

Point of View

~One~

“This is car sixty-seven,” Brion said into the mic, “I’m going on a code ten at oh-eight-hundred hours; out.”

“Roger, sixty-seven. Code ten at oh-eight-hundred,” came the routine voice at dispatch.

Brion parked the unmarked car in front of the diner and went in for a late breakfast, the diner new to him. He usually didn’t work this end of town and didn’t feel like driving across town to the place he usually frequented. Besides, the place had just changed management and the quality of the food suffered.

As Brion entered the door, one of the waitresses caught his attention. Not usually given to girl-watching, the woman’s striking good looks drew him to give her the once-over. She had the fine features of a model: high cheekbones, just right nose, large, expressive, brown eyes and full, sensuous lips—not bee-stung full, but full enough, drawn up into a Cupid’s bow, her lower lip slightly larger than the upper, rescuing her from a pouty, fish-mouth look, something he found unappealing in a woman’s expression. What makeup she had on had been masterfully applied, enhancing her already beautiful features, complementing her honey blonde hair, which hung halfway down her back in a loose ponytail. Her uniform looked crisp and well tailored, emphasizing a more than fine figure.

As Brion’s police-trained eyes took in all these details, he wondered why such a beautiful woman worked in a diner.

She’s probably an airhead, he thought. Just wait ‘till she opens her mouth.

He took a seat at one of the booths; he never liked sitting at the counter, it made him feel rushed somehow. As he hoped, the waitress he had noticed came over and held her pad and pencil poised.

“Good morning,” she said in a soft, well-modulated contralto voice, “what may I do for you this morning?”

Another brilliant deduction of the trained police mind down the tubes, Brion thought, glad, for once, he missed the mark.

“I’ll have two eggs, over easy, hash browns, whole wheat toast, buttered, coffee and o-j. On second thought, make that V-8, if you have it.”

“Sure thing and we do,” she said and went off to wait on another customer.

His order taken care of, Brion fell into the reflective mood he had been in since starting that morning’s shift.

... a very unhappy mood.

Four years earlier, Brion had begun as a rookie on the police force, full of ideals and goals. He had been the first in his family to seek a career in law enforcement, motivated by a desire to do something positive for his fellow man. What better way to make an impact on the crime he saw in the papers, and sometimes on the street, than to become a law enforcement officer? A year later, Brion had become a born-again Christian. This seemed to dovetail nicely with his chosen profession and philosophy. Not only motivated to do something positive, he now had the added dynamic of Christ in his life to aid him in his opposition to crime and the evil that energized it. His goals seemed to take on a new luster, his path clearly marked for him by the

Lord. He felt in the center of God's will. To reinforce this feeling, his career seemed to take off. He worked diligently at his job, earning a number of citations, as well as the attention of his superiors. He moved quickly from walking a beat to a patrol car. He took courses at the local college, working toward a degree in criminology. Two years later, they offered him his big chance; a promotion to detective sergeant in vice. Brion jumped at the chance. He took the exam and qualified. Three years on the force, and already a detective!

From that point, things took a downward turn. Almost imperceptibly at first, a year-and-a-half in vice had turned Brion sour on life; his constant exposure to the underbelly of society had turned his outlook cynical. He began to view the things he saw as inevitable, his work as largely futile. He worked to bring the perpetrators of all sorts of filth to justice and it seemed they ended up back on the streets a half-hour later. The system he worked for and believed in seemed to turn on him, tying his hands, so that he found himself largely powerless to make a real impact on crime.

All of this had a negative impact on Brion's Christian walk. He stopped attending church regularly. The morning quiet time, when he read his Bible and prayed, got shorter and shorter, until it stopped altogether. Once known for his witness at the station house, Brion kept to himself, which caused more than one of his fellow officers to comment. Brion shrugged off their queries. He didn't perceive it as such, but evil had eroded his faith, until he stood on the verge of throwing over the whole thing. Yet, he could never quite bring himself to take that step. Deep inside, he knew he had nothing to replace his relationship with Christ.

Brion found himself in this condition as he sat in the new diner that morning, waiting for his breakfast.

~Two~

The arrival of the waitress with his meal interrupted Brion's inner reflections.

"Here you are, sir. Sorry for the wait. It's a little busy today." With that announcement, she deposited his food and walked off to the next table.

About halfway through his breakfast, she came by with the coffee pot to warm up his cup.

"You're not a regular here, are you?" she asked and Brion shook his head. "By the way, my name's Cynthia." she said, pointing to the embroidery over her left breast.

"Yeah, I picked up on that," he said, returning to eating.

Cynthia chuckled. "You sure are a talkative one this morning, aren't you?" she joked.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. My name's Brion; with an o."

"Nice to meet you, Brion-with-an-o. Can I get you something as a consolation for the meal taking so long? A donut, perhaps?"

He smiled up at her. "What club do you work at?"

"Huh?" she asked, puzzled.

"The nightclub where you do your standup."

"Huh, you got me. Touché."

"Look, I'm not trying to insult you. It's amazing how many cops like donuts, but how did you know I'm a cop?"

"I saw you pull in. It's an unmarked car, but that's a relative term. It's got *police* written all over it."

"Touché on me, then."

“You going to be a regular here from now on?”

Brion looked up at Cynthia. “I suppose I might. The food’s good and so is the service.” He flashed his most winsome smile.

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” Cynthia said, making a curtsy, laughing at herself as she did so.

Brion stopped in at the diner as often as his schedule permitted over the next couple of weeks. Each time, Cynthia took his order they became easier with each other. He liked her direct, self-effacing manner and it became obvious that she liked him. On slow days, she would sometimes join him with a cup of coffee.

On one of those occasions, Brion screwed up his courage and asked the question he had wanted to ask since the first day he saw Cynthia.

“Just tell me to take a hike if you think I’m being nosy, but I have a question I’d like to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I noticed you the first thing I walked in here that first time. You are a strikingly attractive woman. I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I wondered what such a beautiful woman like you was doing working as a waitress in a diner.”

Cynthia’s expression immediately changed to guarded. “Is that the cop in you talking?” she asked, smiling, but it had no warmth.

“Look, Cynthia. I didn’t mean to offend you. Forget I asked,” Brion answered, sorry he had.

Cynthia’s expression softened somewhat. “Why is it so unusual for a beautiful woman to be a waitress?”

