



CHAPTER 1

IT'S TIME

Angels didn't usually talk to humans, much less guardians to the people they kept. But what about his journey with Jasmine had ever been *usual*?

Skylock raised a hand to knock on her door. He had waited ten thousand four hundred and twenty one days for this. Now he wasn't sure what he would say to her.

It was the first time she would see him – actually all she would see was the form of the scrawny teenager in baggy clothes he'd taken on – still, she would look straight into his eyes.

She doesn't know you Skylock, keep that in mind. And please, try not to act your age.

He changed his guise, adding just a little more hair over his eyes, for insurance. He had never been much of an actor.

He thumped the door.

Nothing.

He thumped it again.

You can manage waiting ten more seconds for her to cross the room. He gave a third thump despite his coax to patience.

"Hello?" Two wide eyes peered around the door, expressing every ounce of her emotions.

Oh how he loved them.

"May I help you?"

If you're going to say anything at all, say something stupid. "Ah yeah, uh... here." He stuck out a clipboard with the parcel he had

brought her.

“I wasn’t really expecting anything. Are you sure it’s for me?”

In all the times he’d played this scene out in his mind, she’d never asked that question.

His hands were clammy and he couldn’t stop fidgeting, side-effects of this human form – of course. Apparently they produced a lot of sweat when they were nervous.

Think Skylock.

He twisted his neck to read the cast-off clipboard, “Well like, says there Jenny or something. Yeah, Jasmine Spencer, that you?”

“I guess so.”

“Well there ya go.” That was probably too much enthusiasm. It sounded more like a, *Tada*. This was trickier than he’d expected.

He brushed a bead of sweat off his forehead and breathed for the first time since he got there.

Her eyes were deep and kind. He’d seen that warm gaze so many times before. But they had never been aimed at him. He was melting under it. He wanted to tell her everything, to–

What are you doing? Pull yourself together.

He cleared his throat, “So you gonna take it ma’am?”

“Yes of course, where uh, where do I sign?” Her head dipped and a long strand of hazel hair covered her face. She gave a quick scribble and tucked it back behind her ear. Then she handed over the clipboard with a soft, “You take care now.”

He watched the door click closed, wearing a grin he might never take off.



Cold. Always blastedly cold in the underworld, but this – ridiculous. A skin of ice encrusted the walls of his cavern. Orgon flicked a crystal from his shoulder with a talon, daring another to form.

No doubt some human cretin on the surface was to blame, wreaking havoc, sucking energy. The shallower caves always bore the brunt. They were just expendable underlings – meant to serve

their grand master's every command with silent suffering – weren't they?

A demon scuttled in from the shadows, head bowed so low his panting kicked up dirt from the floor. "We has," he huffed out a white plume, "we has a problem, Boss."

"Ever a wellspring of insight, aren't you Satchwick?"

"Yes Boss."

Worthless gargoyle doesn't even recognize an insult.

The little devil was disproportionate, only three foot high with a pot belly and two pointless legs which did nothing to keep it off the ground. One had the upper hand and their rivalry made his walk a waddle. "The only problem I see is you."

"Yes Boss, if you says so Boss."

"Get on with it."

"It's, it's, it's that Jasmine, her, her—"

"Speak fool."

"Skylock, he's the problem he is."

Orgon flinched. "Didn't I warn you *never* to use his name."

The gargoyle curled into a heap. "Yes Boss, sorry Boss, I mean that awful, stenchy guardian of hers," gulp, "your worshipfulness."

"What about him?"

"He did appear to her, like a regular person. Did bring her something. Has to be important if he brought it himself, doesn't it Boss? That's why I did come straight to tell you."

"What?"

"That he did bring her something."

"What is it?"

"What is what Boss?" Two eyes bulged.

"What did he bring her you half-grown buffoon."

"I, I doesn't know that yet."

Orgon was itching to strangling the very last breath out of the useless mite. "Find out."

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Jasmine put the parcel on the kitchen counter. It must have

been that delivery guy's first day on the job, he looked so nervous. She wanted to give him a hug, poor thing. But that probably wasn't appropriate.

Lord, she smiled, please would You bless him today.

Her eyes fell on the parcel. There was an envelope taped to the top so she pulled out the note inside and read:

JAYJAY IT'S TIME.

Only the Lord ever called her that.

Her hand felt heavy with the message. She slumped back in her chair and her eyes paced the room trying to grasp the full weight of those two, simple words.

"It's time."

Lord, how can it be time?

Her chest started pounding.

"It's *actually* time." A giddy laugh escaped.

