



**Awe-Struck  
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## Angels of Mercy

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This is a work of fiction. People and locations, even those with real names, have been fictionalized for the purposes of this story.

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Although the early summer evening was on the chilly side, Frank considered it bearable. Traffic was light this time of night, and a long walk on a brisk evening was just what he needed to invigorate himself after a very long day.

As Frank rounded a corner, he saw a woman, also on foot, walk towards him. The turned up collar of her elegant black overcoat covered most of the bottom half of her face, effectively masking her. But her eyes and forehead were quite revealing: she wore heavy makeup, making her appear as if she were wearing a mask. It was clear to Frank that this woman wanted to appear much older than she was. Looking, at first glance, to be somewhere between forty-five and fifty, he guessed her actual age to be somewhat closer to thirty--perhaps even a bit younger than thirty. Close to his own age.

He knew this type of woman; she was most likely a high-class prostitute. He had no proof of this, but he had become pretty good at spotting them. These women ran fast and hard. They dressed, fit to kill, hoping to and often succeeding in snaring wealthy johns who wanted a good time along with bed time.

The woman caught him looking at her. She quickly averted her eyes as she unaccountably began to trip on the heels of her very elegant black boots.

"Allow me--" he murmured. He reached out to stop her fall. Suddenly Frank didn't feel well. He felt the very air change. It seemed as if the air's molecules began to swarm, then vibrate like a great bell, and it literally took his breath away.

He heard screams from *somewhere*, but instantly realized they weren't the woman's screams; the screams seemed to come from everywhere rather than from a specific point. The brief flash of fear in the woman's eyes told him she'd heard them too.

"Help me, God!!!" Frank barely heard himself scream as he felt the air tear and disintegrate. He leaped headlong at the woman, throwing his arms around her and holding her tightly, instinctively cradling her head against the hollow of his shoulder to protect her.

The street and sidewalk, like two great black ribbons, suddenly buckled and heaved upwards as brick and mortar exploded around them. A wrenching pain slammed through him. He squeezed the woman even tighter, trying in this mad instant to spare her as much pain as he could.

And then he felt himself tumbling through the air as he fiercely hung onto the woman. He heard her wild, keening scream as he screamed along with her.

As they tumbled, the sky lit up around them, spouting great gouts of fire. It was as if the very heavens were falling. Was this the end of the world...?

*One minute later:*

His life had turned to shadows in an instant. He knew he was bleeding, and he had an unbearable pain down his left leg. He moaned, trying to drag himself to his feet. But he couldn't. He felt outward with his hands. Stone? Bricks? Broken concrete, maybe. He winced as he tried to sit up, finding he couldn't. With a sinking feeling he realized he was pinned to the ground.

He turned his head and saw a form that in the deep twilight looked like an elegant black rag doll sprawled on the ground. "Ma'am?" he called softly. "Ma'am, are you alright?"

She wasn't far from him. Apparently his holding onto her when his world suddenly blew apart kept them together until they'd hit the ground. He tried to touch her, to rouse her, but found she wasn't within easy reach. And when he tried stretching his arm out, a tearing pain seared through his chest. He was sure some of his ribs were broken.

He felt his face. He felt the slick blood in his hair. "Ma'am?" he called again.

The form he knew to be her moved slightly.

"Ma'am, are you alright?"

Silence...

"Ma'am, please try to answer me. We're in real trouble unless we work together."

"Ahhhhh..."

Frank's heart suddenly went out to this woman as he felt her pain.

"Uhhhh...ahhhh..."

"I'm here, ma'am. You're not alone. I'm here," he encouraged.

The woman tried to sit up. Frank encouraged her to push, to try with everything she had in her to come to full alertness.

The shadowy form of the rag doll struggled, finally managing to sit up. "I hurt," she said. "I hurt so much."

"Just sit for a minute, ma'am. Try to get your strength back before you do too much--"

"Ah...! Ahhhh...!!! Where am I?!" Startled and frightened, she began to struggle to her feet.

"Don't," Frank said. "Take your time. You may have broken something, and if you move

too fast, you'll make it worse."

"Who are you?" the elegant rag-doll-high-class-possible-prostitute asked.

"I'm the person who met you on the street. Remember?"

"I...I...yes, I remember now. I remember.... I vaguely...remember...." She looked about her, trying to orient herself. She pushed her tangled black hair out of her face. "Did you...did you hold onto me when...?"

"Yes."

There was a pause from the rag doll before she softly said, "Thank you."

"I only did what anyone else would have done."

"If you knew the kind of people I run with, you'd know that you're the exception in my life; not the rule."

He ignored her self deprecation and said, "Well, there's no point in philosophizing. We're in trouble, you and I, and we have to figure our way ou..." Pain shot through him, then, making him choke on his last word.

"Oh, Jeez. Don't die on me," the rag doll said. She began to crawl towards Frank.

"Careful," he cautioned. He began to cough, and he knew he was coughing up blood.

The woman was at his side, now. He reached up and took her hand. He couldn't see her face; it was too dark. "I would like to know where we are," he whispered between coughs.

"So would I." She clutched his hand. "I can't imagine what happened to us."

"I can't, either," Frank said, surely as puzzled as she must be.

