



Pink Rosettes

It's Like Reading a Piece of
Chocolate Cake.....



THEA RAMSEY

CHAPTER ONE

The Bubble



"How's that head, honey?" Mom asked, touching Rosette's forehead. Her hand felt nice and cool.

Rosette sneezed. "Oh, just a bit achey, and my throat hurts, too."

"You're a bit warm. I'll get you some Tylenol. That'll make you feel better and bring that fever down."

Rosette liked that stuff. It tasted like cherry syrup. She drank the little cup Mom brought and lay back on the couch.

While Scooby-Doo ate a well-earned Scooby snack, Rosette wondered when her head would stop hurting, when she would stop coughing—when the medicine would work.

The faucet's hiss made Rosette look to see her mom in the kitchen, filling a glass with water. Mom always made her drink water when she was sick, even though she didn't like water. At least it was one thing she could have that didn't make her swollen throat hurt.

But Mom wasn't getting water for her. She was getting some for herself and shaking a couple of pills into her hand. Her hands shook as she downed the tablets.

"What's that for, Mom?" It hurt to talk, but Rosette was curious.

"It's just Valium. Makes Mommy less anxious."

"What's anxious?"

"Well, it means I'm always afraid something bad will happen."

"What could happen? Daddy's at work like normal. I only have a cold, so I'm not gonna die. I even get to stay home from Kindergarten and watch cartoons. That's not bad."

Mom came into the living room to tousle her daughter's hair. "Oh, you. You would think of that. Better rest that throat, Rosie."

It did sound worse—awful, really. "But Mom," Rosette insisted, "what could happen? Nothing bad will happen. Anyways, Daddy says you can talk to Jesus anytime you're scared. I do that lots." She had to stop talking. Her throat went on strike.

"Well, honey, if it works for you and Daddy, I'm happy." Rosette's reply was a hacking cough.

"You have a little rest now, while I make some coffee. When you wake up, I'll make you some lunch. Clam chowder'll help that cold."

Rosette made a face, but didn't have the energy to argue. The medicine was starting to make her feel sleepy. She closed her eyes.

A shrill sound jerked her awake. She hated it when grownups leaned on their car horns like that. The grownup had a big, booming voice, and was shouting too. She wasn't sure whether she heard him say, "Come out here" or "Come up here."

Come up here? That was silly. Whoever he was yelling at, she sure hoped the person would come out soon.

"Mommy—" She felt herself being lifted off the sofa. She was in the air, surrounded by clouds. A gust of warm, wet wind whipped her blonde tresses in all directions. She caught a glimpse of a woman's face, looking as startled as she felt. There were lots of people in the clouds with her. Just above her, her grandma was flying too.

This medicine sure gives you crazy dreams, she thought. Imagine flying through the clouds with Grandma who had died six months ago. Well, at least this wasn't a bad dream.

As suddenly as it started, the flying feeling stopped. Rosette blinked, looked around her, totally confused.

Where am I now, she wondered. A man stood there, smiling at her. His face was so bright she could barely look at him. His eyes sparkled like fire, but she wasn't afraid of the fire. Even his feet glowed like fire. A long robe flowed around him as he moved toward her. Rosette couldn't decide where to look. His eyes that held hers, his sun-bright face, the beautiful robe, or the cloth-of-gold around his chest. No matter what she looked at, her eyes were dazzled. Why, she wondered, didn't they hurt, as they should have for looking at all this fiery brightness?

He stretched out his hands toward her, and she drew back in fear. As beautiful as he was in his long, linen robe, a deep hole gaped from each palm. How could such a beautiful person have such terrible scars?

When she didn't take his hand, he came close and put his arms about the little girl. "Hello, Rosette. Don't be afraid."

His voice was huge, like the waves of the sea. It seemed to come from all around her, and from inside her own head.

She looked up again at that sun-bright face, and saw so much love there she could barely speak.

"Hello, ... Jesus. You are Jesus, aren't you?" He nodded, His hair glinting as though lighted by the radiance of His face. "What happened? Am I dreaming, or did I die? How did I die? Can you die from a head cold?"

His laughter was like the waves ebbing and flowing, and very kind. "Of course not," He said, still chuckling. "How's that head cold, now?" She'd never seen anyone's eyes twinkling as merrily as that.

She took a breath. "Hey! It's gone!"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You sound totally shocked. Want it back?"

"No thanks." She was giggling so she could hardly get the words out.

"Good, because we don't do sickness up here, you know."

"What if I ate a billion potato chips and a thousand cakes? I'd be sick forever."

He shook His head. "Sorry, you couldn't get sick if you tried. And you can never die." The amusement in His eyes was now replaced by a gentler smile.

"Why?"

"Oh, because you were changed the moment you left the earth."

"How'd I leave the earth?"

"Remember the clouds? And all the people you saw? And what your Daddy told you would happen someday?"

"Oh yeah! He kept saying you're comin' to get us someday."

"Bingo."

"Then I'm in Heaven! But I don't see anything except You. No angels, no pearly gates, no nothing. Why?"

"Because, little one, we're in a kind of bubble, just you and me. Heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul. You'll see Heaven soon."

"Oh. Okay. How are you doing that? Talking in my head and all around me at the same time, I mean?"

"Oh, that. That's just how my voice sounds. Plus, I'm talking into your mind. You

don't have to talk with your mouth if you don't want to. Not in Heaven."

"Heaven," she breathed. "May I see Heaven now? Wait. I can't see Heaven in my nightgown. I'd be so embarrassed. All those angels, and especially God, looking at me in my—Do You have any clothes?"

"Not a thing wrong with your threads. They're all the rage up here."

"What, my night—?" Rosette looked down to see a flowing linen robe with gold embroidering around the bottom. Something tickled her wrist. She discovered gold tassels on her sleeves. She couldn't tell whether they were made of thread or feathers.

"Thank goodness. I thought I was wearing my nightgown. May I see Heaven now?"

"Yes, you may." The bubble burst.

CHAPTER TWO

Heaven



Golden light glittered on a giant pearl that stood open on golden hinges. For as far as she could see in any direction, smooth gold pavement stretched before her. People were everywhere. The wide street was big enough for everyone to walk on, with plenty of space. Were there millions, or billions? Every one of them was dressed like her. Rosette chewed her lower lip. What happened to all their clothes?

A huge crowd cheered Jesus as He moved toward them. Another large mass was singing, as loudly and joyfully as she'd ever heard people sing. A third group was singing a different song. This song came to her in waves, in the silent parts of the other song, as if the two songs went together. The melodies walked daintily around each other, never clashing. Weird.

She saw a woman kneeling at Jesus' feet, lightly touching her forehead against them. Rosette wondered if the lady would burn her forehead on His fiery-looking feet, but she didn't scream or pull her forehead away. Rosette could hear the woman and the Lord clearly, beside the choirs, the cheering and the happy chatter of the people. She had no idea how.

"Oh, Lord, please forgive my unbelief. I was saying today, just today, mind you—I was saying to my husband, Joe, I said, It looks as if the Rapture's never gonna come."

"Aw, there's nothing to forgive," Jesus assured her. "Point is, you and Joe kept on in the faith, working for My kingdom. There's quite a few people here because of you and Joe. Truthfully, when My Father said, Today's the day, Son, I kept looking down at the clouds shuffling across the sky, business as usual. You know how Joe Junior's always saying, Come on, let's get this show on the road? That was Me today, waiting for the command to be given. I couldn't wait to see the look on—well, a lot of My people's faces when they were caught up. You weren't the only one on Earth wondering if the Rapture was ever going to come."

"Gracious Lord, you sound like my grandkids on Christmas Eve."

"I was much more stoked than that, by about, oh, a thousand times." He said with a smile so broad it reminded Rosette of how she felt on Christmas Eve--too excited to sleep, too excited to wait. "Now My Bride's up here, I'm purring." He rubbed His hands together and grinned at the woman who knelt at His feet. He helped her up and hugged her.