Brion liked the gist of her question. She didn’t try to say she didn’t think herself beautiful; she accepted it as a fact.

“Well... you could be working as a ... you know, a model or something like that,” Brion finally managed.

Cynthia’s smile warmed up more, as she listened to Brion’s halting explanation. “Wow, do you use that line to pick up women?”

“Is it working?” Brion asked, smiling, his estimation of Cynthia escalating.

“Perhaps. Look, let’s just say I had my turn at the high life and leave it at that. I’m a waitress because it’s what I want to do right now. Okay?”

Sorry he asked Cynthia such a dumb question, a nosy one, he replied. “Yeah, okay then.”

Cynthia could see Brion’s discomfort, so she changed the subject. “So, who do you favor for the series?”

“I’m not much of a baseball fan, I’m afraid. I” Brion realized Cynthia’s humorous intent and smiled.

“Hoo, boy!” Cynthia said, “You had me worried there for a minute.” She laughed lightly and Brion thought it the most musical sound he had heard. She put a hand on his arm. “Look, I wasn’t mad at you or anything. I just don’t like talking much about myself.” She paused, and appeared to be wrestling with something in her mind. “I’ll make you a deal. You tell me something about yourself, and I’ll tell you something about me; fact for fact. Fair enough?”

Brion’s seriousness lessened somewhat, and he settled back in his chair. “Okay, but there’s not much to tell.”

“That’s what all the good ones say.”

Wow, she thinks I'm one of the good ones, he thought, rejoicing inside. "I'm a detective sergeant who works in vice. I work like crazy to get some of the filth off the streets and watch them crawl right back out there again."

"Ouch! That sure is a bleak picture. Why do you feel what you do is so futile?"

"Because the system stinks, that's why. We're tied hand and foot out there and the dope dealers and pimps know it."

"Did it ever occur to you that it would be worse without you to stem the tide?"

Brion leveled his most intense look at Cynthia. "Is that what you think I do, stem the tide?"

Cynthia thrust out her chin and straightened in her seat. "Perhaps there are some kids out there who are living straight lives because of you. How can you say you have no effect? Are you God?"

Stung by her question, Brion stared down at the table. "I used to really believe in God once. Thought I was a crusader against evil; right arm of God and all that. I sure found out differently."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, I've seen too much dirt on the street. I mean, I sometimes think that there isn't a thing I can do to make a difference. It's all destined to go to hell."

Cynthia didn't say anything in answer to Brion's last comment. She fell silent and stared straight ahead, a look of profound thought etched on her face. She realized she couldn't say much to change Brion's mind; he simply didn't see the positive side of what he did. He *had* seen too much of the seamy side of life and it had left its mark upon him. She thought of her own life; how, at one time, it had gone steadily downhill and she could understand how Brion felt. The fact of his being a decent guy made it all the harder on him.

"Cynthia?" Brion asked.

She looked up. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right? I mean ... you just fell silent. Is there anything wrong?"

"No," she replied absently, "I was just thinking. Say, why don't I bring you another cup of coffee?" she asked, hurrying off.

"Sure. Sure thing," he said to her back.

~Three~

Brion kept his conversations with Cynthia on neutral ground for the next week. He realized she had never honored her part of their "deal," but he hesitated to bring up the subject, not wanting her to go all silent again.

He wondered what exactly he had said to shut her down. One minute she exchanged quips with him, the next, she stared off into space. Finally, his attraction to Cynthia prompted him to get personal again.

The woman fascinated him. All physical reasons aside, she stood a puzzle to him, and that fact made her all the more attractive. One morning, he screwed up his courage again and decided to ask her out if the opportunity presented itself. The moment came when she brought over her cup of coffee during a lull and joined him while he ate his breakfast.

"Cynthia, I've been thinking," he began.

"Uh-oh, that could be trouble; a cop thinking," she said lightly.

"I'm serious. How would you like to go out to dinner with me, or something?"

Cynthia looked at him for a long moment. She smiled an enigmatic smile and then said, "Sure, I'd be delighted."

"Great!" Brion said eagerly. "How about tonight? I know a great seafood place on the waterfront. Do you like seafood?"

"Love it."

"Great, I'll pick you up at seven. Okay?"

"Fine."

"Oh, there's one thing though."

"What's that?" she asked, looking worried.

"I know I'm a cop and have lots of information at my fingertips, but where do you live?"

The two of them had a good laugh over that.

Brion looked across the table at Cynthia. Her beauty stunned him. She wore a basic black shift that emphasized her blonde tresses and elegant features to a tee. Having only seen her in her waitress uniform, the effect took Brion by surprise. He felt ill at ease with such a beautiful woman, like some clumsy country bumpkin and he hoped he wouldn't do something to embarrass himself.

When they got to the restaurant, it seemed to Brion that every head turned as the host escorted them to their seat. He held himself straighter, proud to be with such a ravishing companion.

The evening had turned out to be everything Brion hoped it would be; the meal perfect, the atmosphere romantic, and Cynthia proved to be an engaging conversationalist. It all seemed so dreamlike to Brion and he had loosened up somewhat, gotten out from under the pall of cynicism that hung over him. The evening had felt more like those optimistic, challenging days he had experienced after he had become a believer. Except, now he didn't feel sure of *what* he believed.

"I've had a wonderful evening," Cynthia said over the rim of her coffee cup. "You were right, this is a great place for seafood and it was kind of nice to be waited on, for a change."

"You're quite welcome," Brion responded. "I enjoyed myself too. You're good company."

Cynthia smiled a crooked little smile. "Why, thank you, kind sir," she said.

Brion couldn't help but think she left something else unsaid. Emboldened by this, he decided to ask the question he had kept in the back of his mind. "Cynthia, remember the deal we made in the diner a week or so back?"

Cynthia's smile quickly faded. "Yes," she said in a small voice.

"Well, I told you something about myself, however you may have disagreed with my viewpoint. Now it's your turn."

Cynthia looked Brion straight in the eye for a long moment before answering. She took a deep breath and sighed. "Not here. Why don't we take a ride and enjoy the evening. I'll tell you then."

When they left the restaurant, Brion drove to a spot overlooking the city that had become a favorite place for him to think. It provided a panoramic view of the city lights, a well-known parking place for young lovers. Sometimes he would see them in their cars and muse over the optimism they displayed; two young people, oblivious to the evil in the world.