"Maybe it was a terrorist, a bomb, a big bomb," the rag doll proposed.

"I don't think so," Frank said. "The whole street just heaved up from the ground. I don't think a bomb could have been that powerful. Not unless it was a nuclear device, and if that were the case, we wouldn't be alive."

"Listen..." She clutched his hand even tighter. "What do you hear?"

Frank listened. "Uh...I don't hear anything."

"That's my point; I don't hear anything either. What do you think that means?"

"I'm not sure." Frank knew why she was alarmed. There were no sounds of ambulances or of people yelling or screaming. There were no sounds of rescuers frantically searching for victims. There were no sounds of rescue machinery. There was nothing. Just a stillness, a silence. They were completely isolated from all that might be happening outside of wherever they were and it scared Frank silly.

He felt something move against him. It was her. She was lending him her warmth. He fell into a fitful and pain-riddled sleep.

\* \* \*

When Frank awoke, their predicament was all too clear. He was horrified at the destruction around them. "Ma'am," he whispered. She was still lying against him, asleep.

She stirred. "Whaaaat...?" she said lazily, as if she were awakening from a pleasant dream. "Oh!" she cried, as she suddenly became aware of her surroundings. She struggled to sit up. She looked around them, confused. "Dear Jesus," she sobbed, when she finally realized where they were.

He took her hand. It was trembling. She was gasping in rapid bursts of panic. "We're in a fix, alright," he said, trying to keep the panic out of his own voice.

"In a fix" was one of his grandest understatements. In the daylight Frank could now see that they had been blown into an alley. Both ends were blocked by collapsed walls of the end buildings that had caved into it, effectively sealing them off. And even though it appeared as if their being blown into the alley may have protected them and saved their lives, if they couldn't get out, this life-saving space could very well become their tomb.

A quick scan from his vantage point of flat on his back showed him there were no alley-access doors they could go through to escape to the outside street. "It looks bad, doesn't it?" Frank murmured.

The woman began to sob. "I can't get you out, Father."

So she had noticed his priest collar under his jacket. *Damn!* he cursed inwardly. "Call me Frank," he whispered. "Please call me Frank."

"But--"

"I insist. What's your name?" He looked kindly at her, then wiped her tears away with his thumb.

"Zanax," she choked.

"That's your street name, isn't it?"

"Yes." She began to cry again. "I saw the look in your eye when we met on the street. I don't know why it bothered me so, but it did. Then I began to feel odd, as if I were choking, or something. Then I stumbled and--"

"It's okay. Really. It's okay."

"It's not okay, Father. I mean..."

"Try saying it. My name won't bite you." He grinned through his pain.

"Frank." She said it hesitantly, as if testing out the way it sounded. "Your look bothered me. It wasn't a look of judgment...but...."

He smiled. "What kind of look was it, then?"

"I...I don't know. It was.... It touched me. I can't explain why."

"Had you seen my collar before you reacted?"

"No." She put her head down. "It didn't have anything to do with what you are."

He laughed. "Maybe it was my incredible charm, then."

"Maybe," she said. "You have a handsome face." Her own face reddened at the saying of it, as if she had committed a grievous sin, just mentioning it.

"What's your real name?" he pressed.

"I only do these dress-up gigs once in awhile. I spend most of my time whoring on the street. You don't want to know my real name."

Frank didn't press further. "Well, Zanax, we're in trouble, aren't we?"

Eyes wide with worry, she looked at the chunks of broken concrete covering him. "I can't get all that rubble off you. I can't get you out."

Frank's predicament was all too clear to him now. He was trapped under a pile of broken concrete. He hoped the chunks weren't interfering with the circulation in his leg; that could mean amputation if they were ever rescued. But he was sure his left leg was broken quite badly. The pain up his left side was nearly taking his breath away now. Last night he had the benefit of his body's endorphins muting the pain and shock. This morning he could barely speak from the pain.

But he had to keep his real fears from her. Sending her into a full-blown panic would

certainly doom them both. "So, Zanax, what's your appraisal of our situation?"

She looked around them. "Well, now I know why we can't hear anything. We're completely sealed off from outside help. Both ends of the alley are blocked, and it looks like the only way I can get help is to climb up the collapsed walls so I can get to a roof," she said, appraisingly.

She stood then, shakily, her long overcoat hugging her tired body. She unbuttoned it, took it off and laid it over Frank.

"Oh, you don't have to do that." He tried to hide his shivering under the coat.

"You need to stay warm. And I need to stay active if we're going to get us out of here. The chill will keep me moving."

Frank was liking this woman. He saw great possibilities in her. He wondered if anyone else did. Maybe not. Maybe that was the reason she'd ended up on the street. "Zanax, come to me."

She sat down next to him. "I don't know what to do," he said, honestly, "but if you have any ideas, please tell me."

"I..."

"Zanax, I can't tell you how much I hate your street name." He looked steadily at her, trying to make her feel comfortable.

She sighed. Her eyes were tired. Frank thought she looked like she had reached the end of her rope long before whatever disaster had put them here. "My name is Maria," she said. "Maria," she said again, as if she were glad Frank insisted on knowing it.

"That's better. That's much better."