No wait. It can't be time, I'm not ready yet. I'm not nearly ready.

What if I can't do it? Oh no – what if I can?

She wasn't sure which thought brought more panic.

But the last time I tried–

That one stabbed.

She propelled the box away. She didn't need this. She was just starting to get her life back together again.

That settled it.

Jasmine went back to the mundane tasks of the day trying to put it all out of her mind. She had a light supper and hoped to distract herself with a book. It was a good book but a futile attempt. Her eyes just kept bouncing back to the parcel.

Leave it alone Jasmine.

Shouldn't I rather try than spend my life hiding from it?

She sighed and eyeballed the delivery, daring it to open itself. It wasn't helping. All it did was sit there, staring back at her. No matter how much she wanted to, she wouldn't open it – she just couldn't.

This was pointless.

It was bedtime.

But Jasmine couldn't sleep. '*It's time,*' kept running circles through her mind.

Exhausted by her battle with the sheets, she opened her eyes to see the clock tick over to 03:14. She gave in.

Jasmine armed herself with a night gown and two fluffy slippers, then shuffled through the apartment and switched on a lamp in the kitchen.

She gingerly approached the parcel. Her breathing was shallow as she took a seat beside it, giving them both time to settle.

She tore open the brown paper to find a thin gold box. She removed the lid. Inside was a fountain pen, resting on a soft bed of cotton. It was exquisite, pearlescent white with a gold nib and delicate leaves decorating the barrel.

It's beautiful, Lord.

Jasmine bit her lip.

It's perfect.

She lifted it out. It was heavy. Then she saw a small inscription along the clip:

JEREMIAH 1:5-12.

She grabbed her Bible and flipped through crisp pages until she found the passage.

“BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW YOU. BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I SANCTIFIED YOU AND ORDAINED YOU A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS...”

She read through the whole promise.

God had spoken – that was all there was to it then.

“So it really is time, Father.”

You know what this means Jasmine. She ran her fingers through her hair. *Are you ready for that? Is this what you want?*

She knew the answer. But facing the fork in the road made it more real.

“Don’t let me fail You Lord, *please* don’t let me fail You.”

The wall clock bassooned every passing second.

For the longest time Jasmine just sat there, staring at the pen, looking into the days ahead. The occasional tear rolled from her cheek. This was so far beyond her.

Okay Lord, if it is time, I might not be ready but I’m ready to try.

Jasmine was beyond exhausted.



CHAPTER 2

A GLIMPSE OF WONDERLAND

Jasmine opened her eyes. Only a dim light broke the darkness. Why was she curled up on the floor? She must have fallen asleep in the kitchen.

She pushed herself upright.

“Well hello,” came from her left.

She startled.

“I didn’t mean to alarm you.” It was an old man, peering over a pair of reading glasses perched on a more than generous nose. His lean frame was seated at her dining table, hardly a threatening sight as it was beginning to surrender under the heavy cloak of time. His eyes were a deep brown and had fixed themselves on her with a warm gleam. “Now tell me, do you feel a little better?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m so sorry, I quite forgot my manners. I’m Rudolph. It means hope,” he added as if sharing something delightful. “I’m so glad you’ve decided to come—”

“Hang on, what are you doing in my house?”

“Such a good question.” His bushy brows curled around the edges of his eyes to frame a smile. “Actually Jasmine, it is you who has just arrived. And you are more than welcome here.”

Her eyes darted around the room. The table and chairs and lamp looked familiar, but this wasn’t her house. There wasn’t even a wall, or door, or ceiling, to make the space ‘a room’.

“I have something for you,” he fingered a blazer pocket. “I

know it's here somewhere," he patted down a few more. "That would be a rib-tickler, 'Hope Looses Faith.' Wouldn't live that one down, now would I? Ah, here it is."

He produced a small, worn leather book. Inside the cover was a piece of folded paper which he placed on the table. "I knew I'd kept it nice and safe for you."

He carefully folded it open. Then pinching two fingers together, in deep concentration, he lifted out an imaginary article.

"You might want to take a seat, my dear."

Jasmine wasn't sure she wanted to. But he seemed harmless enough so she got up and sat across the table from him.

He pushed his glasses up to their usual roost, then cleared his throat and began to read. "It says here:

I TOOK YOU FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, FROM ITS FARTHEST CORNERS I CALLED YOU. I SAID, 'YOU ARE MY SERVANT,' I HAVE CHOSEN YOU AND HAVE NOT REJECTED YOU.

SO DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU AND HELP YOU; I WILL UPHOLD YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS RIGHT HAND."