Rosette remembered how her Daddy had called all the Christians Jesus' bride. But

they were also His children, His church, His body, His servants, and His friends. How could Christians be all those things at once? If she could catch Jesus' eye, she'd ask Him. If Jesus was too busy at the moment, her Daddy was sure to know the answers. Now, to find him, among all these people. She saw lots of people hugging, and heard one of them exclaiming, "Can you believe it! I thought the Rapture wasn't coming for another hundred years."

"Aw, I just felt it was coming," said his companion.

"How could you know when it was gonna be, when the angels didn't even know when? Even Jesus didn't know when till today. Only God the Father knew."

"Yep, biggest secret in the universe. Anyhoo, I'm not saying I knew when, I'm just saying I felt it was around the corner. Felt it in my bones. I mean, all the signs were there. Earthquakes, all the trouble in the Middle East, and that Italian fellow in charge of the UN. Slick as anything—and all those bright ideas for reforming the world and bringing peace. Peace, my foot! Every time I saw him on TV, I shuddered. I don't mind telling you, the man gave me the creeps. And the weather? Too weird. I knew something was up."

She saw two others hugging like they hadn't seen each other in a million years. "Uncle Bill! ... So, how'd it feel to be one of the dead in Christ?"

"Pretty amazing. My spirit was up here, resting, you know. Then all at once, I was in the clouds, resurrected body and all, and seen you coming up behind me. Guess I beat you, slow poke."

"Yeah, by about half an eye-twinkle." They laughed at the joke. She looked harder for her father. Daddy, where are you? She knew he was here.

And there he was, coming toward her. He scooped her up in his arms. "Daddy! I was just thinking of you."

"I heard you. Aw, honey, ain't it great! I was just about to go to lunch when it happened." He placed her back on the golden street.

"How'd the cloud come through all the windows to get us?"

He laughed. "It didn't, sweetie. Jesus came to get us, and we met Him in the clouds. We just disappeared, like that. Poof." He snapped his fingers.

"Like in Star Trek. He beamed us up, without no transporter."

"That's right, honey. Just with His power."

"I bet everyone at work was surprised when you disappeared."

"I bet they freaked out. I was talking to a guy on the way to lunch, in the middle of a word, and poof! I wonder how Mommy's doing—she must be trying to find you. Bet she's calling me at the office, and I'm not there." A look of sadness passed over his face.

"Mommy isn't here, is she?"

"No, Rosie, she isn't. But you know, we can still pray for her, just like we did on Earth." His smile wasn't as bright now. She knew he was trying not to feel sad, so she wouldn't feel it too.

"Everybody's talking about it, Daddy." Her moment of sadness disappeared.

"Yup. Everyone's asking, 'Where were you when it happened?' or singing."

"Daddy, I didn't hear no trumpet, did you? Wait a sec. I heard something. I thought it was someone leaning on their car horn. And someone outside with a big voice yelling for someone to come out, or up. Mommy gave me some medicine and I was kinda sleepy."

That was it, Rosette decided. She'd fallen asleep from the medicine. She was dreaming.

"I heard something too, kiddo, but I was talking to this guy. I remember thinking maybe it was some kind of weird car alarm. Thought I heard someone shouting 'Come up here'. Before I had time to wonder what was up, I was in the clouds. It all just happened too fast."

The Lord seemed to appear out of nowhere. "Happened quick, didn't it?" She nodded. "Just like it says in the Bible—in the twinkling of an eye." His eyes were doing plenty of twinkling now. "Take a look at the spread. Behind you."

Wow, what a great dream!

Jesus smiled. "It's no dream, Rosette. Go ahead and turn around."

That was exactly what she expected a dream person to say. But since it was such a great dream, there was no point in spoiling it.

She turned around.

CHAPTER THREE

Wedding Cake



Rosette saw a table made of pure gold, so bright it was hard to look at. A white linen cloth covered it. She thought the table was hundreds of miles long.

I'm right, she triumphed. This is a dream, since there's no such thing as a gold table hundreds of miles long, and if there was, I couldn't see all of it. As much as she was enjoying this dream, she couldn't wait to wake up and tell Mommy about it. Once she told Mommy how happy everyone was in Heaven, and how kind Jesus was, then she would get saved, and go to Heaven when the real Rapture came. Yeah! Rosette rubbed her hands together. Come on, Rosette, wake up. She waited. Nothing changed, or faded away. Okay, I can't wake myself up. God gave me this dream, to get Mommy saved. Guess He'll have to wake me up. Till then, why not play along? She smiled to herself.

At the far end of the table, she could hear hundreds of voices in song. Even at the table, while they waited, the massive choir sang. Rosette saw now that the clapping, singing throng was made up of every race—though from listening to them, she would have thought they were all black, like the gospel choirs she had heard.

Nearer to her, two teenage boys exchanged rhymes in a rap, praising Christ's beauty and their joy at His coming to get them. Their clapping provided the only rhythm.

"You guys got it goin' on," Jesus said, when the rap was finished. "Andy, I want you to meet someone," the Lord said to the blond boy.

A young black woman came forward and shook the boy's hand. He smiled, blushed, and looked at his shoes.

"Tracy Albright, here because of your prayers."

"No way!" cried the teenager. "You're my favorite singer. I used to pray for you a lot. I had every one of your CD's."

"Thanks." The singer looked first at Jesus, then at the people, then at the golden street. She passed a hand over her eyes, and looked again. Everything was still there. "One of my roadies was a Christian. Kept talking about God, and about a place called Hell—a place I didn't want to go to. Most of us were into ourselves, the whole music thing, and I was actually thinking about firing him. I had no idea anyone was praying. I accepted Christ last night, thanks to this roadie, and your prayers. It's just strange to me that a churchgoin' guy like you would even listen to

my stuff.”

“I did. Caught heck from my pastor and some of my Christian friends, too, for doing it. Some of them didn’t listen to any secular music. I mean, like, since when did Jesus not die for celebs? I had a couple faves, but you were the bomb.” He blushed furiously. The singer smiled. “So, I prayed you’d get saved and all.”

The singer sat down in between the boys. “I didn’t think they allowed hip-hop up here. Thought it’d be a lot of long-hair stuff. So, whatcha say, y’all wanna start a hip-hop thing up here? If it’s cool wit’ You…” she looked at Jesus. He nodded.

“If it’s praising the Lord, why not?” said Andy’s companion—a swarthy young man with dreadlocks. “You’ve never heard of holy hip-hop?”

The singer shook her head. “No. Guess I didn’t get into any kind of Christian stuff. Didn’t even know about the Rapture, just about how to get saved. Heaven sure is different than I thought it’d be.”

Farther down the table, Rosette heard a group of older people singing hymns, like they sang at her church. What she still couldn’t understand was that none of the songs clashed in any way. It was the craziest harmony she’d ever heard, but harmony it was. Those who weren’t singing were praising Him with tears, or laughter, or both. And of course, there were people asking The Question: “Where were you when it happened?” or answering it.

“My Bride,” Jesus purred. The table fell silent. “It’s wedding cake time.” A triple-layered cake rose up from the table as though it had been waiting beneath the surface. A cheer exploded.

“Holy cow!” cried a childish voice that sounded a lot like her classmate, Louis. Rosette looked, and saw that it was indeed her classmate.

“How’d He do that?” cried another child. Rosette looked at the girl in pigtails, and knew her name was Kim. She’d never met the little girl before, but she knew her as well as she knew Louis. All part of the dream.

The black singer gasped, reared back as though from a snake, and put a hand to her mouth.

“Oh my God!” She looked guiltily at Jesus. “Sorry, Lord.”

“Tracy, up here ‘Oh my God’ isn’t a profanity. It’s an acknowledgement of who I am.”

“Thank goodness.” Beyond that, the singer seemed lost for words.

Rosette's eyes bugged out. Fairyland in chocolate stretched before her. She stared at the broad, green leaves that ran in delicious icing around the white cake. She admired the purple violets and pink rosettes that covered the cake on the tops and sides. A chocolate angel looked down from the center of the cake at the delicately-drawn flowers. Equally delicate, colorful letters were drawn around the angel's feet. The air dripped with a thick fragrance Rosette couldn't get enough of.