She put her hand in his hair--gently... "You have blood in your hair. May I take a look?"

"Please," he said.

She carefully explored the area of the matted blood, the mild pressure of her fingers comforting him as if he were an animal being groomed by his mate. "I don't think you have a serious head wound." She grinned. "That's a good thing."

"Yes it is," he said. "That's a very good thing."

She pulled her coat off him, then zipped down his jacket as far as she could. She gently probed his ribs.

"God!" he yelled.

"Sorry. I guess we can conclude your ribs are broken."

"I guess we can," he gasped against the pain.

He was buried under the rubble up to his belly button, but now he could feel there was clearance down his left leg, the leg that was pulsing with pain. He was relieved; he might not lose his leg, after all.

"What else hurts?" she asked, almost clinically.

"My leg. My left leg hurts so bad I want to vomit."

She turned back her coat that was covering him, then slowly felt down his leg, reaching inside his tomb of concrete rubble. "Ow! Ow, ow, OW!!! I don't want to be a baby, Maria, but you're killing me!"

"I can feel that the leg is swollen very badly," she said, thoughtfully, as if she were trying to puzzle out a solution. She pulled her hand out, then stood up, laying her coat back over him. She set her jaw. "I have to get us out. Somehow I've got to get us out."

"What do you suggest?" He could see by the glint in her eye that a transformation had just occurred in her. He didn't know why he knew this. He only knew she had changed somehow.

"I suggest that you rest as best you can while I think."

"I have to admit I hadn't held out much hope until--"

"Until now?" she finished. "I always panic when first confronted with a serious problem. It takes me awhile to gather my courage and calm down."

"Well, you've certainly done that."

"Calmed down?"

"Yes. We haven't a prayer without you."

She looked down at the rubble covering his waist and legs. "I can't get those chunks off you; I'm not nearly strong enough. That means I have to find a way to get out and get help."

"Yes," he murmured. He could see no other way.

"Tell you what..." Her face brightened. "First thing I'm going to do is make you more



comfortable." She smiled. "With *me*." She stepped away from him and looked across the rubble-strewn alley. "There it is..." She stumbled across the jumble of bricks with her stiletto-heeled boots until she stopped at a black lump. She picked it up and came back to him. She bent down, opened up the purse and took out a pack of tissues and, what looked to Frank like a small jar of cold cream. She smiled. "Hold that thought, Frank." She turned away from him, smeared the cold cream on her face and began to scrub furiously. She used nearly the entire pack of tissues before she turned back to him. "Better?"

He gasped in wonder. Her face, no longer hidden behind heavy makeup, had a rugged and earthy beauty. She looked like an angel who would accept no nonsense. He wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be alright. "I can't believe it, Maria. You shouldn't hide your beauty under all that gunk."

"When you're in my profession, it's part of the work. Now,"--she squeezed the tissues into a soggy ball and threw it as far as she could--"I can think."

She half folded her purse until it made a pillow, of sorts. Then she lifted Frank's head and put her purse under it. "More comfortable?"

"Much. Thank you." The sudden relief of the hard alleyway no longer under his head made him almost euphoric.

She smiled. "You are most welcome." She stood up and looked first at one end of the alley, then the other. She looked down at Frank. "I'm going to try and climb out," she pronounced.

"Maria, it does appear as if this is the only way. But let's rethink this. The bricks are too unstable. You could die trying. I'm sure there must be another way."

"Then what would you suggest, holy man? We'll die if I don't try to get out."

Frank looked above him. It was a clear blue sky. Life was going on around them and no one knew they were here. Trapped. He didn't know what to tell her. Trapped. He was close to passing out with pain. Trapped. He was worried for her. Trapped. He was becoming terribly attracted to her.

Things were changing in Frank. And Maria was the catalyst. He wouldn't tell her. Not until he could get his feelings straight. It would only complicate matters right now.

"Penny for your thoughts, holy man."

He grinned weakly. "They're not worth a penny, believe me."

"Hah."

"Give me some hope, Einstein," Frank breathed.

"I'm trying, but even Einstein has her days." She looked at the blocked alley. "Frank, let me try to climb--"

"Listen!"

They strained their ears to hear what Frank thought he heard.

"I don't--"

"*Sh!*" he shushed sharply.

"I hear it now," she said. "It sounds like an airplane."

They looked up at the sky. It was mid afternoon and the day had warmed some. Frank's angel of mercy stood strong and tall, like an Amazon warrior, out of place in this pile of bricks and dust. And Frank's pain was getting worse.

"I don't see it, Frank." She squinted into the sky, her eyes shaded with one hand. "I hear it but I can't see anything. They have to know we're here. They have to--"

"No, Maria! You'll--!" He tried to reach out to stop her.

But she was already struggling across the rubble and down to the closest pile of bricks that blocked the alley. She began to struggle up the pile.

"Maria! Stop! Listen! Stop and listen!"

She stopped. She was gasping with the effort of trying to climb out, and she hadn't made it even ten feet up the pile.

"Maria," Frank whispered almost inaudibly.

The sound of the plane had faded into nothing and Maria slumped against the bricks. "Damn," she muttered.

"It's alright, Maria. It's alright. You tried."

