, he said, "Well, it has sincerely been a pleasure meeting you, Evelyn and Grace. Perhaps we shall meet again?"

Evie said, "Well, as long as you don't mind me inviting our friends as well."

Evelyn had thrown down the gauntlet, so he rose to her challenge. His shoulders shrugged as he smiled. "Hey, the more, the merrier! In fact, here is my business card. Email me with your phone numbers, if you're amenable, and I'll respond. I'm serious about getting together some time. I seem to have a knack for ending up at functions with my dad's crowd. It would be nice to hang out more often with people nearer my age. Be good ladies...and go easy with your blackmailing." His eyes twinkled. "I really am a nice guy." With that, he turned to leave.

Grace called out after him, "Oh...and you can call me Gracie."

He turned around and flashed pearly whites that only a dentist could create. "Sounds good, Gracie." He disappeared up the stairs.

After Shane had disappeared from sight, Evie said, "He seems to be a very smooth operator. Snakes in the grass are in the same category. I'd be careful about getting involved with a guy like that. My Angelic Intuition is throwing up red flags all over the place."

Gracie shook her head in agreement. "Yep. He's a snake alright; handsome, but a heartbreaker."

"Keep that in mind," she said, eyeing her sister warily.

"Alright, already. I get your point."

"You'd better. I'm keeping my eye on you."

"Yes, momma," Gracie said with mock obeisance. "I'll be a good girl."

THURSDAY, JANUARY 3RD

In the living room, she found Gracie curled up on the couch with her nose buried in her latest romance novel. Evie's head shook, but she decided it would be better to leave it alone; instead, she just walked over to the couch, sat down beside her older sister, and hugged her.

"I'm glad you have finally let go of Peter. It's so much nicer when we all can actually enjoy each other's company. By the way, I invited my friend Carlo from work over tonight."

"No problem; and you're right: it's actually difficult to expend that much emotional energy uselessly. I'm ready to move on."

"I'm really happy to hear that, Gracie. Honestly."

A few minutes later, Carlo walked in and sat down next to her. The trio watched one of those medical shows, with a handsome male lead actor, whose character had just entered the scene.

"Uh oh. Here we go," she thought, mentally rolling her eyes. She could feel Gracie about to fall into her feel-first, think later mindset, and she just lay low, watching events unfold.

"Now *he's* cute, said Gracie. "In fact, he's *hot!*"

Silence ensued for a few seconds. "Would you date somebody like that?" she asked.

Gracie started right in. "Well, given the right circumstances, I suppose...I mean, I would have to get to know him first, of course—."

“But would you go out on a date with him simply because he’s handsome?”

Gracie looked at her for a second. “Sure. Why not?”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you actually liked the guy? I mean, if all you like about him are his looks, what do you do in that kind of relationship?”

Gracie, obviously caught in her own lustful ways, looked away, and then flinched. “Okay, okay. I’m naughty. I’ll admit it. Just quit looking at me like that. You’re making me feel guilty.”

Evie’s eyes remained expressionless and stoic while Gracie fidgeted even more. “Carlo! Help me,” Gracie pleaded.

“Hey, you’re on your own on this one,” he said.

She had made a strong point, and done it quietly. Carlo watched intently as she continued to heat her sister over the coals and turn the spit.

“You see, relationships will last only if you invest in the person you’re having the relationship with: not controlling them, but really getting to know them. It’s like dating a guy like Shane Logan: if you only see his handsomeness, you’re in for a world of hurt.”

“Thank you, Ms. Chen. But I think I’m old enough to figure out how my relationships need to work.”

“Well, I sincerely hope they work; that’s where the rubber meets the road.”

Gracie averted her eyes from hers, and looked forlornly down at the floor, surrendering. “I guess I’m not very good at that, am I?” Gracie turned her glistening eyes to her. “Well, I think I’m going to my room now.” She got up abruptly, and left.

Carlo turned to her, looking straight into her eyes. “Don’t waste energy worrying about her. She’ll have to find out on her own how to make her relationships work. We can’t codependently enable her every time she fails.”

“Yes. That’s fair.

She returned from the kitchen, with a drink for herself and Carlo, who took his drink, and she sat back down next to him.

“I’m amazed Evie,” said Carlo. You really let Gracie have it, but managed to be diplomatic about it, even when she obviously won’t listen. She’s so proud.”

She smiled and let her ‘steely blues’ gently bore deep into his. “She loves much who has been forgiven much. Trust me; I’ve had Gracie lay into me on more occasions than I care to remember. I can make my point without having to wound someone doing it.”

“You’re amazing that way; I still can’t understand how you do it.”

“You just remember to do to others as you want them to do to you.”

Carlos smiled and said, “When you’re right, you’re right. Touché, Ms. Chen.”

“Thank you.”

In her room, she sat on her bed, lost in thought. Her friend Carlo and her new family made her happy, but she still missed the One who always comforted her in her quiet moments. Do you still love me, Abba?

Yes. I do

The thought of his warm love toward her made her miss Him even more. Tears ran down her eyes as she fell asleep.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 4TH

Evie, as she walked toward her desk stopped by Carlo's office. "How was Gracie after last night's indictment of her wayward behavior?"

"Oh, she's fine. She has her moments, but she gets past them. She's dealing with the fact that she lost Peter by letting her pride and her anger get the better of her."

"Well, Peter is probably better off – at least for now. I'm sure one day Gracie and Peter will figure things out, and try to work things out."

"Speaking of relationships, do you consider me a good friend?" "Of course Evie. You are a very special friend. I'm very into you."

"Do you think that we could become better friends?"

Carlo said nothing at first, staring uncomfortably away. Then, he said, "Well, I'm not exactly sure of what you mean by that. I'll admit I wouldn't mind taking you out sometime."

"Well, that's sweet of you. I look forward to it."

Smiling at her revelation, Carlo said, "You understand, of course, that I'm not perfect by any means. I have my moments; just like Gracie. Only not quite so intense, obviously." They both laughed.

"Well, I'm not perfect either. I live in this world, and it's fallen. Apparently, I am too."

That empty feeling reared its dark head again. She didn't know exactly how to feel about all this. Yet, her relationship with her Father and The Lamb came into question again. All she could do was speak from her old experiences.

"I know God very well. I just don't know where He is now. I don't know where

I stand with Him.”

“He’s as near as your next prayer.”

She smiled, but didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what she felt about God at this point, to tell the truth. *It’s not fair, Father. Why can’t you love me as you did?*

Maybe one day she would be able to talk freely with Him again, but she wasn’t sure how, and Lord Yehovah wasn’t making it any easier. Worse, Carlo might be taking her focus off her finding the Father again. “Thanks for the encouragement Carlo. It’s still difficult for me to figure this out. But I will pray to the Father about it.”

Smiling, she said, “Talk to you later.” Then very tongue in cheek, she added, “...and I’ll be waiting for that call for an evening together.” In her office, she fought back the frustration. She wouldn’t admit it to herself, but deep down she wanted even more to be able to talk to Him, and have Him hold her in His arms, as she had just before she went into self-initiated exile.

Carlo frowned and looked away from his work. It disturbed him that talking about the Lord bothered Evie so much. He really cared about her. *Good grief, I feel like her brother.* The truth was, whether he could admit it to himself or not, he cared a great deal for her. He instinctively knew better than to stand in her way. She needed to figure this out for herself. If he stood in her way, she’d only resent him for it. His brow furrowed, he rubbed his eyes, both from fatigue and from the emotional stress he felt.

His own sister had rebelled against the Lord, and tried to find happiness in guys that used her badly. The memories came flooding back as though they were yesterday.

He cringed at the images he saw in his mind of his sister Celeste in great emotional pain, yet unable to stop it. Only prayer had pulled his sister Celeste through, and only prayer would pull Evie through. He just needed the Lord to help him remember that.

He could still remember the great relief that went through him as his wayward sister gave up that fight and gave her chaotic life to Jesus' lordship. Evie all too vividly reminded him of Celeste. This would probably be a long road for Evie. He didn't like it, but he knew she was going to have to be broken.

He remembered reading in Psalms, *'My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.'* Evie was going to have to be willing to deal with her pride before she could find the redemption she wanted. Then he realized that this was the Lord's battle, and not his.

SATURDAY JANUARY 5TH

Having just finished and passing her driving test earlier that morning, Evie went for her maiden voyage in her car. Cars beeped and honked at her impatiently. They quickly whizzed around her and past her.

"All right, all *right!* Give me a break!"

Trembling, she managed to get out of the way of the speeding daredevils who passed for everyday commuters during the workweek in the District of Columbia. Driving unnerved her, especially having other cars wanting to force her to drive faster, and most of the drivers in the District of Columbia were, in Evie's opinion, in too much of a hurry to get anywhere.

After her first harrowing experience driving, Evie wobbled into the condo, still

shaking from the experience. As Gracie walked into the living room, she held onto the counter in the kitchen. "Instead of driving a car, couldn't I just transport myself from one place to another? I might live longer if I did, don't you think?"

Gracie laughed. "That's just the way it is with our limited abilities. We do the best with what we've got, and learn to live with it."

"You humans are indeed strange creatures. You want to live long, happy lives yet you do insane things: you murder each other, steal from each other, and drive in these death contraptions you call cars. You're such contradictions, as you once quoted Paul as saying."

Gracie sighed. "Yep. You're right. We are indeed strange creatures. But as the old saying goes, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.'"

"I suppose, but I'm not even sure what the 'Romans' do." She faced the floor, afraid to look at Gracie. "Besides...I really want to be an angel in New Jerusalem, serving Lord Yehovah again, and have the Father hold me and tell me he loves me. You'll never know just how wonderful that felt."

"I can only imagine. But I do know, that if you let Him, he will hold you again...almost as if you were directly in his presence. You just need to reconcile yourself to the Father. And you should know how."

"I know what the Scriptures say, but I don't see why I need to do that. I've had a relation with Him all my life. I don't see that as being necessary for me."

Gracie's eyes squinted, and her hands jutted towards her. "No, Evie. You *won't* see why it's necessary. Better get used to it; you're human with a fallen heart."

Conviction weighed upon her, but her heart wouldn't hear the truth. Pride was another affliction to deal with.

VD grinned with delight as Evie once again listened to her lies about her familiarity with Lord Yehovah. "I just love it. The plan for redemption is right in front of you, and with my help, you refuse to see it. Oh, this is delicious." She turned to her partner, Poisonous. "For an angel, she certainly is gullible. By Lucifer, I might even have her lusting for Carlo's body, if I play my cards right."

"I'm not so sure you could handle that as well as me," Poisonous retorted. "I am a lust nymph and lust and sexual fantasy are what I do best. Why don't you just leave those things to the pro? Okay, sweetie?" Poisonous smiled very condescendingly at her.

"Look, cow. I mislead, and I can *also* put lustful suggestions in their mind as well, honey, so back up offa me, you hear me?" She balled her fists, steeling herself for a fight. "And besides, when was the last time you deceived someone into doing something wrong, and not just injecting your victims with lust?"

Poisonous curled her fingers and her claw-like fingernails. "You dare insult me? Would you like to feel my wrath?"

"Bring it on, cur..."

She and Poisonous launched into a scratching, kicking, and screaming catfight. The air filled with snarling, cursing, and fists flying. What they didn't see was Politically Correct, the Prince of the District of Columbia casting a dark shadow as he descended towards them. A loud, guttural lion's roar expressed his displeasure, capturing both of their attention. Their fight stopped.

"I need not remind you ladies that if you disrupt the plan to keep Evie from

redemption or drag her and Carlo into a lustful affair, there will be more than just Hell to pay. You'll answer to me." His perfunctory smile did not match the cold menace in his eyes. "Do we understand each other, ladies?"

VD realized that neither she nor Poisonous were a match for demonic princes: they were very large, very strong and very evil. She tried to stay away from them, and especially Principalities, which controlled regions or even countries. She had seen one of them before as well, and thankfully, only from a distance. They could crush her to an oily puddle on the ground with very little effort.

"Yes, PC. We understand you," they both said.

"Good. Now why don't you two ladies run along and fulfill your duties? Try to work together from now on. I would hate to have to take correctional measures: none of us would enjoy that, now would we?"

"No, my lord. Not at all."

"Now *BE GONE!*" Politically Correct thundered.

She and Poisonous slinked away, not looking back at the prince of D.C. They didn't speak another word to each other for quite a while.

MONDAY, JANUARY 6TH 10:30

Michael stood before Lord Yehovah ready to make another report. "My Lord. Mighty Warrior Security serves us well as a cover for keeping surveillance on Evie. Nonetheless, I'm very concerned about her. The demons, especially VD, are doing their best to blind Evie to her need to ask for forgiveness and give her life to you.

Father, why does my little sister not see?"

Lord Yehovah smiled. "You see, son: no prize ever means anything unless one gains it by force. If Evie doesn't have to earn her redemption, it will mean nothing."

"I understand, My Lord." He bowed and walked away. Evie would have to come out of this on her own. He believed in his heart of hearts that she would overcome her doubts. Nevertheless, it would cost her emotional bruises and scars in the process. It had to be that way; but he didn't have to like it.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8TH

Along with being a family law attorney, Gracie executed of all major decisions made by her father. She also, just for making matters convenient, executed the duties of a notary public, and witnessed all major decisions and contracts her dad entered into.

She sat at her desk, reviewing the contract between her father's company and Mighty Warrior security. The corporate lawyers in the sister office across town reviewed all the paperwork submitted by, and subsequently returned to Gracie.

Mike Angelo and Frank Chen walked into at the law offices of Halbreath, Petrovich, and Chang.

"Hello, Miss. Mr. Angelo and I are here to meet with Grace Chen. We have an appointment at ten o'clock," said Frank.

"I'll let her know you're here," the secretary responded.

"Your ten o'clock is here." She said into the phone." A pause. "I'll send them right back."

After reviewing the contract, Gracie said, "Looks like all is in order..." She called up her secretary Laurie, and said, "Show the gentlemen in, please."

"Right away, Ms. Chen."

She gestured to Frank and 'Mike Angelo.'

"Come in, gentlemen. Please...make yourselves comfortable. So daddy...Mr....uh...what was your name again?"

"Michael Angelo" Michael answered. "But you can call me Mike.'

She smiled graciously. "Sure, Mike. Anyway, I was about to say that we can go ahead and get this matter settled in short order."

Then she set down to work, getting all the necessary signatures and adding her notary information. The process passed quickly and efficiently. Frank thanked Mike and gave her a peck on the cheek, and excused himself. After Frank had disappeared around the corner, Michael said, "Oh, and by the way Gracie...thank you for the compliment." He let it sink in a few moments.

Gracie blinked in embarrassment, trying to figure out who this guy really was. "Okay. I'm kinda lost here." She tried to think of how he would know her. She studied his visage: his curly blonde locks, bright blue eyes, and square, determined jaw. "Help me out here, Mike. Have we met—" She stopped in mid-sentence; her mouth dropped and gaped open. Recognition hit her hard, like a sledgehammer pounding on a flea. "Oh my Lord in Heaven" she gasped.

Michael put a finger over his lips, signaling that he did not want her to broadcast her newfound knowledge. "Try not to arouse any undue attention to me, Gracie. Yes, I am Michael, and I'm here because the Trinity has put in motion a plan to keep up with Evie's progress."

“Wow! The Trinity is watching her every move?”

His voice grew softer as he looked around. “Yes. This information, for obvious reasons, must stay between you and me and a select few others.”

“Sure. You have my word on it.”

He paused, quiet for a few moments. “This kind of thing has no precedent in Heaven, so we’re taking very careful notes of all that is going on. You might say it is going to be a book similar to your Bible. In your bible, the Lord communicated to the nation of Israel; both those few who came from the descendants of Abraham, and those who are of the nation of Israel by spiritual in grafting. We are compiling a similar book for the angels... *The Book of Angels*, you might say.”

When he smiled, his bright blue eyes sparkled, which didn’t escape her notice. “This sounds unbelievable. I love Evie very much, but I guess I forgot just how much she is loved by her family in Heaven.”

“Oh she is. Especially by me.” He paused. He was getting misty eyed.

“I didn’t realize how much you care about Evie. She’s really special to you, isn’t she?”

“Yes. I’ve known her since we were both new angels. She was always ready to fight in battle.”

“Aw-w-w-w. That’s so sweet!” She shyly turned away as soon as she had made that remark. “I hope I didn’t embarrass you by saying that.”

“It’s okay, Gracie. I don’t mind anyone knowing how much I care about Evie.”

Michael’s face turned sober. “But back to the business at hand. We don’t want it to seem glamorous to be human. We want it to be the truth. We figure this might answer a lot of questions, and head off a mass exodus of more angelic expatriates”

“Well Michael,” she offered, “if there is anything you’d like me to do, please let me know.”

“Just pray, Gracie; you, your family and friends. It’ll make a great difference in Evie’s life.”

I’ll make a concerted effort to do just that.”

“Great! As one who responds to such prayers, I know the Father will answer them. She will experience salvation, but at a great cost. We can’t guide her directly, but she can be guided by prayer.”

He turned to leave. “Oh, and one more thing.” He was smiling now. You’re an attractive young woman yourself.” He grinned, and then disappeared from sight.

Back at her desk, Gracie still shook after having met Michael up close and personally. It was one thing to have seen Michael from a distance; it was quite another to talk with him face to face, as though she were talking to a human friend of hers. To top it all off, she had called him a ‘hottie’ the first time they had met and he had just returned the favor in a very gracious way. The blood rose in her face. She blushed furiously and had to shut her door.

“Hold all calls for a while, Laurie.”

“Holding, Gracie.”

Deep in the recesses of her memory, she remembered that events in her past had tarnished her ‘beauty’. She felt very guilty all of the sudden about recent events. She was no real angel herself; but wasn’t she obliged to help Evie not to make the same mistakes she made? *It’s all so confusing, Lord.*

A gentle voice somewhere in her spirit spoke to her.

Keep praying, and trust me.

THIRTEEN*WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8TH*

Evie walked in from work, removed her coat, and, seeing Gracie in the living room, alighted next to her.

“How was your day?” Gracie asked.

“It was okay. I had another talk with Carlo about salvation. I’m sorry, but I still don’t understand why it would apply to me. The Lamb has always been my Savior, and I have had no sin to need to repent of. I get tired of hearing the same old litany: ‘*Make Jesus Christ you Lord and Savior.*’ I don’t understand why people keep telling me that. I *do* know that I miss The Lamb and The Father, and wish I could go back home.”

Gracie looked at her with stern eyes. “Evie: let me make one thing perfectly clear. You’re not going back home until you die, or the Lord takes you home in the Rapture. In the meantime, you are human, not an angel, and you need to be redeemed. You can’t get around that, no matter what you think. You need to get past your pride,

and whining about how you miss The Lamb and The Father, and realize that you can be back in their good graces by accepting the fact that you're human, and make Jesus your Lord and Savior. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." She answered meekly. "I still don't understand why I need to make Jesus The Lamb my Lord or Savior, but I guess I'll have to figure that out for myself."

"Quite honestly," Gracie retorted, "there's nothing to figure out. The only thing that stands in your way is your stubborn pride. If you'd be willing to get past that, the Lord would reveal the truth to you."

Now her anger had been provoked. "Well, you think what you want. I'm going to my room." She got up from the couch, and turned to look at Gracie. "And thanks for nothing." Before Gracie could say another word, she stormed off to her room.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9TH

Sitting in her office, Gracie mulled over the work at hand. Her phone broke into her thought process, and after three rings, she picked up the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Hi Gracie. This is Shane Logan. I thought I'd give you a call, and see if we could get together sometime."

"That probably wouldn't be a good idea," she said.

"Why not?"

"Look Shane, you're a smooth operator, and I'm not into guys like that."

"Then I tell you what: why don't you bring along your friends and family, so that you won't feel like it's a one-on-one situation and that I'm trying to take advantage

of you.”

“Oh, I suppose so. As long as you and I aren't alone together.”

“How about this: why don't we meet at the *Cheesecake Factory* on Western Avenue and Wisconsin...say this Saturday at about 12:30? I'll round up a few of my friends from church, and we can have a nice little luncheon and visit for a while. What do you think?”

“That would be great. I'll just need to tell my sister so she and her friend Carlo can confirm and we'll all see you there.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11TH

They all arrived at the *Cheesecake Factory* at 12:30.

Shane looked over the new acquaintances. “Hi everyone; I brought my sister Bibi and her boyfriend, Jason Waterston along.”

“I also brought my sister, her friend Carlo, my brother and his girlfriend Jinx. Hope you don't mind,” Gracie said.

“Oh please don't apologize,” Shane reassured her. “It's not a problem at all. I believe I said last time, *'the more the merrier.'*”

Shane looked at Jinx and for a moment, and the well-rehearsed, blind, inbred hatred started playing in his mind, as if on cue. Why don't these people stay in their own world? We work hard for what we have, and are proud of it. We didn't get to be as well off as we are by expecting handouts. His father always said, “Shane, it's a reprehensible thing to live off the hard work of others. Stay out of the worlds of those

who have no ambition, and even if they do, they feel entitled to what they receive.”

He agreed. They dress themselves up, wear expensive clothes, assimilate into the upper classes, and move into one of our neighborhoods, but in the end, they're all the same. They have no right to intrude on my world. He would do everything in his power to be sure it stayed that way. He caught himself, realizing that his view of people had been largely tainted by his father, and changed his face into a very friendly one and turned on his trademark charm. “Nice to meet you, Jinx,” he said, extending his hand in a handshake.

The brief look in his eyes did not elude Jinx. She had come across that look too many times in too many patronizing people like him – men or women – it didn't seem to matter. *They smile in your face, but expect you to be happy with second best. You can be more educated, make more money, and speak and act in a perfectly refined manner, but they exclude you from their world, both professionally and socially.*

It never stopped getting her goat. She knew not all people were like this, but there were just enough to be a burr in her side. The Holy Spirit convicted her. At first, she argued about the unfairness of it all, but after a while, grudgingly gave in. Oh, all right! You did say we should love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and even pray for those who spitefully use us. I need a great deal of your grace now, Lord. I'm going to be charming and civil if it kills me.

She took his hand, shook it firmly, and returned a very sweet smile, hoping he would overdose on the sweetness. “Nice to meet you too, Shane.”

Shane turned to Tony. “And you must be Gracie's brother Tony.” He held out his hand to shake Tony's hand. “Good to meet you as well.”

Then, to Evie, "I see you took up my offer to bring your friend Carlo. Good to see both of you."

He gave Evie a courteous hug, and vigorously shook Carlo's hand. "Well, it's very nice to meet all of you." His well-rehearsed résumé then followed. "Well, to give you a little background, I'm the leader of the Young and Single Career Adults small group that meet at my church on Friday nights. There are fifteen people in that group, and they're all a very fun group. I hope you won't think it presumptuous of me if I extended an invitation to all of you to join us." A very conspicuous silence ensued. Shane nervously eyed the crowd, but indifference was all he could see in all of their faces.

"So, what kind of work do you do?" asked Carlo.

"I'm the Creative Director for Communication Media for the Discovery Channel. Lately, we're developing a new series about human mating habits."

"I'm sure you're an expert on that," Evie said under her breath.

"Were you saying something, Evie?"

"Oh...no, I was just noting how interesting your job sounds," she said with feigned interest.

"Anyway, it dissects the physiology and the psychology of human relationships, not only in developed countries, but also in more remote societies and cultures." Ever the salesman, his eye scanned the room, gauging the reaction. "I have to travel to places most humans have never heard of. But it's enjoyable and very eye opening."

As the lunch progressed, his curiosity and his desire for her made him decide to bring up the topic of dating. "So Gracie, where do you like to meet people to date?"

"Well, I met my old boyfriend on the dating site, *eCompatibilities.com*."

“Huh...you guys like those dating sites?” asked Bibi. “I don’t know if I like the idea of meeting someone on such an impersonal basis. Jason and I met at one of our favorite hangouts, *The Capital Scene*.”

He knew what that really meant: drugs, uninhibited sex and debauchery all kept away from the public eye by its managers. He jumped in and steered the conversation back to safer subjects so as not to expose his darker side...at least, not so soon. “I’ve used *eCompatibilities* on and off over the last couple of years. I guess that most of the people they match you with seem better ‘on paper’ as it were, than in reality.”

“Well, I won’t say that Internet sites like *eCompatibilities* are for everyone” Gracie said. “But you stand as good a chance of meeting a nice person, or a bad person, as you would if you met them in person.”

Bibi deadpanned, “Oh how *charming*...what a lovely story!”

He recognized that dispassionate look in his sister’s eyes. *eCompatibilities* has, however helped him ‘close the deal’ with a few women. He studied Gracie carefully, noting the gentle curves of her body. His thoughts turned to his old conquests, and how long it had been since he had consummated a relationship with a woman he dated. That needed rectifying.

Gracie had decided to compare notes on this Shane character. Back at the condo, she, Evie, Jinx compared notes on the afternoon. Jinx sat across from Evie and her on the couch. The tea she had prepared for the three of them went down smoothly.

Jinx spoke first. “I don’t know. I’ve come across a few guys like Shane, and when you scratch beneath the surface, it gets very ugly. He seems all nice and

charming now, but *'charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting'* ”

“I get the same feeling” Evie said, putting down her teacup. “From the first day I met him, I had the feeling that there is more to him than meets the eye.

“Gals,” she said, “I know the type: your typical lothario. Must always have a woman to seduce: you know: a “flavor of the month” situation. I would not want to get involved with him...he's too slimy.” The very thought made her shudder.

Jinx answered, “You know girl: unfortunately, some women have to learn the hard way. I'm glad none of us will get burned.”

“I don't intend to,” she said. “I've been burned too many times, especially back in college. And even though Peter broke up with me, I'm not going to be lured into a bad situation with Shane.”

MONDAY, JANUARY 13TH

Evie called up Gracie, and asked if she could meet her the next day at the *Panera Bread* in Chevy Chase, Maryland. No sooner had she hung up, when Michael came in her door. Evie startled at first, then ran towards him and hugged him.

“Michael! It's good to see you again, as always.

How've you been?”

“I'm doing fine. And it's always good to see you too.” His eyes twinkled.

“Now, I came here to warn you that a CIA agent, one Adnan ‘Andy’ Farooqi, will be paying you and Gracie a visit tomorrow, He's had you and your sister under surveillance. So be prepared.”

Evie puzzled at this remark. "Why would they be spying on us?"

"Because they want to figure out how I appear as a CIA agent from time to time, whom they can never catch. They want to corral this this 'rogue agent.' Sort of funny, if you think about it."