"Can you read what it says on the cake, honey?"

"Daddy, of course I can! I'm nearly six, you know, and I go to kindergarten."

"My apologies, ma'am." He squeezed her arm with a smile. "Okay, smartie, give it a shot."

She sounded out the first word. "H-a-p-p-y. Happy." She chewed her lower lip. "Hmm. R-a-p-t-u-r-e. What's that spell?"

"Rapture," Jesus whispered in her mind.

"I know!" she cried. "It says, Happy Rapture. Jesus told me so."

Jesus moved to the other side of the table. He had a large knife with a thin blade of beaten gold, and he was speaking to a woman Rosette had never seen before. Rosette realized this woman had been born blind.

"This," He said, pointing to one of the broad leaves that decorated the cake, "is the color green. Like the grass and the leaves on Earth." The woman's eyes followed in amazement.

"This is green, too," Jesus said, pointing to some flowers Rosette had never seen before. "But it is a color you can only see in Heaven."

"What's that, Lord?" The woman pointed at some tiny pink roses on the cake.

"That's pink. Want a piece of cake?"

She nodded, unable to say anything else. He cut her a large piece.

"Me too!" Rosette cried, clapping her hands, barely able to keep from jumping up and down.

He grinned at her. "Those who want dessert must come to the table."

She sat beside her father, and looked at the lady who had never seen anything before. The lady just sat there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. She gazed at her piece of cake. She traced each blossom and whispered the names of the colors. "Pink ... green ... white." She touched the fluffy cake. She continued to gaze at it,

drinking it in with her new eyes for a long time before taking a bite. Her eyes glazed over. "Fabulous. ... Ecstatic. ... Never tasted anything like it. Never even imagined it."

"Gee, that looks good. I know your name's Pearl."

"That's because the Bible says we shall all know each other in Heaven, Rosette."

"What was it like to be blind? Did you have a blind dog?"

Pearl laughed. "Yes, I had a guide dog named Emily. She's probably wondering where I went. We were walking in the park, when I suddenly found myself here. And you know what? Jesus was the first person I saw. Where were you when it happened?"

"Watching cartoons. I had a bad cold, so Mommy gave me some medicine. I fell asleep, and—" She stopped herself. There was no reason to tell this lady that she wasn't real or that all this was just a dream.

"And poof, you disappeared up here, and met Jesus," Pearl finished.

"Yup, and we had a talk inside this bubble He made. So I didn't see Heaven for a while."

"So did I, the moment I got here," both her dad and Pearl said, tripping over the same words. They laughed like kids at saying the same thing more or less together.

"Hey, that can't be!" Rosette said. Except in dreams.

"You'll find a lot of things up here that can't be, honey," said her dad. "Apparently, the Lord had a private little chat with every single one of us the moment we arrived in Heaven. And we all arrived at the same moment."

"What it is," said Jesus.

"Awesome," Rosette said.

"Have a piece of cake," the Lord invited, and placed a golden plate and fork in front of the little girl. He placed a linen napkin at her left. She barely glanced at the flowered napkin, or the fork, though it gleamed in Heaven's light. Rosette's eyes were riveted on the cake. "Those tiny rose blossoms are called rosettes, just like you." He served her father next. He wore an apron as He went around the huge table, serving the luscious white cake.

The blossom was so pretty. She traced it with a finger much as Pearl had done before picking up the cake and taking a bite.

"Look at you," her father laughed. "You look like you've died and gone to Heaven." He neatly cut a small piece with a golden fork set with tiny sapphires. He popped it into his mouth. He chewed, swallowed, and whistled through his teeth. "Amazing."

Suddenly Rosette jumped up from her chair. "No, Jesus, don't! Stop!" she cried, as he placed a plate before her classmate. "Louis can't have that. He's got dia—dia—that sickness where you can't have sugar."

"Diabetes? Not anymore he doesn't. We don't do sickness up here, remember?"

"Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot." Rosette sat back down again.

"Pay attention, kiddo." Jesus winked at Rosette. "There might be questions."

"Hey, Daddy says that. You really were listening to our Bible study."

"Every word." Jesus turned his attention to the little boy who had been diabetic. "How 'bout it, Lou? Think you're man enough to eat all this? I sure hope so. That's your assignment for today."

"Aye, aye, sir." In moments, his face was a mass of pink, purple, and white crumbs. "What's the Rapture, again?" he said, around a mouthful. "My parents never went to church."

Jesus explained it to him. "What about the kids? Do they have to go through that trib—that trouble on Earth You said?"

"There's not a child down there, Lou. I've got 'em all. Only adults and young adults who haven't yet repented of their sins are down there now." He explained that, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Questions And Answers



"Did I do any sins?"

"Everyone has, Lou. That's why I died on the cross."

"Do those holes in your hands and feet still hurt?"

"The only thing that hurts now is My heart. I wish I could have brought everyone up here today. But when a person is old enough to decide to ask Me to forgive their sins, or not, and they don't, I have to wait till they do before I can live in their hearts, forgive their sins, or take them to Heaven. If I could have My way, planet Earth would be an empty ball spinning in space."

"So, why don'tcha just make 'em ask you to forgive them, Jesus? You can do anything," Rosette cried.

"Yes, I can, but what kind of love would that be? I won't force Myself on anyone."

"Mommy and Daddy are gonna go to hell, aren't they?" Lou said. A tear trickled down his cheek. "They didn't even teach me about God. I bet they don't even believe in God." For several moments, the cake lay on the plate, forgotten, as Lou stared sadly at Jesus. Jesus caught the tear neatly in His hand. "What about my parents? You know everything, right? What will they do?"

Don't feel bad, Lou, Rosette thought at him. This is only a dream. He didn't act as if he'd heard her thoughts. She looked at him, hard, tried to make him melt away. He just sat there, eyes fixed on Jesus, who was speaking to him. He wouldn't melt away, either.

"They will be tricked by a man who is on the Earth right now, telling everyone about his plans to bring the whole world together, and make peace. Trouble is, he's actually working for the devil. He's lying to them all. Like a lot of people, your parents will believe him instead of Me. Eventually, your father will accept Me, but your mother will not. She'll turn him over to the authorities, Lou, and they'll kill him for believing in Me. But not before he's gotten your grandma and grandpa, and several of your relatives to believe in Me. Your dad'll be here before you know it."

"Will it hurt much? Dad being killed, I mean."

"Just for a second. Then he'll be here and he'll have forgotten all about it."

"Like today. One second I'm in class, the next—poof—I'm here." Lou began eating his cake again.

"Poof. And he'll be braver than Luke Skywalker."

"Braver?" The boy's eyes grew wide.

"Braver by, oh, about a thousand times."

"Like the Force is with him?"

"Better than the Force!" Jesus joined the boy in his excitement. "He'll have My Spirit with him. And you should see the mansion he's going to live in when he gets up here."

"A real mansion?"

"Top shelf."

"Cool. I just wish Mom—"

"You and Me both." Jesus caught another tear that trickled down the boy's cheek. "Grieving those who will be lost is God's heartache, my young friend. Be at peace." The boy looked bewildered for a moment, then suddenly brightened. Lou finished the cake, and asked for another piece.

"To celebrate the Rapture, and my dad coming here soon, and now that I can eat sweets." He wolfed it down, excused himself from the table, and ran away down the street, waving "Bye, Jesus, and thanks for the cake."

"Look, Jesus," Rosette said a few moments later. "There's Lou, with Your mom."

"Look at that," one man said to another partway down the table. "Total strangers know each other."

"Yeah. Everyone's bonding like Krazy Glu," said the other. "Where were you when it happened?"

"Contemplating suicide. See, I've been a mental patient for many years. Mental illness is hell on earth."

"Don't I know it. I was a psychiatrist."

