

Angels and Ministers of Grace

Chapter 1: Innocence Lost

What then have I done? What, except yield to a natural feeling, inspired by beauty, sanctioned by virtue and kept at all times within the bounds of respect. It's innocent expression prompted not by hope but by trust.

Vicomte de Valmont, Les Liaisons Dangereuses

The trust I have is in mine innocence,
and therefore am I bold and resolute.

William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)

You can't blame the innocent, they are always guiltless. All you can do is control them or eliminate them. Innocence is a kind of insanity.

Graham Green, *The Quiet American*

“Tell me more about your abduction,” Warner said with just a hint of warmth in his voice. Katherine remained as she was and didn't speak. She stared out the window with her back to man who had asked the question, unwilling to make a reply. The raindrops wandered lazily down the windowpane, as the copper-haired young woman gazed out on the bleak, gray, winter morning. Her warm breath condensed on the glass, creating a foggy pallet where her gloved hand next sketched out a frowning face. Her green eyes stared vacantly out to the towers of the city that dominated the skyline. She could barely make out the pyramid through the low-lying clouds. She stood, staring out the window at nothing, trying to spot anything that might make her forget her troubles. She felt uneasy and that bothered her.

The office in which she stood was well decorated in a late Victorian style that was indicative of the historical part of the city. The room was made up like a library or smoking room of an age now long gone. Incandescent bulbs shed their glow about the room, giving the place the appearance of being warm and inviting. However, there was a sterile feeling she got from the place that made her all the more uncomfortable. The smell of apple and tobacco filled the air as Doctor Warner took a long puff from his cherry wood pipe. Although the smell was overwhelming and at first had made her want to

choke, over the years he had grown accustomed to the smell and now tolerated it quite well. A shiver overtook her. She had not realized until now how comfortable she usually was when she was around him. It was no wonder she felt uneasy. With a little work, and the right turn of phrase, Doctor Warner could get her to tell him anything. She knew this about him and that frightened her, but she also knew that she had to trust him. He was, after all, her only confidant. He had never twisted his skill to his own advantage, and he would always make himself available to listen. In a way she almost longed for him to try something. She would enjoy the challenge. He might have been twice her age, but he was still an attractive man. But he never did, and that was just as well...considering her history.

Katherine was quite attractive herself. She was short redhead of petite to medium athletic build, who would look just as good on the cover of Vogue as she would in the pages of Playboy. Her jeans and Air Force t-shirt worn slightly loose, not to show off her best physical qualities, but to improve her own ease of motion and comfort. She absentmindedly tapped her boot on the floor, instinctively telling Warner just how uncomfortable she really was.

“Katherine, you really should sit down and try to relax. That’s why you came to me, isn’t it?”

Katherine mumbled a reply of, “Maybe. Maybe not.”

Warner frowned and toyed with the ballpoint pen in his hand. “Well, you have been staring out the window for most of the session. Don’t you think talking about it will help you work through the anger?”

“Perhaps,” she replied coyly. “I’m sorry. It was on a day like today that he took me. Every time it rains I think about him.”

“Don’t be sorry, Katherine. You have the right to your own feelings.” Warner took a puff from his pipe, and exhaled the smoke slowly. “Is there anything else bothering you? You seem more upset than usual.”

“I found him. Did I tell you that?”

Katherine’s statement seemed to startle Warner. “No,” he answered.

Katherine turned to face him; “He died last year in a prison in Wisconsin. He was on death row for the murder of a little girl. I’m only sorry I had to miss the execution.” What she really wanted to say was how sorry she was that she couldn’t have killed him

herself. Many times she had dreamed of watching him suffer. Making him pay for what he had done to her.

“And if you had known about it. Would that have changed anything?”

Warner’s question bit her like a giant rat. Katherine grabbed her leather bomber’s jacket and slipped it on as she headed for the door. “No,” she replied, “I suppose it wouldn’t have.”

“I take it you’re done talking today,” Warner questioned as she slipped out the door slamming it behind her. “Yes...so it seems.” Warner answered himself, knowing she’d be back next week at the same time. She was a difficult patient at best, but Katherine was a special girl. If only he knew how special.