"Oh, I get it. They're using us to get to you. Well, thanks for the heads-up."

"You're welcome," said Michael.

MONDAY, JANUARY 14TH

Evie walked into *Panera Bread* and saw her elder sister sitting at the booth in the back corner, which seemed to be her favorite place in restaurants. "Hi." She waved as she approached the table.

"Hey, sis. Good to see ya," said Gracie

"So have you seen him yet?" she situated herself across the booth from Gracie.

"No, but I can't wait. Taking these secret agents down a few notches is quite satisfying. Most of them seem to be possessed by a hyper-inflated sense of self-importance. I am *so* ready for this."

"Me neither. I've seen many government agents through the millennia, and they are all the same: they think they're God's gift to the world and the greater good. All they are, in truth, is working stiffs who have a job to do, just like the rest of us."

The girls had just finished ordering their sandwiches and soups, when a man dressed in a dark suit, sunglasses, and a trench coat came into view through the store window. Evie noticed it first, and her radar went up. He walked over to their table, and

sat down uninvited, in one of the chairs.

Agent Farooqi looked at them; then focused on her. "Are you Evelyn Chen?" he asked.

"I am."

"Miss Chen," Farooqi continued, "We have reason to believe you may know something about a gentleman who works for us. He was last seen escorting you to the home of Mr. And Mrs. Frank Chen."

He described Michael/Agent Angelo to her and Gracie. Great effort kept her eyes from glazing over. Feigned interest was the best she could offer as he obviously followed his CIA protocol. *Not very imaginative, either.*

"We need to get in contact with Agent Angelo as soon as possible. We have matters of urgency to discuss with him," said Farooqi.

She knew what he wanted: he was trying to catch an angel, which was laughably funny. "Well, Mr.— I'm sorry; I didn't catch your name."

"Farooqi," he replied tersely.

"Do you have a business card or something, in case we see Agent Angelo and need to get a hold of you?"

"Here's my card should you have any more information concerning Agent Angelo." He gave them his card. "I'll be in touch." Then he stared hard at her. "There's also another matter that concerns you."

Her heart beat faster, as his face looked serious, and she sensed that something very stressful was about to happen.

"You see, Ms. Chen: you are an undocumented alien; we can find no records of your past.

Unless you prove that you are legitimately in the U.S., there's a very real possibility that you may be deported."

"Agent Farooqi," Grace said, "my sister was legally adopted when she first came here, back in November. I drew up the papers myself."

"Yes, but was she an American citizen at the time?" asked Farooqi.

Gracie was stunned, and couldn't say a word. She couldn't say that she had come to Earth from Heaven, so she could only say, "I think so."

Farooqi said, "Well, you have to be sure, otherwise she'll have to leave this country. We have no record of her ever being in the U.S. before, so there's reason to doubt her citizenship." He got up, nodded perfunctorily at them both and left.

Farooqi and his colleague, Walt Browning, sat at his desk, and compared notes.

He shook his head in disbelief. "I just don't understand how he continues to elude us."

"We had the suspect under surveillance" began Browning. "He was first seen walking into the offices of F.H. Chen Enterprises in Bethesda. We have him later today going into Chen's daughter Grace's law firm of Halbreath, Petrovich, and Chang."

Farooqi mulled this information over a few moments. "Hmm. Seems there is a connection here as of late with Agent Angelo and the Chen family. We will have to put out more surveillance on this family. In fact, I need to interrogate Evelyn Chen soon. She not only seems to be in cahoots with Agent Angelo, she's also a suspected illegal alien."

LATER THAT SAME DAY

Evie walked from her office towards the south entrance of the DuPont Circle metro station on her way home, deeply immersed in thought about her relationship with Carlo. Her reverie, interrupted by an arm suddenly on her shoulder, made her startle. She gasped, jumped almost a foot off the ground, instinctively reached for non-existent swords, turned around and pointed them directly at her assailant. Recognition hit, and she said, “*Agent Farooqi!* My gracious, you scared the daylights out of me!” Stepping out of her battle pose, she held her hands on her heart, which pounded hard in her chest. “Don’t you believe in greeting people with ‘*Hi*’ or ‘*Hello*’ like most normal people do, instead of just walking up to someone and grabbing their arm?”

“Do you always point at people like you had swords in your hand?” he shot back.

Gaining her composure and her wit, she added, “*Touché.*” But you might get better results for your investigations that way; you know, *‘You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.’*”

“Please follow me into this coffee shop,” Farooqi replied, not amused. Michael, who had taken human form, walked alongside her behind Farooqi.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’ve got angels on this.” Then he quickly disappeared.

Farooqi led her into the coffee shop, and, after they had both sat down, started his interrogation. “It has come to our attention, Ms. Chen, that this Agent Angelo has been seen accompanying you recently. In fact, we saw him going into your father’s

offices in Bethesda, and later to your sister's offices down the street. We know you're keeping regular contact with him. Why don't you just save us all a lot of time, and tell us all that you know about him."

She was relieved to see Faroh walk into the coffee shop. She motioned him to sit down beside her.

"Why, Miss Evie!" he exclaimed. "It's a mighty fine coincidence to see your lovely face this afternoon. How are we doing today?"

She smiled. "I'm just fine, Faroh. This gentleman here seems to have a lot of questions for me."

Faroh's smile grew broader. "Well, hi there, young man. The name's Faroh O'Dell. You can just call me Faroh. What might your name be?"

"Farooqi," he answered in his usual curt manner. "And I need for you to excuse yourself. I'm conducting Government business here."

"Well, Mr. Farooqi: I'm sure you are. You know, you sound like your momma and daddy came from somewhere in the Middle East. Where exactly are you from, young man?"

"Where I'm from is of no concern to you, Mr. O'Dell..."

Taking this opportunity to 'excuse herself', she said, "Oh my...will you look at the time! I need to go. I'll leave you gentlemen to get better acquainted."

Farooqi started to protest, and tried to get up to stop her, but unbeknownst to him, Cydnie had her hands on his shoulders, rendering him unable to move. She was in angelic form, invisible to human eyes. Evie walked out of the coffee shop.

"So, you never did answer my question, Mr. Farooqi...where exactly are you from...?"

Evie and her sister sat in their living room that evening, discussing the events of the day. Both were in a pensive mood. "Can he really have me deported? And if he does, where will I be deported to?"

"Well, you got me there," Gracie answered. "I don't think they'll send you back to Heaven," she quipped, grinning. "But seriously, I guess I took it for granted that all that was worked out when you came here."

"I thought so too," she said. "It's rather odd that they would put me here on Earth, and give me no history." No sooner had she spoken, than a bright light floated into their living room, and an angelic being soon materialized.

"Hello. I'm Gabrielle, twin sister to Gabriel. He came to announce your arrival, and I have come to take care of the matters you now ponder. Turning to Evie, she said, "Your now deceased parents were Franklin and LiJie Xue Armand. Franklin was born in America, and LiJie was born in China. Evelyn was born, as you know, November 14th, 1982, in New Jerusalem, Ohio. They were missionaries to China but her parents and she came back to America when she was six. Her parents are now buried in Mount Zion Cemetery in Milton, Ohio, about twenty-five miles south of Cleveland. They suffered a fatal car accident a year before Evie was adopted by the Chens. All birth records, death records, and family history are all accounted for. Should Agent Farooqi ask you for your background information, all he has to do is get the information from the Logan County, Ohio Registrar's Office about Evelyn's birth. Her parents' birth and death certificates are also held there. Evelyn is a naturalized United States citizen, and should get an official copy of her Birth Certificate so as to prove her citizenship."

“So, I’m an American citizen?” Evie asked. “Yes you are,” Gabrielle answered.

“Well I’ll get on getting copies of all those documents right away,” said Gracie.

“We need that information A.S.A.P.”

FOURTEEN

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 16TH

Demetrius Middleton waited in anticipation of the Urban Knights meeting to begin at 7:30 PM. His wife Rochelle, Jinx, and Raji were setting up snacks for the meeting in the kitchen.

“Rochelle, honey...do you need any help with the refreshments?” he called from the meeting room.

Rochelle answered, “No, baby. We girls have it all under control. You just keep praying for the meeting tonight.”

As on other Wednesday nights, the Chen girls, Tony, Peter, “T”, Raji and about ten other young people wandered in the door, and paired off in groups, each involved in a lively conversation. The Urban Knights ministry reached the young and single adults who lived in the District.

Tonight, the Lord had put on his heart to talk with the group about sexual purity. He felt very impressed by the Lord to deal with the sexual immorality among young people, even in the church. An open and honest discussion about it would be a good place to start. The study and the discussion went on for almost three hours, before Demetrius called a halt. After the study was over, Jinx and Evie, and Gracie all approached Demetrius.

Jinx spoke first. "Pastor Demetrius, Evie and I have a prayer request. Would you pray with us about this?"

Evie agreed. "Yes, Pastor Demetrius. We would really like the Lord to protect Gracie from harm. A player named Shane is trying to get her into a dangerous situation."

"Yes," said Gracie. "He's a real ladies man, and is trying to lure me into his trap."

They all agreed in prayer, with him leading, expecting the Lord would work on their behalf. "You girls remember to continue to keep this situation in prayer," he added as the three girls walked away. "I don't exactly know *how* the Lord will answer your prayer, but you can be sure He will."

"We will," they all agreed.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 17TH

Evie met Carlo at the *Malaysian* restaurant on M Street for lunch. She kissed him 'hello' and they sat down. Carlo looked at her excitedly. "Say, have you ever been

to Ocean City?"

"Why no. I've never visited anywhere outside of DC yet."

"My goodness. You, young lady, are sorely lacking in your cultural education. You really should see the Boardwalk, the carnival at the end of the pier and taste some *Thrasher's* fries, although the Carnival and Thrasher's Fries are on limited hours; luckily both are open on the Weekend. It's a cool place to hang out."

"Isn't it kind of cold outside to be hanging out at the ocean?"

"True, but we don't need to go swimming. We can just take in the sights. That's just as fun. And since we won't be on the beach, proper, you won't get a lot of sand in your clothes." He grinned. "Besides, I'll be there to keep you warm."

"Ooh. I like that idea." She hugged him. "It sounds cozy and fun."

"Good. Why don't we go there this weekend? There won't be any tourists or the usual summer crowds. I think you'll enjoy it."

"So do you promise we'll snuggle to keep each other warm?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Oh yes. That part of the trip is mandatory."

"Good."

SATURDAY, JANUARY 19TH

They left early Saturday morning. The ride to Ocean City was very pleasant. Evie took in all the interesting sites of Maryland, including the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. "Oh my, we're high. I feel some vertigo when I look over the side of the bridge."

“Well, then don't do that, silly. Why purposefully give yourself vertigo?”

She laughed. “Yes, daddy. I'll be good and look straight ahead.”

“Now there's a good girl.”

Carlo had a jazz saxophonist in the CD player, playing some very gospel oriented tunes. The first was jazzy and upbeat. The second talked directly about only needing Jesus, who would always be there for you. She became quiet listening to this one. It was starting to hit close to home. The third song talked of the love of the Father in Heaven for all those who know Him. She felt the sadness rise in her. Tears pooled in her eyes and started falling down her cheeks.

“Evie! Are you all right? What's the matter?”

“I just miss my Daddy. A lot. It's been so long since He held me.” “Frank? Didn't you just see him last Sunday at the family dinner?”

“Not him: my Father in Heaven, Carlo. I haven't seen Him in person since I...” She realized she was going to reveal her true self to Carlo. She swallowed hard and steeled herself. “Carlo, before I joined the Chen family, I was an angel in Heaven named Ever Vigilant. I served under Michael the Archangel as his second in command. I wanted to understand what redemption means to you...well humans. And I was sent here.”

Carlo processed her words for a few moments, saying nothing.

“If you want, I can ask one of my angel friends to validate what I'm saying.”

“Umm...no: you don't need to do that.” He paused, looking straight ahead at the highway as they drove further eastward along Route 50. “Actually, I do remember Gracie telling me at Christ Community Church that Gabriel announced your imminent coming.”

“Yes. Here I am: Evie the angel; turned human.”

“Wow.” Carlo grasped the steering wheel tightly, and looked ahead, silent.

“Are you having second thoughts about me, now?”

“No, not at all.” He finally smiled, which relieved her. “Wow! That’s wild.

What do you know about that?” He stared at her again for several moments, making her feel uneasy. “An angel. That’s interesting.”

“Well, I suppose so. But I don’t feel all that interesting right now.”

Carlo turned into a small sandwich shop, and parked the car. Turning to her, he held her hands gently. “Evie, honey. I’ve never been in the direct presence of God, so I can’t say I completely understand what you’re going through. But I do know God loves all who call on Him.”

“I’ve talked to Him. A lot. But I still feel sort of...well, like He’s being distant towards me.”

“Distant? Why would He be that way to you? If you really were an angel, why would you suddenly be in...” His turned his gaze back to her. “Good Lord, Evie. You’re human now.” “Yes. Everyone reminds me of that...often. So what am I missing? I’m lost. I’ve always known my Father. How can I know Him any more than I already do?”

“Didn’t you say you needed to find redemption?”

“Yes. But I don’t understand exactly what it means.”

“Well, since you’re truly human, you are not as you were when you were once an angel. You are not a perfect being any more. You need to give your heart to Him and make Jesus Christ your Lord.”

“Don’t you see how silly that sounds? The Father and The Lamb are my Lords, and my heart does now, and has always belonged to them. What’s different now?” Her

frustration rose, and the tears of sadness fell. "Can we not talk about this anymore? It's making me very unhappy."

"Okay. I understand."

The rest of the trip to Ocean City was quiet. Her sadness hung heavily in the air over her and Carlo.

Evie tried her best to enjoy the time at Ocean City. Carlo was tender and understanding and let her have her space, just holding her hands. Evie managed a small smile from time to time, but eventually, the funk would settle over her again.

"I'm sorry Carlo. I guess I'm ruining your trip to Ocean City, which was a very nice idea, by the way."

"First, it's *our* trip; second, you're the most important part of the trip. I've been here many times before. But if something is bothering you, I want to help you through it."

"Thanks. I really appreciate that. You've been very kind to me the whole time."

She looked wistfully at him. "Could you hold me, please? I could really use someone holding me. In fact, I *need* someone holding me right now."

"No problem at all." He put his masculine arms around her, and held her close. She relished the closeness, and let herself melt into him and his embrace.

"Kiss me, Carlo."

He did. Tenderly. She luxuriated in it for several moments. It wasn't her Father, but he was so nice and understanding, it made her feel better to be around him.

VD grudgingly let Poisonous take the credit for this one. "I must admit, you can really appeal to Evie's love for Lord Yehovah to blind her to the truth about becoming one of the Believers in the Light."

"Well, I learned a lot from you, VD," said Poisonous, smiling perfunctorily. "I suppose that we work as a team, and help each other build our talents." "Yes. I guess you might say, 'Two heads are better than one.'"

VD looked around to be sure no Princes or Principalities were around, and whispered in Poisonous' ear. "I sure hope we don't run into PC again any time soon. He scares the evil out of me."

"Let's just say, I would not want to be alone with him. No matter how handsome he looks, I know the menace that lies in his heart."

"Shame, really; he's awfully handsome. I wonder what he'd be like in bed..."

"VD!" Poisonous spoke in a harsh whisper. Don't tempt his wrath by speaking about him like that. You must cool your demonic hormones, and stay clear of him."

"I know, I know; but I'll be honest: there are times when I wish you could inflict him with some of your lust. He's just so attractive..." She sighed.

"I'll give you that. But he's not as handsome as Shane Logan."

"Hmm...if I didn't know any better, I think a certain demon is attracted to a certain human..."

Poisonous leathery face turned ever so slightly redder. "Stop it. You know I can't feel that way about a human. I don't have to point out there are obvious differences between humans and us."

"Yes, but I still think you like Shane more than you let on. You seem to volunteer more for assignments with him than with other human men."

“I do not. Don't be absurd.”

“Mmm-hmm. So why are you blushing so?”

Poisonous surprised them both as tears fell down her eyes.

“Oh, Poisonous. I'm sorry. It must hurt to feel that way and not to be able to do anything about it.” She looked around to make sure no one else was around; then hugged her partner.

“Thank you, VD.”

“You're welcome, partner.”

Poisonous' face became sober. “Don't you *dare* tell anyone else about this.”

“Are you crazy? We'd be brought before Lucifer himself if this got out. I don't even want to think of what would happen to us after that.”

“Nor do I,” said Poisonous.

“Okay, then. Let's be about our business.”

Evie's thoughts and heart made her sad; she didn't feel much like talking to Carlo. The trip back from Ocean City was very quiet. Neither of them said a word, and Carlo just kept his eyes on the road. When they arrived back at Evie's condo building, Carlo kissed her goodbye and she walked into the lobby and took the elevator back to room 618.

Later, while lying in her bed, she found herself talking to her Father.

“Abba, I don't understand why you need to be my Lord again. It makes no sense.”

Sin must be paid for.

“Am I so sinful that you avoid me?”

The blood must cover you. There is no other way.

Evie pondered that last remark. 'No other way.' How could the blood of The Lamb cover *her*? What had she done that was so terrible? She only was here because the Father had seen her desire to know redemption. Humans saw something that she didn't, and she was too tired to try to figure it out now. She resigned herself to the sadness that had taken over her weekend. It was going to be a long one; even Carlo couldn't change that.

VD looked on, smiling wickedly. "Yep. You're lost, and I'm going to make sure you stay that way. It's almost comical, really. You're so used to being an angel that you don't understand your humanness. You're in a fallen state, tainted by the first woman who disobeyed Lord Yehovah and introduced sin into the world. She was an Eve too; how appropriate."

As Evie lay there asleep, VD settled at the foot of her bed, avoiding coming in contact with her. "What is it about redemption that would make you so foolishly give up your angelic status? By Lucifer, I was once an angel of light myself, but Lord Yehovah forced me to become a second-class angel. 'Demon' indeed! Just because Lucifer thought a little too highly of himself was no reason to cast him and all of the rest of us under his command out of New Jerusalem, to be hated and despised."

Thoughts of her former days and Virtue Seeker flooded back into her mind. Those days made her happy then; she had admired and loved Lord Yehovah and Lady Ruache Ha-Kodesh. They always made her feel loved and wanted; but that had all changed abruptly. She remembered crying her tender heart out at being cast out of their

presence. Lucifer made sure she never did that again: the suffering in Hell he threatened scared her out of her mind.

“I didn’t want to become what I am. But my lot has been cast, and I can’t change it.” As she looked at Evie, she realized tears were falling down her cheeks.

“Curses! Why do I have to be an outcast? I want the redemption you seek.” She looked quietly around to make sure no one overheard or saw her.

“It’s not fair.” She paused. “Well, at least you’re clueless right now about redemption. I don’t feel like bothering with you tonight. There’s no point in telling you more lies. You believe them pretty well already.”

She got up off the bed, took about three steps, and fell to the floor, sobbing. Looking towards the Heavens, she wailed, “I want to be loved again. Why can’t I be loved again?” Her sadness overtook her, and she could only cry helplessly.

She didn’t notice that Evie had awakened.

“Is someone crying?” she asked. “Is that you, Gracie?”

VD jerked herself out of her helpless state, and fled before someone started praying. “I can’t go back to Poisonous like this. She’ll chew me out for being weak. I think I’ll go hide in a cave.” She found an abandoned tool house in Mount Vernon Square, and hid there. “Oh my evilness, that was close. Another demon might have seen me. She huddled up on the floor, wrapping her arms around her legs. “I’m going to be strong, and make sure she suffers like I am. She’ll find out what it means to be an outcast. You think you feel abandoned now? Just you wait, sweetie. One day, you’ll be abandoned forever.” She shuddered involuntarily. “Oh curses. So will I.”

She broke into sobs again, leaving her more helpless than when she stood by Evie. The next thing she knew, it was morning. “Oh, my evilness. Poisonous is going to report me if I don’t show up soon.”

SUNDAY, JANUARY 20TH

Poisonous looked at VD warily. "I think you're getting soft, and it disgusts me. You know very well that this Evie the ex-angel needs to burn in Hell like the rest of us dark angels. Or don't you think so?" Her gaze burned into her partner, eyes filled with cold fury.

VD just returned her stare and said nothing.

"Well, you may sympathize with human flesh, but I don't; especially if it was once an angel. This is a golden opportunity to send an angel to Hell, and I intend to do just that." Turning back to her partner, she slapped her hard in the face.

Holding her cheek, VD said, "Why did you do that? I did nothing wrong!"

"What you do," she said, "is disgust me. You're too weak to do a demon's job well." Putting her face directly an inch from her partner's nose, she gritted her teeth, and said, "I'm going to do this job myself. You obviously can't handle the things a demon is required to do." With that, she walked away.

The house in the neighborhood of Embassy row emanated the kind of evil she loved: hatred for all that had to do with Christianity. Angry voices shouted curses in Arabic, and filled her with a renewed zeal for destroying all human life, and followers of The Lamb in particular. She descended into the house, and observed all of the occupants. One in particular, a young man in his early twenties named Darrabah said to

the others caught her eye: he seemed very angry. Venomous words spilled from her lips into his mind. "I have a plan," he repeated from the words now placed in his head.

"There is a theatre on Connecticut Avenue that holds many people. I will destroy them all, to the glory of the Holy Jihad."

"Do you have the weapons?" asked another.

"Yes," said yet another. "They are in a storage room in my basement. "You will be supplied with all you need to eradicate the infidels."

"Good," she said, none of the gathered men hearing. "Now all I have to do is make sure Evie ends up at that theatre for the afternoon matinee."

The afternoon sun shone through the cold of the winter day. Landing in Gracie and Evie's condo, VD observed Evie sitting on the couch, obviously bored. She knew that the Sunday dinner at the Chen's house was cancelled because Evie's father was out of town on business. She observed Evie leaving the Church service she had carefully avoided.

Now Evie drummed on the side table, eyes staring at nothing in particular.

"This is boring," said Evie.

"Oh good," she gloated. "She is ripe for my plan." She floated close to Evie, and said, "I really would like to go see a movie; perhaps at the theatre on upper Connecticut Avenue in Cleveland Park. There's a good love story playing there."

Loud peals of laughter reverberated throughout the condo, as the idea sunk into Evie's head.

A few moments later, unwittingly being influenced by VD, Evie decided to take

in a movie. Perusing the online movie guide, she saw an interesting movie playing at a theatre on Connecticut Avenue. Her overcoat and a sweater on, she headed out the door, and took the eight minute walk to the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metro station. A few minutes later, after transferring to the Red Line, she got off at the Cleveland Park station, and walked into the theatre. She sat in the back of the theatre to get a better and more comfortable view of the screen.

The previews ended, and the feature presentation started. Only a few minutes into the movie, there was a commotion at the entrance to her left. She had barely looked up when gunshots rang out. Bullets flew everywhere, and amidst the terror and the mayhem, some people fell to the floor, hit by the assassin's gun. Operating on instinct, Evie dropped quickly to the floor, avoiding the flying projectiles of death. Laying as still as she could on the floor, a few shots flew through the cushions of the chairs in front of her, and ricocheted off the metal fixture in the chairs. "Oh, please Abba, don't let me die. I'm not sure of where I stand with you, and I don't want to die the second death. Tears ran down her face as she trembled hard, scared witless, but not moving from her prone position on the floor.

The sound of sirens grew louder by the second, and soon, they stopped in front of the theatre. The shooting stopped, but Evie remained on the floor. The sounds of police shouting, "hands in the air," rang through the theatre. She heard the footsteps of someone, presumably the gunman, running towards a rear entrance, and a police officer shouted, "Stop or we'll shoot!" The gunman apparently did not stop, and several shots rang from the police weapons, followed by the sound of someone hitting the floor.

Then the theatre was quiet. She got up slowly from the floor, and peered around to make sure she wasn't in any imminent danger. A female officer walked at a brisk

pace towards her and asked, "You alright, Ma'am?" Evie managed a quiet "Yes," and sat in a chair, still shaking.

"Were you injured at all?"

"No, officer. I'm not injured."

"Would you like a sedative to calm your nerves?"

Evie thought for a moment, but answered, "No...I'll be alright."

"Then you're free to go, ma'am."

"Thanks," she managed, as she got to her feet. She steadied herself, forced herself to stop shaking, then walked out to the street.

"Curses!" VD bellowed, hovering over a bench outside the theatre. "She should have been riddled with bullets. How does she always manage to escape her demise?" Furious, she flew away, cursing and making blasphemous epithets towards Lord Yehovah and all who followed Him, including His angels.

Once outside, Evie sat on a bench for the Metro Bus, and called Carlo. "What's up, Evie?"

"Oh Carlo, it was terrible. A murderer started randomly shooting people in the theatre..."

"Are you okay? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No. I just need you to come get me. I'm still shaking from the whole ordeal."

"I'll be there as soon as I can...stay put."

A few minutes later, Carlo run up to her, and sat beside her. "What can I do for you, Evie?" "Just hold me," she answered. He wrapped his strong arms around her, and she broke into agonized tears. In between sobs, she choked, "Oh, Carlo...I'm so scared. I don't want to die, especially when I'm not of where I stand with the Father."

"You'll figure that out, Evie. Right now, I just need to get you home. Stay right

here, and I'll go get my car."

His car approached, and she climbed in. No words were spoken, but tears ran down her face. Every other minute, between her quiet sobs, she would say, "I don't want to die..." Carlo remained quiet and let her sort her emotions out. Reaching the condo complex, she pleaded, "Could you come in with me? I need you to be with me right now."

Carlo gave her a sympathetic smile, and said, "Sure. Let's go."

Once in the condo, she and Carlo sat down on the couch in the lobby. Carlo looked at her, and started to say something, but she put her finger on his lips, and said, "Just be near me. Your presence calms me." He held her for a while, and she finally calmed down. "Thank you for being such a good and understanding good friend. I love you." She followed the revelation by kissing him tenderly on the lips.

At first, Carlo was perplexed. Then he said, "I love you too, but I didn't know you felt this strongly."

Evie, realizing what she had just done, turned a bright red. "...I don't believe I just did what I did. I'm sorry, Carlo. I don't want to mislead you. I really do love you...as a friend; a very special friend. I'm so embarrassed." She turned away from him for a few moments. Turning back in his direction she asked, "Carlo, would you forgive me? I feel awful."

He looked at her quietly; then smiled. "Well, you're forgiven, but consider this 'game on.'"

"Stop it, Carlo, or I just might kiss you again..."

"So what's stopping you?"

