



By the Waterfall

When Heaven on Earth Becomes Real

A Novel from the New Earth Series
by "Grace Louise Hampton"

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INTRODUCTION

Suppose you were to die at a young age, let's say, 57...

But instead of finding yourself in Heaven, an incredibly emotionally charged place to live, you woke up in a fantastical place called the New Earth. A peaceful place filled with promise and beauty, wonder and God Himself.

Suppose you discovered that here in this incredible wonderland of sweetness and love there were tiny problems to be solved, answers to discern and people to discover and enjoy.

Suppose, just for a moment, that you had a choice to make. An incredible, beautiful, difficult choice. Between Heaven and the New Earth, between one kind of love and another. Between the highest highs anyone on the old earth could imagine, and the wondrous loving steadiness of a quiet New Earth filled with everything you could ever hope or imagine.

Suppose you had a myriad of choices available. All of them beautiful and all of them difficult.

Where would you choose to spend... Your Eternity?

Disclaimer - As the author, I do not purport that these depictions are biblical. They are simply speculative fancy. I hope you will enjoy this novel as a fantastical experience and nothing more. I pray that you will also understand the depth and reality of the Living God and Jesus Christ the eternal King of kings and Lord of lords. Amen.

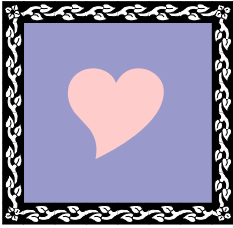
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Chapter One



Soft cotton sheets held the feel of absolute luxury. Stirring beneath the plush softness, awakening gently to the scent of lilac and pine mingled with cedar wood, Valerie hovered between heavy slumber and sweet emotions for what seemed like hours.

Without warning, reality struck and Valerie sat up with a start. She'd expected to wake up from her surgery in pain, not pleasure. Wide eyes opened to a new, unfamiliar sight and swept across a room with rustic wood beamed ceilings and sunlight shining in from almost every direction.

Sitting up in the plush bed, still vibrantly aware of the luxurious softness of the blankets and sheets covering her legs, she remembered having been snuggled down in the gentle feel, in and out of pleasant sleep for at least several hours maybe days. Twisting around to look beyond the white bedding and beautiful furniture, she wondered where she could be. Valerie was 57 years old. Or at least she had been.

She looked down at her long arms. Long for the first time in her life. Her nails were impeccable, long and finished as if they'd been manicured by a Hollywood professional. Beautiful hands and the skin of a 23-year-old met her gaze and a joyful feeling of surprise ebbed up, like honey or very sweet candy coming from somewhere deep inside of her. "Who am I?" she gasped in the sweetest voice she'd ever heard coming out of her mouth.

She bounded out of the bed looking for a mirror, only to find herself unsteady on the long, slender legs that were now hers. From down below her room somewhere she heard a young man's voice. "Honey, Valerie?"

"Yes?" she could only say the word loud enough to be heard by herself. As she looked down the long stairs leading from the upper floor of what was apparently a very large and expensive cabin in the woods somewhere, she couldn't imagine getting down those stairs in her wobbly new legs. She dared not ask who this Honey was. "Jim?"

“Yes baby it’s me.” Jim Spencer had been Valerie’s dearest friend and love for close to 30 years. They’d been married after a long, beautiful courtship. But he had passed three years earlier. An early heart attack. He would be 63 if he were alive today.

Valerie felt a little lightheaded. Excitement mixed with wonder hit her square in the face. Her unsteady legs carried her down the opulent but rustic cedarwood staircase quickly and almost automatically. She turned the corner and looked tentatively into a gorgeous kitchen to find herself standing in front of a stranger. “Jim?”

The man’s smile widened. He was incredibly handsome. Long, golden blonde hair circled down the sides of his face. He was almost the perfect picture of sweet romantic lure, not unlike those pictured on the infamous novels she hadn’t read in many years. But the smile was his. The eyes were his. Beautiful, deep, loving brown eyes. Apparently hiding a delightful secret.

“Good grief! What’s happening!”

The young man stepped a little closer to her and she didn’t hesitate to jump into his arms. She knew who he was and though she wasn’t sure what was happening, she knew it was most likely heaven. Or something like it.

“It’s so good to see you! Where am I? How long have you been here Jim?” Valerie was speaking rapid fire, her voice high and constricted with the thrill of what was happening to her.

“It’s okay Valerie,” he said hesitating cautiously, “I’ve been here a long time baby, I don’t exactly know how long. Step back honey, let me take a little look at my new wife.”

Valerie felt a blush coming up to her checks. She had always loved her husband very much. She looked away from the intensity of his eyes, so overwhelming, and down at herself. But she couldn’t keep away from his gaze for long.

He drank in the look of her for what seemed an eternity. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but he bit his lip the way he used to when he was

in the mood for romance. She felt suddenly weak. "I need to sit down," she said. "What's happening Jim?"

Then she stopped, and caught her breath, it had been too long and she had missed him so much. Now here he was, the most handsome looking man she could have imagined. "What on earth," she mumbled softly.

Jim nodded his head. But took her in his arms instead of saying anything. He placed his hand on the back of her head and his strong arms felt so good. She released all thought of questions and answers, melting into who her husband had become.

What a beautiful sight and feeling he was. What a beautiful day this was. *Thank you God*, is all she could think as he held her close; she began to tremble and tears began to stream. "Thank you, so much," is all she could breathe.

* * * * *

"Look at you. Good gravy lady-friend." Jim couldn't remember the last time he'd used the familiar nickname for his sweet best friend. "I've waited a long time for this moment."

"You've... never seen me before?"

"Not like this. Not since you've arrived here."

"I can't see much of myself," she said, "But, dang, you look good."

"You should see yourself, Valerie, you look beautiful, as beautiful outside as you always were inside. It's so sweet to see you again."

Jim wanted to do so many things all at once. He wanted to show her the new home and world she now lived in, he wanted to tell her what he'd learned, he wanted to talk to her for hours--about everything. He wanted to hold her and never let her go; and he wanted to love her so much he couldn't stand it. But it all had to wait. She was newly here among those who lived in the new world and he wasn't going to rob her of the joy of

discovery.

“So you want to know what you look like?”

“Yeah,” She said it like a teenager’s ‘*no duh!*’

“Give me a few minutes, Val. I want to soak you in. Then we can go upstairs to the dressing area if you’d like.”

“Jim is this heaven?”

“Of a sorts. It’s what the Lord called the New Earth. Heaven is one place, this is another. We have the ability to go back and forth if we wish. Myself, I like it here.”

Valerie stepped into the kitchenette area and looked out of the bay window the beautiful area to the north of the house. “I wonder why,” she said, “It’s beautiful.” She hadn’t yet caught sight of the falls.

His beautiful cabin home stood among tall evergreen trees and trees bearing leaves or blossoms of almost any color. The ground outside was covered haphazardly in lilac, Valerie’s favorite flower, and bees buzzed about the grass and flowers as harmlessly as any other animal on the planet.

Coming here so long ago, Jim had been tickled pleasantly by the reality that the bees just moved over whenever you stepped anywhere. There was nothing to harm you or them anywhere on the planet. No one died. No one got hurt. No need for doctors here. No need for hospitals. No need for fear.

“It’s the best place any of us could have imagined, Val,” said Jim. “Heaven is really something. But this place is my home. Some people live here and visit Heaven from time to time. Others live in there and visit here.”

“Why am I here, Jim and not there? I guess I just assumed that when I died... Oh man... I did... pass, didn’t I.”

“Yes, Honey, you did.”

“And this is what it’s like. Heaven.”

“This is what the New Earth is like. Heaven,” he said, “is... almost too much sometimes. For some. It was for me, especially at first. That’s why I asked that you begin here, Valerie. I figured it would be a softer way to enter your new life.”

Chapter Two

Jim hesitated a moment, allowing his wife to soak in what was happening to her. Although his heart was filled with joy, not consternation. He sat down on the family room davenport next to her, looking over the gift God had given to him in her.

Her hair, long and straight in varying lengths, looked full, sassy, beautiful in a mixture of pale blonde strands. The same blue-green eyes she'd always had flashed with a myriad of emotions. Lashes, long and black, and a beautiful glow made her look like she was wearing some kind of natural makeup, but she wasn't. Her lips were full and pale pink. High cheeks and a face shaped a bit like Sophia Loren's gave her a very unusual look. Her sweet figure gave her the playful look of some kind of biker babe.

The totality of who she was and God's gift to him now, in having her here, started to sink in. He was in heaven on the New Earth. Especially now that she was here.

She started to shake her head, lifting her hand as if she had something to say, but stopped instead looking down at the floor. He wanted so much to kiss her lips for the first time since he'd lost his old earthly life. He'd always been so in love with her. His heart pounded like a mad dog now, although there was no such things as mad dogs in this place. Instead of indulging himself, he leaned over and kissed her cheek lightly and then moved back a little. It would be so precious if she chose to remain. But he couldn't count on that now. He had to wait. Had to wait to see what his precious friend would choose.

"I take it we're still married?" she said.

"Not quite yet honey, but the chance is there. It'll be your choice."

"I never would have imagined it possible to be married here."

"Only here in the New Earth. Not in heaven. Those who prefer to live in heaven must give up the ability to remain married. There's no way to be married in Heaven. It's hard to explain. We'll see it soon."

“I see. Then there is marriage. But only on the New Earth.”

“Right.”

“*Why* am I here, again, and not there?”

“Because I requested you start here.”

“Oh,” she said pensively.

“There’s nothing like this place, Valerie. You can live with the Lord in the Heavens if you prefer. It is an incredible place. But I’ve been watching you when I’ve visited heaven, honey, and I’ve loved you so much I wanted to remain with you if I could. And I can if you chose it. It’ll be your choice.”

“Thank you Jim,” She said it as if she were a little overwhelmed.

“Can we go find a place where I can see myself?”

Jim nodded to her. “Of course.” Jim realized his own excitement needed to be put on hold. “Let’s go take a look in your dressing area. You’ll be blessed by it, I swear, things in this world are incredible.”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded a little cool. *She must be inundated*, he thought.

Valerie’s mood began to pick up and she almost bounced as she headed where he pointed up the stairs, looking back at him with a twist of a smile. He followed her up the stairs taking in who she had become. Jim had missed her so much. He had to hold back his longings. The intense sweetness he felt watching her now.

What if she chose to stay with the Lord and the others in the Heavens? What if she wanted that beautiful place over this beautiful one? It was altogether possible that the sight of the Lord Jesus would cause her to want to stay there for the rest of eternity. Many people did. Some preferred to visit here instead of there. Some never chose to come to this very earthy

New Earth.

God was here in this new world. The Lord Jesus ruled from the Heavens, but God was here as well, in ways the old earth had never been able to know Him. He revealed Himself here so strongly. Jim wanted to show Valerie how God was here. To tell her that all they had to do was ask, and He would give incredible signs of His presence, so many it wasn't funny. Here, God even spoke with them in gentle, audible ways. Here, God was a very real part of their everyday life.

Valerie had always loved her Lord with everything she had. Jim had watched her love for God grow and been beautifully blessed by it then. Since coming here, he had taken every opportunity to grow to know God. So much better from this side of life than ever before. He had grown to love the Lord very much. God was so much grander, more beautiful, more gentle than anyone had ever taught him on the old earth.

Service to Jesus Himself, however, could be very appealing to anyone. Jim knew he would most likely join Valerie if she wanted to be there with the multitudes who worshipped Him continuously, but in his heart he knew he wanted to love her as he could here and not there.

Valerie walked back into their bedroom and Jim watched as she looked in awe at the absolute beauty of their private room. It was a sweet and precious hideaway. Filled with all the amenities and frills they could ever desire. Lovingly designed with both Val's and his favorite colors and styles.

"Who decorated the house?" she asked incredulously.

"I did." Jim's heart felt warm and ten times its normal size. He had wanted her to see this so much. He'd spent a lot of time combing through the extensive things available for view at one of the learning stations in his home where he was able to ask the Lord for anything he wished and it simply materialized.

It was such a joy to have this much done before she arrived and know that anything could be "recycled" with a simple request, changed to suit her perfect tastes, as she chose, anytime she wished. This was such a loving and

beautifully designed world. Every aspect designed and created by the very loving hands of God. Jim's own heart swelled with gratification. All his work and knowledge of her heart and life had been valuable. It brought a wondrous smile to her sweet lips. And he was pleased.

As she stepped around the side of the bed and into the dressing area her face lit up. It was a calming room. It would have been called a bathing room in the old earth. The room was designed in blues and greens with a very natural beauty. The walls were made of blue-green, marbled, rough-textured stone, and crinkled glass through which the sun sparkled in every direction.

The first thing she seemed to notice was the large bath. It wasn't necessary to wash often in this place. Dirt just seemed never to rest on a person and every part of the new human body was sweet and pleasant, nothing to remind us of the body we once had suffered. Even so, a bath was a wonderful thing when you wanted one. And a person could get dirty if they really tried.

This one was surrounded in flowers, picked and placed in the water and in glass vases, never fading or dying. Here you could even plant them back in the soil and they would take. Candles with the most delicious and realistic scents you could ever desire, were placed around the bath, glowing safely in the half dim sunlight and never diminishing.

The bath was filled for her with a bluish, scented water that remained warm and inviting until you pulled the plug. It was large and built with seating for two. Valerie winked at Jim and his heart did a flip-flop. She turned on what she most likely thought was a light switch and the ceiling opened up. Jim was tickled by her gasp of delight as a large covering rolled aside leaving the sun piercing through an overhead window.

"Oh!" Valerie exclaimed. "Are there stars in this world?"

"Sure are." Jim's giggle was quiet enough that it most likely went unheard. Valerie's elbow in his ribs told him she noticed his delight. "I love it," she said. Then she turned to notice the mirror and her beautiful big eyes widened even further. This area he knew would be one of her greatest delights, even though he knew that wasn't why her eyes widened so much.

This was the first time she'd seen her new body. He couldn't help but be tickled at her delight. He wanted so much to tell her all about this world and its easy-breezy ways.

The mirrored area was any woman's dream. Full length three-way mirrors with blowing vents on each side stood ready for drying hair and body almost instantly. All she had to do was stand there and let the hot air blow. No curling irons, no working with your hair, no makeup to put on.

Everything and everyone was beautiful in this world. Your hair fell into its natural place as if a professional had worked for hours. Your nails grew naturally beautiful and you could even change the level of curl or the color of your hair temporarily simply by applying a harmless lotion. The style washed out with another rinsing lotion. His smile widened as she looked puzzled at the lotions and vents that surrounded the area. "I'll explain later," he said.

She squinted at herself in the mirror. "Wow. I could never have imagined. Eat your heart out Kristi Brinkley! Huh." Her words were almost disbelief. Almost sarcastic. Almost as if she were dreaming and would wake up disappointed in the dream's lack of reality. "Very unusual looking," she said, "but it all seems to work together. Who did my hair! I wonder if it'll always look like this."

"Sure will," Jim said. His response was teased with the sweet understanding that so much wonder awaited his cherished wife. He couldn't wait to walk with her as she discovered what lay ahead.

Chapter Three

Tenderness filled Valerie's heart as she stepped out of the kitchen onto the large cedarwood deck of her new home. God's new world was certainly more than she could have expected. Yet something was missing. God was missing. The Lord was missing. She had to ask Jim about that when he returned. "But look at this beauty!" she exclaimed to herself. She took in the gorgeous grounds around her new home. Was this her vacation home? If so, it was stunning. And her husband must be rich.

She didn't notice anyone else around, although Jim had said people were everywhere. She seemed to be alone. At least for miles around the house. The area surrounding her home was natural in its landscaping. Everything perfectly beautiful, although naturally and splendidly haphazard. Definitely not manicured as some gardens would be. There was a large pond--or was it a small lake--to the east of the house. A gorgeous waterfall cascaded down the side of a beautifully jagged cliff and a stream coming from the lake bubbled across the grounds a couple of hundred yards to the north of the lounge chair where she sat drinking her coffee.

"The sun must come up over that waterfall!" Her words were founded on the hope that there was a sunrise and the reality that there seemed to be a sun in the sky. *Jim had said there were stars*, she thought, *so there must be a night*. It was all so beautiful. As if she were in some Paradise bliss! Then Valerie realized for the first time. This was Paradise! It was the real thing. All her hopes and faith were now a reality. In every way except one. She had hoped to see the Lord and thought that He would have been the very first person she would see when she died. Even though He was not here, directly in her presence physically, she felt as if it were the right thing, not God's dismissal of her, but His acceptance of her 'lowly estate.'

Valerie had loved God so deeply. She had wondered what her estate really was. Where she would be in the scheme of things once she had passed. Certainly not the most important person in the world. Yet now, here in His world, she felt as important as she needed to be. Not lacking in anything. The thought tickled her that at one time Valerie had been so

concerned for where and whom she would be when she reached heaven. Somehow hoping she could be so very important. Now the idea seemed almost ridiculous. Her hunger a distant memory. Still Valerie wanted to hear from God and wondered if it would even be possible.

In the bright sunlight and scent of lilac and pine trees, she decided she couldn't wait to see the beauty that surrounded her. As Valerie went back inside the lovely cabin home to put away her coffee cup, she changed her mind. *I need to have a look at the house before I go romping around the outside world*, she thought. *What fun! Besides I want Jim to be with me as I check out the lake.*

She jaunted up the stairs that went up to her bedroom. The place seemed to be endless. Room after room. Most furnished with simple bedding and children's things. She couldn't help but wonder, *Why would there be children's toys when Jim and I have never been able to have children.* The thought rolled around in her mind as she opened the door to each room.

After going through four moderately sized rooms that seemed to be designed for children of various ages, she went into the room at the east end of the upper floor. The door to the room was in a half-door style, before she had time to be puzzled, she realized this was a nursery.

Tears began to form as she looked at the crib and tiny little baby things. Valerie had never had the opportunity to hold a baby of her own. She began to wonder what this could mean. And then the realization hit her. If marriage was a possibility in this New Earth, most likely so were children. She sat down on the floor at the foot of the crib and began to cry. This had been the hardest part of her life. Valerie had wanted to have her own children and grandchildren so much. Her life had been a bitter-sweet ordeal. With all she had, Valerie had loved Jim. But how sweet it would be to hold his babies.

"Just one, Lord," she said through her tears. "Please?"

It was an old prayer. One that had never been answered. As she sat there quietly wiping the tears from her eyes, a verse of scripture seemed to play itself in the back of her mind. It was a verse from the book of Isaiah.

She tried hard to remember it exactly as she had memorized it. It had been an important verse to her. Little by little the words came back to her. “Sing, O barren woman, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, for more are the children of the desolate woman than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.”

Her mouth hung open in disbelief. Could it be true? After 57 years of childlessness? Could she bear children in this new afterlife? *I would never have believed it!* she thought. *Even if ten people came back from the dead and told me. I would never have believed it.* Her thoughts turned around and around in her mind. Had she been on the old earth, and still standing, Valerie could have fainted.

Then from nowhere a gentle breeze, almost like someone’s breath swept across her face, lifting her hair just a touch. At first Valerie didn’t think anything of it, except that it felt so comforting. Before her mind could comprehend that there was no cause for a breeze, a soft whisper came seemingly from its soothing caress. “I love you,” it said in sad but poignant concern. The voice was almost not there, gentle but clearly audible. Startled, she turned around to see who was speaking to her. When no one was there, the realization came to her gently, the voice must be God’s.

“Is that you Father?”

“Yes,” came the loving response.

Valerie’s tears turned to sobs. The breeze responded a little stronger this time. Lifting her hair and flowing through and around her like a soft hug. Valerie’s tender heart responded and her sobs continued. Then as an increasingly strong but gentle flow of love seemed to spring up from somewhere inside of her, gratitude overcame the heartrending tenderness and she was swept with a peace stronger, sweeter than any she’d ever known.

“I am here, Valerie,” said God, “and always will be.”

Chapter Four

Jim's heart was filled with a boyish tease. He smiled widely as he rang the doorbell to his house making sure both hands were well hidden behind his back. Valerie answered the door with a puzzled look on her face. He circled around with his back facing away from her and his teasing grin widened more than it had in years. No matter how well he hid his hands, however, he couldn't stop the high-pitched 'mew' coming clearly from behind him.

"James!" Valerie exclaimed with a brilliant smile of her own. "What have you got there? As if I didn't know! Give it here!"

He pranced around the living room and held both kittens up in his hands just out of her reach. "I'm taller than you are!" He giggled boyishly as she lunged up to grab them and couldn't. Then he took both of his arms and drew them in a circle down around her, kittens behind her back, for a sweet hug. The kittens, as always docile, stayed within his easy grasp, but mewed with excitement nonetheless.

Valerie melted into him, kissing him deeply and then, as he relaxed within her arms, she spun quickly within his arms to grab one of the kittens before he had a chance to react. "You rat!" He teased through smiling lips, "but you can't have *this* one!"

The pretty little white one nuzzled up to Valerie's neck as she brought it up near her face. The sweet little angel started to purr and nuzzled her again as Val squealed with delight. "Where did you get them!" she exclaimed. Her giggle was the sweetest, silliest little-girl giggle Jim had ever heard.

"It's been forever since you've called me James." His smile was as large as his heart felt. He brought the little grey and white one over to Val and she held them both up to her cheeks, rocking back and forth slowly in a little-girl circle. "How old are you?" He asked her delightedly.

"Uh, I fink I'm five wears ohd." Valerie's laugh was precious. "Fank

you, daddy.” She reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“You’re very welcome, honey.” Jim giggled himself.

It took Val a couple of minutes to recuperate. Her eyes sparkled like diamonds in the sun. “Really *James*, where did you get them?”

“Some friends,” he said. “They’re not that hard to get really. You can make pets out of most of the little creatures here if you really want to. Everything’s harmless.”

“Cool!” She came over and sat on the arm of the overstuffed chair where he had seated himself.

“Really, honey, thank you. They’re darling!” She still held the little tykes up to her face. She’d never been able to have kittens on the old earth. Allergies and all. This was probably one of the best things he could have done for her today.

“You knew. I always wanted to have cats. I couldn’t even have them when I was little.”

“Yes you can.” He smiled gently this time. A kind of overpowering gentleness filled his whole being.

“Oh, I get it! I can be little now *and* have them now! Yes!”

“You can be five wears old any time you want to, baby.” Her responsive smile was so wide it was delightful.

“Fank you,” she said as she leaned over and placed her cheek on his head, still holding the baby kittens in her arms. They squirmed but didn’t try to scratch or get away at all. He’d been so surprised when he first saw the way the creatures of this world reacted to humans. They were fearless! And completely harmless. You could take a cougar into your home, have your own babies crawl on top of it and not worry one iota. Many people did.

“Jim, I’ve got some things to ask you. But before I do... I want to be

with you for a while. Can we snuggle somewhere and talk?"

"Oh, you've got to be kidding! Sure baby. Good grief yeah."

Valerie set the kittens down on the living room rug and sat down on the floor next to them and the fireplace. Jim set the fire ablaze by simply thinking about it and asking his Heavenly Father. He'd learned how to do that in the Learning Center here in his home. There were rules to living in this world, but they were incredibly easy to live.

Valerie startled a bit and then relaxed. She must have realized what he'd done. "It's easy to light fires here, baby."

"I see that." She looked into his eyes deeply and seriously. "What do we have here?" She asked the question pointing back and forth between him and herself.

Jim didn't know how to answer that question, though he knew what she meant. "Love." It was the only answer he had. "Plain and simple honey. All the love I have to give you plus."

"Plus?"

"Plus God."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

Jim liked these one syllable conversations. He was tickled and remained silent as he lay down on the living room floor facing the fire.

"You know, that's almost all you have to say." Valerie's voice trailed into what sounded like that sweet exhaustion he'd known so many times. She lay her head down so that she was lying with her head next to his. The two of them created an L shape. He on his side facing the fire, she on her back with her head touching the arm he was leaning on and her feet facing the fire. "This feels so good," she whispered.

They lay there for several minutes silent as the sun began to melt behind the trees in front of the large picture window that faced the front yard. Twilight here was gorgeous. “Look honey!” Jim was hoping there would be a firestorm here tonight.

“What?” Valerie turned over on her side, facing the window, feet still toasted by the fire.

“A firestorm.”

Jim sat up facing the window and let Valerie put her head in his lap. He began to pet her hair back as she watched in wonder. The firestorm was beautiful. Tonight it was all in a yellowish but brilliant white. Little droplets, trailing like tiny comets, rained down from the skies and bounced along the ground before soaking into the earth. It was stunning. It rained fairly heavily. He was hoping there would be a firestorm tonight.

“Some people say, it rains like that when God is particularly happy.” He said the words in almost a whisper, watching out the window as the fire crackled and the fire-rain pelted the ground all around their home.

* * * * *

Her heart beat steady but pounded fairly loud as Valerie lay with her head in Jim’s lap. The rain was spectacular. She was overwhelmed. Everything was almost hard to take in. It was all so incredibly... spectacular.

The fire crackled and popped, warm but not over warm. The weather was a perfect early summer. Most likely about 70, maybe 72 degrees. Still the fire didn’t make the living room downright hot. The rain popped along the ground outside in little glittery fireballs. She’d never seen anything like it.

“What does it feel like?” she asked.

“It feels as unbelievable as it looks. Would you like to go out in the storm?”

“Not really.” She felt inundated with stimulation. “I’m overwhelmed as it is.”

“Okay baby. I understand.” Jim’s petting felt so nice. She kissed his thigh, not intending anything sexual. He reacted by pulling back just a touch.

“Please don’t baby.”

“Really?” she asked, “Why not, honey?”

“I can’t. We can’t. Not yet. You have a major choice to make before we can. We aren’t actually married yet, remember? We were in the old world, but we aren’t here.”

“Really.” It was a statement of disappointment.

“Really.” His own statement seemed to hold disappointment also, but finality as well.

“Thank you. I think I understand. No premarital in Paradise.”

“No.”

“I love you baby.” Her words sounded as tired as she felt. She was emotionally worn. But the mild exhaustion actually felt sweet. Not the drudgery of being tired like in the old world.

“We won’t sleep together then will we.”

“No. I’ll sleep in one of the children’s rooms.”

“Oh,” she said. “I really want to speak with you about that. But I can’t right now. Can we talk about it first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Sure love.”

They lay there for what seemed like hours, just being with each other.

It was so nice to be with Jim again. The kittens snuggled up in the corner between her shoulder and his thigh and they all lay there silently watching the rain. It was spectacular. It was all so spectacular.

* * * * *

“This water feels heavenly.” The moment Valerie had stepped into the bath she knew she was in Paradise. The water was soft and soothing, warmer than warm, but not too hot. The fragrance of the water and floral bouquets together with the candles all made her feel incredibly loved. The lights were out and the rain still fell, though lightly. It was particularly visible through the large window in the ceiling of the bathing room. “What a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful world,” she whispered.

She sighed as she slipped down under the water, holding her breath. It didn’t even hurt her nose! Suddenly she wondered, *Can I breathe this water?* She wanted to check it out, but didn’t want to put God to the test by actually trying it out. Water in her lungs could be a problem. She did however, stay underwater for four or five minutes. Without struggle.

Exhilarated, she popped her head out of the water. “Ah-hah!” she said. “That’s awesome!” She smoothed the skin of her arm with her wet hand and the softness of the water felt tingly. As she lay her head back against the comfortable rim, she thought about Jim. This had been one incredible day. Between meeting Jim again, hearing God personally, and all the things she had seen, it was the sweetest, most exhausting day she’d ever had. “Oh, and then there’s the kittens!” she exclaimed in a quiet yelp. She knew she would sleep well tonight.

“Who’d have ever thought,” she whispered. “Tired, but very sweet sleep. In Heaven.” *No. Not heaven. The New Earth*, she thought. *These things are going to take some time to sink in. This isn’t heaven and it isn’t Paradise. It’s something else. Whatever it is, it’s beautiful.* She lifted her arm out of the water and rested it against the edge of the tub.

“Well, if I can’t have my own kids here God,” she said in a little girl tone. “Thank you for the kittens. Yah! Maybe we can adopt!” The thought had never crossed her mind. There must be millions of children here in this

world whose parents were still in the old world! “I should ask Jim. I can’t think anymore! No more, God! No more!” She heard a soft chuckle in her mind. And the sparkling rain picked up speed.

* * * * *

I’m so sleepy, Jim thought. The little kittens purred gently beside him as he lay in his improvised bed, snuggled up to the soft downy pillow. He felt so warm and fuzzy. Valerie was home. It felt so right. He hadn’t seen it firestorm like that in a long time. God must be very pleased with Val’s re-birth into the new world. “Lord?” he whispered, “How do you feel about Val’s coming here?” He could hear the rain pound on his roof a little harder. A whirlwind of firestorm droplets. “That good huh?” He waited a minute and then painfully asked another question. “How do you feel about her staying here with me permanently.” The rain beat down even harder. “Really?”

“Really.” He heard the gentle, still voice that he’d sensed might be God in the old world, only now it was accompanied by an actual whisper in his mind rather than an impression alone.

“You love her don’t You, Father?” he said the words as he rested the back of his hand on his forehead. “So do I.” His eyelids, softly heavy, began to drop with even heavier softness and soon he was fast asleep.

Chapter Five

The morning was bright and cheerful. This time as Valerie woke up, the sound of birds chirping wildly filled her bedroom through the open window somewhere behind her headboard. Sunlight, also wildly shining, streaked across her room filling the place and her heart with gentle elation. “It must be early.” She sat up and stretched, completely unaware that one of the kittens had crawled under the sheets with her.

She caught sight of a bump in the bedding moving around mysteriously and giggled. Just then the little creature pounced. She chuckled at the fact that the little one’s catch was her stretching foot. “Now what do you hunt here in this world?” she teased. Then she wiggled her toes and the kitten began to paw them without any claws. “I see!” she said. “You hunt twinkies.”

The kitten began to ebb its way back out of the bottom of the bed. As Valerie watched with a snicker, the bump in the bedding moved forward toward the edge of her sheets. “Mew,” came the little ‘good morning’ from the angel-white cat. It tucked its head out from under the sheets, and Valerie gasped at its pretty blue eyes. *I didn’t noticed that last night*, she thought. *Her eyes are blue!* She’d seen white cats before and she wasn’t sure but she thought she’d seen cats with blue eyes, but never both in the same animal.

“You’re gorgeous!” she said. Shall I call you Angel? Or is that inappropriate here?” She mused for a minute and then decide to call her Celeste. “Okay, so you’re name is Celeste, huh? Pretty little blue-eyed Celeste. I like you!” She picked up the purring kitten and held it up to her chin. “Mew,” it responded through its purrs. It nuzzled her chin and mewed again. “Are you hungry Celeste?” asked Valerie. “The cat mewed three or four times, expectantly. “I guess you are.”

She swept the kitten up with her as she jumped out of bed, looking behind the giant mirrored headboard/dresser that separated the bed area from the parlor area. The view from the giant picture window was phenomenal. A waterfall cascaded down the rocks and into the lake, visible

on one side of the window behind the little parlor area within their bedroom. “I don’t know why I’m thinking of this as *our* bedroom,” she told Celeste wryly. “I guess for as long as it takes, it’s actually *my* bedroom.”

She slipped on comfortable padded slippers and checked the mirror to see that she looked okay before going downstairs. She looked like one of those movie stars from an old movie popping out of bed with makeup on and perfectly askew hair. She gave herself the thumbs up in the mirror and headed down the stairs for some milk for Celeste and a bite of breakfast for herself. She felt just a tiny bit hungry. Just hungry enough to really enjoy something nice.

“Morning lovely.” Jim turned from behind the stove crackling with what appeared to be fried potatoes and bacon cooking on the burners.

“Morning,” she said with a kiss. “Bacon and eggs?”

“From a package,” said Jim, “and cholesterol free. We don’t eat animals here. But there *is* meat for our enjoyment. It just comes from packages. So does milk.”

Valerie scrunched her face up into her old silly puzzled-looking face.

Jim chuckled as he petted the little angel cradled in Valerie’s arm. Celeste purred a little stronger and mewed. “Morning to you too,” he said, giving her a scratch on the head. “You must be hungry too.” He poured some milk in a bowl on the counter for Celeste and placed it on the floor to the side of where they stood. She quickly began lapping it up.

Valerie could hear the other little kitten bumping around in the family room, just the other side of the stove and countertop that faced the east side of the house. From there she could see the same perfect picture of the waterfall and lake that was visible from the bedroom window and balcony upstairs.

“Oh, what a beautiful morning!” She sang the words in faux operetta style, but her voice was enchanting. “Wow. I’ve never been able to sing like that!” she said sheepishly holding her fingers against her lips. Her voice echoed lightly off the canyon half surrounding the lake and bounced

back to them through the open windows.

“I wonder if all our neighbors heard me!”

“No neighbors for miles around. Probably not.”

“Really?”

“We have total privacy here. Except when people decide to visit unannounced. Which doesn’t happen very often. People here prize their privacy. And yours.”

“That’s cool,” she said. “I’m so happy!” She spun around the little kitchen with her hands raised up to heaven, stopping with her eyes closed tightly to clap her hands in joyful applause.

Jim chuckled.

As she turned to nuzzle his side, the grey and white kitten stuck it’s nose up from where it had jumped onto a bar stool on the other side of the counter. “What do *you* want Sampson? Stay down!” said Jim. The kitten lowered his head and jumped off the stool and back onto the floor, meowing as it went. “I take it he wants some bacon,” said Jim.

“Most likely,” she agreed. “Out of a package. Even the animals like meat out of a package.”

Jim chuckled. “Yep.”

* * * * *

“I got a good night’s sleep last night. You?”

“Oh yeah.” Valerie’s words were far more rested than they had been last night. She stretched her arms out and Jim caught his breath. *Stop that*, he told himself. “You know, Val, maybe it’s better if we aren’t exactly living together. It’s allowed here, if you were married there, but it is quite a temptation, you know.”

“Yeah?” she said with a come hither smile.

“Yeah.” His word was wry with the reality that she was teasing him. He wasn’t sure he liked that. It was a serious matter. Obedience was key and any lack of obedience to the Lord here was dealt with uncomfortably. He didn’t want discomfort. For either of them.

Valerie suddenly held her hand to her head. “Ooo,” she said.

“What’s the matter? Headache?” He said it sarcastically, like a father talking to his teenage child, or vice versa. He knew well that small headaches were a gentle way God led his children into obedience here.

“Yeah,” she said the word with disbelief.

“It happens honey. God does discipline his children here. Mildly, but nonetheless effectively, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah,” she said the word with disappointment. “Ooo. I’m sorry Father,” she responded humbly. “I should be more careful, huh Jim?”

“Huh,” he said in agreement.

“Well okay then.” Valerie turned away and pouted like the gorgeous little biker babe she was. *Boy this is going to be difficult*, he thought.

He placed the bacon, eggs and cheesy potatoes on two plates and filled two mugs with coffee, hers with a little cream the way she used to like it. “You still like cream in your coffee?”

“Yes,” she said. “I do. Thanks.”

“I’ll get the plates, if you’ll get the mugs.” He walked out through the huge floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors on the east wall, carrying the plates out to the lounge table on the cedarwood deck. The deck was one of the features he liked most about this house. It cornered the north side of the house and covered the length of both the north and east walls facing just about everything that was the most beautiful of God’s landscaping on this

particular plot of land.