The fog had not rolled in yet but she knew that it would; just as it always did. San Francisco. It was the “City by the Bay” and the cultural center on the West Coast. She headed down 14th Street to Market Street and on past Russ and Turk towards Union Square. As she did so the rain continued to drizzle down in rills across her forehead and down her cheeks. The air became moister and colder. The smell of the salt air and the city mingled together like a dank cesspool. For all its glamour and its high-rise buildings, the downtown area was still just a crowded shit hole. It was an icon of capitalism, diverse culture, and crime.

She kept walking all the way to the Embarcadero. When she got to the wharfs she walked out on one and stared out at the bay as the fog rolled in. She let her mind wander. Eventually her thoughts settled on her father. He had been a genius; there could be no doubt of that. With six PhDs and a Nobel Prize under his belt, he was a man to be reckoned with in the scientific community. Her mother was beautiful and clever as well. She was a genius in her own way. She had the talent of understanding security systems and locks. If she hadn’t done so well in the electronics business she would have made a hell of a cat-burglar.

When she had been kidnapped they spent every waking hour searching for her. They never gave up on her. Even when the police found her in that abandoned

building—bloody and dying. Her abductor was a pedophile and a sadist. She was only 10, and on her way home from the playground, when he snatched her. She remembered the smell of urine and scotch on his clothes. She remembered the rough calluses on his hands as he tied her up and beat her. She remembered the pain when he had raped and sodomized her. When she was completely used up, and he found no other pleasure in her, he cut her hands off and left her for dead. In fact, when the police found her she was so near death that they had to resuscitate her twice in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Her father was there when she was found. The horror of the incident shown on his face for years to come. Her father did his best to protect her from further pain. Somehow her parents kept the incident out of the media. The legal and medical records were sealed so no one knew her shame. No one knew, except her and her parents.

After the sun had set she stepped back out to the street. Headlights illuminated the wet asphalt of the street as she turned north towards Battery and Fisherman's Wharf. It was a long ways to go but she needed to clear her head. There was something soothing about walking in the rain, although the rain had stopped and was being replaced by a dense chilling fog that made her cheeks turn red. She kept thinking about what Warner had said. "Would it have changed anything," she whispered to herself, "Damn straight! It would have."

She clenched her fist and thought of her father again. He was a genius. After all her gave her new hands. Who else but a genius could do that? Her original hands were never found. It was assumed that her abductor had kept them. Her father created her new hands. They were hands that she really did not want. They were wonderfully strong and utilitarian, but they were not very pretty. Gloves were her only way to hide her obviously artificial appendages. She never told her father how much she wanted "real" hands. That would have hurt him deeply, and she could not bear the guilt of that. She had more than her share of guilt left over from the abduction. Eventually, she had grown to accept her bionic replacements. Besides that, her parents doted on her. They gave her many gifts to improve her life, and make her feel safe and strong. Many gifts which she used everyday.

Eventually her steps brought her to Pier 39. The crowds were massive even now and would remain so until well into the night. The Embarcadero turned into Jefferson. The

rows of stores were no longer focused on high fashion and high society. Their wares included the most trivial of items. Tourists wandered here and there searching for trinkets for loved ones. Gangs of thugs, policemen, prostitutes, businessmen, street vendors, musicians, artisans and college students mingled with the tourist crowd. It was like the melting pot Johann Bernard Stallo had coined so long ago. This was how she had always seen America. She only wished it could be better.

Motorists moved their cars slowly up and down the streets looking for the precious few parking spaces. The MUNI trolley clanged its bell as it passed her. She went all the way to Hyde before she turned south again. Now she wove through the few remaining blocks towards her destination like a panther on the hunt. Ghirardelli Square. Her favorite diner was there. A bakery where they served fresh clam chowder, in a bowl made from a sourdough roll, and hot espresso mochas with rich, dark chocolate. As she got closer she could smell the tangy scent of the sourdough and the rich, buttery chowder.