"Oh, Brion, it's a lovely spot!" Cynthia exclaimed.

"I like to come here and think. I'm afraid it's not exactly secluded, if you know what I mean."

“There’s no need to apologize. I like it very much.”

Brion shifted in his seat. “I’ve been thinking about what I said at the restaurant on the way here,” he said hesitantly. “Look, you don’t owe me anything. Don’t feel you have to say a thing. I was out of line to ask. Your private life is none of my business.”

“A deal’s a deal.” Cynthia countered. “Besides, I *want* to tell you. I don’t think I’ve kept it a secret that I like you a lot. Despite the layer of cynicism you’ve built up around yourself, I sense that you are a kind, sensitive man. You’ve been hurt by the cruelty and filth you’ve been exposed to. A sensitive person couldn’t help but be affected by it.

“I’d like very much to get to know you better, and I see that the only way is for me to tell you about myself. I’m afraid that in so doing, I may lose you, yet I couldn’t let our relationship begin on false pretenses.”

“Is what you’re going to tell me *that* bad?” Brion asked

“Perhaps. I’ll let you decide. Remember when you said I should be a model or something?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, I *was* a model at one time. I was a classic American story, a small town girl come to the big city to seek her fortune. I had aspirations of becoming an actress, but got sidetracked when a job offer with a modeling agency materialized. I did well, and was getting top money by the time I was twenty. I think back and see that it all came too fast: the money, the high life and the fast friends. I started experimenting with coke and, before long, it became a very expensive habit. Most of my big salary was going up my nose. The ironic part was, as my habit got more and more costly, it robbed me of the only way I had to pay for it ... my job. The cocaine affected my health, my looks and my performance. Pretty soon, the job offers stopped coming. There were always new faces waiting in the wings.”

Cynthia paused for a moment and Brion could see the pain and sadness in her eyes.

“Having lost my means of buying more of what I saw as my only comfort, I sought another means of income, one that an attractive woman like me would find readily available. I had lost all my self-respect anyway. Coke was my master and I would do anything for it. I deluded myself into thinking it wasn’t so bad. I hired on with an escort service I heard about from one of my modeling colleagues, who worked part time there to supplement her income. The clientele was high tone and paid well. No one asked too many questions about what went on and it was up to each girl to decide how the evening would end.

“For awhile, things went along smoothly. Then the coke got in the way again. I became hard to deal with, so my customers began falling off.”

Cynthia stared out the windshield with a blank look on her face. Brion, somewhat taken aback by her revelations, could imagine how hard it had to be for her.

“The next step down the ladder was the streets. I hustled my wares on my own for a while, but wasn’t doing so well. Then I met a man who promised me all the coke I needed and proceeded to come across. He became my pimp. I got all the coke I asked for in return for all the money I made. When he had me firmly hooked, he used coke as a weapon, cutting me off when I got out of line, doling it out when I behaved. It went on that way for a few months, as I sunk lower and lower into depravity.”

Cynthia paused and her composure began to crumble. Tears began to run down her cheeks. When Brion had proposed their information swap, he had no idea what he had asked of Cynthia. He wanted to tell her to stop, to cease torturing herself, yet he sat transfixed by her tale of human suffering and degradation.

“One morning, I awoke in a sleazy motel room right out of a Mike Hammer paperback, sprawled naked on top of the bedclothes. I supposed I had been with a john, but I couldn’t remember. I figured I had slept where he left me the night before. I noticed my body had bruises in several places. I staggered to the bathroom, feeling like death warmed over. The face that stared out of the mirror was bruised as well, with dark circles under the eyes and sunken cheeks. The bones in my shoulders and upper chest stood out sharply. I hardly recognized myself.

“I remember thinking that I was no more than a slave, bound in chains I helped forge. Just then, I heard a noise at the door. I turned and went to the bathroom door, just as the cleaning lady came into the room. She took one look at me, standing naked in the door frame ... and screamed!”

Cynthia lowered her head into her hands and cried softly for a few moments. Brion tentatively put his arm around her shoulders and felt her trembling. At that moment, some of the ice around his heart melted and it went out to this human being in distress. He didn’t think about the futility of reaching out at that moment; he only knew he wanted to help somehow.

Cynthia, having gotten herself under control, looked up at Brion. “Can you imagine?” she said pleadingly, “The woman was so frightened of the apparition she saw, that she screamed. I got myself out of that motel as fast as I could and went to a hospital emergency room. I had slid into the gutter far enough, and now I wanted someone to help me try to climb out.

They gave me a thorough physical, and the young resident told me of the results. I was suffering not only from bruises and contusions, no doubt given me by my john, I was suffering from malnutrition, incipient heart disease, a partially eroded septum and exhaustion. In two short years, I had gone from top model to ravaged whore. As the young doctor recited his litany of woe, I felt so ashamed I wanted to run from the room, but a small voice inside me told me to sit still and take all the shame I had coming. I had done this to myself, now I had to pay the piper.

“The doctor said he could get me admitted to a city-run detox program. I could see he was really trying to be kind to me, so I accepted his offer. The place was a real snake pit, but I was able to kick my dependency on coke there. Somehow, that doctor had planted a little seed of hope inside me and it began to sprout.

“I began to look at the other inmates, all victims of their own brands of madness. I reached out to some of them and they didn’t reject my help. I began to put on weight as my appetite returned. I slept more soundly and actually began to wake up feeling good again. As my coke-fogged brain cleared, I began to read and watch television to pass the time. I even sat down with the Bible.

At about the same time, I began watching the 700 Club on TV. I thought the show was corny, but they would have people on the show who told how Jesus had rescued them from a terrible life. I could easily identify with that. On each show, they told how the viewers how Jesus could do the same for them. At first, I was quite skeptical. It all sounded so nice, yet it seemed too easy somehow.

I continued to watch, however, and found myself in the lounge one afternoon listening to an ex-coke user tell her story. It sounded so much like mine; I could only stare at the screen in amazement. When she finished, she was in tears, and so was I. I actually dropped to my knees right there in front of all the other inmates, not caring if they saw, and prayed the sinner’s prayer that she and the minister suggested. I felt so dirty, so despicable. I had been given so much, yet I had ruined my life through my own selfishness. All I wanted at that moment was to know

forgiveness and to forgive myself. I don't know how long I knelt there, my mind in a turmoil, asking God, Jesus, *anyone* to hear and forgive me.