“Orange juice?” she asked from the kitchen.

“Sure, I’d love some.”

She carried the glasses and mugs along with some napkins and flatware out onto the deck using a teakwood tray he’d placed on the counter in the kitchen. Everything here was almost rustic. His dream and hers for many years. A semi-rustic cabin in the woods, with all the amenities and gorgeous grounds. He was definitely in heaven on earth.

“Speaking of heaven,” he said.

“Who was speaking of heaven?”

“I was. Inside of myself.”

“Oh. And what did you say?” she said sitting down beside him.

“That we need to go there some time soon.” He said. “Maybe later today or tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. Before we do, can we speak of that which I spoke of last night?”

Jim giggled. Valerie’s choice of words sometimes tickled him. She didn’t seem to be offended or even notice his laugh. “Oh, yeah! Sure honey, what’s... oh that’s right the children’s rooms.”

“Right. What’s that about anyway?” she asked looking at Jim inquisitively over her coffee mug. “I should put it in a nicer way,” she said. “I saw the nursery yesterday. It broke me down to sobs.”

“I’m sorry.” He truly was. He didn’t intend for the nursery to hinder his wife’s landing here on this planet, so to speak. “Preparing it was so relieving to me. I had to have it ready by the time you arrived. I wanted you to know my heart.”

“What is your heart, Jim. I really want to know. I mean, are these rooms for adopted children? Or for our own?”

“Yes,” he said with a touch of a tease.

“Both? Or either.”

“Yes,” his smile widened a tiny bit. He didn’t want to make her mad by teasing too much at a time like this.

“What do you mean by that?” Her words were emotional. Almost frustrated.

“I mean the choice is yours. But it is my heart to have children.”

“Good grief, mine too.” She hesitated and then tentatively said, “You mean we can have children here?”

“Yes honey.” He wanted to be careful at this point. This was one major reason he wanted to stay in this earth.

“How?”

“The usual way.” Oops! Now he was beginning to get a headache.

“Jim!” She *was* getting mad.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he was. “What you do is ask,” he said. “You ask God and if the time is right, that’s how you get... well... pregnant.”

“Pregnant? I was hoping I wouldn’t have to go through all that here.”

“No, honey, not all that. Pregnancy here is not a curse. It’s a beautiful blessing.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Not at all. I’ve seen women go through it here. It’s almost delightful. I’ve heard that even birth here is like getting a massage.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“And all we have to do is ask? I’ve done that before.”

“He almost always answers. But sometimes where’s a wait.”

“Oh!” she said the word in almost a cry. “Not again! Can you be barren here as well?”

“I’ve never seen it happen, it’s just a matter of timing. There’s a lot to do to prepare for raising a child here.”

“Wow. Really.”

“Yes, really.” Jim felt a little wary. His hopes had been dashed so many times in the old world, he knew only one thing could keep them from having babies in this one... If she chose to remain in heaven. And that was altogether possible.

Chapter Six

Time was on a different schedule here than on the New Earth or the old. It was basically timeless. Although time did pass on each of the two worlds below. You never knew when you visited here, unless you kept close tabs, how much time had passed on either world. It could have been 10 minutes; it could have been 10 years.

Heaven was an incredible place to be. Jim held Val's hand as they hovered around all the milling millions. He wanted to show her the portals first. There was a reason they were called portals, plural. There were at least three portals for viewing various dimensions, at least as far as he knew. One was there to watch what was happening currently on the old earth. Another looked over the New Earth and still another the old earth's spiritual realm.

Nothing evil could come anywhere near the New Earth. But the old earth was a different story. They were--and sometimes as a result--we were, truly at war. It was the biggest part of the reason why the old earth was dying down to nothing and its people turning downright ugly or outright abused. At least for the most part. There were respites of beauty even on the old earth and there was always a beautiful reason for everything that happened, good or bad. Still the darkness with which the old world turned was a very present darkness.

Jim hated to view the third portal. It was nasty and he didn't like it at all. Still there were those living here and visiting here who fought the spiritual battles by praying wholeheartedly and with a great deal of love. All those viewing through the portals of heaven were caught up in learning or doing something of great value.

He wasn't sure why they were called portals. No one necessarily traveled through them, at least not at this point. He'd heard they were once the gates between heaven and earth. Before man had fallen and those in the fallen spiritual realm had been cast down as 'princes of the power of the air.' Those who could travel through from the New Earth to heaven now-a-days, traveled via instant teleportation, he supposed you would call it. You just

thought of the place you wanted to be, whether here in heaven or there on the New Earth, and you were there.

Heaven was a little daunting, especially to the novice. No one here had a body. They operated in 'visual' ways as spirits of varying degrees of light. The higher the spiritual being's status, the greater the light. The spiritual body was a wonder to see. Again, he wasn't sure how it all worked, but you could see people and things here, kind of like a very, very vivid dream. Only very, very real.

Millions upon millions of people and other creatures roamed around the Heavens like a giant factory in operation or a huge hotel conference area. He had spoken with many of them while here. The languages were very diverse. Angelic languages were almost like a star-wars episode. Spiritual ears heard the varying words and sounds, but the mind immediately translated everything said. It was simply amazing.

Valerie felt scared. Jim could feel her emotions as she hovered next to him holding onto his hand. In heaven, you could sense the emotions of those you chose by mentally thinking of them and asking God at the same time. He could experience Val's emotions and was aware that she felt overwhelmed and more than a little simple. She kept comparing herself to the gigantic beings of light around her small frame. Although she was small in size here, Jim noticed that her appearance was exceptionally bright. He wasn't sure why. She hadn't appeared to be anything exceptionally spiritual on earth. He supposed it was the love she held for God and all the 'seeking His face' she had done.

Valerie's hand trembled in his and he switched one hand for the other and put his free arm around her shoulder. You could feel people here, only it was strange. Not a physical feeling at all, but a... well... spiritual one. Her hand felt a little cold and clammy, so to speak. She was scared.

"Honey, do you want to go home?" he asked. "It's okay if you do. I understand how intense a first time visit here can be."

"No, not yet," she responded. "It's incredible, just a little big." Jim could sense that by 'big' she meant spiritually and emotionally significant, rather than physically large.

“Yes, it can be.” He stopped and held her while she shook and turned to bury her head in his bosom, so to speak. Here it was almost possible to walk inside of a person, you could know them so well. It was a very revealing place.

“I think I’ll want to go back soon,” she said, “but first I want to see Jesus.”

“You’re sure,” he said a little disapprovingly. “It’s a pretty strong thing, baby.” His emotion of warning seemed to cause her to shake a little harder. “I’m sorry,” he said, “Jesus is awesome to see, but He’s like the Mt. Zion of Mt. Zions. The Holy of the holiest holies. He will affect you baby, very strongly. Some people never quite recover.” He was also certain she could sense his reluctance due to his fear that she would want to stay eternally. But he knew he shouldn’t fear, she would choose whatever was right. People always did. And other creatures he supposed.

* * * * *

The shaking Valerie was experiencing stemmed from her emotionally charged heart. What an astonishing place to be! It was really too much. Way, way too much. It was like being in the presence of, actually it *was* being in the presence of, all the angels of heaven. She was flustered. She kept thinking to herself, *Who am I in all this? And why am I here?*

For the first time she understood why there would be a quiet little spot like the New Earth. It was a respite from intensity. She also understood why she hadn’t started her new life here. She would have been scared to death without someone to meet her, and even then she would have been quite frightened. She was almost uncomfortably scared now.

She walked along, actually floated along, quietly as Jim led her around the various locations. The portals were a little too graphic. Depressing to her. Except for the New Earth, which held quite a bit of black-out, actually almost white-out, type privacy. Anything that went on was viewable from the portals, even people’s thoughts and emotions. The portals looked like gigantic holes surrounded by barriers of light, around

which hundreds if not thousands of people and other creatures looked down, watching all that went on there. All you had to do was think of somebody and you experienced what they were going through.

It was incredible. Too incredible. She had, for a split second, thought of Caroline, her sister, only to experience Caroline's deep anguish at the news of her death. Valerie couldn't handle it. It was too strong. She had heard Jim speak a little prayer on Caroline's behalf as they looked down beyond the barrier of light that surrounded the open hole. At the same time, she had wondered how many people were feeling these intense emotions while watching what was happening to their loved ones on earth. When she had thought this thought, a flood of emotions and a barrage of words filled her mind until she really wanted to run and not look back.

With all that she saw as she looked around the Heavens, she was overwhelmed with impressions. It held her captive and kept her nearly silent as they floated along. By the time they had been there for what seemed like a couple of hours, she was nearly ready to go home. The only curiosity she had was that of the Lord Jesus. Could she somehow see Him. When Jim asked her if she wanted to go back home, apparently aware of her emotions, she told him so. "I think I'll want to go back soon," she said, "but first I want to see Jesus."

Jim seemed taken aback, almost scared to let her see the Lord. *I think I understand why*, she thought. *This place is mind-boggling.*

"You're sure," he said as if he really didn't want to take her to see Him. "It's a pretty strong thing, baby." Then he seemed to back away from his emotions. "I'm sorry, Jesus is awesome to see, but He's like the Mt. Zion of Mt. Zions. The Holy of the holiest holies. He will affect you baby, very strongly. Some people never quite recover."

"I see," she responded tentatively. *I could see how that could happen.* She thought the words and then remembered he could hear her thoughts. *How long would you recommend before going to see Him?* she continued thinking.

"Just about any time, whenever you feel ready."

“I feel ready now,” she said. “But I don’t know if I really am.”

“If you feel ready now, He may be calling you honey. We should give it a try. Elbow me if it gets to be too much and we’ll go immediately. Okay?”

“Okay.” She whispered. “I understand.”

She looked up at Jim whose light shone pretty brightly. Compared to the others around her, his light was fairly exceptional. Jim had said that the level of brightness was due to a kind of spiritual status. She wondered why his light would be so bright. He hadn’t seemed like one of the spiritual giants of her day. She supposed it was because of the love he had held for the Lord. All the ‘seeking of His face’ that he had done. She’d always admired that. More than that of Billy Graham or her pastor or what she imagined the apostle Paul would have been like. She hadn’t wanted to do all that hard work herself, preferring the company of God to the riches of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Okay then, here we go.” Jim took hold of Valerie’s hand and although she couldn’t feel it, physically, it felt warm and strong in a strange kind of physical-type way. Almost emotional, almost physical, almost... she guessed it was a spiritual feeling.

All at once Valerie sensed she was somewhere very different from the portals. Her eyes were ‘closed’ and when she opened them she saw a wondrous sight. Millions upon millions of people all around her, everyone looking in one direction. A throne stood, high up above them all, encircled with an emerald beam of light, much like a rainbow. And there... sitting on that throne... was a being of the most incredible light she had ever seen. More brilliant than anyone or anything else. It almost hurt her eyes to look. But not quite.

This, she whispered, *must be Jesus*. Creatures hovering above the crowd spoke in a voice that sounded like a million thunderous waters, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

All at once the whole crowd burst into praise mixed with applause

and everyone bowed down to the ground in worship before Him. Without a second's hesitation both Jim and she joined them. The emotion Valerie felt was at the same time both overwhelming and not. One of absolute elation and weightlessness. Nothing hindered. Nothing had ever felt so good. She had never experienced exotic drugs on earth but imagined that they could never compare with this. Not in a billion years.

As she looked on the Lord, high and lifted up, she began to cry tears of absolute joy combined with absolute love. Valerie looked around and noticed everyone else was also crying. And their tears were the most beautiful effect she'd ever seen. Like extremely expensive crystal, flowing in liquid form, and shining under the light of the Lord.

Chapter Seven

After what seemed like days, Jim could feel Val's elbow in his ribs and he knew it was time to be heading home. Relieved and yet invigorated by their experience before the throne, he took hold of her hand and thought really hard about standing by the lake. All at once a peaceful wind was blowing through his physical hair and he slumped down on the grass in spiritual exhaustion mixed with the sweet, burning afterglow of being in God's presence.

Sometimes he felt like this for days following standing before the throne of the Lord Jesus. For him it was a beautiful vacation that he only wanted to take when he was really ready. It was incredibly delightful and yet overwhelming in every sense of the word, consuming and overshadowing him in ways that made him sometimes feel helpless. It was both good and overpowering.

Valerie sat on the ground next to him, stooped over with her arms crossed, elbows resting on her bent knees, her head resting on her arms. She looked wiped out as well. "Are you okay, Val?" he asked.

"Wait, wait... please." Her words were soft and warning. She was most likely more spiritually exhausted than he was. After all this was her first experience with the Heavens. She must be completely overcome.

He lay down with his face looking up into the nearly clear blue skies. A few fluffy white clouds dotted the blue atmosphere. In a lot of ways the New Earth was similar to the old one. No drastically different moons of green or anything like that. Well actually there were things like that, like the firestorms and other anomalies that delighted the senses, and were, after all, a part of this earth. He was too sensationally delighted to want to be delighted any further. Not even by thinking about such things.

He rolled over on his side and looked at Val. She was weeping very quietly. And holding her arms, shaking as if cold. "It's pretty strong isn't it." He whispered the words so that she could ignore them if she still needed to.

She just nodded her head, wiped the tears from her eyes and kept crying. Then she collapsed on the ground, arms limp by her side, and groaned with an exasperated groan. “That was way too much!” she finally said.

Jim crawled over to where she lay looking into the sun, tears still streaming down her cheeks. He touched her tears and kissed her cheek. “I hope you’re all right.”

“Fine.” she said, “Just fine.”

He giggled, but there was a trace of sadness in his laugh. He kept silent. Waiting for her to recuperate. Hoping she felt good rather than overly exhausted; at the same time hoping she hadn’t changed too drastically.

It was always such a tough line to figure out. He wasn’t sure when he was crossing the line between love for Valerie and displeasing God in his desire for her love. He wasn’t sure about much lately. He’d started out here feeling confident and having a great deal of fun. Lately his confidence seemed to be ebbing away as he contemplated her possible rejection of this world in favor of that one.

Why should I worry, he corrected himself. If I feel this way, and God showed that He seemed to feel this way last night, then most likely she will too. Even if it takes her ten or twenty thousand years.

But he didn’t want to wait that long. He really wanted the good life. Now. The life he wanted was one of earthy existence, with tons of children and grand children and great, great, great, great grandchildren. Together, enjoying all of them and other people *and* God, here, on this earth.

He didn’t quite understand his reluctance to live in the Heavens. It was a marvelous experience. Still this is and always had been the way he felt. He also felt a slight sense of guilt at the self-centeredness he held in response to what he believed to be his calling from God to live here in this earth. Maybe, just maybe Valerie wasn’t called to live this kind of a life with him.

He knew he'd better get his own self-centeredness in check, or there would be consequences. Not that God punished anyone arbitrarily, never had, most likely never would. But everything you did had consequences. Some good, some not so good.

No one here did anything that was out and out wrong. But like any child growing and changing, you learned. And much like a child, there was still a slight form of self-centeredness. Not quite selfishness, but self-centeredness nonetheless. It was part of the growth inherent in being human.

In his heart, Jim knew he was thinking about himself, not Val. If he truly loved her, and he hoped he did, he would step out of her way and let her choose. Whatever it was she chose. He determined that very second, to do just that. *God help me*, he prayed silently. *I want to love her as you do. If that's even possible.*

* * * * *

With the sun shining down and clouds casting shadows on the two of them, Valerie wanted nothing more than to sleep on the grass by the lake forever and ever, amen. Where she had felt elation and overpowering emotion, they were now merely a distant memory and peace washed over her in the warm afternoon sun.

A sprinkle of something cold hit her sun drenched and sleepy skin almost like ice. When she opened her eyes, Jim stooped over her holding a tall glass of something iced and cold. She leaned up on one elbow and took the offering gratefully. "Thank you Jim," she said.

"Welcome baby," came his response. He smiled over her like a mischievous little boy. Again, that boyish look of his stole her heart.

"Come sit down with me." She smiled up at the love of her life. There was nothing else in the world she wanted right at this moment in time more than Jim's loving friendship. And that glass of whatever it was.

“Try this stuff,” he said. “It’s a little different, but very good.”

She sipped the cool liquid with a curious and thankful heart. It was absolutely splendid. It quenched her thirst--as if you could call it that--pleasantly. Hunger and thirst in this world seemed to merely be precursors to enjoyment of food or drink. They were not gnawing or unpleasant in the least. They seemed to develop in order to contribute to enjoyment rather than quench it.

Valerie felt back to earth. She felt on solid ground. Her experience in heaven had been altogether too pleasant. Emotionally uproarious. She’d never known the heights of love and compassion and love and ... love.

At the same time, she couldn’t say she’d never known the discomfort of too much emotion. On earth her emotions had been high and then low and then high and then low. She was altogether ready for some steady ground. Had it not been an act of treason, she might have kissed the ground she lay on now. She didn’t worship this New Earth, but it sure was nice to be home. She loved worshipping God, but knew the quiet steadiness of worshipping Him here on this planet was also something to be treasured.

“Oh!” she said in mock extremity. “I have a husband! I have a home! I have a life!”

“Well you have a home and a life,” Jim said. “But a husband? I don’t know about that.”

“Well I think I do!” said Val. “When can we get married?”

“Wow.” Jim’s eyes were almost sullen.

What have I said now? she thought. *Dang!*

“Val, I got to thinking about what we both went through today. And... well... I think you need some time to make this decision. The first time in Heaven is always a little overpowering.”

What are you saying! she thought. She couldn’t believe her ears. “You don’t want me to marry you?”

“Yes.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “But no.”

Dang! She scratched her head and looked at him with her face all scrunched up. *What are you saying!* she thought again.

“What is it you want?” is what she finally asked. *Come on Jim!* Her heart ached with the thought of having to wait. And possibly wait and wait and wait. *This is a new one on me*, her thoughts flooded her mind. She couldn’t help but wonder what the heck he was doing.

“I want you to make a decision based on complete knowledge,” he said.

“Jim, is this my decision, or isn’t it.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Uh, yours.”

“Uh, yeah!”

“But I’m a part of this decision too Val, and I want to be sure myself.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“I’m not sure if you’re making the choice too quickly. You haven’t been here that long. You don’t know what can happen.”

“Well like what?” She was growing a tad impatient. She wanted to marry her husband... now. But he didn’t want to get married? Why?

* * * * *

Wow. That was fast. Jim wasn’t sure what to do with his wife’s quick decision. She hadn’t seen the children of this world or the people of this world yet and she hadn’t been with him very long. Most importantly she hadn’t seen all there was to see or experience of Heaven nor had she had a chance to grow used to the marvels of seeing Jesus. How did she know

what she wanted. He was downright mad.

He could tell she was feeling the same way. She had stated her disappointment in his not respecting her decision. He wondered how he could tell her, that her decision made all the difference in the world to him. But that he didn't want her to regret for all eternity a decision made too quickly today. If that happened, it would only end with two, if not three, broken hearts. Not to mention any children involved. At that point all chances of resolution outside of the marriage dissolved. No more choices for him or for her. Marriage on this planet was permanent. Eternally so. Either you stayed married, or you separated, whether temporarily or not, and stayed single.

Jim headed back to the cabin in a flurry of emotion, wanting to stomp it off with a hard walk. She, on the other hand, had wanted to go for a swim. Apparently, she'd figured out how to use her ability to pray on a change of clothing. All at once, she'd stood in front of him, wearing a navy blue bathing suit and looking rather angry. She'd then disappeared, yelling into the air from the top of the ledge on the rocks that served as a diving board into the lake. He watched her dive 20 or 30 feet into the water screaming all the way down.

He'd decided to let her swim off her feelings. They could talk about it later. When they'd both cooled down. The range of emotions available from this side of life, here on the New Earth, still surprised him. Yes things were generally peaceable. But boy they could be volatile at times. Things were more steady and less emotional here on this planet, but other human beings always added a bit of spicy flavor to the mix. Sometimes a little too spicy.

"Even *you* get outrageously angry," Jim was talking to God. He was justifying the way he felt. The way she felt. The harshness of the moment that should have been cinched in tenderness. It should have been easy. But it rarely seemed to be when it came to such things. The only things on this planet that weren't easy... were relationships.

His strides were long and confident. With each one he felt a ton of weight lifted off of him. God was hearing his unspoken prayer. Tears began to flow as anger turned into helplessness, the tenderness he wanted a few

moments ago. The closer he got to his home, the more he wanted to cradle Valerie in his arms and say yes. Yes, I want to marry you! Yes! Boy this was hard. So difficult it hurt.

Why were relationships so hard? Every one, everywhere, anywhere there were two people. Jim wondered if God sometimes felt this way and then he knew. He bet God often felt this way. God had entire groups of people for whom he felt this way. A bazillion of them. Many of them trapped on the old earth and desperately fighting against the one who loved them most.

“I’m sorry Lord,” he said. “Please help us to love you. With all that we have.”

Chapter Eight

“Hi... I’m so sorry Jim.” Val’s words swelled up inside of him like a sponge soaking up water.

“Yeah,” He said quietly and most seriously “I am too.”

“I had time to think Jim. I know you’re right. There are so many things about this world that I’m only beginning to understand. Maybe you could talk to me about it a little.” Her words almost seemed like a dream through his own sleepiness. Jim sat up from the family room couch and struggled to come to his senses fully. His sleep had been deep. He rubbed his face with his hands as he turned toward her.

“Of course, Val.” He stopped and thought silently for a moment and then decided to address what was probably her real need. “I love you. Respecting your choice is an important thing to me. Especially where it concerns your decision to stay with me for eternity. I didn’t mean to make light of you or your choices. I’m sorry.”

“I remember Jim. You’d always listened to me before. I figured that out as I swam and talked to God about it.”

The fire crackled loudly as Sampson jumped on top of Jim’s thigh, climbing with front paws on his upper arm and sniffing toward his face. Jim figured he could probably sense his angst. ‘Meow.’ Sampson had grown about 6 month’s worth while they were gone in the Heavens. That was one drawback of traveling back and forth, unless you were really careful, you could miss a lot.

But the animals had kept each other company and plenty of food remained in the house. God Himself provided. The kittens’ food and water never diminished. When Jim had gone to fill the bowl, it was already filled, with fresh tuna no less.

Val had changed back into a pair of jeans and a pretty white linen blouse. It was criss-crossed in a soft and gentle, slightly sheer fabric. She

had burgundy colored nails with lips to match. She must have been learning about applying color to the body.

“I wondered if we could sit down and have a serious heart to heart,” she said.

Jim felt a twinge of guilt but figured God would take care of life if he took care of the things that he needed to. It was the only thing that came to his mind in response to her look of disappointment. That look made him feel helpless again, and he didn’t like that feeling. “Sure Val. Where would you like to talk?”

“How about on the deck. It’s almost twilight and I’d like to experience whatever happens out there. It’s beautiful being out there anyway. I couldn’t think of a better place to talk.”

“Agreed. Can I get you something?” asked Jim, getting up to walk into the kitchen.

“No, thanks. I’m seriously *not* hungry or thirsty.”

“Okay.” Jim felt awkward as he walked out onto the deck. The sun was just about down and the air felt just a tiny bit chilly. He went back into the family room and grabbed a jacket and a sweater Val had thrown across one of the chairs. “You might want a sweater he called out to her, it may get cool.”

“Sure,” she called from the lounge table out back.

Walking out on the deck Jim drew his jacket up over his arms and handed her the pretty light-weight burgundy sweater stitched with varying colors of swirls and flowers just below the top button of the neck. She looked up at him through eyes that looked a little sobering and solemn. “You know, don’t you, that I’ve loved you almost all of my life.”

“Yes.” He almost said ‘dear’ but caught himself. It sounded trite and that wasn’t how he felt. He hesitated a moment and then said, “I do.”

He sat down in one of the lounge chairs and leaned back with one

ankle up on the other knee and his arms folded across his chest.

“Then you should also know that what I’m about to say is coming from a sober heart. One that cares for you very much.”

Jim felt a wave of almost nausea come over him. What was she going to say, anyway.

“Okay,” was the only word he could think of.

“You were right,” she began, and he knew the but was coming. It came. “But, I need to be sure you aren’t trying to pull my strings. In any way. I need to make this decision based on what I want to do. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” His heart was starting to pound a little uncomfortably. He didn’t think he was going to like what she was about to say.

“Do you want to marry me? Or do you need to make decisions of your own?”

The question caught him off guard. *Of course I want to marry you!* he thought, while his mind took into consideration what he really wanted to say. He was thinking hard and fast. Wanting to get the words right. Not to mess up again. In the end he simply said, “Yes, I want to marry you. Why?”

“It looked to me this afternoon like maybe you had questions.”

“I did. I mean, I do. Val this is a serious decision. I didn’t know what to think when you popped off a sort of yes like that. It was all I wanted this morning. Then this afternoon, I was prepared for a long, hard wait. Then this evening, it’s back to... I don’t know... questions. And necessary answers. But yes, I do want to marry you. Very, very much.”

“Then I have a proposition for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Please don’t keep me hanging on a string. I’ll take some time, check out Heaven and wait to see what happens if I ever get to meet Jesus face to face and then when I’ve made up my mind, whether it’s in a month, or 10 years, let’s get married?”

“Sure, Val.” Jim was relieved. *That’s what she wanted*, he thought. *I thought for sure she was going to tell me to make up my mind or take a hike. I should have known better. Valerie wouldn’t do that. She never has.*

* * * * *

Barbara Harris loved the sound of the rumble, rumble, rumble of her shiny chrome-laden chopper. She turned the corner leading around to Jim’s house in perfect unison with her husband Charlie, their son and his wife following right behind them. She also loved to play the part. The top wisps of her long, medium golden blonde hair were held securely in a black leather do rag while the rest of it flowed back behind her in the wind. What fun she’d had since coming here.

The blue azure skies and brilliant sunshine made for a perfect riding day. She wondered, as she looked at the gorgeous scenery around Jim’s house, what Valerie would actually be like. He’d described her so many times in old world ways. She seemed like the kind of gal Barb would like. Very straightforward, very good to the guy who had been her life-time partner.

Her daughter-in-law was calling something out to her but she couldn’t hear it through the wind. *Why don’t you think it to me, babe?* she said in her mind, directed to Janie. *All you have to do is ask God first.*

How much further do we have to go? Barbara heard Janie’s voice in her mind.

Not too far babe. She aimed the thought back to her. It was a wonder, she thought, how many people were confused about how to use the rules in the new world. Janie seemed a bit overwhelmed by it all. Barbara had kicked this world in the tail. Although at the time she wouldn’t have used the word ‘tail.’ She had loved it all and drank it all up like a tall glass of

beer. Well, that is... She was always wary of troubling God with her thoughts. He was rather new to her. She hadn't been a Christian for too long before her old life ended.

She could hear Charlie's snicker. *You're funny woman.* His gruff voice melted her heart.

Now how did you hear that? she threw the thought his way. *Those were private thoughts.*

Watch what you pray, he responded with a teasing sound to his voice. Charlie smiled at her from his chopper. The rumble, rumble, rumble of his bike drowned out the sound of his otherwise obviously audible laughter.

She winked at him and put the peddle down to shift gears. She pulled out ahead of him, running substantially faster than he was. They raced up the side of the hill and around to the front of Jim's drive. She won.

Her laughter filled the air as he pulled off his do rag and slapped her backside with it.

"Hey!" She said with a giggle, "stop that! You flirt."

"And don't you forget it!" came his teasing response. He kissed her with as gruff a kiss as his goatee and mustache were against her face.

"Really," she said through flirtatious clenched teeth, "Stop that." Then she pulled off her own do rag and smacked him with it in kind.

The kids pulled up just about then and Charlie had her in a backwards embrace facing them as they rode up. "That was fun mom!" said Janie. It was the first time Janie had ridden since coming to the new world, maybe ever. Every other thing was fun for Janie right now. It was kind of annoying.

Barbara blew her bangs up with her breath, a sign to Charlie that she was a tiny bit wigged out. No one but Charlie knew that signal. He hugged his wife a little tighter and said, "Wasn't it now."

Janie dismounted her rocket, a petite little thing, she was rather unusual looking in her long straight brown hair and bangs. About 18 or 19, you'd say, and very perky. Her hair was perky, her smile was perky, her voice was perky, her attitude was perky. It was really annoying. *But then aren't all daughter-in-laws a little annoying, she thought. They're always the opposite of their mother-in-laws. For obvious reasons.*

Bobbie stayed straddled on his chopper with his arms crossed in front of him staring at Barbara.

You reading my mind? she threw the question at her son.

No mom, I'm reading your face, he said a little annoyed himself.

Didn't know I was that obvious, she responded. *I'll chill.*

Thanks, he thought to her, blowing his own bangs up with his breath.

I get it, she said. *I said, I'd chill.-- Man, I thought that was Charlie's and my secret,* she thought to herself. "I guess not," she said softly but out loud.

"You two thinking secrets," said Charlie.

"None ya," retorted his wife with a smile.

"Answered my question," he shot back at her. Then he mock punched her arm and dragged her by the hair toward Jim's house.

She laughed as she followed along with her hands planted firmly on her hips and her head tilted to the side following his lead. She sure loved her husband. He was a kick.

Bobby giggled himself and Janie looked dismayed. She pointed at the pair and Bobby shrugged his shoulders. When they got to the front door, Charlie released Barbara's hair and she kicked him in the backside and pouted. "Brat!" she said.

Bobby dismounted and kicked down the kickstand to his gorgeous

chopper. The four bikes looked really nice together. Well, at least the three bikes did, the rocket was a dang soar thumb. In many ways.

As the four of them ganged up at the front door, Barbara couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of this motley crew charging into their home unannounced. *Poor thing*, she thought. *We really should have warned them we were coming.*

Chapter Nine

A small biker gang stood looking haphazardly askew on the front porch. Valerie couldn't help but laugh out loud as she opened the door.

"I like her, I like her," said the woman with tussled golden blonde hair. "Hi, my name is Barb." She stuck out her hand and smiled like it was a Christmas gift. Valerie responded in kind.

"Sorry for laughing," she said with delight. "But you all look really... different."

"Yeah, we know," said Barb.

"We are different," said a very gruff looking man with biceps the size of cantaloupes--gruff, but handsome in his own biker dude kind of way.

"Please come in." Valerie turned and ushered them in as she looked across the room at Jim who was peering over the top of a book with his eyebrow raised and a grin the size of cantaloupes.

They all shuffled in with varying walks. The gruff dude like a real biker. The woman with a bit a dance and the two younger kids like regular-old people. But at varying paces. Valerie looked beyond them at the chrome in her driveway. "Wow," she said.

The woman caught her glance and said, "Yeah, cool, huh."

"Yeah!" said Valerie, still standing there with the door wide open.

"Jim has one too," said Barb.

"You do?!" Valerie's question was one of wonder. She'd always wanted to ride on the back of a motorcycle. "What kind of bike is it?"

"A chopper," Jim said.

“A chopper?”

“Yeah,” said the woman. “A chopper. Is she for real?”

“Yes,” said Valerie. “We never owned one in the other life. I always wanted to.”

“But we couldn’t,” said Jim. “We had other priorities.”

“Where are they?” said the blonde.

“What?” asked Valerie.

“Your little priorities,” the woman’s smile was one of amusement, but Valerie kind of liked it. She was direct. An attribute Valerie loved.

“No, no!” said Valerie, “not little children, other things.”

“Oh,” she responded, “None of our bees wax. I see.” She was still amused.

Valerie was not. Exactly. Well maybe sort of.

“These are our priorities,” said the gruff guy, “my son Bobby and his wife, Janie. Oh... Uh, Harris. We’re all Harris’ here. I’m Charlie.”

Valerie shook his extended hand. It was humungous. Hers felt like a baby’s in the grip of his.

He smiled at her and then walked over to the couch and sat down.

“Please,” said Valerie, “be seated.”

“Sure,” said Barb. The kids followed along, Bobby with his arm around his pretty, very young wife.

“I’m new here,” Janie said.

“Oh, really? Me too!” said Valerie.

“Uh-oh, two nu-bee’s... Uh, actually, we knew that already, Valerie,” said Barb. “We heard you’d arrived when Jim stopped to pick up the kits.”

“Kits?”

“Kittens.”

“Oh! You’re the people who gave him Celeste and Sampson!”

“Cute,” Barb said. “Celeste and Sampson. Two very different characters from the bible. Sampson, very earthy and Celeste... Uh-oh, I don’t think there is a Celeste in the bible. Woops.” Barbara held her fingertips up to her mouth and shrugged like she was in trouble. “I’m kind of new to the bible and all this Jesus stuff. Woops. I suppose I should be more better about talking about Jesus. I really mess up some times.”

“You can stop now,” said Charlie. “You’re shoving that foot a little deeper every second.”

Barb shot him a look to kill. Or at least to sizzle.

“That’s okay,” said Janie. “I’m new to this world even if I know my bible well.”

Barb shot her a look to sizzle as well.

“I’m glad to meet you all,” said Valerie. “It’s nice to meet people here on the New Earth. You’re the first.”

“The first!” Barb choked on the words. “Really? Jimmy baby, why have you been hiding her away all these months?”

“We’ve been in the Heavens,” said Jim.

“Ohhhh,” all four of them chimed at the same time.

“Been there, done that,” said Charlie. “Would always do it again.”

“Same here!” said Barb. “It’s the best high *I’ve* ever had.”

“I don’t know,” said Valerie. “I think I flew a little too high.”

Barbara guffawed. Her laugh filled the whole room and Valerie found it contagious. But she didn’t join in. She just smiled.

“So tell us about how you got here!” said Janie. She was really perky. Valerie found it adorable. And also contagious.

“Oh, I...”

“She started off in bed,” said Jim. His grin turned into a sly tease.

“Ah,” said Barb, “the best place to be.”

Valerie blushed. “No! We don’t...”

“We know, we know!” said the four of them in unison.

“You don’t need to get graphic,” said the blonde.

Valerie blushed again. “I think I need to pull my own foot out of my mouth,” she said with a wink toward Barb.

Barb smiled and winked back. She pointed at Valerie and said, “I like her, I like her.”

Valerie blushed again. “All right,” she said wryly, “what on God’s green earth, do I do with you all.”

The biker gang laughed.

“Like us,” said Charlie. “We grow on yah.”

* * * * *

Janie stood up. She wanted to look around. She liked this big elegant and rustic cabin. “Do you mind?” she asked.

“Mind what?” asked Jim.

“May I have a look around? I’ve never seen anything quite like this place. I haven’t been here long and I wasn’t very rich on the old earth.”

“Sure,” said Jim, “Valerie hasn’t seen all there is of the house yet either. Why don’t you two go exploring together.”

“This I gotta see,” said Barbara. Janie was sorry Barb was going to join them. But decided to make the best of it. She always wanted to please her mother-in-law but never seemed to be able to do it.

The pretty light-blond haired woman they called Valerie stood up looking a little excited. “Actually,” she said, “There are some rooms down here on the first floor I haven’t even opened yet.”

“Oh goody,” said Barb with a bit of a sarcastic tone.

Janie wanted to tell Barb she should be a little nicer, but decided it wasn’t worth making a fuss over.