But her evening was cut short by a scream. It was a scream of panic--a woman's scream. It was muffled, and far off, but it was a scream. She heard it as clear as any other noise on the street, though no one else did. Her heightened hearing tuned in on the sound like a bloodhound on the trail. Her thoughts turned immediately from food to prey. She sprinted down Beach Street past the square. Not so fast as to attract attention, but faster than the typical gold medalist. She ran up Polk and turned on North Point. The sound came again, this time stifled with quiet sobbing. She followed it to a dark alley. She gazed into the darkness and saw what all she needed to see.

A man dressed in dark tattered leather stood over a weeping woman. A huge bloody cut and bruise marred her left cheek. The man had bound her to a water pipe with a length of nylon rope, and stuffed a dirty cloth in her mouth. Her blouse was torn open exposing her breasts; and her already far too short skirt was hiked up to her waist. The man chuckled with vile contempt as he cut away her underclothes with his butterfly knife. "You ain't got any cash in yo' purse, bitch," he spat, "so I'm going to take my share out yo' hide!" He unbuckled his pants and dropped them just low enough to expose his erect member. The woman was too weak, or too disoriented, to fight back as he crouched down in front of her. His gloved hands gripped her knees and spread her legs wide. As he prepared to thrust home, he did not expect the clear, cold, furious voice of the woman behind him.

“Somehow, I don’t think so.”

Before he could make a move he found himself traveling upwards at an incredible speed. He stopped just enough above the fog to see the highest towers peeping through. The redheaded woman in the brown and metallic suit was holding him by his collar with very little effort. Her mask and her sneer belied the satisfaction she felt at seeing this scum shake with fear. Or was it with cold? His shoes and pants had fallen off in the speedy flight up, and the icy air made his manhood shrivel like a prune.

“Listen to me you bastard,” she hissed as sharp metal claws popped from her fingertips. “You caught me on a good day, so I’m going to let you go. But remember, I know your face, and if you ever do anything like this again, I will hunt you down and rip your heart out.”

Despite his defiance, the man wet himself. He stuttered out a few lame excuses, but when he said it was ‘the bitch’s own fault’, Katherine grabbed him by his privates and let him dangle as she carried him away. His screams shattered the cold air like a baseball through a glass window. She took him out over the bay and dropped him in. She figured he had about a 50-50 chance of making it back to shore, but she really didn’t care. Evil deserved less of a chance than she gave.

She flew back and found the woman unconscious on the cold, damp pavement. Katherine snipped the rope with her claws, gather the girl in her arms and flew south. St Francis Memorial was the closest hospital she could think of. Katherine held the woman close and tried to keep her warm. “The innocent should never have to suffer,” she said to herself, only half believing it could ever be true.

Chapter 2: What are little girls made of?

What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice, And everything nice, that's what little girls are made of.

Author unknown

Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.

Michel de Montaigne (1533 - 1592)

The stench of a thousand tons of decaying garbage floated in the rain soaked air. One would have thought the rain would have wiped away a bit of the smell but it hadn't. It had not rained this hard in many months. Drought was expected this year, but instead came the torrential rains. No matter how smart men became, they still could not predict the weather.

The rhythmic tapping and splashing of the raindrops drowned out the noise from the city that stood across the bay. It was a massive icon of the technological achievements of mankind, but technology wasn't only an achievement of man, but a curse as well. Nature and technology met on common ground here in the refuse. Waterlogged rats scurried to and fro as they searched the garbage heaps for scraps of food. They would eat what they could and then take the rest back to their burrows to feed the hoards of their squirming young.

This is where she woke up. The wet and the stench clung to her naked body as she lay in the mud. Her head ached and she moaned as one waking from a dream of pleasure into a nightmare of reality. She was not yet fully awake when she heard the voices. Through her bleary, rain soaked vision she saw the dark shapes approaching. The voices were not familiar but the words were.

"Hey, man! Check this out!" The first voice sounded young.

"It better not be another burned out computer monitor Chico," the second voice replied.

"Palos sent us here to get stuff to make weapons out of."

The first voice spoke again, "It ain't no computer parts, hombre."

"What a babe," said a third voice full of glee.

A fourth voice called out, "Taint no place for a chicka to hang out, man."

The second voice sounded closer now, "She smashed or high?"

The first voice was very close now, "Don't know... but I'm goin' to fine out."

A fifth voice was right above her now, "Roll her over on her back."