Maria struggled back down the pile, then came and sat down next to Frank. Her hands were bleeding, but her boots had protected her below the knees. "I need a prayer, Frank, and you'd better make it a good one."

Frank wiggled his fingers, beckoning her. She took his hand.

"Promise me something, Maria."

"What would you like me to promise?"

"Promise me that you won't try to climb up those bricks again."

"But--"

"Promise me. You're not strong enough."

"I'm stronger than I--"

"Prah...muss...," he said firmly.

"I promise," she said. "I won't climb them again."

"Good. I'll hold you to it. Now, about a prayer..."

"Yes," Maria whispered. "A prayer. Make it good, Father." She closed her eyes and bowed her head as he continued to hold her hand.

"Lord," Frank began, "please make sure Maria doesn't try to climb out of here. I suppose I should be asking you to give her the strength to make the climb, but to be honest, I would rather just die here rather than chance that she be hurt. So keep her down here with me, please, and everything will be fine. Amen."

"That's a strange prayer, Frank."

"But a practical one, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," she whispered. She lifted Frank's head, then gently pulled her purse out from under it. "Sorry to take your pillow, Frank, but I think I have some Ibuprofen in my purse. Maybe you could swallow them without water. It may cut the pain a bit. Would you like some?"

"Yes." He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out. He wasn't even sure how he had found the strength to keep from screaming himself hoarse with the pain.

She found the pill bottle and shook five caplets into her hand. "Two-hundred milligrams each. I'll give you five for a one thousand milligram hit. That will be a safe dose, but a good one." She looked at his tired face. "You game, holy man?" She smiled encouragingly.

"I'm game."

She held his head up and helped him roll as far to the left as he could. She didn't want him to lie on his back and possibly choke on them. "Okay, Frank, here they come."

He opened his mouth and she dropped them in. He swallowed furiously until they were all down. He was so tired. He sighed and lay back on her purse as he quietly gave it up to sheer pain and exhaustion.

\* \* \*

"Frank! They're coming for us! Wake up! Wake up, Frank!"

Frank instantly stirred awake. The window of blue sky was gone and it was replaced with blinding lights and the unmistakable whup, whup, whup of chopper blades.

Maria briefly hugged him, then pulled her overcoat off him and began waving it furiously over her head like a flag. "Here! We're here! We're here!" she screamed.

Frank silently thanked God as he saw a man come down a winch extending out the side of the helicopter's side door. Maria ran to him when he reached the ground, gesturing wildly and pointing to Frank.

The man nodded, let go of the winch cable and came to Frank. "She says you're hurt pretty bad," he shouted above the roar.

The dust in the alley was wildly stirred up by the chopper rotor. Frank squinted his eyes to protect them from the blowing grit. "I think my leg is badly broken," he yelled. "And my ribs." He was freezing in the night's chill, now, as the chopper rotor's blast took his precious heat from him.

The rescuer shone his flashlight along the concrete rubble that held Frank prisoner. Frank read the rescuer's lips as he muttered, "Jesus". He looked back at Frank. "I have to call down my buddy to help me get you out. Can you hang on a bit longer?" he yelled.

"No choice. I'm just grateful you're here."

As the man called up to the chopper for more help, Frank pulled Maria close to him. "Maria, I want to give you something."

Maria looked at him, questions, and maybe a little bit of hope on her face.

The rescuer said, "My buddy is coming down now." He looked at Maria. "We will need your help as well. Do you think you can stabilize his limbs when we take this rubble off him?"

"Yes," Maria said. Her hair was flying about her face and Frank thought she looked gorgeous. And he was sure he must be hallucinating when for just an instant he saw wings on her back.

The second rescuer was on the ground now. Frank was glad the rescuer looked to be husky and strong. The first rescuer was of average build, and Frank had feared he couldn't have done much alone.

The two men quickly bent to the task of freeing Frank. As they pulled the concrete chunks off of Frank's body, Frank cursed mightily and loudly as Maria held onto his limbs to keep them from shifting and perhaps injuring him further. She found herself loudly muttering, "Go ahead, holy man. Cuss. Cuss all you want. These are extraordinary circumstances. Cuss your heart out."

When they had Frank free of his prison of rubble, the men ran to the winch cable. It had a stretcher dangling on the end. They detached it, then disconnected the air splint strapped to its frame. They put the splint on Frank's leg, and for a brief moment he thought he would pass out from the pain as the splint stiffened his leg bones into place.

The men put Frank on the stretcher and reconnected it to the winch cable.

Frank said, "Maria, remember I said I was going to give you something?"

"Yes, Frank, I remember." Her hair flew wildly around her face in the rotor's blast as she held onto his arm and bent close enough to hear him.

From his button-down black shirt collar, he pulled out the white collar-tab that marked him as a priest and handed it to her. "Keep this for me."

"What does this mean, Frank?" she yelled through the continuing roar.

"I'm not sure. Just keep it. Alright?"

"I'll keep it, Frank." She clutched it in her fingers. He could see tears streaming down her face.

"And I want you to wear this." He fumbled in his inside jacket pocket and pulled out his Rosary. "Lean down to me, Maria." As she did so, he put the Rosary around her neck.

"Frank..."

"Wear this for me."