Finally, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. I looked up into the eyes of one of the other women that I had tried to help, her face wet with tears as well. We were the only two in the room. Everyone else had gone to supper. She didn't say a word, yet I knew from the look in her eyes that she felt the same way I did. I got up from my knees and stood facing her. She, too, had been a prostitute, only her poison had been heroine. We just stood looking at each other for a long time. Then, she simply embraced me.

At that moment, I knew God had heard my childish prayer. I had found both someone in Heaven and someone on earth who could forgive me. My heart went out to this fellow fallen sister. I hugged her back with all my strength. Then we walked hand-in-hand to supper."

While Cynthia paused in her story to pull herself together, fishing around in her purse for a tissue, Brion mulled over the story he had just heard. He found it hard to believe that the beautiful woman who sat next to him had been the subject of that story. Yet, God reached down and brought her out of her pit to faith in Jesus.

It made him think of his own experience, of how God had spared him the consequences of his own selfishness and he felt more than a little guilty at his own cynicism. Cynthia's voice continuing her tale cut his ruminations short.

"Lola and I became close friends after that afternoon, when we had both made a commitment to a new life. We were inseparable companions. We studied our Bibles together, in an effort to bring some order back into our lives. We shared our hopes, our dreams and our goals, planning for the time we would leave our self-imposed exile from society.

"When that time did come, we both took jobs as waitresses in the same diner. We took an apartment together, pooling our meager resources. We vowed to remain celibate; not even *seeing* any men, so great was our revulsion to our past lives. For a while, it seemed like heaven; then the roof fell in.

"Unknown to me, Lola had gone back to drugs, sneaking out after we had gone to bed. I woke up one morning and found she hadn't been home all night. I went to work, worried about her. We both knew we could always lapse. I called the apartment several times that day, but got no answer. My questions were answered late that afternoon, by the arrival of a couple of policemen at the restaurant. They asked if I lived with a black woman by the name of Lola. When I said I did, they broke the news that they had found her body in an alley. She had died of an overdose. It hit me like a ton of bricks.

"I almost went back to drugs myself after that. I came so close it frightened me. But God was merciful, and showed me how foolish that would have been. I moved here then, convinced I needed to get away from my past haunts. I took a job at the diner where I now work and have been there a little over a year.

So far, I haven't touched drugs, or gone out with any men. I've been drug free and celibate now for over two years. I live simply, saving my money and not going out much. It's a lonely life in some ways, yet, when I get to feeling sorry for myself, I just have to remember how it was with me *and* with Lola."

Cynthia directed her attention back to Brion. "You're the first man I've gone out with since I woke up in that motel room, so very long ago. So ... what do you think? Still interested?"

Cynthia's abrupt question brought Brion up short. Until she had asked it, he had never considered personalizing the facts of what he had just heard. He looked into her beautiful, honey-

brown eyes, searching for a hint of her innermost feelings. He saw sadness and weariness, yet he also saw a resolute decisiveness there.

“I really don’t know exactly how to answer that.”

“Look, maybe we should just remain coffee buddies. I don’t mind ... *really*. I don’t expect you to—”

“Now just a minute,” Brion interrupted. “I never said I wouldn’t answer your question. It’s just that I don’t want to sound glib.” He reached over and took one of Cynthia’s hands in his.

“As far as I’m concerned, what you were before you were born again is history. It’s what you are now that I care about. If I remember correctly, it says in the Bible ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new.’ I may not have it word perfect, but I believe what that verse says.”

Cynthia’s serious expression slowly broke into a smile. A tear formed at the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek. For long moments, she and Brion just sat looking into each other’s eyes. Then, they slowly moved closer until their lips nearly met.

“I want to kiss you in the worst way right now, but I won’t if you don’t want me to,” he said softly.

“I don’t think I ever wanted a kiss as much as I do now, but ... you’re so cynical, so down on your faith. After all I’ve been through, I don’t want to buy into that.”

Brion moved back. “You’re right. I need to do some soul-searching myself. I’ll take you home. I don’t want anything to happen that would compromise your commitment to the Lord.”

“Of course.”

“Well, okay then,” Brion mumbled, reaching for the ignition key. The drive back to Cynthia’s apartment took place in silence. Fifteen minutes later, Brion pulled his car to the curb and hurriedly got out to open the door for Cynthia. He walked her to the front door and turned to her.

“In spite of ... *before*, I had a great evening, Cynthia.”

“So did I,” Cynthia replied. “Sorry to dump the whole, sordid story of my life on you on our first date.”

“No problem. Look, I—” Brion began, but Cynthia put up her hand to stop him.

“I had a lovely time, *really*. You don’t need to say anything. Good night.”

She gave Brion a peck on the cheek, turned and entered the apartment house door.

At his apartment, Brion lay in his bed, his mind rehashing what went on earlier that evening, unaware that the same scene took place in an apartment across town.

~Four~

The next day Brion went to the diner for breakfast, eager to speak with Cynthia, but she wasn’t there. He inquired of Judy, one of the other waitresses.

“Gee, hon, I don’t know where she is. She didn’t call in or anything. Kinda left me holdin’ the bag, you know?”

Brion thanked her and left the diner, all thoughts of breakfast forgotten. He drove to Cynthia’s apartment, but didn’t see her car on the street anywhere nearby. He walked up to the front entrance and rang her bell. As he waited for a response, he thought incongruously that he had never been inside her apartment. He was just about to leave, when he heard a muffled voice from the intercom speaker.

“W-who’s there?”

“Cynthia? Is that you?” he said, concerned by the sound of her voice. For a long moment, he thought he would get no response and reached for the bell when Cynthia finally answered.

“Why are you here?”

His mind raced, trying to make sense of her question. “Why am I here? You weren’t at the diner and didn’t call in or anything. I was worried.”

“Don’t be. I’m okay.”

“Cynthia, what’s wrong? Please let me in.”