Apparently Barb caught the look on Janie’s face. “What?” she said. “I mean it.” Barb started to blow her bangs up the way she always did when she was ruffled, but stopped and blew down instead.

Valerie walked down the hallway and opened the first door she came to and Janie and her mother-in-law followed her into a small room. It was filled with things designed for a child about a toddler’s age. There was a small table and two tiny chairs, the table held a plastic box filled with hundreds of coloring crayons. There were also some over-sized coloring books and toys everywhere, lined up and looking as if they were just waiting for the perfect little boy or girl.

“For the little priorities,” said Barb. “Cute but...”

Janie shot her a look and Barb shrugged and stopped.

“But nothing really spectacular, unless you don’t have kids!” said

Valerie, a pained look crossing over her face. Then she brightened with a look of excitement. "But some day..." She kind of did a skip and looked at Barb with a wink. *I think she likes Barb*, thought Janie, with a little pain of her own. *I wonder if she'll like me.*

"Yeah," Janie said, "Someday I'd like to have little priorities too."

"So would I!" said Barb, "I mean, me too, but mostly I'd like for *you* to have little pri... I mean... granddoties."

"Granddoties?" said Valerie with an amused look.

"Oh, you know, the little tiny grandkids. The kind you can dote on."

"Ah!" said Valerie.

"Me?" Janie said, "Oh, I'm not ready to have kids yet."

"Why... Okay, never mind. None of my business whether you have kids now or not."

"You two don't get along very well, do you," said Valerie. "Okay, none of my business now!"

"Yeah!" said Barbara. And then she stuck her hip out to bump Valerie's hip. "We think alike," she said with a rather smug smile.

"Okay, on to room number two," said Valerie just in time to save Janie's hide.

The second room was much the same as the first. Almost identical except the toys and games were a little older. As was the room next door to it. All of them were quite small, looked like they could hold one, maybe two kids at the most. It wasn't until they got to the door on the other side of where the second turn in the U shaped hallway stood that the real excitement started. When Valerie opened the fourth door it led into a large room filled with what looked like giant computer screens. "What's this?" Valerie said with an inquisitive look on her face.

“Ah!” said Barbara, “Jimmy was smart. He put in a good-sized Learning Center. If he’s going to have this many kids, he’ll need it.”

“What’s a Learning Center?” Janie asked in unison with Valerie.

“No one’s told you?”

“No,” they both said together. Janie was beginning to hope maybe Valerie would have some things in common with her after all.

Barbara walked over to one of the screens and touched its face. “This,” she said, “is a learning station.” Janie and Valerie walked over to the screen and watched in amazement. It *was* like a computer screen. “One thing I do know about God,” said Barb, “is that He’s the One who runs it.”

She started pushing areas on the screen until one opened up with a picture of a little girl in a ballet pose. “You see?” said Barb. “As you press this button,” she pressed a button that had the word ‘Tutorial’ printed on it, “the teacher begins to show you how to do it.”

“Wow!” she said with Valerie once more. Janie watched in amazement as the little computer figure on the screen began working through a simple ballet step and then stopped and repeated the same sequence again and again.

“Stop!” Barbara yelled at the computer and hit a ‘Stop Sign’ on the screen at the same time. “Dang!” she said. “It’s really annoying if you keep on letting it go on and on and on... But it’ll teach the kids.”

“No more teachers, no more books,” said Janie. “Thank you Jesus!”

The two older women laughed. Janie felt a twinge of gratification.

“Learning Centers hold information on anything God knows. If,” said Barb, “He wants *you* to know it.”

“Can I ask it a question?” said Janie.

“Sure,” said Barb and Valerie in unison.

“Sorry,” said Barb, “This *is* your house.”

“Of course,” said Valerie winking at Janie, “Be my guest.”

Janie jumped at the chance. “How do you ask it a question?” she asked Barbara.

“Just ask it a question,” said Barb. “Actually no, you have to ask *God* the question,” she corrected herself.

“Okay,” said Janie out loud. “God, does Bobby love me?”

The computer screen lit up and began showing a video-type picture of Bobby in sobs, praying lovingly over Janie as she lay with her eyes staring into nothingness in a hospital bed on the old earth. Tubes were coming out of her arms and nose, and breathing apparatus out of her mouth. She was bandaged and limp, nearly lifeless.

“Wow,” said Barb. “I had no idea.”

On the screen Bobby was weeping uncontrollably, his prayers almost unintelligible because of the tears.

Janie was beginning to weep herself. She couldn’t bear to look at the scene of herself and turned away from the screen back toward the other women, whom she didn’t really want to face either.

“Oh my Go... I mean, man, I had *no* idea,” said Barb. Her hand lifted to her mouth, twisting her lip at the what she saw on the screen.

Janie kept weeping and turned back to the screen watching Bobby’s uncontrollable tears. She couldn’t believe how much Bobby loved her. She didn’t remember looking like that. But she remembered the time. She was awake, but no one knew she could hear what was going on around her. Or at least that’s what she’d thought. She was in a great deal of pain and no one knew. She was scared to death, literally, and no one knew. Apparently, except Bobby... And God. Who loved her. Yes.

Chapter Ten

In a million years Valerie would never have thought it possible. She soared through the wind atop her very own chopper still thinking soberly about what she had seen the sweet young girl going through on her learning station's screen. *I have to turn my attention back to what's going on now*, she told herself.

She looked over her new fantastic, kind of girly chopper. It was a pretty metallic navy blue color with pale blue and silver paint in swirls on the gas tank. And lots of chrome. It was similar to Jim's but with saddle bags that had cool silver studs on them. She thought it was the cat's pajamas, 100%.

She'd never learned to ride and it was amazing to her that it was so easy here in this world. You simply got on it, like a bicycle and rode. Jim had given her a few tips in how to use the various gadgets. Like how to shift. But it was really easy! She had learned that in this world, all you needed to do was ask God and He showed you how to do almost anything. Almost automatically.

Barbara and Charlie led the way as Jim and she followed down the road with the kids trailing behind them a few paces. They were all headed to The Escapades. Here on the New Earth, The Escapades were where most people met for fun. It was a major event held continuously, only closing down during the night hours, somewhere on the other side of the ridge from where the waterfall plunged down to the lake.

There was a river along which The Escapades flowed in what was apparently a large, never-ending fair or group picnic. It's where people hung out. It's where they met. It's where they enjoyed themselves and each other. She couldn't wait. But even the ride there was exhilarating.

"This is cool," Valerie tried shouting up to Barbara.

Why don't you say it in your mind, babe? Came her response, like a mental whisper in Barbara's own voice. *I can't hear you from up here. All I*

can hear is a muffled bunch of gibberish.

“Okay,” Valerie said out loud to herself. She turned to Jim and tried to ask him how to talk mentally like that but he couldn’t hear her either. His mental voice simply said, *Huh?* while he looked over at her with a puzzled expression.

Apparently no one was going to explain to her *how* to do this mental speaking. Frustrated, she began to think it through in her mind. Then she heard another mental voice, mildly familiar, but different from the group. It said, *Honey, just ask me.* “Oh,” she said to herself aloud, “I need to ask God!” Finally when it was no longer appropriate to say her original comment, she was able to tell all four of them, *Thanks. This is fun. But you could have told me how to talk this way!*

You figured it out, said Barb. *See? We had faith in you. And God.*

Valerie decided to soak in the scenery as she traveled in this marvelous new way. The six of them on choppers, and a rocket, sounded and must have looked outrageous. They were a biker gang! She was part of a biker gang! It was cool.

Jim looked striking with his hair in a long, golden dark blonde braid and a leather jacket covered with patches. His shades just added to the effect of making him look like the rough guy he wasn’t. It made Valerie giggle inside. It must have been one of his favorite fantasy’s. Looking like that.

Valerie on the other hand was dressed the part as well. She was wearing a leather do rag, as Barb had called it; a little head-shaped, almost scarf-looking hat, made out of leather, and they had dressed her in a pair of tattered jeans and a leather jacket of her own. Although she hadn’t wanted all the patches. She wore the nice dark brown jacket atop a white tank top with pretty embroidery on it. She had used one of those lotions to tint her skin a dark golden brown and her hair, wild with it’s long, straight, sassy tresses streaked in varying shades of blonde, definitely looked the part. Now she really was Jim’s biker babe. She was pleased.

Jim must have caught sight of her smile. *You look happy baby,* he

thought to her. *You having fun?*

Yes, she said simply and confidently. Her confidence bubbled. She'd never quite felt like this before. Jim blew her a handless kiss. She turned her head as if it had smacked her on the cheek and then smiled and winked at him. She liked this winking stuff. She liked Barbara. In some ways, Barb was going to be a good influence on her.

Valerie began to sing into the wind. She could hear her own voice anyway. And she liked what she heard. One thing she hadn't heard much of here, except in Heaven, was music. It was something she missed. She decided to ask Jim about it. *Baby*, she said, *Why isn't there music in this world?*

I was wondering when you were going to ask that question, he responded and smiled over at her at the same time. He took his hands off the handles, both of them, and Valerie bristled and frowned. He shrugged and put one hand back on. *You can't get hurt here*, he said, *but I'll be careful anyway. For your sake. For now*, he said with finality.

Valerie felt a twinge of guilt. It was, after all, his business. *Oh, well*, she thought to herself, *Live and learn*.

Jim picked up where they'd left off, *Music is piped anywhere in or throughout all the house if you want it. God can teach you in the Learning Center. You can make your own music here. Similar, apparently, to how you can on the old earth now*.

Really, said Valerie.

Yep. God's Learning Station records the music you create, like on an old earth computer, and then adds it to the New Earth's network. Kind of like the world wide web. Only God-run.

Interesting. You'll have to help me learn.

Sure honey. Later. Right now I want to enjoy this ride, don't you?

Yeah, sure, she said with a giggle. She was being dismissed.

* * * * *

Val looked like the biker babe of his dreams. Jim watched her latch onto Barb's arm with his own private and intense emotion as she walked in front of him. He looked over at Charlie who was watching his own wife's walk with a look of amusement mixed with admiration. "It's nice to have them around," he said to Charlie.

Charlie cleared his throat in a manly way and said, "Yep. *It sure* is."

Barb's giggle pierced the breeze and Val responded with a head-tilted-back laugh of her own. The two men looked at each other knowingly. It was wonderful to have them around.

"Girl of my dreams," said Charlie.

Jim cleared his throat in agreement. "Do you suppose we could head over to the Music Center later?"

"I don't see why not," said Charlie in his signature voice. Gruff as usual. Almost harsh. It was something Jim had always admired about Charlie. He was truly one rough cut guy. Even if he had a soft heart. Another thing he admired about Charlie. His soft heart.

Charlie and Barb raised kittens. It was their service to the New Earth. He liked that. It was Barb's dream in the old earth to be able to raise the baby kittens for the sake of other little kids, and big ones. Charlie had no problem with it. In fact he seemed to like it. A lot.

"Why the Music Center?" asked Charlie.

"Oh, Val said something about it on the way over."

"The Music Center?"

"No music in general, dufus!" snapped Jim playfully.

“Don’t call me dufus!” Charlie snapped back with a glint in his eyes and through long piece of grass he was chewing on. “No more than you, weirdo.”

Jim liked this guy. He was one tough act. He liked that.

* * * * *

Excitement filled Barb’s heart. She liked this cookie next to her. She had a feeling they would be good friends. Someday. Right now, Valerie’s eyes were lit up with the country fair atmosphere in this part of The Escapades. In the Country Goods Center there were homemade goodies from all over the area set up for display and give-away. Some edible, some not. It was marvelous. No price tags on anything. No one here in this world needed to make a living, so skills were used in different ways. People did things just for the fun of doing them. And giving them away.

Jim moseyed up next to Valerie and hit her in the ribs with his elbow flirtatiously. “You want to check out the Music Center later?” he asked.

“Yeah!” she kind of yelled it and kind of whispered it. “Can we wait a while first, I want to shop!”

“Oh!” he groaned in mock abdominal pain. “Don’t say that word.”

Valerie giggled and Barb stepped back to talk to her own husband. “What do you think of these two?” she whispered.

Their kind of cute. He said in her mind, but not too cute if you know what I mean. Oh, no, here comes trouble.

Barb looked up and crossed her eyes at her husband, blowing her bangs up as she did.

“Darlings!”

“Uh, Hi, Elizabeth,” said Barb. Elizabeth wasn’t exactly Barb’s favorite person. Although she did get a kick out of watching her operate.

The woman, who looked suspiciously similar to Jackie-O dressed in a pale blue form-fitting dress and white loosely knit cardigan sweater, gave her a mock kiss on the cheek and strolled directly over to the new kid on the block, who stood looking at Barb with a glance of desperation. Barb winked at Valerie and blew her bangs up, at the same time widening her eyes to warn her.

Elizabeth wasn't that bad. She was just very different. Barb didn't like her antique attitudes and actions. Not that there weren't people from all era's here. Though God did seem, thankfully, to group them in like company at least when you first arrived. Not that she didn't appreciate differing people, but the thought of living with 17th Century ladies from the Puritan era put her teeth on edge.

Barb pictured herself, clad in a white peasant blouse, jeans tucked into biker boots, blowing on her bangs while tied to a pole some time near the 17th Century... in Salem, Massachusetts! *Talk about witch hunts!* she thought, and then felt a twinge of guilt. *That was real*, she said to herself. *I can't imagine that.* Coming back down to the New Earth, she reminded herself that it wasn't Elizabeth's era that bothered her. It was her attitude. But even that was a matter of taste in this world, she didn't want to be mean after all. *No reverse witch hunts for me!* she thought.

"Hannah!" Jim's voice carried across the small crowd. He'd moved on ahead of them and had his arms around the 12-year-old Purple Queen. Hannah was Elizabeth's granddaughter and dressed as always, head to foot in purple. Glitter no less. A bit young for a girl of 12, Barbara thought. But then she hadn't been 12 for many a year. *Okay decade. Okay. Longer than that!* she thought.

Barb decided she wanted something to munch. Get away from the people scenery. She walked over to a pretty young woman, about 23, *but then aren't we all*, she thought. The gal had the prettiest long kind-of frizzy pale blonde hair. It went out about a yard by the time it reached it's full length somewhere around her mid thigh. Rapunzzelle! She said to herself. But it wasn't quite accurate. Her hair wasn't *that* long after all. But it did look like spun gold. Only lighter. "Hi," she said to the woman. "What do you have there?"

“Oh, this is my mother’s favorite home made apple pie,” she responded in a beautiful high pitch, almost sing-song voice. “It’s made with home-churned butter, cinnamon and nutmeg, tart apples and a butter crust.”

“So you like to cook.”

“Love to.”

“I’ll try a piece,” said Barb. The woman handed her a piece of the most melt-in-your-mouth pie she’d ever tasted.

“Ummm! No! Ummmmm!” she said. “It’s a good thing some people know how to cook around here. I wouldn’t even have known what to ask God for. This is awesome!”

“Thank you,” the girl said quietly, beaming briefly before shyly lowering her eyes. “Would you like to take some home with you?”

“Oh, no, but, dang! I wish I could. I’m on a bike and well...”

“You know we can have it ‘delivered,’” the girl reminded her.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. You betcha, sweetie, send ‘er my way! Are you willing to share your recipe?” And then the thought struck Barb of herself in an apron with flour from head to toe, and all over the kitchen... blowing on her bangs. “Oh, never mind about the recipe, I could never do this! Can I order them from time to time?”

“Sure!” The girl seemed delighted. She handed her a reminder card with her g-mail address on it. “Just ask.”

All you had to do on this planet to get something like this was think of the person and ask God, and then send her a thought-message. You could send what amounted to a mental e-mail, known here as a g--for God--mail. The other person, or you, could say a polite, no thank you. I’m busy or whatever you wanted to say and put the interruptive thoughts on hold at any time, for as long as you wished. It was really nice. Convenient.

The girl's smiling photo stood on the card with the words, 'Mouth-watering apple pie and a gigantic smile.' *She isn't kidding*, Barb thought.

"Thanks, dear," she said.

Chapter Eleven

All of the sudden there was a ruckus in the skies! Valerie looked up above the crowds where they sat, all eight of them, surrounding a table in the Music Center. There, riding in a blaze of brilliant light on a brilliant white horse, was a man dressed in light with an army of angels surrounding Him. They charged down from the skies in a fast-paced gallop and landed somewhere in the far distance, several miles from where the large crowd gathered at The Escapades. The most amazing thing was, no one seemed to notice! People went on talking and walking around as if it were nothing marvelous.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but what was that?” She pointed up to the skies where the company of angels still trailed, along with a brilliant trail of light that remained following the entourage. Janie, gaped at the clouds herself silently.

“Oh, sorry honey,” said Jim, “I should have explained. That’s the Lord, coming down to the New Earth to take care of His business.”

“What!”

“Yeah, I guess I should have told you while we were in Heaven. He does make a grand entrance sometimes. It’s the way most people here are brought before him for their personal judgment.”

“Is it that common that no one even looks up?”

“Not that common, but common enough,” he said. “Most people don’t want to get in people’s business by watching His arrival for these kinds of things. The believer’s judgment is a very personal thing. Whether it’s *The Judgment* or some other personal business between someone on the New Earth and the Lord.”

“If it’s private, then why does He come in that fashion?”

“For the sake of the person about to be judged. It’s a hard thing to

meet the Lord face to face. He makes it as grand as possible.”

“Have you been judged?” she asked Jim.

“Yes, I have,” he responded. “You will be too.”

“When!” she asked excitedly.

“Whenever He chooses,” Jim responded.

Janie and Bobby were whispering over on the other side of the table privately. Valerie assumed they were speaking of the same things. Most likely they were. Pretty 40’s era big-band music was playing softly in the background as they all relaxed around the table and chatted leisurely.

“What happens when He judges you?” Valerie asked.

“It’s really an individual experience,” he said tilting his head back and closing his eyes briefly. The sun was going down and the shadow of a cloud passed across his face, then the whole area around them went briefly shaded.

The crowd was beginning to thin a little. There were about 50 or 60 people gathered in the Music Center area and empty chairs and tables were plentiful. Music, beautifully diverse and seemingly coming from all directions straight out of the sky, played constantly in the background. Apparently there were some areas where you could listen at a higher volume level. But for the sake of conversation, they’d chosen an area with a lesser degree of intensity.

Listening stations were also available where the music came in almost directly to your ears and you could sit back, rest your feet, and soak up the music in perfect surround sound while relaxing privately, or almost privately. Invariably the teenagers, and not a few adults, loved these stations.

The type of music played in these stations was your choice. You didn’t have to listen to whatever the crowd was hearing and God Himself directed which songs played in an exhilarating and very personal way.

Choosing songs for you that were perfect for the mood of the moment. One after the other.

Valerie had sampled one of the stations. She had wanted to hear classical music and found that the music in the station she listened in was stunningly beautiful and extraordinarily arranged and produced. Special effects were both satisfying and astounding. The stations were open to the outdoors, so that you could watch the river or the clouds rolling overhead and listen at the same time. It was a very relaxing experience.

As she looked at her husband, with his head tilted back and his eyes still closed, she realized that there was probably nothing on earth or in heaven she wanted more than to love and be loved by him. And yet... watching as the Lord came down from the skies made her think. *Is it possible?* she wondered. *Would I want to live in Heaven once I got used to it?*

People here were used to Jesus. It was as if he were an average part of their everyday existence. *Could I grow so used to the Lord and Heaven that it became a thrill rather than a source of exhaustion?* She began to think that maybe her husband, or whatever he was considered, might be right. She really needed to understand what she was choosing. It was a very important choice. A very, very important choice.

* * * * *

The skies burst with color. Janie sat in one of the listening stations, with the prettiest soft rock music ever playing into her ears. The sky show was like an aurora borealis only not quite as wicked looking. She'd seen videos of auroras on the internet in the old world. They had struck her as almost ugly in their dark flavoring. These were definitely not ugly. Nor dark.

In fact, they were gorgeous. Orange turned to hues of green and green to hues of purple, purple to hues of hot pink. Each color carried a varying array of impressive effects. Anything from glittery sparkles falling down from above to streaks of what might be considered color-enhanced sun rays, piercing through the reflective clouds. They shone across the skies

in a brilliant lightshow creating a sweet-feeling glow in the twilight skies.

The closest she'd ever come to something this spectacular was the sunset she'd seen on the internet that had been in beautiful purples and pinks. She'd seen it through a video from Milan.

She'd found a secret back then. A video club on the internet that kept itself quiet to avoid lurkers. She herself had added to the collection with shots from her best friend's digital video camera. She'd taken video clips of her neighborhood area. Shots of people some might consider wealthy caught in cases of extreme hardship. In the midst of San Francisco's incredible riches, she herself had lived somewhat in poverty. A kind of apartment-house poverty. The rents were so high, you couldn't afford to eat. It was a stark contrast worth documenting at the time.

She forced her mind back to the present grandeur. *Why on earth think about earth right now!* she thought. *Thank you Lord, that I'm not there any longer.* She wouldn't give up this place for all the photojournalism opportunities in The City or the biggest house in Marin County. *Just look at the gorgeous cabin Jim and Valerie have!* she told herself. *I'd rather have a place like that any day.*

She couldn't help but think about things as she sat there soaking in the beautiful music and lightshow. Janie and Bobby were putting together their own place now, while the two of them stayed temporarily with Barbara and Charlie. That was quite an experience. Living with the pair from Chopperville. New York bikers weren't her particular cup of tea. But she supposed west coast would-be photographers weren't exactly theirs either.

What a challenge, she thought. *One I never thought I'd be living on the other side of the other world. In fact, I never thought much about the other side of life,* she thought. *What a blessing it is!* She never could have imagined living in a place like this, nor dying at so young and promising an age. But the promises there could never, ever, in a million years, equal those of this world. Never... Ever.

* * * * *

Valerie decided in the midst of this beautifully elaborate lightshow, that she'd almost rather watch the people who were gathered around the large Music Center. *Especially*, she thought, *the children*. But her hunger to watch them was more than just viewing what they were like here in the New Earth. She wanted to watch them grow. See what they saw, or at least ask them what they felt and how they saw life.

What an amazing thought, she wondered. *What would it be like to grow up in a place like this, rather than a place like the old earth?* The question hung around in her mind, echoing throughout the festivities and laughter, the 'Ooo's' and the 'Ah's,' the delightful and fun conversations happening all around her. Though the crowd had thinned substantially since the night started coming on.

None of it was quite as thrilling as the children happily playing amongst all the adults. *What a place to grow up!* she thought. Her heart ached with the hope of having children of her own here. And the realization that Jim had something to say about it as well. *What on earth*, she wondered, *or in heaven, could cause her to want to give up this?*

Hannah, the little girl with Elizabeth, stood beside Jim fastened to his side by her purple-clad arm. Her satiny purple dress with its glittery lavender patterns and swirls reminded her of her own pre-teen dreams. She was certainly a sight to behold as was her mother, *Oh*, she thought, *I mean her grandmother*.

Both looked like they were as diverse in age and era as they actually were. Hannah had passed away at the age of 8, she was now somewhere close to the age of 12 even though Jim had said children here grew up very slowly. About a year to a decade. Elizabeth having passed away in the 1940's at the age of 27, was actually a perfect picture of 1965.

She wore a cute, form-fitting pale blue dress and white cardigan, as well as a pretty white hat and short white gloves. If Valerie had a guess in the matter, she'd say she drove a powder blue Caddy with a white convertible top, down of course.

She was certainly stunning. Looking a bit like Jackie-O, she had short dark hair, perfectly placed, and dark glasses which she loved to take

down just far enough to eye Jim and her with a pretty not-quite smile. She was the essence of a 1960's movie star. As eloquent as she was couture. A *real classy broad*, the thought popped into her head almost obtrusively; it seemed altogether inadequate. Truly out of place. She was classy, but she couldn't imagine Elizabeth being called a broad.

On the other hand, her new best friend? Ah, well, Barb was really cute. And definitely the type Valerie would have loved to befriend on the old earth, but never had the chance. Valerie had been a busy woman. Too busy with her career to mingle with bikers. Especially since they didn't own a motorcycle. Not at least back in the old earth. *Here*, she sighed as she thought the words, *I can be a biker broad if I want to be a biker broad*. And for the moment, she thought maybe she did.

Chapter Twelve

“I’m exhausted. Again!” Valerie’s attitude was one of inner deliberation. She wanted to think about things for a while. She’d almost had enough of people for the day. Even Jim was a bit of a distraction from her desire for contemplation. “Jim do you mind if I take a walk by myself?” she asked.

“In the moonlight?” he asked with one eyebrow raised.

“Yes.”

“Well... I don’t see why not.” He looked a little disappointed, but picked his book up and lifted it up toward her. “I’ll read for a while. You want me to wait up? Or will you be a long time?”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be,” she said. “Do whatever you wish, honey.” Valerie thought about it for a minute. “You said the animals here are harmless, right?”

“Very,” he responded. “Very.” Most of them will be battened down for the night anyway, Val. But those that aren’t won’t approach you at all unless you ask God.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel better.” Valerie was again overwhelmed. But this time, she wanted to talk to God about a lot of things. Things she wasn’t quite sure she knew how to express.

As she walked along the trail to the lake, she wanted to traipse it’s shore for quite a long while. Walking was one way she let off steam. And steam was beginning to build up pressure inside of her. Just a little. She needed God. She’d had a wonderful time with Jim and Charlie and Barbara and the kids and the crowds, but... now she needed the One she loved the most. She needed God.

“Nothing matters more to me, Lord,” she said, “than You do.” A wind picked up, a gentle, warm breeze passing over her softly. But there was no

voice. Not yet anyway. "I had such a wonderful day, today," she said, "but I need you, Father, desperately."

She felt an emotion she knew was not her own. One of loving poignancy. As if God were saddened by her words in a beautiful kind of way. "I have to know Father," she started the words but the rest of it caught in her throat. She didn't know how to say it. So she spoke whatever came to her mind. "Who is Jesus in my life? What is He all about? Where am I in comparison to Him? Does that make any sense?"

"Yes," came a rushing sound of wind. But nothing more.

She sat down on a rock. It actually felt warm from the day's sun and comfortable. Not quite soft, but comfortable nonetheless. She sat beside the lake looking over the moonlit water and listening to the soft, gentle sound of the waterfall. *Funny how that waterfall sounds so soothing, rather than painfully roaring in my ears*, she thought. "Who am I Lord?" she asked painfully aware that she didn't know. But there was no answer. Just a feeling. "I truly don't know." Still no answer. But Valerie didn't feel ignored or alone. She felt the love God had for her, and even stronger the love she had for Him.

"My Son," said God through the wind, "has a job to do." Tears formed as she heard the sound of the air a little stronger than a breeze. "So, my daughter, do you. But in a different place, a different way."

"What..." she asked as the tears began to spill over. "What can I do here?"

"Right now," the wind whispered, "You can love me."

The tears streamed a little harder. "You need me?" she asked.

"I will always love your love," He said almost sadly. "With all my heart, my darling daughter, I love you so much."

Valerie sat for what seemed like an hour, tears streaming down her face, just basking in God's love for her and her love for Him. It was a time much like she remembered on the old earth, except that she heard Him, felt

His breeze, could nearly touch the Father's heart. Everything around her seemed to radiate with His love. Love for her. And she loved Him right back. *Even God's world, she thought, is filled to the brim with His love.*

* * * * *

Jim put the book down on the coffee table and took the stairs to the upper floor. He opened the bedroom door designed for one of the older kids. *Hannah, he thought, is the kind of child I would love to have.* His heart broke with the weight of his desires. And he began to sob openly. *How could I have turned Val down?* he asked himself. *How could I have said no to her proposal that we make our marriage permanent.* His hand went up to his forehead and back down to wipe away his tears. "Dang!" he said. "What a dope I am."

"What do I do Father?" His words were filled with desperation. "I don't want to make any choices. I don't want her to chose anything different. Please," he begged, "What do I do?" He heard the patter of rain on the top of his roof. Val would probably be coming back if it was raining. "Please?" he asked. "I really want to know." His tears fell silently as he sobbed holding onto the little child-sized pillow on the small bed in the third room. "Please don't let Val come back and catch me like this."

"It's okay," said God's voice within his mind. "Everything's in my timing, son."

Jim could hear the sound of Val's moving around downstairs. She had more than likely popped in once the rain began to fall. "Jim?" he heard her call.

"I'm... up here... honey..." His voice came out of him broken by sobs.

She suddenly appeared next to him, having traveled straight to him without a second passing by. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I... can't... talk now."

She knelt down by the bed and took his huddled form in her arms. “It’s okay,” she soothed. “God loves you, baby. It’s okay.”

Help me, Jim pleaded inwardly to God. Please Lord, help.

* * * * *

The tears had been flowing for a while, but this time Valerie’s tears fell for her husband. He was so beautiful. He sat there on a small bed holding onto a small pillow weeping uncontrollably. Her heart wanted to take him in her arms and hold him forever. So she did. At least for a few moments.

When he stopped weeping, he lay down on the small bed and carried the pillow down with him, breathing in sobs. She let him fall to the bed alone. She wasn’t sure that headaches would stop her from the love she felt for him. *They probably would.* She thought as she felt one coming on, stronger and stronger, until she thought the words.

He lay there on his side, staring into the darkness of the room. The light coming from downstairs contrasted the lower half of his body from the upper half as the door to the room cast a cross-wise shadow. She waited knowing how strongly he felt. She’d rarely seen him cry like this. Very, very rarely.

When his breathing became regular, she asked him, “What is it baby?”

He reached up and touched her cheek. “I love you,” he said. “I’m sorry I said no.”

“Oh,” she whispered knowingly. “Wow.”

They sat there in the stillness as the shadows took on more and more visibility, her eyes growing used to the dark room. In the dim light she could see a collection of children’s books. One of them plainly said, ‘A Story About Love, by Daddy.’

“A Story by Daddy?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “A story by me.”

“Oh...” she said soberly, “really. You’ve been writing children’s story books?”

“Every single one.”

“Oh...” she said soberly, “really.”

Suddenly she knew she needed to be with her husband. “What on earth,” she said, “would I want more than you, Jim?”

He nodded in agreement as she bent over to kiss him. He looked her square in the eyes. Very serious. Very sober.

Then he took her in his arms and held her, the child-sized pillow between them. And as he kissed her, all resolve began to melt. “Please,” she said, “Let’s get married.”

* * * * *

Elizabeth’s heart beat with pleasure as she picked up her granddaughter and headed for Jim’s house. She’d been here much longer than Jim, and so much longer than Valerie. She didn’t want Jim to make the mistake of his eternal life by marrying someone, anyone, even his wife from the old world, too quickly. She would see to it that they didn’t choose wrongly. She was certain that such a quick marriage here was altogether the wrong choice. God Himself had told her of their plans. She knew, oh, how she knew, that this was not *His* plan. Certainly not His plan after all she had asked of Him.

Her powder blue Thunderbird convertible was sweet joy to drive. Elizabeth had put the white top down and knew Hannah would love to play with the wind as they drove over to her favorite ‘uncle’s’ house. Hannah had a powerful pull on Jim’s heart. Elizabeth knew she could pull Hannah’s strings. And Jim’s through Hannah. “We’ll see about this Valerie,” she said into the wind.

The wind whipped up a little forcefully and pulled Elizabeth's white chiffon scarf off of her hair and back onto the road behind her. "I'm sorry Lord," she said quickly. She didn't want to incur God's anger by her whiles, "but do you want this?" she asked Him directly. She knew by His silence and her lack of headache, that He most certainly did not.

As she pulled up into her own drive, little Hannah, who wasn't so little any more, sauntered out to the car looking a little unkempt. And more than a little disconcerted. "What's up darling?" she asked her granddaughter. "Why the long face?"

"Uncle Jim's going to get married," she said. "I wanted to marry him when I grow up!"

Oh good, thought Elizabeth, Here's one opportunity.

"Uncle Jim most likely won't be marrying any time soon, dear," she said. "We're going to go and visit with him and his old-world wife. Won't you come along with me and help me out a little?"

"What are we going to do, Grandmamma?"

"We're going to play a little game, darling."

"What kind of game, Grandmamma?"

"You'll see, just play along with me. If I ask you a question, answer it honestly. Try to behave as if you don't know we're playing a game."

"Okay... what sort of game is this, Grandmamma?"

"A very special one, darling. One that may help Jim and his old-world wife a lot more than they know. You want to help out Jim and Valerie don't you?"

"Yes, Grandmamma," she said deliberately. And a little sadly. "But I don't want them to get married."

“Then let’s play our little game. We’ll see what we can do about that. Trust me, darling, I have a way with people.”

Chapter Thirteen

The screen before her went blank. Valerie began pressing the screen only to have it remain as it was. Apparently God-designed computers had down times too. But she knew His down time was intentional. She had been learning about weddings and marriages in this world. It had been quite enlightening. Then the black screen. And she couldn't get God to tell her why.

"What gives?" she kept asking with no response.

"Come on, God." Still there was silence. Then the doorbell rang. "Oh," she said. "I get it. Sorry for my impatience." It was like she'd been pulling on a string that was attached to her own sweater and God was stopping her from unraveling the very thing she wanted to make work.

"Something's probably coming that I'm not aware of. Thank you Father." But she didn't feel like this was quite right either. Something wasn't quite right. Period.

She walked to the door, looking out the front picture window before opening it. Sure enough, there was a powder blue Caddy, or was it a T-Bird, on her driveway with a white top, pulled down. "Elizabeth!" she said in desperation. And no one to back her up this time. Nonetheless, she opened the door.

"Hello, darling!" came Elizabeth's classic voice. She kissed Valerie's cheek as she stepped into the living room, pulling off her white gloves.

Uh-oh, thought Valerie, I'm in for a white glove inspection.

"Hello, Elizabeth," she responded politely. "Please come in."

"Don't tell me James is out and about," she said as the little Hannah stepped in behind her.

"Yes. He is," said Valerie, and then she added, "Hello, Hannah."

The little girl smiled weakly and then stepped aside and walked around Valerie as if she were upset with her. "Please, have a seat."

"When will Jim arrive home?" Elizabeth asked with a touch of concern in her voice and on her face.

"Soon, I hope. Shall we call him and let him know you're here?"

"Oh, would you dear," she drawled, "it would mean so much to me."

"Certainly."

Jim, she said to her husband in her mind and then waited. *Jim*, she repeated. "He's not answering," she said to the ladies who were now seated in the living room, Elizabeth sitting on the edge of her seat and facing the opposite direction, looking away from Valerie. *This is uncomfortable*, Valerie thought to herself.

"Ah, well, we've come a long distance," she said glancing in Valerie's direction briefly. "Would you mind terribly if we waited?" she asked turning back around again and staring out the front window.

"No... sure." Valerie wasn't sure what to do with her new guests. They almost appeared to be ignoring her altogether in favor of Jim. Of course they were long time friends of Jim's and had just met Valerie. Then she dismissed her dismissal of their rudeness. *No, that's no reason, they could still be more than barely civil*, she thought.

Suddenly Valerie got an idea. Barbara! *Oh, Barbara?* she thought to her friend. *Could you come on over quickly? Without just popping in? Elizabeth is here. I need your help.*

Barb's response was fast. *Sure, babe, I understand that one. I'll be there in a flash. Just need to get my chopper and I'll ride on down the road a pace.*

Thanks, she said. *I appreciate that.*

Elizabeth picked up Jim's book from off the coffee table. "Simple Pleasures," she said. "By James Spencer. Really! I didn't know James could write!"