"You're frustrating me Frank. You know this can go nowhere."

He took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. "I will find you, Maria. When this is all over, I will find you. As God is my witness."

\* \* \*

*Six weeks later:*

Frank eventually learned that a mile from where he and Maria had met on the street, a chunk of meteorite the size of a grand piano had plowed into the ground. It had set the area, literally, on fire. And it had devastated a great deal of the city.

It was a planet-wide calamity. Even though the meteor was quite small, considering the size it could have been, the fact that it had hit a populated area and caused massive destruction initially elicited panic among all those who knew of the event.

But six weeks had passed, and with it, so had much of the panic. People were once again settling down to some degree of normalcy.

The area where Frank and Maria had experienced the meteor's fury was gradually being dealt with. Slowly but surely the reconstruction effort was showing progress. Most of the old haunts of Frank and Maria were left untouched. The true destruction lay a mile to the east of them. Those at ground zero were obliterated. There were no bodies to even have a prayer service for.

Frank was stunned when he heard what had happened. But on reflection, he knew meteorite chunks made it through the atmosphere every day. It was only a matter of time when a sizeable chunk made it all the way down and struck a populated area. He didn't know if it was pure chance that he and Maria had survived the hit, or if it was a miracle. Frank considered it chance, but he strongly suspected Maria considered it a miracle.

Frank had recovered somewhat from his injuries. He was still limping, but the doctors assured him that with physical therapy, medication and a good diet he would recover most of the leg's function.

And now, with his cane, along with the new-found freedom of once again being able to walk, he tapped his way down the street, bent on just one thing...

Finding her.

\* \* \*

He couldn't believe his eyes. Chance had thrown them together, and now chance had thrown them together once again. She was just ahead and walking towards him. "Maria!" he shouted. He lurched forward, trying to hurry his pace so he could put his arms around her that much sooner.

Maria stopped, mid stride. "Frank...?" She looked worn and tired. No elegant overcoat and stiletto-heeled boots today. A faded burgundy t-shirt and worn jeans were all she wore. A simple cord bracelet attached to a dangly charm bracelet added to her ruggedly beautiful look.

"It's me, Maria," Frank said as his heart caught in his chest.

She began to cry. "No, Frank. Nothing will come of this. I can't bear to lose you again."

"Maria, please..." He was close to her. He could see the pulse quickening along her temples. "Please. I need to talk to you..."

"No, Frank. I won't become involved with you. I won't." She was right in front of him, now. He felt her soft breath on his face. She gestured wildly as she was half screaming at him, bludgeoning him with her presence.

"Maria, let me explain--"

"No!" Tears were streaming down her face, just as they had been when the helicopter had hauled him up and out of his hell.

"I only want to talk to you, Maria. There's no harm in that. How can there be any harm in just talking?" He felt himself sweating. He had to make her understand. He couldn't lose her again.

She shook her hand in his face. "Frank, I'm going to turn around and walk away. Don't try to find me. Don't follow me."

"But--"

"Frank, give me your word as a priest that you won't try to find me."

"I can't."

"You must, Frank. We can't have each other and you know it."

"Maria," he pleaded.

"Your word, Frank. As a priest."

He put his head down, almost bowing before her. "As a priest," he whispered.

She quickly turned around and fled from him, sobbing as she ran.

\* \* \*

*Two weeks later:*

This particular streetwalker looked tough. Worn. Her black Goth costume was unsettling. She wore a heavy black robe--far too heavy for this summer heat. Her head

was covered with the robe's hood and her black leather boots peeked alluringly from under the robe's mid-calf hem. Her ghastly Goth-white face covered with piercings, she looked like a vampire that really could devour you if you lingered too long in her presence. He hesitated. But he realized this woman may very well be his last chance. It seemed he'd already approached every other street walker in the city. "Ma'am?"

"I got good stuff for ya, honey. Ya want me? I'm reeeeeeal good. I'll take ya ta places you've never been before. Ya look reeeeeeal good. Yum." She licked her dead-black lips, and the thick silver nose ring dangling over her lip quivered as if she were salivating for him.

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me find someone you might know."

"I don't know anybody. Get lost," she said gruffly. She curled back her lips, partly opening her mouth in a low feral snarl, and Frank was momentarily startled at her gleaming designer vampire fangs.

Quickly recovering, Frank waved a fifty in his fingers. "Her name is Zanax. Do you know her?"

The woman eyed the fifty. "Maybe."

Hope sprang within him. No one else he had questioned so far had known her. If the vampire wasn't lying... "I need to find her."

The vampire continued to look at the fifty.

Frank flipped out another fifty. "Well? Do you know her?"

"I might. But..."

Frank showed her another fifty.

"Oh, I know who you're talkin' about now," the woman said. She smiled crookedly, her lip rings glistening. "You're talkin' about candy ass Zanax." She eyed the three fifties in Frank's fingers, her red contact lenses glowing with greed.

Frank pulled out yet another fifty and the vampire reached for them. But Frank pulled them away. "Listen to me; you're not getting these until I have your assurance that the directions you give me are correct and will lead me directly to her. Do I have your word this is legitimate information?"

The woman sighed, then huffed, irritated. She cocked her head to one side so her black leather spiked collar moved alluringly against her neck.