She felt herself being turned over. She moaned again and tried to ignore the world around her. She thought to herself, 'what a lousy dream this is'. Her mind was so foggy she thought she must have been drugged.

The first voice was so close now that it must have been coming from whoever rolled her over. "Hey Carlos, she's out of it, but she looks tasty, man!"

The third voice replied, "Let's fine out. Luis. Jose. Hold her down."

Suddenly she felt two pairs of hand grab her arms and hold them down into the sticky mud. She began to panic when she realized this might not be a dream. The voice of the second man address her directly as his hands started roughly caressing her breasts and the inside of her thighs, "Hey, chicka. You wanna have some fun?"

All she could muster was a muffled, moaning, "No...don't..."

They all laughed at her plea. The second voice retorted with an unbridled sense of evil and lust, "Sounded like a 'yes' to me." He laughed as he unbuckled his pants.

"Hey! Save some for us Chico."

"There's plenty of her to go around, hombres!"

She felt the same rough hands grab her legs and spread them apart. She knew it wasn't a dream when she felt the man lean down on top of her. The next few moments blurred into a swathe of red. The man on top of her was crushed as she instinctively forced her legs together. She was vaguely aware of her actions as she broke free of the hands holding her and leapt to her feet. She didn't seem to be in control as she began to snap bones, crush skulls, and tear flesh. With lightning speed she swept though them like a scythe; and when she had finished her twirling, macabre dance of motion, five young men lay dead. In a sense she recognized them. Not by their faces but by the colors they were wearing. Gangland punks.

She stood silently for a moment. She was surprised to find that she had no clothes on. More surprised was she to note that she did not remember who she was. She grasped at the fragments of the last few minutes, trying to force some distant memory to the surface. Alas, there were no memories to be found. Only the last minute was truly clear in her mind.

The rain that continued to drench her finally brought her to her senses. The lukewarm wetness drizzled down her smooth, brown body in narrow streams. Strands of her long black hair clung to her body in tangled, muddy clumps. She did not feel cold, but she felt acutely uncomfortable with the thought of wandering around completely exposed. Her nakedness had caused enough trouble for one evening. Quietly, she began to strip the bodies of her victims. She put together an outfit that was not attractive, but that would protect her from the elements, and from prying eyes.

She wandered around the dump for an hour or so. The place was quite massive and seemed to go on for miles in all directions. Eventually, she encountered a high,

corrugated metal fence. With the grace of a cat she scaled the fence and dropped to the ground on the other side. She found herself on a deserted street. In the distance she could see the lights of the city. Its tall canyons of glass and steel beckoned to her. So she decided to head in that direction. She was miles away yet, but at least she had a destination.

She still tried to capture some sense of who she was. She listened to her own thoughts, trying to find something familiar to hold on to. All she could hear was the sound of her newly acquired sneakers, as they squeaked to the rhythm of the stride. She walked for hours on the empty streets. Many of the buildings along the way bore signs of decay and misuse. Some were condemned. Some were habitable. Almost all appeared to be vacant. All were riddled with the scars of violence. It seemed like a place that had been forgotten long ago. She searched for signs of life. She found only and occasional stray cat or dog. However, in one building she did find a young man and woman. They slept silently in an embrace that showed both desperation and love. As she moved closer, she could tell that they were also lying in the embrace of death. Their skin shown as pale blue, in the dim light from the streetlamp outside. Beside their cot were syringes, a spoon and a lamp. A half-eaten loaf of bread sat molding on their makeshift table. She was hungry and would have eaten the bread, but a pack of rats had recently moved upon the scene and were devouring anything edible--bread and people alike.

