

Chapter 1

Objects began to emerge from the dark as the sun struggled to crest the skyscrapers. Pink rays shot into the gray sky like paint hitting wet watercolor paper. The moment the color touched the sky it exploded, and suddenly there was color everywhere. Orange bled into the pink until the whole sky seemed to be on fire.

But, it was not the fireworks display in the heavens that woke Davy O'Connell that morning. It was the sound of the city waking up. A refuse truck just down the street pulled to a jerky halt, brakes screeching. A few doors away, the owner of a bakery chased away a derelict from the doorway where he had spent the night. Curses hounded the man down the street as he stumbled a few paces before crumpling to a heap, retching violently.

"Worthless drunk!" the bakery owner screamed, throwing an empty wine bottle after him. It hit the sidewalk, the glass spraying the oblivious drunk. He heaved a few more times before staggering to his feet and moving off down the street. The bakery owner went to get a broom to clean up the mess he'd left behind.

Davy shifted uncomfortably. The door frame dug into his back. As he rubbed his hands over his face, the scratchy stubble of his beard reminded him of why he was not in his own warm bed at his apartment.

She'd kicked him out. Again. He remembered that. She told him that he didn't appreciate her - she always said that - and that she'd found someone who did, so not to bother coming back. He hadn't planned to either. Until he had a few drinks in his belly.

Who did she think she was, kicking him out of his own place? He'd been there first. So, he'd gone back. She wasn't there, and the apartment was locked up tighter than Fort Knox. His belongings were outside the building. It looked like they'd been there a while because passers-by had been pawing through them.

He'd gathered up what was left and hidden it in an alley until he could figure out what to do. Then he'd gone back to the bar. He had a vague memory of being kicked out of a taxi for throwing up, but that's where he blanked out.

He stood up shakily, stretching some of the stiffness from his limbs. The fresh aroma of brewing coffee drifted down the increasingly busy street. It awakened a gnawing ache in his stomach. Somehow, he had to get some money today.

GUARDIANS

Davy headed to the alley where he'd left his stuff. He squeezed into the crawl space between two garbage dumpsters and groped around in the darkness, rumbling for the slick plastic of the garbage bags his belongings were in. Just as his fingers brushed the surface of the bags, a crash in the alley made him freeze. He was in an awkward position, his lower body exposed in the alley while his torso was wedged into the crevice.

One hand went automatically to the gun in his pocket. Its weight was reassuring in his hand, and he palmed it gently, almost lovingly. Davy had never shot the pistol. He backed out of the crawl space, heart triple-beating in his chest. He squatted back onto his haunches with a growl, his eyes scanning the alley, the gun in his hands weaving uncertainly.

It was Crazy Carol.

She was looking at him the way a bird might, head cocked to one side, as if he were an oddity, not a threat. Matted black hair, liberally streaked with gray, poked out from beneath a woolen ski hat that belied the seventy degree temperature. Her face reflected the effects of her harsh living conditions.

She carried all her clothes on her back, the layers padding her thin frame with their tattered insulation. Black eyes blinked rapidly at him, and she grinned a wide, toothless smile. A curious purplish birthmark shaped like a half-moon beneath one eye made it look as though she'd been involved in a street brawl and walked away the loser.

Beside her was the dog she rescued from a garbage bin while looking for lunch one day. At least that was the rumor. He stood taller than her waist and was thinner than any dog had a right to be. Huge feet splayed out from his long legs. He was covered with wiry hair, a gift from some Irish wolfhound ancestor. His tail wagged gently as he watched Davy. His eyes were intense, almost human.

"Whatcha doin'? Whatcha doin'? Whatcha doin' there?" Carol sang. "Move along. No loitering. No gun. Bad man." She shook her finger at him, and he looked down at the pistol in his hand, suddenly embarrassed. He waved it at her.

"Aw, go on, Carol. Take your dog with you."

"Come on, Come Here," she told the dog, tugging on the frayed string that was tied around his neck. Come Here turned around obediently and followed her on down the alley as she talked to invisible people. "Get along, Bob, ain't got no leftovers today. Tell ya what, come back tomorrow, Janet. Gonna rain, it is. Shore is. Shore is."

GUARDIANS

Davy pulled out the garbage bags and began to paw through them trying to locate the few items he wanted to take with him. A change of clothes would be nice, if he could find something that ‘she’ had managed to wash. He was so preoccupied that he didn’t notice the change in weather until a few premature raindrops splattered on the hot pavement and evaporated instantly. The sky swirled moodily, mixing charcoal clouds in angry circles before opening up, the deluge obscuring sight. Davy cursed his luck and hunkered into the crawl space to wait for the storm to pass.

That was when it dawned on him that Carol had been right. And for just one second he was sure he heard her odd cackle float down the alley as an undertone to the pounding of the storm.