"Ah, then you know, at least secondhand. All my life ... horrible manic highs, hallucinations, hospitals ... terrible depression ... crushing fear. I could never plan anything ... never be anything ... never knew from one day to the next how I'd be. I've been tempted before, but today was the worst. Couldn't talk to nobody at my

church. Tried once, but I got told I'd go to hell if I killed myself. Plenty people don't mind tellin' ya what to do if they haven't been through it."

"You're preaching to the choir, friend."

"Thanks, doc. It's a nice change. Anyhoo, I was looking at the bottle of pills, trying to pluck up the courage to take 'em all, but I wavered. I didn't know if I'd lose my salvation, or what. I just wanted out o' this hell. Thought I heard something—a loud noise, and a voice. Thought, Oh, great, I've lost touch with reality again. Then my feet just left the floor, and I was in the clouds with a bunch o' people. Next thing I know, I'm starin' into the Lord's eyes. Found myself flat on my face before Him, and I was thinking, Oh boy, I'm in for it now. Thing was, I didn't remember taking the pills. One second I'm looking at them, the next I'm here. He told me I hadn't killed myself. You can't imagine how relieved I felt, knowing I'd been raptured instead." He sighed, leaned back in his chair. "Praise the Lord, it's all gone. No more mental illness, no more medication that doesn't work or has horrible side effects. When He said, Be at peace, and lifted me off the ground before Him I felt every bit of that peace. Finally, to feel like I'm not going through hell. How about you? Where were you?"

"I was treating a long-time patient."

"Poor soul. I bet your patient freaked when you disappeared."

"No, I did the freaking. We disappeared together. I had no idea my patient was a Christian. Ya can't talk about things like that, not to your patients, anyway."

Rosette shook her head. Why in the world was she dreaming about such grownup talk? And why was the dream going on so long?

"Okay, God," she whispered. "It's time to wake Rosette up now. It really is."

People were leaving the table in groups, or in pairs. Jesus looked at Rosette when they were alone at the table. His eyes held a world of understanding in them.

"Sweetheart, we have to talk. I know you've been trying to make this just a dream, but the fact is, you're in Heaven, and the Rapture really happened."

"Oh, please, Lord Jesus, couldn't this be just a dream—just this once? Just till Mommy gets saved. Then it can be real." Rosette gave Him the look she knew always melted her daddy.

He shook His head. Rosette started to cry. "Then Mommy's gonna go to Hell!" she wailed.

Jesus patted His knee. "Come here."

When she was settled, her head buried in His chest, Jesus said, "No she's not."

"But that bad guy you said—" Rosette sobbed.

"Oh, the Antichrist is down there, but I never said your Mom would believe him. You did too much praying, and your Dad did too much talking about Me, and the Rapture, and what was going to happen after that. That guy hasn't got a prayer where your Mom's concerned. Thanks to you and your dad."

"That's good. Still, the Rapture could've waited till she got saved."

"Tell me something. What time do you have to go to bed every night?"

"You know when. You know everything."

"True, but humor Me. When's bedtime?"

Rosette sniffed. "Eight o'clock."

"What happens if you're not in bed by eight?"

"Nothing, at first. I have ten minutes to obey by myself."

"If you don't?"

"Then I could lose my TV privileges, or get grounded, or get a spanking if I argue about it."

"Mm. Big trouble, huh?"

Rosette nodded.

"Well, it's just the same with God. He gave the world a certain amount of time to believe in Me. Guess what time it is?"

"A hundred million minutes after eight." Rosette couldn't believe she was feeling this depressed in Heaven.

Jesus hugged her. "Aw, it's not nearly that late. Let's call it eleven after. What happened when you didn't go to bed on time, and you got in trouble? Did your mom stop loving you?"

"Course not!"

"Same with God. Your mom missed the Rapture, and she's going to have some troubles she wouldn't have if she got saved before the Rapture. But she won't miss Me. Not only that, she's bringing a whole bunch of people to Me."

"I guess." Rosette wasn't quite ready to give in.

"God knows that if He gave people more time, it wouldn't do them any good. Would you rather your Mom go on and on in her sin or would you rather the Rapture happen and she comes to Me?"

"I'd rather she comes to You."

"Me, too. Don't you trust Me to look after your mom like I'm looking after you and your dad?"

"Yeah, I guess." She felt shy and uncertain. She was, after all, questioning God, the Son. She silently thanked Him for not striking her with lightning.

He laughed softly, and rubbed her back. "Now. What say you go and enjoy Heaven and stop worrying about your mom?"

She was about to get off His lap when she thought of another question. "What about the people that are going to Hell? Won't You look after them, too?"

"Till the last, possible moment. You know, you're really blessed. Both your parents will be here. There are kids here who won't ever see their parents again, because both of them will believe the Antichrist."

"Gee, aren't they sad?"

"Remember how sad Louis was, till I took it away?" She nodded. "That's because he decided to trust Me with that sadness. The moment you do, I'll do the same for you. ... Ah, I see you want to think about that. Fair enough."

"See You around," Rosette called as she ran down the golden street. She wasn't sure how she felt about enjoying Heaven. It seemed wrong somehow, with her Mom still on Earth, possibly in trouble.

Rosette's eye caught sight of someone she'd never met, but knew all the same. "Hey, Peter! It's me, Rosette," The apostle waved back at her. She ran down the street to catch up with him. On the way, she ran into two young men who were rapping in Spanish. The fact that she understood them didn't even surprise her.

"Hola, Juan. Hola, Carlos," she called.

"Hola, Rosita," they called back. She danced down the street in time to their rap.

"Holy, holy, is the Lord!" Rosette looked up at the sound, and found herself staring at a creature with six wings. Two covered his feet, two covered his face, and two carried him through the air. He uncovered his face and locked eyes with Rosette, who'd been staring at the mountains of billowing softness flapping as he stood in

the air.

"Hellow, young lady. Happy Rapture. Welcome home."

"Thank you, sir. You're an angel, right? I've never seen a real angel before. How come you have so many wings? All the ones in the picture books only have two."

The winged beings were everywhere: flying, singing, playing harps. And they only had two wings.

"All those angels only have two wings too. How come you have so many?"

The six-winged being smiled. "So many questions. I'm just a different kind of angel, that's all. God is very creative, you know. He made all kinds of animals, didn't He?"

She nodded, unable to take her eyes off the mountains of feathers.

"He made all kinds of people, too, didn't He?"

She nodded.

"And all kinds of creatures in Heaven."

"Your wings look fluffy-puffy soft. Doesn't your face just melt off from the softness when you cover it?"

"Melt off?" The angel raised an eyebrow.

"You know. When something's so soft and you touch it, you tingle for a long time, as if you're still touching it when you're not. It feels like you're melting into the softness, doesn't it?"

The angel rubbed his face with his wing, and shook his head. "Nope. Nothing melted. Not even a tingle."

Rosette giggled. "That's too bad. My face tingled just watching you rub your face with those fluffy feathers. So, what's your name?"

"Uriel. At your service." He stretched out a wing, and patted her cheek with it.

Rosette gurgled. "Aa-a-a-a-ah, that's soft! My whole face is tingling. It's gonna melt away for sure."

"So may your worries melt away."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, have faith in what the Lord told you, and your worries will melt away. Till next time, then." He raised a hand, and flew away in a whirr of feathers.

Her cheek still tingled, as though the intense softness of Uriel's wing still touched it. She looked around, dazzled by houses made of gold and studded with jewels.

I wonder if I have a mansion, and where it is.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heavenly Peace



As soon as she thought it, she found herself and Jesus in a glade surrounded by large shady trees. A hammock hung from one, a swing from another.

"Oh, there you are, Lord. Where were You before?"

"I'm everywhere. Welcome to your home in Heaven."

Rosette watched swallows swooping, chasing the butterflies who danced away, as if daring them to catch up. The sneaky butterflies hid themselves in the bells of large, yellow flowers that graced Rosette's meadowland yard. A patch of glossy white fur caught her eye.