She turned her back on the scene and walked out of the hovel. She continued her trek towards the city, the towers of which seemed no closer now than they did at the dump. She soon came upon a building with one side lit by the yellowed glow of an ancient incandescent bulb. Beneath the bulb was a sign that read "St. Christopher's Shelter". Near the sign was a short flight of concrete stairs that led up to a metal door. She tried the handle and found it locked. This did not stop her for long. She grabbed the edge of the door with her fingertips and pried it open, quickly snapping the lock and breaking the bolt. She marveled at her strength, but in some way found it completely natural. She hoped no one had heard the noise, as she slipped inside. She moved as the stealth of a shadow. Although the interior was completely dark, she was surprised to find that she could see as if the room were lit by candlelight. Dozens of people were in the building. Each lay on a simple cot or bedroll. The sound of their quiet breathing touched her ears like the whisper of a secret. She made her way through the crowded mass of slumbering

homeless, and found herself in a large kitchen. After plucking an apple from a bowl of fruit on the counter, she curled up in a corner to rest. In the back of her mind she remembered that fresh fruit was a rare commodity, not to mention a whole bowl of it. She wondered where it had come from. Fortunately, this simple revelation did not deter her from immediately devouring the apple. Her need to digest some kind of food had grown exponentially since she left the dump. She had not realized how hungry, and tired, she actually was. When she was through with the apple she laid down on the floor and let the peace of sleep take her.

Daniel woke in the gray morning, still dressed in his gray clothes, and still trapped in his gray life. The cold crisp air scratched his lungs like cat claws on furniture. He hated mornings, because he knew they would be followed by miserable days. He had lived at the shelter for the past six months; ever since the state had taken away his home. They had foreclosed on him without warning. It was like being trapped in the jaws of a financial bear trap. His job had been taken away and given to someone “of higher quality”. His fiancée, the daughter of a corporate fascist, had left him when he lost his job. Donna had claimed to love him. He felt lucky when he hooked up with her. She was attractive, self-confident and great in bed. He could still image running his finger through her hair, or spending all day in bed with her on weekends. Unfortunately, all that ended because he was “enhanced”.

That’s what the doctors called it. Other less pleasant descriptions included “bot”, or “borg” or “tank”. He had been in an accident on the job. He could still remember the burning agony when his legs and hand were dissolved. The cloud of super heated acid had burst from the containment pipe with such force that he had been thrown nearly 30 meters from where he’d been standing. Techcorp developed volatile chemicals for the military, but their working conditions were not exactly safe. It was surprising there had not been more accidents. The company was more than happy to replace his lost limbs, but genetic replacements were not covered by his insurance. He had to settle for less. The cybernetic replacements were skillfully camouflaged. They looked as real as any other piece of him. The only problem was the tremors. The doctors called it a mild form

of epilepsy. "Bio-cybernetic interfaces aren't perfect," they said. When Donna found out that his new limbs weren't real, she spurned him. So did anyone else who found out. It was because nearly everyone who's had cybernetic implants eventually goes crazy. That's a risk that Daniel was willing to take. Only now, no one else would now take a risk on him. Still, he woke up, made himself get going every day, and tried to live as normal as possible.

The St. Christopher shelter had been his home for three months. He'd lost his job and his savings and could no longer afford the luxury of his own apartment. The job hunting had been futile. He'd been black-listed by Techcorp. No one in the area would hire him. It was time to move on he often thought to himself; all the while wishing something would happen to change his luck. All the while he was hoping for an end to the endless grey days. What he did not know was that today was going to be different.

A loud commotion had started up in the kitchen. Someone was shouting about stolen food. He made his way to the crowded doorway. Fortunately he was about half a foot taller than most people. Looking over the top of the mob was easy for him. There in the kitchen was a woman who he'd never seen before, arguing with a man who had just recently come to the shelter. He could not tell what nationality she was. Her skin was the color of an espresso mocha; rich and chocolaty brown with a hint of cream. Her features were Amer-Asian and her hair was black like a panther. The woman was strikingly beautiful, apart from the tattered clothes she wore, and the clothes told a story. They marked her as a member of gang.

"Damn Gangland bitch! Come to steal our food?" The man shouted in a voice filled with rage and violence. "Don't you know how precious fruit is," he demanded.

"I was hungry," was her only reply. Daniel noted that her voice was soft and calm, but stout as steel.

"We'll see about that," the man replied as he drew a long knife from his coat pocket. He made a lunge at her mid section as though her were trying to gut her. In one fluid movement the woman dodged the man's thrust, pulled the knife from his hand and broke three of his finger on the same hand. Most of the crowd stood aghast. Two other men moved in to help their stricken comrade. This was a mistake on their part. One of them flew back into the crowd, his nose shattered. The other had his hand nailed to the counter by his friend's knife. The woman had moved so quickly that Daniel could barely

tell what she had done. She moved back to a defensive position just out of reach of the three men and waited.