Although Davy couldn’t see them, two angels loitered in the alley nearby. Both were radiant in their brightness, a sharp contrast to the dingy weather. Rain fell in black sheets around them, but they acted as though it didn’t exist. Their concentration was completely absorbed by the exchange they had just witnessed between the recently homeless Davy and the permanently homeless Carol.

“He doesn’t see his condition in its true light,” Jes mourned. “He is so blind that he thinks he is fine, that things will work out. He is so self-centered, so self-absorbed, that it doesn’t even occur to him that ‘she’ may not take him back. And she won’t. She’s had enough. Of course, he doesn’t know that, and so he plans and schemes to make things the way they were. To make them normal.”

Saiph nodded sagely. “Normal may be comfortable, but it’s certainly not a catalyst for growth.”

“Can’t he see what a shallow, meaningless life he leads?” Jes asked. “It is so far removed from what Christ the Master intended, and yet he is happy with it! How can that be?”

Balor, a shriveled old demon, sat hunched up along the opposite wall of the alley. He picked his teeth nonchalantly with one long, dirty fingernail. “He is happy with it because he’s doing what pleases him,” he informed the angel with a patronizing smile. “And he will continue to do what pleases him because he hasn’t got a sacrificial bone in his body.” He scuttled aside to get a better view of Davy while he waited out the storm.

Jes turned her back on the demon, wrapping her wings protectively around her body like a shimmering cloak of light. She leaned toward Saiph and lowered her voice. “I have been talking to him. The other day the taxi driver almost beat him up because he didn’t have any

money to pay for his fare. I impressed him that there was money in his pocket. When he saw it, he was so relieved that he thanked God for saving him.”

Balor snorted. “You think that did any good? He didn’t mean it, I assure you. God is a curse word to Mr. O’Connell. He’s an atheist through and through.”

“There is no such thing as a true atheist,” Jes replied softly, not making direct eye contact with Balor. “When their lives are on the line, they will call on God whether they claim to believe in Him or not. An atheist is someone who does not choose God, not someone who does not believe in Him.”

“Semantics,” the demon scoffed disdainfully. “And it doesn’t matter what optimistic definition you give it. Davy O’Connell does not believe in God now, and He never will.”

“Humans are free to choose life or death,” Jes countered evenly. “He is free to listen to you or me.”

Balor studied his fingernails as if they held some sort of secret. “And it is my job to see that he listens to me.” Deep-set black eyes looked up without warning, and an evil grin split his homely, deteriorated face. “It’s nothing personal, you understand. But we’re right, and you’re wrong. Simple.”

“Yes, yes, it is personal,” Jes corrected. “Because you chose the path of destruction, because you were wrong, you hope to drag down as many innocent people as you can.”

Balor shrugged. “Misery loves company,” he joked. “I wouldn’t let it get to you,” he added sarcastically. “It won’t be much longer until it’s all over anyway. The end is near, isn’t it?”

“It ended two thousand years ago,” Jes said grimly. “You know that. It is that fact that makes you so desperate.”

“That’s not desperation, my enemy, that’s confidence,” Balor replied smugly.

Saiph turned slightly and peered down the alley through the rainfall. Carol was trudging back up the alley. Come Here padded softly at her side, head low, eyes almost closed against the pelting rain. Saiph flew to her, wrapping a wing around the homeless woman. “Carol, follow me. I know a safe place where you can wait out the storm.”

Carol’s head snapped up and she smiled. “Follow me. Follow me,” she said. And while humming Jesus Loves Me, she allowed herself to be led by the angel.

GUARDIANS

“It’s mine!” “Is not!”

“Is too! Daddy gave it to me last week!”

Billie Jo stepped into the middle of her shrieking offspring and lifted the toy in question out of their grasp. She closed her eyes and counted to ten before she attempted to speak. Even though she kept her voice soft, the awful headache pounding in her skull made it sound loud even to her own ears.

“OK, looks like it’s time for some time-out.” Groans greeted this statement, and Cassidy slunk off with a glare and a pout. Dallas hugged one of her legs and refused to let go.

“Mommeeeee,” he whined. “Daddy did too give that to me, I want it back. Why can’t I have it? Why? Mommeeeee...”

Billie Jo put both hands to her ears to block out his voice. One more syllable and she just knew her head would explode. “Dallas, this toy is in time-out for awhile. Please be a good boy and go find something else to play with.”

She tried to take a step, but he clung to her, refusing to let go. There was a stubborn glint in his eyes that Billie Jo recognized. It was the same one his father got from time to time. “Dallas, let go,” she warned. “Let go, now. One, two...” She never made it to three.

Suddenly the front door burst open, and Helen was in the room as large as life. Billie Jo was tempted to think that it was a headache induced nightmare until Dallas relinquished her leg with a squeal and flew toward his grandmother. Even Cassidy, who was a little reserved around Helen, came running at the sound of Helen’s voice.