"Neither did I," said Valerie looking at the book curiously. *I thought he was reading someone else's book*, she thought to herself.

"You don't know much about your new-world husband-to-be, do you."

"Husband-to-be?" *Was she saying she knew they were getting married? And if so, how did she know?* Valerie's suspicion changed her attitude from one of defensiveness to one of an almost offensive posture. *She's here to stop us, I'll bet*, she thought.

"Yes dear, everyone knows you two are getting married soon."

"Really."

"Oh, quite. No one would think any differently," she said and then reached for her head with a sour look on her face.

Ah, thought Valerie, *she's got motives, and a headache*. Just then Valerie heard the sound of Barbara's chopper coming around the corner toward her house. *Thank you Barb*, she thought to her friend, *you're saving the day!*

Sure babe. I'll be up in a sec.

"Oh, dear," said Elizabeth. "That woman isn't my favorite cup of tea. If you know what I mean."

"Really," said Valerie, "I kind of like her."

"Oh." Elizabeth's voice was terse and she began putting on her gloves as if she were about to leave.

Hannah spoke up. "But Grandmamma, aren't we going to play our game?"

Elizabeth chuckled nervously. "Why no, darling, not until we get home." She reached for her head once again.

Just then Barbara knocked on the door with a hard rap, rap, rap.

"Excuse me please," Valerie said to her guests.

She swung the door open and blew on her own bangs as Barbara caught her gesture and gave her a hug. "Hi babe!" she said. "I couldn't wait to see you again. You're free aren't you?"

"Oh, of course!" said Valerie. "Please, please come in." *Please!* she said once again in her thought language. *Thank you dear, dear, dear Barbara.*

* * * * *

Barbara was slapping the filth off her legs as she walked through Jim's door. *Really!* thought Elizabeth, *that woman is uncouth.*

Her granddaughter had nearly gotten her in trouble. She would talk to the girl as soon as they were in the car. But in the car, she determined, was where they were going to be.

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. "Maybe I should let the two of you talk for a while," she said getting up to leave. She really did not wish to be coy with these two 'ladies.'

"Suit yourself, babe," said the broad who stood chewing on gum as if it were cud.

"Thank you," said Elizabeth. "Do let James know we dropped in, and ask him if he will to pop on by when he gets home? I do want to speak to him so."

"I'll do that." said the lesser of the two broads. "You can be sure." Valerie was less than sufficiently polite to Elizabeth as she stood to leave

and Elizabeth did not appreciate that.

“Well... shall we?” she directed the question to her granddaughter who was soon to receive a talking to.

“Sure Grandmamma,” she said as she walked around Barb, bright eyed with wonder. “Don’t stare!” said Elizabeth quietly. It really troubled her when her granddaughter behaved rudely. She especially did not want her looking up to that... woman.

* * * * *

“Oh, thank you!” Valerie burst into laughter as soon as the car with the two ladies disappeared around the corner northeast of the house.

“What a broad!” Barb was delighted to call her that for the first time. “She’s a wench!” That felt great as well. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but that woman gives me the willies.”

“I’m getting there,” said Valerie who had a secretive glint in her eyes.

“What?”

“What, what?” said Val.

“What’s that glint of a secret in your eyes, girlfriend?”

Valerie giggled and then took her by the arm. “Oh, boy, have I got a secret! Don’t tell a soul!”

“You asked for it, you got it, Toy...! Boy that’s an oldie but moldy.” She glanced back at Val from over her shoulder.

“I’m old enough that I remember that commercial!” Val responded.

“Honey! We’re young compared to some around here.”

“So true! But I haven’t met anyone thousands of years old yet! So...

My secret...”

“Do tell!” she tried to say in an Elizabethan accent. Elizabeth-an that is.

“Fine!” she said. “Only please be yourself.”

“You asked for it, you...”

“Okay! Okay!” she hesitated a moment, “Jim and I are getting married!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Nnnno!”

“Yes! But I have a paranoid suspicion that yay-hoo there knows something about it. She out and out said she did. And she spoke of it in really negative terms. Like she disapproved or something.”

“No!”

“All right! All right!”

“Cool! I can’t believe you two are tying the knot, yanking the chain, uh... I mean getting hitched. So soon?”

“Yeah.” She said it as if she felt it was just the right thing to do.

“So have you been checking out all the wedding info and all?”

“I tried this morning, but the screen went blank and then yay-hoo showed up at the door.”

“Oh,” Barbara wanted to be careful here. Screens just didn’t go blank that often. “Honey, are you sure this is *God’s* idea?”

“Why?” Val looked puzzled and a little upset.

“Because of the screen thing. That doesn’t happen very often. You think we should...”

“Go check!” they said it in tandem.

They ran for the Learning Center and *all* of the screens in the room were still black as coal. Black as a piece of hard, cold, coal.

Chapter Fourteen

Jim rounded the corner to his house in a state of mild panic. He didn't know how to tell his wife what had happened today as he'd tried to make preparations for the marriage. Nothing would work! Nothing!

Every person he tried to contact was gone or unavailable. Every thing he tried to do was unsuccessful for some silly reason. Most importantly, when he sought God about it, He was absolutely silent. That was not a good thing.

Even the reservations for their Honeymoon were already filled for every spot he checked on in the Learning Center while he was at Joy and Dan's place. But when the screen had gone black, Jim knew something was very wrong. *God's not in this?* he thought. *How could that be?* He'd sought Him about this before and God seemed to be pleased about the matter then. "What gives?" he'd asked God, with not a single response. Nothing.

Valerie greeted him at the door with a bit of a frown on her face. "Everything okay?" asked Jim.

"No. Not exactly," she said scratching her head, as if you needed to in this world. "Honey, as Barb and I checked for wedding information, all the screens in the house went black. Barb was worried maybe God was trying to tell us something."

"Maybe He is," said Jim. His hopes were beginning to turn into frustration and not a little bit of angst. "I've had the same things happening to me today, all day."

"Do you think we should sit down and pray about this?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. But I have been praying, all day, and God isn't answering. Did anything else happen today?"

"Well, actually, yes." Val's face turned to the side with a look of

concern mixed with suspicion. “We had a visitor. And she wants you to return the visit.”

“Me. And me only.” He was beginning to get the picture.

“Exactly.”

“Elizabeth.” He said it with a knowing shake of his own head.

“How did you... Okay, you know something you’re not telling me.”

“Elizabeth.”

“You know Elizabeth.”

“Exactly... And I think she may be the reason we can’t go forward.”

“Oh, really. Why would God...” Val stopped short, with a thoughtful look, and Jim finished her sentence for her.

“Because He cares about her and He cares about us and He doesn’t want there to be any divisions.”

“Oh.” She looked a little guilty as he said those words.

“But she does have designs,” said Jim.

“I figured as much.”

“Well, well, well.” he said, “I think we should take all this to the Lord together. If we’re going to be married, we need to go to Him together anyway.”

“You’re right,” Val said softly. “I didn’t stop to think that someone else might be affected by our decision.”

“Very much so, I’m afraid.” Jim was thinking on his feet. He wanted to sit down and relax, pour himself a tall glass of iced tea before he did any further thinking. *Relationships are hard*, he thought. *Why do they have to*

be so hard.

* * * * *

“God, why did you stop me from stopping them!” Elizabeth was polite though downright angry. She held her tongue, knowing God wouldn’t like yelling one bit. Instead she banged pots and pans around like she used to when she was mad at John, Sr. in the old world. The more she banged the better she felt. “I truly thought You wanted them *not* to get married,” she said. “I truly did! ... So why did you stop me?”

“Because I love you,” God said within her mind.

She responded with more banging pans and then once her dishes were put away decided it was time to clean the bathroom tub. It didn’t need cleaning, but it was going to get a scrubbing anyway.

“I really do,” He said quite clearly. “I understand you. More than you think.”

“Stop it,” she said through hot tears. “Just stop it. I want to be loved!” She was crying full throttle now.

“I know you do,” God said with firmness. “And I do love you.”

“By a man,” she said in tight words. “Please,” a little less tight.

“Not by this one, darling,” he said more softly. “Not by this one.”

“Then who?” She was in baby mode now. Whimpering like a little snot nosed brat.

“By your husband.”

“I have no husband,” she retorted. “John wants to live in Heaven.”

“Yes,” God said, “He does.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Live with him, honey.”

“I don’t want to live there!”

“I know you don’t.”

She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Live with John? In Heaven?”

“Yes,” he whispered with his breath of soft breeze. “Yes.”

“It’s too hard to live there,” she whispered.

“Let me show you how...” the words trailed off and upward. She knew God was calling her to follow. So she stopped, called Hannah and told her she would be gone for a while and for her to go and live with Uncle Jim. Then she disappeared quickly before the child could say a word.

* * * * *

“Uncle Jim?” The little purple-clad girl stood standing outside of Jim and Valerie’s house. She’d rung the door bell, and stood shivering as if it were 40 degrees outside instead of quite warm.

“Hannah?” Jim’s look of concern turned to hugs as she began to cry. “What is it, Honey?”

“Grandmamma is gone,” she said. “I don’t think she’s coming back.”

“She left you alone?” asked Valerie.

The girl nodded her head and said, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Come in honey.” He turned to Valerie and asked her to get something warm for the girl to drink.

“Want some hot cocoa?” Valerie asked. *That woman has nerve*, she thought.

The girl nodded a second time. Valerie turned around and thought about the hot cocoa and then turned back with the mug she'd quickly asked God to give her for Hannah.

Hannah clung to Jim as Valerie came over with the warm chocolate milk topped with whipped cream.

"Thank you, Ma'am," she said taking the cup from her hands.

"Please, call me Valerie."

"Oh, I... Grandmamma would... not like it."

"Okay then, call me Auntie Valerie."

Hannah nodded. "Thank you, Auntie Valerie."

"Are you going to marry Uncle Jim?" she asked.

"Well who said that, Hannah?" Jim asked incredulously.

"Grandmamma said if..." she stopped short, seeming a bit shaken.

"We're going to wait a while, Hannah," said Jim, "and then, yes, we're going to get married."

Hannah began to cry. "But I want to marry you when I grow up!" she said through pouted lips.

"Oh, Hannah," said Jim. "It's okay. I'll always love you as your Uncle Jim."

"No!" said Hannah.

"It's okay honey," he said to the shaken little angel. Valerie now understood why she'd seemed upset with her earlier this afternoon. She also knew why she was distressed now. Little girl crushes could be devastating.

“Hannah, we can both love you,” she told the wary little angel. “I can love you too.”

“Grandmamma said I should come and live with you Uncle Jim.”

Oh boy, that woman has nerve, Jim’s voice came through in Valerie’s mind. She left her to fend for herself!

“Yes,” Valerie responded out loud.

“Can I come and live with you Uncle Jim?”

“Of course you can Hannah. Of course you can.”

Valerie wondered how there could be so much trouble in Paradise. *Where was that promise to wipe away all tears?* she started to wonder and then internally whispered her apology to God. She knew that promise was for after the millennial reign.

Jim caught sight of her consternation and whispered in her mind. *Why don’t we go over to Hannah’s house with her right now and pick up some of her things. She can sleep in the third bedroom. The one we were in last night.*

Sure honey, she sent the thought his way.

“Hannah, we’re going to take you over to your Grandmother’s house and pick up some of your things. You can sleep in one of our children’s rooms tonight.”

Hannah nodded her head and smiled weakly. “Thank you Uncle Jim,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he said lovingly while shooting Valerie a disapproving look, disapproving of Elizabeth that is.

* * * * *

Elizabeth's house was perfect. Not an item out of place. Filled to the brim with her collection of gold-rimmed tea cups and thin china saucers, exhibited on gold wire or clear crystal mountings over white lace doilies, placed perfectly in or on various cherry-wood cabinets and furnishings.

The little girl's bedroom was done in white ruffled bedding, a white canapé bed and a large frilly collection of Barbie-type dolls dressed in beautiful satin gowns, lace and various 1960's styled outfits. Complete with a blue convertible toy Cadillac with a white top, down of course. They were, Valerie imagined, items designed more with Grandmamma in mind than Grandmamma's darling little granddaughter.

Valerie chose several items of clothing, shoes, socks and sets of sleeping attire, packing them into an overnight bag while Jim and Hannah chose various stuffed animals and toys for the little angel of a girl. She was as polite as any child Valerie had ever witnessed, much less a young pre-teen child.

Anger welled up inside of Valerie as she chose various uncomfortable-looking articles of clothing for the little girl. Apparently purple was the only thing Hannah had been allowed to choose for herself. It was infuriating to Valerie who had always been amazed at how many adults managed to maneuver their children into whatever place they desired their children to be, at least on the old earth. *Why can't they just let the little ones be themselves!* She was really angry.

Hannah sat on her bed hugging a large fluffy white stuffed dog. It looked slightly bent up, soft with a lot of use, but not worn. She held it tightly as Jim went through the array of stuffed animals and things Hannah possessed here with her grandmother. Valerie didn't think she ever wanted to use the phrase Grandmamma again. It was disgusting to her. Like mommy dearest or something.

With all her heart, at this moment, Valerie wanted to take some time with this young woman-to-be and help her develop who *she herself* was. She stood up, hands on her hips, and politely asked God to allow Hannah to stay for a while. *Maybe*, she thought to God, *this is why You don't want us be married just yet?* Hannah was definitely one worthy cause.

* * * * *

My pretty white Duffy. You'll never leave me. Hannah wanted to hug her little stuffed dog and stay in her room as long as she could. *Maybe Uncle Jim might come and live here, in Grandmamma's house,* she hoped. Then she thought about that again. Why would she want Uncle Jim to live here in this weird place. She didn't like it herself.

She felt a twinge of guilt at the thought. *Grandmamma wouldn't like to hear me think like that,* she thought. *I better watch what I think. If she's in heaven, she may be listening to my thinking.* The idea made her feel tired and she sighed a heavy sigh, the kind Grandmamma didn't like much either. She didn't want Grandmamma to listen to her thoughts. She'd get mad. And then she would come back and get really mad. At her.

Hannah wished her momma was here on the New Earth with her instead of in Heaven with Grandpapa. Her father, she knew was still on the old earth. He was a very old man now. At least 100 years old. With really old skin. She'd seen it when she visited her momma in heaven one time. Through the potholes. No, portholes? Anyway, she wanted her mother right now. Not her Grandmamma.

Chapter Fifteen

“May I have something to eat?” Hannah looked worn out and just a little bored. She sat quietly on the family room couch with her ankles crossed in front of her and her hands folded politely in her lap.

“Certainly,” said Jim. “Afterward, would you like to try finding some new toys at one of our learning stations?”

“Sure!” Hannah’s enthusiasm was very real, even if the rest of her behavior was not quite child-like, a little unnatural.

He stood up to walk into the kitchen. “What would you like to eat Hannah?”

“Whatever you’re having Uncle Jim.”

“No, honey, what would *you* like? You can having anything you want. I’m going to eat something you might not care for.”

“I don’t mind Uncle Jim.”

“Oh, Hannah,” Jim didn’t want to be short with the girl but this was exasperating. “How about a corn dog and some French fries?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“With a milk shake? Chocolate? No! Strawberry with little berries in it? And a long curly-straw? A purple one?”

“Sure. You got it girl.”

“Thank you, thank you!” Her smile was worth his little bit of effort.

“You’re very welcome Hannah.” The young girl sat down at the table

in the kitchenette and ravenously ate everything that Jim ordered, actually requested, for her. She was starved? This world didn't allow for starvation. What on earth would make her so hungry. He supposed it was the fact that this was something she had chosen. Apparently a rarity for her.

Jim started to eat along with Hannah. His egg-salad sandwich tasted perty good to him. It was made just the way he liked it, with sprouts, tomatoes, Swiss cheese and mayo between slices of dark rye bread. It was out of this world. But he was certain Hannah would not have appreciated it the way he did.

“You enjoying that?” he asked her.

“Yeah, I mean, yes Uncle Jim.” She spoke around the corn dog in her mouth and then covered her mouth, apparently embarrassed by her impropriety.

“You're fine, darling,” he said. “You're such a polite young lady.”

Hannah finished swallowing her corn dog before responding. “Thank you Uncle Jim,” she said with a look of gratitude.

Once they had finished their lunch, they headed over to the Learning Center for some fun. Hannah was eager to look for toys. She combed through various stuffed animals and Barbie dolls looking at Jim each time she saw something that pleased her, apparently to check on whether it met with his approval that she liked it.

As time progressed, and he tried his best to encourage her to choose the things she really appreciated, she began to lose her grip on his opinions and eagerly ordered all kinds of toys. At one point, she reached a particular screen with a toy Barbie-looking doll dressed in a biker babe costume and sitting on a motorcycle.

“Oh, can I have one!” she squealed with delight.

“Sure,” he said. Then he had a great idea. “Would you like to go for a ride on the back of my motorcycle some time, Hannah?”

Hannah looked almost scared, but fear turned to a look of inquisitive wonder. “Could I?” she said with an incredulous tone in her little girl voice.

“You bet your bippy,” Jim said.

“Really? I mean really, really?”

“Really and truly,” he responded. “Maybe we could get Auntie Barb and Uncle Charlie to go with us, what do you think?”

“Hahhhh!” her mouth gaped with dubious wonder. “Really?” It was a quiet whisper that almost gave Jim a dark sort of chills.

“Of course,” he said, “I wouldn’t ask, if I didn’t mean it.”

“You wouldn’t?” she looked at him with suspicion written all over her face.

“No, darling, I wouldn’t.

* * * * *

“What do you mean she left her alone!” Barb’s fury was plain and evident.

“She left her alone.” Valerie was sure her own face looked almost as angry.

“The wench! So how’d she show up at your house? By herself?”

“By herself.”

“Oh! That woman! It still amazes me how people can be not too nice on this planet.”

“Yeah,” said Valerie, “Me too. But I think it’s actually a good thing.”

“How?!” Barb’s face was contorted just a touch with the disgust that

Valerie herself was feeling.

“She’s going to be living with us. I think this may be the first time in her life, at least here on this planet, that she’ll have had some choices of her own. I’m praying that she stays long enough to get the chance to learn about herself a little.”

One of Barb’s kittens jumped up on the couch and gave that little noise they make when they’re questioning something. “Good idea,” she said scratching it’s head and then tussling it playfully. “But man!” Barb hesitated and then quietly added, “I guess this *is* actually a good thing.”

Then Barb apparently thought of the blank screens from earlier that day. “Maybe this is why God didn’t want you two to get married just yet.”

“I think you may be right,” Valerie agreed. “It would certainly be a good reason.”

“Yes,” said Barbara wryly. “It would. Dang! That woman.”

“Amen, sister!” Valerie was beginning to feel a slight headache. *What is it Lord?* she asked in her mind.

Gossip? Came the firmly spoken question.

“Oh, she said out loud. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” Barb asked.

“I was talking to the Lord. I got a bit of a headache. He mentioned we might be gossiping.”

“Ooo. We sure might. Sorry Lord,” she said.

Honey? Jim’s voice came into Valerie’s mind, surprising her and making her jump just a little.

“Hold on, Barb,” she said, “Jim’s calling me.”

Yes, Jim? she thought to her husband.

Could you and Barb and Charlie, if he's there, ride on over? I want to take Hannah for a ride on one of the choppers. She's fascinated with them, not to mention Barb and Charlie.

Hold on a minute, Jim. I'll ask, thought Valerie.

"Barb," she said, "do you and Charlie want to go for a ride with Jim and Hannah and I? Hannah would really like to give it a try."

"Sure!" Barb was delighted. "I'd love to show that little doll how to love the back of a bike. Could she ride with me?"

Jim, Valerie thought, Could Hannah ride with Barbara?

That's a really good idea, Val, Jim responded. *She seems particularly fascinated with Barb.*

"Come on girl!" said Valerie. "Let's get Charlie! I wonder where we could go? I don't think I want to go back to The Escapades so soon. Where do you recommend Barbara?"

"Oh, I think the beach!" she said with her head tilted to the side and a smile on her face. "The little angel would probably love to get wet and sandy at Trinity Sea."

* * * * *

Hannah was swinging her feet back and forth behind Barb on the back of her bike as they prepared to ride away. Jim started to say something and then decided it was Barb's business. Barb took care it just fine.

"Hannah, you're going to have to stop swinging your legs if you want to ride without falling," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Hannah immediately stopped swinging her legs and stayed perfectly still, holding onto Barb's sissy bar, with her feet dangling.

“Where do I put my feet?” she asked.

“Woops! Forgive me little one.” Barb pulled down stirrups designed for littler riders.

“You’re prepared,” said Val.

“As always,” Barb responded. “Girl scout on the old earth, you know.”

“I didn’t,” Val smiled. She pulled on her do rag and finished packing some things in the saddle bags.

“You know,” Jim decided to tell her, “you don’t need to pack anything here on this planet, Val.” His smile was teased with the love he felt for both of the ladies in his life now, not to mention the excitement he felt at the long, exhilarating ride ahead.

“I forgot about that,” she said. “I don’t know why.”

“Would it be the fact that you’re *new* here?” Barbara’s voice was teased with her own excitement. She was about to show Hannah the ride of her life.

Hannah had not stopped talking about it, incessantly, since Jim had told her she would be riding with Auntie Barb to the beach at Trinity Sea.

She started up her bike and Hannah squealed with delight. “Oh, goodie,” she said and Barb’s smile grew twice as bright.

“Now, Hannah,” she said to the wide-eyed young girl, “You have to think your words to us while we’re riding. I can hear what you say, a little, but the others won’t be able to.”

“Okay, ma’am,” she said.

“Please, honey, call me Auntie Barb.”

“Okay, Auntie Barb,” the girl smiled a mile wide. “I can’t wait, I

can't wait!" Her enthusiasm was mounting and Barbara kicked off the ground taking off in a wild moment of splendor. Her hair was braided back behind her for Hannah's sake, while the young girl's dark hair flowed back behind her wildly shining in the sun, highlighted with its glittered purple and lavender streaks.

Hannah was wearing her own lavender leather do rag, jeans and a white leather jacket with purple beads fastened to twists of white leather, almost like fringe, only battened down. She almost looked like a little woman. Almost.

"Woo-hoo!" Barbara thrust her elbow down in a victory fist and Valerie started her bike and sped up to meet the ladies who, he guessed, were going to lead the way to Trinity. As they rode, Hannah clung tightly, at first to Barbara's shoulders, then as she began to relax and enjoy herself, she clung lightly to Barb's waste.

This is fun! he could hear Hannah's voice in his mind. *Thank you Auntie Barb!*

You're welcome, angel, she replied with a gratified tone. Apparently they were going to have a group communication. *Shall we give her a handle?* asked Barb.

A handle? asked Val.

Yeah, a handle. What do you like to be called little sister?

I don't know, said Hannah.

I know, said Barb with a backward glance, *why not Little Sister!*

Sure! Hannah's voice was one of sheer joy. She was looking around at the scenery passing by.

What's your handle, Barb? asked Val.

Well you wouldn't want to know what it was on the old earth, she said, *but here I go by Daisy.*

What about you, Charlie?

Me? I just go by Charlie. Don't like them fancy-shmancy names. Twinkle Toes! he said with a rough laugh.

Actually, said Barb, *when we're riding alone, I always call him that! Just to tick him off.*

Now, Barb... Charlie warned.

Yes, Twinkie? She was giggling. Charlie sped up beside Barb and blew her a kiss. She blew one back. Twinkie fell back in line with Jim.

Auntie Barb?

Call me Daisy while we're riding in a group like this Little Sister.

Oh! Okay. Daisy?

Yes Little Sister?

What does a beach look like?

You've never seen a beach Little Sister?

No, Hannah's word was tainted with a little fear, maybe guilt.

Well, it's a wondrous thing. You'll love it.

Chapter Sixteen

Jim watched the waves roll in and back out again. The sound of the sea roaring mildly against the beach made him want to tilt back his head and relax in the sun. The sand beneath him was warm and slightly wet. A sand crab scuttled across to the side of him and popped down into a hole. As he sat soaking in the sun and the soothing sounds of the beach, he felt just a tiny bit frustrated. Still.

He and Val had been skirting around the issues he felt hard pressed to address, but they hadn't actually taken the time to talk about them. When he'd come here to this earth, he'd been crushed by the way Val had taken his death. As a result of watching her own agonizing tears mixed with prayer from the portals, he'd spent almost every single minute preparing for her to meet him here. Now that she was here, it was as if he were a relatively small part of her new life. This was not what he'd expected. And he was, frankly, a little upset.

Children were of utmost importance to him, third only to God and then her. He hadn't been able to discuss his feelings with Val in the former world, much, especially as time went by, due to her own emotions on the subject. Back then, he hadn't wanted to harm her any further by sharing his strong emotions. She'd felt bad enough as it was. Not being able to have children had been due to her poor health.

Her doctors had warned them that a tubal ligation would be necessary. And that they'd have to wait to be active again until after she'd recovered from the minor surgery, physically but mostly emotionally. Like many people in the old earth, they weren't yet married. They hadn't been Christians at the time. After several years of barrenness, she was to become surgically barren for life.

The frustration he felt now, however, wasn't due to the fact that they didn't yet have kids. It was due to the fact that she almost seemed to be ignoring him. Almost. Although he couldn't say that he hadn't been spending time on his own either. He definitely had. Still, he missed her.

This moment, she stood playing in the waves with the legs of her pants rolled up and sand and water covering her calves and feet. She was certainly having fun. But he felt just a tad bit selfish. He wanted his wife to himself. Now that Hannah was going to be with them, it was apparent that they'd be spending less and less time together alone and that only served to create a touch of panic in his soul.

After deliberating with himself for about 20 minutes, he decided to make the opportunity to be with her. Make it a reality in the present moment, right where they were. Now. Not waiting for a time when they were alone, or she turned to him. But letting her know how he felt. Right now. He turned the bottoms of his own jeans up and rolled them until the water was less likely to soak into his clothing. The idea of letting the waves splash against his feet and ankles sounded good anyway.

Valerie played contentedly with the other 'kids' and Jim felt a touch of guilt as he broke into her afternoon fun. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to do or say but knew he had better say something rather than let his feelings continue to simmer slowly into a raging boil. "Val," he said, "May we have some time together. To talk?"

"Sure honey," her brow took on a crease and she covered her eyes to shade them from the sun as she looked up into his face. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," he said, "I think I just need some time alone with you. Right here. Right now."

"Oh," she looked a little perturbed, "something is wrong."

"Let's go find a quiet little place and talk." *Lord help us find the right place, please*, he prayed privately. They walked up the beach and decided to take a pathway that led up to a meadow somewhere behind the beach and following along the shore. The trail went up a slightly angled hill that looked like there might be a good-sized drop on the other side. It was a harmless looking trail. Looked like a tiny dirt road in the middle of grassy meadow. Nothing spectacular, but fine for a walk.

Valerie kicked along the little dirt path and pointed out a sign that

said, Seal Beach Trail. *That's odd*, he thought, *doesn't look there would be any seals around a meadow like this*. He turned his attention back to Val who waited for him with a somber look on her face, up the trail a few paces.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he said, catching up with her. "It just feels like you're neglecting me."

"Neglecting you?" she seemed both surprised and unhappy but not quite mad. Then she quieted down. "How?"

"I'm alone. In the middle of this crowd of people. It feels like you're leaving me alone."

"I'm not quite sure I understand this," she said with a perplexed look, her eyes squinting in the bright sun. She pulled a pair of sunglasses out of her shirt pocket and put them on, covering her blue-green eyes.

"Please take those off," Jim's manner was gruff, but he really needed to see her eyes right now. Needed the intimacy.

"Jim!" she sounded frustrated. "What is it with you!"

"I want you to understand me so bad," he said, "but I don't know how to say what I want to say."

"Just say it, honey."

"All right. Let me think it through a minute." Jim took a few minutes and their pace slowed as she folded her arms in front of her upper abs and walked along with him, squinting into the sun, her sunglasses hanging in the hand farthest away from him.

I need you, he thought to her privately as a young couple walked past them on the other side. It felt better to think the thoughts anyway. They were very private thoughts.

Oh! her thought sounded like one of compassion and understanding.
Jim!

Another small group of kids passed by them from behind. *Gads!* he thought. *No privacy here either!* “Let’s turn onto this pathway here,” he said noticing a high mound of rock and sandy gravel that seemed to be cut through the middle by another little trail. “Too many people on this path.” He was frustrated by the lack of seclusion. The little dirt road they’d turned off from didn’t seem that special to him anyway.

As they walked along the slightly narrow, less traveled pathway cut into the rock and gravel through to the other side, the most breathtaking sight met his gaze. A beautiful little beach waited below with a wooden staircase leading down to the sandy shores. Small waves combed up onto the sand and gorgeous fiords surrounded a tiny bay apparently separated from the rest of the sea and its larger waves by breakers.

A thousand tiny waterfalls cascaded down the sides of jagged rocky fiords jutting out into the waves every time a wave hit the rocky cliffs. The bay cut into the fiords with a beach between sets of them about 20, maybe 30 yards wide. It was an unbelievably beautiful sight. Most incredibly, no one else was there. *Talk about privacy,* he thought to her.

Wow, she responded. “Wow,” she repeated out loud.

“I’ve had so much I’ve wanted to say to you,” Jim knew he said it almost as if it were an indictment. “But I haven’t had the words.”

“Say them now,” she said with a mild defensiveness that looked very real.

“Oh, forget it.” Jim stopped and started to turn back.

“What is it, Jim?” she asked, “I really want to know.”

“A ton of things,” he said. “I don’t know. Just a ton of stuff.”

She stopped him at the top of the staircase down to the beach, put her arms around his neck and snuggled up close to him. His heart beat a little faster. “Do we need a little romance?” she whispered into his ear, causing shock waves to rush through him. “Even if we can’t have everything? Do we need a little something?”

“Yeah!” he whispered with his head thrown back. “Yeah.”

* * * * *

Hannah jumped and ran out of the water with glee. “Look Auntie Barbara! A puppy like Duffy!” Barbara didn’t know who Duffy was, but figured it must be an animal she’d known at some point in her life.

“Uh, yeah!” she said half-heartedly. “He’s cute.” The little half-white, half drenched dog barked and ran along the waves with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. *Real cute*, she thought to herself wryly. *I don’t like dogs. Stay away from me mutt!* She shot up a little prayer asking God to send the animal somewhere else and it veered around her as she stood ankle deep in what remained of the last wave that had come ashore.

“I’m getting tired of the beach, Little Sister. I think I want to find a place to relax and take a bath. Or else, pop home. *Instant travel, now that’s something I like. Thank you Lord.*

The little girl shrugged her shoulders and ran over to where the dog now sat next to a family sunning on the sand. *Oh my*, thought Barbara, *there’s more of those little puppy’s like Duffy.* And there was. A family of fluffy little Duffy’s amongst a family of people. She didn’t know where Jim and Val were, but she did know that she’d better stop Hannah from falling in love with a fluffy Duffy puppy before Jim and Val had had a chance to make up *their* minds about how cute he was.

“Uh, Hi,” she said to the couple on the beach covered with little children. “I’m Barb and this is Hannah, we really shouldn’t play with the puppies,” she said to the couple. “Come on, Hon, please come along.”

“No! Oh, please Auntie Barbara, I’ve never seen anything that looked like Duffy before!”

“Oh, that’s incredible!” said the woman with curly red hair. “One of the puppies *is* named Duffy.”

“No! Auntie Barbara, please?”

Now this, thought Barb, is too much of a coincidence to be anything but God. God? she asked silently. The breeze off the water picked up a little and blew around them just a touch. *Yes, God said firmly to her mind. This is for Hannah.*

Okay then, she thought. I won't argue with You, Lord.

“Okay, honey, go ahead and play with them, but only for a minute,” she said to Hannah, who sat on the blanket in the sand petting the cutest little fluffy balls of fur she had ever seen. Except for any of her kittens of course. “Okay, so they’re cute,” she spouted, bending over to pet one of the little yappers.

They were about 8 or 9 inches long, with pure white fluffy hair that seemed to be longer than they were. They looked like little white dust mops. “Okay, so they’re cute,” she said again with a little brighter smile.

“If you want one, they’re free for the taking,” said the tall, very slender woman. She was dressed in a 60’s styled bathing suit that cut across her legs.

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Barb’s warning bells were blaring in her head as she thought of what Jim and Val would say if she encouraged this without their approval.

“Oh, please Auntie Barbara, could we?”

“Honey, I don’t know, we’ll see.” The thought briefly crossed her mind that she herself could take the little Duffy into her own home if Val and Jim didn’t want him. She hated to see the little girl suffer another blow in the same day. *God?* she asked.

Wait, he said through the sea breeze that picked up once again.

“We need to wait and see, honey,” she told the dejected little girl. “Can I take a reminder card?” she asked the couple.

“Oh, we haven’t created any yet,” they remarked with disappointment shadowing their faces, “Have you got one?”

“Nope. What’s your names, can I g-mail you later?”

“Sure. Barb and Charlie Walker.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, why?”

“Because I’m Barb. And my husband’s name is Charlie.”

* * * * *

Duffy! Oh, God, please can I have him, please? Hannah had prayed for hours and hours and days and weeks it seemed. Until Uncle Jim and Auntie Valerie came walking toward where she and Auntie Barbara and Uncle Charlie sat with the other grown-ups and babies on some blankets.

All the grownups wanted to do was talk. She just wanted to take Duffy home to be with her. Even if she had to live by herself in Grandmamma’s house. Even if nobody else wanted Duffy. She did. And she’d live by herself in her own house if they didn’t want her to take him home.

You’re really pretty, Duffy, she thought. *I want you to be my own little Duffy. Duffy, Jr.* The little doggy seemed to know she was thinking to him. But not really. He just wagged his tail and she just wanted to hide Duffy in Auntie Valerie’s pretty silver and black purses that hung on the back of her motorcycle.

Grandmamma would have called them handbags. Hannah knew she couldn’t really put Duffy in the handbags because he might choke on the blankets and he might get sick inside of them and he might want to go home to be with his own mommy and daddy doggies. *Well,* thought Hannah, *someday I can make up my own mind. And then I’ll come and get you, Duffy.* Tears started to pour out of her eyes and she sniffled and held Duffy

up to her face to cover her tears.

“What’s wrong, Hannah?” Auntie Barbara was upset. Hannah was scared. If she got too upset she’d make her go home and drink some warm milk and go to bed.

“Nothing,” she couldn’t help but make a funny sound in her throat as she said the word. “Please don’t make me go home and drink warm milk.”

“What? Oh, honey, no,” said Auntie Barbara with love inside her eyes. “I wouldn’t do that. What’s wrong Little Sister?”

Hannah was getting tired of that name. She wasn’t *that* little. “Nothing.” She only said that because she really didn’t want Auntie Barbara to get mad. She really liked her.

“You’re crying Hannah, what’s the matter?”

“Duffy!” she said and then covered her face with her hands hoping no one could see her tears.

“Oh, Hannah,” said Auntie Barbara. “What can we do. Oh, good, here comes Jim and Val.”