He extended his imagined offering across the table. She met it with a cupped hand. And sure enough, lodged in a crease of her palm was a tiny yellow ball, only slightly larger than a pinhead.

"It is a gift," he seemed quite excited about the gesture. "I call him Gilbert, it means 'Bright Promise,' and suits him rather well."

"Thank you," *I think?* She hoped to be hiding most of her confusion.

"I would be careful not to lose him. Here'wa," he handed over the inscribed wrapper he had just read from. "Keep him safe in this. I know you'll do just fine."

"Excuse me?"

"Come along. I have something to show you," Rudolph gave her a smile.

Jasmine was vertical before she looked back. He was still seated with hands set wide on the table, braced for action. He let out a slight grunt. It was all of two seconds before his legs responded.

"It takes just a little longer these days," he said sheepishly then tucked the book in his jacket pocket.

She looked at him with new tenderness.

This is just a dream, Jasmine.

It had to be. How else did she get here?

She studied the darkness. It was a big space.

"My dear, this is the Hall. A place where prayers are answered, wounds are healed and most anything of eternal consequence is born. It is also the heartbeat of our little village." Rudolph stopped to catch his breath. Then he opened a door and the brightest light flooded in. "Welcome to Carmelton, my dear."



Satchwick was back. "I found it. I did find what Sky—" gulp, "that stenchy guardian did bring to her." He stuck his nose in the dirt, "Oh your mighty royalness."

Flattery only works if it isn't glaringly obvious, you dim-wit.

"All it is is only a pen Boss. Just a pretty thing, did look like a Pearly it did," he nodded feverishly.

No, it couldn't be.

He'd destroyed any chance of that years ago. But if she did get a pen, *the pen*... Orgon turned cold.

"Don't tell me you left her unguarded."

Satchwick gulped. "I did hurry back to tell you."

Orgon grabbed him by the neck and throttled until his feet were flailing in the air. "You imbecile. That isn't a pen, it's a veritable call to war."

"Looked just like a pen to me Bo—"

Why do I bother with this buffoon? Orgon dropped the heap to the ground. "Get your miserable hide out of my face."

"Y—yes Boss, whatever you says Boss." Satchwick hobbled away with a half lame leg.



Jasmine stepped through the door of the Hall and out onto the sidewalk of a busy street. It was a bright sunlit morning. Across the road was a park with enormous eucalyptus trees. Around it were people going back and forth about some exciting business.

She glanced from one face to the next. They all wore the same optimism, as if their hearts were whistling a cheery tune. It felt like she'd just stepped into Wonderland, half expecting a tree to begin talking to her. She eyeballed the nearest one, just to be sure.

Rudolph was already a few paces down the road. She caught up with him.

"...and each has a story to tell for it. It's a beautiful sight, isn't it? The body of Christ flourishing in its calling, when the eyes can see, the hands can grasp and each part does exactly what it was destined for."

"Hey Rudolph," a young man waved from across the road.

The old man tipped the hat he wasn't wearing.

They looked so comfortable with each other.

It must be a wonderful feeling.

"And there she is," Rudolph turned into a broad alley flanked by buildings on each side. It led to a large gate with a well rusted bolt and chain. It must have been locked for years.

Rudolph walked right up to it and motioned for her to join him. She did.

Behind the bars was a garden with an oak tree in the center. It stretched out its branches like a hen covering its chicks. A pathway wove into the secrets it held and Jasmine could smell the fragrance of spring from within. Even the sun was curious about this hidden haven and dappled what it could with light. It looked like an Eden, hiding its jewels from the world.

"It's beautiful," Jasmine tried to swallow her unexpected emotion. "May we look inside?"

"Oh no my dear, the keeper doesn't allow anyone in."

"It's a shame, isn't it?" The voice came from behind them. A

young man stood there. His eyes were so light they almost looked transparent. “It must be quite something inside.”

Jasmine could only manage a smile.

He had an ease about him, which made her suddenly conscious of her awkwardness.

“Where are my manners today? My dear, this is Joshua, an old friend of mine. And this here is young Jasmine.”

“Hello Jasmine,” he had a velvet voice. “You’re welcome to call me Josh if you prefer. Rudolph here isn’t one for nicknames.”

Her face felt flushed. Could they please leave now, before she made a fool of herself.

Josh smiled at her. “Had any breakfast yet?”

“Not really.”

“Excellent.”

Not really? It’s a yes or no question Jasmine.

“You two go ahead. I have my beauty sleep to catch up on,” Rudolph chuckled.