He had to wait so long, Brion despaired of her ever letting him in. He pushed her bell again, frantically stabbing at it, surprised when the front door solenoid chattered. He flung himself at the door and hurried down the hall to Cynthia’s apartment. When he got there, he pounded on the door like an impatient fireman. He heard the rattle of the safety chain and the door swung open, but he couldn’t see Cynthia. Brion’s inner alarms rang loudly, as he tried to piece together what had obviously gone wrong. He entered the apartment and, when he got to the end of the hall and turned left into the living room he saw Cynthia huddled on the sofa, wearing a pink, quilted housecoat, her feet drawn up under her, her hair tousled as though she had just gotten out of bed. She clutched a tissue, dabbing at her eyes with it. She looked like she had been crying a lot, judging from her red, puffy eyes. Even so, she looked vulnerable, desirable and impossibly beautiful.

“Cynthia. What’s wrong? What happened? Are you all right?”

“Physically, yes,” she replied and it sounded so forlorn it broke Brion’s heart.

He moved to the sofa and sat down next to Cynthia. “What has you so upset?” A thought struck him. “It isn’t about last night is it?”

Cynthia shook her head from side to side. A new wave of emotion seemed to wash over her and she burst forth with a new flood of tears, throwing her arms around Brion, sobbing her heart out against his chest.

An hour later, both of them sat side by side on the sofa, their hands wrapped around steaming mugs of coffee Brion had made when Cynthia had cried herself out and fell into a troubled sleep.

“I’m sorry I fell apart like that.”

“Don’t be. You were obviously very upset about something. Do you feel you can talk about it now?”

She nodded, staring into the dark liquid in her cup. “Ever since that day, when the police told me Lola was dead, I’ve been able to keep myself under control. I guess I’ve been numb, not properly grieving over the loss of my dear friend. Then, last night, after our nice time together, I got a call reminding me of the past and the dam just burst.”

“Who called?”

Cynthia took a long pull from her mug. “My pimp.”

“Your *pimp*?”

“After Lola died, remember I said that I figured it best to move away from my old haunts, to start fresh so to speak?” Brion nodded. “Well, I thought I could make a clean break with the past. Then, last night, Julio called.” Cynthia looked up at Brion, her lower lip quivering. Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. “Brion, he said he was coming for me! He said he missed his main lady and tracked me down here. He said that none of his ‘ponies’ ever left his stable and that he was

going to bring me back where I belong.” Cynthia stared down into her cup, as if to find an answer there. “I should have known it wouldn’t have been easy, that my filthy past wouldn’t wash off like so much dirt. Last night, I thought there was a chance for a new life for me. I should have known better.”

“Hey, now.” Brion interrupted. “Aren’t you forgetting someone here? Why don’t you ask *me* what I think?”

Cynthia met his gaze, her expression serious. Taking her silence as a cue, he continued.

“Before *you* go all cynical on me, remember that you’re not the only one who needs a new chance here. I lay awake half the night thinking about what happened between us. I realized that, for the first time in a long time, I was having optimistic thoughts about the future. *You* made me think them. Hearing how you came out of a living hell made me realize how hardened I’ve become. I’ve let the evil in the world blind me to the good.”

Brion put his mug on the end table, reached for Cynthia’s mug and put it on the table next to his. He took both her hands in his.

“*You* changed that. I’m convinced the Lord brought you into my life, brought us into *each other’s* lives for a purpose. Don’t you worry about Julio. Whatever happens, I’ll be right by your side. I’m a vice cop, remember? I’ll do my level best to see that nothing comes between me and the woman I love, Julio or no Julio!”

Cynthia’s expression softened and her eyes widened. “You ... *love* me?”

“After we almost kissed and you let me have it, I thought I blew it with you.”

“Oh, Brion, I wanted to kiss you so badly when I saw that even my sordid story didn’t turn you off, but your cynicism confused me. Even as I said the words, I felt sad that I probably ruined any chance we had.”

Suddenly, she flung her arms around Brion. Her head on his shoulder, she said softly but earnestly into his ear, “I love you too, Brion-with-an-oh; with all my heart.”

“Cynthia, you’ve made me so happy.”

She raised her head and locked eyes with him. This time, as they moved their lips closer, they didn’t stop and merged into a soft, sweet kiss as light as a feather’s touch. They held it, not wanting to go any further, but not wanting it to end. Brion tightened his embrace and Cynthia responded by tightening hers. Finally, they broke it off, both of them breathing heavily.

“Wow,” Brion said. “That was the most amazing kiss I’ve ever experienced.”

“Yeah, amazing in that it didn’t go any further,” Cynthia added. “You don’t have to tell me, but have you been with a woman, you know, in that way?”

He shook his head. “No. Jesus saved me before I got that far. I’ve dated some and got into some heavy petting, but it never went all the way.”

“You sound almost disappointed. Don’t be. Be proud of the fact you saved yourself for that special woman in your life.”

“Yes, for *you*.”

Her expression grew sad. “I’ve been with so many men, I feel ashamed to even consider the possibility of taking your virginity. I don’t deserve to do that.”

“Whoa! Now who’s being cynical? Like I said, when Jesus saved you he made you a new creation, a new virgin, if you will. When I marry you, it will be as if it was the first time for you.”

“Oh, my ... you’d marry me?”

“Would? I *will*. That is, if you want that.”

“More than life itself,” Cynthia said, kissing Brion for the second time.

~Five~

“Are you sure you understand what to do?” Brion asked.

“I think so.” Cynthia responded.

“I *think* so isn’t good enough.” Brion said sternly, his hands on her shoulders. “There can’t be any uncertainty on your part here. I have to know I can count on you in this. Now, are you sure?” Cynthia sheepishly nodded her assent. “Good. The only thing left to do is to wait.”

Brion leaned back into the cushions of the sofa, rubbing his eyes. Now the following evening, he had insisted she stay at his place and get some sleep while he worked his shift.

He ran a sheet on Julio and found the usual litany of arrests. Drugs, robbery, assault, procurement, pandering, even vagrancy. Julio had done some hard time on an old robbery charge and later form a drug bust.

“Looks like our boy is a real upstanding pillar of the community.” he had told Cynthia when he got home and showed her what his investigation had uncovered.

“Why do you think he tried so hard to track me down?” Cynthia asked him.

“I figure he didn’t at first. That’s why over two years have passed. He probably heard about your rehab, might have even known Lola. My guess is that he’s fallen on uncertain times.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the way these guys use and abuse their stable of women, the mortality rate is high. The ones that live don’t remain too enticing for long. His stable is probably not too extensive right now, so he thought of you. Judging from your looks and from what you told me, you probably did some good business for him. With his connections, you probably weren’t hard to find. After all, you weren’t really trying to avoid him; you just moved.”