"Daisy! Wow, I never thought I'd see you again." The white puffball jumped off a low-hanging branch and came to Rosette. Daisy was purring before she could reach down to pat the creature, who looked more like a bank of cloud than a cat. Her hand melted into fur she thought would never end. She was still tingling from the cat's head rubbing against her leg as she walked to the center of the lawn to find what looked like a doll's house—except it was big enough for her to live in. Jesus opened the door, and ushered her in.

"Mmm," she sniffed the air, which had a sweet smell of wood added to the flowers outside.

"Cedar. Your resting place in Heaven is made of fine cedar, and your roof is made of the wood of the fir tree."

"Thought so," Rosette smiled up at Him. "It kinda smells like Christmas. Reminds me of the fir tree Grandpa brought home every year."

Jesus nodded, with a smile of His own.

"Wow." The Persian throw rugs in the living room looked beyond comfy. The small tea service on the table was fit for a princess.

A spacious, winding staircase led to the bedroom. Lacy blue curtains fringed with pink rosettes parted to let Heaven's golden light through the windows, where she could look out onto her meadowland yard. "Wow. Even I couldn't have dreamed this up. Guess that means this really is real. But who will look after me?"

"I will, of course." The seawave sound of His voice was calm and soothing. Rosette sighed. She'd never felt so happy. She couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was wrong—being so happy while her mom was down on Earth. Nor could she deny it was so.

"How come there's a feather bed?" She pointed to a downy bed surrounded by green curtains. "I thought people never got tired in Heaven."

"They don't. They can't. When I took you into the clouds to be with Me, I made your body as healthy as Mine, and glorious, too. But you may want to come here to play and have some quiet time with God. It can be quite noisy in the City of God."

Rosette stretched out on the feather bed. "Soft." She rubbed her hands up and down the pillow and the comforter. She didn't feel tired, but she closed her eyes anyway. The feather bed seemed to swallow her up. She heard the door of her house open and close. Someone had come in, or perhaps Jesus had gone out. She didn't know.

Something or someone was climbing the stairs. Daisy's loud purring announced her presence before she came into Rosette's room and jumped onto the soft bed beside her. Rosette's face melted into the vibrating ball of fur. As she lay there in the stillness, a new sound made itself heard. Along with Daisy's purring, she heard and felt a deep heartbeat. She thought it might have been her own, and yet not her own. With fluffy Daisy in her arms, and the heartbeat relaxing her, she began to feel as if she were floating. Was she really lying on a bed, or was that a pair of strong, encircling arms underneath her, rocking her and Daisy? Was her bed surrounded by a green curtain, or was she under the wings of some great angel? "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust." She heard the memory of her father's voice reciting the Bible verse that had kept her from being afraid of nightmares.

"God the Father," she whispered. "Daisy, I think we're inside Peace, and God the Father is here, too." Daisy continued to purr. The heartbeat grew deeper, slower. The bed grew warmer, the comforter folded itself over her. Aware of little else other than the softness and the heartbeat, she sank deeper inside Peace. Unseen hands caressed and soothed her. What were the hands made of? Warmer than fur, softer than feathers, perhaps the hands were made of peace itself, or maybe love. She puzzled over it for only a moment, then gave into it as it overwhelmed her.

Did it last a moment, or forever, or was there no such thing anymore? She didn't know or care. She surfaced slowly, and wondered if there was a park in Heaven. She stretched, jumped off the bed, and went to her bedroom window.

CHAPTER SIX

Rainbow Park



On the other side of her meadowland yard, she could see a bridge with a hand-painted, gold sign saying, "Rainbow Bridge and Park." Beyond that, green, rolling hills and the faint sound of people singing and a guitar.

I want to go to Rainbow Park, she thought, and found herself among the picnickers.

A group of people sang as a man played a guitar. Heaven's light glinted off the gold wood of the guitar, and the solid diamond pick the man strummed with. Jesus sat among them, receiving their worship with a gentle smile, returning their adoration with love. Babies and small children climbed all over Him as He sat on the lush, green grass. How He found room in His arms and on His lap for all of them, Rosette had no clue. They squealed with joy at anything Jesus did or said. They gurgled and burbled at Him. She ran to join them, and Jesus found room for her, too.

"Hey, Israel," Rosette greeted a chubby blond baby boy she'd never met before.

"Tha-tha-tha-tha."

"Yay, Jesus. I know. I feel the same way. ... Hey, I understand baby talk. Wild!"

"Little Israel's mom and dad missed the Rapture," said an older kid. "Too bad. They're missing out on all the fun."

"They missed the Rapture, but they won't miss Me," Jesus said. "Eh, Is?"

"Tha-tha-tha-tha." The boy looked adoringly into the Lord's eyes. Yay Jesus.

"How about your parents?" Rosette asked the older kid.

He pointed. "There. Everyone in my family made it."

Rosette looked around for her Sunday-school teacher. "Mrs. Brown isn't here."

"That's because she only knew Me in her head. She thought her good deeds would get her into Heaven. Sometimes it's easier for people who've been to jail, or had really bad problems, to accept Me than for people who've had it easy, and think they are good."

"Murderers and robbers accept You before Sunday school teachers?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Some people who get into a lot of trouble realize they need Me. Mrs. Brown never really did that. I feel her absence as keenly as you do. "She should be here, but she isn't. And people who you think wouldn't be here are."

Jesus nodded.

She felt sad about Mrs. Brown, and remembered Jesus' offer: "Give Me permission to take away the sadness, and I will." It was worth a try. She looked at Jesus. He smiled. She felt better. Interesting. Still, Mrs. Brown was one thing; her mom was quite another. Could she surrender her Mom? Maybe she could. Jesus had kept His word, and removed her sadness about Mrs. Brown. She didn't even wonder whether her Sunday school teacher would be saved or lost. That was God's business. Rosette wondered at this strange peace that had come over her. God's business? She'd never thought that before, not about people she loved who didn't believe. Well, she was in Heaven, after all, so there was no point in being sad. Still, her mom ...

She might just as well enjoy Heaven, she decided, and took a look around Rainbow Park. A teacup poodle approached her, sniffed, and gave her a friendly lick. Some of the other kids crawled or walked over to investigate.

"Pinkie, where are you? Come here, darling." The dog raced away, yipping and wagging her tail. Rosette looked up to see the girl in pigtails who'd sat beside Louis at the gold table.

"Hey, Kim. That your dog?"

"Yeah. She died last month. She was real old. But look at her now. Mom said she went to a beautiful place. She sure did."

"Where's your mom?"

"She's not here. Daddy died last year. I was real sure he'd be here, but he isn't here either. I think he's ... never gonna be here." Kim's mouth quivered. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Aw, don't cry. Jesus told me He'd take away all the sadness if I let Him. I tried it just now, and it worked." Kim looked at Jesus. He smiled. She ran to hug Him.

"Look, there's Louis. He and I go to Kindergarten together."

"You what?" Jesus asked.

"I mean, we went to Kindergarten together." Both girls giggled and raced away with the dog, who bounded up to Louis, sniffing and wagging. "Hey girl," he said, giving her a pat. "Hey, she's licking my hand off."

"Cause of all the chocolate on your hands."

"That's not good for dogs," Kim said. But Pinkie was enjoying herself. "I guess she can't die twice."

Louis had placed himself in front of a large picnic basket that lay on a gold wood picnic table. "Boy, this is fun. To be able to eat whatever, whenever, and never have to worry about blood sugar."

Rosette grabbed a sandwich, some salad, and a glass of lemonade. "Look at all this stuff, just lying out for people to eat. We had a picnic last summer and we could hardly keep the bugs away."

"Yeah, but there ain't no bugs here," Louis said.

"But look at Pinkie," said Kim. "And check all the other dogs and cats here, and all the lambs and birds and potbellied pigs. D'you know all these animals used to be people's pets? Anyway, they're not coming around the food either. I guess even the animals can't sin." Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Not in Heaven," Rosette said. "Or maybe the animals don't sin anyway. Thing is, all this food's out, and not one of them is over here trying to get at it." Pinkie was too busy sniffing around the three children.