Chapter Seventeen

With Jim's arm around her shoulder, Valerie felt a lot lighter than she had when they left to talk a little while ago. Actually, she guessed it had probably been about an hour, hour and a half ago. *What a wonderful hour and a half*, she thought to herself and then did a little skip under Jim's strong arm.

They'd talked and sparked the whole time, sitting on the sandy beach beside one of a number of what Jim had called fiords--gorgeous, rocky, tapering cliffs that jutted out into the Sea. Every time a wave had come in, there were these itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, gorgeous little waterfalls cascading, one over the top of the other, down the sides of the jagged rocks. The waves would crash up against them and then the waterfalls would start. It was beautiful!

On top of it all, the small bay that came into the middle of two of these fiords held a family of seals! What sweet fun! Sweet, sweet, fun. Jim's arms and kisses had felt like candy. Like honey on the back of the throat. Or the best of the chocolates from Lee's Candies in her old home town. Very, very sweet. Rich. Absolutely delicious.

Jim's grip tightened on her and she gave him a sideways squeeze. "That was nice," she whispered into his ear.

"Yes it was," he said bristling as if she'd tickled his ear in the process of her whisper.

Now who are these people? she thought to herself. *Barb and Charlie sure are friendly!* They sat together with Hannah, another couple and a crew of small kids and dogs loaded onto a combination of blankets, soaking up the sun and talking excitedly. Hannah sat over to the side, almost by herself, with one leg outstretched and the other drawn up in front of her, holding and drooling over a little white fluffy puppy. "That puppy looks like Duffy," she said to Jim. "Uh-oh."

"Oh boy," he said. "Do we want a puppy as well as two kittens?"

Valerie shrugged her shoulders. "Why not."

"We've got room," he said.

"She'll be devastated if we don't."

"I think we should, don't you?" Jim's look of love pierced her already wounded heart. Wounded with cupid's arrows. *Or God's that is*, she corrected herself.

"Why don't you tell her," Jim said to Valerie.

"Oh, good!" she said. "Thank you Jim. I really want to bond with this little girl. That will be one very good way."

"Then it's settled."

"It is," she nodded in agreement.

Hannah looked up at them as they walked toward her and held the little puppy back as if she and Jim were going to grab it and throw it in the trash. "She's scared," she told Jim quietly.

"I see that," he whispered.

"Hannah!" shouted Valerie with enthusiasm. "What have you found there?"

"It's Duffy," she said with a pout.

"Wow! *It is* Duffy!" Valerie responded with as much delight as she could muster.

Hannah, stood up on her knees and held the little puppy out to Valerie with her lip still protruding. Tears still shone in the sunlight on her cheeks. She'd been crying.

"Well!" said Valerie, "What a beautiful little dog." Then she turned to

the new couple and introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Valerie Spencer and this is my husband-to-be Jim.”

“Hey there!” said the red-haired woman. “My name is Barb Walker and this is my husband Charlie.”

“Oh, boy!” said Jim “another Barb and Charlie!” He bent down to shake Charlie’s extended hand.

Barb Walker looked like someone she’d known in her past on the old earth. She had fairly bright red hair with curls everywhere, which of course could have been a style out of a bottle, and beautiful caring green eyes. Charlie had dark eyes, dark hair, tanned skin and a beard and mustache. Both of them were tall and lean. Almost too lean. But then everyone here seemed to be made to their own delightful tastes. Exactly as they wanted to be made. Perfectly.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” said Charlie W. “Hannah here wants one of our puppies and we’re giving them away, if they’re wanted that is.”

Valerie stooped down to where Hannah knelt on the ground holding the tiny little Duffy to her chest as if it meant as much to her as it did. Valerie petted the beautiful little thing and looked into Hannah’s fearful eyes. “He’s very welcome in our home. Hannah? Would you like a puppy of your very own?”

The look on Hannah’s face turned from one of certain rejection, to one of disbelief and then one of pleading. “Really?” she whispered softly. Then she bit her lip.

“Yes, Hannah. Really.”

* * * * *

The strength of Jim’s love for Valerie bloomed inside of his heart. It mushroomed and made him feel like he was freefalling from the clouds down to the New Earth. They’d had such a wonderful time at the beach, despite his fear that she wouldn’t understand his feelings. She’d zeroed

right in on the problem he didn't even know how to express. He needed her. Desperately. *Lord*, he thought, *how long do we need to wait before we can get married?*

A firestorm started to rain, very lightly, from the clouds. *What?* Thought Jim. *What's making you happy?*

It's not always about you. God's words were punctuated with a brilliant flurry of fiery raindrops. Tonight they were in purple, with lavender trails. And they sparkled like nothing he'd ever seen before. Bright, brilliant sparkles. His question forgotten, he turned to go into the living room with Val and Hannah. There they sat, reading one of his Children's books, with Hannah curled up in the crook of Val's arm. He couldn't see much more than the upper part of Val's hair and her arm around the top of Hannah's head, but he knew they were having a very special moment.

He thought about asking if they wanted to go out in the rain, but decided this was their private moment. Hannah, looked up from the book to the roof and said, "It's raining Valerie!"

"It sure is," said Val. "You want to go outside and feel the rain?"

"Yeah!"

The two of them got up off the couch and turned to see Jim standing there watching them. "You want to join us?" asked Val.

"Yeah," said Jim. "Very much."

* * * * *

"Firestorms are awesome!" Hannah said the words as if she were in a wonderland of her own. "Today God made them purple!" she said with glee.

Valerie suspected that tonight God made them purple just for Hannah. She wondered if maybe Hannah's Grandmamma, or her Grandpapa or maybe even her mother were praying for her from the portals. They sat out

on the deck listening to the sound of the fire-rain hit the house, the ground, the deck and the table where they sat watching it all with wonder.

But the best part about it was when the comets landed on their skin. It was like a tiny electric jolt, only very sweet feeling. Like the electricity that had happened between Jim and herself earlier this afternoon. It was God-love. God-beauty. And God's gift to both Hannah and herself.

What a sweet little girl sat in her lap, watching the falling purple-lavender comets like they were manna falling from heaven. *Maybe*, thought Valerie, *they are. They seem to be quenching the hunger of one bright and beautiful little angel.*

Hannah's little Duffy sat nestled in the same kitty bed with Sampson and Celeste. They all cuddled together under the sound of the rain as if it were all so natural. Hannah had been delighted to bring Duffy, Jr. home. She wanted Duffy, Jr. to sleep in her own room, but Jim had said no. Animals weren't allowed in the children's rooms, he'd said. Valerie had disagreed but kept silent about it, not wanting to ruin his parenting. He was as new a 'father' as she was a 'mother.' And Hannah, she understood, was beginning to feel at home here. She didn't want to question Jim in front of Hannah. At all. Ever.

She figured if it was that important to her, she could bring it up with him privately. When he was not in the middle of settling his own parental decisions.

"Hannah, aren't you getting tired?" Valerie's concern turned to confirmation as she realized Hannah was fast asleep in her arms. She sat there snuggling against the top of her head and petting the beautiful little girl's soft, purple-streaked brown hair.

That moment, she fell in love. With a little angel.

* * * * *

Hannah was definitely heavy in Jim's arms as he carried her up to bed and placed her under the covers. He was glad Val had helped her to take a bath and change into night clothes. Once under the covers, she snuggled up

in her soft flannel night gown and opened her sleepy eyes just long enough to ask for Duffy. Jim understood she was talking about the fluffy white stuffed animal instead of the fluffy white dog and reached over to nab the older Duffy and place him in her arms.

She seemed a bit young to him for her 12 years. A little underdeveloped emotionally. He and Valerie would have to spend some time asking God to teach them how to parent this little one. Hannah had her own particular complications. She had obviously been stifled in her development. Most likely by all the circumstances in her little life, rather than merely by Elizabeth's lack of parental concern. *How do I know, he thought to himself, maybe Elizabeth is plenty concerned. Maybe she lacks sufficient examples in her own life.*

He walked downstairs to where Valerie sat in the living room watching the rest of the purple rain. "A penny for your thoughts," he said.

"My thoughts?" she responded. "I was thinking about this afternoon with you," she said.

"Oh, that's worth more than a penny!" Jim's delight ebbed up from his belly like it was going to take control. *Oh, no, he thought. Lord, help!* "You know," he said aloud, "we do need to pray together, tonight. Especially after this afternoon. It's going to be very difficult for me to stay pure. And it's important to me that I do. We do. So we can have a happy 'I do.'

"I understand that one," she said with a yawn and a stretch. "You want to pray for a little while? And then I'm going to take a long, hot bath."

"Oh, no you don't! It's my turn, and I only built one as large as ours! He started to add on 'one built for two' but decided against it. The other ones are tiny, built for kids." Then he thought of an even better idea. "Why don't we do a little more sparking," he said, "and then I'll go spend the night in a bungalow somewhere outside the area. Somewhere where you can't find me. Somewhere where I can be alone with my thoughts of you."

"Unnnn," she said teasingly. "Sounds wonderful."

Chapter Eighteen

Babies! Babies! Everywhere babies! The beautiful little brown eyed toddler that sat on her lap, taking the cookie from her hand with pudgy little fingers, stole her heart away.

He looked so much like Jim but with Valerie's pinched up nose and his own pudgy little cheeks. All around her were darling little tykes. Some blue-eyed with dark hair, some with little red curls, some with darker skin, some with pale thin tresses, some with no hair at all! All of them smiling. All of them happy. Not one of them crying. Not one of them that her heart didn't love, dearly. All of them Jim's. And *all* of them hers.

The one on her lap began to mumble words that she couldn't quite make out. What was he saying? What was that? What is it you're saying little one? What?

She opened her eyes and found herself lying on her bed, face turned sideways down on her pillow. *Oh, no!* she thought. Her heart began to break. The little beautiful boy, the one she had been loving over a period of what felt like had been months; the boy who was so very real--was not. *Oh God*, she thought, *why? Another baby dream. Why?*

Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes, the same old tears from the old earth. But this time God's voice gently whispered, *Valerie, you are my daughter. I also love you very much. The dreams aren't just dreams anymore. They're really going to happen. You're not dreaming Me.*

She rolled over onto her side and hugged her pillow. *Really?* She said in little girl tones.

Really. He whispered softly.

Thank you Father, she thought sitting up in her bed.

Slowly she got up and walked behind the headboard in her bedroom, over to the parlor area where she stood looking out the grand picture

window. It led through glass doors out into a pretty, fairly large sized balcony with wooden furniture and a love-swing. At least that's what her earthly father had always called them. A swinging seat made for two or three people. The memory of her father brought a question to her mind. He must be somewhere up there in Heaven or here on this planet. He'd passed away a number of years earlier.

What a comparison! she thought. *My old-earth father with last night.* Her Heavenly Father was certainly a wonderful Father, not that her old earth father had been so bad, but still there was no comparison. The prayers she and Jim had prayed last night had been beautiful. It was the most intimate time she could remember having. God, Jim and she talking together quietly like the three of them were old friends. Quietly asking each other questions. Exploring God's desires for them. And their hopes and dreams for each other.

She'd never seen anything like it. It was like having the best Father in the world. Sitting right there with you. Whom you could ask anything in the world and He not only knew the answer, He was never offended. No matter what, no matter how. She didn't need to be pretentious with her Heavenly Father, nor Jim. She could sit back, relax and drink Him in. Them in. It had truly been the most intimate time she could remember.

And private. Now here in the morning light, she wanted to ask God why. Why ruin the intimacy of last night with the dreams that couldn't happen. At least not now. God had shown them that they couldn't get married until He was finished with Hannah in their lives. He also had said that He wouldn't say what the timing would be. That He rarely did. It interrupted His work to give those kinds of specifics about the future. Hannah could be with them for a month, or it could be years.

Children in this life grew slowly. As Jim had told her, about a year to a decade. Hannah had actually been born in 1956 and died in 1965 when she was 8 years old. It was now 2005 on the old earth and she had been here the equivalent of 40 old-earth years. After 40 years in the New Earth, Hannah was all of 12 years old.

The Lord had assured them last night that Hannah was not going to be with them through to adulthood. But that still could mean anywhere again

from 1 month to 40 years or longer. Parts of Valerie wanted to run away as Elizabeth had and wait in the Heavens where time seemed to pass so much faster. But she knew that wasn't what God wanted and she also knew that wasn't what Hannah needed.

Patience, she told herself, wait patiently. Jim is right around the corner. And who knows what else! Maybe those babies Lord?

Could very well be, he whispered softly. Valerie wondered what that meant.

She decided to make a cup of coffee and go out on the balcony of their bedroom. It was nice to have some privacy last night. Jim's disappearance hadn't been a moment too soon. They both had melted into each other's arms after sparking sweetly for quite a while and then he was gone. Gone. Thank Heaven, gone!

Valerie didn't like those headaches. She could tell by their increasing intensity that you didn't dare go on doing whatever it was you were doing when one started. They definitely were effective. A migraine was something she did not want to invite into her new life. Nor did she want to invite God's disappointment. Especially after last night. She could see what a marriage could be like with God at the helm in this new beautifully intimate way.

She ambled downstairs in her nightgown, alone, it was very early in the morning, she guessed it would have been about 6:30 in the morning on the old earth. There weren't any clocks here. There really was no need for them. Rays of sunlight pierced over the rocks near the waterfall. It wasn't quite yet sun up. *Oh!* she thought, *I've got to watch the sun come up!* She quickly requested a cup of coffee and prayed herself upstairs on the balcony.

The sunrise was magnificent. Birds flying from off the cliffs dotted the skies over the lake up just above the waterfall from her perspective. Sheer clouds with silver and gold linings shone in the early morning sun, glowing as they wisped across the back of the falls like a perfect movie backdrop. Rays of light pierced over the rocks just south of the falls in a peaceful 'good morning' from God.

“Good morning God,” she said over steaming coffee. “I love you.”

She felt an emotional rise of love from inside of her and knew it was God’s ‘good morning hug.’ *Hannah*, she thought, *must still be sleeping*. It was nice to have a little alone time before starting the day with the kitties, the doggy and the precious little child now in their care. Her care for the moment.

Jim was apparently still in his hideaway, somewhere where she couldn’t find him, somewhere where he could be alone with his thoughts. She entertained the idea of calling him, but decided to keep this wonderful time alone, knowing that he might be experiencing the same kind of delightful alone-time as well.

Good morning Jim, she thought the thought to herself alone, *I love you too*.

* * * * *

The breeze outside of the bungalow’s window was warm and balmy. A feeling Jim always loved when he arrived here, but didn’t love for long. The deep serene blue skies held a veritable glory of sunlight. The sun shone against pale wispy clouds. And the sound of a bird landing on his open window twittering back and forth to its mate just added to the allure.

He wandered around inside of his paradise bungalow hideaway. He picked up a book from among the collection on the wall and sipped his hot and delicious latté. Valerie had been in his dreams all night. Her loving voice, her sweet touch, her gorgeous self. He had been so pleased with his dreams. They were apparently contagious. One followed another, following another, following another. He was hooked and he knew, since he had no control over his dreams, that God was the One doing the fishing.

He smiled wryly and put down the book in his hand. “Thanks Father,” he said taking another sip of his latté topped with whipped cream. Trinity Havens was an incredibly beautiful little place. A set of visitor’s bungalows lined the seascape on the other side of Trinity Sea from where they’d been yesterday. Palm trees lined the beach for a couple of miles,

interspersed with sandy ground, tall grass and bushes filled with colorful flowers. It reminded him just a little of Hawaii in February. But without all the tourists.

The bungalows were a private haven. A getaway worth getting away to. He had enjoyed himself immensely last night. It was so intensely wonderful to have Val back in his arms. His beautiful young biker wife. As always, gorgeous inside. But now, the woman of his absolutely beautiful dreams.

He knew that when it was time to go back, his senses would be jam-packed with a total rush when he saw her. Jim blushed now even at the thought of seeing her. He wanted to make sure that by the time he went home, she was fully dressed and not too invitingly beautiful. *Maybe I should call her*, he thought, but decided to keep the private time he was having for a little while longer. *Maybe*, the thought crossed his mind, *she's enjoying her own private sunrise*.

He set the latté down on the little round, rough cut table and picked up the book once again. "The Order of Things to Come," he said aloud. *Doesn't sound like a novel. I wonder what this is*. He opened the book to it's inside coversheet. It's where the New Earth books always held their opening statement. Kind of like the back cover introduction that used to be on the soft-cover novels of the old earth. The taste of coffee and whipped cream still lingered on the roof of his mouth.

The half-page introduction simply said that this book was one he probably wouldn't enjoy. It was a treatise on old-earth theology and the differences between their ideas and the realities that actually were. "Not my cup of coffee," he said putting the book back up on the shelf. He'd never liked the phrase, 'cup of tea.' It felt so pretentious to him. He'd refused to say it most of his life. Being real was very important to him.

Wow, Jim thought, remembering last night. *Talk about being real*. The time he had shared with God and Val last night had been hard to believe. *Talk about intimate!* he thought. *What a wondrous thing it's going to be, being here with Val, especially with such a close-at-hand God in the mix. Although*, he corrected himself, *to me, God isn't just an ingredient. He's the major flavor*.

What intense intimacy they'd all had together last night. 100% real. 100% out in the open. Nothing held back from any of them. Including God Himself who had been very adamant about their purity and the reasons they had to wait for marriage. It had been one of *the* most intimate times he could remember having. With God there with Valerie and him, he couldn't imagine anything better. Nothing. Nothing he could think of anyway. He knew he was called to this earth. He was certain now, that Val was called with him.

* * * * *

"Hello, Sleepy Eyes." Auntie Valerie's eyes were full of love. *Why do you love me?* Hannah thought inside herself, but then decided not to pray it over to Valerie's inside thoughts.

"How did you sleep, little one?" Hannah stood up on her tip toes and stretched out her arms, yawning with Duffy, Sr. at the end in one of her hands. Hanging there like a funny looking Duffy. Her hand was squishing his neck!

Hannah giggled. "Duffy looks funny!" She giggled again, looking at her stuffed animal hanging from her curled up fingers.

Valerie laughed as well. "He sure does," she said. "He looks like he might as well have his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Ha, ha! He does!"

The two girls giggled together and Hannah crawled onto Valerie's lap. "You're getting to be a pretty big girl for laps!" said Auntie... said Valerie.

"I am, huh?" she smiled real big. "I *am* getting bigger. I'm not little anymore."

"No," Valerie said, "You're not. In fact, you're old enough to decide for yourself what you want for breakfast."

"Anything?!"

“Anything.”

“Uhhhh.... Uhhhh... I don’t know what I want!” the ideas turned around and around in her mind. *Maybe pancakes? Maybe French Toast? Maybe Waffles? Maybe a hamburger!* She giggled out loud, her thoughts were really funny this morning. She liked it. She wanted to be a funny thinker more often.

“I think I want a hamburger,” she said with a snicker.

“A hamburger! Are you joking!”

“Nope,” she said with a smile, “A hamburger and a cola. And maybe some pizza!”

“If you want it,” Val said with a silly look on her face, “it’s yours.”

Chapter Nineteen

Valerie? Jim called, his voice laden with the sound of his mild concern. *You decent?*

A veritable angel! she responded. *Dressed in white. Come on over.*

Thank you, he said knowing his voice was filled with the relief he felt. He popped in next to Valerie, who sat in the family room, reading his book, ‘Simple Pleasures.’

“Oh,” he said blushing with embarrassment, “You found my book. I forgot that I’d left it out.”

“Thank you, I’m glad you did,” said Valerie. “I had no idea you could write like this.”

“It’s something I love doing,” he responded bowing his head down and scuffing his foot on the area rug that covered the hardwood floor. His hair fell forward, covering the view of Val and his book. The pattern in the rug caught his attention as he veered away from the embarrassment he felt.

She really was dressed in white. Almost 100%. Actually it was 100%. She looked kind of... white. But nice in her dark-colored skin and *dark curls?* Cool! She’d used one of the hair lotions to make herself look totally gorgeous. Again.

Her eyelids were colored with a soft mauve shading and dark brown eyebrows with burgundy colored lips and nails. Long lovely nails, very shiny, with white patterns printed on them.

Wow! She’s really been learning how to doll herself up, he thought. She wore a nice freshwater pearl bracelet that matched her necklace, the pearls interspersed with tiny gold beads. And she had a beautiful diamond ring on her finger! Her wedding finger!

“What’s this?” he said holding her hand up so that he could look at

her beautiful, feminine fingers, curled just lightly over his.

“Oh,” she said with a little blushed glow, “my engagement ring. I forgot to take that off. I’ve been shopping for one.”

“On your own!” He could feel his cheeks rise with his own blush. “That’s a good thing Val. I like it.” He was teasing her but he didn’t want her to be embarrassed by the thought that he disapproved. He didn’t.

“I wanted the world, this world, to know that I’m not available.” She said the words with a tad bit of tease mixed with defensiveness.

“Understood. And thank you.” Jim turned to look for Hannah. “Where’s the little one?”

“Playing outside with Duffy, Jr.”

“Cool! I wanted to talk to you a bit before we go romping around today.”

“What about?” she asked looking a little perplexed. Jim stooped over and kissed Val on the cheek, his long hair falling against his arm and hers. He looked up into Val’s gorgeous blue-grey eyes before responding. Apparently her eyes changed colors with what she was wearing, just a touch. The same way they had in the old earth.

“I want to take Hannah to visit her mother in Heaven.” Jim didn’t want to announce such an important matter in front of Hannah. It was up to Valerie and him to make this decision together. Alone.

“Oh, good grief, that sounds like a great idea!” Val’s enthusiasm washed over him like a warm, wet wash cloth, spiced with fragrant bath gel. *Woops!* he thought to himself, *watch that!*

“I’m kind of ready to go back,” she said, “myself.”

“It sort of grows on you, doesn’t it,” he responded.

He wondered again if Val were going to get to a point where she

might want to stay in the Heavens. Permanently. It was a place that honestly did grow on you, often times rather overwhelmingly.

It could definitely make you want to stay. With it's sweetness and love, it's incredible ability to view almost anything, past or present, most of the creatures in any world or spiritual dimension would rather live there than anywhere else, most of them actually did live there.

The number of people who chose the New Earth was mild by comparison. A very small number, by comparison. There were millions of people on this earth, he supposed, but gazillions chose to stay, to love, to work, to play, in the Heavens.

I'm still thinking of myself over Val, he thought to himself. *Stop that!*

Val's hand was beautiful with it's diamond studded engagement ring. It's shiny moderate sized center stone was surrounded by tiny little diamonds in swirls, all set in yellow gold. So elegant. So Valerie. He wondered if it had any kind of symbolic significance. That would also be Valerie's style.

"I want to see this in the sun," he said delighted by the sight of the ring that separated her as his.

They stepped out onto the deck and the sun hit the diamonds which all sparkled in unison under the brilliant light. "Wow," he said quietly. "Wow." And then he thought to himself privately, *I hope you choose to keep this particular one. It's beautiful.*

Valerie beamed with joy. "I like this one." she said with gratification. "I think I'll keep it. If you don't mind."

"Mind? Uh, no." He said the words with a sense of seriousness. "I like it. It's my cup of coffee."

* * * * *

Duffy, Jr. barked in little tiny yips. Hannah thought he was just the

best little birthday present God could have given her. Again, no one else had remembered her birthday. Except God. She sang a little song as she teased Duffy, Jr. playfully with a long piece of grassy like stuff with feather like stuff on the tip. He sneezed! “Dogs don’t sneeze, silly,” she told him. “Oh, but I guess they must, because you just did!”

She lifted the piece of grass up to her own nose to see if it made her sneeze.

“Nope,” she said, “It doesn’t make *me* sneeze after all. Silly, cute, little, tiny Duffy, Jr. You’re my favorite animal!” She picked up the dog and got up off the grass. Her long lavender and white sheer blouse with pointed corners covered a white tank top and blew in the warm, soft God-breeze.

She could hear God’s voice in the wind saying, *Do you like your birthday gift sweetheart?*

“Yes, Daddy-God, thank you! I love it.” She truly did. It was a really great gift. The most best gift she could ever have imagined. “Thank you, Daddy-God,” she said once again. She really meant it.

As she got up off the grass, Valerie and Uncle Jim were walking toward her, holding hands. Valerie was dressed like an angel. With pretty dark, curly hair and everything all shiny. She liked Valerie. Really, really liked her. She wondered, though, if her mother would come and visit her today. If she ever remembered that it was her birthday!

She had been reborn a long, long, *long* time ago. A long, long time ago. It seemed to her to be forever before she grew up. She wanted so bad to be a grownup. But nobody would let her be one, no one would listen to her at all. Except Valerie. And Uncle Jim. She liked Valerie. And she loved uncle Jim.

“Maybe it’s okay if Valerie gets married to Uncle Jim,” she said to Duffy, Jr. “Maybe they could be my new mom and dad. And maybe you and me and them could live here forever in this pretty house with all the kid stuff in it.”

“Oh, and doggy stuff,” she reminded herself. “I hope we can look on the learning station for some doggy stuff for you to play with.”

“Hey Hannah!” Uncle Jim shouted to her as if he had something very important to say. Very important. *Maybe*, thought Hannah, *He’s going to sing me a Happy Birthday song*. She held little Duffy, Jr., up to her chin. Duffy yapped like a happy little puppy. And he wagged his tail.

“Yes, Uncle Jim?” Hannah’s own voice was starting to sound a little different to her. More like a grownup’s voice. A little. She was hoping that maybe she and Uncle Jim might get a chance to make some of those songs Uncle Jim made for the Music Stations before she left his house to go back home to Grandmamma’s place. He had such a nice voice. She hoped someday maybe hers would be as pretty.

“We have a surprise for you,” he said as he and pretty Valerie got close to where she was standing, holding onto Duffy, Jr. with both hands. Hannah noticed the pretty little diamond ring shining in the sun. The ring that Valerie had let her have earlier this morning when they were looking for wedding rings together. It sparkled! Really sparkled!

She felt almost like a grownup... or what was it the grownups called themselves? That’s right, adults. She felt almost like a adult now. She was really growing up. Especially with her sparkle-ring on her finger and her nails growing a little longer. Valerie had let her color them dark red, like hers. And she even let her put on lavender eye shading like hers. They were lots alike. Valerie and her. Lots alike.

“What kind of surprise?” asked Hannah, she was starting to feel more curiouuser and less scared.

“We’re going to visit Heaven this afternoon. We’re going to take you with us. And we’re going to visit with your mother there.”

“Mommy said it was all right?”

“Your mother said it was all right.” Hannah couldn’t believe what Uncle Jim was saying.

“Yea! Yea! Yea!” She said jumping up and down with Duffy, Jr., flopping in her hands as she jumped.”

“Put the puppy down honey,” said Uncle Jim.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Uncle Jim.” Hannah put the puppy down on the ground and he jumped up and down yipping and then started turning circles. Chasing his tail. She felt bad. It wasn’t going to be as much fun if she messed it all up like she always did.

Going to Heaven was important. She really must be growing up. She loved it in Heaven. It was really, really, really lots of fun. Especially when she got to see her mommy and her wrinkle-skinned daddy. Who was still on the old earth. She still loved her daddy a lot. Just because he had wrinkle skin, didn’t mean she didn’t love him. After all, he was her real daddy.

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“Your mother said she has a big surprise for you.” Valerie chose her words carefully. It wouldn’t do to excite the little girl more than was necessary. Not to mention ruining her surprise. Her mother’s surprise, was her father. John Marriott, Jr., had passed from the old earth the equivalent of the New Earth’s last night. Apparently, he had loved arriving in Heaven and had the whole family there to greet him when he arrived. Something Valerie knew she wouldn’t have wanted. But apparently some people did.

The little Hannah, started jumping up and down and turning circles with her hands lifted up in little-lady fists. She sang out words in a young lady sing-song voice, “I get to have a birthday surprise.” And then she sang to herself, the old earth song, “Happy Birthday to me! Happy birthday to me! Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday to me!”

It broke Valerie’s heart. *Wow, she thought, she’s had to celebrate her birthday alone. That’s really sad. How irresponsible of Hannah’s parents and grandparents in the Heavens, she thought. They didn’t even tell us it was her birthday.*

Chapter Twenty

This time as Valerie traversed the Heavens, she was filled with joyful wonder. A lot more confident than the last time. She was used to the idea of the gigantic spiritual beings that surrounded her. But it was the reality that the little girl walking between she and Jim had something very important to discover... that was what made Valerie's heart blossom with love and good feelings.

They both held onto Hannah's hand. This wasn't her first time here in the Heavens. Hannah wanted, Valerie could feel, to check out the children's playground here; to play for a while before leaving to go back to the New Earth. If she ever went back at all, that is.

Valerie could tell, 'listening' very closely to the little girl's emotions and thoughts, that Hannah really wanted to stay. Not to go back. Except that she knew she couldn't bring Duffy, Jr. here with her. It was a sad reality the little girl would have to face. She had to make a choice. *Little problems*, thought Valerie, *even here. But nothing she can't handle. I believe it!* Valerie started to hum a little. It was a peculiar feeling. Humming without a mouth.

This time as Valerie looked around, she was a little more curious, a little more relaxed and a lot more cheerful. It was actually a nice place to be, once you got used to the differences. She had hoped they would meet with Hannah's parents right away. *Oops!* She thought, *Hannah may be reading my mind!* She still wanted to keep this a secret.

Keep what a secret? Hannah's curiosity burst into Valerie's mind.

I'm not quite sure how to keep a secret here, she thought. *It's supposed to be a surprise.*

Oh. I'll let you have your privacy, thought the little girl. She could tell that Hannah was honestly going to tune out to Valerie's thoughts. *What an incredible place!* she thought to herself privately. *Honesty is an absolute must! For very real reasons!*

Jim was 'calling' Hannah's mother, Alice Marriot, who was on the other side of old earth's portal with her husband from the old earth. Alice and John, Jr. wanted to talk for a while before meeting with Hannah, so she had asked that the three of them give them some time before popping over to where they were.

Valerie looked around curiously at all the things there were to see. A huge new portal stood a few yards--if there was such a thing as space here--from where the three of them stood looking around. It was larger than that of the old earth's portal by far. She touched Jim's sleeve and pulled both of them in the direction of the portal. *I want to see this*, she thought to them both.

Jim felt slightly amused and Hannah a little bored. But there was just something inside of Valerie that had to see what this portal area was all about. Far fewer people, actually creatures, gathered around this particular portal. It was almost downright sparse. But beyond the gates of light that held you back so you could look down into the hole, lay a brilliant shining light. It came up from the area beyond the portal's barrier. Almost like a reverse sun burst.

We'll meet you back here, said Jim. Valerie could sense that they both would be relieved not to have to wait for her here. Still she felt a touch of resistance to being left alone, but decided that as long as she stayed right where she was, she couldn't possibly get lost. *Okay*, she said. *Meet you at the cabin if we somehow get lost?*

It's not possible, Val, said Jim. *But if you'll feel safer then that's fine.*

Okay then, she said.

Okay, then, he threw his loving feelings toward her like a he was blowing a sweet emotional kiss. *See you later, baby.*

Bye, she said a little regretfully but then decided it would all be just fine, as long as she stayed right where she was. She turned around and floated over to where a couple of women stood looking over the edge, holding onto the barrier gates as they did.

Hi, she said to them.

She heard a barrage of strange words. Some kind of a Middle-Eastern language, she guessed. Then the translation started coming through to her mind. Her ears heard one thing, while her mind heard another. One woman said, *Hello! You must be from America!*

Yes I am! She said. *How did you... Oh, I think I know.*

We know Americans well, said the other woman. *We're from 1st Century Israel.*

You're kidding! Her curiosity turned from the world below to the women standing there with her. *Are you from the early church?*

We are, they both spoke together.

Oh, man, were you tortured to death back then?

We were, they both said, but then the second woman added, *We don't like to talk about our deaths. At least I'd rather not. My name is Deborah, and this is Refkah. It would be Rebecca in your language.*

Hello, Deborah, Refkah, she tried saying the name with the hard kh pronunciation in the middle.

Both women giggled. *Just say Rebecca*, Rebecca said, *we'll hear our names correctly.*

Oh, thank you God! thought Valerie.

You're welcome, came the strong and yet sensitive response. God's responses here were apparently even stronger than in the New Earth.

Speaking of the New Earth, said Deborah. *Look down here with us. We wanted to see some of our great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren.*

Now, thought Valerie, these woman have my full attention.

They both giggled. Valerie kept forgetting they could read her mind.

As she looked below the barrier all she could see were clouds and flashes of colorful light. Apparently you could look out over the New Earth from here. She could see periodic firestorms and flashes of lightshows from the upside of the clouds. *I don't see anything except clouds and light*, she said.

You have to think of someone or some thing, said Deborah.

Rebecca giggled. *It's always fun to see new people catch on to things*, she said.

Like this, continued Deborah. She took Valerie's hand and Valerie began seeing the New Earth through Deborah's eyes.

What she saw was amazing. Small children, like in her dream, everywhere. A group of Semitic women, some in beautiful long sarongs, others in jeans or dresses, gathered together at a playground in an Escapades type area filled with exotic wonders. She guessed they would have been from modern-day Israel or somewhere on the other side of where she had lived on the old-earth planet. They were very happy, but obviously living a very different lifestyle.

Wow, she said. *That's cool. I wonder if I could visit there some time.*

The women both giggled again and Valerie was beginning to feel a little offended. *Yes. You can. We're sorry*, said Rebecca. *We love your thought language here. It's just so very different from ours. We're still not quite used to American culture. We spend most of our time working and praying for Middle Eastern people.*

I understand she said, and she did. Their culture was a curiosity that she herself felt. But didn't necessarily want to indulge this particular minute. She wanted to see children from her own culture.

We understand, said the woman. Valerie had again forgotten they

were reading her thoughts. *We'll let you be to your own business. Call us if you need any help.*

Wait! She said. *Can you tell me how to ask for what I want to see?*

Just ask, they said, *but not us, Valerie, God.*

Oh yeah, she said. *Thank you both. Very much.*

The two ladies walked a few yards over to a different area, giving her some privacy and she prayed a little prayer. *Thank you God,* she said, *for this wonderful place. If I may, I'd like to see my future, especially children.*

No, honey, he said, *no visitations to the future here. I'm the only One who can foresee the future, even here. I only share the future with those I choose, for reasons I choose. What else would you like to see?*

Children, she said with heartrending desire, *I'd like to see happy little children.*

* * * * *

The emotion Hannah experienced was one that Jim treasured. He was enjoying 'listening' to her here. She was happy and yet a little more sad than Jim had realized. But still the playground served as a wonderfully uplifting experience for her. Here, children of all kinds played 24/7/365. Round the proverbial clock. And clocks were, of course, proverbial.

Uncle Jim, look! Hannah shouted from where she stood sliding joyously down a golden light slide that looked much like the water slides of the old earth. She felt elated. Jubilant. Carefree. Jim could tell she liked it here. It seemed she'd really rather stay here than go back to the New Earth. *That,* he thought, *might be a good idea.*

Hannah climbed the ladder of light beams to the top of what would have been about a two-story height and slid down again and again and again. Jim could feel her joy growing steadily and her confidence increasing as she played.