As Brion spoke, Cynthia’s manner grew more somber. Finally, he noticed she had begun to cry.

“Oh, Cynthia, I’m so sorry.” he apologized. “When I get to talking shop I’m afraid I’m not too tactful.”

“It’s not that.” Cynthia said, sniffing. “Look at me. There was a time when I couldn’t find it in me to cry over anything. Now I’m shedding tears like a spring shower at the drop of a hat. I’m not crying over your comments. I’m crying at the mess I’ve made of my life and how hard it is to get past it.”

“I see it as a positive thing.” Brion said softly.

“What do you mean?” Cynthia asked, puzzled.

“Well, the fact that you cry so easily is a sign of healing. Seems like the Lord is working on your life. That shame you feel is a sign of how far you’ve come. I’m the last one to preach, but since he’s forgiven you, he can take your shame away too. It’ll just take time.”

Cynthia smiled. “You know, Brion, you’re going to have to watch out. Your cynical cop image is slipping.”

Brion merely smiled back.

“This is Steve,” Brion said as Steve took Cynthia’s hand. “He’s not my partner, since I work alone, but he’s had my back from time to time.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Steve said to Cynthia and then looked at Brion. “Where have you been hiding this knockout, you dog you? Afraid of some competition?”

“I haven’t known her all that long.” Brion said, blushing. “Besides, I didn’t bring you here to gawk and make wisecracks. We have a job to do.”

“Yes sir, boss, sir,” Steve said, snapping off a mock salute.

Steve looked the opposite of Brion. Where Brion had dark hair, stood at five-ten, with a compact build, Steve stood at six-four, with a rangy, gangling build and looked as blond as a surfer. He wore his hair in a crew cut, further emphasizing his boyishly young features.

Cynthia found the whole scene delightful, glad to be in the company of two men who obviously found her attractive, yet who didn’t look at her as a prospective bedmate. Brion and Steve stood as proof that normal, decent relationships with men could again be possible for her.

“Steve and I will take turns keeping an eye on your apartment.” Brion said, interrupting her train of thought. “The tap’s in place on your phone and the apartment is wired. If our boy Julio calls, anything he says will be on tape for future evidence. When you leave here for any reason, you’ll be wearing a wire, too.” Brion looked at Cynthia solemnly. “I honestly don’t think you’re in any physical danger. Julio wants you back; he doesn’t want to damage the merchandise. All you need to do is get him to talk, to brag, to say anything incriminating. If he tries to get physical, we’ll be all over him. Okay?”

Cynthia smiled, first at Brion and then at Steve. “Yes. I’m not so afraid anymore; I’ll do the best I can. Thank you both for what you are doing.”

“This is our job. Thank *you* for being so brave,” Brion said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

For almost a week, nothing happened. Cynthia, even aware of the constant presence of someone just outside her apartment, slept fitfully. Going about her daily business, she jumped at the most innocuous of sounds, expecting to turn and see Julio at any given moment.

Finally, one morning at the diner, she went to serve a customer and looked up from her pad to see Julio sitting at the table. The shock hit her like a jolt of electricity.

“Buenos Dias, chica.” Julio said, smiling up at her.

When she just stood there staring at him he continued. “It don’t look like you’re glad to see Julio. I don’t know why.” He looked around the diner. “Just look at this dump.”

Surprisingly, instead of fear, cold anger welled up in Cynthia’s breast. She glared at her old nemesis. He didn’t look at all like the cool, immaculately attired, powerful man she remembered. Instead, he just looked small and sleazy.

“At least I can hold my head up. The money I make in this dump, as you call it, doesn’t require I sell my soul.”

“You were more than glad for my help, as I recall,” Julio shot back, his smile vanishing.

“Well, I’m not asking for it now.” she said coolly, amazed at her boldness. “Why are you here?”

Julio leaned back in the booth and stretched his arms along the seat back. “Aren’t you going to take my order? That is what you do here, right? Take orders?”

“What do you want me to get you?” Cynthia said, still glaring at him.

“I guess I’ll start with coffee.” Julio answered.

She walked over, got a cup, saucer, spoon and the coffee pot off the warmer, hoping her wire transmitted its signal to Brion and Steve. As she walked back to the table, her eyes never

left Julio's face, with its smug expression. She put the cup, saucer and spoon down in front of him and proceeded to pour the coffee ... in his lap.

Julio screamed, releasing a stream of epithets, as the hot coffee soaked into his sharply creased suit pants.

"What's the matter with you, you stupid bitch!" he yelled.

Cynthia pulled the cloth she carried from her apron pocket and began dabbing at the spill. "Oh, I'm *terribly* sorry, sir!" She said. "I don't know what's the matter with me this morning."

Having pulled himself together after the initial shock, Julio said under his breath, "I'm going to walk out of here to my car and you're going with me. Make any excuses you gotta, but come with me, or there's gonna to be trouble."

He turned back the lapel of his suit jacket, revealing the pearl handle of his nickel-plated thirty-eight, snub-nosed revolver in a classic shoulder holster. "Understand?"

"Why the gun, Julio?" she whispered back. Are you afraid of me?"

Cynthia nodded and turned toward where her boss, Joe, looked at her from the grill. "I'm going to step outside a moment with this gentleman. Family matters. I just got some troubling news. I'll be right back." Joe nodded and she walked with Julio to the door. He walked behind her with his hand on the butt of the gun inside his jacket. "Why do you need me?" she asked. "Don't you have enough whores to keep you in enough money for your coke habit?"

Julio didn't go for the bait and, when they stepped outside, she looked for the familiar unmarked car and began to panic when she didn't see it at first. There! She saw it a few cars down from where it had been. She could see two heads in it. Julio, who had her upper arm in a bruising grip, led her to his gaudy Continental, opened the passenger door and pushed her in, nearly catching her foot in the door when he slammed it. He hurried around to the driver's side and got in.

Atta girl," Brion said when he heard Cynthia's questions over the wire. "Get him talking about what he wants, so we can bury him." He looked over at Steve, who smiled back.

"Not only is she a stunner, she's a smart cookie." He said. "You're a lucky devil, you know that?"

"Don't say devil. She's the one God chose for me and I'm going to marry her."

"Whoa, when did this happen? I thought you said you didn't know her for that long?"

"You're right, I haven't, but we complement one another."