Uh, guys, check that lemonade jug. And the salad bowl. And the sandwich plate. Freaky."

"What's freaky, Lou?"

"Well look at them, Rose. You got a glass of lemonade. Look at the jug." It was full.

"And some salad. Look at the bowl." It, too, was full.

"And I've eaten lots of sandwiches."

"But you couldn't have," Kim said. "The plate's full."

"Yeah, and I didn't even see the sandwiches appear again. The plate was just full again. Freaky." Louis grabbed another sandwich and watched the plate. "See what I mean?" He pointed at the place that should have been empty. "I watched, honest. Well, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Kim said. "I didn't see another sandwich appear either. It was just there."

She moved away from the plate and turned to Rosette. "Do you have any pets?"

"I have a cat named Daisy. She died too. When Jesus showed me my mansion—well, it's really a big doll's house, and you can see Rainbow Park from there—anyway, when He showed me my mansion, there she was. When I saw Rainbow Park, I thought about coming here, and I was here before I could think about bringing Dai— Hey, there she is!"

"Nice kitty." Daisy pressed her head under Kim's admiring hand.

"Holy cow. She's nothing but a big puff ball. I never seen a cat with so much fur." Louis patted her for quite a while. "Wow, and would you listen to that motor."

The little poodle was Daisy's next admirer. "Hey, looks like those two know each other. Look at them licking and Daisy's purring."

"They've been here before, together," Rosette said with sudden understanding that surprised her. Knowing people's names as soon as she met them was one thing; this was quite different from that.

"Lou, Rose, check the lake, you guys."

"That's my next stop. Who's with me?"

The two girls ran to catch up with Louis. "You're going swimming in your Heaven clothes?"

"Why not?" He jumped in.

"Rose, check that!" Louis was splashing about in the lake, sporting a bathing suit.

"Come on, you girls."

They jumped in, too. Rosette felt her robe shimmering around her, till it had reformed itself into a bathing suit.

Jesus, you sure this ain't a dream?

Totally. This is as real as it gets, kid. The sound of His thoughts in her mind was still strange to Rosette.

The water was refreshing, but not too cold. They played there for what seemed like hours to Rosette.

"Anyone have any idea what time it might be?" she said as she got out of the lake. "There's no sun, just all that light. How does anyone know if it's day or night?"

"Looks the same as it did when I got here," Kim said.

"I think there ain't no such thing as time anymore."

Both girls looked at Louis, who shrugged.

"Hey, my Heaven clothes are dry." Louis and Kim said the same.

The three kids ambled over to the guitar player and the other people who were singing. Jesus sat in the center of a circle of worshippers, who concentrated all their attention on Him.

The guitar player looked up as the kids joined the circle. "Okay, I'm taking requests."

"Oh, How I Love Jesus," Rosette said.

"Don't we all."

"No, the song!"

The people laughed. They sang.

"How 'bout He's Got the Whole World in His Hands?" Louis said. "I know that one."

"I do have the whole world in My hands," Jesus whispered into Rosette's mind. "Including your Mom. Do you believe that?"

Of course she did. Still, there was a lot of scary stuff going on down there, and her mom was in for it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That 'Woo' Feeling



Rosette thought of her grandma, wished to see her home in Heaven and found herself in a large parlor. Grandma was taking cookies out of the oven. She rushed into her grandma's arms. Grandma hugged her tight.

"Well, child, it didn't take you long to get here, did it? I was barely drawing my last breath, and here you are."

"But Grandma—"

"Lord Jesus," Grandma knelt before the being who had followed Rosette into Grandma's house. Jesus laid a hand on her head, and raised her up.

"You see, Liza, there is no time in Heaven. To Rosette, you have been dead six months."

Grandma's face was wreathed in smiles, looking first at her Savior and then at her granddaughter, and back again.

Rosette looked around her and was surprised. No bookshelves? No books? And especially, no Bible? "Grandma, where's your Bible?"

"Right there," Grandma said, pointing to Jesus.

"Right here," Jesus said, at the same time.

Grandma laid the warm cookies on a plate in the center of a teakwood coffee table. She invited her guests to help themselves. The aroma of sugar and cinnamon was too great for Rosette to resist. Grandma's house smelled so Christmasy. It felt warm like Christmas too, and not just from the oven. Music played—harps, bells, a choir—that sounded like Christmas, but Rosette didn't recognize the song. There was no stereo in sight.

"Where's that music coming from?"

"The angels. Whenever I want to hear them, I do. When I want quiet so I can pray, the music stops."

Something else felt like Christmas, too—something in the air that had nothing to do with the cinnamon cookies, the warm house, Grandma, or the pretty music. Rosette chewed her lower lip. Hmm. The air moved, or tingled, or vibrated—or

something. It was so strong Rosette couldn't sit still any longer.

She got up and walked around Grandma's big parlor, past the stone fireplace, unaware of the soft carpeting underfoot. The feeling almost overpowered her. She stopped right in front of Jesus, who was munching on a cookie.

"It's You. It was always You. I felt it last Christmas Eve when we prayed, and on Christmas when we prayed before dinner. I thought it was the toys and being excited for Santa to come, but it was always You making that 'woo' feeling."

"'Woo' feeling?" Grandma asked.

"Yeah. When someone feels close and warm, but when you reach out to touch them, no one's there."

"Oh, child, that's just God's presence you're feeling."

"God never brought us presents, did He?" Rosette looked at Jesus.

"All good gifts come from God. Anyway, you were celebrating My birthday, you invited Me to join you, so I did. Question answered, mystery solved."

"I'll sit beside You, where the mega 'woo' feeling is."

"Feel free." The Lord patted the velveteen settee. Rosette sat and shivered. "It's really 'wooey'."

Grandma laughed, and sat on Jesus' other side. "She's right. You do have a special—Oh, let's just use Rosette's word. Out of the mouths of babes You have perfected praise. Woo feeling. Who'd have thought a child's made-up word could so describe that feeling? A warm something moving beside and all around you, even above you that you can't see or touch, but you can feel it there ..."

"How old are You now, Jesus?"

"Rosette, I don't think—"

"It's no problem, Liza. I'm eternal. I live forever and ever. No beginning, no end."

"But how old would that make You?"

"Oh, let's just say I'm in my mid ... forever."

"That sounds way old. But You don't look old. Will we celebrate Your birthday in Heaven? Does it snow up here?"

"Christmas was a reminder of My birth, my first advent, on Earth. Now that you've

been raptured, there's no need to celebrate my first coming. And no, it doesn't snow, or rain, in Heaven."

"Will we ever see Earth again?"

"After the Tribulation. I'll go down there with the armies of Heaven and all my saints—that's you, your Grandma, Dad, Louis—all the people I brought up here. I'll get rid of that Antichrist—"

"How?"

"With His word," Grandma said. "And we'll all be on white horses."

"Really? I'd like to see mine."

"At the right time, you will."

Rosette couldn't remember having fun just sitting around talking before, but then she'd never been part of a grownup conversation till now.

"I'd like to see Daddy now." The words were barely out of her mouth when she found herself, Jesus, and Grandma standing on the deck of a houseboat.

"Mom, it's good to see you," Dad said kissing his mother and bowing low before his Savior.

"The sea looks like glass," Rosette said.

"Crystal," said her father. "Across the water, you can see the throne of God where the angels sing 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty'."

"They sing it constantly," Grandma said.

"Why?"

"See Him on His throne, and you won't have to ask why," Dad said. From across the river, she could hear the muted strains of the angels' ceaseless praise. This was a sound Rosette knew she would never tire of. Each sound was like the first moment of hearing it. No time here.

"Who wants the fifty-cent tour?" Dad asked.

"Me!" cried Rosette.

Grandma followed behind, while Jesus stood on the deck. The deck was made of a polished wood Rosette had never seen before.