"You're so bad..." Then, smiling impishly, she pulled him closed and kissed

him, letting it linger. "Now behave yourself, and go, before I kiss you again."

"Awww...do I gotta?"

"Yes. You gotta."

"I'll let myself out." He opened the door, and turned back toward her. "I'll see you tomorrow."

MONDAY, JANUARY 21ST

Evie walked towards the International Language Institute building slower than she would normally. She quietly reflected about the events of the past weekend. She faced the sidewalk, not looking directly in the face at anyone going by her, and retreated into her own world. A few minutes later, she looked up and saw the Institute coming into view. "I guess I'd better get myself together. I can't whine all day long."

She walked in and poked her head in on Carlo. "Hey. How was your weekend?" she asked.

"Very good. I found out that someone really loves me. Yours?"

His smile disarmed her. "It was very good, other than almost being killed, and then feeling very attracted to my co-worker."

He smiled at her, and she smiled in mock anger. "You're incorrigible, Mr. Bocelli; you realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, and I intend to stay that way."

She smiled back. Then a dark cloud covered her, and her eyes fell.

"Why do you look so down in the dumps?"

Carlo had this laser-like ability to see into her heart all the time. "I...guess I'm struggling with my relationship with the Father."

"Oh yeah." He paused, shrugging his shoulders. "Well, it's still the same: I can't really break it down any simpler for you."

She threw up her hands. "Yes. I know. Jesus must be my Lord and Savior."

"So what's so hard to understand about that?"

"Carlo. This is getting to be a tiring discussion. I'm not really in the mood to go through it again. Not now. Could we talk about something else?"

He looked away from her for an instant. "Sure; whatever you want to talk about."

"Quite honestly, I don't want to talk about much of anything right now."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm easy. I'll give you your space."

"Thanks. I'll talk to you later." She walked away, almost relieved for the conversation to be over. She sat at her desk and fought back the sadness. Wiping the tears from her eyes, blowing her nose, her day got underway.

Poisonous looked at her, and grinned sardonically. VD stood at her side. Turning to her partner, she said, "You'd better make sure you stick to your duties, VD. I think you went AWOL the other night, but I decided to keep an eye on you instead. Now let me do the talking this time. She looked contemptuously at Evie.

"Oh Evie. You are *so* blind. The answer is obvious even to me, and I want nothing to do with The Lamb being my Savior." Evie's sadness made her pause. She

suddenly remembered her eventual end. She found herself feeling sad. No matter how much she hated Lord Yehovah for punishing all the followers of Lucifer, and giving these humans chance after chance, her end made her shudder. She couldn't help but become sick with apprehension.

“What is wrong with you, Poisonous? You look as though something bothers you. You aren't getting soft, are you?”

She looked up at VD, and fairly spat out the words. “No, of course I'm not getting soft! Now shut up and let me talk to this foolish ex-angel. Her undulating tentacles slithered back and forth over her bare body a little faster than usual.

“Poisonous...does it ever bother you that we will be living in agony for eternity... with no hope of escape? It's just not fair!”

“Yes, but what of it? All the more reason to drag these pitiful humans there with us. We need to keep them focused on anything but Lord Yehovah. If they –” Poisonous pointed at Evie -- “especially her, find out about salvation, we've lost them. And we can't do that.” Poisonous' face contorted with fury. “They are despicable, these humans. I want them all to live in agony forever, as we shall, and this ex-angel would be a delicious win for us. Don't you agree?”

VD mustered up her best demonic face. “Yes...of course.”

“Well, what are you sitting there contemplating for? Get busy, and mislead this stupid angel. Make sure she never finds out what salvation is really all about. In the meantime, I will make sure she dies without knowing the salvation of The Light.”

“I have been, in case you haven't noticed.”

Poisonous still had an uneasy feeling in her gut. Evie being suddenly vulnerable only seemed to remind her of how lost and condemned she was. Evie needed to be the focus of her attention, so she shook herself out of her strange feelings.

“That’s right, you stupid once-angelic one. You, Ms. ‘*I’m so clueless*’ are going to be like us.” Her evil cackle reverberated off all the walls in the room. Evie, of course, heard nothing. For which Poisonous was very grateful. “And I’m going to keep you clueless.” As she walked off to another assignment, the thoughts hit her again. The tears pooled in her eyes. “Umm...excuse me, VD. I need to go do some thinking. You know, plan some strategies for misleading Evie. Stuff like that”

VD eyed her warily, but finally said, “Sure...whatever.”

FIFTEEN

Poisonous turned away from VD, and walked away, not wanting to be seen as soft or weak. She couldn’t let any of her colleagues see her like this. It would be her ruin as a demon. In some strange way, she almost didn’t care. However, her demon-sense kicked in, and she decided that if she didn’t hide soon, she might start crying

right then and there. She held her feelings at bay for as long as she could; but the sadness wouldn't leave, her, and she had to hide. In fact, she found such a place, looked around to be sure no other demons were watching, her and went in.

She stumbled into a corner, sank down the edge of the wall to a crouching position and broke into deep, anguished, heart-broken sobs. A short while later, her tears spent, she held herself tightly, trying to find comfort any way she could. She forced herself to be calm, berating herself for exhibiting such un-demon like behavior; but the sadness still remained deep in that small corner of her heart and would not let go. "Oh curses! Why do I feel this way? In all my years as a dark spirit, I've never thought or cared about my ultimate end. Why do I care so, now?"

Knowing her emotional state bordered precariously on tears, she decided she'd better stay in the cave for a while. "At least until these strange emotions leave me." A day or so later, she finally calmed down, and went back to find VD. She figured she'd tell her partner that she needed time to think...which was half true, anyway. As long as she didn't tell her how she felt.

A short distance away, The Lamb watched as Poisonous and VD walked away from trying to torment Evie again, only to have to excuse themselves to go off and cry. "Yes, my dark-spirited ones. You have hearts, and I'm going to keep reminding you of it." He turned his attention to Poisonous. "And mark my words, Poisonous: your partner is going to help you find your heart...and she will find hers as well." He smiled with satisfaction as he returned to New Jerusalem.

As Poisonous and VD compared notes; Poisonous extolling the virtues of killing Evie, and VD just wanting to make her promiscuous, an evil presence dressed in a three-thousand dollar suit, with expensive bracelets and watch walked up to the two hapless demons.

“Ladies,” he said, almost in a whisper, menace in his low voice. “So how is destroying this ex-angel now human going?”

“Lord Lucifer!” the both exclaimed.

“Well?” he said.

VD said, “We are misleading her from knowing salvation. Poisonous has been trying to kill her outright without knowing redemption.”

“Let me make one thing clear,” he said, his voice still quiet. “I want Ever Vigilant to die in the human flesh she indwells. We need to make an example of how stupid this ex-angel is.” He eyed the two of them with derision. “Apparently, the objective has not been attained. Is there a reason why?” His glare bore into them even harder.

“No, your evilness,” said VD.

“Then let me make one thing perfectly clear...I want this angel dead and bound for the Second Death. I will not tolerate failure...or would *you two* like to taste the second death early?” His face was calm, but his eyes belied his fury.

“No, my lord,” said Poisonous, shaking hard.

“Then I expect to hear success in your mission. Do not fail me, because I don't give second chances.” Turning to leave, he said, “Goodbye ladies.”

Neither VD nor Poisonous said a word. Their gazes met, and VD finally said, “I don't want to suffer torment early.”

“Nor do I, you ninny. You heard the boss: we had better step up our game, or it will be game over.”

VD just nodded, saying nothing.

Evie ran in the door, and answered the house phone, which had been ringing insistently since she walked toward the condo.

“Oh, hi, daddy. How are you?”

“I’m fine, honey. How is Gracie these days?”

“Who is it?” Gracie asked.

“It’s daddy,” she answered. “She’s okay, but I’m still a little concerned about her seeing Shane. She needs prayer to deal with him in the wisest manner possible.”

“I know. I remember that painful time with Brian like it was yesterday. As a parent, I’m concerned about this Shane character as well.”

“Can I speak to Daddy?” Gracie asked. “Sure,” she said, and handed her the phone.

“Hi, Daddy,” said Gracie. “Could you pray for me, please? I know Shane Logan is a womanizer, but the Lord told me to be a friend to him. And right now, I need to get my mind off Peter, or I’ll go crazy...quite literally.”

“I will honey. I’ll talk to you later. I love you.” “Love you too. Bye daddy.”

TUESDAY, JANUARY 22ST

The day was just another at the institute: the classes had all gone well, the lesson plans for the next day had been written, materials had been photocopied, and quitting time approached. As Evie closed the file drawer and locked it, a figure

darkened her doorway. Looking up, she recognized Agent Farooqi. "What can I do for you, Agent Farooqi?"

"We've done some looking into your background, and as I suspected, there is no documentation verifying your being in this country legally."

"But Gracie has filed all those with Citizenship and Immigration Services. You should be able to find all my information there."

"We have contacted them, and they have no records for you. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me."

"But I know we filed the papers there..."

"Just come with me, Ms. Chen. Don't make me force the issue..."

Perplexed, Evie just stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Let's go. It's late, and I want to go home, and forget about this day." Reluctant, she got up and followed him out of the office, and into his car, a typical Government Issue black sedan. A few minutes later, they arrived at the Department of Corrections building on 14th Street. Farooqi lead her into the main door, walked her to the in- processing desk and told the clerk, "This person is being held without bond until further investigation is done into her background. If you want more information, contact me." He gave the clerk his card.

"This is all a big mistake," she said, on the verge of tears. "May I at least make a call before you lock me up?"

"You're allowed one call," came his curt reply.

The number dialed, the voice on the other end soon answered. "Evie? What's going on?"

"I'm being held in the D.C. jail on 14th street; seems that Farooqi and the C.I.A.

have not gotten the paperwork proving that I'm a legal U.S. Citizen."

"This is outrageous," Gracie said, her voice rising in volume. "I'll get over to Citizenship and Immigration Services tomorrow, and get this matter taken care of."

Choking back tears, she said, "Thank you, Gracie. Please hurry: this place gives me the creeps."

Poisonous walked with VD towards their willing victim. As a demon good at her job, she was a powerful evil force – one best not taken lightly. "I cannot rest until I inflict my victims with all the wrong desires," she always said. Shane Logan, a long time pawn of hers, sat on his bed, lost in thoughts that she and VD were planting there.

"Once his father opened the door to Shane's heart to me as a young boy by allowing him to read that Girlie magazine, I never let him go." She smiled fiendishly.

"Yes, and he is such a good tool in our hands. He does a lot to help our cause," VD added.

"It doesn't hurt to have members of the Unlovable Spirits, Anger, Resentment, Pride, and of course, Sexual Immorality squadrons assisting us in our mission," said VD.

Poisonous cackled with satisfaction. She took pride in her work. "The fool willingly lets me lead him by the nose, and even invites *his* victims to know the effects of my venom. I couldn't have picked a more willing slave."

"Ah, which brings us to this accursed Evie and her sister Gracie," VD said.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to making Gracie become attracted to Shane, and making sure Evie's relationship with Lord Yehovah is never restored." A twisted smile

appeared on her grey, death-shrouded face, as she moved in to investigate her next victim.

The Lamb of God and the Father discussed this current turn of events, as Ruache Ha-Kodesh listened quietly. The Lamb recalled his fateful journey to the cross that started in the upper room, and continued with the painful discourse between him and the Father in the garden of Gethsemane that fateful afternoon.

“You know, Father, I knew what was ahead of me that day. I wasn't afraid of the crucifixion, because I knew my ultimate destination, and that death was no obstacle, rather a doorway. The only thing that bothered me was the sin I was to inherit upon the cross.”

He paused, recalling the agony of that moment.

“I knew it was necessary, but I was not used to having my relationship with you severed. She cannot see beyond the immediate pain she feels. She will see the need for forgiveness soon when she realizes that her own will and her own actions will only bring her the very misery she is trying to avoid.”

The Father added, “Yes, ‘if there is no pain, there is no gain.’”

“Yes,” the Lamb answered. “I know very intimately the truth of those words.”

Meanwhile, VD sat outside the Shane's apartment, strategizing about Evie and

Gracie.

VD sighed, exasperated. Those accursed followers of The Lamb were praying for Evie, and against the bad intentions of Shane towards Gracie. "This is just never going to do," she spat out angrily. "I've gotta get my boy here to apply some acceleration to the seduction of Gracie, and it's gotta be quick. Gracie has been spurning his advances, and he is beginning to think of actually doing the right thing. That would be disastrous."

Shane lay on his bed, deep in thought. "She's nice, and her family is very nice. I would like to see her again, and I think I'm really beginning to like her. Maybe I ought to visit her family and her church sometime."

VD took her cue, flitted within earshot of Shane, and started the suggestive lie, speaking in the first person to make the thoughts those of her charge. *And man, she is hot!* VD knew to appeal to men. It took the best of intentions and twisted them into a knot. *I've got to step up the game with Gracie. I want her...a lot. I can just imagine us hooking up. I need to figure out a way to get her to my condo, so I can get her to like me. I want her to like me; badly. Oh yeah, that's exactly what I need to do. Shane old boy, you are the smooth one, and soon you are going to be a boyfriend.*

Shane, unaware of VD feeding him lies, smiled at the thoughts that paraded through his fertile imagination.

VD smirked, and then broke into a loud, long, raucous laugh. "Mission accomplished." Her sinister cackle erupted as it did whenever she played another of the sons of men so skillfully. She sashayed off in her stiletto heels to report her progress to Politically Correct, and to unabashedly gloat about her accomplishment. "Men are so stupid: appeal to their sex drive, and they are suckers to be had!"

Politically Correct agreed. "Yes...and that is why most of the politicians in

D.C. are in my pocket: nothing like having a pretty little trophy to chase after, take your eyes off your scruples, and take you down the road to self-serving. Don't you just love it?"

"Oh, yes, P.C.; very much."

Michael looked over the status report, and shook his head, then rubbed his temples with his fingers. "This seems like a never-ending battle. Well, Lord Yehovah and The Lamb are always victorious, no matter the outcome. Taking a break from his work, he called Cydnie into the Situation Room.

"Coming, Michael."

As she entered the room, he said, "Hi, Cyd. Have a seat, please." She sat down daintily across the table from him.

"You know, it never ceases to amaze me that such a skillful, high-ranking angel can be so very feminine."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

He knew better than to try to win that argument. Cyd managed to win every time. "No; but I need to get to the matters at hand." The papers on his desk reminded him of Evie's progress; done reading them, he looked back up at Cyd. "Okay. Prayers have been going up for Evie, and Shane and Gracie's situation," he began. We can't force an outcome, but we can certainly influence it. You need to step into Shane's circumstances and talk some sense into him. He has been under the attack of two of the minions of Politically Correct, the Prince of D.C., and we must implement as much

damage control as we can to deter to the wiles of our eternal enemies.”

“I’m on my way, Michael,” Cydnie said. “The prayers of those involved are many and in earnest, so I have been given more grace by Lord Yehovah and Ruache Ha-Kodesh, their names be praised forever!”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23RD

She took the door between New Jerusalem and the Earth and met up with Faroh O’Dell, who was sitting in Frank Chen’s *Après Café*, enjoying some coffee.

“Hey Faroh!” She paused, admiring his look, carefully sizing him up. “Ooh, I really like your outfit: jeans and a sporty t-shirt are always handsome in a low-key way.”

“Thanks, Cyd.” He grinned. “You and your eye for fashion blow me away. You should have been born a human fashion designer rather than an angel.”

She just smiled at his teasing. “I do like fashion, I must admit; followed it all my life.” He motioned her to his table with a wave of his hands. She went over and sat down. “So, what’s the plan for Shane?”

Faroh filled her in on the details, which he had gotten from Michael just before she had arrived. “Now Shane is a real lady’s man, and he would be more apt to listen to a woman telling him to grow up than a man. I’m going to return to invisible angel form and cause him to have to end up in here.” He pointed towards the table. “Intel from the team has indicated he is heading toward Gracie and Evie’s house, hoping to pick up Gracie and convince her to go out on a date. We’ll divert him so that he’ll

decide to end up here. This is his favorite place to hang out.”

A few miles away, Shane drove down Wisconsin Avenue. Ample time remained before his afternoon appointment downtown to go to a coffee shop and strategize about his business and personal life. “Yep. It’s only 10:45. I should be able to stop by Gracie’s condominium, and score a date with her. Maybe tonight, if all works out well.”

He turned left on Van Ness, headed over to Connecticut and then turned right onto Connecticut heading south towards DuPont Circle. Unbeknownst to him, Faroh waited until the car was within striking distance, and thrust his sword in the engine, causing it to stall at about Connecticut and R Streets, just north of DuPont Circle.

“Oh *man*. Just my luck,” Shane groaned. “Guess I’m going to have to catch a TNC ⁽¹⁾, and have my car towed.” After the towing service picked up his car, he realized he had lost about an hour, so he scrapped his plans to see Gracie, and jumped in the first cab he could hail.

The *Après Café* near *Le Château Bleu* appealed to him, because the chain coffee houses were not quite classy enough for his tastes. The TNC dropped him off in front of the *Après Café*, and he went in. He looked around to see if there were any interesting specimens, a subconscious habit. He spotted a flaming redhead with bright green eyes in the corner. “Oh my. Talent at eleven o’clock.” He sighed in mock exasperation. “So many women, so little time.”

Cydnie sipped on her coffee, and tried to warm herself up. The snow was falling, and the winds howled outside. The thermometer read seven degrees on the bank building across the street. She recognized him as soon as he came in the door: devastatingly handsome, always smiling like a Cheshire cat, and oh-so sure of himself.

She looked up as he came to her table.

“Hi,” he said. “Are you here to grab a coffee and relax?”

She gave him a friendly smile. *He starts right in on the charm; got to give him credit for his ambition.* “Yes. It *is* a bit chilly outside, so I thought I’d grab a coffee. It’s always nice to have someone to talk to. You live near here?”

The thousand-watt smile almost blinded her. “Well, actually, I live in Chevy Chase, in the Chase Point Condos. It’s a real convenient location, not too far from the Friendship Heights Metro Station. How about you? Where do you live?”

“I live in Capital Hill, just south of Pennsylvania Avenue, near Seward Square. Not too far from where I work.”

“Oh, forgive my manners -- my name is Shane Logan.” He reached out his hand.

She took his – daintily as was her custom – hand and replied, “Mine’s Cydnie McGuire. The *Après Café*: nice little place to get away to do some thinking. How did *you* find out about this place?”

“My family was invited to the grand opening of the restaurant next door. I met the owner and two of his daughters.”

Cydnie’s radar pinpointed her verbal missiles on Shane’s intensions, and focused her conversational sights on conviction, which, she figured, is that which reflects the truth; she intended to let them fly. “Oh, then you must know Gracie and Evie.”

Shane smiled nervously, caught off guard by her knowledge of his affairs. “Why yes, do you know them as well?”

Cydnie’s mind hummed, and with deadly accuracy that could slice a frog’s hair into four equal pieces, she asked, “Yes. They are both nice girls, and come from a

family that believes in God, and has a good moral underpinning. Gracie in particular is a very nice girl. I know a lot about her.” She gauged his reaction at the mention of his current objective, and watched with amusement as Shane crossed his arms across his chest, subconsciously mounting his defenses.

“I go to a church: First United Presbyterian Church in Bethesda. In fact, I lead a small group there for young adults.”

“What do you discuss in your small groups?”

A trickle of perspiration formed on his forehead. “Oh, you know: how to make God relevant in modern times; reaching the seekers of spiritual truth with ways of helping them fulfill their potential.”

She returned his volley of meaningless avoidance with a direct question. “So what did Jesus mean when He was saying ‘...anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it?’ He didn’t say anything for a moment, and she smiled to herself. Finally, after letting Shane stew for a few moments, she said, “C’mon Shane. It wasn’t that hard a question.”

“Well, I guess it means that sometimes you’ve gotta make some sacrifices to get what you want, and be willing to take some losses along the way.”

“What if it means that you must be willing to humble yourself; do for those you don’t deem worthy of your attention? Or even more, maybe you should be willing to give up some of those goals in your life for a greater good?”

Shane sat there, stunned into momentary silence, smiled defiantly and said nothing.

The momentum she had gained with every question, continued to build. “Do

you plan to date Gracie?"

"Umm, are you and Gracie friends, or something?"

"Yes, we are. We've met a couple of times, and I really like her. And you haven't answered my question." She waited for him to gamely put on his best 'friendly' face, and sidestep the issue.

He smiled again. "Well, I guess that since I am not ready to settle down any time real soon, I suppose I am more disposed to date more than one woman at this point. Just seems a shame to lead any woman on, when I am not ready to commit to any relationship on that level right now."

She countered. "I'll bet that's true. No commitment except to get what you can out of the relationship, and move on. Don't you think that using women like that will backfire on you one day?" Her eyes focused directly on his, unmoving, keeping him steadfastly in her crosshairs. "I'm surprised a smart man like you hasn't figured out that a *reputation* has more power than all the charm and charisma in the world. Yours is obviously one that makes your intentions less than honorable. It's a shame; you could do so much better."

With that, while Shane was still recovering from a direct hit to his conscience from Cydnie's verbal missiles, Cydnie got up and left. "Bye, Shane. Have a nice day."

SIXTEEN

Leaving the scene, Cydnie, aware of the eventual outcome of things, awaited her counterparts.

Predictably, they approached. VD and Poisonous swayed and slithered purposefully up to her, obviously angry.

VD took the lead. "Look, you angelic daughter of a cow. Shane is my charge. If you know what's good for you, you'll just back *off!* Do I make myself clear?"

Cydnie just stood there calmly and replied, "Let's get one thing straight, VD: I don't care how much fire is in your eyes, or how much anger is in your soul. You need only know one thing: I rebuke you in the Name and by the Blood of The Lamb."

"*Ow!* Stop mentioning that accursed name."

She ignored her, and continued. "When someone is in my charge, I will be involved in the life of said someone, and neither you nor your partner, nor Lucifer

himself can stop me. And by the way, sweetie: I always win.” Her gaze remained steadfast and unmoved.

Poisonous stepped up, glaring at her, tentacles undulating faster than usual.

“Are you threatening us, accursed Spirit of Light?”

Cydnie smiled too sweetly. “No, honey. I’m promising you. Therefore, unless you would like me to explain how the Blood of the Lamb works, and be a first-hand recipient of the benefits of same, I would suggest you both be good little demons, and just walk away...*NOW*.” She practically shouted out the last word. The holy resolve in her eyes burned hot. She had beaten them, and even though they appeared to look as nothing of the sort had happened, they didn’t answer her either.

They just stood there, defiantly, waiting for some way to launch a rejoinder.

VD finally answered, “Yeah, well those prayers you spoke of aren’t going up all the time and I never tire of my work. So you’d better keep an eye on your charge in there, because I intend to bring him down, and you won’t always be there to stop me.”

She stood her ground and said nothing, keeping her eyes locked with VD’s. VD eventually left with Poisonous slithering behind her, both of them spitting out a long litany of curses as they huffed off.

Gracie fumed as the anger in her became hotter. This was outrageous. How could the bureaucracies in this town be so inefficient? Well, for now, she figured, she was going to make certain government lackeys got their job done, or face her ire.

“Laurie, I’m stepping out of the office for a couple of hours,” she said as she headed for the Citizenship and Immigration Services. A little over fifteen minutes later, she

walked into the building on Massachusetts Avenue. At the receptionists desk, she said, "I'm Grace Chen, my sister Evelyn Chen's lawyer. I filed my sisters papers this past Monday proving that she is a U.S. Citizen. I need to speak with Agent Mandy Greenlee. It seems that there's been a mix-up somewhere. This is urgent, Miss. Could you ask her if I could speak to her, please?"

"Just one moment," said the receptionist. "Let me call her." A few seconds later, she said, "Yes, Ms. Greenlee. A Ms. Grace Chen would like to speak with you." Hanging up the phone, she said, "Ms. Greenlee will be with you presently."

"Thank you," she said. After waiting a minute or two, Ms. Greenlee approached her. "Ms. Chen. How are you," said Greenlee, shaking her hand. "What may I do for you?"

"Hi, Ms. Greenlee. I'm the lawyer for my client, a Ms. Evelyn Anne Chen, and I filed the paperwork, including her Birth Certificate and Social Security cards with you this past Monday. An agent from the C.I.A., who is investigating someone that knows her has decided that they can't find the records proving she was born in this country, and is thereby a citizen."

"What was your sister's name again?"

"Evelyn Anne Chen. Her social security number begins with 276, as she was born in Ohio.

Her Birth Certificate was issued shortly after she was born, stating that she was born in New Jerusalem, Logan County, Ohio, about fifty-five miles outside of Columbus, Ohio. She is now 25 years old, and resides with me here in The District."

"One moment, please, Ms. Chen. Let me look up her records. What was the complete Social Security Number?"

Gracie gave it to her, and moments later, Evie's information came up. "Oh, yes," said Ms. Greenlee. "Here are your sister's records, including a copy of her Birth Certificate and her Social Security number. Would you like me to print you a copy of these documents?"

"Please," she said. Ms. Greenlee put the documents in a manila envelope, and gave them to her. "Thank you, Ms. Greenlee," she said and walked out the door.

Back at her desk, Gracie dialed the number for Agent Farooqi. After five rings he answered. "Agent Farooqi; this is Grace Chen, counsel for Ms. Evelyn Anne Chen. I have evidence to prove that she is an American citizen, and that you put her in jail under false circumstances. I need to have her released as soon as possible, no later than close of business today. Are we understood?"

"Can you show me the documents, and are you sure they're authentic?" Farooqi asked.

"Oh, I can assure you, Agent Farooqi. In fact, if you need to, you can call the Vital Records Office in Ohio, where you can verify that what I'm saying is true."

"Good, idea, Ms. Chen. I'll do just that. Give me a few minutes, and I'll get back to you." The phone hung up, and she sighed. "Father, please make this a speedy process." Moments later, the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Ms. Chen," Farooqi answered, "The paperwork seems to check out."

"Good," she countered. "Let's head down to the District Courthouse, and spring my sister."

"Very well. I'll meet you there in half an hour."

At the courthouse, Gracie and Agent Farooqi walked up to the Intake Desk. She lead the conversation with, "My sister, Evelyn Anne Chen is being held here under false pretenses. Agent Farooqi, who had her admitted to this jail will show you

her documentation proving her citizenship.” Her demeanor stone-faced, she turned to Agent Farooqi, and said, “Agent Farooqi?”

“We need to have Ms. Chen released from her detention here. All her paperwork is in order.”