"Man, you must be gone on this gal; you sound like a TV movie on the Lifetime Channel. Time to call Oprah."

"Thanks for the support, Steve. Now I know why I work alone."

"Ouch! I'm here now, ain't I?"

"Shah! Listen."

"How about you let me know you ain't lost your touch?" Julio asked, looking at his crotch.

"What, you want me to go down on you right here?"

"It'd go a long way to showing ol' Julio you still love him."

"Love you? You exploited me. Offered me drugs if I turned tricks for you. You made all the money; I didn't earn a dime of it."

"Hey, ol' Julio took good care of you, didn't he? Gave you the happy stuff."

“Yeah, and watched me waste away to nothing. Do you want to know why I left? I saw myself in a mirror, what I had become. It’s taken me over two years to get healthy again, kick my addiction.”

“Well, you sure are lookin’ fine now.”

“Yeah, hooray for you. What’s in it for me if I decide to turn tricks for you again?”

“You get the same deal, unlimited happy powder. Ol’ Julio will take care of everything.”

Cynthia laughed. “Wow, what a deal; the same old lies. Sorry, I’m off cocaine now and I’m not going back. You have to stop playing the same old record. Let’s hear the flipside. You want me back? Make it worth my while.”

Julio pulled his revolver and stuck it in her stomach. “How about I just shoot you, you ungrateful bitch?”

She looked down at the gun in her stomach, a thrill of panic running through her. She knew she’d be worthless to Julio if he killed her, but she worried over an accidental discharge of his weapon. Even as she considered it, a wave of peace swept over her. Whatever happened, she knew she’d see Jesus’ face.

“Take care of me? How is putting a bullet in my stomach going to help either of us earn? Calm down and let’s negotiate.”

Without another word, Julio started the engine and screeched out of the parking lot of the diner with hardly a look at traffic. Cynthia looked at the side-view mirror on her side, relieved to see the unmarked car in its convex reflection pull out behind them.

“So, you think you can treat Julio any way you want? We’ll fix that soon, eh?” Julio reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a small packet of white powder. He tossed it into Cynthia’s lap. “Some nose-candy little girl?”

Cynthia looked down at the packet in her lap and then back at Julio. “You don’t honestly think I’d use this stuff now? Forget it!”

Julio lashed out with his right hand and caught Cynthia across her right cheek with his knuckles. “Shut up, *puta!* Things are going to be different, starting now! You get with it or Julio’s gonna punish you real good!”

White lights danced behind Cynthia’s eyes from the blow and she felt a warm trickle of blood leave her nose. With trembling fingers, she reached for the little packet of white powder. In her mind she prayed, *Dear Lord, save me!* over and over, while her eyes searched the side view mirror for assurance that the unmarked car still followed.

~Six~

“This is car sixty-seven. In pursuit of suspect driving an electric blue Lincoln, license number S-T-U-D-1. He has a woman with him.”

Brion started his car and shot from the curb, at the same time reaching for the rotating, red beacon on the seat next to him. Before he slapped it on the roof, he reconsidered the folly of tipping off his perp. He kept his ear tuned to the radio, listening for anything Cynthia or Julio said over the wire.

“Lord, help me to do all the right things,” he prayed out loud.

“Amen to that,” Steve added.

Cynthia dabbed at the blood oozing from her nose with a corner of her apron. Her cheekbone throbbed and her right ear still rang from the blow she had received.

"I can't use this stuff now," she said, mad at herself for the quiver in her voice. "My nose is bleeding too badly."

Julio gave her a sidelong glance. "No problem. We have plenty of liquid fun where we're going. Just so you know you don't mess with Julio."

"Why did you seek me out now, after all this time?"

"I missed my main lady," Julio said breezily. "I heard you was in detox. I even knew about you and that other whore, Lola. I was more than willing to give you the time to pull yourself together. You needed the rest, but you shouldn't of left town like that."

Cynthia knew Julio's words of concern to be nothing but a sham. "What makes you think I'll agree to work for you again?"

Julio turned his head, a malevolent look in his eyes. "'Cause you an' me got unfinished business. I told you on the phone that none of my girls just ups and leaves me like you did."

"I don't live like that anymore. I quit coke, cleaned up my act. I have an honest job as a waitress and keep to myself." Cynthia wondered if she should say something about her new life as a saved Christian. "I ... I found Jesus, Julio. He changed my life. I belong to him now."

"Hey, a little religion's good." Julio responded. "Just so's it don't get in the way of business."

"It's more than just religion." Cynthia tried again. "I found Jesus Christ and he saved me from what I was, gave me a new life, both here and for eternity."

"Who do you think you're kiddin'?" Julio shot back. "All you hookers got some kinda hustle. It might work on one of your johns but this is Julio, remember?"

Cynthia could see the futility in trying to reason with the man, so she lapsed into silence. She figured she had gotten enough incriminating conversation with Julio and prayed help would arrive soon.

Brion allowed a couple of cars get between him and the Lincoln and moved back and forth to get a view of Julio and Cynthia. He could see the back of Cynthia's head in the passenger seat. What he had heard said a lot for Cynthia's courage, but made him keenly aware of the danger she faced. Neither he nor Steve could predict what Julio would do.

Brion did not like the fact that, for the necessity of the case, he had placed Cynthia in such danger. Yes, she had readily agreed to the plan to put Julio away and get him out of her life; yet he mentally berated himself for not planning things more carefully, even though Steve had assured him they had done all they could to protect Cynthia. Who was he to play with her life like this? He looked over at Steve.

"Look, I think we have enough damning information on Julio. When he gets where he's going, we'll collar him."

"Are you sure? She hasn't said the safe-word and she seems calm enough."

"She could be terrified, Steve; too terrified to use the safe-word."

"Brion, I know you have feelings for this lady and I understand you completely, but let's see this through. We're three car lengths back and getting a clear signal. I'll do my very best to see she's not hurt. Okay?"

Brion looked at Steve. "Okay, but stay sharp."

"As a razor, man; as a razor."

Cynthia was doing her best to pray, while she kept one eye on Julio. Although things seemed relatively calm, she knew Julio to be capable of violent action in a heartbeat and witnessed his explosive temper when one of the other women did something to incur his wrath. A brutal man, who would not feel the least bit squeamish about beating one of his women to death, Cynthia had managed to escape beatings at his hands by virtually doing whatever he had wanted; cocaine had been her god and nothing else mattered.