From the deck, they walked into a small room with cupboards made of gold-finished woods. "This is the galley—the kitchen."

"Where's the stove?"

"There is none, Rosie. If I wish to eat, all I do is think of something." Dad closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was holding a steaming white fish.

"Daddy! Your hands!"

"Mm. This is great. Want some?" He showed her palms that should have been blistered.

It smelled delicious, and his hands were fine. She nodded, closed her eyes. A steaming white fish appeared in her own hands. She could see the steam rising from the fish, but her hands felt just fine. She ate the fish.

"Neat! Daddy, I never saw a wheel or those things you use to move a boat, or sails, or anything. How does the boat get anywhere?"

"You mean oars? All I have to do to get anywhere is think of it. That's how you got here, right?"

"Right," Grandma said.

They moved into Dad's cabin. It was small, with a bed and a porthole to look out upon the Crystal Sea.

"Daddy, why do you live on a boat?"

"I always wanted one of these. I even got the bunkbeds I always wanted, for when I feel like resting."

They went back out on to the deck. "Jesus, could you show me Mommy, please?"

"It's almost time."

"Time for what?"

"Come and see."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Meanwhile, Back On Earth ...



"Rosette? Did you call me?" Heather Olson came into the livingroom and stopped short. Her daughter was not on the sofa. Her nightie lay on the sofa, but Rosette was nowhere in the livingroom. Mrs. Olson picked up the nightie. Maybe Rosie had decided to change. Except she would have heard her daughter go into her bedroom.

She went there now. "Rosie, you forgot to—" She looked around. No Rosette.

Okay, so the kid was in the bathroom. But this was a small apartment. Why hadn't Rosette spoken, or coughed, or something? Heather checked the bathroom. Rosie wasn't there.

Where was that child? A few minutes making coffee in the kitchen, and the kid had disappeared. Fear gnawed a hole in Heather's stomach.

Rosette's mom went out into the cold drizzle and looked all over the unkempt excuse for a playground across the street. She knew her daughter wouldn't go out to play in this cold rain, but the urge to do something hammered insistently in her head. There's a logical explanation for this. Meanwhile, the fear continued gnawing at Mrs. Olson's stomach as though it hadn't eaten for days, and she was its favorite delicacy.

"Scuse me, ma'am." A teenaged girl tapped her on the shoulder. Turning around, Mrs. Olson found the familiar face of her babysitter. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Mrs. Olson," said the girl.

"Why, Christine, what's the matter?"

"I can't find Joey anywhere. I've been looking all over hell's—I mean, everywhere—for him. Is he with Rosette? Please say my brother's with Rosette."

Mrs. Olson shook her head. "I can't find Rosette anywhere."

Now she looked around, Mrs. Olson could see a lot of worried or tear-stained faces. A man walked up to them and asked, "Have you seen this woman?" They both looked at the photo, and shook their heads. "Are you sure? You haven't seen my wife anywhere?"

"No," said Mrs. Olson. "I'm sorry. I'm looking for my little girl. She's sick with a bad cold."

"I don't understand. It's not like her. Such a good woman—religious and all." The man walked away still mumbling to himself.

"I'd better get home and phone the police. I suppose your parents have already done so, or will, once you get home."

Christine nodded. "Will you still need me Saturday, Mrs. Olson?"

"I sure hope so."

She trudged through the wet ground that was fast becoming mud. She began to shake violently, despite the Valium she'd taken minutes before. Something was very wrong. Rosie hadn't left the apartment, she was nowhere in the apartment, and she hadn't been kidnapped. Wait. She'd been sure Rosette had called out to her. Could someone have come through a window without her notice and abducted her daughter? Someone could jimmy a window quietly, couldn't they? There was a window near the sofa. The TV was on, her back was turned. That was it. Her daughter had been abducted.

"Get me the police, please," she told the operator.

"I'm calling to report my daughter missing," she told the cop who answered. "I think she's been abducted. She's five years old, blonde—"

"Ma'am, I've taken hundreds of calls like this in the last ten minutes. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

"What do you mean there's nothing you can do? Send a man out, for—"

The cop sighed. "That wouldn't do any good. Might I suggest you turn your TV on?"

"The TV is on," Mrs. Olson snapped, before slamming the receiver in the dolt's ear. What did the TV have to do with—She gaped at the screen. The constant stream of cartoons had been replaced by reports of people missing all over the world. Panic made Mrs. Olson feel sick. She knew who she needed to talk to.

She called her husband at work. Pat always knew what to say to calm her down.

"Black and Decker," said the receptionist. "How may I direct your call?"

"I need to speak to Pat Olson."

"I'll put you through," the receptionist said, sounding frantic herself. "Let him know you're all right."

"Excuse me?" But the phone was already ringing. Someone answered.

"Pat Olson, please."

The man was talking gibberish—something about people disappearing. He sounded even more frantic than the receptionist. Was the whole world going mad?

"Look," she finally said, exasperated with the fool. "I want to speak to Pat Olson, your foreman, and I want to speak to him—now. What part of now don't you understand?"

"Lady!" he practically screamed, "I'm telling you he's not here. I was talking with him myself, when he disappeared—in the middle of a word, for the love of Mike. Half the department's just disappeared. Vanished! Gone! Poof! In the middle of a freakin' word! What part of that don't *you* understand?"

"Put me through to your supervisor. Now."

"Ma'am, one more time. I no longer *have* a supervisor." He slammed the phone down in her ear.

Heather replaced the receiver and turned off the TV. There was no way she could control the trembling, or the tears—no way she could prevent the horrible truth from barging its way into her mind. Her daughter had disappeared; her husband had disappeared. She remembered the man in the playground mumbling about his wife. "It's not like her. Such a good woman—religious and all." Christine's little brother, Joey. Now she almost wished Rosette had been abducted. At least, the police would be able to help, and there would be Pat's strong shoulder to cry on. Most of all, there'd be a rational, natural explanation for her daughter's disappearance.

But she didn't need an explanation. She knew what had happened. The thing Pat was always on her about. The Jesus thing. Get saved before it's too late, and all that. Well, apparently she'd played chicken once too often.

Heather walked to the bathroom, poured out a handful of Valium and washed it down with water. She wondered if it was enough to do the job. If it was true that Jesus had taken His people away, the rest of that doom-and-gloom stuff Pat talked about must be true, too. There was no way she was staying around for that. She started to cry. She guessed she'd be in Hell soon, and couldn't decide which was worse—going to Hell now, or going through hell for the next seven years.

CHAPTER NINE

Adoration Melt-Down



"I don't want to see any more," Rosette said in a small voice.

"My wife—"

"My daughter-in-law—"

Dad and Grandma looked as scared as Rosette felt.

"Why are you afraid?" Jesus asked the little girl. "Remember what I told you would happen?"

"But she took all those pills!"

"Doesn't matter. What did I tell you your mom would do?"

"Rosie, Pat, look what she's doing now!" Grandma was crying and smiling. Rosette decided it was safe to look.

Mom was on her knees in the bathroom. Tears streamed down her face.

"Dear Jesus, I think I've taken enough pills to kill myself, and now I'm sorry. I know You died on the cross to save me from my sins. Please forgive me for all my sins, and be my Savior."

"Yesss!" Christ disappeared and reappeared in the same moment, while Rosette, her dad and Grandma threw their fists in the air in triumph.

"Wow, that is way cool. Could I disappear and come back at the same time?"

"Nope. Even glorified girls can't do that. That's a God thing."

"Oh. ... But what about the pills—"

"She's calling 911 right now. Have faith, Rosette. She's going to be fine. She has to be in order to do the work God called her to do."

Dad and Grandma crowded around Jesus.

"What's she gonna do?"

"What did You tell Rosette?"

Jesus raised a hand. "One at a time. I told Rosette her mom would be saved. I told her the Antichrist didn't have a prayer. She wouldn't be tricked by him for a minute. I told her she'd bring a lot of people to God during the Tribulation."

"Praise God for that," Grandma sighed.