“Very well, sir,” said the clerk. “I’ll call up the Cell Supervisor, and have her brought here.”

A few moments later, Evie ran up to Gracie, and hugged her. “This place is awful. You feel like a criminal, even if you aren’t.”

“It’s okay, honey. You’re out now,” she said, and turned to Farooqi. “It’s a good thing she’s out, Farooqi, or I would have had to sue you, and even the entire C.I.A. if necessary.”

“That won’t be necessary. Good day, Ms. Chen.”

THURSDAY, JANUARY 24TH

The lesson plans finished, and stacked neatly in front of her, she looked up and started thinking over the situation with her sister and Shane. In the middle of her reverie, Carlo walked in. They both tried talking at once.

“Evie, I need to apologize... {Carlo, I’m so sorry ...}”

“I’m sorry. Go ahead... {I’m sorry, I’ll let you speak first...}”

They both laughed, then Carlo said quickly, “Let’s flip for it. You call it.” He flipped the coin and Evie called “Heads.”

George Washington’s bust faced upward on the quarter. Emotion welled up

within her again. She didn't want her tongue get the better of her, especially with people about whom she cared. "I've been awfully stupid lately. I can't believe how much I've let my friends and family down." She smiled sheepishly. "All of you really care about me." Grinning, she added, "Especially you. Would you forgive me?"

Carlo smiled. "Evie, all is forgiven. Can we hug on it?" "Sure."

After they embraced, Carlos face brightened.

"Say...what do you say we hang out together tonight after work. I just want to be able to talk with you, only away from work; you know: undistracted time with my best friend. Would that be okay?"

Turning back towards Carlo, she said, "Actually, I think this is going to be fun. In fact, I'm looking forward to it. Sure; let's do it."

"Yeah. And I get to flirt with you again."

"Please do. I love it when you do."

"Hey, all is fair in love and war." He grinned, then said, "How about we go up to a sushi place I know of for some sushi and some Asian food? It's down near the Farragut North Metro stop, and maybe I can walk you home from there. It's about a twenty minute walk, but that will give us time to stretch our legs and get our convo on."

"My, but you just made me very happy. A good meal is one of my favorite pleasures."

"Yes; I know."

"Oh, good grief! You are beginning to know me too well." Evie rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. So sue me," he countered, grinning broadly.

She had to laugh. She and Carlo high-fived each other: this was going to be fun.

How awesome was that?

THAT EVENING

Evie forgot how much she enjoyed talking to Carlo.

“Gracious, Carlo. We haven’t talked like this in way too long. We’ve let those long talks we used to have at the Institute fall by the wayside.”

“I know. What’s wrong with us, anyway?”

“I don’t know, but…” She looked away briefly. “I’ve been stupid to let things get to this.”

Talking to Carlo was as natural as talking to her sister, or Rachael. Neither one of them brought up her relationship with the Father; they just laughed, and kidded each other. They talked about everything under the sun that mattered to them, including hopes and dreams. The conversation flowed so easily that time disappeared before they knew it.

“Gracious! It’s eleven thirty. Maybe we should take the train home: I’m not real comfortable with being on the streets of D.C. this late at night.” She must have said the right thing, because he looked like he had found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

“Sure. It’d be my pleasure. Better yet, let’s take a TNC home.” He rode with her home, and stood in the condo’s lobby, about to say goodbye. They were both lost for several moments in each other’s eyes. Evie had to admit to herself that she was very attracted to Carlo. She thought for a moment, and realized she actually wanted him to kiss her again.

He drew closer to her. She trembled with anticipation. He gave her a friendly peck on the cheek. "Night, Evie. It totally rocked."

"Hey! Is that any way to kiss someone who cares about you?" She drew him close, and gave him a long, lingering kiss on the lips."

"Well. I stand corrected," he stated, smiling drolly. "We'll have to take up where we left off next time."

As he walked away, waving at her, she called out, "G'nite, Carlo. It was great...I really enjoyed myself. See you tomorrow."

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25TH

Carlo made her smile as he poked his head in her office. "Hey you. How's your day going?" she asked.

"I must say I'm doing better now."

His eyes teased and she enjoyed the flirtation. "Hmm. Well try to behave yourself, and maybe it will stay that way." Her eyes teased back, as she got ready for her day.

Lunchtime came, and true to form, Evie was famished. She looked up, and saw a familiar face staring at her. "Michael! What brings you here? This is a nice surprise."

"Hey...is there a law that says I can't visit my sis every once in a while?"

"No, there isn't. And I'm glad, because I really miss you." Her eyes brightened.

"Hey, want to join your sis for lunch?"

"Why sure...I'd be delighted."

“It’s on me, Michael.”

“You don’t have to do that Evie.”

“I insist...*please?*”

He tousled her hair and smiled good-naturedly. “Okay. Well, then, where are we going?”

“I figured we’d go to *Kramer Books and Afterwards*; it’s my favorite hangout for lunch, and it’s close by.”

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s do it.”

As they walked over to the restaurant, Evie couldn’t help but notice that Michael attracted the attention and stares of lots of women, all discreetly stealing glances at him whenever they could.

Evie looked at him, and the realization made her startle. *Whoa! He is a hottie.* As she blushed at the thought, she now understood Gracie’s remarks from the first time he and Gracie had met.

Finished, Michael put his napkin down, and leaned back, satisfied. “Say sis. This was actually very enjoyable. We should get the gang together and hang out one evening. Just because I usually see you as part of my duties doesn’t mean it has to be boring.”

Her mouth opened wide. “Can you do that sort of thing? I know the Father and I have to work out our differences, so don’t you think He might not approve?”

“Well, it’s not really against any rules.”

“I don’t know Michael. I’d hate to get you in any trouble—”

“Well, I guess you *could* see it that way.” He smiled half-heartedly, put down his napkin and just stared at the table, embarrassed. He didn’t look her directly in the

eyes for quite a while. He finally shook himself out of his stupor, and looked up at her.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

The realization hit her hard in the gut. “Michael...oh my goodness...I’ve hurt your feelings, haven’t I?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I guess I’m rather new at dealing with human emotions.” Looking at her admiringly, he added, “It seems my former second in command is a very different kind of person these days: you seem to handle emotions very well.”

“Well, I’ve been through a lot lately, so yes...I imagine I do deal with emotions. Although, I’m not sure how well I handle them.” She looked straight at him. “But I did hurt your feelings, didn’t I?”

“I...don’t usually get emotional...at least I don’t think so...*do I?*”

Evie smiled, and took his hands into hers. “Michael, sweet brother of mine...take it from your sister. I’ve hurt a few people’s feelings lately, I ashamed to say. I recognize that look.”

“You do?” He wasn’t sure what to think or say or what look she recognized. He had to admit; Evie did help him discover his gentler side.

“I do,” she answered. “And I think it would be great to get the old gang together. I really miss them.”

Michael smiled with unexpected delight. “Hey: it’ll be great to spend some time with you and the gang. How about this Saturday night at about seven?”

“I’ll be there with bells on. Would it be okay if I brought Carlo, Rachel and her boyfriend Ben Cohen along?”

“The more the merrier, sis.”

“Awesome. I can hardly wait; and thanks, Michael. I really enjoyed our lunch.

We really must do this more often.”

“You betcha, sis.” He kissed her gently on the forehead, and said goodbye. “Oh, and Michael...?”

“Yes?”

“Gracie was right. You *are* a hottie. So do us women a favor and try not to break our hearts as you walk down the street, will ya?” she said, enjoying every minute of teasing him.

He responded in kind. “You’d better watch it, sister. You’re incorrigible”

A mock sigh: “Yes. Aren’t I?”

Michael left, still chuckling at Evie’s remark. He felt the presence at first, then, with a discrete glance to his left, noticed him. Agent Farooqi stood in the foyer of the old hotel undergoing renovation on Dupont Circle. Not being able to resist the urge to have a little fun with the man, he walked right towards him into the lobby where he was standing. Agent Farooqi turned away from him, feigning ignorance of his presence.

He walked up to him, tapped him on the shoulder. “Hi, Agent Farooqi. I noticed you were observing my behavior, and I thought I might be able to help you with your task.”

“I...that is...I don’t know who you are, sir.”

“Then please allow me to introduce myself,” said Michael. “I am Agent Michael Angelo, and I’m at your service. I believe you think me a rogue agent, who is working outside the parameters of agency policy, is that right?”

“Agent Angelo! You keep showing up out of nowhere. I don’t know how you got away so easily last time, but I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you’re

apprehended.” He stood there silent for a few moments. “You know, I’m curious as to why you would suddenly want to cooperate with us.”

“I didn’t exactly say I was cooperating – at least, not the way you think. If you need me, just call me at any time, and I will arrange a meeting.” Michael gave him one of his Mighty Warrior Security business cards. “And I’ll tell you what: if you want to see me again, you can catch me at Christ Community Church again this Sunday. I guarantee you I’ll be there.”

“But wait. I need to ask you a few more questions,” said Farooqi.

“That’s enough questions for one day,” said Michael. “I’ll see you on Sunday.” With that, Michael walked out the door and returned to the New Jerusalem before Farooqi had a chance to object.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 26TH

That evening, Evie, Carlo, Rachel and her boyfriend Ben met her angelic friends and family at an Ethiopian restaurant in Adams Morgan. Evie had decided she needed to vary her menu, and this would be an interesting change of pace.

Rachel stared transfixed at Michael until Ben jabbed her in the ribs. “Ow! *Ben!*” When she stopped rubbing her side, she whispered discretely in Evie’s ear. “Boy Evie, your brother is *so-o-o-o* hot! Those blue eyes...that curly blond hair...Oh my gracious... It’s a good thing Ben and I have been dating for a while. He’s really tempting.”

“Yeah -- I’ve noticed that.” She rolled her eyes and sighed. What was a girl supposed to do with such a handsome brother? Faroh and Michael wore slacks and

polo shirts, with sweaters under their overcoats against the cold. “Well, Faroh, Michael, I dare say you two are very smartly dressed. I approve.”

“Actually, I helped dress them,” added Cydnie. She and Cydnie laughed heartily at that one.

Turning in Carlo's direction, she saw Carlo gawking at Cydnie. She had on a strapless black empire dress, which showed off her porcelain shoulders, and her pumpkin-colored freckles. Her green eyes sparkled underneath her flaming red mane, which was hanging gracefully just below her shoulders. Her sandalwood platform shoes highlighted the bright plum polish that adorned her toes and her fingernails.

She admired the sartorial taste of her angel friend. “Wow, Cyd. You look really cute.” “Thank you Evie.” Cydnie beamed.

“Hi Ben, Carlo. I'm Cydnie.” She held out her hand daintily, and offered it to Ben first, then Carlo.

Ben stood there speechless with his eyes riveted on Cydnie. Carlo just stood there with his mouth hanging open, transfixed.

Evie did not like this one bit. *Oh good grief.* Cydnie had mesmerized all the guys there, practically with her ‘hello.’ Her hard stare burned into Cydnie's eyes. Cydnie just smiled sweetly in return.

“Hi Cydnie. Good to meet you,” said Carlo. He kissed her hand in the old world tradition, and pulled out her chair for her.

Carlo's behavior perturbed her. Cydnie had him practically drooling all over himself. After some thought, it hit her that she didn't really have cause to be upset. *Did she?* They were just good friends, after all. *Weren't they? Well; they had kissed...* Carlo's behavior, however still bothered her, irrational as she knew her feelings to be.

“I must say, Cydnie, you look very attractive in that outfit. It suits you.” Carlo gushed.

Cydnie smiled demurely, looking sweetly at Carlo. “Why thank you Carlo. You’re a gentleman: charming, and very attractive at that.”

Carlo’s infatuation with Cydnie galled her. Cydnie flirted like crazy with Carlo, and she didn’t like it. She couldn’t understand why she was so jealous about Carlo.

Michael communicated directly to Cydnie’s thoughts. *Cydnie...decorum.*

Why? Is there something wrong with being nice to someone?

No. Nice is fine, but you are coming on to him.

You haven’t said one thing about how I look.

Cydnie ...

Cydnie stared mirthlessly back at him. *Keep talking Michael. You’re digging yourself deeper in a hole.*

Women!

I heard that.

Michael just smiled.

Evie did a slow simmer while Cydnie smiled and continued her very friendly conversation with Carlo. He had spent most of the night talking to Cydnie, an adoring puppy wagging his tail at her every word. Evie’s blood got hot at first, then rose to a boil, watching Carlo ogle Cydnie.

LATER THAT SAME NIGHT

In spite of herself, she asked, “Carlo, would you mind driving me home? I hate

to be alone on the streets and in the subway this late at night. She found that herself looking forward to it, in spite of what had gone on earlier. However, after Carlo parked, and walked her into the lobby, she became upset. She couldn't talk, and didn't want to. How could he so thoroughly embarrass her like that?

“What? What did I do?” he asked, finally.

A few tense seconds ticked by. “Why didn't you just jump in her lap, and cover her with kisses?” she shot back, her anger rising all over again, turning her face red.

“*What?* What exactly are you implying?” he asked. “Evie...look...I'll admit *Cydnie is* very pretty; and I enjoyed talking to her. But I wasn't making out with her.”

“Well, you practically gushed all over her throughout the night.”

“Evie...she's a nice girl, and I enjoyed our conversation. Besides—.” He smiled suddenly, looking Evie directly in the eyes.

Evie didn't like this. First, he has the audacity to flirt with Cydnie all night and then he starts to act smug about it all. She felt like slapping him, but held back, not wanting to do something she might regret.

“Evie Chen...you're jealous,” he said.

“I am *not*.”

“Then why does my talking to Cydnie bother you so much?”

“It doesn't. You just didn't have to go gaga all over her like you did.”

“Evie. You and I care about each other. And I'd like to continue developing our relationship.” His eyes twinkled with the implication. “Nothing will change that. But you can't convince me that you're not jealous.”

She hated it when he was right. Why did he see through her so well? No fair. The warmth covered her face leaving it a bright crimson. “Okay. Maybe a little.” She

felt it coming. Carlo was going to use that same charm on her.

“Evie...”

“What?” Her gaze avoided his.

He gently pulled her face towards his. “Cydnie may be pretty, but you make my heart melt. Do you understand that? Besides, you’re prettier than Cydnie.”

The unexpected adulation from Carlo flustered her, making her blush even more furiously. “Stop it! You’re embarrassing me.”

“Well, then, let me make it easy for you.”

He moved slowly towards her, eyes fixed on hers, making her tremble. *Oh dear. It’s happening again.* His mouth moved in close to hers. “Carlo? What are you doing? I’m upset with you.” Her mind wanted to push him away, but her heart melted into a sappy puddle of mush. His lips brushed hers gently, lingering there for a few seconds. Unable to breathe for a long time, she just stood in stunned silence. Her heart wanted more, but her mind was arguing.

“I just wanted you to be sure to know your best friend feels about you.” His smile teased her.

Evie swore that his eyes were smoldering underneath that smile.

“You are *awful*, kissing me like that when I’m supposed to be upset with you,” she chided. Nevertheless, her heart ignored her head, and she pulled him towards her, and kissed him back, the same subtle tease. “Your best friend wanted you to know she feels the same way.” The kiss made her warm deep down in her heart, and she felt inexplicably happy.

SEVENTEEN*MONDAY, JANUARY 28TH*

After work, Gracie arrived at the condo, went in, took her shoes, her coat and her mittens off, and walked to the kitchen. She made herself a cup of Chai tea and sat on the couch. Sounds of conversation came from Evie's room, so she figured she must be on the phone, probably with her friend Carlo. Speaking of male friends, she thought about it, and decided that she needed to move on with her life, no matter how bad she missed Peter.

“Well, I found him on eCompatibilities, so maybe I should find someone else there as well.” She took her tea to her room, settled down in her desk chair, and fired up her computer. The sites she visited often were in a login manager program. “Boy, I haven't used this in a long time.” Her thoughts turned to the days when she had first met Peter, and how they had met and fallen in love.

The familiar pain in her heart pricked at her thoughts, and fighting back tears so

she wouldn't give in and cry again, she quickly got on the web page where one found potential matches. The criteria she entered were that the man had to be near her age of twenty seven, live in D.C., be a believer, and be financially self-sufficient. She preferred men of European descent, and entered that as well. All the criteria entered, she clicked on the "Submit" button, and found several matches. Reading through them, she weeded them down to three men. A text was sent to all three of them, but only one seemed genuinely interested in her.

So the texts went back and forth between her and the gentleman named Jay Zeelen, and after they graduated to sending each other emails, they decided to meet each other on a date this coming Friday.

Gracie looked forward to going out with Jay. She was thinking about what to wear, when her office phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Hi Gracie. It's Shane Logan."

Gracie's guard went up right away. "What can I do for you, Shane?"

"Well, I was wondering if we could spend some time together, perhaps over dinner." "Hmmm. Let me get back to you on that."

"You know my number. Call me."

"Bye."

LATER THAT EVENING

Gracie walked with trepidation towards Evie's room. Poking her head in the door, she said, "Say sis, can we talk for a minute?"

Evie looked up. "Sure. What's on your mind?"

“Well, Shane Logan just asked me out to dinner, and for obvious reasons, I’m not sure I want to. In fact, I don’t want to get sucked into his game of cat and mouse. I’d rather go out with the guy I met on eCompatibilities.”

“Well, why don’t we pray about it,” said Evie. “Just going to dinner couldn’t be all that bad. Maybe you’ll even get a chance to share your faith with him. Of course, I wouldn’t expect him to change just because of you; only the Father can do that.”

“I agree. Let’s pray,” she said.

Evie began. “Father, Gracie is dealing with someone whose scruples are very tainted and very lacking. Be with Gracie as she spends time with this lost soul. Give her wisdom and discernment so that she will see through Shane’s intentions, and let her words be from your Holy Spirit.”

“And Father,” she prayed, “I put my heart in your hands, and ask you to protect it. Don’t let me be sucked into Shane’s evil intentions. Keep my mind focused on you. Amen.” She sat silently for a few moments, pondering how she was going to do this. Then she heard a quiet voice in her spirit say, *Trust Me*. “Oh, and by the way, you got some ‘splainin’ to do, Lucy...”

“What do you mean?”

“I walked into the lobby last night after working late at the office, and happened to notice Evie and her friend Carlo doing some serious kissing. Now, what’s up with that?” Her wry grin accused and didn’t let up.

“I...I...” Evie stammered. “Carlo and I like each other, but we’re just good friends.”

“Mmm-hmm. I’ll say you’re good friends. I haven’t seen kissing that passionate in a long time. You love him don’t you?”

Evie turned bright red. "Okay...okay...I think I'm falling in love with him. I can't help but want to kiss him."

"I'm happy for you, honey."

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29TH

The doorbell rang at exactly seven o'clock. "At least he's punctual; I'll give him that," said Gracie. The outfit in the closet hung before her and gained her approval. She turned to the doorway, and yelled, "Evie. Can you get the door? I'm still getting dressed."

"Sure."

When the door opened, and Evie let him in, she relaxed and went back to finishing getting herself ready. A couple of minutes passed. She walked out into the living room. A casual, preppy look adorned him: tan slacks, maroon loafers and a light gray-blue polo shirt. He also discreetly scanned her from head to toe, mentally undressing her. Gracie squirmed at the obvious ogling she was getting, but let it pass. Evie looked at her, and rolled her eyes. She just smiled back as they engaged in a secret conversation.

"Hi Shane. Good to see you." He gave her six yellow roses. "Oh! Thank you! They're very pretty." She couldn't help but wonder if it was a casual gesture, or did he seriously want to be with her?

"Well, shall we be going?" Shane asked, offering his hand to her.

"We shall." Shane helped her into her coat. Then she offered her hand to Shane

and let him escort her. Then, turning to Evie, she said, "I'll see you later."

Evie answered, smiling, "Have a good time you two."

Shane took her to the *District Chophouse* on 7th Street. The conversation began with, "So, what kind of lawyer are you? My company retains a lot of them."

"Well, I practice family law primarily, and setting up the occasional business contract. What exactly does a Creative Director for Communication Media do?"

"That's just a fancy way of saying I organize all the programming we do for all the shows you might watch on the Discovery Channel."

Pearly whites flashed at her, and blue eyes beheld her. "You, Gracie Chen, are not only a very lovely young lady, but a talented one as well."

"Thank you, Shane. I appreciate that."

Shane just smiled.

Their dinner finished, they left to go to Union Station to take in its grandeur, grab an ice cream, and make some more small talk. As they finished off their drinks, she looked at her watch. "It's 10:15 PM. I'd better get home."

"Well, it might win Brownie points with your sister Evie if I get you home relatively early. Hey. I'll tell you what: how about if we meet this Friday at my church's singles meeting. You can invite your sister and her friend and your friends. What would you say to that?"

"Well, let me think on that, and I'll let you know." How far was this going? Did she really want to go to what she knew was a dead church?

Trust me, a still small voice said to her. *I am your Shepherd. I will guide you through any difficult situation.*

Shane deposited Gracie at the door of the apartment at precisely 10:30 PM, said

as gracious a good night to Evie as he could, and left.

“Well, I must admit he got you in at a decent hour,” her sister admitted. “I’ll give him that. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, but I’m kind of tired, so I think I’ll turn in early tonight.”

“G’nite Evie,” she said, “and thank you for your prayers. They really helped.”

Her sister smiled back, “You’re welcome.”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 30TH

Gracie sat on the couch next to her sister, perplexed. “You know what? He invited us to attend his church’s Singles Meeting. What do you think?”

“Well, I guess it would be a sign of good will. We both know that the church is dead, but I believe the Lord is going after Shane through you. Just tell him ‘yes’.”

“I have an even better idea,” she said. “I think I’ll invite him to our Wednesday night meeting; sort of give him a chance to see how the other half lives. Maybe he’ll see what Believers are really like.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s pray about it.”

Gracie left the couch, said ‘Good night’ to her sister and walked into her room. She touched the number, which was now stored in her phone and waited until Shane answered.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Shane. I was wondering if you’d like to come to our Urban Knights meeting tonight.” “Gosh, I don’t know Gracie...I don’t know many of your friends,

and your family might not think much of me.”

“Oh, c’mon, Shane. Don’t be such a baby. My friends don’t bite, and my family is the same way. What do you say?”

“Can I think about it and get back to you?”

“You promise?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Call me soon. It’s at 7:30.”

VD was close by as usual. Her version of the story began in his mind. I can just see all those goody two shoes Christians at that church criticizing the lifestyle I lead, or at least bad-talking it, pointing out that we should practice ‘sexual purity.’ Well, if God made sex to be enjoyed, why be married to enjoy it?

Prayers had been faithfully going up by all members of the Chen family on Gracie’s behalf, so Cydnie showed decided to give VD a visit in the middle of her lies. VD looked up, and gave her a stern look.

“You had better be gone,” she intoned, “or I will talk to Evie and her parents personally, and encourage them to pray more. Don’t make the mistake of underestimating the power of the prayers of faithful saints.”

VD frowned and her eyes flashed. “You blasted angels and the sons-of-men that follow the Light; why don’t you just leave us alone!” She left in a huff.

Cydnie smiled a little *too* sweetly. “It’s a dirty job, I realize, but someone has to do it. Might as well be me,” Cydnie called out after her.

VD said nothing and walked away faster.

“I just love making them squirm. They deserve to.”

Ruache Ha-Kodesh paid a special visit to Shane, floating into his room, where he lay on his bed watching TV. Love emanated from it powerfully, and Shane absorbed it. Shane suddenly felt a peace that did not make him afraid of the holy ideals of real saints. He dialed Gracie's number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Gracie.”

“So are you going to come or not?”

“Sure. Where is your church?”

Gracie filled him in with the details.

“You realize I'm doing this for you.”

The charm never seemed to stop, but she placated him anyway. “Thanks, Shane.”

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER

Gracie and Shane met Evie, Tony, Jinx, Anthony, Raji and all the rest of the gang. The topic that night was a continuation in the series on sexual purity. Demetrius Middleton, the Single's Pastor, lead it, along with his wife, Rochelle. Tonight's discussion was about God's timing for your mate, and making sure you remained sexually pure before marriage.

Pastor Demetrius wasted no time getting right to the point. "Sexual purity is God's standard. Anything else not only defiles the sexual relationship in marriage, but also teaches non-commitment in any relationship. God intended sex for marriage."

"But Pastor, why should you wait until marriage?" asked Shane.

Gracie waited for Pastor Demetrius' answer to Shane's question. At least he asked an honest question. Looking at her sister, she was glad that Evie was listening intently to everything Pastor Demetrius said. She could just feel her sister preparing another lecture.

"Does anybody want to answer Shane's question?" Demetrius asked.

"Because God tells us to stay pure until marriage. That way He can bless your sex life," Jinx said.

"Well, for one thing, without a commitment, you both are using each other," Evie said.

"I can see that, but what if both of you really love each other?" asked Phil, one of the single men who attended.

"Well, then, you should not be afraid of a commitment," said Evie. The discussion went back and forth the entire study.

"Well, gang," Demetrius said at last, "We need to wrap it up. We can pick up on this next time."

The study ended. People were still abuzz; lively discussion continued after the study had ended. Gracie looked at Shane, who looked like he'd been hit by a Peterbilt truck. "What's wrong Shane? You're awfully quiet."

"I...just need to go home and think. That was a very uncomfortable meeting for me. I have issues with some of what was said."

Before she could say another word, Shane left.

She turned to her little brother. "Tony, what do you think of Shane?"

"I noticed Shane's reaction," Tony answered, "and being a member of the testosterone-fueled of the species, I suspect that Shane has 'indulged' a few times." He gesticulated with his left hand to underline his point. "He doesn't exactly strike me as one who makes a habit of sexual purity. I'd be careful if I were you," Tony said. "Guys who are real smooth like him tend to get what they want, and get it easily; and what they want is usually the 'nasty'...sex."

Gracie couldn't agree more. "I tell you what, little brother. Why don't you spend some time with him; you know: a little 'man-to-man' talk. Maybe he'll open up a little more to you."

"You know what, sis: you're right. I need to hang out with the brother sometime. Just me. That way I'll get an inside view of the case, and I'll give you a guys-eye view of the situation. Cool?"

"Here, here," she agreed. "It will be good to get another perspective."

"Well, I can't say for sure 'till the brother's in play. I'll have to wait until after our convo to let you know what my verdict is."

Agreeing, she said, "Great, Tony. I'll wait until then to hear what you have to say."