Frank pulled out a hundred. "Okay, take a look. Three hundred bucks for some simple



information. Just how difficult can this be?"

The vampire said, "She works in the Cinder Block. It's a cafe on Abbot and Loreli."

"What are her working hours?"

"She's there now. Ain't that enough for ya?"

"And...?" Frank pressed, waving the bills impatiently.

"She works from ten in the morning until ten in the evening, six days a week. It's Thursday, so she's there right now. That enough info for ya, pretty boy?"

"It is if you haven't lied to me."

She opened her mouth to give him another look at her fangs. "This vampire never lies."

Frank handed the woman the four fifties and the hundred. "Thanks."

As he turned and walked down the street to hail a taxi, he chuckled. He would have given her every dollar he had, just to find her.

\* \* \*

He had wanted to go right to her. But he knew that would have upset her. She would have to be nearly finished with her workday before he dared show up. What was she doing, working those long hours? Maybe she had given up the street. He wondered.... He hoped....

He would find out soon enough.

His heart pounded with anticipation as he pushed open the door of the cafe. He looked around. It was a nice place--not at all the way he had pictured it. It wasn't a high class, expensive place. But it was a very nice restaurant you could bring a family to.

"Just one?" the maître d' asked.

"Yes. May I have a booth, please?"

"Certainly." The maître d' picked up a menu, led him to a booth, and laid the menu down on the table. "What would you like to drink, sir?"

"Coffee, please. Black."

"I'll have it for you in a New York minute." She smiled at him.

The maître d' turned to leave, but Frank stopped her. "Uh, ma'am?"

"Yes...?"

"Do you have someone named Maria working here? She's probably about twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Black hair? Pretty, in an earthy kind of way?" He grinned. "A real pistol?"

The maître d' smiled. "Yes, we do. Shall I say you're asking for her?"

"Uh, if that would be alright. I would greatly appreciate it. But I think she's almost finished with her shift. Maybe I shouldn't bother her until--"

"Nonsense. Maria is my best waitress. She's been working like a dog all day. You look like a nice boy." She winked. "And I'd know you anywhere."

Frank didn't know what she meant by that, but he grinned sheepishly, anyway.

"I'll go get her. Be right back." She touched his sleeve, as if assuring him, as if she already knew him, before she walked away.

Frank began to panic. What if Maria really meant it when she said she didn't want to see him again? What if what he felt for her was just one way and she was trying to keep him away because she didn't want to tell him she didn't love him? He started to get up to leave, now convinced she didn't want him.

"Stay, Frank," a familiar voice whispered.

Frank sat back down. She stood in front of him, now. She looked bone tired. She looked beautiful. "I was afraid...I was afraid..."

She sat down across from him. "How are you, Frank?"

"I'm okay. I'm still working with a leg that's not quite healed. But aside from that I'm okay. I...I couldn't stay away from you, Maria. I'm sorry, but I needed to talk to you."

Maria reached into her blouse and pulled out Frank's Rosary. She fingered the beads, lovingly. "I learned the Rosary, Frank. It's a beautiful way to pray, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, distracted, "Beautiful.... Maria...?"

She pulled Frank's priest collar-tab from her blouse pocket. "I've been keeping this for you."

"You keep it. I don't want it."

"But--"

"You told me a couple of weeks ago that you wanted my word as a priest that I wouldn't try to find you."

"So much for your word as a priest." The corner of her mouth quirked up as if she were laughing at him.

"I left the priesthood, Maria."

"You..." Eyes wide, her jaw dropped.

"I left," he whispered. "Never to return."

"How...how could you? Priests never quit. They're men of God. It's a holy mission you're on. I can't interfere with that, Frank. I don't have the right."

"Let me ask you something. Am I wrong in thinking that you have left the street?"

"You're not wrong in thinking that, but--"

"We all make mistakes, Maria. My mistake was in joining the priesthood. I knew at the outset I couldn't remain celibate. I'm not the type. My mother strongly encouraged me to do God's work through the priesthood, but that's the wrong reason for entering the profession. I respect those who can remain celibate. But I can't. I need a loving woman in my life. I was hoping it might be you."

"Frank..."

"Is there someone else?"

"No... No, Frank. There's no one else. I fell in love with you two months ago, and I've been spending every waking hour thinking about you, praying for a miracle; praying to God that you would come back to me."

"Here I am, Maria; I've come back to you."

"But I didn't think you would. Priests never give up their holy quest."

Frank chuckled. "Sure they do. It's only in the movies where they make the supreme sacrifice for God. Holy quests make inspiring movie plots, but reality is something else again. I can give my life to God and to you at the same time. I'm quite certain God won't mind." He smiled.

"What are you asking me, Frank?"

"I'm asking you to marry me, Maria. I love you so much it hurts."

"Oh, boy, Frank. You're taking my breath away." She felt herself trembling.

"Just asking you is taking *my* breath away. I've never felt like this about anyone before. Never. When I first became attracted to you I was confused. Then I worried I might not be doing the right thing by leaving the priesthood. God knows my bishop tried to talk me out of it." He looked at her, asking her for help with his body language alone.

"And now?"