"Look at the angels, across the Crystal Sea." Dad and Grandma looked. The bright, holy beings were high-fiving each other much as Rosette, Grandma and Dad had done.

"Bible says there's joy in Heaven when a sinner repents," Dad said. "Looks like they're about to throw a party."

"There's reason to party. Your wife's going to be quite the Tribulation saint."

"My daughter-in-law--a Tribulation saint." Grandma was smiling.

"Amazing," Dad said.

Rosette couldn't feel sad. Things were just too beautiful. Jesus was here, and she could feel so much goodness and love coming from Him. He knew exactly what He was doing.

Rosette gazed out over the sea at the City of God, dazzling even in the distance. "Look, Daddy, they're pouring champagne."

"Don't be silly, dear. There's no alcohol in Heaven."

"But, Daddy, it looks like champagne. It's fizzy."

The six-winged angel cartwheeled through the air, and landed in a flurry of feathers on the deck. He handed them each a goblet of sparkling liquid.

"How'd you do that? Cartwheel through the air without breaking the glasses?"

The angel raised an eyebrow. "What, you've never cartwheeled through the air with several goblets in your hands? It's easy enough, if you don't mind breaking a few laws of physics."

"What's physics?"

"Dull Earth stuff you wouldn't be interested in. No fun at all." He flapped a wing.

Rosette eyed the glass in her hands with suspicion. "Is this champagne?"

"Heaven's own. To the Lord, and His wondrous saving power." They clinked glasses. Rosette took a careful sip. It was great stuff—sweet and fizzy like cherry Coke. Each sip made her feel warm.

"I just came to congratulate you three on the redemption of your loved one. What a proud hour."

"One more kick in the pants for the Devil," Dad said, and drained his glass.

"Not one, Pat," Jesus said, "but many. Heather's going to do things for God you wouldn't imagine."

Sparks practically flew from Grandma's wide grin. "My daughter-in-law, a Tribulation saint."

"I'm off to the City, just in case anyone wants a ride on my back."

"A piggy-back ride?"

The angel nodded.

"Promise you won't keep brushing your wings all over my forehead? All that fluffiness makes my forehead feel like it's melting off, you know."

"I promise no such thing."

"What's this?" Dad asked.

"Rosette was feeling sad because her Mom missed the Rapture," Jesus said. "I asked Uriel here to stay nearby and offer a comfort. He does have the softest wings in Heaven."

Grandma crossed the deck of Dad's houseboat to stand in front of the angel. "May I?" He extended one of the wings that covered his face. She shielded her eyes from the brightness that blazed forth, and touched the wing. "Aaaaaah!" She turned away, rubbing her hand. "Now I know what Rosie means. Softness like that. My hand's tingling, feels like it might just melt away."

Uriel covered his face again. "I'm still off to the City of God, and I'm still planning to carry, um, cargo." Rosette giggled. "Assuming the cargo makes up her mind."

Uriel bent over. Rosette hopped on and waved goodbye to her family and her Savior.

Rosette held tightly to the angel's neck, and wondered at the speed. She'd never moved through the air so fast, not even in an airplane. Uriel uncovered his face. Billowy feathers collided with Rosette's face. "Wooley! That's soft!" Rosette cried as

they flew over the Crystal Sea.

"Now, tut, tut, it's not so soft."

"Is too."

"Is not."

The same wing rubbed her face. "Aaaah! You did that on purpose." Rosette tingled and giggled as they neared the city.

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

He set her down on the golden street. He uncovered his face long enough to let Rosette see a broad smile. "If my wings make you feel warm and fuzzy and all kinds of tingly, wait till you see God, the Father."

He flew away before Rosette could tell him that she had heard the Father's heartbeat in her heavenly home, and felt His hands. Still, she hadn't seen Him. If seeing Him was even more tingly than feeling His presence in your home, she didn't know if she would survive it. But she couldn't possibly die, could she? Not in Heaven.

"Hey, Rosette! Up here!" She looked up to see Louis waving at her from a high, gold-paved terrace. "Check out my old man's pad. Jesus wasn't kiddin'. This is top shelf. And I get to take care of the joint till he gets here."

The walls of the house were solid gold. The windows were set with diamonds, sapphires, and rubies. She could only imagine what must be inside. Louis surprised her by jumping down off the terrace. On Earth, she would have screamed in terror. Now, she watched him float to the ground and land gently beside her.

"Not bad," Jesus said. The boy grinned at Him.

"What's it like inside, Lou?" Rosette asked, feeling a little breathless.

"It's the bomb. There's purple silk pictures on the walls, and the carpets feel all puffy. It's like walking on clouds. And the sofa feels like even puffier clouds." Turning to Jesus, the boy asked, "Can we meet your Dad now? God, I mean."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Look."

In the city's center, there was a magnificent chair with a rainbow-shaped emerald around it. "Is that God's throne?"

"It is," Jesus said. "See you guys later. I must be at my Father's side." Jesus went to sit on a throne beside his Father's.

Rosette could barely look. "Wow, He's so bright." Neither could she look away.

"Holy cow," Louis said. "Look at those ... animal-people-creature thingies." Rosette gaped. There were strange creatures before the throne, with eyes all over their bodies, all over their wings. One seemed like an ox, another like a man, but she couldn't really tell what they were. They sang, "Holy, holy, holy", and Rosette's heart nearly leapt out of her throat for joy. A thunder came from the throne that sounded like it was part of the joyful music—like a big timpani Rosette had once heard.

Surrounding God's throne, Rosette counted about two dozen other thrones. Men in brilliant, white clothing sat on them. Every time the strange creatures sang, the two dozen men took gold crowns off their heads and placed them before God.

"Glory, and strength, and power, be to our God," they sang. The angels sang too, in loud, joyful harmony, as they played their harps. Rosette watched dumbfounded, as one by one, the bright beings fell like stars on their knees before the Throne. Rosette thought she heard bells pealing, but couldn't say for sure. The choirs of saints she had heard at the Banquet were all singing, too. Only this time, it was all one song.

"Blessed be God, who lives forever. Worthy is the Lamb." Everyone was on their knees, including Rosette, who couldn't say when she'd fallen to her knees.

During a chorus of Hallelujahs, Rosette looked directly into the Father's eyes. His eyes tugged at her heart. Somehow, it squirmed into her throat. Joy jolted through Rosette like electricity. Her body was too small. She wanted to burst out of it.

The song became a warm murmur. The thunderings from the Throne softened, too. Heaven purred to God. God purred back.

Rosette began to tremble. Tears gushed from her eyes. "Wooley! ... Woo-wee!" she cried.

"Yeah. Wooley," said the softest, deepest voice she'd ever heard. Rosette wiped her tears away and found herself looking directly into God's eyes—not from a distance, but nose to nose.

"Wow." Looking at that face, feeling His presence all around her, she'd run out of words.

He lowered her head onto His chest, and stroked her hair. Again, she heard the deep pulse that had covered her with peace in her Heavenly home. Peace covered her now.

"Thanks for saving my Mom," she murmured. He didn't answer. He sent a warm feeling into her heart. Ah, God was even happier about her Mom coming to Christ than she. He told her all that with just a warm feeling. No wonder everyone worshipped Him.

The feeling of being surrounded passed. She no longer felt God's arms around her. She found herself back among the singing throng. But she wasn't fooled. She knew better than to think she was no longer surrounded by God.

She wanted to sing, but didn't know the words. How'd all these people and angels know the songs? She looked at Louis, whose eyes were fixed on the Throne. He was singing loudly. How'd he know the songs?

Maybe it didn't matter. She'd just sing from her heart. She took a breath, and started singing. Somehow, the words came to her. Her voice, like the rest of her, was perfect. She could go on forever. A quick look around her told her the others felt the same way. All faces glowed. All eyes adored the One who sat upon the Throne.

She couldn't believe she'd actually asked her Lord to make this just a dream. Now she thanked Him with all her heart that this was no dream. No dream! She exulted. She locked eyes with God.

The End