Nog clung to Helen like a second skin. His eyes were red-rimmed and glazed over. He’d been working overtime on her, and it showed. Digging, digging, always digging. It had been easy to reopen old wounds, rekindle old insecurities. With him around, Helen would never run out of ways to try to keep her claws tightly locked onto the life of her son.

And Nog was determined to keep it that way.

He sized up Billie Jo like a boxer entering the ring. She was easy prey today. Even without the benefit of her weakened mental state resulting from her headache, she would react to the least provocation, and there was hardly an angel in sight to help her. A few well-placed jabs and kerpow! Out of the ring she’d tumble.

“Push her,” he urged Helen. “But be nice about it. Don’t give up an inch. Take what’s yours.”

GUARDIANS

Lately Helen's moods had been swinging back and forth from downright chilly to nauseatingly happy. Today, Billie Jo realized with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, was a happy day. Although Helen gave her nothing besides a cool 'hello,' she instantly pulled a bag from behind her back and presented it to the children.

Cassidy dropped the last of her reserve and accepted a new doll before hugging Helen around the waist. Dallas was no less appreciative of a remote controlled monster truck, which he proceeded to try out immediately.

"And I brought you some candy," Helen crooned, giving them each a thick chocolate bar.

"No candy before..." Billie Jo began, but Helen cut her off.

"I hope you don't mind," she simpered apologetically, her eyebrows lifting along with one slim shoulder. "Please don't take it away from them. It's just a little treat. It won't hurt a thing."

Billie Jo swallowed the retort on her lips. She knew she was being manipulated, but she couldn't bring herself to ruin the look of joy on the kids' faces. It was always this way. Helen would do something nice, and Billie Joe would come out looking like the ogre when she took it away or spoiled their fun. Today, she just didn't have the strength to fight it.

"Take a moment," Jewel pleaded. "Ask for the Master's strength. You must see that you have none of your own. Only in His strength can you stand firm in love. All you have to do is ask." The angel stood poised to infuse Billie Jo with unlimited power from above at her request, but it wasn't forthcoming. He watched with an overwhelming feeling of helplessness as Billie Jo plowed on in her own strength, relying on her own judgment and her own ability to control her temper.

"It's just that it's so close to suppertime," she said, hoping that an explanation would do what it had always failed to do in the past. "We don't usually let the kids eat between meals. It ruins their appetites."

Helen rolled her eyes. "Well, a little treat now and then isn't going to kill them," she replied, some of the old bite back in her voice.

"No, of course not," Billie Jo muttered as she walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water so she could swallow the aspirin tablets that were melting in her hand.

"What was that?" Helen barked.

Billie Jo ducked her head to avoid Helen's glare. "Nothing," she mumbled. "Nothing at all."

GUARDIANS

But Helen was on her like a hound dog scenting its quarry. “No, you said something. What was it? I want to know.”

“Don’t do it, Billie Jo,” Jewel pleaded. He watched as a gang of demons surrounded Billie Jo, taunting her.

“You gonna let her talk to you like that?” one hollered, buzzing circles around her head, making little jabs at her.

“Mean old witch, who does she think she is barging in here and bossing you around?” another asked haughtily. “I’d give her what for. After all, she deserves it. Give it to her. Go ahead.”

“Billie Jo, nothing good will come of an argument. Reason with her. It may take more time, and it won’t be as immediately gratifying as appeasing your anger, but in the end it will be so much more satisfying to follow the Master. “Jewel wrapped Billie Jo in his strong arms, but she wrestled away from him to confront Helen.

Billie Jo tried counting again, but before she reached ten, she spun around and faced her mother-in-law nearly nose to nose. She felt as if her head had come clean off her shoulders. “And we have liftoff!” she heard a little voice in her head say as if it were narrating the sequence of events. “I said ‘of course not,’ ” she ground out, jaw clenched, hands balled up at her sides.

“And just what is that supposed to mean?” Helen asked, lifting her nose a few degrees into the air.

“It means,” Billie Jo said slowly, enunciating each word, “that it wouldn’t do them any harm to wait either. In fact, that’s what is best for them. But you don’t care about that, do you? You just want them to like you. You know we don’t give them candy, let alone between meals. Why do you have to bring it in the first place? Give it a rest already. Don’t you know when you’re not wanted? GO HOME AND QUIT BOTHERING US!”

It was as if she could feel their eyes burning holes through her. Everything moved like a dream-state. She swung her head around. Cassidy and Dallas were staring at her, dumbfounded, frightened.