To get to fair maiden Gracie, Shane had to climb up the tower at the top of the castle at K Street Condos, and get past the gatekeeper, Evie. Tony's invitation seemed a bit odd, but he accepted it anyway. *I'll do anything to get closer to Gracie. They may*

want to cross-examine me every time they get the chance, but she's worth it. I just need to be patient. 'Good things come to those who wait.'

THURSDAY, JANUARY 31ST

VD just chuckled to herself. "Must be a slow-down in the prayers for these two. I have ways of getting around the saints."

"You are very wrong, VD."

VD spun around. There was Cydnie...again. "What is it you want? I'm just observing, now. But I like the way he thinks, and I didn't even have to put the idea in his head."

"We'll see about that. *I'm* going to put some ideas into his head, and they won't be like yours."

"Whatever. I'm sure you angels of light must do whatever you must do, but I have a feeling Poisonous and I will win out in the end."

Cydnie smiled and said nothing; she simply turned around and walked away.

She bristled. "How is it that she seems so sure that she can alter Shane's destiny? One thing I hate more than anything else is the absolute smugness of those enemy angels: they always think they will win. Well, we'll just have to see about that."

Cydnie had heard Ruache Ha-Kodesh mention that even more prayers had gone up since the Wednesday meeting, so she decided to make an appearance at the *Après*

Café herself. She decided to encourage Tony to ask a few pointed questions about Shane's past. At the entrance of the *Après Café*, she found The Lamb standing there. Kneeling on one knee, and bowing her head, she deferred to His Holiness; then arose. "My Lord. It's good to see you here in person. What brings you here?"

"The same thing that brings you here, Cydnie. We must continually work on Shane's conscience to make sure the lies that VD and Poisonous tell him are thwarted."

"I consider it a great honor to work with you tonight, My Lord."

She followed The Lamb into the *Après Café*, where both of them positioned themselves next to Shane's table.

Tony found the guy whose description matched that of what his sisters had told him. He walked to the back of the *Après Café* and walked up to the table. "Are you Shane Logan?"

Shane's stood up to greet him and shook his hand. "Hi, you must be Tony...good to see you. Please have a seat. Can I get you anything; a latté, a tea, a pastry?"

"Well, actually, I could use a coffee -- black. Been a long day, and I'm needin' a kick-start right about now. Thanks."

"No problem." Shane got up, walked to the counter, and ordered them both coffees. He brought the coffees back, and set them down. "So, how's everything with you?"

"Just fine. Look bro: let's dispense with chit-chat and get down to it." He leaned in and focused into Shane. "So, straight up: do you date many women?"

Shane was quiet for a moment. "I'm not sure I've met the girl I want to marry just yet, so I haven't been *exclusively* dating anyone thus far. Your sister is very nice, and I enjoy her company. I am thinking of dating her more to get to know her better."

Not wanting to dance around the issue, he moved Shane closer to the real intention of his questions, with Cydnie and The Lamb guiding. "How long do your relationships last, and when they end, why?"

"Well..." Shane paused. "I've been in about three relationships in the past three years. I'm still friends with two of them. In both cases, we liked each other, but realized we had differing opinions on things that mattered, so we agreed to see other people."

"And what matters is the dirty deed. When they are willing to have sex with you on occasion, it makes it worthwhile for you and these women to stay friends."

"One I did break up with. She and I didn't quite see things the same, and it was obvious the longer we went out together. I figured there was no point in continuing a relationship on any level, so I broke it off completely."

She probably was of those women who wouldn't put out. "What kinds of things did you disagree about?"

"Mainly about where our relationship was going: with the one I broke up with, it was about getting serious and considering marriage, and I wasn't ready at that time. With the two I am still friends with, we just mutually figured we weren't ready to settle down, and we wanted to experience more things that you can only do as a single person."

"You're twenty-eight...when *do* you think you'll consider doing the domestic thing? You know, droppin' a rock, finding a crib, and getting some shorties in the

mix?"

Shane gave him a blank stare. "I'm sorry?"

"Oh. My bad. When do you think you'll get married, get a real house, and have children?"

"Oh...probably when I am about thirty; dad did the same. I figure by that time, I will be far enough in my career to be comfortable financially, and I will have sown enough of my wild oats..." Shane stopped short, and looked down at the table.

Tony's sly smile shot at Shane when he heard those words. The significance of the statement did not escape him. "You know, you just gave up your game right there, bro. It's been obvious to me that you're a player. Now, what you do is your biz, but I have a problem with you doing it with my sister."

"I...I..." Shane stammered.

"Face it, dawg; I've got you dead to rights; now come on, man. You're doing some serious backpedaling; be a man and admit it."

"I...meant I will have experienced all those things you can only do when you are single. I didn't mean I would take advantage of your sister."

Cydnie was about to jump right out of her angelic skin. She decided that she'd better get in there, and make *sure* Shane got the point. Besides, she actually enjoyed setting arrogant men in their places, and this little boy was long overdue for a good verbal spanking. "May I, My Lord?"

"Please proceed."

Cydnie took on her human form, and sat at a table behind Shane, his back to her. She got up, and walked by them both, heading out the door.

"Well, Hi guys. Shane...Tony...good to see you again." Her presence obviously made him uneasy. "Shane, I couldn't help overhearing the latter part of your

conversation. I sincerely hope your single activities don't include *'sowing your wild oats.'*” Her bright green eyes bore directly into his. “When women's hearts are involved, the only thing that grows after such behavior is hurt, sorrow and broken hearts and spirits.”

Target approached, target obtained, target neutralized. She gave him one of her trademark overly sweet smiles. Before Shane could answer, she turned to Tony, “See you around Tony. I hope your time with Shane was meaningful. Take care.”

Cydnie walked out of *Après Café*, and followed The Lamb back to New Jerusalem.

Tony thought about the evening's event as he drove back home. He found it interesting that both he and Cydnie had noticed Shane's reference to *'sowing his wild oats.'* “I can't deny what the Spirit is practically yelling at me: brother is most certainly after the play. And in a big way.”

EIGHTEEN

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1ST

Shane wanted to be able to see Gracie away from the Chens and their friends. They were okay, as families go, but they always seemed to judge him unworthy of Gracie's time and attentions. It always worked out better, in his mind, to get the women he dated alone. He called her to see if she would see him for another date.

"Halbreath, Petrovich. Grace Chen."

"Hi, Gracie. This is Shane. How's everything with you? I was wondering if we could go out tonight."

"Look, Shane. I'm busy today; I have a lot of work to do before I go home. I'll be home late, so I'm just going to lay low tonight. I have a date tomorrow night, so I'm not available this weekend, either. I'm sorry, but I'll have to catch up with you another time. But thanks for thinking of me."

"Oh...okay. No problem. Enjoy your date tomorrow." For some reason, he felt let down that he couldn't see Gracie. It wasn't so much that her answer was off-putting:

truth was, he was beginning to like her.

THAT EVENING

Evie lay in her bed, lost in her thoughts. Her frustration mounted.

“Father...please help me. She got up, and read the Bible, trying to find some answers there. All she could find was that she should she should wait upon the Lord, because by doing so she would see the goodness of her Father and be truly alive. She exhaled deeply, and put the Bible down. “Wait? Be strong, take courage and *wait?* I’m losing my mind. Please show me how I can be in your good graces again.”

I will.

“Oh please do it soon. I’m getting discouraged.”

Patience, my child: you will see all things soon enough.

She wanted to hear something different, but she was obviously going to have to be patient. There was no way around it. “And Father, I give Gracie to you. Help mend her broken heart, and let her move on with her life. She still loves Peter, and is beating herself up for letting her anger drive him away.

Hearing no further answers, she helplessly lay there until she drifted off to sleep.

The angel in charge of rebellion against the Father in Heaven descended into Evie’s room, not saying anything but emitting his evil as strong as a stench from rotten food. He patiently waited for her to wake up.

After twitching her nose a few times, Evie’s eyes opened up. “What is going on here? It feels awfully stuffy in here.” Looking around, but not seeing anything or

Lucifer, she said, "Something smells putrid." She got up out of her bed, and looked around, when suddenly, she noticed a well-dressed man staring at her.

"Ah...I see you have awakened. Good, because I have something to tell you."

"...Lucifer? What are you doing here? What do you want with me?"

"Let me make this perfectly clear. You were foolish enough to give up your status as a servant of Lord Yehovah and become human. Well, I frankly will not let this opportunity pass. I will make sure that you meet your demise before you can find redemption. You will know and taste the second death and suffer for eternity, like the rest of us."

"I'm not afraid of you Lucifer. Just as when I was an angel, you will be defeated; not by me, but by the Lamb himself."

"Well, now. The Lamb isn't here, is he?"

"That can be changed," she said, glaring at him. "May the Lord Yehovah rebuke you."

He winced for a brief moment, and then seeing that nothing had happened...yet, he said, "I know I can't defeat the power of the Light, so I'll leave. Rest assured, however: you will die before you get your redemption, even if I have to do it myself. I will do it when you are unaware, so you can't call on protection from Lord Yehovah." With that, he disappeared.

A few moments later, Gracie walked into her room. "Is everything all right? I thought I heard you talking to someone."

"I was. Lucifer himself."

Gracie gasped. "The devil? Why would he want to talk to you?"

"He, in his usual cocky way told me that he would make sure I died before I

know redemption.”

Gracie gasped. “No! That cannot happen. Promise me you ask the Lamb to redeem you and soon.”

“I’m trying, Gracie. I hope I can find the redemption that seems so elusive to me and soon; just like you.”

Gracie ran over to her and hugged her, hard. Crying, Gracie said, “Please, Evie: don’t end up in Hell when it is so unnecessary. Please...?”

“I won’t’, big sister. I’ll make sure of that.”

“I hope so,” said Gracie, sniffing. “I certainly hope so.”

SATURDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 9TH

The new outfit Gracie wore made her feel a little better about things. She admired herself in the mirror, and decided she passed muster. Then, she called up a TNC, and decided to wait in the lobby. Since Evie was going out with Carlo, she shouted towards her bedroom. “Have a good time.”

“We will. Prayers for your date with Jay, sis.”

“Thanks,” she answered, and went to the lobby. The TNC arrived within the five minutes one usually waited, and she got in. The driver confirmed her location, and she arrived about ten minutes later at a well-known Brazilian Steak House. A tall, handsome gentleman with a congenial face flagged her down soon after she walked in, and asked, “Are you Gracie Chen?”

She smiled back and said, “Yes. And you must be Jay Zeelen.” “I am,” he said,

smiling. "Let me show you to our table."

A few minutes later, after they had been served a beverage and ordered their respective meals, they got into the real conversation.

"So what kind of work do you do?" she asked.

"I'm a Business Systems Analyst with a large consulting firm based out of Tysons Corner. We do the typical government contracting."

"That sounds interesting. I'm a Family Lawyer for a firm in D.C."

The night went on with her getting to know him, and vice-versa. At the end, as she prepared to leave, he said, "It's been nice meeting you, Gracie. I'd love to meet you again; perhaps for lunch sometime."

"That sounds good," she answered. "Call me, and we'll arrange it." She got up to leave, they gave each other a friendly hug, and she waved goodbye. As she walked out the door, she recognized Peter walking toward her with a date at his side. Startled at first, she finally said, "Hi Peter. It's good to see you. How've you been? And who is your friend, here?"

In a manner that was at once cordial, yet aloof, Peter said, "Hi, Gracie. I'd like you to meet Shelli. We've been dating for about a month now."

Shelli turned to her and said, "Nice to meet you Gracie."

"Likewise," she answered back. "Well, I've got to get home: need to get some briefs prepared for Monday." As she walked away, the sadness hit her hard. Around the corner, she waited for a TNC, hoping no one would see the tears falling down her cheeks. She fought back the tears, wiped her eyes and her face. "Please, Peter. Quit haunting me. I've got to move on."

As Shelli walked beside Peter into the restaurant, she turned to Peter and said, "She loves you, Peter."

"Why do you say that?" Peter answered, his voice guarded.

"Because I saw the sadness in her eyes. She may have sounded like she was okay, but she is in pain. She hasn't gotten over you."

"I told you why we broke up. I'm sure I don't want to go back to being the brunt of her anger."

"Yes you did, but she still loves you, and I strongly suspect that down deep, you still love her. People who love each other can hurt each other badly. Love turned upside down is anger. Indifference is true hatred."

Peter quietly said, "Can we please go in and enjoy our evening together?" She said nothing, and walked in behind him.

Evie wanted to do something different, so she called up Carlo. "Hey, honey. It's good to hear from you. What's up?"

"Baby, let's do something different, and see a romantic movie. Maybe that one where a young woman wrestles with the idea of standing by her sister's side as her sibling married the man she was secretly in love with."

"Sounds good to me. I'll pick you up at six o'clock; that way we can grab a bite to eat and catch the seven-thirty show."

"I can't wait. See you at six."

Moved by the movie, she smiled at him the whole night, and held his hand. They kissed as they always did, long and with passion. Afterwards, they settled in a coffee shop.

“Carlo, I have something to tell you...” “What’s that, baby?”

“Lucifer visited me, and threatened to take my life so that I would die without redemption.”

“Wait...you mean Satan...the Devil came to you personally, and threatened your life? Evie: that’s horrifying.”

“Well, I’ve dealt with Lucifer before, and the best thing you can do to him is have Lord Yehovah rebuke him.”

“That may be true, but I’ve gotta admit: I’m scared for you. I don’t want you to die; at least not until you’ve lived a full life and have reached a ripe old age. An age where you can leave this earth peacefully.”

“I want the same thing, baby.”

He held her hand and said, “You know what: we need to pray.”

Carlo took the lead as she held onto his hand. “Lord, you know the plans you have for us, and even though the enemy of our souls wants to kill, steal and destroy, you want us to have life abundantly. I plead the blood of Jesus over Evie, that no harm come to her. You who indwell us are greater and stronger than the evil one he rules this world. Satan, the prince of this world is judged and condemned and sentence already is passed upon him. We declare that you are our refuge; we make you make you our dwelling place, and therefore no harm will overtake us, and no disaster will come near us. In Jesus name. Amen.”

“Thank you for that prayer, Carlo. I feel much better. I’m encouraged.”

“You bet, baby.”

Cydnie sat at a party that Shane Logan was hosting, and which Gracie was attending. She expressed thanks to Lord Yehovah. In all their dates, Gracie hadn't given in to Shane's advances. Any victory was better than no victory. VD stood nearby, watching her pray for Gracie's situation, and said, 'Haven't I told you to stay out of my business, cow? Back off and leave!'"

Turning towards VD, she said, "I am not obliged to do anything you say, fallen one. You can dupe sons and daughters of men, but faithful saints are involved in Gracie and Evie's lives. You can count on one thing: as long as they call me, I will faithfully thwart any of your doings." Her green eyes shone brightly. "And try as you may, you can't escape the fact that you will ultimately bow your knee to the Holy One who sits on the throne. Whatever you accomplish is only because the Holy One allows it."

Observing Gracie, she noticed that Gracie looked uncomfortable. "Shane, I want to leave."

"Must you leave so early?" Shane asked. "We're all having fun, and I'd really like you to be here with me."

"Sorry Shane," Gracie answered. "This party is full of people practicing all variety of dissipation, including people having sex in the bedrooms. Drinking to excess and marijuana are things I find great contributors to moral depravity." She smiled at him and said, "But don't let me ruin your party: enjoy yourself." With that, Gracie left.

"Huh," she said to VD. "...seems your influence is not affecting Gracie."

“Oh, shut up, goody-two-shoes. You’ve made your point, so why don’t you leave?”

Cydnie couldn’t make VD leave the party: too many here were very willing to listen to her. Gracie was not in that place, thanks be to the Father in Heaven.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11TH

Michael had to step up the battle. He had promised Frank Chen that he was going to give regular reports on the comings and goings of Gracie. He decided to call a meeting with Evie and Frank downtown, in the *Après Café* in the office in the back where they could have some privacy. Agent Farooqi would also be hot on his heels, but that was fine: the best defense against Farooqi was a good offense. He would take care of that later. Right now, first things first.

He walked into the back office of the *Après Café*, held out his hand, and took Frank’s. “Hi, Frank. He went over to Evie, and gave her a friendly hug. “Hi, sis. Good to see you again.”

“Have a seat, Michael,” Frank said, pointing to a chair across from his desk.

Michael sat down and began. “We have all of our best angels on her case. Vick is keeping a constant watch her, and Cydnie, of course, is dispatched to help at opportune times.”

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13TH

The phone's shrill blast derailed her train of thought. "Good grief! Just when I start to concentrate..." She grabbed the receiver and put it against her ear.

"Halbreath, Petrovich...Grace Chen."

"Hi, Grace Chen...I sure do need to see you again. I miss you bad."

Gracie felt that now familiar check in her spirit. After having thought about this course of action, and in no less measure, the prayers of faithful saints, to include her sister, she began to feel peace about Shane Logan's pursuit of her. She didn't want to be anything more than just casual friends.

"What do you say we meet for lunch?" he said, "I'm going to be in that part of town anyway, so maybe we could meet at The Melting Pot, which is not too far away from where you work."

They met a half an hour later.

Gracie could already hear what was coming: every word out of his mouth flattered and ingratiated. As insincere as it was, she still didn't mind, because she saw right through the flattery. Her suitor sat in a conspicuous place in the restaurant, and flagged her down, flashing his trademark smile as she approached the table. "Hey there! Boy, are you a welcome sight. I've missed you."

"Well thank you. So what's on your mind?"

"The truth is, I'd like to see you again this weekend. I was thinking of getting some friends, my sister, and her boyfriend together, and heading out of town to the ocean, in Ocean Pines, near Ocean City. Have you ever been there?"

"Yes. Once or twice with my family."

“Well, then, it's settled. You'll have to come with us. We have a house in Ocean Pines with five bedrooms, so everybody will sleep comfortably. Are you in?”

“Umm. What do you and your friends do on these kinds of trips?”

“Oh, you know. We sit around, chat, have a few drinks, or some herb if you are so inclined...stuff like that.”

“Shane: to be perfectly honest, I really don't want to put myself in that situation. It sounds like the kinds of predicament I'd rather not be involved with. Sorry.” Looking him directly in the eye, she continued. “Look, Shane. I'm not sure what you're after, but I'm not willing to be someone who ends up in bed with you. So either treat me like a lady, or don't bother calling me anymore. Am I clear?”

There was silence following her last words, but he said, “Okay.

NINETEEN

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14TH

Evie had never experienced her own Valentine's Day before. She came home to find a Valentine's Day cards addressed to her from Carlo, which intrigued her. She had not been able to see much of him the last month; they both were rather busy organizing the end of a series of classes.

This was an unexpected surprise. She quickly opened the card and started reading. The cover of the card was a cute puppy looking at her with big, brown, expressive eyes. The words said,

Some things just can't be avoided

She opened up the card, and the message continued:

I would follow you anywhere!

The sentiment tugged at her heart. “*Aw-w-w-w!*” She read the rest of Carlos’ card, written in his handwriting:

Evie:

I know we care a lot about each other, but that still doesn't change the fact that I consider you a good friend (and love you as such). <smile> I value knowing you, and hope that we can find more happiness as our friendship grows.

Love, Carlo

Evie felt burning behind her eyes, as the emotion rose. Carlo had yet again proved to be a true friend, and it touched her. “Oh Carlo. I don’t deserve you.” Their relationship was something special in a different way than she had ever felt before. She could talk to Carlo about practically everything. She was going to make a point of telling him tomorrow.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15TH

Evie made a beeline for his office. *Oh good. He's there.* “Hi. I was hoping I

would catch you. It was sweet of you to send me the card. It was lovely and I really appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome, Evie. I meant what I said on the card. I’m glad for our relationship, and I hope we will continue to make each other happier as the days go by.”

Evie’s eyes were misting now. Carlo really cared about her, and the friendship they shared was genuine. It didn’t matter if she was pretty or plain, smart or dull, rich or poor. Well...he *had* said she was pretty. She blushed at the thought. He just genuinely cared about her for herself.

She and Carlo always allowed each other just to be themselves. Her thoughts turned to that night when Carlo walked her home and made her admit that she really liked him. She had very much enjoyed that kiss. His kiss felt as comfortable as the Lamb holding her in his strong arms. He gave it freely, expecting nothing in return.

“I’m really going to miss you,” he said,

“I’m going to miss you too...terribly. But I leave this afternoon from Union Station to National Airport to catch a flight to Texas. As tears pooled in her eyes, she manage to choke out, “Please hold me Carlo,” and cried softly.

Resting on her bed that night, Evie was about to put the Bible down, and think more about what Salvation meant, when a bright being emerged from her, and sat down at the desk. “Ever Vigilant!” she exclaimed. “Why are you out of me, and what’s on your mind?”

The angel from inside the woman smiled, and glowed softly as she sat there, her

robe brightly decorated with her officer's markings and insignia. "Evie, *this* E.V. thinks it would be wise to take your place while you're learning to be a human warrior. I know that things like this take time, and I know you'll miss everyone here in D.C. I can at least run interference for you, and take your place, if you will. Since you and I are one and the same, it will be like the woman is still here."

"You'd do that? How will you feel interacting with other humans when you're an angel?"

"Oh, I'll do fine." Smiling she added, "You see, I've indwelt a human for a few months and grown accustomed to how you act and react...especially to Carlo." E.V. blushed, and said, I don't know how I'll act in those situations, but the Father will guide me."

A gentle smile broke out of Evie's otherwise calm demeanor. "I hope you'll kiss him passionately for me. I'm in love with him, you know..."

Blushing even more, E.V. said, "You must know that I'm not familiar with having affection for a human Son of Adam..."

"Oh, I think you'll do just fine," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "And thank you for helping me out. At least my other half will keep up with everyone here."

"I'll do my best, Evie. I'm obliged to help you out, since it's for both of our benefits." After thinking, E.V. said, "And I'll talk to Gracie about our plan."

"Great! Now get back in me so I can get some rest."

"Well..." E.V. said slowly, "I'll do that, but tomorrow, when you leave, I'll explore your world a little. You know, visit the Institute myself, stop by the Café near the DuPont Circle for lunch, take the Metro home, see the sights; in human form of course."

"Okay, my angel half. I think you'll enjoy being directly part of my world."

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16TH

Evie sat in her room in the barracks, quietly sipping on a cup of hot herbal tea. The shadow caused by the mid-morning sun had grown shorter as the sun had risen higher in the sky. Gracie, not being in the same house as she was different, she had to admit. But for once, she actually enjoyed the solitude; she needed the time to think. She picked up a picture of her and Gracie that Sue Chen had taken shortly after she arrived on earth. She smiled as she sat, looking at the picture from different angles. “Oh, Gracie. I love having you as my sister.

The picture returned to the bedside table, replaced by her teacup. The warmth of the teacup felt good on her hands this cold February night. Another sip warmed its way down into her cold body, as thoughts raced through her mind. Staring back at the picture, and then looking in the direction of the picture of her and Gracie, a long, slow happy sigh left her. Then she looked towards New Jerusalem, and implored audience with her Father in a conversation.

“Abba...what am I going to do? Feeling her throat tighten, she bit her lip, forcing back the heaviness and sadness she felt. After that last round with her sister, she didn't want to talk to her sister again about salvation – at least any time soon. The thought of fighting with her sister brought back vivid images of Gracie's anger.

“I'm at a loss, Father. I give myself to you. Please help me do what's right, because I certainly don't seem to be doing very well on my own. It obviously won't work. Something is holding me back from seeing the truth.” The room stayed

conspicuously devoid of any paternal voice from her heavenly home. A magazine lay on the side table, so she perused the cover, and took it back to her seat on the couch.

Trust me.

At first, she startled. "Father? Was that you?"

Be still and know that I am God, and I am at work in your life and your situation. Even in your heart.

"My heart, daddy? What do you mean?"

Your pride is blinding you to the fact that you need to humble yourself for redemption to be yours.

She didn't answer. The last remark had gone deep into her conscience, and stung. The sadness she now felt she knew to be because of her pride. It hung heavy over her, like a pall. He had made it clear that she had deviated from the right path, and she had to eat crow, and admit that her Father knew better than she did. It wasn't that she really doubted it; she had just never admitted that she was wrong -- and she was.

Lost in her troubled thoughts, she didn't notice a gray-green reptilian creature with long tentacles standing in front of her. When she did notice the creature, she startled. "Who are you...and for that matter, what are you? What do you want with me?"

"I am Poisonous..." said the creature. "I'm going to make sure that all that Lord Yehovah told you will be foiled."

"You're obviously a demon, so why do you think you are greater than Lord Yehovah?"

"Oh, sweetie: I'm aware I'm not greater than The Lord God, but I am very sneaky, and do my work with great stealth. One day soon, I'll catch you off guard, and make my attack. You'll be dead and I'll be gone before Lord Yehovah has a chance to

rescue you.”

“You’re mighty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” she shot back. “Haven’t you read in the Revelation to John, the disciple, these words:”

And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

“Even if you should kill me, The Lamb of God, the Living One died to give life; was dead, and now is alive for ever and ever can save me from Hades!” Her eyes held those of her adversary, without flinching. “He now holds the keys of death and Hades, and has the authority to raise me back to life, even as He did for Lazarus.”

“That’s all well and good, sweetie, but I wouldn’t count on it. You shall see me again when you least expect it, and it will be the end of your human life.”

Before Evie could say another word, the demon flew away, leaving only the putrid stench of evil.

Evie looked at her partner for the mission, a Second Lieutenant named Pam Howell, who showed as much promise as she did. "Hey, Pam. Are we gonna blow those targets to bits?"

"You bet, Evie," Pam answered.

"Well, let's get this mission underway."

The two F-15E Strike Eagles thundered down the runway, left the ground and climbed into the sky. Twenty-five miles from the base, a dummy target had been set up, along with poster-board people, who acted as enemies.

"I'm going in first, Pam," she said. She pointed the nose of her jet downward, and fired two missiles at an empty tank, watching it go up in smoke. Next, machine gun fire from the M61A1 Vulcan 6-barreled Gatling cannon reduced the poster-board people to dust. "Your turn," she told Pam on the radio.

Pam followed suit, headed for another target 5 miles away, and exacted the same damage as Evie had done earlier. Mission over, they turned to head back to the training base.

Poisonous noting that Evie was in a jet followed by another jet, decided to use the other pilot to take Evie down. She floated into the rear seat, settling down quietly, and then talked to the young pilot in the front seat. "You must shoot down Lieutenant Chen's plane. She is known to be a maverick, and plans to strike actual government buildings in the District of Columbia."

Pam, startled to hear another voice inside her cockpit called Evie over the radio.

“Evie, did you just hear a radio message stating that you were a renegade pilot who wants to destroy people and buildings in D.C.?”

