Prologue

David and Maria talked for a while before Maria had to get ready for work. It seemed that the two could talk all day and night until they fell asleep, if it was allowed. In fact, they had on more than one occasion.

Both David and Maria worked separate jobs, but David's schedule was more flexible than Maria's, with him being his own boss.

After David got off the phone with Maria, he called his mother.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hi Mom," said David, "I was just talking to Maria about you and Dad meeting her."

"What did she say?" asked David's mother.

"She said Thursday after five will be fine, so I'm going to pick her up at five and head up."

"Great," said David's mother, "We'll see you then."

"We'll be there," said David.

The two chatted for a couple of minutes, and then said good-bye.

The next Thursday came and David picked up Maria that evening and headed to his parent's house. Maria's parents lived very far away, but David's parents were close by. It had been a while since David had seen them, so a visit was overdue.

David visited his parents often, but lately work had been heavy and he had not had time to do so. David saw this invitation as the perfect excuse to go visit them.

When they arrived at David's parents' house, David and Maria got out of the car. They went up to the front door of the small colonial house, and David rang the bell.

The house was small, and was built during the colonial times. Being an only child, David did not find it too crowded. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, and a spare room that his father used as a study. Of course, the original house was smaller, but over time, some owners had added to it.

A moment after David rang the bell, a tall bald man in his mid-fifties answered the door.

"David," he said, happy to see him.

"Dad," said David.

The two hugged a short hug that said they were glad to see each other.

"Dad," said David after the hug, turning toward Maria, "this is Maria. Maria, this is my dad."

"Peter," said David's father while extending his hand to Maria.

Maria shook Peter's hand.

"Glad to meet you," said Maria.

"Well," said Peter after the gentle handshake, "come on in."

David and Maria went inside and Peter closed the door behind them.

"Alice," called Peter.

The air smelled like cooking food. It was a delicious smell, and made David and Maria hungry.

A moment later, a woman wearing glasses and about the same age as Peter came out from the kitchen.

"David," she said as she went over to him.

The two hugged.

"Mom," said David, referring to Maria, "This is Maria."

"You can call me Alice," she said, "It's good to finally meet you. David has told me so much about you."

"I hope it wasn't anything bad," said Maria, joking.

"Oh, no," said Alice, "It's been all good. Well, you two make yourselves at home. Dinner will be a while."

David and Maria sat on the couch in the living room, while Peter sat in his lounge chair. The three talked a bit before dinner, and Peter was able to get to know a little about Maria.

Dinner was a simple and delicious dish. David and Maria both enjoyed it, and it reminded David some of when he was a child. After dinner, Maria offered to help clean up. Alice took the offer, and the two cleaned up and washed dishes while David sat on the couch and his father sat in his chair, smoking a pipe. While the women were cleaning, David and his father talked. After things were cleaned up and the dished put away, Maria and Alice also sat down. Alice sat in her chair, and Maria next to David. The four talked and watched some television until it got late. By the end of the evening, it seemed that David's parents had taken a liking to Maria.

"Well," said David noticing the time, "We've got to get going. It's been good seeing you again."

"Next time," said Alice, "don't wait so long to visit."

The four got up and headed for the door.

"Sorry it was so long," said David, "I told you things were hectic, but it looks like it's calming some."

"Well," said Alice, "you take good care of Maria."

Alice then looked at Maria.

"It's been real nice meeting you," said Alice.

"Same here," said Maria, "And thanks again for dinner."

"You're welcome," said Alice, "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"It was delicious," said Maria.

"See you both soon," said Peter.

David hugged both of his parents, saying bye, then he and Maria got into the car. Peter saw that both were in and the car started before going inside. David then drove Maria home.

The drive back went well, and within a half-hour, they were in front of Maria's apartment.

"I had a great time," said Maria, "Your parents are very nice."

"Thank you," said David, "I had fun too."

The two kissed each other.

Maria unfastened her seat belt. The two held hands, and talked, kissing from time to time.

David and Maria talked about the evening and their plans for that weekend. Afterwards, David got out of the car and opened Maria's door for her. He was brought up the old-fashion way, where the man held doors for the women and things like that. After Maria got out, David escorted Maria to her apartment door.

The apartment building was a three-story complex with a door in the middle and apartments on the right and left side. Maria lived on the right side of the second floor.