Other children around her laughed and giggled, sliding down along side Hannah, holding her hand all the way down. Little toddler-type children turned summersaults as they were tussled safely by the force of the 'gravity' here in the heavens, laughing joyfully. No fear whatsoever. God's soft wind blew constantly in this part of Heaven. The children remained forever in His care. Growing and being cared for by God Himself as well as other adults and angels who constantly watched over the tiny little beings.

Jim was growing uneasy, just a touch restless. He wondered how Val was doing on the other side of the old earth portal, where he'd left her looking so expectantly at the portal to the New Earth. He'd suspected she wanted to watch the little children there. She'd said something to him about it on the way home from Trinity Sea.

He himself had watched them incessantly after coming here and before writing any children's books or preparing his and Val's home for the children he hoped would be a part of their future. He didn't really feel like watching them right now. He had a child of his own to care for. But he did understand Val's desire. He'd experienced that gnawing hunger to understand New Earth children himself.

God had satiated his hunger to understand them with hours of loving communion between Jim, God and the other children whom Jim could see, hear and feel, but whom he couldn't otherwise effect from this portal. Nothing but God Himself could effect the people of the New Earth. They were in His care and His care alone.

It was why the portal always seemed to be so sparse. People and angelic creatures seemed to be able to do more for the old earth and the spiritual realm of the third portal than they could at the portal of the New Earth. It was a place to learn and make decisions, but prayer there was not much of a necessity, except for mothers and fathers with their children left on the New Earth. That was a slightly different story.

Uncle Jim? Hannah looked up from down at his side. He hadn't noticed her coming his direction.

Oh, Hi Sweetheart, are you finished with the playground now?

Yes, she said with a little emotional sigh. I want to go see my mom now. Do you think it's okay to see her?

I don't know, honey, let's ask.

Hannah felt uncomfortable. He could sense her heartache over her mother. She had no idea... *Woops! It almost slipped!*

What almost slipped, Uncle Jim.

Your surprise, dear heart, your surprise.

Chapter Twenty One

Auntie Valerie floated over to where Hannah and Uncle Jim were talking. *She looks awfully bright. So does Uncle Jim, Hannah thought. I wonder why. They sure look bright.* Valerie looked sad. She had shiny tears in her eyes. The kind that looked like the crystal cups on Grandmamma's dining table when company came over for dinner. The ones she put ice-water in. Hannah liked those tears, they looked pretty, but it probably meant Auntie Valerie was sad. She was sorry about that.

What's wrong? Uncle Jim asked Auntie Valerie.

I've been watching the children in the New Earth, Auntie said. I just feel so blessed. Someday, she wiped some tears from her eyes, some day.

Hannah wanted to hug Auntie Valerie and Auntie must have been reading her thinking because she looked down at her and said, *It's okay Hannah, I'm fine. I'm actually feeling pretty good.*

You're not sad? she asked her new favorite Auntie.

Yes, honey, a little, Auntie said, but I'll get over it.

She wants to see her, uh, mommy. Uncle Jim said the words to Auntie in a funny way. Like he was kind of... *Well I guess he is.* Hannah told herself. *He's keeping a secret. From me.* Hannah felt a little sad herself. Her birthday surprise was beginning to be a gigantic, colossal, huge old pain in her heart. *Why don't they just tell me what it is!* she thought. *I want to go home if they don't.*

Hannah was tired of waiting. She was always waiting. Waiting for someone or some thing. She was really tired of it. Really tired.

I want to go home, she said. Auntie Valerie and Uncle Jim seemed surprised. They must not have been listening to her thoughts then. *Either I want to know my secret or I want to go home.* She really meant it. She was tired of waiting.

Oh, said Uncle Jim, let's ask Alice. He must have been talking to Valerie, Hannah thought. Or he wouldn't have called her Alice, he would have called her my mother.

Alice? Jim asked, Is it time yet? Your daughter is wanting to go home. She's tired of waiting.

He got that on the nose, thought Hannah. Her arms were crossed in front of her and she was really tired of waiting.

Just then Hannah's mother appeared standing in front of them with a man who shined really, really bright. Who's that mommy? asked Hannah.

This, Hannah, she said lovingly, is your father.

* * * * *

Hahhhh! Hannah's exclamation caught John Marriott, Jr. by surprise. She felt to him like she was shocked. And delighted. He could feel her delight. Alice had shown him what it was like in this Heavenly place for what seemed like months, though only a couple days had passed by on the New Earth and not too many more on the old. He had marveled at the time differences. He had also marveled at the beauty of the people and other angelic beings around him. Who was he in all this, he'd wondered. *Well right now, he thought, I'm Hannah's father.*

Hi Hannah, he said to the little girl whom he'd lost so long ago. I've missed you so much.

He was surprised at the level of Hannah's brightness. She shone like the morning sun. Brighter than many people and angels here. But not quite as bright as the two who stood beside her, loving feelings radiating from their souls.

Oh, mommy! she said. I can't go back to the world now! Daddy? You're here?

Yes darling, he said, You don't need to worry, you'll be with us

Hannah, wherever we go.

Hahhhh! Again, Hannah was delighted and greatly, greatly surprised. John had been furious when he'd heard how his mother had abandoned his little girl on the New Earth with friends. And he was grateful that they had her here with them now.

But will you have wrinkly skin? Hannah's question and the force of her truly innocent heart caught John's emotions like a fishing hook in his heart. He was both delighted and very, very saddened. *What has my mother put my very precious angel through,* he thought.

No darling, I won't have wrinkled skin, he said. *because we're going to stay right here. In Heaven.*

Hahhhh! This time John wished he had arms to hold her with. Hannah's emotions felt like she might have been shaking if she'd had a body. *I love you Little Angel,* he said. *It's all right now. It's all right.*

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But what about Duffy? Hannah asked the question in a pinch of a panic.

Duffy is her new little puppy, explained Valerie. *We'll take care of him Hannah,* she said, *You can come and visit us any time you wish.*

But I want Duffy to live with us here! she said sorrowfully.

You know that's not possible, stated Alice rather heartlessly.

It's all right Alice, said John. Then he turned his attention back to Hannah. *We'll visit him very, very often, honey. If it's important to you, we'll visit him every single day.*

But a day here makes the puppy grow up and I won't be able to play with him when he's little!

I'm sorry, Hannah, said John, but you'll have to make a choice. Mommy and Daddy want you here. With us. But Duffy has to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Spencer. If you want to live with the puppy, you'll have to make a choice.

No! exclaimed the little girl. *I want my mommy and daddy!*

Valerie could tell that Hannah was just about at wits end. *We'll take very good care of Duffy, Hannah, she said. We'll love him just like he was our very own puppy. We'll love him for you. We promise.*

* * * * *

John Jr., Darling! The sound of his ex-wife's voice was nearly grating on John Sr.'s nerves. He'd been dealing with Elizabeth, his 'beloved' ex-wife, for what felt like far too long. He wasn't sure why she was up here, but he'd been really ticked when he heard she'd moved up here and left his little granddaughter alone with the Spencers.

Hello Mother. John Jr. didn't seem all that pleased to see his mother either. Even though he'd just arrived, it appeared he was hiding away from the two of them. He, himself, wanted to hide from her ceaseless pretentiousness. Up here, you couldn't get away with things the way you could on either of the worlds below. You could see right through Elizabeth's pretense. She was transparently ugly. Even her heaven-light was as dim as any he'd seen.

John Sr. remembered the time that God had revealed His love for Elizabeth and told John that it was His will that they be together for a while. But his patience was wearing thin and Elizabeth was growing frustrated. She couldn't hide her snide inner remarks up here. She couldn't turn the thought reading off, or she would have. Other's could hear her heart, unless they themselves chose not to listen. Which was a frequent occurrence.

She could be a 'dahling' if you didn't know what she was thinking inwardly. But, here in the Heavens, without the ability to hide her inward self, Elizabeth Marriott was simply unbearable.

The group that surrounded John's little granddaughter was beautiful. A veritable who's who of light-glowing faith. Not that anyone knew why. But the group seemed to glow beyond anything he'd ever seen. All except Elizabeth. And no one here was able to see their own strength of glow.

Even his little baby granddaughter, not quite a baby anymore, shone like one of the oldest and wisest he'd ever met. But then again, she was a little older than her appearance on the near earth. She'd been here longer than Alice and he combined, even if she had the appearance and mentality of a young girl.

The conversation had taken another turn and John Sr. brought himself back up to speed with the gang of ultra-brights. Elizabeth was droning on about seeing her son for the first time in years. It was certainly true. She hadn't been watching him much from the portals. As she droned, he tuned out again. She honestly seemed to believe they all couldn't hear her inward complaining. Or she was merely ignoring the fact that they could. They could hear her. She was exasperating.

John had turned off Elizabeth's emotional state long ago, not wanting to know how she felt. He'd had to because it seemed she felt helpless and love-starved. That only proved to endear her to him. Not enough, however, for him to want to feel the rest of what she felt. She seemed to feel and believe that everyone else around her was persecuting her. That they were all at fault. And nothing she had ever done was wrong. Case in point, Hannah.

Yes, God had called Elizabeth up here. John was aware of that. And yes it was God's will that she leave the New Earth. John was painfully aware of that. But leave Hannah to fend for herself! Leave her to face her own emotional crisis? This was really, really self-centered. Almost downright wrong. He'd read, in the bible, where it said that nothing evil could enter the New Jerusalem. He supposed, comparing her to the old earth's evil, that she couldn't actually be called evil, by comparison. But, man, she came close.

He just wanted to tape her mouth shut and that wasn't possible in the Heavens, she didn't have a mouth to tape. Right now, as he looked and listened, people all around her were growing anxious to get away. He was

plagued. He had to remain. At least for the moment. No marriage in Heaven. Thank Heaven. But still, he knew God had called him to walk with her for at least a short while. Not telling him why. Not telling him for how long. Just that this was what He wanted.

John had almost complained and then realized that Elizabeth must be very lonely up here, that she must be struggling with all her little heart, her very little heart, to remain here according to God's will. That Elizabeth lived in the Heavens knowing full well that she wasn't very appealing here. And couldn't hide her fangs.

Oops! He thought to the group, *I've slipped into inner space again.* He said the words 'loudly' so that he could interrupt into the conversation without being as pretentious as his ex-wife. He hoped no one had tuned into his own thoughts. Especially Elizabeth.

What are we all talking about? he asked.

We were all just getting ready to go our separate ways, the barrage of words from all of them at once hit him almost blind-siding him. They really did want to get away. He understood that one.

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Inside of her heart, Elizabeth felt like weeping. Even her son seemed to hate her here. *Why do you want me in this place?* she asked God over in a corner of Heaven by herself. She quivered inside like a shaking leaf. *No one loves me here. No one. Father, I can't stand it. Please may I go home?*

Not yet honey, he said to her lovingly. *I have some things I want to teach you. Don't forget, Litsy, I love you even if no one else appears to yet. Be patient. It's all right. I promise.*

Chapter Twenty Two

From Valerie's perspective, the wedding was on! She couldn't wait to get the go-ahead from God and start making beautiful plans. On the old earth, she and Jim had been married nearly alone before a Judge in the Centerville County Courthouse. No wedding plans, no hassles, but no real fun either.

Planning a wedding was only part of what needed to happen. Val wanted to find relatives and friends in the Heavens or on the New Earth, like her father, whom she could invite to the wedding. It was a phenomenal opportunity. One she really wanted to take advantage of. Before looking up her father, however, the first person she wanted to find was her little sister Joanna.

Joey had passed away when she was a toddler, drowning in their outdoor pool. It had crushed her mother and father and Valerie had never forgotten it. Valerie was seven years old when it happened. She was a little girl, helpless and frightened by what was happening around her. Feeling responsible. Unable to do a thing.

She knew as a reasonably sane adult on the old earth, and with lots of counseling, that she wasn't to blame for her sister's death. Still, they had been playing outdoors and running around the pool like they weren't supposed to when Joey slipped on the slick wet cement, hit her head and fell into the water. Valerie had watched in horror as Joey floated in a surreal slow motion down to the bottom of the pool. It was catastrophic to her very young self. And her parents. Who'd never said a word to blame her, but who hadn't said anything to soothe her fears about it either. Her counselor had pointed out that they were in their own world at the time and probably didn't know to comfort her in that particular way.

She understood, mentally, that she was not to blame, but emotionally it had never really sunk in. She wanted so desperately to meet the little sister she'd never been able to get to know. Then she remembered the time differential. How old would Joey be now, anyway?

Let's see, she thought to herself, I was 7 when Joey died, and 57 when

I died a few New Earth months ago, that makes it fifty years ago, which makes for 5 years of growth. Oh, man, she's only 7 years old!

The ramifications were slowly becoming apparent, she couldn't ask Joey to be a part of the wedding, except maybe as a flower girl. Most importantly however, she couldn't really sit down and have a heart-to-heart with her little sister. Her little sister was too little!

"How does that work anyway?" she said out loud quite by accident.

"How does what work, babe?" Jim's welcome voice cut into her quiet thoughts. She was grateful. He put down his book and looked her square in the eyes.

"Oh, I was thinking about the time differential and Joey," she responded.

"Oh," he said knowingly. "I take it you want to look her up."

"Very much so. She'd only be seven years old, Jim. Do you suppose she has much of an intelligent mind? I mean, that was 50 of my years ago."

"I'm afraid not, honey," he said lovingly. "She'll be a regular seven year old mentally and physically. It's part of the way things are here. A little frustrating at first, but after you've been here one or two hundred years, you begin to see why."

"How would you know, you're not 200 years old?" Valerie could feel the oomph in her words and knew she had spoken a little harshly. "Sorry about my tone of voice."

"It's okay honey. To answer your valid question, I've talked to the sages who are."

"Oh." Valerie didn't want to stay in the subject any longer. It was a sore spot to her. "You mind if we change the subject?" she asked.

"Not at all. I take it you were thinking about wedding plans?"

“Yeah, guests and colors and ideas for the ceremony.”

“Ceremonies here, Val, are a little on the private side. Not necessarily the major planning events they were on the old earth. At least not the events that happened part of the time. I’m sorry about forcing the no wedding issue on the old earth.”

“Thank you,” she said smiling at Jim. “You mean there aren’t big weddings?”

“The ceremony is different.”

“How, baby?”

“It’s a private thing, between the couple and God. People party but you walk through the ceremony here alone. With God.”

“Then how do people party?”

“Outside of the wedding chamber, so to speak.”

“What do you mean?” She was beginning to feel cheated.

“Invitations are sent,” he said, “to each individual invited by God. The couple doesn’t send the invitations, God does. Those whom he has chosen to be a part of their celebration have a big party near where The Escapades are held. Up the river a couple of miles from The Escapades in our region.

“After spending some time with their guests, the couple walks out onto a white-fenced bridge over the river to share the words they’ve prepared for each other, alone, with God. The ceremony is officiated by God. He is the priest, so to speak. He leads the ceremony 100%.”

“Wow,” said Valerie. “Then what?”

“Then there’s a gigantic celebration. The guests keep on partying while the bride and groom leave, usually in a chariot of fire, as they call them, whisked away up into the skies. No one knows where they go, except

the bride and groom themselves. No one sees them after the ceremony until they come back from their honeymoon. Everyone just parties until the twilight falls. It's lovely. I've been to a couple of them. It's so private, very nice."

"That sounds beautiful!" Valerie was hoping she'd get a chance to see one of the ceremonies before their own wedding. *But maybe, she thought, I don't want to wait that long.*

* * * * *

Disappointment filled Jim's heart. He'd hoped that Val's marriage to him would be soon after Hannah's departure. But tonight, while he and Val prayed together, they'd learned that God was not finished with the three of them just yet. And that he and Val would have to wait. Yet again. He knew that Val's heart must have dropped with disappointment as well. She looked tired. *Hope deferred...* he thought within himself, *sure does make the heart sick.* But God had apparently heard his disappointed 'self-talk' as Val would have called it.

Son, God whispered in Jim's heart, Don't despair, I have a plan. Tell her how you feel. It's my best for you now. Don't despair.

"I think I want some time alone," said Val.

"Honey, no," Jim's disappointment would quadruple if she chose to back away now.

"I really need it," she said.

"Val!" he whispered softly, almost pleadingly, but his expression wasn't nearly as strong as he felt. "I need you right now."

"Jim, I'm wiped out. I don't really know what I want, but I think I need..."

"Do you care about my needs?" he asked her.

“Yes,” she said dejectedly.

“Could you maybe go for a walk or take a bath alone for a few minutes?”

“Yes,” she said, “I guess I could. But I don’t know that I want to.”

Boy this is getting messy, he thought to himself. But I can’t take a whole night without her right now. He decided to tell her so. “Val,” he said, “Honey. I need to let you know, I think I’m in a place right now where I can’t take a whole night without thinking this through. With you.”

She looked both worn and like maybe she was about to assert herself as she used to when they came to the point of disagreement in their past. Instead, she slumped a little and said, “All right, Jim, if you will, give me a few minutes. I’ll go take a bath and we can come back and talk. I feel wiped out, but I don’t want to say no. I want to love you the way God wants me to love you. I suppose that would be sacrificially, I suppose it’s the way He would choose Himself.”

“Thank you,” he said with real heart-felt gratitude. “I appreciate that.”

* * * * *

Val slipped on down into the relatively cool water. She needed to wake herself up. She was very disappointed at the news that they wouldn’t be going forward with their plans to marry just yet. Hot water would have put her to sleep, so she cooled it down before filling the tub. She was glad she had.

The slightly cooler than tepid water felt invigorating to her exhausted body. *What a wild couple of weeks, she thought. I hope life here isn’t continually filled with all these fast paced learning lessons.* She was truly exhausted. Not quite as harsh an exhaustion as in the old earth, but the somewhat sweet exhaustion was tainted this time with a sense of defeat.

She’d never imagined herself saying what she said to Jim before

getting ready to take her bath. *Sacrificial? What was that all about?* she asked herself. It had been years, actually decades, since she'd felt like being sacrificial. Not to mention the tons of emotional weight she'd lost in learning not to be co-dependent. Now here she was, returning to it? *Not quite*, she said to herself. *This is different.* She wanted to defer this time. Out of love.

. *Help me*, she prayed silently, *Help me to be able to do this right. I don't want my own resentment and exhaustion to get in the way of Jim's real needs. Or my own. I need Your help Father. I can't obey You in this without it. I'm truly tired. Would You grant me enough energy to do this? I want to love my husband and I want to be obedient to You. I can't do it Lord. Without Your help.*

* * * * *

Valerie looked much better as she walked with a quietly confident gait into the family room. "Thank you, for helping me Val," Jim said.

"You're welcome," she said simply and quietly. But the look of love was definitely in her eyes.

"It means the world to me that you did this."

"I... it's a good thing, Jim," she responded. She moved Celeste from where the kitten sat next to him and sat down holding her, cuddling into the crook of his arm.

"Thank you," he said. "I really mean that."

"It's okay Jim," she said, "I'm not mad."

They sat, cuddled like that while Jim thought through what it was he wanted, what it was he needed to say to Val. In the end he decided he didn't need to talk about anything. He just needed her.

"Thank you for trusting me," he said. "I just need to quietly be here with you."

“You’re welcome,” she said. He could hardly believe his ears. She really wasn’t mad.

Chapter Twenty Three

“Honey?” Jim’s voice sounded so sweet. Valerie opened her heavy eyelids and felt the warmth of Jim’s arm around her; his other hand was shaking her lightly. She sat there feeling his chest rise and fall, keeping time with his breath. It was a wonderful feeling.

“Honey?” he said again with that delightfully masculine voice. “We fell asleep. I don’t know how close it is to morning, but I thought you might be uncomfortable sitting here like this. You want to go to sleep?”

“Yes,” she said dreamily, but Valerie didn’t want to move. She was plenty comfortable and it felt marvelous to sleep in Jim’s arms like this.

He kissed her lightly on the head. “I want to get up,” he said. “Do you mind lying down here and sleeping while I’m awake?”

“No,” she said the word opening her eyes again. This time she was a little more aware of her surroundings. “Don’t go,” she said.

He giggled. “You’re sweet when you’re sleepy.”

“Thank you.” Valerie lifted up her arms to stretch. “Could you make me some coffee?” she asked. “I want to wake up with you.”

“Sure,” he responded.

It was pitch dark outside. The embers in the fireplace crackled pleasantly and Valerie stretched her legs out and slowly got up off the couch. Jim rose up with a quizzical smile on his face. “You’re cute when you’re sleepy.” His own eyes sparkled with that wide awake look. He was excited about something at... what was it about 4:00 in the morning?

“I wish we had clocks here sometimes,” she said the words around her yawn, stretching again as she walked over to where Jim stood in the kitchen preparing the coffee. “I’d like to know what time it is now.”

“I have no idea,” he said with his head tilted to the side looking at her. Amusement etched his handsome face. “It was nice sleeping like that wasn’t it.”

“Sure was.” Her voice was beginning to take on a more normal tone.

She looked down at herself. “Good grief! Clothes don’t even wrinkle here!” They looked pristine. As if she’d just put them on. “Cool.”

She walked around the countertop and back into the family room, picking up Jim’s book once again. “This is truly one delightful book,” she said.

“It was my first,” he responded from the kitchen. He walked around the countertop and ambled toward her. “Do you like it?”

“Very good,” she said. “A lot of fun. Have you actually been here a lot longer than three years?”

“Yeah,” he said the word long and drawn out. “At least it seems like ten or twenty. Time passes so strangely without calendars or clocks or jobs. I never really paid much attention to the sun’s movements or anything like that. Don’t know that it would have helped.”

“I suppose you could ask God for a clock if you really wanted to know.”

“I suppose you could.” Jim put his arms around her from behind her. Placing his chin on top of her head. She leaned forward to put the book down and stretched once again within his grasp. He backed away a little, releasing his hold.

“I wonder how long I’ve been here,” Valerie queried.

“No idea.” Jim picked up something from off the table and put it in his mouth. He chewed on whatever it was and looked rather pleased.

“What have you got there?” Valerie asked.

“Oh, uh, chocolates.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “What do they taste like here?”

“See for yourself.” He picked up a chocolate from out of a little dish on the table and held it up to her lips.

She tentatively took it and it tasted like chocolate alright. Good chocolate but nothing spectacular. Once the chocolate shell melted, however, the flavor seemed to burst in her mouth. “Ummm! Raspberry!” She spoke the words around the sweet confection. “That’s delicious! Good gravy! And I’ll never get fat?”

“Never.” He was looking at her with an expression that was strangely serious. But he apparently tried to put a smile on his face. It looked a little forced.

“What is it Honey?” she asked.

“God told me something this morning.”

“What?” she was really curious now.

“I can’t tell you.”

“But it’s sobering?”

“No, it’s precious. But you’ve got a choice to make.”

“Another choice?”

“Same choice, actually. Only this time there’s more to it.” He paused. “I’m saying too much.”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll stop pressing the matter.”

“Oh, you weren’t.” He popped another chocolate in his mouth. “This would taste a lot better with coffee.”

“Ooo. It would.”

They walked over, arm in arm and poured the coffee into mugs. It was funny how you could live life here without movement if you wanted to, but you actually did want to do things like wait for the coffee to brew and cook the roast in the oven. It was life. And life here was nice.

Jim lifted a cup up to her and she took the hot coffee, sipping it quickly, while the taste of chocolate and raspberry were still in her mouth. “Wow. Good,” she said.

He drank from his own cup and nodded in agreement. “Very.”

She looked out the window into the blackness where she knew the waterfall fell. Thinking private thoughts. Almost wordless.

Suddenly the dark skies burst wide open, lighting up the waterfall and the grounds around the house in an almost eerie splendor. Unnatural, but not dark flavored at all. Spectacular. Angels dressed in pure light bounded down out of the skies surrounding a chariot also lit up with brilliant light.

It was Jesus. And He was headed this way.

“Oh, wow,” she whispered, astonished. She nearly dropped her coffee. Jim quickly took the cup from her hand and set both cups down on the table. “I’m about to be judged.”

* * * * *

The Lord stood before her with a somber but compassionate look on his face, which shone like fire. Bright, like the sun, only beautiful. Dressed in a robe, which shouldn’t have surprised her, of spectacular light. He held out his hand and a myriad of angels jumped at his beckoning. Her house was filled with angels. Brilliant light shone from them and filled the place, almost making the furnishings disappear.

Around his waist was a band of brilliant gold. He was dressed for court, she guessed and...

“Valerie,” the Lord spoke, interrupting her thoughts. His voice was like a million rushing waters, almost frightening. She began to shake. “Valerie,” he spoke a little softer, in more normal tones. “It’s okay.” His words were filled with love and compassion. He reached out his hand and touched her shoulder. She felt instantly better. Revived. Strengthened.

She realized the magnitude of what was happening and about to happen. The Lord of lord and King of kings was about to show her what He thought of her life. Tears began to spill. She was truly scared.

He held up his hand again, and an angel floated over to where she stood and handed her a piece of brilliant light-looking paper. It held writing on it, but she couldn’t make it out. When she took the piece of paper from his hands, it flooded her with emotional and spiritual sensations, as well as physical. Visions began to run through her mind, every single thing she had ever done while on the old earth. She comprehended almost instantly all of the consequences of each of her actions. Each of her words.

Valerie was overcome by fear and concern. Her actions had consequences she could never have understood. Some of them broke her heart. She felt ashamed, embarrassed. Jesus simply smiled. And beckoned for another angel.

The angel floated over to where she stood and handed her another sheet of light-looking paper. This one was tinted with a slightly rose hue. “This,” the Lord said, “is how I felt about you.”

She took the piece of light-paper and held it to her heart. *This*, she thought within herself, *is what I want to know*.

Suddenly visions of beautiful rapturous light flooded her senses. Love of serious and brilliant colors beamed from the piece of paper and the visions in her mind. Each and every word of love and whisper of adoration she’d ever given God flooded her mind. “Oh, my Lord,” she thought out loud. “You love me.” She began weeping and her tears dropped down onto the paper, splashing away as if it were made of some kind of... she couldn’t find the words.

“This is yours to keep, Valerie,” he said. “You can hold it anytime

you choose. Only... don't share it with anyone else. It's yours and mine alone."

"Oh thank you!" she said wanting to give him a hug. And then he disappeared.

* * * * *

The whole inside of the house glowed with a yellow-white light and Jim stood aghast as he watched the Lord and Valerie silently commune together. Then the angels and the Lord disappeared, but still the light shone in their family room. Valerie collapsed on the floor. He started to beeline toward her to help, but was held back by some unseen force.

"No," came a whisper of wind.

"Okay, Lord," was all he could say. He stood there helplessly as Valerie sat up, leaning on the palm of one hand and clutching the pink-colored piece of paper-light that the angel had given her. Her breath was shaking as was her body. He wanted so badly to help her. But knew he'd better not.

Valerie got up on her feet, still clutching the paper-light. It was now glowing a little less than before. She folded the paper up and walked slowly toward the kitchenette, as if she were in a daze. She then walked through the kitchen, down the steps to the dining room and up the stairs to the top floor, he supposed to her bedroom. He wanted to follow her, but still that force held him back.

This was the first time he'd personally witnessed a judgment other than his own. He remembered all too well what it was like. The fear, the trembling, the beauty, the love. But watching it this time was a very intimate thing to do. He had been included in her private moment with God. He felt privileged.

He sat down on the floor where he stood, still held back by the hand of God. His knees were weak. He had to sit down. *What an amazing thing, he thought. To witness the wonder of the Lord coming into his home. Into the life of his beautiful wife and God's beautiful daughter. What an*

incredible, amazing thing. He felt truly privileged. And beautifully effected.

Chapter Twenty Four

The steps up to Valerie's room were hard to manage. She almost tripped over them because of the heaviness of her feet and legs. She was in a daze. And deeply shaken. It had all happened so fast. She'd had so many questions to ask Jesus, so many things she wanted to say. *But I guess I'll have to say them in my inner language*, she thought to herself.

She was a little in shock, if you could call it that here. Just dazed. The piece of shining rose hued paper was the dearest, most beautiful thing she ever could have hoped for. The whole time she held it, it sparkled with love-light. This was God's opinion of her. His feelings toward her. In their strongest form yet. Their deepest depths. *His* deepest depths. At least toward her. So far.

She didn't want to put it away, but knew she'd better. She quickly prayed for a box where she could hide it away. One she could keep locked. A private place to keep the heart of God toward her. The Lord's feelings. His love. It had all passed too quickly. Far, far too quickly. She had so much more she wanted to say.

She opened the door to one of her drawers. There sat a box, a cedar box big enough to hold the piece of shining paper. Valerie unfolded the light-blazed paper and placed it down in the center of the box, glowing on the navy blue velvet lining. She closed the box, and it locked--automatically. *All you have to do to open it, God said, is pray. Your husband is waiting for you. But I have something to tell you before you go.*

"What is it Lord?" she asked, astonished that there could be more.

I have something I want to ask you, he said.

"What is it Father?"

If you want, He said, *There's a place for you with my Son.*

"What do you mean?" Her voice whimpered a little.

I so appreciate the love that you gave me on earth, daughter, that I have a testing question for you.

“Please, Lord, what is it?”

I want you to search your heart deeply, and honestly, for this is a test.

“Okay.” She was almost at wits end. And this sounded very serious.

My Son has a place, a position, which He is considering asking you to take. A job, if you will.

“Oh, my,” her thoughts turned around and around in her mind. *What kind of job could Jesus have for me in the Heavens!*

Yes, daughter, in the Heavens, God said. You’d be working as one of His assistants. But it would take every ounce of your energy and all of your time, even to go through the preparations for taking that place, working in His presence.

“You mean Your presence?”

His. And mine.

“Oh.” The doctrine of the Trinity had always been such a mystery to her. She supposed she couldn’t understand it all at once, even here. She sat down on the edge of her bed, still in a haze.

“What is it You want me to do Father?”

Whatever your heart tells you to do. This is a test of your heart. What is it you truly want to do?

Valerie searched deep within herself. She wasn’t sure why but this just didn’t feel right. How could she turn down such an offer! It was as if she were being asked to serve in the President’s Cabinet. She was honored, but warning bells were going off inside of her somehow. She didn’t understand it. It should have been what she wanted. But she didn’t. She

truly didn't. For some odd reason, she wanted to stay here. In this little world. Doing her thing. With God and with Jim.

"Do you want an answer right away?" she asked.

If you know what you want, daughter, yes.

Father, I don't know why, she said, I should want to walk in service to You in this very special way, but somehow I don't. She was puzzled at herself and her choice. It didn't make any sense at all. I truly don't Father. I'm sorry? she asked the statement rather than saying it.

No reason to be sorry, he said with love. It's my design, Darling, my hope. I wanted you to know that you chose this yourself. But it's also my plan for your life. I'm pleased with your honesty. And your decision.

Valerie looked down at the cedar-wood box in her dresser. *You love me, she said. This I know. I know it beyond any doubt I could have had. And you want me to be small--here in this world. This simply feels right Father. It simply feels right.*

She felt a wave of love wash over her. She was being embraced. The hug she had wanted to give to the Lord. The hug she had wanted from Him. She now had.

* * * * *

Valerie woke up with a start as Jim walked into her room. "Honey?" he said lightly. Apparently Val had fallen asleep in the exhaustion of the moment. "Are you okay, now?"

"Yeah, Jim," she said sitting upright. She rubbed her face with her hands as she struggled to come to her senses. It had been a few hours since she'd gone upstairs. He had fallen asleep himself on the davenport in the family room, waking up with the sun in the skies shining just barely through the cover of clouds. Apparently it was about to rain. Maybe thunderstorm.

Sure enough the crackle of a thunderbolt stirred the quietness. "Oh!"

Valerie jumped up. “Thunder?”

“You bet your bippy.”

It was a good old fashioned earth-like thunderstorm. Bright flashes of white light against dark clouds. And raining. Very lightly. Not cats and dogs as they would have said in the old world. That kind of rain was a rarity here.

“Oh, I want to go out in the rain,” Val said excitedly. She got up and walked around the mirrored divider that separated the parlor and bed areas. He walked around the bed himself and watched her, leaning against her palm on the window, looking out at the old-fashioned storm.

“These were always one of my favorite things on the old earth,” she said. “Thunderstorms.”

“Mine, too,” he whispered coming close to her. “Except for what they could do to my computers.”

“Yeah,” she chuckled turning around to face him, leaving a disappearing handprint on the window. “Not true here, I’ll bet.”

“You’d be right.”

“Speaking of computers,” she said looking a little more awake, “I’d like to spend some time at the learning stations today.” She lifted her hand up to her face and rubbed something away from her eyes. Probably hair.

She held her hand out to him and said, “Let’s go out into the rain, sit on that porch swing and enjoy.” She smiled lovingly at him and waited as he moved toward her.

That sounded good to him. He took her hand and held it lightly as they stepped out into the droplets and sat down on the clean, wooden love-swing as Val used to call them in the old world.

“So what did you choose?” he asked as they sat down on the swing.

“Umm,” she responded with a brief nod. “Very carefully.”

“I don’t understand.” He wasn’t quite sure that was a direct answer to his question.

“I chose very carefully,” she said, “God said He was testing me with the question and wanted to know what I truly wanted.”

“And?” He said the word lightly, hoping not to pressure her in any way. “I mean did you make a choice at all?”

“Yes,” she said looking up at a crackle in the sky. “I did.”

Jim was growing a little anxious. “You chose to go with Jesus?”

“No,” she said, “I didn’t.”

His sigh of relief was obvious. A bit too obvious he thought.

“No, honey,” she said, “I really didn’t.”

“Want it you mean?”

“Exactly.”

“Would you like something to drink?” He decided he wanted a cup of coffee, actually a mocha.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll take one of those.” She pointed to the mocha that appeared in his hands instantly. He prayed one into her hands. She took the steaming liquid and sipped it, turning to look out over the lake. A flash of lightning lit up both the skies and the water.

“Thank you,” he said.

“It just felt right,” she said.

“Thank you.” Jim responded out loud, but to God, not Val. “I appreciate that.”

* * * * *

Valerie loved this beautiful world. The rain felt like soft water dropping on thirsty skin. The mocha tasted like a delicious chocolate coffee-candy drop, leaving a sweet sensation on the roof of her mouth. The clouds, dark but not in the least bit scary, made her feel like she was filled with wonder. It wasn't a lightshow, rather it was homey, making her feel comfortable. At home in this new world.

The rain droplets hit her white clothing and immediately disappeared. Though she felt their small pelt and a tingly, cool sensation as they did. It felt like a good, old-fashioned thunderstorm, only better. She was at home in this world, that was true. She loved it here. Heaven was beautiful. But here she felt good. Very good.

She wasn't sure why she loved this New Earth so much more than Heaven. In some ways it seemed to her that such a choice should be all wrong. Her decision early this morning, a bad one. For all the reasons she could think of mentally, she should be choosing Heaven. And service to the Lord. But for all the reasons she could feel emotionally, she truly, truly did not want to. And she didn't understand herself. She really didn't.

God had said that this was what He wanted. *He* wanted this. It was His design. Maybe that's why she felt so right about it. It seemed to her that in this world doing the right thing came naturally. This world was built, she was built, to chose to do the right thing. No matter how ridiculously ludicrous it might seem to the mind. Working for Jesus, whether or not she actually had an opportunity to work *with* Him, would have been her first choice at one point. Her only choice at one point. But it truly wasn't what she wanted at this point.