Gael and Boreas, the children’s guardian angels, struggled to protect them from the angry emotion Billie Jo was carelessly spraying, but it was as futile as trying to block the spray of a skunk. It saturated the air and made it impossible to breathe. They retreated as the demons moved in, chortling at their victory. One infused the children with fear, and another battered them with anger.

Jewel took in the whole scene with tears streaming down his golden cheeks. The whole of the army of heaven waited - just waited - for the

command to protect Billie Jo and the children. A few words would have placed a barrier around them that Satan and his demons could not have penetrated. But those words, that prayer for help, never came.

Instead of fighting back and vindicating her whole tirade, Helen averted her eyes and dashed toward the door gulping back tears.

“You hate me,” she wailed. “You’ve always hated me. No matter what I do, it’s never right. I don’t know why you hate me so much!”

Billie Jo stared after her and then turned to face the accusing looks on the faces of her children. Before she could even offer an explanation, Jimmy came through the door, his face dark with anger. “What in blazes has got into you, woman?” he roared. “My mother’s out there just a’bawlin’ her eyes out saying you hate her and she always knew you did. Whatever did you say to her?”

Nog moved forward like a bullfighter parrying the final thrust. “You worthless piece of nothing,” he said with smug satisfaction. “How could you do that? She was only trying to help you and look at what you did. She’s crying! Crying! Don’t you feel bad now? You did this. You crushed her. I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“I... I...” Billie Jo struggled to say something, anything, in her own defense. “What have I done?” her mind wailed. “Oh, God, please forgive me. I lost my temper again. When will I ever learn?”

The bridge of her nose stung the way it always did just before she had a real good crying jag, and there was a horrible sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if she’d swallowed a boulder and it was thinking of making a return trip. She looked up, trying to meet Jimmy’s eyes and felt it coming on like gangbusters. Her shoulders shook, and she dissolved into tears as he watched in bewilderment. Then Dallas started crying, and Cassidy joined him. Jimmy took one panicked look at them and fled.

The instant the prayer left Billie Jo’s lips, Jewel was at her side. He wrapped his arms around her and assured her of God’s love. He was barely aware of Nog’s hollow victory laugh as he left to follow Helen. The rest of the demons scattered but stuck around in case Billie Jo should regret her hasty petition.

“Too late now,” one of them scoffed. “The damage has been done. Why don’t you just curse God and get it over with. After all, it isn’t like He helped you when you were down, now is it?”

But his words fell on deaf ears. Billie Jo sank to her knees and gathered her children in her arms. She murmured apologies mixed up with prayers, and they clutched each other for comfort. Over and over

GUARDIANS

she tried to erase the look of fear she had caused in their eyes, but it wouldn't go away. She mourned that even more than the outburst itself.

By the time Jimmy came back home, she had managed to get her emotions under control. She had apologized to her children for the scene, apologized to her God for her sin, and was ready to make peace with her mother-in-law. Her headache had subsided enough to allow rational thought. The kids were playing quietly in their room when Jimmy opened the front door and found her in the living room straightening up.

He didn't say a word, just walked over to her and wrapped his big, strong arms around her, enveloping her in forgiveness. Billie Jo sank into him and gripped him tightly around the waist.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I know," he said, his breath warm against her neck. "Me too. I just don't understand how come you and my mother can't get along together. It don't seem that hard to me."

Instantly Billie Jo's anger returned, and she pulled away from him. "No, it isn't, as long as I let her have her way. She bullies me around, and you know it. And you always stick up for her."

Jimmy scowled at her. "That's not true. Just so happens this time she's right. Wasn't no big deal her giving the kids a present."

"No, maybe not this time," Billie Jo agreed. "But what about last time and the time before that? It's like she's trying to buy their love. And what about me? It's my job to be the police, to monitor her. I shouldn't have to do that. And it makes me look like some kind of ogre. She's a grown woman. Why can't she respect us?"

"She respects us," Jimmy replied defensively. "In her own way."

Billie Jo snorted. "You got that straight. In her own way - the land of no way. We've asked her before not to bring the kids candy, but does she ever listen to us?"

"Aw, I used to eat candy before supper," Jimmy said, "and nothing bad ever come of it. Didn't stunt my growth or nothing, did it?"

Billie Jo stifled a smile. Jimmy was built like a sequoia. "That's not the point," she forced herself to reply with an even voice. "The point is that we've asked her not to do it."

"And we'll just have to ask her again," Jimmy said. "It'll get through that thick head of hers sooner or later."

GUARDIANS

“I just wish you wouldn’t stick up for her,” Billie Jo whispered. Her stomach was convulsed into a thick knot, and tears slipped softly down her cheeks. “It makes me feel second best.”

Jimmy shook her shoulders sternly. “That ain’t true, and you know it. Now buck up, hear?”

Billie Jo nodded. What choice do I have? she thought to herself. She’s won again.

“Yeah,” she said aloud. “I’m bucking.”