No. Was he leaving her? He couldn’t leave. She glanced at him to plead for mercy. He only gave a reassuring nod and ushered her off. She left her defenses back with the old man watching them walk away.

A lump formed in her throat.

“He has a way of creeping into your heart, doesn’t he?” Josh said after they had walked a few paces.

Say something Jasmine. Like what? Anything.

Her fingers began to fidget. She shoved them into her pockets.

It doesn’t matter what, just say something.

“Josh?”

“Yes?” His voice was deep and smooth. It sounded like nothing in the world could ever unsettle him.

All confidence drained out of her. “What is—” her throat tightened. “I mean, what is this, uh, you—” she sighed.

“Don’t worry Jasmine, it will take a little time is all. But first, pancakes.”

Her face was tingling, her ears burned, but somehow he had coaxed a smile out of her. She loved pancakes.

He made a right turn and headed for a street café no more than a few yards down the road. The cheery sight had a few scattered tables on a broad sidewalk. Red and white striped umbrellas provided shade to the oasis, each with 'Sam's Sweet Spot' decorating an end.

"Josh," a voice came from inside. A figure followed it out of the shadows.

He was a slightly portly fellow with bandy legs which hobbled from side to side as he came towards them. It looked like his face had caught a sunbeam and refused to relinquish it. He was wearing a white apron with the café's name on the pocket.

"So good to see you."

"Sam," Josh greeted with equal warmth.

"Hello, I'm Sam." The man looked at her and pulled his neck back, boasting not one, but two chins.

"I'm Jasmine," she found his smile contagious.

"Welcome to our little village. Take it from Uncle Sam, no matter what happens you'll be glad if you stick it out, you hear?"

He handed Josh a brown paper packet. "Your order's good to go, just like you asked."

"Thank you my friend."

Sam pronounced a blink in return.

The two of them set off again.

"Is he always so friendly?"

"Sam? Oh yes, now he is. He wasn't always that way though. Growing up he was an angry young lad, hurting really. He didn't know how to show his feelings so he used his fists instead. He got that limp from a tussle. I remember the day he hit rock bottom, he planned to take his life. It was a good day."

"Excuse me?" The words just slipped out.

"It was the day I met him," Josh smiled. "So tell me about yourself Jasmine. What makes you get up in the morning?"

The awkwardness leapt on her again.

“Me? Uh, oh not that much really.”

Oh shucks, that doesn't sound good. Lord, help.

“I mean, uh, I just, you know, I just do, uh... whatever.”

“Whatever?”

“Well there is this one thing, it's something I just have to write, like it's bursting inside of me,” she swayed her head in child-like protest, “but I don't...”

“Don't what?”

She was suffering through his cross-examination. “It probably sounds silly,” why was she telling him any of this? “I'm terrified that people might actually listen to me.” *Stop talking Jasmine.*

He simply looked at her. She had to fill the silence. But how was she supposed to explain it? “It's something God showed me. I only ever spoke about it once before. I had no idea it would affect people as much as it did - I got scared.”

So there it was. She'd mouthed the words. The dream was just an agony and now someone else knew it too. Somehow that made it more final. “Maybe I should just forget about it.”

“And bury the talent God gave you?”

Now just a minute, what gave him the right to do *that*? She'd said it, hadn't she? Wasn't that enough? Why should she pour her heart out just for people to trample on it? Case closed.

Josh began to whistle a happy tune. They had walked into a clearing on the outskirts of town.

“Here we are,” he said.

It was an open plane framed by the village on one side and a range of mountains on the other. A small stream trickled down from them.

He led her to a tree with a curved trunk which hung low over the winding water, a picture perfect spot.

“Ah, a journey well rewarded,” Josh unpacked breakfast and handed over her share.

“Thank you.” She waited for him to start, then unwrapped

hers and took a small bite. “Oh my word that’s amazing.”

He laughed. “Thought you’d like ‘em.”

After polishing his share, he propped himself up against the tree and breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

Jasmine wandered over to the stream. She sat on her haunches, allowing the water to trickle over her toes.

Lord, why is it so difficult to be with people? They don’t get me. With You is the only time I’m... me.

She looked over at him. “Josh?”

“Hmm?”

“What, uh, I mean what made Sam change like that?” She was going to regret asking this, wasn’t she?

“Love did.”

She recoiled. He made it sound so simple. But love was never like that, was it? At least not with people.

“I just saw a fish.”

Josh opened one eye and looked at her with a naughty gleam. “You think you could catch it?”

“I’ve never caught a fish before.”