I don't know, she thought, *maybe later I'll want to. Maybe later, I'll regret this decision.* But she didn't think she would. She somehow knew she wouldn't. She supposed if it became the right thing to do at some point in the future, she'd want to do it. But for now, her life here was what she wanted.

She put down her empty cup and looked over at her husband-to-be. He was certainly glad she had chosen what she did. He looked content, sipping his mocha and swinging the love-swing back and forth with one foot planted on the ground and the other crossed, his ankle on his knee. His relaxed smile made his face look so... content. Deep inside she knew she'd made the right choice. Even though questions seemed to wander through her mind, still.

Valerie wondered if it were even possible for her to choose and experience the wrong thing. She knew that if she had been dishonest with herself or with God, it might have been possible, at least for a while, to experience the wrong choice. And it's wrong results. This life seemed to have consequences--almost as much as the old life did. Only far less severe.

She almost wanted to go and get that piece of yellow-gold shining paper, the first one the Lord had given her, and re-experience the effects of seeing the consequences of her prior life. But she knew it wasn't there. Her shame was not given to her to keep. It was His love that she was allowed to re-experience. Anytime she wanted to.

"Honey?" she said, "I think I want to go check out some things in the Learning Center. Want to come with?"

"No, go ahead, babe," he responded. "I think I want to finish reading my first book. I might want to write a sequel."

That was an exciting thought to Valerie. She wasn't yet finished reading the book, but she definitely like it. It was always so disappointing to her when she arrived at the end of an excellent book, only to be saddened that it had ended. "That sounds like a very good idea. I like that book," she said.

Then a thought struck her hard. This world was endless. Jim could write sequels for generations to come. Thousands upon thousands of years of sequels if he chose. She wondered what eternity was going to be like. In a couple of thousand years. The women at the New Earth's portal seemed to be very happy. And very busy. Not at all bored with eternal matters. Used to things, but not searching for something better. Newer. More incredible. *No angels on clouds playing harps*, she thought.

There must be so many things to discover here, she mused. And so much more to discover in Heaven. She was sure that there was an endless supply of things to learn and do, right here, on this down-to-earth earth. *How many things, she wondered, are available in eternity?* She supposed the supply of things to do was as endless as the time to do them. As diverse as the colors and flavors of all the places she'd seen combined. As numerous as the people. As wild as the other creatures she'd witnessed in the Heavens. And as beautiful as all the things she was experiencing now.

Eternity, she thought, was sure worth one little prayer. Or two. Or three... hundred thousand.

Chapter Twenty Five

For some reason the learning stations were exceptionally cheerful to Valerie today. They were almost comical. Lighting up in overstated fashion with pictures that were delightful and fun. God had a sense of humor. It was evident. He was playing with her. That was evident too. She giggled as she passed from one silly answer to another. He was almost a tease.

“You’re cute Father!” she said playfully. His gentle breeze swept her up in a Fatherly kiss on the cheek. “I love you too,” she responded. “Now there’s this picture, see, on the screen, see.” She was talking to Him in silly talk, feeling the freedom of the moment. “It’s got a pretty lady on it. But I don’t know who she is.”

That, the Lord said, Is your replacement in the Heavens. That job I was telling you about.

“Oh Really?” she squealed with delight, but felt a twang of jealousy at the same time. “My replacement?”

She was second in line for the job, the Father responded.

“Wow. I really could have chosen that job,” she said in quiet wonder.

Yes, He said. You could have.

“She’s pretty.” Valerie studied her replacement as the video-type picture reeled, showing the woman receiving the news of the position she would be taking with Jesus. The woman was quite petite. She had short straight golden blonde hair with pale highlights, a cute little nose that perked up a sweet smile and beautiful dark blue eyes. She was quite excited and Valerie felt the tug of a tiny bit of envy in her heart. *Now Val,* she told herself. *You said no, remember?*

And it was my best will for you Valerie. This is also my best will for Marlow.

Valerie sat, twisting her lip with a wry sense of destiny. *Why are you showing me this woman and her choices Father?*

Because, he said, I want you to be her friend. She's single, childless, lonely and about to become frightened with the prospect of what she needs to do and who she needs to become. It's a hard thing working for the King of kings and Lord of lords. Everyone's watching you. And everyone wants to be your friend. But for their own reasons. Not always the most beautiful reasons either. She'll need a true friend, Valerie. One whom I trust.

"You trust me, Father?"

Definitely. With all I am and this woman's heart. I trust you.

"Wow." She wanted to turn off the screen, but felt it was the wrong thing to do. That was her own jealousy speaking. "I need to talk to you about my feelings Father," she said. "For some reason I feel jealous of Marlow. Part of me seems to wish I could lead two lives."

Jesus, my Son, He said with a thoughtfulness that grabbed Valerie's attention, is a very sought after individual, Valerie. He's very busy and very required. By everyone. I don't doubt that you have feelings of wanting to be near Him.

"Yeah," she responded.

Everyone does. To one degree or another. But the responsibilities of being anywhere near my Son are phenomenal. Very, very difficult. I want you to watch her reactions and I want you to g-mail her. I want you to keep in contact with her constantly. As constantly as you can and still run your own life. She's very, very important to me. And you, dear heart, will be very important to her.

"Thank you, Father." Valerie was beginning to feel the weight of her charge. "Will this be my job here on earth?" she asked.

Yes, darling, in a sense it will be.

"Oh," she said still twisting her lip.

One more thing, He said, It's important that you keep this confidential.

“It is?”

It is.

“Can I tell Jim?”

Tell Jim only what I say you can tell him.”

“Okay Father.” Now Valerie was biting her lip. Hard.

* * * * *

Marlow Christianson sat down on the chair in her study. What was it that God was telling her. Asking her to do. And why? Why her?

Because I trust you Marlow, I trust you very much.

“But why Father?”

Partly because you ask that question, He responded.

It was an astonishing thing to Marlow that God wanted her to do this. She had been feeling so lonely. So desperate. She didn't necessarily like it here in this New Earth. Heaven was where she felt God's Spirit calling her. At least for the moment. But she was so alone. So very alone.

Her relationship with God had been top priority in her life, always. But she just couldn't imagine working for the Lord Jesus Himself. She felt like Mary must have felt when the angel Gabriel told her she was going to give birth to the messiah. Of lowly estate. Not at all worthy. And very, very blessed. She had met with the Lord Jesus a few days ago, during what she now understood was probably something similar to an interview. For this heavenly secretarial position, you might say.

“How will it work Father,” she asked.

Whatever He tells you to do, Marlow, do it. Whatever. You’ll just be one of His assistants. A helper. That’s all.

“That’s all!” She was at a loss for words. *That’s all he says. Good Heavens!*

Don’t be surprised at this Marlow, you’ve always wanted to serve the Lord. You served Him well in the Old World. As missionary to your home town. And as friend. He trusts you. And so do I.

“Good Heavens.” She started to think it all over. Maybe this was why she had no children. Never had been married. Never even had had a relationship. Her friends had been few and she did not have any relatives, except for her single mother and a father she’d only seen from the old earth portal. Never in her old life. He and her mother had divorced when she was three years old. He never had bothered to look her up.

“If I’m going to be that busy in this job,” she told her Heavenly Father, “Then I’m glad I have so few friends. I won’t have time for them.” Her words were more of an excuse than the way she felt. Truthfully, she wanted a friend. At least one, whom she could trust. Especially now.

I hear you Marlow, God said, And I’ve already answered your prayers. Your new friend, the one whom I trust, is watching you from the her learning station. Say hi, Valerie.

Uh, hi, said the voice of a woman in her mind. I’m Valerie. The Lord told me you needed a friend. And will need one in the future. I’d love to be your friend Marlow. Hello.

Marlow felt flustered. Overwhelmed with the news. “I’m not sure,” she said, “what I want right now. But I trust you Father. Thank you for my new friend. I suppose I can trust her as well.”

You can, Marlow, she’s my choice for the job.

“The job! Am I just a job to be had?”

No more than my Son is Marlow. No more than I am. But I want Valerie to take this on as both a friend and a confidant for you. As seriously as she would a God-directed job. That's why I said it that way. I myself have to take things this way. People, after all, want my powers and abilities far more often than they want Me.

“Good Heavens,” she said, “I never thought of it that way.”

* * * * *

You two want some time to talk? asked the Lord.

“Sure Father,” Valerie wanted to get to know this woman. She seemed very nice and a little lost by the choice Valerie herself had just declined.

No rules, Valerie, Marlow. You may say or speak of anything, unless I say otherwise.

“Thank you Father,” Marlow’s voice drifted away slightly. She seemed overcome with the weight of the news.

“Marlow?” said Valerie, “I’d like to speak with you personally, if you’ve got the time. Would you come by my place? I’ve got a private spot where we can meet. You might want to know,” she added, “I just turned down this job.”

“Oh my heavens,” she said, “How on earth could you do that!”

“I don’t know.” Valerie truly didn’t have an answer to that question. “I don’t know. But it just seemed right at the time and God said, after I’d made the choice, that it was His best plan that I not take the job. But that you take it instead.”

“Oh my,” Marlow said. “I can’t imagine why.”

“Why you, you mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Marlow. “Yes Valerie, I’d love to swing by. Let me have some time to pull myself together. I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but I think I need some time to myself. May I?”

“Of course,” when you’re ready give me a buzz, my name’s Valerie Spencer. I have a husband to care for, so I may need to be careful. But if I’m available, *God help me to be*, then maybe we can have a heart-to-heart this afternoon over... I don’t know... whatever you like to drink.”

“Lemonade,” she said, her voice drifting away again. “That sounds like a good idea. I’ll see you this afternoon. I might need a couple of hours. At least.”

“You got it,” said Valerie. “Whatever you need.”

“Thanks. Bye. For now anyway.”

“Bye,” said Valerie. And then she tuned out to the woman’s thoughts.

Chapter Twenty Six

“Jim?” Valerie looked mildly upset. At least perturbed.

“What is it babe?” He looked up from the last chapter of his book. He’d been deeply engrossed in the ending he’d written. It was surprisingly poignant and filled with the wonder he had experienced when he’d first arrived here on the New Earth. Actually, his initial experience was in Heaven. But when he saw the New Earth from the portals, he was swept away by the hopes he’d felt at the prospect of another chance. A beautiful chance. An opportunity to be *able* to do things right.

“I can’t tell you what,” she said, “But the Lord just gave me a job. One filled with responsibility. And confidentiality. He told me I’ll have to be very careful about what I even say to you.”

“Woe,” he said with his eyebrows lifted. “That doesn’t happen every day.” He was beginning to wonder if this was why Valerie’s light had shone so bright in the Heavens. Maybe she was more important than he thought.

“It’s not that big a deal,” she said softly, “it’s just that I’m going to have to learn how to keep secrets. From everyone. Including you! I’m not used to that Jim.”

“God will help you,” he said putting down his book and the pen he’d been writing notes with. “Those headaches can come in mighty handy. Ask Him to use them this way honey.”

“Good idea.” She stopped for a moment, looking perplexed and thoughtful. Jim gave her some time. He supposed she was probably asking God to lead her in this way.

She confirmed his thoughts, saying “That was very a good idea. He said He’d do it. Now I feel so much more comfortable. Able to do what He’s calling me to do.”

It was very sweet, thought Jim, that she was willing to take his

advice like that. So quickly. She truly trusted him, and he felt needed. Loved. Trust was a very important thing to a man. Valerie seemed to trust him more than ever before since coming here. Or was it only that he could sense the trust she'd always had.

Whatever the case, it was nice. Relationships could be pleasant on this side of life. Even if they were etched with difficulty at times. They were far better than relationships on the old earth. No interference from the 'princes of the power of the air.' No one to pester and cause the darts to start flying. The portal to the spiritual realm had shown him the meaning of the words 'fiery darts of the enemy.' God wasn't kidding. As if He would about such a thing.

Valerie started to go through the door that led into the Learning Center. Jim picked his book up and started reading again. It looked like she needed her space. If she had a newly appointed job, one that entailed anything like the job she'd turned down, then she probably needed her space. He would be busy anyway, especially once he got started with writing. He was looking forward to that. Very much.

He picked up his cup of iced blackberry soda, sipping it slowly as he read. The kittens and Duffy, Jr. played rambunctiously on the family room floor. Toys he'd picked out for them banged and bobbled around. Bells ringing and animals thumping on the hardwood floors. One of them bumped pretty hard against the coffee table and Jim had to tell them to quiet down. Which, of course, they immediately did.

Jim had to wonder what it was Val would be doing. *Lord?* he shot up the prayer. No answer. Total silence. *Well, Jim supposed, it's probably something I'm going to have to get used to on the subject.*

* * * * *

Mild panic rose inside of Valerie. She had hoped she and Marlow would have the complete privacy of her home. But it wouldn't be possible for them to get acquainted here in the seclusion of her family or living room. Not with Jim busy preparing to write. *We'll have to go out by the lake, she thought, and get to know each other. As if that were a problem.* She began

making preparations, praying for a table and chairs to be set on a little space of land just south of the lake and out of view of the house.

When she finished dressing and popped over to the table, she felt a wave of relief. It was set in a pretty little spot, nestled in pine and wild leafy trees. Some of the foliage held branches and leaves that were as lovely as their blossoms. Some had fruit. Others flowers. Still others simply held elaborate, naturally colorful leaves.

The blossoms on the tree that hung over the table were colored with a combination of pale and dark blue buds mixed with little white and green foliage. A small grove of them stood amongst other various greenery and perfect, naturally trimmed lawns. The small number of trees in the grove were basically the same, except for size and the color of the buds. Some were in blues, others in shades of purple.

The table was charming and outdoorsy, made of white wrought iron filigree. Matching chairs were comfortable enough for the two of them to converse while they watched the falls cascade down from the south side of the lake. From here you could see under the falls. She could see that there was a small pathway under the waterfall. A ledge on which to stand. But not quite private. It was wide open to this view at least.

The setting was lovely. Beauty everywhere the eye could see. A place of visual softness, a mixture of God's very best scenery. The best she had seen at any rate, up to this point. The table was set with pretty light blue cut crystal dishes and silverware with a twist of gold running through the handles. The plates were set over royal blue linen mats and accented with pale blue napkins and crystal rings. Clear crystal glasses lined with rims of gold, prepared for the most delicious lemonade, shone in the sunlight. Everything sparkled. A perfect setting for semi-formal entertainment. Marlow would be here any minute. Valerie hoped she would feel as welcome as she truly was.

The Lord had shown Valerie what those private whiteout's were all about. The areas of privacy not viewable from the New Earth's portal. Apparently the New Earth was where people in heaven could come for absolute privacy. If God directed and allowed it. Marlow was in need of such privacy. And Valerie wanted to provide the best atmosphere for

fostering trust that she could.

A young woman came rambling up to her. Wearing short black curls and dark sunglasses. Her skin was a beautiful dark bluish black and Valerie assumed she was a stranger. “May I help you?” she asked rather puzzled.

“It’s me, Valerie,” said the woman in Marlow’s voice. She took off her glasses and Valerie could see her pretty dark blue eyes. “You have beautiful gardens here,” Marlow said looking around. She was taller than Valerie had expected. But just as petite. Tiny hands, tiny features. Both face and body.

She removed a bulky cardigan sweater and sat down on one of the chairs. “May I?” she asked pointing to the crystal pitcher of lemonade.

“Certainly,” said Valerie. “I was hoping we could talk privately in my home. But my husband is there. Reading and getting ready to start writing again.”

“Oh, this is better anyway,” she said taking a long look around the beautiful grounds. “I’m so grateful to have a place like this to come to down here. I wondered if you’d mind if I come here from time to time incognito, on your grounds, alone.”

“Not at all,” she responded. “Just let me know when you’ll arrive. For the sake of my own privacy.”

“Thank you,” said Marlow.

Valerie poured lemonade into one of the tall glasses, including as many crushed ice cubes as she could pray into the sparkling glass.

“I so appreciate this,” said Marlow.

“Actually so do I,” Valerie responded. “You don’t know how scared I’d be if I were in your position.”

“Oh, yes I do.” The woman raised her gaze up the side of the falls. “Heavens. I’d love to dive off that cliff some day.”

“Any day,” said Valerie. “You want to give it a shot now?”

“Oh, no,” said Marlow. “I’ve got too much to say. I’ve been in class all morning. Apparently I have a lot to learn if I’m going to do this job right.”

“Actually,” said Valerie, “I’ve dived off once. While I was really angry. Screaming all the way down. It felt wonderful.”

“I’ll bet,” she said taking a sip of the lemonade.

“What did you learn in your class today, if you can say, that is.”

“So much. It was overwhelming, to say the least. Today’s course was about Court etiquette and the laws that govern the Lord’s work.”

“Wow,” she said, “Glad it’s you and not me.” She felt a twinge of guilt. *That*, she thought, *was inappropriate*.

“Oh, no!” she said lifting her sunglasses down off of her eyes and looking at Valerie soberly. “I absolutely love it. It’s sort of up my alley, you might say.”

“How so?”

“I was an Executive Admin Assistant for a large banking firm on the old earth, worked at the top of their world headquarters in San Francisco. Previous to that I’d held a position as a Legal Secretary for a large law firm in Oakland.”

“Wow. Then you’re used to corporate etiquette and legal procedures.”

“Yes. I am. But this is different. Very different. I don’t know if I should tell you all the details. But wow! I mean wow!”

“It must be awesome,” said Valerie.

“Yes!” Marlow responded with an excited yelp. She leaned back in her chair and looked up into the sun. “My,” she said softly, “that sun feels good. I’d forgotten how nice it is to come down here. I’ve been so busy lately, I rarely take the time to come down here for a visit. It’s very pleasant.”

“Wouldn’t live anywhere else. At least not at this moment.”

“How long have you lived here?” Marlow asked.

“I can’t say as I know. But I think I’ve been here a few months.”

“Honestly? You seem like an old hat at this.”

“Thanks,” Valerie responded, “I needed that. It’s still a bit daunting at times. But then, I suppose God knows what each of us needs.”

“Yes.” She hesitated looking over at the house. “I see you have a lovely cabin home.”

“Yeah,” said Valerie loosening up a bit. “My husband-to-be and I hope to raise children there when the time is right, and after we’ve married.”

Marlow smiled. “Kids. Always wanted them. Sort of. Actually I’m glad I remained single all my life. I never would have had the time for a family.”

“Seriously?” Valerie’s voice was filled with the incredulous tone she felt. “Well, you won’t have time for them now,” she said, remembering what God had told her about the position’s importance and all the time and energy it would take.

“No. I won’t, will I.” Marlow stopped and took her glasses off, setting them down on the table. She lifted up the dripping glass of lemonade and took a couple of hard gulps.

Valerie thought that was curious. The woman had been selected for a position that required a strong knowledge of etiquette and yet seemed uncomfortable with being anything but real. She felt somewhere inside of

herself that Marlow had been chosen for good reasons. The Lord Himself had seemed that way to Valerie. Proper in some ways, but compassionately real.

* * * * *

Valerie's home and gardens were exceptionally nice. Very much where Marlow would like to have lived if she'd lived anywhere on the New Earth. Heaven was so much different than this very beautiful earthy existence. It was wide open, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Marlow appreciated having a hideaway to get away to, where no one could track her down as she supposed they would if they knew she had anything to do with the Lord Himself.

She also appreciated having a friend. She could tell that with time, she and Valerie would probably be very good friends. She'd had good friends herself at times, though they usually left for one reason or another. It seemed to be her lot in both this life and the old one. No one stayed. Not because they didn't like her, but because there were other pressing matters in their lives. She'd never known anyone long enough to become close. She hoped, this time, things would be different. She hoped, maybe since God Himself was in on this relationship, that He wouldn't suddenly take it away from her. She'd been disappointed before.

Marlow took in a deep wonderful breath. "I love your place," she said. "I wish I could have one like it in Heaven."

"Maybe you could have a place here," said the lovely Valerie. Valerie looked to Marlow like the perfect New Earth angel. Or a biker babe. One or the other. Maybe both.

"You're not a biker by any chance, are you?"

"Well, actually," said Valerie, "I have been on a chopper once or twice."

"You have one?"

“I do.”

“Oh, my heavens! That’s awesome! Do you suppose I could ride myself sometime? Incognito?”

“I don’t see why not. Sounds like fun to me.”

“Heavens that would be fun!” said Marlow excitedly.

“Come dressed in jeans and a jacket and the rest of who you are today,” said Valerie. “No one would ever guess you are who you are.”

“No,” she said putting her glasses back on. “They wouldn’t, would they.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Writing tablets!” Jim stood up from the table and stretched his arms out above him, arching his back. He’d had enough of reading and book preparations.

He walked over to where the chocolates sat on the game table just the opposite side of where his book and tablet lay, and popped another candy into his mouth. The tablet lay open with almost unintelligible scribbles written on every page. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t like using the learning stations for his writing projects. They sure would have come in handy.

Valerie had been gone for two or three hours. She’d been so nervous before leaving. He hadn’t known what to say. It seemed this new gal, what was her name? Marlene, no Marlow. As in Thomas. As in his old crush from younger days. “That Girl.” The New York actress with pretty black hair and a posh 60’s styled New York apartment. *Wow!* he thought. *That’s an old memory.*

Marlow Christianson. Valerie’s new charge. The one she was befriending according to the Lord’s prompt. That much he did know. But that was about it. He wasn’t even to get a chance to meet her, at least not today. It made him feel a bit left out. The proverbial third wheel.

He walked over to the window and looked south of the lake where she’d said they’d be. He couldn’t see anything from here. The porch, and the storage sheds, yes. Trees and more trees. But not his wife, nor her charge.

He thought about turning on the television. “Dang,” he said, “striking his head with the ball of his hand. What an old thought that is. Television.” He hadn’t even seen one in this world. I know, he thought. I’ll go check out something cool in the Learning Center.

Walking into the huge room with its white walls and small windows, he sat down at the middle station and repositioned the large flat screen till it was facing away from the sunlight. It was really cool how these screens

worked. They weren't attached to anything, suspended in mid air, and you could place them just about anywhere, at any angle you chose.

He'd placed four of these stations in both the Dance Room and the Music Room downstairs, just under the deck and family room. One screen placed on each wall. They looked like the old earth plasma TV sets. You could move them anywhere they were needed, and start the tutorials or begin recording by speaking to them. Jim wasn't even sure Val had seen these rooms or knew of their existence, yet. The dance room was a typical dance studio. The music room an atypical music studio.

All these rooms, stood empty. Ready and waiting. Waiting for a family. For Children. For Val. Who apparently had a job to do. An important one. And still they weren't allowed to get married. Not yet. God wasn't finished with the three of them.

Jim turned his attention back to the learning station screen. *What*, he asked God, *do you have for me today?*

The screen lit up and a video began to play. The video of a little girl, with dark brown hair and a delightful smile. She was picking a dandelion off the grass. Ready to blow it's seeds into the wind, he supposed.

What's this? he asked. The Lord just simply said, "Watch."

* * * * *

"Jim?" Val had popped into the family room, excited about the wonderful time she'd had with Marlow. She wished so much that she could tell him all about her, share with him what was happening. But God had said no. Not this time. Nothing.

"Honey, come in here." The sound of Jim's voice was one of curiosity mixed with amusement. But it was more than that.

She stepped into the Learning Center and started to walk over to where he sat, wanting to sneak him a quick kiss on the cheek, but he turned to face her and the moment was gone. "What is it?" she asked with a smile.

“If I were to tell you that you could check out the future, just a little, and apparently God would allow it, would you want to see what I’m talking about?”

“Of course.” Jim really had her attention now. “Yeah, of course.”

“Here,” he said, “take a look at this.”

Valerie walked over to where he sat in front of one of the learning stations and peered over his shoulder. “What is it?” she asked.

“Just look,” he responded.

On the screen was the picture of a beautiful chestnut-haired girl, about two, maybe three years old. She was squatting down, with one hand holding back her dress and the other picking a dandelion puff ball. “Who’s that?” she asked.

“That,” Jim said surreptitiously, “is our daughter.”

Valerie stared at the video display disbelieving what she saw. She moved one of the nearby chairs closer to his and sat down on the edge of her seat.

“This,” said Jim, “is her introductory bio.” He divided the screen into two sections. One, the short video reel of the little girl, the other a written biography.

“I just discovered this,” he said. “I’d never thought to ask such a question before and apparently God’s allowing it. It’s not the usual thing for Him to do. Showing anything from the future is usually verboten.”

“Read the bio,” he said to the display, and a voice began reading aloud as the reel played full screen. Almost as large as life. Valerie gaped at what she heard. The station was telling her that this little girl was going to live a life of joy and imagination. An imagination that God was going to originate and bless. *My little girl?* she thought. *Wow.*

The reel finished and the voice came to a stop. "It didn't tell us her name," she said almost in a panic, "Isn't there more?"

"I don't know," said Jim. "Lord?" he asked aloud.

"It's not for you to know," came the Lord's audible response, firm but undeniably caring.

"Wow," they both said in unison. "Amazing," Jim added.

Valerie wanted to watch the video and hear the bio over and over again. "Jim?" she asked. "May we watch it all again? At least once?"

"Sure," he said, but as he went to touch the screen, it went blank. "I guess not," came his second response.

"Can we see others, Lord?" Valerie asked out loud.

Another picture popped up on the screen. A large still photograph. "Oh..." she said choking up a touch, her throat constricting with mounting emotion. "My... I know who that is."

"Who?" Jim asked in amazement.

"The little boy from my baby dreams," she responded in kind.

"Your baby dreams," he was speaking quietly and with wonder. "I remember those."

"He's the one I was always so enamored with. The darling one I always thought was my real little boy. Until I awoke. Good gravy..." her voice trailed off, "he's real?"

"Wow," Jim said. He began to play the video, and the little boy, about the same age as the girl had been, threw a ball to Jim haphazardly. "Stop," he said to the learning station. Jim was beginning to shed tears.

She looked down at her husband, taking in what was happening. It was almost as if she were in shock. *A little baby boy? Someday? In my*

arms? But there was no emotion tied to it. Except fear. Her hopes had been dashed so many times, her dreams merely dreams, that now with this very real possibility on the horizon, all she wanted to do was go to sleep. Her eyes felt heavy. She knew she had things to face inside of herself. *Lord, she whispered within, help me. This hurts too much.*

Valerie's eyes focused on Jim once again. She watched him, tenderly noticing his tears, wondering what he was feeling. The little boy on their screen was their own child. Someone from some time in their future. Someone very real who had stolen himself into her dreams. A baby boy she would love. A child Jim would adore. His child. And hers.

* * * * *

Val's arm felt good around his neck. Jim wept silently, looking at the picture of his son, so cute, lopping the little ball his direction. The only sons he had ever had were in his hopes, in his dreams. But they'd been there, all along, tugging at his heart, pulling at his fears.

Val had had her baby dreams. Years and years of her own heart tearing apart. But no one had known. He hadn't shared it with anyone. That he also had had dreams.

He'd seen it all. Over the years here since he'd arrived. Baby clothes and rattles, cribs and playpens, books and toys and games. He'd wanted so much to fill his rooms with them. He'd wanted it so badly that he had actually done it. Those empty rooms. Filled with things but not people. The little people he wanted to love. Wanted to hold. Wanted to talk to about life. Wanted to share his life with.

Val's own tears were beginning to spill. The video resumed until there was nothing left but the still photo on the screen. *Don't take it away God, he entreated inwardly. I need to see my son. I need to know he's real. Please.*

The screen remained, photo charged with the smile of his little boy, and his own smile. Valerie pulled closer to him and knelt down with her arms around his neck and her head resting against his upper arm. Jim wiped

his tears and took hold of the arm she'd wrapped around in front of him. She dropped her arm and took hold of his hand, their hands held limply in his lap.

He couldn't speak. Couldn't tell her how much this promise meant to him. How much that little one caught hold of him. How long he'd waited for this moment. On both worlds. Then all at once, he couldn't take it anymore. Couldn't hold it back and a torrent of tears gushed out from somewhere inside of him. Deep, deep within him. He felt strange. Guilty for all the tears he'd shed since Val had been here in his new home. But this was all so important. His whole life hung in the balance right now. His hopes, his dreams, his future. And hers.

They sat there holding onto each other and weeping together. Love flowing between them, through them from God. A shadow passed across the window on the other side of the room and it darkened slightly. Rain began to beat lightly against the window. *God, thought Jim, must be crying too.*

* * * * *

The wind was blowing a little harder than usual. Barb was almost cold as she stood outside of Jim's and Val's home. Ready to rap on their door. Something had told her, though it wasn't quite in verbal form, that she needed to be here. Needed to stop something from happening. She didn't know what. But it felt very serious.

She hesitated and then knocked on their front door. There was too long a pause. Either no one was home, or they were ignoring her knock. "Not a good sign," she said out loud. "Val? Jim?" she called out almost dismayed. Something was wrong. She knew they were within the walls. God was never off target and she'd prayed to be wherever they were.

She was getting a gut feeling--a bad gut feeling--that they were about to lose their purity. About to give into their own strong feelings. She knew that God wouldn't allow that to happen. So she called out to them loudly, "I'm walking through the dang door you two!"

No one appeared to be inside. *Father?* she asked within herself. *It's enough*, he responded. "Okay, then," she said out loud, and walked back out the door. Disappearing back to her own home.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The weight on Jim's shoulder's began to lift. He'd ignored the warning signs. His emotions too strong. His love for her making it too difficult. God hadn't even given him a headache. Why? Why didn't God try to stop them Himself? He usually didn't allow these kinds of choices. But then God was doing things differently than Jim had ever seen Him do things before. Videos of the future? And Val in his arms. And then it had been too much. He was fumbling with her clothing until Barb knocked on his door. Loudly. As usual.

Now as he knelt there facing her, Val was buttoning her blouse. She looked pain stricken. But not with a headache. With a heartache. He supposed this was too much for her as well.

I've got to get away, put some distance between us, he thought. Got to do something to stop myself. What's so important, Jim thought, that Val and I can't get married. Now.

The breeze outside the house picked up and cloud cover darkened the room even further. God, he was certain, was not happy with them. He knew he was not happy with himself.

He gathered himself together and told Val he would be back later. Then he popped out to the lake, out to where apparently his wife and Marlow had been earlier. He figured his wife would want to talk with Barb. And he wanted to be alone. Definitely.

His breathing picked up pace as he thought about everything. Everything. *Lord, he thought, what am I going to do? How long will it be before we can make this is real marriage? And thank you, by the way, for Barb. He waited but all that was there was a breath of wind. You seem to be silent a lot lately, he thought.*

He lay down on the grass by the stream, his face against the cool grass. The water bubbled over rocks making a soothing sound. As he lay, face down in the grass, his thoughts turned around in his mind. He hated

feeling like this. Hated feeling out of control. *Someday*, he thought, *I'll get myself together. Some day*, he thought, *Val and I will be married.*

* * * * *

Barb? Val sent the g-mail to her friend. *Are you willing to come back?*

Sure babe, I thought maybe you needed your privacy.

No, actually I don't. Could you pop on over? Or are you busy?

No, babe, not too busy for you.

Barb popped into her living room holding two small kittens. They couldn't have been more than four or five weeks old. Tiny little tykes. Valerie smiled and gave a short giggle. "You're funny, girl," she said.

"Yeah well, I try," Barb responded, handing her one of the little kits. "Are you okay, babe?"

"No," said Valerie, "I'm not." She cuddled the little black and brown kitten. "I'm not at all." She hesitated. "Did you know?"

"I, uh... Yeah?" Barb said it almost apologetically.

"Thank you." She said softly, and she meant it. Very much. "Barb, I don't know what happened. We were there, talking and watching something and then all of a sudden we were... almost doing the wrong thing."

"I know," she said. "God showed me I needed to pop over."

"Thank you, and thank God," she said, "You saved our hides."

"You're not kidding," she said. "God don't like that. It'd cost ya, big time."

"Is it even possible? To break God's rules here?"

“I hope not.”

“Yeah...” The kitten mewed in the tiniest mew she’d heard in ages. “It’s been a long time,” she said, meaning the kitten, but Barb took it the wrong way.

“Now’s not the time to start it up again,” she said.

“No, I meant seeing a kitten this tiny.”

“Oh.” Barb sat silently, stroking the kitten’s fur with her index finger. Her kitten was a beautiful blue-cream color. They were pug nosed. Valerie just watched her, feeling a little helpless, a little ashamed. But grateful, very grateful for the small talk. She needed to calm her body and emotions down.

“Persian?” Valerie asked.

“Yep. They’re cute, aren’t they.”

“Yes, they are.” There was a long pause as the two women sat there on the rug of the living room floor. “Barb?”

“Yes darlin’?”

“I’m scared.”

“I’m glad,” said Barb. “You just don’t do things like this in the New Earth... You don’t.”

“I guess not.”

“You guess right.”

“So how did you stop *yourself*?” Val asked.

“We didn’t live together. It would have been impossible.”

“Maybe,” said Valerie, “That’s a good idea. Maybe... We need to separate until the wedding.”

“Maybe,” said Barb, “you’re right.”

* * * * *

Thoughts still rumbled around and around in Jim’s mind. The clouds covering the sun were a gigantic blessing to him. They told him how much it meant to God that they keep themselves pure. He was certain that these clouds were God’s way of showing His own moodiness. His own emotions. His own disapproval.

“I think it’s time, Lord, that Val and I go our separate ways. Temporarily. Don’t you think?” The sun peeked through the clouds and it grew suddenly brighter. “I thought you’d agree.”

He sat up, holding his face up into the sky with his eyes closed, his arms hung loosely over his bent knees. The light wind felt nice. It was slightly cool. But balmy. A little humid. A bolt of lightning crackled across the sky. And rain began to pelt his body. It felt nice. Right. Good. God had saved his hide today. He was grateful

You just didn’t break this rule here. He’d never heard of it happening. Why it was so important to God, Jim wasn’t sure. But it was. Always had been. Here, however, such disobedience would most likely ruin their marriage. He knew he felt pretty strong emotions of guilt right now. He didn’t want to anger his Lord. He didn’t want to ruin that intimacy he and Val, and God had experienced a while back. It was precious. This could have thrown a rock into the machinery. And ruined the whole thing. Why, he wondered, was this such an important thing to God? Why not just let them get married.

But Jim already knew the answer to that question. Had they been married when the job with Jesus was presented to Val, she wouldn’t have had a choice. That choice was important to Jim and he was certain it was important to God. Had they been married right away, Hannah wouldn’t have grown so much in the little bit of time they’d had with her. Had they

been married, Elizabeth might not have gone into the Heavens to live with her husband from the old world. And Hannah, and most likely Elizabeth, would have been altogether miserable.

Had they been married, they wouldn't have been looking for something to do. They wouldn't have seen their children on the screen. Who knows, he thought, what else might be effected by their abstinence from everything. Including marriage. Including... marriage.

"Well, if there's going to be much more time before we can be married," he said to the Lord. "Then I'd better move out. And preferably with someone else. It would be safer that way. Maybe Barb and Charlie?"