There was silence for a brief moment, then Evie answered with, “Goodness no! I’m an honorable pilot who fights for the good and protection of the United States of America.”

“I said shoot her down. I have orders from Post Command,” she said, getting angrier at the pilot and Evie.

“I don’t believe you and your report,” Pam said, and ignored her, saying nothing. Evie, suspecting demonic activity, radioed a message to Pam in morse code.

... .. ◊ _ _ _ _ _ ◊ _ _ _ _ _ ◊ _ _ _ _ _

(Keep your radio on)

“Roger that,” Pam answered.

Poisonous, in the meantime was enraged that the pilot wouldn’t listen to her. “I’ll show you what happens to those who don’t obey me,” she said. Her tentacle went around Pam’s chest, and squeezed...hard.

“Evie...I can’t breathe,” Pam managed to choke out, trying desperately to get some air in her weakening lungs.

The jet Evie was flying in moved in closer to Pam’s jet.

“Drat! That bothersome ex-angel is now snooping on me,” she said.

Evie, now aware that a demon had been threatening her and now tried to strangle Pam. “May the Lord Yehovah rebuke you, evil one.”

"I will not listen to you, bothersome ex-angel," Poisonous replied.

No sooner had those words come out of her mouth, than two bright beings carrying swords appeared in front of Pam's jet.

"Leave her," the first one said.

"Yes, leave her, or be sliced to bits," said the second one. Poisonous let go of Pam, and flew away as fast as she could. The angels came over to her jet.

"Im Rafael," the first one said.

"I'm Gabrielle," the second one said.

"Thank you both," she said.

"Our pleasure," said Rafael. Then he and Gabrielle flew away, two flashes of white light. "What was all that about?" asked Pam, breath labored from her ordeal.

"Let's just say that you were under attack from a very evil creature." "Huh?"

"Don't worry about it. You're alright, and we need to head back to base."

Carlo sat alone in the lunchroom, munching on his sandwich, and thinking of Evie. His whole world had fallen off its trajectory, making him feel like a visitor in a foreign land. Evie's absence had left a big hole in his heart: he really missed that crazy girl with whom he could have the most wonderful conversations.

"You seem deep in thought. Do you miss her?"

He looked up, and thought he was seeing things: a woman stood in front of him, looking straight at him, like Evie had done when he first met her. As he took a closer look, he realized that she looked just like Evie, only she was dressed in a white robe, with gold bands sewn into it in the form of insignias. She looked as though she was a

high-ranking officer of some sort.

“Hi, Carlo. I’m Ever Vigilant. I’m the angel that Evie told you about. I’m the one she was before she decided to find redemption. I’ve come here to talk with you about her, since she is in Flight Training School.”

“You...you’re really an angel?” he asked. “This is almost too fantastic to believe.” After he realized that she was real and truly an angel, and stood there before him, and hadn’t left, he said, “If she was you, how is it that you aren’t Evie? Although I must say, you remind me a lot of her, Ever Vigilant.

“She and I are the same person: she’s just the human body her spirit and I indwell. Carlo, I came to you because I’m worried about Evie. I admire her becoming a warrior, because that’s what I am. What I’m worried about is that she, being flesh, is very proud, and thinks that she is still like me. The worse part is that she and I are now subject to the same consequences. If she should die without giving her heart to The Lamb, and making Him her Lord, we both will end up in the second death.”

“That’s unbelievable: you, an angel, are subject to Hell if Evie doesn’t repent.” He looked at her, suddenly saddened. “I’ve been trying to get her to understand, Ever Vigilant...”

“Call me E.V. It’s easier.”

“Well, E.V., I am going through the same struggle that you are, and I just can’t believe how she refuses to see the obvious truth.”

“I know, Carlo...I know. We need to pray for her...desperately.” She smiled and took his hands. “Let’s pray,” she said. The power of the prayers moved them both for several long minutes, leaving her glowing with the power of the Holy Spirit. When they finished, he felt a tremendous lifting of his burden for Evie.

“Thanks, Carlo,” she said. “I really feel much better now. I can honestly say I feel at peace about Evie, no matter what happens. I’ll be taking Evie’s place while she is gone. It’ll be as though she never left. Only you and Gracie will know what’s going on. You’re a really great friend.” She leaned over, and kissed him on the cheek.

He stared at her and said nothing. “Did you just kiss me? Do angels do that?”

“Yes; but only when they indwell someone who is attracted to you.” She blushed a little, and turned her eyes away from him.

Liking how she blushed, Carlo returned the favor, and saw her looking into his eyes, a troubled expression on her face. “I shouldn’t have kissed you like that,” she said. “You are attracted to Evie, not the angel that indwells her.

“Do you not like me kissing you?” he said playfully. He smiled at her, enjoying embarrassing her with his comfortable charm. She didn’t say anything for a while. Then she looked at him and said, “I can’t believe you’re flirting with an angel. It doesn’t seem right. And yes I do! That’s the problem.”

“Well. I can’t help you there. I happen to like it.” He grinned mischievously at her. “So deal with it. I may even try it again.”

She punched his arm good-naturedly. “You are incorrigible. Now I’m leaving, before I’m tempted to take you up on your offer.”

She left, but not after he gave her a very friendly look. She turned quickly away, and flew away. “Gracious. I need to think through this one: the woman and I are truly one” After reflecting on it, she realized that she was truly part of Evie. She acted just like her, with the exception that she knew what Salvation entailed, whereas Evie still struggled with it.

*TWENTY**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 22ND*

Evie sat on her bunk, her thoughts on Carlo, as they had been lately, quite frequently. She missed him something terrible, but fought back the sadness and emptiness she felt. It was after hours and she decided to walk to the Post Exchange on the Army Base.

She walked in, and came upon the Greeting Card section. Just for the fun of it, she walked down the aisle, seeing many different types of cards: some for Birthdays; some for Feeling Better; some for Congratulating someone for a particular accomplishment in their lives. The Sentiments section caught her attention. A card about relationships interested her; she smiled as she started reading the cover. A puppy dog was on the cover, and the caption read:

It's not just puppy love

She opened the card, and on the inside it said,

You make my tail wag. Come here and give me a wet sloppy lick!

“*Aw-w-w-w!* That’s so sweet.” The words no sooner came out of her mouth, than Carlo came to her mind. She couldn’t avoid the glow she felt in her heart. “Yes, Carlo. This card is so you.” The envelope in the cubby and the card made their way to the cash register. On the way back to the barracks, a smile on her face replaced the loneliness, if only for a while.

When Evie entered her room, E.V. suddenly appeared to her. “E.V. how have you been?” “I’ve been doing well, adapting to your human routine. It is actually quite interesting. I dare say it’s almost as interesting as being a warrior.”

“So has Carlo asked you out on a date, yet?” she asked, happily smiling.

E.V. blushed bright pink, and didn’t answer right away. “I’m not sure how I want to handle such a thing. But I do like him a lot, I’ll admit.”

“Well, get him to ask you out, if only for my sake. I really love him, and miss him badly. Besides, you and I are the same person. I’m the woman, and you’re the angel.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” E.V. said, her face void of emotion. “But there something I need you to know: the receptionist at the Institute, Ashleigh is taking drugs: cannabis, Methamphetamine, and Cocaine. I smell all of them on her breath, coming out of her pores, and on her clothing. I’m very concerned this young lady is destroying herself.”

A pause followed as Evie digested this news. "I suspected this a while ago, but I wasn't sure. One day when I walked in, she seemed unusually sensitive to light. She also seemed a bit hyperactive, and talked a mile a minute."

"That was the effect of Cocaine," E.V. said. "I'm thinking seriously about confronting her about it; I'm just not sure when or how."

"I'd say consult an therapist who specializes in drug addiction, and seek their advice. Then take it from there."

"Alright, Evie. I'll do that. It sounds like the wise thing to do."

A few moments later, E.V. sat there, staring at the wall. "E.V. you're blushing again," she said. "Go on: spill. What's going on? Are you afraid of Carlo asking you out?"

"Well, let's just say, that I won't refuse him if he does."

She just grinned. "You'd better not..."

SATURDAY, MARCH 1ST

Gracie sat in the passenger seat of Shane's car. They had ostensibly made plans to grab dinner and see a movie. Shane turned to her, his face animated. "Hey, let's order take-out, and spend an intimate night in," he suggested.

"The deal was dinner and a movie. I'm not about to be alone with you in your apartment: it's a recipe for disaster. We both know that in such a setting, things get quickly out of hand." Pausing for a moment to let her ultimatum sink in, she said, "So which is it. Do we stick with our original plan, or do I go home?"

Shane stared back at her, disappointment in his countenance, and finally said, "Okay. We'll stick to our original plan.

"And may I remind you to keep your hands to yourself. No hugging; no wrapping your arms around my shoulders, and no kissing. Am I understood?"

"Sure. No problem."

The night over, Shane helped her out of this car, and escorted her to the lobby of the condo building. "Thank you for being a gentleman, Shane. I actually enjoyed the evening."

"You know, Gracie. You're the only woman I've dated that seems to have a clear understanding of what they want. I've actually enjoyed this evening as well. Would it be okay if I called you again sometime?"

"Sure. But do me a favor: don't call me at work; it disrupts my concentration. Call me on my cell phone in the evening."

"Fair enough. See you Gracie."

"Good night, Shane."

A few minutes later, she walked through the door of the condo, and headed directly for her room. In the corner of her eye, something brightly shone in the center of the living room. Brought to a halt by this strange apparition, she stared at it, not quite believing her eyes.

"Hi, Gracie," it said. "I'm Ever Vigilant, the one who indwells Evie, your sister." "You're Ever Vigilant...the angel? But how...why would you leave her?"

“Because, Evie is busy going through military training, and I’m here to sort of...take her place.” Ever Vigilant looked at her with brows furrowed and said, “You look angry and upset. What’s wrong? You look like somebody hurt your feelings. Do you want to talk about it?”

Gracie, caught by surprise from her unusual visitor, stared at her, still somewhat unbelieving, but realizing this was basically her sister, she said, “Yes...I’m upset...I miss Peter; badly. On top of that, my sister is stubborn and prideful, and refuses to see the truth about salvation.”

Ever Vigilant sighed. “Yes, I know. I live in her and can’t believe she won’t see the truth. It’s right in front of her nose.”

Gracie paused for a few moments, thinking about what to say. Finally, she said, “I don’t know what to do about Evie. She won’t listen to me. And Shane is nice enough, but I still want Peter back. Shane is like a little boy who needs to be taught a lesson.”

“I think our Lord is using you to teach Shane about being a real man. He will minister to Shane through you; and honestly, you’ve done a good job of thwarting his advances. Continue to be strong, and make sure Shane doesn’t talk you into something you know you don’t want to do. Trust the Lord for this situation. Let the Lord be strong on your behalf.”

“Boy, Ever Vigilant. It’s difficult. I’m sure I’m not crazy about him at all, but for some crazy reason, I let him take me out. Am I crazy, or do you really think the Lord is reaching him through me?”

“I do. Don’t think of your time with Shane as a date; think of it more as an opportunity to let the Lord work through you. As you give love away, the Lord will fill

you with love.”

“Thanks, Ever Vigilant,” she said, sighing. “I guess I’ll just give him to the Lord, and leave it at that.”

Ever Vigilant just smiled at her and said, “That’s a good choice; and call me E.V. It sounds more friendly, and isn’t such a mouthful as Ever Vigilant.”

“Thanks, E.V. It’s nice to meet you. Is Evie okay? I miss her a lot.”

“She’s fine, but continue to pray for her salvation. She and I have a lot to lose if she doesn’t find it.”

“I will,” she said.

“Oh...and one more thing,” said E.V. “Trust the Father for Peter as well.”

Tears pooled in her eyes, while she could only stand there, helpless. “I’m trying, E.V. It’s hard but I’m trying.”

As Gracie settled in her room, the loneliness in her heart would not abate. With her gaze facing nothing in particular, she talked to her Father in Heaven. “Father: I’m feeling so alone. I can’t stop missing Peter.” She stopped, realizing what she had just said. She could no longer deny the feelings she had for him, even if she had chased him away. “Please tell me what to do Lord. I’m getting so discouraged, I...well, I don’t know what I’ll do. Please help me Father. I’m so heartbroken I can barely function.”

The Father decided to talk gently to her soul. *Turn to me, my beloved.*

“I want to, Father. It’s hard, especially when I feel so sad, How do I?”

I’m right next to your heart.

“Stay there, Father; hold me. This is hard.” With that, she gave in and sobbed heartbroken tears. When she calmed, she felt that somewhere in the midst of all her

sadness, that she was worthwhile, somehow. She couldn't see very clearly right now, but the tiny spark of hope was growing into a flame.

"I feel you getting closer, Father. Guide me. Help me. Help me overcome the sadness in my heart."

You will be. Soon, I promise you.

"Thank you, Father..." Tears ran down her face. "I desperately need you to hold me so I can know you love me."

Are my words not always true?

She resigned herself to listen to the Father's words. "Yes, Lord. You are true and faithful to your word."

MONDAY, MARCH 3RD

E.V. walked into the Language Institute, thinking about her lesson plans for the week. Most of them had been finished last Friday. She had made an appointment with a counselor in a Drug And Alcohol Awareness program in Tenleytown for this afternoon at 3 p.m. "Heavenly Father: please lead me to a therapist who loves you, and is skilled dealing with drug addiction."

The hour came to leave, and she hopped on the Red Line to the Tenleytown/American University station. Walking into the building, she asked for Dr. Susan Rogers. A short while later, Dr. Rogers led her into an office where bookshelves contained hundreds of books.

"Please, sit down, Ms. Chen. What can I do for you?"

“Dr. Rogers: I know a young lady who I know is very addicted to drugs, and is obviously in need of help overcoming addiction. I just don't know how to go about it.”

“Well,” said Dr. Rogers, “we offer many different kinds of treatment here, including group, individual and family counseling. We also have various ways to check on their sobriety, including organizations that help with alcohol and drug addiction. If the client does not feel like talking about certain things in group therapy, they can attend individual counseling. There are various ways to keep track of their progress. There is just one small problem, Ms. Chen: the individual must voluntarily desire to be helped, otherwise the treatment is not effective. Those kinds of people aren't willing to give up their habits.”

“Then how do they find the motivation to try to break their addiction?”

“Well, there are also interventions, where the patient is confronted by a therapist, family and friends. Hopefully, the outcome will be positive; but isn't guaranteed.”

“Well, thank you for your time, Dr. Rogers. I'll look into this further.”

“Good luck.”

FRIDAY, MARCH 6TH

It had only been about three weeks, but Carlo missed her a lot. Then, while staring off into space, focusing on nothing in particular except his loneliness, his phone rang, and he recognized the number. “Evie?”

“Yes, honey. It's me. I miss you desperately. Carlo, when I'm done with Flight Training, I want you to date me, and make me fall even more in love with you.”

“You’re in love with me? You want to start dating me? Are you sure?” Carlo asked, incredulously.

“I’ve never been more sure.” She succumbed to the smile involuntarily. “So what do you say? Would you like to take me out sometime?”

Silence. When he finally answered, he practically shouted. “‘*WOULD I LIKE TO!?*’ Evie, wild horses couldn’t keep me from taking you out. I’d love to. The first night you’re home, if you’re not too tired.”

“That would be great; Gives me a little time to do some shopping.”

“Get something pretty, will ya? You’re very pretty, and I’ll bet you’re amazing when you’re dressed up.”

“My, Mr. Bocelli. A girl could get used to such compliments. I look forward to that night.” “Great. See you then.

The End button terminated the call. He smiled, feeling more genuinely happy that he’d felt in a long time.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7TH

On her day off, Evie decided to head off base to a fashionable contemporary clothing store, about ten miles away. Having no car, she called a Transportation Network Car, and arrived about fifteen minutes later. As she stepped out of the car, the hot, humid heat assaulted her, so she walked quickly into the department store and headed for the womens section, smiling and practically bouncing as she walked.

Visions of her date with Carlo played in her head like a favorite movie. She

perused the skirts and tops until she found a combination she really liked. A most interesting aroma filled her nose as she wandered towards the exit. The attendant at the counter spritzed some perfume her way. Her curiosity aroused, she asked, "My but that's a wonderful scent. What is that?"

"That's the latest perfume from Michel Jardin, ma'am. Would you like to try some?"

She let the clerk spray a small amount on her wrist. Within seconds, that enticing aroma gained entry into her senses. The price of the perfume made sense, and she wanted to impress Carlo in every way. The perfume paid for, she gathered her belongings, and headed back home.

Since it was Saturday night, and she had nothing in particular to do except read boring training manuals, she decided to go out on the town. "Maybe this will help me not to miss Carlo as much."

She put on some nice clothes, and headed to a local pub, which featured country music and western dances, like the line dance. She didn't have western boots, so she put on some comfortable shoes. Inside the pub, people sat at the bar, typically drinking beer. Others danced a line dance to the music that played over the P.A. system. It looked like fun, and a short while later, a young cowboy type walked up to her.

"You know...it ain't good for a pretty gal like you to be sittin' here at the bar, all alone. Why don't you join me in the line dance? I'd be much obliged."

Jumping at the chance to do something fun, she said, "Yes. That would be nice."

She and the gentleman danced a few line dances, and she decided she needed to

sit down and catch her breath.

“Join me at our table. We're all just regular people here, and we believe in making everyone feel at home.” He pulled out a chair for her, and sat down himself.

“Now what is your name, if I might be so bold?”

“I'm Evie,” she said.

“I'm Rod.” Pointing to the occupants of the table, he said, “This is my buddy, Jim; next to him is his girl Sheila; next to her is her friend, Bonnie Sue; and lastly, there is another buddy, Hank.”

“Good to meet you, Evie,” they all said in turn.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, “Back up off me, you punk, or I'll shoot.”

“Uh-oh,” said Rod. “That's Barry Dunsmire, and he's known to have a temper. He comes from the city. Trouble is his middle name.”

The brawl became a matter of fisticuffs, and caused such a commotion that the local Sheriff's office was called. Five minutes later, three deputies came in, broke up the brawl, and pinned Barry to the floor, with one deputy resting his knees on Barry's neck. Minutes later, Barry said, “Git off my neck...I can't breathe.” Eventually, Barry passed out.

Another deputy checked his pulse. “I can barely detect it,” he said. The third deputy said, “We'd better call an ambulance.”

The ambulance arrived three minutes later, siren wailing, and two emergency techs ran into the pub, and immediately checked Barry out. One of them took his pulse by putting her finger on his carotid artery. “I'm afraid I don't feel a pulse.” She then put a stethoscope on his chest, and after listening for a few moments, said, “I think he's gone.”

The first deputy said, "We're taking him to the morgue. I'm pronouncing him dead as of 22:31 hours. The two of them carried Barry out on a stretcher, and loaded him into the van. The van left with lights flashing and the siren wailing.

"Don't you think it was unnecessary for the deputy to basically strangle Barry to death? That to me, is murder."

"That's what it looked like to me," said Rod. "Unfortunately, there are some overzealous law enforcement officers around here who take the law into their own hands to the detriment of those they're trying to protect."

"I hope they arrest that deputy, and put him in jail. He should be charged for murder."

"I think so too," said Rod. "Unfortunately, the people in the city think we're a bunch of rowdy rednecks who would just as soon shoot you as look at you. There's been a lot of bad blood between the citizens of Wichita Falls, and we who live in the outlying Wichita County. Barry was just one example of the city boy who came to the county looking for a fight."

"This is awful," she said. "I'm going to talk to the Sherriff's Office on Monday."

"Good luck," said Rod.

MONDAY, MARCH 9TH

Evie stormed into the local Sheriff's Office. "I'd like to speak to the Sheriff, please."

The clerk at the front desk said, "You have to have an appointment, ma'am. He's very busy." "How do I make an appointment," she asked.

"Hold on, and I'll see what dates are available."

The Sheriff walked out of his office to the front desk clerk. "Hold all calls, Mary: I'm going to have lunch with the mayor."

"Will do, sir," the clerk answered.

"Sir," Evie said walking toward him and calling for his attention, "I just want to say that the deputy that caused Barry Dunsmire's death should have disciplinary action taken on him."

"I agree, miss," the Sheriff said, "There is a lot of outrage against the officer already. He has been suspended from his duty. The people in the town Mr. Dunsmire was killed in are in an uproar, and demanding the officer go to jail...even so far as to be put to death."

"He should go to jail," she said.

"We'll have to investigate further, but I believe public sentiment will cause that to happen."

"It's sickening that such a thing has taken place. Anyone who is mistreated should be vindicated." "I agree," said the Sheriff. "I just have a bad feeling that there are going to be riots breaking out."

TUESDAY, MARCH 11TH

Evie read the local newspaper, looking in particular for the latest on the murder of Barry Dunsmire. True to the word of the Sheriff, riots had broken out in the town, followed by looting and arson against all public buildings and businesses in the downtown district. Much of the downtown Wichita Falls area was in shambles as an aftermath, so the local authorities, aided by a decision of the governor of Texas, called in the National Guard to restore order.

“This is awful...they destroy things in order to demand justice, yet believe they are solving a problem. The reality is, they are just practicing anarchy, and are only making matters worse.”

Days later, the deputy was sentenced to serve life in prison for first degree murder. “At least there was justice there,” she said.

MONDAY, MARCH 17TH

Evie sat at her bed, absentmindedly staring into space, preparing for the next day's rigors. She missed Carlo and called him every chance she got, and wished she could be back in D.C. A frown covered her face as she thought about her situation. The other reasons for her disturbed state of mind lived down in that deep, dark chasm in her soul, which she had learned well to ignore. She had given up her relationship with the Father and the rest of the Trinity – and she knew it. “I know my pride is keeping me from seeing my way back to the Father. I need to deal with that.

More importantly, she just wished those empty, lonely feelings would leave her

alone. They seemed to hit her hardest late at night, when she was alone and had to face her thoughts, which came relentlessly.

LATER THAT NIGHT

She lay on her bed, unable to sleep, and becoming more agitated by the moment. "Father, why won't you take this emptiness away from me? It's not fair. If I had known how awful this experience was going to be, I would never have done it." Her pride kept her from solving the breach between her and the Heavenly Trinity that loved her so much. Yet, her heart quaked in fear, and she found herself trying to find solace in the One who had always loved her.

"I hate having to figure this life out. No one seems to help you in this lonely world. Abba...please...I don't know how much longer I can do this. I'm going crazy, and it hurts. Please...please..."

TWENTY-ONE

The Lamb had heard many prayers petitioned on Evie's behalf, including E.V.'s. It was now time to open this tossed and troubled traveler's eyes all the way. He needed to speak directly to her heart.

You need to humble yourself for salvation: your former status as an angel does not make you as a woman automatically a servant of mine. It is a relationship that must be accepted as it was freely given through my blood.

"I know...I know. It's just so difficult. All I can think of is what I used to be. I don't know how to change my outlook. I still can't see why I must be saved and you must be my Lord when you have always been my Lord, and I never had any sin.

I have warned you. Your pride once again keeps you from seeing the truth. I can help you no more.

Evie's heart fell. The words were true: she suddenly felt very alone.

SATURDAY, MARCH 22ND

Shane had invited Gracie to go with him to a party at Bibi and Jason's house. She agreed but she said she had made plans to spend some time with Rachel during the day. Since the party started about seven, she figured it would be best to meet him at his condo, and they could go from there.

She got into Shane's Corvette, and they headed back downtown to go to Bibi and Jason's condo. She said nothing but for the occasional one-word response to his questions.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

"You just seem kind of quiet tonight."

"It's nothing...just a lot on my mind lately." She couldn't muster up the courage to tell him the truth, so she kept quiet and evasive.

They said no more until they arrived at the party.

All the usual suspects were there, along with the now familiar surroundings. Sensual, undulating music coursed through Gracie's veins. She thought of being intimate with Shane, and fought back the natural disgust she felt at such obvious sensuality. The party bored her. "Shane may we leave. I'm not comfortable with this situation. I just want to go home."

"Sure, Gracie; whatever you want."

She left the party, and headed back to the condo. "I'm glad we left the party. It was full of superficial people. I wasn't in the mood for small talk," she said.

"Actually, I'd rather be alone with you."

She looked to Heaven, and prayed a silent prayer. "Father, help me, because

I'm tempted to be alone with Shane. Is there no way you can help me get over Peter?"

As she and Shane sat in the lobby of the condo building, Shane sat beside her, and held her hands.

"Shane. Please don't. I can't lead you to believe what isn't true."

"I know you may not believe this Gracie, but I really do care for you."

"Shane, I really appreciate that, sweetie, but you and I are in a different place spiritually. I don't think we would ever be more than friends." The pain in her eyes was obvious.

"I can live with that. I've really enjoyed getting to know you." He paused, and looked right at her. "All you alright Gracie? You seem sad about something."

A few moments passed, and tears started falling from her eyes. "I...I'm still in love with someone else, Shane."

"You mean Jay?"

"No; my ex-boyfriend, Peter. I just can't seem to get over him no matter what I try. Can you understand that, Shane?"

Shane responded quietly. "Yes, I can. I happen to really like someone who can't return my feelings for her."

Her hands went out to his, and held them. "Sweetie, I'm sorry. I really am. If we had met under different circumstances, this would be very different. I care about you too, Shane, but I can only be a friend." Her face fell, and tears began to fall freely. "I'm sorry Shane. I need to be alone. Would you mind leaving now?"

"Sure. I'll leave you with your thoughts. I hope everything works out with you and Peter. I really do. I just want you to be happy."

“Thanks,” she choked. “Good night, Shane. May the Lord bless you.” With that, she walked towards the elevator.

Ever Vigilant mused about many things, but mostly about her relationship with The Father.

VD and Poisonous were there to keep Evie blind to the truth, and now taunted Ever Vigilant.

VD broke out in a raspy laugh. “The Lamb cannot help her. She is corrupt flesh. You wanted redemption, and now you inhabit corrupt flesh.”

Her shoulders drooped in defeat. “Why did I want to know redemption? Will nothing save me from the corrupt flesh I now indwell?” Suddenly, a bright light started to fill the room.

Poisonous tentacles undulated faster. “Oh curses. It’s the Lamb of God.”

VD stared wide-eyed. “By all that is evil. You’re right. We’d better make tracks. And fast.”

They both disappeared faster than Ever Vigilant had ever seen a demon move. The bright light approached her, its warmth surrounded her, bring her a sense of calm and peace she hadn’t felt in a long time. The words were serene and full of wisdom.

“Child. I have heard your prayers. I AM faithful, and will not neglect anyone who calls upon my name.”