She looked at the small envelope in her lap and marveled at how such an innocuous-looking white powder could do such things to a person and she shivered when she thought of how debased a person she had allowed herself to become. She sent a prayer of thanks and praise heavenward for Jesus' mercy toward her.

"Sonofabitch, we have a tail!" Julio spat, shattering Cynthia's attitude of prayer.

"Where? How do you know?"

"I'm not an idiot, I can spot a cop car a mile off. He's three cars back." He looked over at her, reaching out to grab her uniform top, ripping it down to uncover her chest and reveal the wire. "You bitch! You played me!"

Julio reached for his revolver, which he had laid in his lap. Cynthia dove for it, managing to get it in her grasp before he did. He grabbed her hand, trying to wrench it from her grasp, at the same time struggling to control the Lincoln.

"She's busted!" Steve cried.

Brion slapped the magnetic beacon on the roof, got it going and Steve flipped on the siren. Seeing a break in traffic, he pulled out and floored the accelerator, trying to overtake Julio's Lincoln, which swerved wildly from side to side.

I'm coming, sweetheart! he thought, as he guided the speeding car.

Cynthia heard the sound of the siren as she wrestled with Julio. Though small, he still had more strength and managed to get the pistol from her grip. Faced with certain injury or death, she grabbed the wheel and pulled it toward her ... *hard*.

Hurry, my love, she thought. *I don't know how much longer I can hold him off!*

As Brion pulled abreast of the Lincoln, on its left side, Steve, in the passenger seat, had his gun in his hand.

"I can see them wrestling in the front seat," Steve observed. "Oh, my God! It's a gun!"

"Can you get off a shot?"

"I'm afraid I'll hit her. Just hold steady; I'll see if I can get a good angle. Fall back a little."

Before either man could say or do another thing, the Lincoln veered off to their right, jumped the curb, sideswiped a tree and ended up embedded in a wrought iron fence. Brion angled in toward the curb in front of the wreck, jumped out of the car and pulled his gun. He ran toward the Lincoln, which had steam emanating from its front end. He could see Julio, blood covering the left side of his face, still wrestling with Cynthia over the gun. He ran to the driver's side of the wrecked car, but, before he could get there, the gun fired.

"Cynthia!" he screamed. "Cynthia; talk to me! *Dear Jesus, please let her be all right! Please don't take her from me, God.*

“I got the gun!” he heard Cynthia say as he reached the car. He pulled the door open, collared Julio, dragged him from the car and threw him facedown onto the ground, cuffing his hands behind him. “You have a right to keep your mouth shut, creep!” he yelled.

Just then, he heard Steve call from the other side of the Lincoln. “Brion, get over here!” he cried.

Brion looked into the front seat and saw Cynthia, her uniform torn off her upper torso. What he saw beyond that, made his blood run cold.

Blood soaked the bottom half of her uniform!

~Seven~

“Are you the officer who brought the woman with the gunshot in?” a man in scrubs asked Brion when he entered the waiting lounge of the hospital.

“Yes! Is she going to be okay?” Brion asked, jumping up, his voice shaky.

“I’m Doctor Parvishnu,” he answered, sticking out his hand. “Yes, she’ll be fine. The bullet went through her left side, but didn’t hit anything vital.”

“But there was *so* much blood!”

“As would be expected; a lot of capillary damage, but no major veins, organs, or arteries were compromised. She was not in any danger of bleeding out.”

“Thank God and thank you, Doctor!”

“You’re very much welcome. It is always much better to bring good news. Namaste.”

“Namaste,” Brion replied, shaking his hand again.

Brion stood in the doorway of Cynthia’s room, holding a bouquet of mixed flowers. She lay back, propped up on pillows, a nasal cannula for oxygen under her nose. Even with the device in place, she looked more beautiful to him than she had any right to be. She even made the ridiculous open-backed, cotton tunic they grandiosely called a gown look good. As if she sensed his presence, she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

“Aw, you brought flowers,” she said, her voice hoarse from her intubation during surgery.

“These?” he asked. “No, they’re for Steve. I’m thinking of taking him on as a steady partner.” He walked to the bed and handed them to her. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I feel like someone thought I was a note and jammed me on one of those spikes.”

“Wow, you have the descriptive talent of a novelist,” he said.

“Thanks. Well?”

“Well what?”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

“It’s okay?”

“He didn’t shoot me in the lips.”

Brion leaned over Cynthia, gently laid a kiss on her lips and held it for a few, long seconds. When he broke it off, he sat on the edge of the bed, took the flowers from her hand, laid them on the covers and took that hand in both of his.

“When I saw you in that car, your uniform torn and blood all over you, I nearly passed out.”

“I nearly did myself.”

“You were so brave, sweetheart!”

“I just wanted it to be over, so I could be in your arms again. How’s Julio?”

Brion smiled a mirthless smile. “Well, aside from some sidewalk burns on his face, he’s fine. We got enough from the wire and, with the assault, he’ll be staying at the Gray Bar Hotel well into the next decade; maybe more, when we’re done gathering all we find out about his little foray into entrepreneurialism. Your information will go a long way there.”

“Then he’s out of my life?”

“Forever. Look, I did a lot of thinking while I waited for you to get out of surgery and I ... I want us to get married as soon as you’re out of the hospital.”

Cynthia grinned, giving Brion a wan look. “About that. Are you sure you want to buy into all the filth of my past? You’re a virgin and I’m ... well, let’s just say I’ve been around the block a few times.”

“Sweetheart, I meant what I said about your being a new creation in Jesus.”

“I know, but actions have consequences, even though I know I’m forgiven.”

“Don’t you *want* to marry me?”

Tears welled up in Cynthia’s eyes. “More than anything. I just don’t want to hold you to something you may have second thoughts about. Every time we make love, I know you’re going to think about how many men I’ve been with.”

“Cynthia, stop it! You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. God brought you into my life to help me renew my commitment to Jesus. You gave me a second chance and you deserve one too. Will you marry me, or not?”

She smiled as tears spilled over, onto her cheeks. “Yes, I’ll marry you and I’ll work hard every day to be the best wife I can be.”

“Just being you will be enough for me,” Brion said, leaning in to kiss her again, this time long and passionately.

Thank you, Lord, for changing my point of view.