"And now there is no doubt I'm doing the right thing. We're right for each other, Maria. Don't you feel it?" He struggled to keep the pleading from his voice.

"Yes," she whispered. "Who would have ever thought the angel and the devil were a match?"

"Maria, you are the angel and I'm the devil."

"Hah, holy man. Don't make me laugh. It would be more accurate to call me your Mary Magdalene."

"My intention wasn't to make you laugh. My intention was to ask you to marry me. Will you?" He looked directly into her eyes, now, suddenly and totally emboldened. He *knew* they were right for each other. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind now.

"Yes, Frank. I say yes. I must be nuts, but I say yes." She gasped, audibly, as if she couldn't believe what she had just agreed to. Then, gathering herself, she smiled, took his hands in hers and kissed the backs of them.

"Oh, God, Maria. Thank God, thank God, thank God--"

She shushed him with a gentle wave of her hand. "Frank, I've been waiting for you a long time. I dreamed that some day I would find my soul mate just around the corner." She grinned. "And so there you were." She sighed with relief. "It was a rough route from the corner, but we made it, Frank."

"Yes," he murmured. "By the way, contrary to church tradition, there's no proof that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. She was a follower of Jesus, which meant she was one of his disciples. She was a good and decent person, whether she was a prostitute or not. You describing yourself as Mary Magdalene, then, is quite accurate." He kissed the back of her hand.

"God, I love you, Frank."

"It would be quite awkward right now if you didn't."

"No danger of that," she murmured, squeezing his fingers.

"Maria, what would you like to do with your life?"

She picked up the salt shaker from its chrome wire holder, then looked at it, then looked at Frank. "See this salt? I began my adult life as white and as pure as the salt in this shaker," she said, thoughtfully. "Or so I thought. You say we all make mistakes. Well, I really made a big one. A few years ago I began to pursue a degree in nursing, and I would like to finish it someday. But when I started nursing school, I got badly sidetracked when I started whoring for extra money. I justified it at the time, promising myself I'd do it for only a short time, but before I knew it, I was in its snare. And before I knew it, I couldn't get out. And before I knew it, you came along, with a meteor at your heels. And before I knew it, I never had a chance." She slumped back against the seat of the booth, setting the salt shaker back in its holder, seemingly exhausted in the recalling of it.

Frank took a deep breath. "I can't imagine what that must have been like."

"No one can. Not unless they've experienced it first-hand. Tell me; how did you manage to find me?"

"It wasn't easy. When I finally awoke in a hospital bed, I thought that maybe the whole experience in the alley didn't even happen. I thought you might have been an angel sent to help me. I even hallucinated when the rescue chopper came." He grinned, then added sheepishly, "At one point I saw angel wings on your back."

Maria snorted a low laugh. "Boy, holy man, wishful thinking."

"Maria, please don't laugh. I was extremely confused. I was afraid that you didn't really exist, except in my own mind."

Maria grinned. "Maybe that's the only place I *do* exist."

"Oh, you're real, all right. I knew it, finally, for certain when we nearly bumped into each other on the street a couple of weeks ago. You're a tough one, Maria. I really had to chase you down."

"I didn't think there was any hope for us Frank. I still can't believe you love me."

"I can," he said softly. "You are in my every waking thought. But at first I feared that you were just that; a thought; not at all real. I needed to prove to myself that you really did exist. So I tracked down the men who rescued us."

"My, you've been a busy boy, holy man."

"I have been. Our rescuers assured me that you were very real; that they saw you, too,

and that you had physically helped them when they pulled the rubble off me. So that's when I began my search for the real you. I had no plan. I just started approaching street walkers at random. Desperate to find you after you turned me away on the street, I got very brave and started asking after you in all the wrong parts of town. Finally I encountered the most unsettling street walker I think I'd ever seen."

Maria leaned forward, caught up in Frank's tale, now.

"Goth Girl," Frank said conspiratorially. He sat back and waited for Maria's reaction.

Maria began to giggle, covering her mouth with her hand. "Goth Girl? Wait until I tell Prudence what you call her. Goth Girl?" she said again.

"Yeah, funny. She scared me silly. I was uncomfortable even approaching her. And when she realized I wasn't interested in her services, I had to use the powerful persuasion tool, money, to get any information out of her."

Maria continued to giggle.

"Yeah, funny, Maria. Laugh at my expense." He grinned and squeezed her fingers.

Maria sobered, then said, "Prudence has had great success with that extreme *look*. You wouldn't believe how that nose ring and those fangs bring in the business."

"Aye!" Frank put his head down on the table, gagging, pretending nausea.

Maria laughed. "I'm sorry, Frank. I should go easier on you. An explanation might help. Goth Girl and I are very close friends. She and I went to high school together. After we graduated, we started off together in City College's school of nursing. We were both conventional kids raised by loving parents and we had wonderful dreams of becoming healers."

"So, then, what happened?"

Maria shifted in her seat. " Prudence began dating a man--Jack--who later became her pimp. He wasn't a pimp at the time, but he decided he didn't want to work for peanuts the rest of his life. He talked Prudence into hitting the streets. I wasn't looking forward to making student loan payments for the next ten years of my life and you can figure out the rest."

"Yee...ah...."