When they got there, Maria opened the door. The two kissed each other goodnight, and then Maria went inside. When she closed the door, after one last kiss for the night, David left to go home.

Maria had been estranged from her parents because she didn't follow in the family business of their restaurant. That and her religious beliefs weren't the same as her parents. They were traditional Catholic, and she believed in a broader faith. She did not pray to the saints nor did she follow many of the typical rituals her parents did. In addition, Maria believed in more than one god or goddess.

Maria graduated high school, and soon after went to a college where she went into retail, eventually leading to where she was now.

About three months after Maria met Davis's parents, he asked her to marry him, and Maria said yes. She wrote a letter to her family, inviting them to come, but never got any response.

After six months of engagement, David and Maria got married. The wedding was moderately priced and beautiful. It also had a sad note for Maria, not having her family there to see her get married, or have her father give her away.

Maria had hoped her family would at least acknowledge her wedding, but despite the attempts to reach out to them, they still would not respond. Maria, however, did not let that ruin her wedding. She proceeded to get married, and make it a very happy day, understanding and accepting there was nothing more she could do. It was up to her family to accept her or not. She was used to the idea that her family wanted nothing to do with her, but had still hoped for some kind of response. Even an angry response would be better than no response at all. At least that would show they still cared.

Two months after their wedding, David and Maria decided it was a beautiful day to go for a long drive in the country. It was mid-spring, and there were only a few clouds. It was comfortably warm, and everything was in bloom.

They decided to go to a place they had not been since the year before. It would be a couple of hours before they got there, but the long drive was worth it.

David and Maria decided to pack a picnic to take with them, and left in the morning. They got to their destination, and was enjoying themselves when early that afternoon, the weather started turning bad.

"Looks like it's going to rain," said Maria to David, "We probably should start heading back."

"Yah," said David, "it does. The weatherman didn't say anything about rain, but it's getting cooler and the clouds do look threatening."

It was then that Maria felt a raindrop on her face.

"Yes," said Maria, "It was very nice."

The two headed back down the path toward their car. It started to lightly rain on the way. They got in the car and started the drive home.

The weather did get bad, and they ended up heading right into the storm. The rain was coming down hard, and the winds were blowing it around. The visibility, though impaired, could have been worse. David had driven in much worse weather, and was managing through it quite well. It was the kind of storm that got better and worse as it progressed.

They were driving on the highway, doing about the speed limit, when David saw something in the road. Not knowing what it was, and seeing that it was of substantial size, David swerved the car to avoid it, but lost control. The car slammed up sideways against the center guardrail, flipped, and started to roll.

# Chapter 1

David and Maria came in the front door to their house from the rain.

"It has really started to pour," said David.

"I know," said Maria, "It's a good thing we got home when we did."

David stopped for a moment, thinking.

"How did we get home, anyway?" asked David.

Maria stopped what she was doing, unable to remember the events between driving home and coming in the front door.

"I'm not sure," said Maria after a few moments, "The last thing I remember is driving home on the highway. It was raining and then… then we were here."

The two looked at each other, wondering what was happening to them, and how they got home. They looked around the house, trying to find some clue as to what happened. Maria went to pick up a silver plate from the mantle, but instead passed through it. It was then she noticed her face was not reflecting in it.

David noticed the television was on. A news report about a deadly crash caught his attention. It involved a couple driving on the same highway he and Maria had taken home. The wreckage looked like their car. David was stunned, as he put the pieces together.

"Maria," said David, "I think you should see this."

Maria came over to watch the rest of the report.

"Hunny," said Maria, "That was us, wasn't it?"

"I think so," said David, "and I don't think we survived, but we should check just in case."

The two went out to the garage to see if the car was there. David opened the front door, and left after Maria. The two quickly found themselves in a very strange and frightening place. This was not the front yard they remembered. Instead, it was a place of strange images, moving around them. Some images moved faster than others did, and it seemed they were suspended in air. The only thing that was not moving around them was their front door. After a few moments of shock and surprise, David and Maria went back into the house.

Shaken, and feeling trapped, the two held each other, and soon realize things weren't as they left them. The basic structures were in place, the fireplace, dining room, kitchen, living room. These things were there, but their furniture, pictures, and other belongings were gone, replaced by someone else's. Their things on the mantle were replaced by a couple of medieval statues, and the wedding picture on the wall was replaced by a picture of a family they had never seen.