“My Lord?” She bowed low before the Holy One. “I am grateful for your help. But why am I unable to make Evie see the truth?”

“Because, child. As the evil ones said, she is corrupt flesh. Only I can help the woman you indwell...” Lord Yeshua eyes burned with holy resolve. “I will open her

eyes to the truth that only I can redeem her.”

Ever Vigilant was back in Evie. Evie woke up with a start, shaking and covered with sweat. “Gracious God in Heaven! I’m very afraid of going to Hell.” Before she could finish the thought, her stomach lurched. Nausea climbed from her gut to her throat. She instinctively put her hand on her mouth and ran to the bathroom, knelt over the toilet, and wretched violently. She collapsed on the floor, held her stomach, cramped and sore from the exertion. Another wave of nausea gripped her, and she repeated the ritual, and collapsed again, even weaker from the exertion.

A round of dry heaves ensued, finally ending her misery, and she crumpled next to the toilet, holding her aching belly. Sweat drenched her body, which trembled from the ordeal. For several moments, she sat still, making sure there wasn’t going to be another episode. She weakly got to her feet, headed towards the sink, washed her face with cold water, and rinsed the bile from her mouth. She gargled with some mouthwash, and headed slowly back to her bedroom.

E.V. left her body and stood before the woman she indwelled. “Evie...please. Open your eyes to the truth; see the truth and repent. I don’t want to spend eternity in Hell. Please...for both of our sakes, quit being stubborn, and let The Lamb redeem you...please?” She fell to the floor and sobbed.

Evie looked at her in astonishment. “Gosh, E.V. I’ve never seen you cry like this. This is even troubling to you. Lord in Heaven, please help me see the truth.”

“Yes, please...” cried E.V. As she knelt on the floor, broken and sorrowful, weeping with deep sadness, a gentle light came into the room.

He stood before E.V, and said, “You will see the salvation only I can bring. Take courage, arise and go lay your hands upon the woman’s head. She will see that I am the truth; the only way to redemption, and the only way to eternal life. I am the only way back to the Father. Only I can redeem her.”

She did so, and suddenly, Evie’s eyes flew open wide. E.V. could only dare to believe that a change had truly happened to the woman she indwelt.

Poisonous was not to be outdone. The ex-angel had eluded her attempts to end her life, and now was the time to step up the game. “I can no longer rely on stupid humans or events to do the job. If it is to be done well, I must do it myself. She flew to Evie’s apartment, and watched as Evie slept soundly. She walked with slow and deliberate steps towards Evie and stood right next to her bed. A moment later, her mind made up, she sat on the bed next to the human flesh, and glared at her. She let herself be manifest in the world, appearing in her grotesque glory and stood before Evie.

“Wake up, you fool!” she bellowed, not caring if any other human heard it.

Evie woke up with a start, turned in her direction and sat up on the side of the bed, gasping at the sight of her reptilian body and now fierce, angry grey-green eyes

“Poisonous! What do you want with me?” Evie asked.

“What I want...” she said, pausing for effect, “is to see that you die in your sins. You have escaped all my efforts to destroy you, but no longer.” The talons on the end of her fingers grew longer as she pointed them directly at Evie’s chest. “Prepare to meet your doom...”

Evie screamed. "Please...let me live..."

The razor-sharp needle thrust into Evie's heart, sinking all the way through. "Now, you vermin," she said, menace and threat dripping from her lips. "You shall taste not only your physical death, but the second death: the lake of fire that cannot be quenched. You shall know agony and hopelessness forever."

Evie gasped, eyes opened wide in terror, fell to the floor, blood gushing out of her body, gurgling out words with great effort. "Help...me...Lamb...of...God..." Then Evie's head fell and her body slumped to the floor as life slipped out of her.

"Ha! It is too late for your feeble attempts to save yourself. Taste death, you miserable ex-angel and worthless flesh."

"I have won!" she exulted. "You will never be an angel again, and you will know the misery that we will suffer."

Ever Vigilant arose out of Evie's lifeless body, and looked towards Heaven. "Please have mercy on me, Gracious Lamb of God. Is there no way Evie could have another chance, and be redeemed?"

Poisonous just laughed, and said, "It is too late, stupid angel. You and your witless human counterpart are doomed for the same end I am."

Ever Vigilant turned and saw a light growing brighter. Staring at Poisonous, expressionless, she said, "Look behind you, worker of evil."

The room filled with the bright light. Shaking, Poisonous turned around and saw the Lamb of God approaching her.

The Lamb spoke in a solemn voice. "You, worker of evil, will not be victorious in this situation. I have plans, not only for Evie, but for you. Evie will not die, but see eternal life. Behold the work of the One who controls all things with incomparable

power to those who believe. I am the One who spoke all things into being; I am the Word of God. I have overcome death and its power.

“To those who believe, it has no victory: there is no longer the sting of eternal death for those who believe. I sit at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. My Father has placed all things under my feet and appointed me to rule over everything.” The Lamb turned to Ever Vigilant, and said, “Return to your earthly vessel. You have more work to do on this Earth.”

Ever Vigilant returned to Evie's body, which now had been covered in blood. In an instant, the blood disappeared, and Evie's wounds vanished. She sat up and cried. Beholding the One who had just given her life back, she said, “Oh blessed Lamb: I'm not worthy of your kindness towards me. Please forgive me.” Evie then fell prostrate before Him, and just cried.

He bent over, lifted up Evie's head, and said, “Peace, child. You are forgiven. Heed the words of the angel inside you, and follow me.”

Then, Jesus turned to her and said, “As for you, worker of evil: your evil days are numbered, and so are those of your accomplice.”

“What do you want with me, Jesus the Son of God? I beg of you before Yehovah the Father; please do not destroy me before the appointed time...*please!*”

He simply replied, compassion in his voice, “I have plans for you that you cannot escape. Now begone, and no longer threaten the life of my beloved.”

“Shaking hard, not able to control herself, she turned and flew away as fast as she could, until she no longer felt the holy power of the Lamb of God. Settling on the edge of the water of a great lake in a large forest, she shook with fear. She could

destroy humans, but she had just met the One much greater than she, and held herself, finding no comfort. Then she broke down and sobbed.

Poisonous looked up, dried her eyes and startled. Lucifer stood before her, eyes full of fury, glaring at her.

“She did not die,” Lucifer said. “Why not?” Sticking his nose in her face, he added, “...and you'd better have a very good reason.”

“My lor-...my lord,” she stammered. “I had killed her. She was dead, and the angel that indwelt her left her body. I told the angel, E.V. that she had lost the battle, but she looked behind me as a bright light filled the room, and the Lamb of God approached. He returned her life to her, and healed any wounds I inflicted. I cannot overpower the Holy One. I am no match for His power. He defeated me, and threatened me and said that my evil days are numbered. What should I do?”

Lucifer glared at her for a little while longer, then finally relented. “Let me make this perfectly clear: I should destroy you, and send you to the Second Death this very moment. “The only thing that caused my plan to fail, and that has saved you from me destroying you, is that the Lamb of God intervened. I will let you go this time, but if I hear of you failing again, be prepared for an early visit to the Second Death.”

“Yes, my lord. As you command.”

Lucifer disappeared in a flash, leaving powerful, very palpable unholy spiritual energy behind him.

She shook again, her head lowering, and choked. “I've failed. I can't bear the shame...what am I to do?” Sensing another spirit beside her, she turned and saw VD.

“Chin up,” sister in evil. “I don’t know what will happen to us, but I have a feeling in the long run, we’ll be much better off.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? How can we be better off? We’re doomed for Hell, and the only thing we can do is practice as much evil and cause as many human souls as possible to join us in misery.”

“I heard what The Lamb said to you, that our evil days are numbered...I don’t know that means exactly, but at least the Lamb of God isn’t one to destroy those who belong to Him.” VD smiled at her, sounding very different than she normally did.

“Evil, it seems to me, has very little reward. Think of it: no matter what we do, we end up in the Second Death forever. I figure there must be a better way.”

“Well, I know of only one way, and that’s to do my duty as a demon who serves Lucifer. You can defect to the Lamb if you want to; I’m not ready to be a traitor to one who can destroy me.”

“Just think about it,” VD said, and flew away.

A glimmer of hope snuck into her heart, catching her like a punch to her gut. The emotional turmoil she had just experienced completely undermined her evil will, and she let herself cry again.

The next day, Evie awoke, and turned her gaze to Heaven. It was as if a light had been turned on. Realizing that the Lamb had saved her, it dawned on her that He did it for a purpose, and that purpose involved that she know salvation. The words The Lamb rushed back into Evie’s thoughts. “...*only I can redeem you.*” The realization hit her so suddenly and with such force, she involuntarily gasped. “My gracious Father in

heaven; that's it!" She looked in the Bible on the table. "Where was that verse...?" She looked in the concordance, and found what she sought. The passage lay in the gospel of John.

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Memories of Lord Yehovah speaking through prophets and faithful saints of long ago flooded into her thoughts. First, David's agonizing lament in the Psalms:

The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand; any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

The corruptness of her heart had been laid bare; she could make no more excuses before her Heavenly Father. Then, Solomon's sober words from Ecclesiastes reinforced that truth:

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.

She noted carefully that he spoke of 'righteous men.' She who was always righteous had become unrighteous. As if to join in the fray, Isaiah's verdict of humanity came to her:

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

“Oh dear...oh dear. I'm undone. I'm human and I'm guilty. That's why Eldest Brother and Father would not answer me.” Tears of understanding fell from her eyes. “Oh, abba; my humanity had put a wall between you and me. You still loved me, you still wanted to hold me, but you couldn't. Grief upon grief; now, at last I understand.”

She exulted, and cried towards Heaven. “Oh blessed Lamb...Eldest Brother. How I love you.” She wept with a mixture of joy, relief, and a release of months of frustration. “Redeem me, precious Lamb. Redeem me with the blood that you shed to pay for my now corrupt heart. Be the Lord of this human life...” Then peace came over her bit by bit. The more it filled her, the calmer her soul felt.

The next moment, Evie and Ever Vigilant stood before the Father, with The Lamb at his side. He bid her to come to him. She practically ran to Him. Her soul exulted as his loving arms held her once again. “Oh Abba. I love you so much. I've missed you so badly...” Her tears returned. Joy covered every inch of her soul as she hugged her Father back.

“Evie, my child. You have proven to be a worthy daughter of mine. I am proud of you.” He held her as He had before she began this fateful journey. She hugged Him for all she was worth, not letting go. She said nothing. The smile never left her face.

The Lamb came to her. “Welcome back, precious daughter. E.V.: you know what you must do now.”

“Yes, Lord. I know.”

E.V. dialed the number on the phone. "Peter. We need to talk. Can you meet me in the lobby of my condo. I know it's late, but this is real important."

"Sure, E.V. I'll be right there."

Peter walked across the lobby towards her, and sat down next to her on the couch. "What's going on?"

"Peter..." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Peter...I care about you and Gracie. I honestly do. You two were made for each other. I've admired you since I first met you..."

"But...?"

"Peter. You still love Gracie..."

"Evie, I—"

She put her fingers gently on his lips. "No, Peter. You do. I've known it for a while. You just aren't willing to admit it to yourself."

"But this isn't fair. Gracie treated me like I was dirt."

She smiled and hugged him. "I know. But you still love Gracie." She smiled wryly. "Yes, she's impossible. Yes, she has a temper, and her words can cut you to the quick. But she never really stopped loving you, or you her. In fact, she's heartbroken about losing you." She looked him straight in the eyes. "Now, I'm right, aren't I?"

Peter paused. His head dropped. "Alright...alright...*Uncle*. You're right. She and I do still love each other. We just don't want to admit it. She probably went out with Shane and Jay to fill the emptiness she feels."

"She did. You and I both know it. She was looking for love, but entirely the wrong way. Even though she cares about Shane as a friend, she still loves you...very

much.”

Peter held her tight. “You know...you’re awfully wise, young lady.”

Her smile waned. “Perhaps. But wisdom sometimes comes at a great price. Yes, I’m sure it will be difficult for you and for Gracie, but she still loves you and you her.” She got up, and Peter followed her lead. “You’d better go now. I’ll be praying for you.”

Peter hugged her hard. “Thank you, E.V. I really appreciate you.” He closed his eyes, as one accepting the fate he cannot resist. “And I’ll always love Gracie.”

“And I appreciate you, Peter. Now go.” She turned and walked towards the elevator and headed back up to the condo.

TWENTY-TWO

VD compared notes with Poisonous.

“At least I kept her blind to the truth,” Poisonous said. “Even if she has listened to The Lamb, we kept her blind for a while” With that, she cackled wickedly.

“Yeah; we sure kept Evie in the dark about redemption. For a while anyways.” That old familiar sadness crept into her heart again. She felt her eyes burning, but she forced herself to maintain composure. She started to say something else, when she looked up and saw Cydnie in front of them, very still, with fire in her eyes.

“Your work is done. *Go!* And, ladies: I *have* my sword, and am not afraid to use it.” She started to protest. “What? No way! Evie was mine and –“

Cydnie held up her sword, and spoke with authority. “You both will leave immediately, or be sent to the Abyss.” Looking at Poisonous, she added, “It seems the Lamb has warned you that He has plans you can’t escape. I would think about that if I were you.”

Poisonous just stared at Cydnie, expressionless, uttering not a word. Her eyes however, had glassed over.

VD knew she had to obey; and honestly, she felt herself being happy for Evie. She didn't dare say another word, because Cydnie's face remained rock hard, her jaw set like a flint. Cydnie's look meant business, and no one with any sense would stay there. Poisonous continued to say nothing, standing still, her tentacles undulating across her body.

VD left faster than she had ever moved before, sashaying with deliberate strides. Her partner just left -- no expression in her dark grey-green eyes. They both knew when they were dealing with something stronger than both of them.

Gracie lay in her bed, the events of the evening replayed in her brain, crying in earnest now.

She walked to the living room, sat on the couch and sobbed, not caring if anyone heard her.

“Oh Peter. I know in my heart I love you...very much. I don't know what to do but to give you to the Lord ” She looked up towards Heaven, and cried out, “Lord, help me. Give me your peace. If Peter and I are meant to be together, then I'll trust you for the outcome. In the meantime, I'll leave him in your hands.” A small smile crept up on her, and she felt a peace in her heart she hadn't felt in a long time.

Gracie remembered reading about an event from long ago in the land of Israel. A faded memory, read somewhere in the Old Testament; a picture taken long ago which had lost its sharpness and clarity, but now came back into focus after many

years. Then, with blinding intensity, the entire sordid passage flashed into her memory. Tamar's brother Amnon had callously and selfishly raped her, only to hate her in the end, and leave her in misery. Shane had at least had the courage to really care about her, and let her face the truth about her love for Peter.

The shutting of the door caught her attention. E.V. praised the Lord for Evie's salvation. The pattern of the footsteps gave away their owner. On the lampstand, the blue L.E.D. clock on the stove read *12:04 AM*. Then, the sound of tiptoeing feet caught her ear.

"Is that you, Gracie? What time is it?" "Oh. Hi, E.V. It's shortly after midnight." "Did you have fun with Shane?"

"Sure did."

E.V. didn't believe her. Gracie did a lousy job of trying to hide the depressed look on her face. "We had a lot of fun...talked about everything under the sun." Gracie yawned, and started walking towards her room. "I'm tired. Mind if I just go to bed?"

"Sure. No problem. We can catch up later. 'Night, sweetie." She shook her head and sighed. She desperately missed that happier older sister that Gracie had been to start with. Oh well, It's in your hands Father. I have a feeling I know what's wrong, but I'll leave it with you. You'll make everything work out." She returned to bed.

Gracie lay there, wide-awake. No matter how hard she tried, sweet sleep eluded her. She got out of bed, and sat down on the couch in the living room, tears running

down her cheeks. It hurt.

Bad. She really *had* loved Peter. Even though he had done nothing to hurt her, it didn't take away the pain and the guilt she felt in her heart. It ripped through her very being. She realized too late that she was too caught up in her selfish desires to treat Peter fairly. Right now, even E.V. couldn't help her with that.

The sounds of a bed squeaking came from Evie's room. Soon, E.V. walked into the kitchen, and put some water on to boil.

She half hoped E.V. would come and talk with her. As it turned out, she got her wish. "Gracie...honey, are you alright?" E.V. asked.

Gracie tried to stop her crying, and sniffled, "No."

"Did Shane hurt you?"

The pain and humiliation from the ill-fated relationships of late, including with Peter, burned hotter, and she started crying again. E.V. came over to her, and held her arms around her. Gracie buried her head against E.V. and couldn't stop herself. All those doubts and fears continued to bubble their way to the surface. Some of the pain left her. She even had to admit to herself that she really liked E.V. holding her. It was the most comforting embrace she had felt in a long time, outside of Peter and Shane's.

When she finally regained some of her composure, she answered, "E.V., I broke up with Shane tonight. I admitted to him finally that I'm still in love with Peter. I don't really feel like continuing to date Jay, either."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Honestly. I know how much you love him."

"Well, I can't help but feel that I caused him to leave me for very selfish reasons..." Gracie's face turned away now, and tears started falling again.

"Gracie? Now what's wrong?"

Gracie started crying in again in earnest. "Oh E.V. I made a fool of

myself...again. I let my anger get the better of me, and drove Peter away. And what hurts the worst is that I really care about him.”

E.V. held Gracie's hands in hers and listened.

“But he left me, and rightly so. I was mean and thoughtless to him. I wish I had acted differently then, but now it's too late.”

“I know, honey. I know you've been very sad lately, and it's tearing you apart.”

Gracie's eye popped wide open. “You know?”

“Yes, honey. I knew. I just don't know how to make things better for you, and really, I'm sure I couldn't have if I tried. I knew from what Michael had told us that you would have to be broken before you would be willing to change.”

“Michael? The *archangel* Michael?” Gracie's eyebrows rose almost up to her hairline. “I don't believe that Michael has been paying such careful attention to me, never mind that fact that he has been talking with you, and probably the rest of our family.”

“Yes, honey; him; but the truth is, no matter the source of that information, I still figured this to happen. I knew Peter was bound to leave you. I told you all along. Remember?”

She winced, and then looked back at her. “Yes. I do. Well. To be perfectly honest, I knew I was being unreasonable; I just refused to see how badly it affected our relationship. I've been a fool, E.V. And what's worse...” Gracie turned her head away. “...I thought that you were just trying to be a goody-goody. I thought you didn't really care about me; you just wanted to me to be that wonderful big sister you were at first so fond of.”

E.V.'s face darkened. “Honestly, I am naïve sometimes – I'll admit that; I'd be

foolish not to.” She paused, frowning with sadness. “And yes, I try to control things too; but you could never convince me that I don’t care about you. Do you really think me such a cold and manipulating person that I would just want you to live up to some preconceived notion of me?”

“No.”

“The sad thing is that you have experienced more than Peter leaving you; you’ve realized that it was unnecessary...and *that* really hurts. I tried to stop you, but I couldn’t.”

Tears started streaming down E.V.’s cheeks. “Oh Gracie,” she choked, and looked directly at her, sadly. “I didn’t want you to live up to my expectations. I was really just sad that you were going through a painful experience all over again. At least Peter really cared – and cares about you – and he didn’t use you, like Brian did. I guess that was the answer to our prayers: I finally found redemption, and you have been broken by what your temper caused.”

She frowned. “I appreciate what you’re saying, but it doesn’t help me now: I’ve lost – probably forever – the one man I have truly loved.” Gracie turned her stare upward “*Why...?* Why did you let me do this stupid thing with Peter?” The tears resumed streaming down her face. “Why do I have to go through this misery? Lord, don’t leave me to feel this hurt and anger in my soul for the rest of this wretched existence on this earth. I can’t take it anymore.” She covered her face with her hands, as tears ran down her face in earnest. Her voice filled with emotion. Her words choked out. “Please, Father, forgive me...” Unable to speak any longer spoke, she sobbed, unable to stop.

E.V walked towards her, and held her tight in her arms, hugging her even tighter, and said, “Honey. I think I finally understand what the real problem is, but we

need our family...our *entire* family involved in this. We need to pay mom, dad, Tony, probably Uncle Eddy and Aunt Florrie a visit tomorrow at our Sunday dinner.

Gracie lay in her bed, defeated, looking towards Heaven. "Father, I've been so wrong. I...I've disgraced myself before you." Tears rolled down her cheeks anew. "My heart must have hardened to cause Peter to leave me. I can't believe how foolish I've been...again."

I still love you, Gracie.

"Oh, Father. Would you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

Yes. Just sin no more. Trust me for your happiness.

"I will...I promise I will—" She yawned, and exhausted, fell asleep before she could think another thought.

TWENTY-THREE

SUNDAY, MARCH 23RD

E.V. dialed the number of her earthly father. After a couple of rings, he answered. "Hello?" "Daddy, could you invite Auntie Florrie and Uncle Eddie, and Jinx to our Sunday dinner?"

There's something really important Gracie and I want to talk about. "Sure honey. Is everything alright?"

"It is now, daddy. But we'll talk about this later."

"Okay, honey...I guess I can wait..." He hung up.

E.V. surprised all by volunteering an explanation to the situation before anyone could ask questions. Tears began pooling in her eyes, her chin quivering. She steeled

herself, and pushed on with what she knew she must do. "First of all, I need to apologize to all of you for all I have put you through over the last few months. I've acted foolishly and not listened to the advice of my friends and family..." She looked at Jinx, then Gracie and smiled sadly. "I'm not going to lie to you" My pride and stubbornness kept me from seeing the truth." She looked down, embarrassed. "...and I'm ashamed of it." The tears began rolling down her face again. Almost everyone in the room was glassy eyed. Sue dabbed at her eyes, joined by Florrie and Jinx.

"If I didn't understand what I do now, I would feel totally hopeless, but I began to understand last night that the Lord is always there and loves me, but I've always turned my back on Him." She couldn't think of anything else to say, and for a moment, there was an awkward silence. She looked at her father. "Daddy, I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit very strongly. Would you mind praying for me?"

The Holy Spirit come upon Frank, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit started speaking through him. "Evie, child of mine by God's providence, we have loved you since you joined our family. We all have prayed for you in your journey here on this Earth, and the Lord has shown Himself faithful, and opened your eyes to the truth. We rejoice in your salvation, and welcome you to the family of God."

"Thank you, daddy."

Frank turned to his oldest child and said, "Gracie...child of God and daughter of mine: your heart is wounded, and you are very angry; you must give all your hurt and anger to him."

Tears now rolled down Gracie's face, in earnest. Frank was talking, but she recognized the authority behind his words. Frank now looked at her. "Gracie, do you know what you'd like to do?"

Gracie was crying now, but managed, in between sobs to say what she knew

she must. "Yes. Very much so." She knew that what Holy Spirit was saying through Frank was true, and suddenly the misery she had gone through with Peter made perfect sense. She could sense the veil lifting further from her dark, sad mind, and she knew she must be willing to give up her current course.

"Do you want us to lead you in a prayer to the Father, or do you feel comfortable praying yourself?"

"I'll pray, daddy." Gracie now understood that she really needed to pray, and trust God for all things, including her relationship with Peter. Further, she needed to give all the hurt and anger in her heart to Him. The prospect of that, in a tender, yet bittersweet way was very appealing to her now. "Thank you for your prayers for me, and for Evie." She looked around at all her family and friends. "Would you agree with me in prayer?"

All gathered around her, and silently waited while she began the first earnest conversation she had had with the Father in what seemed like an eternity. "Oh Father...please forgive me for not trusting you for my happiness. I know very clearly now that the anger in my heart has broken me. Lord Jesus -- please forgive me and cleanse my foolish, prideful heart. Lead me and guide me through this life." Her tears flowed freely now as she looked towards Heaven. "I love you, Father." Her eyes, filled with tears, turned to her sister. She hugged her tightly, and continued. "And Lord, please have your love work mightily through Evie. Guide her and lead her through this life, and let her know her strength is in you, and not in herself."

E.V. just hugged her.

VD, her partner Poisonous and several other demons that had been hounding Evie so gleefully, felt the effects of the Holy Spirit as if a bomb had gone off. They were cast so far away from Evie and the Chen household; they barely had time to collect their wits.

“I just hate it when we lose them. But there are other fish in the sea.” She gave Evie and Gracie the ‘three-snap’ of dismissal. “I am *so* through with the both of you.”

She and the others reported to Politically Correct to await orders for another soul to harass, but most of the demons were licking their wounds. This was not just another soul that had escaped her clutches: this was a former angel, who had fallen from grace, like her. Yet, love had now redeemed the angel. This gave her pause.

“Goodness...could the same happen to me?” She smiled a hopeful smile for a brief moment, but quickly put the notion out of her mind, and went on about her business. She hid her head from everyone’s view because a tear had formed in her eye. She didn’t try to stop it. She even let the hope she felt deep down inside — away from the prying eyes of the other demons — dare to grow.

A knock sounded on the door. “I’ll get it,” said E.V, walking to the front door. “Peter!” “Look, Evie,” he said quietly. “Don’t make a commotion. I just want to talk to Gracie. Could you please tell her? Ask her to come outside when she gets a chance.”

E.V. smiled warmly. “I’m glad you came, Peter. I’ll be praying that you two will work it out.”

“Thank you.”

“Hold on. Let me go get her.” E.V. walked back inside, and tapped on Gracie’s

shoulder.

Turning to her sister, who had quieted down some, she gently admonished, "Gracie. I think someone needs a hug from *you*."

Gracie looked at her quizzically. "Who on earth..." She slowly began to understand. "I'm not sure I want to talk to him."

"You owe it to him to at least listen to what he has to say."

Gracie said nothing for a few moments, and then slowly turned and walked towards the front door.

"What is it you want, Peter?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest, keeping her churning emotions at bay. Her face was expressionless.

"Gracie, I know we've fought and said some mean things to each other, but...well, I really want you to give us another try."

She blew out an exasperated breath. "I'm afraid that we'll just fight a lot. I realize I have a temper, and it gets out of control. I don't want to hurt you any more Peter. I'd make both of us miserable." She took a deep breath, and swallowed hard. "I love you too much to want to hurt you anymore."

"I think I'll take a chance on being miserable. It sure beats being without you, and, well; I still love you too, Gracie. Just can't help it. You're worth the effort."

Tears rolled down her face. "Are you sure, Peter?"

"Yes. More sure than I've ever been."

She managed a tired, but happy smile. "Oh, Peter...I love you." She walked to him and held him tightly, kissing him for all she was worth.