"Jack was *my* pimp, in a way. Since we began as close friends, he never put the hammer on me like he did with his other girls. I could work the streets, or not. Just as long as he got his cut he didn't care. I was like gravy to his operation. So if I wanted to do the high class escort stuff on my own, he didn't care. He knew I'd be back on his turf

when an escort gig was over."

"Do your parents know about the life you've been leading?"

"No. Maybe you could help me tell them?" she asked, hopefully.

"I would be happy to do that. Maybe the fact that I was a priest and am not in the least bit put off about your past life will hold some sway with them."

"What if I were still whoring, Frank? Would you still love me?"

"Yes."

"And if I would have told you I wouldn't stop whoring?"

"I would have waited...hoping...."

"How long would you have--"

"For the rest of my life, if need be."

"You love me that much?"

"That much."

She began to cry.

"Do you think your boss would let you go home, now?" he asked gently.

Maria looked at her watch. "It's ten. I'm off. Take me somewhere, Frank."

"I'm going to take you home with me. Alright?"

"Yes. Please. I need you."

\* \* \*

Before they had left the cafe, Maria's boss, the maître d', kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then she told Frank how wonderful it was to meet him and how she had recognized him as "Frank" as soon as he walked in and how Maria had talked about him every single day since the day she began working for her. Maria's boss was breathless in the telling of it, which made Frank feel good. Maria was a very easy person to love.

Maria's boss had taken a liking to Maria when she applied for the waitress job, and when she learned that Maria wanted to get off the street, she took her into her home. It appeared to Frank as if Maria's boss had been like a substitute mother to Maria. He was

glad. Not being able to tell her parents about her past life on the street, he knew she had needed someone to confide in. He had worried terribly for her. If he would have known she was safe, under this woman's protection, he would have searched for her just as frantically, but he wouldn't have worried as much about her as he searched.

At his apartment he sat Maria in a chair, then got down on one knee in front of her and formally asked for her hand in marriage. She sighed at his romantic ways, said yes again, and they made urgent love until the sun came up.

Two months later they married under the apple tree in Maria's parents' back yard. Goth Girl was there as Maria's maid of honor. Frank didn't think Prudence looked so bad without her face jewelry and fangs. In fact, he found her quite attractive, as well as surprisingly nice. He had already planned to introduce her to his best man. His best man had left the priesthood, right after Frank decided to.

*Six college semesters later:*

"Frank! Frank, Frank, Frank! Stop kissing me! I'm trying to study! Stop kissing meeeeeee!"

Frank laughed as he covered Maria's face with kisses. "You know you're going to get an A. You always ace your tests. What are you worried about?"

She pushed him away. "Frank, you know what a big deal this is. If I don't pass the state nursing boards tomorrow, there will be no registered nurse in this family. And neither of us would like that, now, would we?" She shook her finger playfully at him.

"Sweetheart, I have complete confidence in you." He cuddled her until she couldn't breathe.

She gasped dramatically, then sighed in defeat.

He walked her to a window in their apartment--a window that was on the 28th floor. Twenty-eight floors up gave them an excellent vantage point of the cityscape. "Can you see it, sweetheart? Look. Just to the right of that cell tower, and a city block behind. Do you see it?"

She followed his pointing finger. Even though she knew where it was, he delighted in going through this ritual every evening, making a big deal of spotting it for her. "I see it. And if I don't pass the boards tomorrow I won't be the director of nursing for our little enterprise," she explained patiently. She pecked his cheek.

He laughed. "Oh, so it's our *little* enterprise, is it? I was under the impression that it was to be a pretty *big* enterprise. But you say it's little," he teased.

"I have high hopes for it, Frank. You know I do. We can make a difference."



"I would say so. Even Goth Girl has left the street to help us. And the fact that she gave me my three-hundred bucks back is encouraging. I consider that a real victory, in fact. And we don't even open for two weeks yet."

"We've done the right thing, Frank. We both began our adult lives making the wrong choices, heading in the wrong direction. And now look at what we've done?"

"Yes." He smiled. "I think we've done quite well." He paused, then looked into her eyes; they were sparkling. "I've got a surprise for you. While you were in class this afternoon, our *little* enterprise was given its name for all the planet to know."

She quickly kissed the side of his face. "Let me see." She squinted, trying to resolve the image she knew to be on the front of the building, now. "I can't see it. It's too far," she said, truly disappointed.

Frank took his binoculars from the hall closet, then handed them to her.

Maria put the binoculars to her eyes. She focused the center knob, then the independent focusing collar on the right eyepiece. "I see it!" she said excitedly as the image popped into sharp focus. "I see it, now." She took the binoculars from her eyes. "We just may be in business, yet, holy man."

"We just may be at that." He hugged her. She felt good against him. Never was he happier than he was right now.

Maria looked through the binoculars again. It felt good to read the sign from the 28th floor of their own apartment. A quiet peace passed through her. 'Angels of Mercy' was going to make a difference in people's lives, and Maria would be a very important part of it. She realized, then, that she was made of pretty good stuff. And she was fully prepared to give of herself to others who weren't as fortunate as themselves. She took Frank's smiling face in her hands, then softly kissed her holy man until they melted in each other's arms.

~The End~

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