Daniel nearly jumped out of his skin when the shotgun went off behind him. Father Curtis, the owner of the shelter, stood at the back of the crowd with a look of righteous fire in his eyes. His aged face belied the strength of his spirit. No one dared mess with Father Curtis. Now that he had the crowd's attention, he moved forward, as a path was quickly cleared for him. "The show is over. Everyone outside while I settle this ...disagreement," he ordered. All who could move did so at his command. The shelter was emptied in less than a minute. Only Daniel and lingered behind to see what happened next. Father Curtis walked over to the man with the broken fingers and shook his head with disapproval. "Garth, where do you get the idea that you can deny anyone food in my house?"

Garth only uttered several whimpers of pain.

"And you boys," Curtis spat at the other men, "I've told you before. No violence in my house! Now get your damned sinful hides out of here before I shoot you myself."

The men obeyed. They had the firm desire to leave before any more pain could be inflicted upon them. Garth and "Broken Nose" helped their friend unpin his hand from the counter. They walked out and did not look back. Garth muttered something under his breath, before passing out of sight. Daniel thought he heard the words "kill her", but he couldn't be sure. The woman, to Daniel's amazement, showed no sign of fear. Her hazel and amber eyes were fixed on Father Curtis.

Father Curtis stared back, as a man intent on a mission. "Who are you," he demanded of her.

The woman hesitated for a moment and then replied, "Eve."

The reverend nodded, "I've seen the back door and how it was jimmied open, what I don't understand is why a ganglander would break in to steal food and then stay for the night. You're either incredibly stupid, or you're not a ganglander. The clothes you're wearing are obviously far too large to be yours. Did you steal those as well?"

The woman hesitated again before answering, "I got them from the dump. They were the best I could find. I didn't realize they would get me into trouble."

Father Curtis smiled, "Well, sister, you can make up for it by fixing the back door you so brutally broke open." Daniel was still thinking about Eve's eyes when Father Curtis

addressed him, "And you, Daniel. Since you chose to hang around you can help her." Daniel opened his mouth to say no, but realized quickly that Father Curtis had not made a request. Besides, this was the first time in a long time that the day wasn't turning out like any other grey day.

Chapter 3: A Brief History

We'd like to know a little bit about you for our file.

Simon and Garfunkle, "Mrs. Robinson"

On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good and not quite all the time.

George Orwell (1903 - 1950)

"What was the question again," she mumbled quietly. The room seemed to roll back and forth with the shadowy figures that stood just outside the range of the spotlight, which blazed down on her like an angry eye. The heat from the lamps caused sweat to bead upon her freckled skin. Her linen night gown clung to her body, exposing parts of her that she'd otherwise be embarrassed to have seen by strangers. Unfortunately her mind was too clouded at the moment to be rational.

Her abductors had strapped her to an uncomfortable metal chair, and attached electrodes to her skin to monitor her vitals. The stuff they'd injected into her arm made her dizzy and caused her teeth to ache. The smell of cigarette smoke filled the room. One of her captors was a chain smoker; a bad social habit that had lingered around since the last century. Behind her she heard the voice again. It was a man's voice, cold and unemotional, "We want you to tell us about yourself, Mrs. Myers."

She gritted her teeth and shook her head, "You can just go to hell!"

"Perhaps." The man snapped his fingers and she felt another injection in her arm. The world began to spin faster. After a few moments she felt even less in control of herself; the drug had erased all her self control and good judgment. "Shall we begin again," the man asked coyly.

“What do you want,” she responded pitifully. “Can’t you just let me go home and see my husband?”

The man chuckled, “You should really try to stop worrying about that Mrs. Meyers. You have absolutely no chance of getting out of here unless you cooperate with us. Just tell us about yourself, Maggie, and we’ll let you see your husband.”

Maggie shook her head again, “Don’t call me Maggie. Only people I know can call me that”

The man chuckled again, “Just start from the beginning.”