Barb? he sent her a g-mail. *May I speak to you and Charlie for a minute.*

Hold on Jim, she responded. *I'm with Val right now. You need me immediately?*

Maybe we all need to talk together, he thought to her. *And Charlie needs to be there. Is he busy?*

Don't think so. Why don't you call him and we'll meet at your place?

Sure.

Charlie? he called to his friend.

Yeah Jim, what's up?

I desperately need to speak with you and Barbara and Val at my place. Is that okay? Are you available?

Sure buddy. I'll be there straight away.

Jim stood up and brushed sprigs of green grass off of his trousers. He was fully aware that there was a possibility Barb and Charlie wouldn't want any more company. And where would Val stay? He didn't want her to become his constant temptation. And it would be tempting to pop over and

stay alone with her if she were there, alone, in their house. They needed to be a little more careful than that.

He looked up into the skies before readying himself to pop into his living room. “Thank you, Lord,” he said smiling weakly. “I love you so much.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

“Of course you can stay in our house.” Barb said it without looking at Charlie, which ticked him off just a little. But he agreed. His friend needed a place to stay and Janie and Bobbie had just moved into their own place. So there was an extra room.

“But I don’t want to be alone, here, either. That in itself defeats the whole purpose.”

Val had a brain in her head. Charlie wondered why they didn’t think of the obvious. “Hey, dimwits,” he said, “Why doesn’t Barb stay here with Val, while you’re there with me, Jim.”

“Good idea!” said Jim.

Barb looked a little perturbed by the thought. “What will I do here?”

“Bring your kittens, Barb,” said Valerie, “I’ll have things to do myself. Just bring any old thing you want to bring. I’ll sleep in one of the kids rooms and you can sleep in my room.”

“That big, giant bed with all the pretty white blankets?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, okay. You convinced me. I’ll do it.”

“So will I,” said Jim.

“And I,” said Val.

“Then it’s a deal.” Charlie shot the words out around the long piece of grass he was chewing on. “It’s a done deal.”

“Thanks so much you two,” said Val. “We really needed this.”

“Tz okay,” said Barb.

“Yeah, it is,” said Charlie smiling at his wife with just a bit of sarcasm. He wished she’d check with him on these things before spouting them off like that.

“Charlie,” said Barb, “You know that I love you.”

“Sure, why not,” said Charlie. “What’s up, baby?”

“I’m sorry I invited Jim over without checking with you first.”

Charlie was bowled over. “Is that right,” he said.

“That’s right,” she said smiling softly. She leaned across from where she sat on the floor opposite Charlie and pecked him on the lips. “That’s right.”

* * * * *

Barb packed her things into the drawers Val had left empty for her. She hadn’t needed to bring much along with her. Just a few homey things--books she wanted to read, her journal, her feathery fluffy topped pen. Things that would make her feel less of a bother and more at home. She looked around at Val’s pretty bedroom. *Nice!* she thought. *Very nice.*

There was even a little parlor area behind the gigantic headboard. *Mirrors no less!* she said to herself. *Huh. Fancy parlors and Oh! A private balcony! With that gorgeous view.* She would enjoy reading here out on that balcony. Or in the parlor.

This was going to be a nice home away from home. She rather needed a bit of a vacation from the old man anyway. It would be nice to spend some time in this big, beautiful cabin.

Val was away in Heaven. Talking to some lady named Marlow and visiting with Hannah and the gang. She said she wasn’t sure how long she’d be gone, but then that was a ‘no duh.’ Barb picked up her journal and

began to write. Her thoughts were jumbled and it always helped to write the jumbles out on paper before she actually got down to doing something constructive.

The sunlight pierced through the window and Barb sat down in one of the parlor chairs. Jim sure had put a lot of thought into decorating this place. Not to mention having it built. He was such a thoughtful kind of guy. Caring about every little detail. Val hadn't had to do much, she imagined. Jim was not like Charlie at all.

Charlie was a sweetheart. But not much sensitivity to his mannerisms. Or his character. He had his ways. And they could be very, very, *very* good. But sometimes she wished she could have both his sexy gruffness and a little more sensitivity. "Kind of mutually exclusive," she supposed out loud. She kicked her foot up under her, so she was sitting on it. Barb knew she never would have chosen anyone else. Never. He was almost perfect for her. It's just that sometimes, she wished he'd be a little nicer with the way he talked to her and the things he did for her.

Whatever, she thought. *He's got his pluses. Not too many minuses either*, she reminded herself. *Not many at all actually. Nobody's perfect*, she thought, *not even here*. Even so, Charlie was a kick. A real kick. And she loved her husband. Almost all of the time.

She looked down at her scribbled notes. Her jumbled up brain was beginning to make more sense to her. She lifted her purple pen up, its feathery fluff resting lightly against her cheek felt soft, tickly. "May I have some music, Lord?" she prayed. A soft, flowing music began to play throughout the room and she hummed along with it. It was a tune she knew from somewhere. She wasn't sure where. "Thank you," she said.

Val and I will have to record something later, she thought. *She'd love to learn how to use the Music Room, I'll bet. And I'd also bet her voice is as beautiful as she is*. Barb's own voice was nice, but nothing special. Still she loved to belt out some of the old gospel sounds. It was a lot of fun.

* * * * *

Valerie popped into her living room looking delighted and excited.

“Oh! Barb!” she almost shouted the words she was so excited. “We’ve got permission!”

“Permission? Oh?... No! Permission to get married?”

“Yep.”

Valerie stood in their living room with the new lady Marlow, and Hannah, Alice and Elizabeth.

“Oh, girl!” Barb jumped up off the chair and took Val by the forearms. “Oh, my goodness! It’s time.”

Barb looked up at the other gals. Alice she’d met once or twice before and Elizabeth was looking more relaxed than ever before, Hannah almost looked like a young woman rather than a young girl, but this new lady was rather intimidating. Her looks were as pretty as anyone else’s. It wasn’t her looks that made her intimidating. It was her sense of stature that made the difference.

She stood erect. Almost tall. Her tiny features punctuated by short dark curls and bluish black skin. She was like the Queen of Sheba, so to speak. Royalty, more or less. She almost dressed the part as well. But not quite. Professional, you’d say, in a slate blue jacket over an exquisite white blouse and a stylish flared black skirt. A silver buckle and an odd looking broach garnished the look with a sophisticated touch of class.

“Hello, Barbara,” she said with a regal sounding voice. “My name is Marlow.” She held out her hand and Barbara shook it softly.

“Hi,” said Barb, “It’s a pleasure.”

“Hello, Auntie Barbara,” Hannah’s voice was almost adult. She sounded older than she had when she left for the Heavens and she was dressed in a beautiful peach blouse and skirt. No purple!

“Life in Heaven must be treating you nice, Little Sister,” she said.

“You look wonderful.”

“Thank you Ma’am,” she said.

“Please, don’t call me that,” said Barb trying hard not frown, or blow on her bangs.

“We’re teaching her graciousness with adults,” said Alice. “It’s important to us that she learn to address them respectfully and not as a child.”

“Understood,” said Barb. “I can appreciate that. She *is* growing up, isn’t she.”

“She certainly is,” said Valerie.

Elizabeth hadn’t said a word, no ‘dahlings,’ nothing. She stood there quietly with a rather pleasant look on her face. Barb didn’t want to disturb her pleasantness by talking with her. She knew she always seemed to bring out the worst in Elizabeth.

“It’s nice to see you again, Barbara,” Elizabeth spoke in warm tones.

Barb wanted to hang her mouth open, but decided against it. “Uh... Thanks,” she said. “Same here.”

“I’ve been watching the wedding ceremonies from the New Earth portal,” said Valerie. “They’re beautiful! Oh, Barb, I can’t wait!”

“Heard that,” said Barb. She was still puzzled over Elizabeth’s apparent good will toward her.

“Have you spoken with Jim about it yet?”

“Of course,” she said sweetly, “He was the first person I spoke with. Actually, he spoke with me. The Lord told him first.”

“Wouldn’t you know it!” It was beginning to sink into Barb’s brain. “How long has it been up there. It’s only been a day down here.”

“We’ve been up there several months worth,” said Val.

“Oh, I see. Months, not years,” said Barb. It was always amazing to her how time could pass so quickly up there and crawl down here. Or vice versa.

Valerie walked over to Barb and gave her a big hug. “Thanks so much,” she said.

“For what?” Barb was truly stumped.

“For everything.” Val’s face was aglow. She was very happy.

“Has Jim been up there in Heaven with you?”

“Yes!” Val responded. “It was an afterthought we had. Why not get to know each other very well, along with other people, in a place where temptation isn’t possible!”

“Why didn’t we all think of that!”

“It’s definitely been worthwhile. We got to see our past history together, check out our past emotional states...”

“At the history portal, I see that you found it.”

“Yep. Elizabeth was the one to show me that.”

“Elizabeth? What’s happened to you Lizzy?”

Elizabeth didn’t even bristle at the name she used to so dislike. “I’ve learned love,” she said. “John, Sr. and Jr., Alice and I went through a Circle of Friends. We’ve been there nearly eight years. We all got to know each other so well, together with the Spirit of God.”

“I’ve never been through one,” said Barb, “I might want to try it some time. Looks like it did you a world of good.

“We’ll all have to talk! Please! When’s the big date?” asked Barb

“Soon,” said Val. “We’re not exactly sure yet, but soon.”

Chapter Thirty

Come along honey, Walter walked beside his lovely little daughter who was definitely in good humor. *We'll be there in a little while.*

When, daddy, when? Joey asked.

Soon enough, he responded with love.

His little daughter had been ready to plunge headlong from his arms down through the New Earth's portal. She wanted to go down and visit her older sister that much. She was such a precious doll, Joey. And Walter understood the depth of beauty that his little girl was developing here.

He'd been so thrilled to find her there when he'd arrived in Heaven. He'd waited for months before visiting Joey, watching from the portal as his sister Darla raised up his daughter in their New Earth home. Darla had apparently taken in his little one following Joey's death when Walter had been such a young father--on the old earth--many, many years before his own death, actually his own rebirth twenty years ago.

What a delight it had been to see Joey back then. She had only grown to be about five years old, now she was seven or so. It was nice how time passed by so slowly for children here. He had an opportunity to watch and wait and grow to know her like he never could have had he raised her himself, on the old earth. His mother, Beatrice, and Darla had been absolute sweethearts, raising her up to be a strong, vibrant, lovely little girl. Her own mother, his wife, was still on the old world.

On the New Earth, Joey looked much like the little cherubs of the old world's whimsy. Pale, thin, curls fell down along side her chubby little face. She was at least as beautiful as any other little girl on the planet and Walter was exhilarated knowing his adorable little sweetheart had been raised and loved for so long before he'd arrived.

He stopped, told Joey they were going now, took hold of her hand and thought about being down on the New Earth, transporting them somewhere

in the vicinity of his newly arrived daughter's home. Valerie, he knew, would be delighted to see them.

As Joey and he traipsed along, holding hands and meandering down the road toward Valerie's house, she skipped, biting her lower lip like she always did. "I love Jesus, Yes, I do, Yes I do." She sang the words her Auntie Darla had taught her to a little ditty they'd created on his sister's learning station. "When we are in His delight, I love Him with all my might." Her skip turned into a little dance as she tugged at his arm to look backwards at a fluffy-looking white bird that landed on a nearby bush. "Look, Daddy," she said. "Daddy, look at the pretty white bird!"

"Yes, darling," he said with a smile. "It's very pretty."

"Do you think Sissy will want to play with the pretty white birds? I do!"

"I don't know, Little Princess," he said. "We'll have to ask Sissy when we get to her house. She just might want to play with some animals." He bet his boots Valerie would be willing to take time to play with her little sister.

He remembered Valerie very sweetly. They'd grown to know each other so well on the old earth. She had been the pride of his life back then. A lovely woman, heart and soul. They'd spent a great deal of time together getting over Joey's death. He couldn't imagine Valerie not wanting to play with his Little Princess.

The third of his five children, Joey had been taken so quickly, so unexpectedly. It had been a horrifying devastation to the older kids, not to mention Walter and his wife, Lotty. But it had effected Sissy more than any of the other children. Because of the fact that she had witnessed her little sister's death. First hand.

His younger children, Dorothy and his son, Walter, Jr., hadn't yet been born when Joey died in 1954. Today, they were still on the old earth with Caroline, his oldest daughter. He couldn't wait, himself, until they were all reunited here, somewhere in the New Earth or in the Heavens. Somehow. He hoped sooner than later.

They were nearing Sissy's home. It was a bright, bright day. The sun unusually brilliant. Like a hot summer day, without the heat. Another white bird flitted by. Its feathers unusually full. Most likely the other bird's mate. He wondered if there might be a nest close by. Then the two birds answered his question.

They flew overhead, playing a little bit of a leap frog along the trees and bushes, and landed on a tree a few yards ahead of them. One bird twittered joyously and hopped over to a nest in the tree feeding some chirping nestlings something from its own mouth. A berry most likely, that's what most birds seemed to feed on here.

"Look, Little Princess!" he said to Joey. She turned her head toward where he was pointing.

"Hahhhh! Can I see?" she asked.

Walter lifted Joey up to the nest. She was getting downright heavy. Not a baby anymore after all. Hadn't been for quite a while. But the lift wasn't too difficult, at least not yet. It wasn't a real problem here, lifting up the older little ones. You just knew when the child wasn't to be lifted. It became inappropriate at a particular point. And God seemed to let you know when that point came.

The child giggled, holding her fingers to her mouth. "Little babies!" she squealed. The mother and father birds hopped back allowing Joey to pet their nestlings.

"Be careful, sweetheart. Don't pick them up," he said, "They're very tiny and they might fall out of the nest. That might be a little scary to them."

"Thank you," he said to the birds who twittered their response. The mother bird then sat squarely on her little ones and nestled down, probably to keep them feeling safe and secure.

"There we go," he told his little darling. "We're almost there Little Princess."

“Yea!” she squealed. “Sissy Valerie!”

* * * * *

Aghast, Valerie swung open the door. She knew who these two were. She’d seen them many times from the history portal. “Joey!” she said, “Papa!”

“Hello, Sissy,” Valerie’s father said with a kiss on her cheek. Valerie couldn’t hold back her love. She hugged her father with abandon and then turned to her little sister.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said softly. The little tow-haired girl looked slightly shy. She bit her lower lip and Valerie fell in love with her. “I’ve missed you so much!” she said. “Come hug your Sissy.” The little angel flopped into her arms with her own abandon. Joey hugged Valerie’s neck like she didn’t want to let it go.

“I remember you. Daddy and I watched you from the portal,” she said into Valerie’s ear. Valerie’s face began to tickle as her little sister’s eyelashes fluttered against her cheek. She was giving her a butterfly kiss!

Valerie touched her own cheek with a sober feeling. “I’ve missed you, Joey, so, so much.”

“Me too, Sissy,” she said with a softness that told Valerie she was feeling just as sober.

“We hear you’re to be married soon,” said her father.

“Yes, sir,” she said, “as soon as we possibly can.”

“When’s the date?”

“The Lord said any time now. Apparently, He’ll choose the day for us.

“As He usually does,” said her father. “I guess I asked more out of habit from the old world than anything else. His ways are eternally the same. It’s so good to see you, Pumpkin.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, giving him another hug. “It certainly is.”

“Your Aunt Darla wants to visit with you before the wedding, if at all possible. But she’s been very busy herself with her portal projects.”

“What’s she up to?” Valerie asked, opening the door to let them both in. They walked in and Joey gasped. “What?” she asked her little sister.

“The stairs!” she said with wide-eyed wonder. “Where do they go?” she asked. “We never had stairs in our house before.”

“They go up to some bedrooms, just for little boys and girls,” she said, “Like you. Want to see?”

“Sure!” Joey ran up ahead of her to climb the stairs and her father gave her a pleased look.

“Children’s rooms?” he asked.

“Your grandchildren-to-be,” she said smiling soulfully.

“You and Jim going to have plenty of little ones, Sissy?”

“Yes sir!” she said with delight. “Absolutely! We’ve even seen our future daughter and son.”

“No kidding?”

“The Lord allowed it, daddy,” she said looking at her father intensely. “Man, I’ve missed you.”

“Me too,” he said placing his arm around her shoulder. “Very much.”

Chapter Thirty One

Nervousness tugged at Jim's lips. They twitched a little, almost shaking. Today was the day. And He was about to take the plunge. Eternally. Weddings were definitely unsettling. Although he himself hadn't been a groom in many, many years. If it weren't for the fact that he was marrying his life-time partner, once again, he might have had cold feet right about now. But Valerie, he knew. Well. He loved. Very much. He couldn't wait to be married to her.

Valerie's father and his own stood talking somewhere behind him. Jim checked the mirror to see them chatting quite happily. They had so much in common Mr. Johnston and his dad. Both of them quite professional in their old lives.

Walter had been a business man. He had worked as a high-level administrator for one of the hospitals in his home town on the old earth. Mr. Johnston, he liked to be called by the younger folks. Although here they were all basically the same age. He had been here living in the Heavens for years. Apparently he and Joey, Val's little sister, had just come in contact with her this week.

His own father, a minister most of his life, had just arrived a couple of years earlier. Having died at a ripe old age. He was 85 when he'd passed. His mother, now 83 was still deeply grieving and wouldn't be attending, still caught on the old earth. Jim was sorry she wouldn't be a part of the wedding banquet. It would have done her heart joy.

"Dad?" Jim prompted.

"Yes son?" replied his father.

"May I speak to you privately?"

"Sure. Excuse me Walter, I'll speak to you later on the matter."

"Certainly. It's been a pleasure Gregory."

“What is it, Jim.” His father caught Jim by the arm and then gave him a sideways hug. “You look a tad nervous.”

“Exactly,” said Jim. “You’ve done this a million times on the old earth. Weddings and all. What do you have to say to a nervous groom?”

“Well,” his father smiled, looking down at his own feet, “this’ll be my first here on this planet, son. I haven’t yet attended a wedding here. I have no idea what to tell you about this kind of marriage. It wasn’t anything I would have expected to be available from the old earth... What is it you’re feeling nervous about?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, “It’s just unnerving.”

“What part of it is unnerving, Jim?”

“Facing her... today... knowing we’re about to start on a wonderful, eternal journey. Knowing that I haven’t got a real clue what’s going to happen or how to go about building a family here. I feel... scared. Of the responsibility.”

“Now that’s an old-earth problem!” His father swept his hand through his short black hair. He was almost smiling, but not quite. Jim supposed he understood, more than anyone else he knew, exactly what this was like. Having officiated so many old-earth weddings and having spoken with so many old-earth grooms.

“Why don’t we sit for a minute, son, and talk.” Jim tucked his hands into his pant pockets and walked with his father over to a bench in the little private garden area within the wedding hall designed for such moments.

They sat there quietly, Gregory’s arm around his shoulder and Jim just staring at his feet, almost squirming. Jim chuckled lightly, holding the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “I never thought I’d be nervously fidgeting over Valerie again, just before meeting her at the altar.”

“I think I understand why,” his father responded. “I can’t imagine how I’d feel if I had the chance to marry Marie again. Your mother and I

had a rather austere relationship on the old earth. Although I know she's grieving pretty hard right now. Sometimes I wonder if I'd marry her again. For eternity especially.

"Yeah," Jim knew his father would understand. "But Val and I aren't that way, dad. We really love and need each other. But eternity. That's still intimidating."

"Yes it is, son. It is. It probably always is."

"Thanks. I never thought of that." Jim stooped forward and his father placed a hand on his closest shoulder.

"Eternity is a long time," said Gregory. "A very long time." He hesitated a moment while they both stared at their feet. "You will always have options, son, even so. I know marriage is permanent here, but your mother and I always considered it so on the old earth. Sometimes it was hard, other times wonderful. I suppose, don't you, that the same thing will happen here. Only very long term."

"Exactly," said Jim. "Exactly."

"You will have other options. Maybe marriage isn't the only lifestyle you'll want to have throughout the ages. Maybe heaven will be a long term part of your life at some point. Maybe simply playing with children or great, great, great, great grandchildren. Maybe service. Maybe travel. The possible maybes are endless, son. Endless."

"The only option I won't have is another wife, a different woman... I suppose."

"That's not true, son." Gregory's words were cautiously spoken. "Your wife will change. You will change. Things will change. You're going to have some great opportunities. To know differing Valeries. To know differing selves. To become someone different. To grow. To learn. To change. She'll be an entirely different person in 20 years. Who knows what she'll be like in 20,000."

"So true." Jim was beginning to get the picture. Even here nothing

was set in stone. Except that they were making a commitment to work things out together. One way or another. No death to part them. None. Ever. At first this wasn't much comfort to him; it actually served to increase his sense of panic. But then he remembered Valerie's smile. Her arms around him. Her loving voice. And Jim's heart began to take on a little lightness. The weight lifting a touch.

"Do you suppose she'll always love me?"

"Do you suppose you'll always love her?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I, son," he said, "and I suppose, neither does she."

"You're right dad." Jim was definitely getting the picture. "But if I have to choose someone to live this side of life with, for better or for worse, it's Valerie."

"Then I think you're making the right choice."

"Yes, sir, I believe I am."

"I believe you, son. And I believe the Lord has every detail planned. Every aspect already set in place. Every part of your changing life, ready and waiting. Beautifully perfect, even if it may be filled with some difficult learning lesson at times."

Jim hugged his father. "Then I guess this is it dad. Let's give this a go."

Jim's father smiled. "I've always loved you, son," he said. "And I've always loved Valerie. It'll be wonderful to watch you both make this choice. To choose life together. Real life. For the rest of eternity. I believe in you son; I believe in Valerie. But mostly I believe in God. What do you say, we go out and join the wedding party?"

"Sure, dad, thanks."

* * * * *

Barbara was stunning dressed to the hilt. Her hair and dress were essentially like that of a Venus d'Milo. Her pale blue gown draped loosely under her long neck, attached at each shoulder with a gorgeous diamond broach. Each diamond on the broach was at least two carats and intricately shaped like a leaf, twenty or thirty of them, set in a wreath on each shoulder, sparkled like delicate fire in the sun.

Her walk and mannerisms were as regal as any Valerie had ever seen. Barb stood a few feet away, serving garnished wafers on an elegant silver tray inlaid with cut crystal, making very polite conversation. It was amazing.

Marlow on the other hand, also dressed in Grecian style, looked more like a biker babe than Barbara did. Her hair was straight, black and spiked. Her eye shading drastic. Her skin still that beautiful blue-black tint. At this point Valerie wasn't sure which colors came out of a bottle. She'd never expected Marlow to style her hair so outrageously at an event like this, as couture as she had been when Valerie had first seen her. Marlow was definitely striking, nonetheless. And talking to Valerie's guests as if they were old friends.

Other guests crowded the Wedding Hall's garden area everywhere, surprising Valerie with who they were and how she knew them. Valerie herself stood regal, felt regal in her formal wedding gown. Looking, surprisingly, like the old-earth Disney films' Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. Valerie knew she was about to marry her handsome prince. Most handsome, most princely indeed.

She looked across at Jim who came ambling toward her, his father's arm around his shoulder. They both seemed in a sober mood, although Mr. Spencer was smiling. Jim looked incredibly handsome in his tuxedo and long golden blonde hair, waving down the sides of his tuxedo in a perfect flow of ruggedness mixed with exquisite opulence. Both combined with his own sense of dignity. It was a killer combination. She wanted to drop to the ground in a true faint.

Instead she smiled at him, lips quivering, and caught his gaze from a slight distance. His mouth dropped open, just a little, making him look extremely sexy. She truly did want to faint. He looked quite serious. Truly thoughtful. And very much in love. Exactly what she had always wanted. Perfectly. Beautifully. All she had ever wanted. Again.

Things started spinning around in her mind. Here she was, a young girl of 57 going on 23 and 23 going on 200,000. Getting ready to make the choice of her eternal life a reality. A beautiful, precious, promising reality. It was something she never thought she'd have the opportunity to do. It was a real shame her mother, Lotty, couldn't be with them. Both she and her mother-in-law, Marie, were still on the old earth. Widows awaiting their turn to enter their new eternal lives. Waiting to make their own eternal choices.

Valerie suddenly felt lightheaded. A little too gleeful. Maybe a slight bit panicky. This was it. Her decision never would have been any different. She didn't want anything more or less than what she had received, what she was about to receive. Still she was nervous. Just a touch. Just a tiny little touch. Then she began to wonder... what would touch be like in this world? What would marital relations be like. Oh, my, with the heights of physical sensitivity? And the beauty of everything that happened? Oh, my...

Her lips began to quiver a little harder. And then when she looked up, there he was. Close. With loving eyes. Searching hers. At this point, she almost did faint. Instead, he took her hands gently in his, and her quivering stilled. "I love you Val," is all he said. But it was enough.

Chapter Thirty Two

After four or five hours of lovely time with so many beautiful, close strangers, Valerie was ready to make the final walk down the final isle. Her father, stood beside her, ready to give her away. And her Heavenly Father called them both to begin the procession. Everyone stood, watching as she and Jim were joined hand in hand and the father of the bride offered his daughter to his son-in-law permanently.

Tears were being wept, Valerie could hear them as they passed through the crowd gathered behind white flower balustrades. She and Jim walked holding hands; carefully, lovingly looking into each other's eyes from time to time as they walked along the wide grassy isle leading up to the white bridge on which they would be joined in marriage.

The most awesome display of sunlight, almost like a giant diamond shining in the sky, sparkled from the sun itself, hanging in a cloudless expanse of crystal clear azure. Valerie felt like a princess, God's very own daughter, walking down the pathway leading to the most beautiful promises of eternal love and joy. An isle worth walking indeed.

She looked over at her soon-to-be husband. His bright and cheerful smile radiated with love. Pure, unadulterated love. Pure, unadulterated and intimate joy. She smiled at him beaming with her own loving wonder. They were about to share eternal promises. Eternal longings. Eternal hopes. Eternal dreams. Theirs was about to become the brightest love-light that had ever shone in her life, and most likely his. Outside of the love of the Father. The love of the Lord.

She skipped just once. Joy bubbling up inside of her. Like a well springing up within her. God had given his blessing. His greatest blessing yet. And He was about to draw them into His own loving embrace. Together as one. She'd heard the songs about eternal love. She'd seen the promises made so glibly. But never in a million years could she have imagined the possibility of their reality. Eternal, sweet and precious love. The love of her life, the one she could have chosen *not* to wed for eternity. Would be forever hers. In a matter of moments.

Forever, she thought. For... ever. The stuff that dreams are made of. Made real. *Oh, my, Father,* she prayed. *What an awesome world to live in. Thank you.*

* * * * *

There she is, Jim said within his heart. The love of my life. Dressed in white. Cinderella, pure and chaste. She waited! She waited for me! She's in love with this old bum. And wants to be my wife. Me! My wife! Oh, my, Father, he breathed almost breathlessly. The greatest gift you could have given me is this moment. Apart from you, there is nothing I want more. Apart from you, and my gift of eternal life, there is nothing I could give you higher praise for doing in my life. Apart from you, Lord, there is nothing more important, more pleasant, more precious to me than my Valerie.

Valerie Spencer. For eternity. My wife. My love. The mother of my children, my great grandchildren and their children down through every generation. I don't know, Valerie Spencer, what I'm going to do with you in 20,000 years. But I hope I'm doing whatever it is, together with you. With increased love. With increased joy. With little children dandled on my knee. And little babies pulling on my hair.

Valerie Spencer, for eternity. I love you. You are my excellent hope. My excellent dream. My loving promise. For all eternity. Thank you! Thank you, so much. For marrying me.

Jim only thought the words he wanted to say. But still, the words he had to say openly were tucked in his vest pocket. Ready, willing and waiting to be spoken. Ready, willing and waiting to become a reality. An eternal reality. God blessed reality. God conquered, God delivered hope. You have no idea, Valerie Spencer, he thought within himself as they climbed the steps to the top of the arched bridge, how much I love you.

* * * * *

A gloved hand held Jim's arm, taut with expectation, Valerie finished the climb to the top of the bridge. She stood, facing the southeast, with the sun piercing through the sky in splendid, brilliant love-light. A pair of white doves spread their wings and flew into the distance before them. Jim caught his breath and Valerie felt so loved. By God, by her Lord Jesus, and by the man who was about to become her husband for all eternity.

She knew, in the back of her mind, that this was the way she wanted to love God, love her Lord, love her world. To serve in this way, and any other way God chose for her future. Her brilliant, shining, love-lit future. All the trouble she had gone through in her prior life had melted away the moment she woke up in this beautiful world. The moment she met the Lord in the Heavens. The moment she experienced God's love in the brilliant rose-hued paper. And the moment she chose what she knew God was calling her to do. But here, right now, was the culmination of a new beginning. A new life. A life of love and pleasure, a life of sweet and easy service and gratitude. A precious life of intimacy between herself, her husband and God... And their children. Forever. For... ever.

She drew back her skirts and squared herself, holding her husband's hand and leaning against the white gates of the bridge. She looked out over the water flowing beneath her. What a beautiful, intimate world. Filled with goodness. Filled with love. Filled with faith now reality. Filled with real people. No angels on clouds playing harps here. But beauty, in every direction, as far as the eye, and heart, could see. Beauty. Which swept her up in the moment, and lay her down in the life to come.

She drew in her breath and looked up into her husband's eyes. Speechless. She didn't know what was coming next. But she knew it would be God's perfect blessing. His perfect ceremony. His perfect will.

Standing there helpless and very much in love, she took her husband's hands and tears began flowing, sparkling in the sun.

"Valerie Spencer," he said to her, "I promise to love you with all that I am. I promise to love whomever you become. I promise, before God, to hold you in highest esteem, second only to God and to the Lord Jesus. My gentle, loving wife, I have always adored you. And I always will."

Valerie was overwhelmed as she gazed into her husband's eyes. She closed them briefly before saying her promises. "James Spencer," she said to him, "I have adored you almost all of my life. It is with great desire and pleasure that I give my life into your care and the Lords. It is with great honor that I take yours into mine and the Lord's. My precious husband, both now and forever, I am yours. You are the one I desire. You are the one I will always love. God willing and God making me able, I will walk with you for all eternity. Gratefully. Willingly. Lovingly. Incredibly enjoying every minute.

At just the moment they looked away from each others eyes, the heavens opened up and a rainbow of brilliant greens, followed by brilliant blues, followed by brilliant yellows, followed by brilliant purples lit up the skies before and around them. And a voice from the skies began to speak. Softly. Sweetly.

"My children," the Lord said, "I promise to love you with all that I am, with all that I create you to be every whit, with all that I can give you from deep within my heart. My precious loves, both now and forever, I am Your loving God. You are the ones I yearn for. The ones I will always adore. I am willing, and I am able, to help you to walk with each other for all eternity. Gratefully. Willingly. Lovingly. Incredibly enjoying every minute. My children, I have always loved you. And I always will. You are now... husband and wife. If you have any needs, do not hesitate to involve me. I care. I am. I love... you both. Forever and ever. Amen.

Then from out of the skies came the most beautiful chariot of fire. Aflame with brilliant rose-hued light, shining and dazzling in the light of God's precious love. It swept Valerie and James Spencer away. Into the future. Into sweetest life. Into sweetest love. Forever. For all eternity.

Chapter Thirty Three

An Epilog

Over the next several centuries, Valerie and Jim Spencer had eight slowly raised children, three cats and one beautiful white fluffy Duffy. Their oldest daughter's name was Cheri Spencer. She was the little girl from the learning station video. Jim's first son, the little brown haired boy from Valerie's dreams, lopped the ball his father's way until he was proficient at teaching his younger brothers and sisters, not to mention other children, how to play baseball.

Barb and Charlie had fourteen granddoties, a collection of bikes and friends to ride with them, and a slue of little kits to give away to granddoties everywhere.

Hannah became a precious young woman with a Bo of her own, a young man named Derrick Foster. They're giving some thought to marriage, but haven't yet taken the challenge.

Liz and John Marriott Sr. stayed in the Heavens serving as facilitators in several Circle of Friends groups, working together with the Spirit of God. They're both very, very happy and Elizabeth is very, very relaxed.

Joey became one of Valerie's closest friends. And Valerie's sister Caroline entered the New Earth kicking it in the tail. She and Barb together with Joey and Valerie get along very well.

The Spencer family and the Johnston family hold gatherings once a month at the Escapades' Rally Center for incoming family and friends. Many of whom are just entering the New Earth or the Heavens and desperately need a place to get to know somebody.

And Marlow Christianson, well... You'll meet her again... in the next book in the series.

Blessings to all! And thank you for reading.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the book, a phrase was used. Valerie states that her home, her New Earth, the eternal life she's now living, was certainly worth one little prayer. Or two. Or three... hundred thousand. In the bible, Jesus tells us that there is no marriage in the resurrection. That's one of many reasons this book and it's subsequent series couldn't be considered biblically based. It is merely the author's desire to convey the depth of God's reality in the form of a fantasy.

There is a biblical concept, though, that the author would love to convey. The idea that heaven, and the New Earth, which are very real and eternal places, whatever they actually *are* like and however fantastical they will be, are a gift rather than the result of doing good things. One that's worth one small prayer. Or two.

The prayers this author prayed before experiencing the reality of who God is were very simple ones. They went something like this... "Father, God, I really want to know what Jesus is all about. Would you show me please? I only want to know what the real God has to say, please."

I then checked out a church website that told me biblically what Jesus was all about and it made sense for the first time, though I had heard it before. Almost immediately afterward, I experienced a time of remembering some of the things that I had done wrong and some of their consequences. It made me feel kind of sick of myself. Temporarily.

I then prayed a second prayer, saying "Wow, Father, I know that's almost cliché but this time I understand it. Okay, I get it, forgive me please, Jesus, and come into my heart. Live within me and take away the consequences for all that I've done that was wrong. I need your mercy. Help me to change. I want to live with you eternally. Help me. I need your help."

I really hadn't known up to this point that I was in need of any mercy. It never dawned on me that I could be "a sinner" (which is merely someone who does something a little not nice.) Jesus said that becoming a disciple is not necessarily always easy, at least in this life. Your friends might make

fun of you.

The bible also says that this life can't compare with the beautiful life that will come. After this one. A very real life. In a very real place. A very real choice of places. Both as real as God is.

After several years of learning from God and experiencing Him here on this planet, I can tell you that God is very real.

And if He is, isn't the real eternal life worth one little prayer? Or two? Or three...

Hundred thousand?

Series e-Book #2

On Wings of Splendor

The City of the Great King

“Back Cover”

INTRODUCTION

Marlow Christianson

Journal Entry: Heaven's Gates

There are times when I just feel like crying, but instead I sweep myself up in what's happening around me. The responsibilities of working for the Master Himself are astonishingly real, now more than ever before. More difficult than I could have first imagined. Although my imagination in itself was overwhelming at the time I accepted this position.

Today I face the prospect of a new beginning. New with a capital N. Today is the day we made eternal history. Today is the day the Master took his place as King of kings and Lord of lords, on Earth as it has been in Heaven. The New Jerusalem! Come down from Heaven! An introduction to the world. The Master, introducing Himself to His eternal reign.

What glory! What sweet glory! What precious splendor awaits those living in this time, this place, this eternal moment. Today I ride on wings of splendor. And on the wings of a Dove. Today I remain calmly shaken. As we open the reality of Heaven's Gates.

Look for Book #2 of the Series, due for release in September, 2006