“Well then, we’ll have to change that don’t you think?” He hopped up to join her.

“It’s a silver one. There.”

“Ah yes, he is a beauty.”

Josh took off his sandals and began rolling up his jeans. “Now I’ll take him from the left and chase him upstream. You wait for him here.”

“You’re kidding, right? And then? How do I catch him?” She wasn’t expecting an ingenious plan, but at least a plausible one.

“Oh I’m sure you’ll think of something,” he went bounding into the water.

Was he serious?

“Well come on, we’ve got a fish to catch.”

She waded knee-deep into the cool water, with her elbows above her ears. Something squishy was oozing between her toes

and her fingers wriggled, acclimatizing to the new sensations. “Okay, where do I stand?”

“That’s perfect. You ready?”

Oh why not, here goes, “Yip.”

Josh started to splash the water around like a kid. It was hysterical, a grown man performing like a five year old and loving every second of it. “There he is. Catch him. Catch him.”

The silver streak swished past her leg, but she was too late.

“He’s coming back. Your left. Your left.”

Jasmine scrambled for the shimmering target only to surface with a shiny pebble. “He’s gone back your way.”

“I’ve got him,” Josh leapt left and right after the ricocheting bullet, water spraying everywhere. Then he made a desperate plunge, arms stretched, launching out in spectacular style.

He actually had it. Well, for a split second until the scaly thing wriggled free and came flapping through the air toward Jasmine.

Its tail began to wag in slow motion. She was sure she could reach it. She could catch it. She saw her own hands groping through the air and – splash.

Jasmine was on all fours, trying to take stock of the situation. She looked for the fish.

Nowhere.

Then she turned to Josh. He was completely drenched and dripping from his nose, his ears, his chin, everywhere. He looked like a puppy halfway through a wash.

He erupted with laughter and she felt the same come right out of her belly. She howled at the absurdity of the scene as the reel played highlights through her mind.

“Should’ve seen your face,” she managed between breaths.

“Mine? You could have,” gasp, “swallowed that fish whole when it headed your way.”

Josh re-enacted her expression and Jasmine grabbed her stomach for mercy. She was struggling to breathe, weeping through her silent laughter. It took a few seconds before she gulped in a

huge breath and wiped the tears dry.

Oh boy, that did feel good. She couldn't remember when last she'd laughed like that.

A grinning Josh held his hand out to help her up from her perch. "We nearly had him," he said and flopped on the grass. "Oh my, that was close."

"How the heck did you actually catch it?"

"Catching it is only half the problem. You should try keeping hold of that slippery thing." He just lay there for a while, trying to recover his breath.

Jasmine could have stayed there forever. There was a silence so comfortable she didn't even want to disturb it.

"Maybe next time we should use that instead." He pointed to a fishing rod resting against the tree beside her.

"Why you, you... you knew all along, didn't you?" She thumped him in mock punishment.

His cheeks inflated in a vain attempt to contain the next round of laughter, but they were both in stitches again.

"I should've known when you came up with that ridiculous plan that I was being had." Jasmine felt the Sam-smile plastered to her face.

"Oh it was worth it," Josh peeled himself off the grass. "We'd better get you back."

She wanted to beg him to stay.

Shucks she was all over the place today. Just an hour ago she wanted to run a mile from Josh, now she hoped he would never leave. What was it about this place?

He led her back via the outskirts of town, picking strands of grass and sloshing with every step.

It felt like home.

"Am I dreaming?" She felt silly asking that. "I'm sorry, it's just that everything feels so different here – like it's the way the world is supposed to be. It can't be real."

Josh stopped and turned to face her. His playful smile had

been replaced by a deep, searching gaze.

“This is the way I wanted it to be for you.”

Her chest tightened, it was something in the way he said that.

“Life was never meant to be full of heartache and tragedy. I’m so sorry Jayjay. I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through. I never wanted to see you hurt.”

She was finding it hard to breathe. How did he know the name only the Lord ever used for her? Why did it look like he cared?

She had to be dreaming. Nothing else made sense.

His eyes grew more beautiful the deeper she looked. The world disappeared behind him. It was only the two of them in that moment.

“I know you,” he cupped her elbow in his hand. He felt close but somehow she didn’t want to run. His words seemed intimate. “I know your heart, I’ve seen your tears, your hopes, everything – even last night when despite your fears you were brave enough to say ‘yes.’”

His voice had engulfed her. She closed her eyes to soak it in.

“That is why I brought you here. It’s time to leave all the darkness behind little one. You don’t know the way out. But you don’t need to – just follow Me – I *am* the way.”