For the first time in a long time, E.V. realized that she had a big family: both on earth, and in New Jerusalem. She beamed with pride that Michael considered Gracie

his sister as well, but mostly she was very overjoyed to have her big brother back. Of course, having her Father hold her was something she would always cherish. As she contemplated these things, a familiar light floated into the living room, and Michael landed on the carpet. Michael turned his eyes towards her. "How're you doing, sis?"

She felt tears starting to come again, tears of joy this time. "Michael, I need to tell you something I think we took for granted in Heaven. I love you, Michael, with all my heart. Now I'm sure of it because my heart is a very real thing that I don't take for granted any more. You are the best big brother a girl could ever have; more than you will ever know."

She turned towards her older sister. "And you, Ms. Grace Susan Chen."

Gracie's eyes turned towards her, red from the tears and, not saying a word, managed a weak smile. Peter stood next to her.

"I love you too, sweetie; even if you and I butt heads sometimes." She couldn't help but grin.

SUNDAY, MARCH 30TH

Back in the Operations room, Michael prepared for a debriefing. Cydnie walked in, tears in her eyes.

Michael greeted his fellow operative and friend. "Hi Cyd."

"Hi, Michael. I..." She looked away, embarrassed. "I'm sorry...I've never cried like this before."

Michael smiled. "Don't be ashamed. There is nothing wrong with realizing you

care. In fact, I am quite proud of you. You were a real help and steady warrior on Evie and Gracie's behalf. I couldn't have accomplished my mission without you."

"I'm honored to have helped," she choked.

I'm just letting you know, I think of you as a friend and a younger sister. I don't even think Faroh or Vick will mind." He winked.

Cydnie blushed, and wiped the tears from her eyes, trying to regain her composure. "I'm your friend...and sister? Really?"

His smile broadened. "Yes. You don't mind do you?"

Cydnie blushed harder. "No, no; of course not." She said nothing for a few moments, but regained her composure and playfully smiled at him. "You won't be jealous if I talk to other guys, will you?"

His head shook and his eyes rolled. "No Cyd...I won't mind."

Michael looked over the Evie report. "This is quite a story," said Faroh.

Cydnie entered the room and joined them.

"Can you hang out for while Cyd? I have an item of business to take care of."

"Sure, Michael; what's up?"

Michael looked at Faroh and Vick. "Hey, I need you guys around as well. Can you guys hang out for a while?"

"Sure," they both said in turn.

"Good, because I have a certain CIA agent who needs to have his eyes opened. Hold on a second while I go get him. I'll be right back."

Andy Farooqi relaxed on his couch, watching the Sunday 'March Madness' basketball championship games. A beer occupied one hand, his remote control took up his other hand and some chips and fruit sat on his coffee table. A bright light came towards his window and caught his eye, taking his focus away from his television. It was not the sunlight coming in; it was even brighter. As the light got closer, he noticed what looked like a tall, robed creature coming towards his window.

A second later, a very tall male figure in a bright white robe, looking all lit up, started talking to him. "Agent Farooqi. I need a few minutes of your time. You need to come with me."

"But who are you?" Andy still didn't believe his eyes.

"I am Michael the Archangel," the creature said, "although you have always seen me as Agent Michael Angelo. You should by now have figured out that my code name really described what and who I really am. 'Angelo' means 'angel.' You've been after me for all the wrong reasons, and I need to enlighten you to a few facts you haven't considered before. Come with me."

Andy didn't understand why this creature, which he'd never seen before, would beckon him to follow. "But where are we going?" He never got his answer; before he knew it, the creature that called himself Michael led him away from his apartment through the window, into the air, and into a strange place where all the beings glowed like this Michael who had brought him here. When they arrived, Andy marveled at the sites around him. Bright and beautiful buildings, golden streets and creatures like Michael floating through the air. In the distance, on what looked like a mountain, a very bright glow emanated which filled the entire city. Many beings that looked human, but had a different kind of energy about them, walked by. A very shiny river

flowed from the glowing mountain, smooth as glass, the likes of which he had never even imagined to exist. He saw the walls of the Heavenly City on all four horizons.

In contrast, he noticed that his clothes now looked old, worn, and ragged, and had a rancid odor to them. Shame covered his face. All around him, he felt a great sense of peace, calm, and absolute holiness. By contrast, his heart felt heavy within him; all the things he had done in his life produced a profound sense of guilt.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“You are in what is called Heaven, or as we call it, ‘New Jerusalem.’ You see, Andy, this is the truth of what goes on in the part of reality that you never see, and have never thought about much.”

Andy noticed there were three other winged beings there also. Faroh, Cydnie, and Vick introduced themselves respectively. “But why am I here?” The reality of these strange events sank in.

“You see, Andy,” said Michael, “you and I had a conversation at Christ Community Church back in Washington, D.C. You said ‘...*religion has no practical place in my life.*’ Well, here is the absolute reality. The God who created you abides here in the Throne room in the center of New Jerusalem. I would let you talk to Him, but your corrupt heart would necessitate your dying – instantly. Did you want to go talk to Him now?”

Andy cringed at the thought of some god on a throne putting him to death.

“Um, I don’t think that would be a wise choice.”

“You’re right. The reality is, you need to make it right with Him. You see all the people here?” Michael swept his hand towards all the Believers in the Lamb who occupied the Holy City. “They made it right with Him. Do you see Mohamed here or

men with their concubines and treasures here for their dying valiantly for the holy war?"

Andy's heart sank. He couldn't deny what his eyes saw; all that his religion had taught him had nothing to do with this place. "But how can someone like me who was brought up a Muslim ever 'make it right' with God?"

"Very simple: there is one who sits at God's right hand, called Yeshua, the Lamb of God, whom you Muslims call, *Yasū*. He paid the price for all who desire to be reconciled with God. You just need to acknowledge that The Lamb paid the price, and you need to let Him be your Lord and Master."

Andy pondered this for a while. He sighed loudly. He looked again at all the people with peaceful countenances. He couldn't deny the reality of what he was seeing around him, and it was nothing like what he had read in his Quran. Further, the longer he stood in the midst of all the perfection and peace, the more ashamed he felt. "But how do I ask this 'Lamb' those things?"

"Would you be amenable to having us help you?"

"Sure, if it wouldn't be a bother."

"Oh, honey," said Cydnie, "It would be a pleasure, trust us."

"Are you in a position of authority?" he asked.

Cydnie smirked. "Yes I am; and no, I'm not a member of someone's harem. Things don't work that way here."

Michael said, "That's Cydnie, my 8th-level officer. She commands many squadrons of angels on their missions. But to the business at hand." They all came to Andy, and put their hands on him.

Michael said, "Just repeat after me." He and Andy prayed the sinner's prayer, and the life and power of Ruache Ha-Kodesh filled Andy at that very moment.

Immediately, his guilt and shame were replaced with an even deeper sense of peace and joy. His garment was a white robe like all the others wore. Tears poured out of his eyes for the immense joy and forgiveness he felt.

Soon after, One who looked like an ultimate Authority approached him. "I am the One they call The Lamb," He said. "Welcome to the family and Kingdom of God. As you can see, many others here have decided they wanted to be counted as part of my Heavenly family. Your sins are now forgotten to me, never again to be counted against you."

Although this being appeared formidable, Andy sensed a warmth and a love he had never known while he was in His presence. "Th-thank you sir," he stammered out. "Thank you very much."

"Fear not, my son," The Lamb said. "He whom the Lamb has freed is free indeed. From now on, no matter your circumstance, you will know the joy of your salvation."

Andy smiled hesitantly. He felt light and carefree – as if someone had just lifted a great weight off his shoulders. All his previous notions of life and the afterlife disappeared. He looked around at all the saints, and the One called The Lamb, and Michael and the other bright beings, and shed tears from sheer joy. "I'm really glad this is to be my future. It promises to be a bright one."

After Michael had dropped him off back in his apartment, he said, "Be sure to read The Book, which is more commonly called The Bible. It is a guide written to you sons of men to give you God's truths."

Andy realized he didn't have a Bible. He decided to go out and purchase one, right away. "I will," he answered. "I want to understand more of God, The Lamb, and you angels. But most of all, I want to understand the hope I now have."

Michael smiled. "See you later, Andy." "Good bye, Agent Angelo." He grinned.

TWENTY-FOUR

SUNDAY, APRIL 13TH

E.V. couldn't help herself. She smiled contentedly all day long. She walked into the garage towards her car, which would take her to her parents' house for the Sunday dinner. The bounce in her step and the song that she sang as she walked toward her car expressed her newfound peace and happiness. When she arrived, she bubbled happily all that she had shared from her heart with the Father.

Gracie listened attentively. "Man, I think I'm jealous. You seem to have a very special family."

"Don't be jealous sis: So do you. One day you'll see them face-to-face on a very regular basis. It's just a matter of time."

Gracie grinned mischievously. "Yeah. Then I can flirt unashamedly with your big brother. I'm sorry, but he's still a hottie."

E.V. only smiled back. "Yep. He is that. My goodness, he is that."

MONDAY, APRIL 21ST 2008

Ashleigh's desk came into view as E.V. walked into the building. The familiar smell of cannabis wafted towards her nose, even stronger than it had been before. Her heart sank further thinking of what would be the outcome of Ashleigh's continued drug use. Sweat poured from Ashleigh's forehead, even with the air conditioning making the Institute feel like a meat locker. "Are you alright, Ashleigh?" she asked. "You're sweating an awful lot in this very cold air conditioning."

"Oh, that. I just sometimes get hot for no apparent reason. I'm not sure I understand why; I'm too young for hot flashes," she said, smiling weakly.

"Well, take care of yourself, please? I worry about you."

"Oh, no need to do that. I'll be fine."

TUESDAY, APRIL 22ND

"Say, Carlo. Do you guys keep track of the families here at the Institute? You know: emergency contacts and things like that?" asked E.V.

"Yeah, we do. Why?"

"Ashleigh Cook, the receptionist has been using drugs, including some powerful ones like methamphetamine, and cocaine. Evie first noticed it back in December."

"Are you serious?" said Carlo.

“Yes; very. I’m thinking she needs an intervention, because most drug addicts don’t want to admit they have a problem.”

“Well, let’s clear it with the Director about it and see what he thinks.”

As they walked into his office, he looked up at her and Carlo, and asked, “What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Rundström,” she said, “we have reason to believe that Ashleigh Cook is addicted to drugs, including methamphetamines and cocaine. We were wondering if we could call her parents to see if we couldn’t arrange an intervention.”

“Do you have proof she is taking such drugs?” asked Rundström.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’ve smelled cannabis on her, and seen behaviors that coincide with drug use, such as sensitivity to light, manic behavior, and sweating in this building; the air conditioning is set very low, and if anything, most of us wear a sweater. Sweating in such conditions is not normal. You can even see for yourself.”

“Very well. You two stay here, and I’ll be back.”

When Rundström returned, he said, “She does display the symptoms you have suggested. I must warn you, however, that if any adverse action is taken because of this, you will be held personally responsible, and the Institute will disavow any knowledge thereof.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rundström,” she said, and she and Carlo walked to her office.

As E.V. watched with curiosity, the name of Ashleigh’s Emergency Contact came up. The name was a Samantha Cook, listed as her mother. “I think we’ve made some headway,” she said. “Let’s call her mother, and see if we can’t arrange a meeting with her.”

“Sounds good,” Carlo said.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23RD

“So, you see, Mrs. Cook, we believe your daughter is doing drugs,” said E.V.

Samantha Cook became quiet. Then, in a small, shaky voice, she said, “I’m not surprised. She began smoking weed back in High School. We tried to get her to stop: you know, we told her all the bad things that happen to you when you do drugs, but she wouldn’t listen. I’m sure she is in a bad way by now. I’m at a complete loss as to what to do about her.”

“Well, Mrs. Cook, I have talked with a therapist at a Rehabilitation Center in Tenleytown, and she suggested we do an intervention. She would even be willing to participate from a professional point of view.”

Looking down at the table, Samantha Cook wrung her hands together. “Nothing else has worked, so Ed and I would be willing. We’ll do anything to get our daughter back.”

SATURDAY, APRIL 26TH

E.V. sat in the Cook’s living room with friends and family gathered. She, Carlo, Dr. Rogers, Ed and Samantha Cook, a sister and brother and even an Aunt and Uncle sat all around the living room.

“She should be arriving any minute now,” said Samantha Cook.

About five minutes later, Ashleigh walked through the door, surprised to see such a gathering. "What's going on," she asked. "It's not my birthday."

She faced Ashleigh head on, looking her straight in the eyes. "You see, Ashleigh, I have observed you since last December, and I could smell marijuana on you. You've also been acting like someone under the influence of amphetamines and cocaine."

"Yes, honey," Samantha Cook said. "You've been smoking marijuana since your dad and I caught you doing it in your room back when you were in tenth grade. Now, it seems that you've progressed to harder drugs."

"You've got to stop," said Ashleigh's sister Karen. "You're going to kill yourself, and mom, dad, Kevin and I would be devastated."

"But, this isn't fair," countered Ashleigh. "I can do whatever I want with my life. You all have no right to interfere..."

Very seriously, E.V. said, "We're not interfering: we're trying to keep you from doing further harm to your body." Looking to Dr. Rogers, she said, "Dr. Rogers works at the Rehabilitation Center in Tenleytown. She's an expert in these matters."

"Yes, Ashleigh," said Dr. Rogers. "You are a very typical case of a drug addict. Denial is your most prominent behavior. We can help you face the truth about your addiction, and help you to recover. We have many different types of therapy, and they have a very high success rate."

E.V. walked over to her, sat beside her, and said, "Honey, everyone here cares about you. We all want to see you overcome your addictions and live a normal, healthy life."

"But I'm scared," protested Ashleigh. "Withdrawing from drugs is hard and

painful. I've heard of other junkies going through detoxification, and it's hell. It's your worst nightmare."

"We have medicine you can take to help you withdraw slowly and with much less pain," said Dr. Rogers.

"Please honey: for your sake, get help. We all love you, and don't want to see you throw your life away," said Samantha Cook.

"Please Ashleigh," said E.V. "I and everyone else here want you to live a normal, healthy life."

"Will I really be able to kick the habit?" Ashleigh asked.

"There's a very high probability you'll be clean within a few months. The hard part is staying off drugs. Luckily, part of our therapy is having people like you keep each other accountable, and encourage one another." said Dr. Rogers.

"Give it a chance," she said. "You have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. "Okay...okay...I give up." Said Ashleigh, defeated and crying. "I'll enter the Rehab program."

"I'll be there to help you if you like," she said. "Thanks," Ashleigh said, and gave her a hug.

MONDAY, APRIL 28TH

Rachel and Carlo had heard the news of Evie's new relationship with Jesus, and were very happy for her. "Carlo, Rachel. May I talk to you two?" They were in the lunchroom, back where their relationship had begun.

“Hi, Evie...what's up?” Rachel sat down beside Carlo.

“It may seem trivial to you, but you've been real friends to me, ever since I met you. I know I struggled to find my redemption, but you both patiently helped me and guided me to it. Thank you for loving me.” They did, of course. Rachel gave E.V. a kiss on the cheek, and had to beg off. “I'm meeting my boyfriend Ben for lunch. Sorry! And great news, Evie: good to have you in the family, so to speak.”

After Rachel had gone, E.V. turned to her human counterpart's best friend. Tears were going down her cheeks. Especially you, Carlo: you've really been there for me this whole time.”

He smiled warmly at her. “Hey. What are good friends for?”

“Yes Carlo, you're a true friend.”

E.V. noticed Carlo looking at her absentmindedly. He blinked hard, looked at her, and started blushing. “Sorry...I was lost in thought,” he said.

E.V. felt her heart melting. He was so endearing when he blushed like that. She couldn't resist. “Oh really? And what were you thinking about?” She pressed on, unashamedly looking deep into his heart.

“Truth is, I was thinking about you and Evie. I've liked you both since I first met you, and now that Evie's found the Lord, and both of your lives and hearts are at peace...” He stopped, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Come on Carlo. Tell me what's on your mind.” She actually wanted to hear this, even though she suspected strongly what he felt. He was going to have to say the words himself, because she didn't want to assume anything. His eyes had a softness to them she hadn't seen before. It made her melt inside, and in a good way. “Truth is, E.V. I think I like you and Evie as more than just a friend.”

A YEAR LATER; TUESDAY, APRIL 22ND 2009

E.V. sat at her desk, concentrating on the work at hand. She heard someone knocking on her door, and looked up to see Ashleigh Cook walk in. "Ashleigh! You look well. How're you doing?"

"It's been tough," Ashleigh answered. "I've had some pretty difficult moments when I wanted to go back to using...but you and other people in my therapy group have encouraged me to hang in there and get better." Her eyes misted, as she looked at her, and said, "Thank you for caring enough about me to help me get over my addiction."

She got up and gave Ashleigh a big hug. "Sweetie, I'm glad to have helped."

Evie sat in her room, filled with a bittersweet sadness at having found her way back into the Father's good graces, but missing her family and boyfriend. Powerful feelings ran through her heart. "I desperately wish I could go home, and spend time with them. It drives me crazy not being able to see them." It had been eleven weeks since she had started her training as a fighter pilot. She had done so well that she was already flying powerful jets. To her, it just came naturally. The feeling of not being alone crept up on her, and she looked up and saw her angelic counterpart. "E.V.! I'm so glad to see you. I miss you, daddy and momma, Gracie, Carlo and even Peter. I'm glad

to hear that Gracie and Peter have gotten back together.” Smiling at the angel before her, she said, “So how are you? And more importantly, how is Carlo?”

“That’s what I’m here for. Your Officer Training School has just finished. The Father has arranged for you to take a week off, and go back to D.C. Carlo really has strong feelings for you. There’s something else he needs to tell you.”

“Really?” She sucked in a breath, and smiled. “Don’t tell me anything. I want to find out for myself.”

“You will,” E.V. replied. “This is something both of us are going to really like.”

FRIDAY, APRIL 25TH

Evie ran up to him, hugged him and kissed him for a long time. He had taken a week off from work to be with her the whole time she was in D.C. “Lieutenant Evie Chen reporting for duty, sir,” she said, smiling.

Peter, holding her close, said, “I’m glad you’ve done so well. You not only graduated at the head of your class, but you came out a Lieutenant. It makes me feel very proud to know you.” He paused, looked her directly in the eye, holding her hands. “Evie, I feel very strongly for you.”

“Carlo...I feel the same way. But I won’t lie: I’m scared to death. I have never felt quite this way before, and I don’t know what to do.” She looked helplessly at Carlo, hoping he could help her know what to say and do next. “Help me out here, Carlo please?”

Carlo looked at her with his gently eyes, and she calmed down.

“What I think you need to know, Ms. Evelyn Anne Chen, is that I asked you to marry me, through E.V., and E.V. said yes.”

“Really? You're being serious?”

“Very serious,” said E.V. crying happy tears.

Happy tears streaming down her face, Evie gently put her hands in his. “Oh, Carlo, yes. I want to be your wife.”

“Good, because I think we should go out this tomorrow night to a really romantic restaurant where we could talk.”

They both hugged each other, comfortable with how close they felt to each other. “Does this mean that you'll be kissing me some more?” Evie asked. “I'll have about a month off before I report to my first duty station, which has a strong possibility of being here in D.C.”

Carlo smiled, and held her face in his hands. “Yes, Evie. I look forward to being able to spend more time together.”

“Oh Carlo; so do I; gracious, do I!”

“Well, then that settles it. But we should still be cautious, and have wiser eyes than ours helping us to stay out of trouble.”

“Don't worry, Carlo. I don't want to arouse trouble. I am happy enough that we care about each other.”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30TH, 2009

Le Château Bleu and the *Après Café* had become regular hangouts. All the

gang found themselves congregating there on a regular basis. In fact, it had become the hangout of choice after the Wednesday night meetings.

Evie sat in the *Après Café*, waiting for the gang to arrive, sipping on an iced tea. Her eyes wandered towards the front door, and she noticed a pretty, young Latina woman walking deliberately towards her. She got the distinct impression she had come across her before: there was something familiar about her.

“Hi, may I talk to you for a minute?” the visitor asked.

The young woman's earnest expression intrigued Evie. “Umm...sure. Please. Have a seat.”

“You don't recognize me do you?”

“I swear I've seen you somewhere before, but I just can't put my finger on it.”

The woman hesitated, and then took a deep breath. “I'm VD. The one who made your life miserable the last year or so.”

“VD? Gracious! What on earth brings you here?”

“I...well, that is...I wanted to tell you that I'm happy for you. You've found your redemption, and I think it's wonderful.”

“But...aren't you...?” She lowered her voice. “Aren't you a demon, and don't redemption and holy matters like that bother you?”

Tears rolled down VD's cheeks. “I'll be honest with you Evie. I'm not sure what's come over me lately, but I'm beginning to think that...well, that I like the idea of your redemption. Maybe one day, even a demon like me might be able to be changed by the love of your Lamb of God.”

Evie just sat there, stunned.

“Please say something Evie,” VD said. “Don't hate me because of what I did. I

was doing my job. It really wasn't anything personal. It's just that...well, I've felt so..." Stopping for a moment, at a loss for words, VD finally said, "I've felt so sad, lately. My heart feels like it's breaking, and I can't for the life of me understand what's going on."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she just sat there. Finally, she said, "I'm not completely sure, but I'd say the power of the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

VD's eyes misted. "I've felt that power a few times since you gave your heart to The Lamb. I'm not sure why it comes over me, but it does, and I smile. Then The Lamb tells me, 'Take courage child: wondrous things are in store for you.' Then He goes away. Evie, The Lamb is the most wonderful person I've ever known." Shyly turning her head, she added, "Believe it or not, I really like Him."

"Sweetie, that's wonderful; and no offense taken about doing your job. All worked out for the best, anyway." Her face brightened. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll pray for you, and ask the Father to open your heart to the truth."

"Really? Would you?"

"I will. I promise you."

VD took her hands. "Thank you Evie You're a really wonderful person."

"Thank you. I love you, sweetie."

VD blushed profusely. "No one has said anything like that to me in longer than I can remember. Thank *you*."

"No. Thank *you* for coming to talk to me; I'm honored that you would risk so much to do such a thing."

VD got up from the table. "Thanks, Evie" Looking out the window, she said, "Don't say anything but Poisonous is out there too. I told her what I was going to do, and that if she knew what was good for her, she'd let me do it."

She looked out and saw a young South Asian woman standing outside, with very long black flowing hair. "Well, she's here, and she obviously didn't stop you. That's a good thing."

"Yes. It is. Thanks again, Evie, and may Lord Yehovah bless you. A lot."

She got up, stepped over, and gave VD a hug, at which point VD started crying.

"Oh bless your heart."

"No one has loved me like you do, Evie," she sniffed.

"I *do* love you, VD, and as I said, I'll be praying for you, okay?"

"Thank you Evie."

With that, VD walked back outside, and joined Poisonous who walked away with her.

"I'm amazed," she said, shaking her head. Soon after, a familiar soft blue aura hung over the coffee shop. She looked at the source of the light, and recognized the glory of the Lamb, which shone brightly. "Lord Yeshua! Your holiness, what brings you here?"

"I see that you have beheld my handiwork."

Evie gasped, then tears fell from her eyes as well. "You love both of them, don't you?"

"Never underestimate my power, child. Now continue in your new found redemption, and serve me on this earth." An enigmatic smile graced The Lamb's lips. "And do pray for your two friends. They have quite the adventure in store for them."

"Yes, my Lord. As you require, your servant will do."

The Lamb slowly faded away, leaving Evie standing there, amazed. "My, He's amazing." "Thank you child," said a now disembodied voice.

“You’re welcome...Eldest Brother.” She swore she saw Him smile as she faded away completely.

The Wednesday night Urban Knights meeting ended, and, as was their custom, the gang had all gone to the Après Café. Evie suggested to Carlo that they stay afterwards and spend the evening together after the rest of the gang had gone. She sat across from Carlo, and smiled, then looked rather nervous.

“You okay, honey? You look worried,” Carlo said.

Evie looked at Carlo, and had to speak the words. The feelings in her were going to explode if she didn’t get them out. “Carlo?”

“Yes, Evie?” He looked at her and broke into a soft smile.

“I...well...Carlo, stop smiling at me like that! You’re making my heart melt, and I’m already nervous enough. You see, I...” She stammered and got frustrated with herself.

“What, Evie? Tell me.” His gentle smile helped ease her nervousness a little.

“I...I love you Carlo; very much.”

“I love you, too, Evie...very much.”

He held her trembling hands, and she calmed down, now about to burst with joy. He pulled her face towards his, and their lips met. The kiss lingered, and Evie felt a warm sensation cover her. She wasn’t worried about it this time. She just enjoyed the man she truly loved.

The kiss broke long enough for her to catch her breath. Her arms remained firmly wrapped around his neck. She grinned, but her eyes shone. “Baby, do you know how much your friend loves you?” She pulled him towards her and kissed him back,

just as passionately, filled with great happiness.

“May I also say something?” E.V. asked and stepped out of the woman she indwelt. Evie looked around and found her standing close by.

“E.V.! What brings you here?” Evie asked.

“First of all, you should know that on this past Valentine’s day, Carlo asked us to marry him.”

“Really, Carlo? Did you really?” she said, tears of joy falling from her eyes, followed by hugging and kissing him.

“Yes, I did,” he said.

“Well, I hope E.V. said ‘yes’ because I *do* want to marry you! I love you very much.”

“I did,” said E.V. She turned to Carlo. “First, I wanted you to know, Carlo, that your prayers with me meant a lot. I’m very grateful you did, because I was scared to death of ending up in Hell.”

Then she turned to Evie and said, “And thank you for opening your eyes, and giving your heart to the Lamb.” Then blushing profusely, she walked over to Carlo, pulled him to close and kissed him tenderly, while he turned bright red. “Remember that I told you I wanted to kiss you. Well, I’ve made good on my promise.” Then, turning to Evie, her human counterpart, she smiled and said, “...but I’ll let you have him back.”

Tears of joy fell down Evie’s eyes, and she said, “I love you Ever Vigilant. You and I have had an interesting journey, both as a woman and an angel. I’m glad that you love my boyfriend and that you two prayed for me; it means a lot. After all, we are truly one.”

Turning shyly back to Carlo, E.V. said, “I enjoyed that kiss very much. Evie

and I both love you.”

With that, E.V. re-joined her. Evie found comfort in the angel with whom she shared life and redemption. *We love you too, Abba; very much...*

Glossary

<i>(1)</i>	<i>TNC</i>	<i>Transportation Network Car. E.g. Uber, Lyft</i>
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