Looking at a newspaper on a small table, David showed it to Maria. The date was six months after they had come home.

"I don't believe it," said Maria, "We weren't gone that long, were we?"

"I don't think so," said David, "At least it didn't seem that long."

"What happened to us back there?" asked Maria, "Where were we, and who are these people?"

A couple of minutes later, a little girl ran past them, calling for her mother. She seemed very upset.

"Mommy!" she yelled, as she ran into the kitchen "Richey got Cassandra and won't give her back! He hid her and won't tell me where she is!"

The hysterical little girl was about four years old, had long, straight, dark-blond hair, and light blue eyes, which now had tears in them.

Following the girl, was an older boy, about twelve years of age, with light brown hair, and the same eyes as the little girl, only not as big.

"She lost her doll and is blaming it on me," said the boy, sounding aggravated.

The boy walked into the kitchen after the girl. Fortunately, the kitchen was good sized, and the two did not get in the way of their mother, who was preparing lunch. Curious, David and Maria followed the two into the kitchen and observed.

"All right you two," said the mother, "Angel, you know there is no running in the house, and if you lose something, you don't blame it on someone else."

The mother was a woman in her mid-thirties, about average height, and Angel was a spitting image of her.

"But Mommy-" Angel started to say.

"No buts," said the mother, interrupting her daughter, "now go sit down at the table. I have your lunch. Rich, I want you to help Angel find her doll after lunch."

The two went to the dinner table and sat across from each other.

"She lost it," said Richard, "How am I supposed to know where to look?"

"Simple," said the mother, as she set soup and sandwiches on the table, "Angle, where did you last have the doll?"

"In my hands," said Angel, "Just before Richey took her to his room."

"What would I want with a doll?" asked Richard.

"You said you were going to rip her head off, and feed it to Sassy if I didn't do what you told me to," said Angel, clearly upset.

"And what was it I supposedly told you to do?" asked Richard.

"Nothing yet," said Angel.

"Why are you insisting I took the doll?" asked Richard, "I want nothing to do with your dolls. Besides, plastic is bad for dogs. If I were to feed Sassy your doll, the Andersons would probably be very upset and have to take her to the vet."

"Maybe," said Angel, "but that's what you said."

"Stop lying," said Richard, becoming angry.

"Alright," said the mother, "that's enough. Rich, when you two find the doll, I want you to bring it to me. Angel, if you're going to blame your loss on your brother, then you can't have the doll at all, if it's found again."

"But Richey took her!" said angel, insistently trying to plead a case that was not being heard, "He really did! He knows where she is."

"Not another word," said the mother, getting irritated, "or you'll be spending the afternoon in your room. Now sit down and eat."

Angel fell quiet as the mother walked away. The two sat at the table. A moment later, Richard started to tease her quietly.

"Just for that, you little turd," said Richard, quietly "I'm taking Stacy too. That little spaniel is going to have a nice snack. Oh, don't worry; I'll cut them up nice and small so Sassy won't have any problems digesting them."

Angel sat glaring at her brother. She started plotting how to prevent him from getting any more of her other dolls, and how to get Cassandra back before Richard had the chance to feed her to the dog.

Angel was very upset because Cassandra was her favorite and she felt she couldn't replace her.

"In fact," said Richard, quietly "If you're not careful, I'll rip the head off that stupid bear of yours, and shit down its neck."

"I telling mommy you said shit," said Angel just as quiet.

"What?" said Richard loud enough for his mother to hear, "Did you say what I think you said?"

"You said shit!" said Angel loudly.

"Angel!" scolded their mother, "You know not to say that word."

"But Richey said he was going to take my bear and rip her head off and shit down her neck!" said Angel.

"Angel," warned her mother, "don't talk like that, or you'll go in time out!"

Angel opened her mouth to say something, but though she would only get in trouble, so she closed it, and held her tongue.

"Ha, ha, Sucker!" whispered Richard to Angel.

Angel gave her brother a mean face and stuck her tongue out at him. Richard just ignored his sister, figuring he got her into enough trouble for the time being.

"That's awful," said Maria, feeling bad for Angel, "her mother automatically assumed she was lying."

"Actually," said David, "she seems to favor the boy."

"I kind of feel sorry for Angel," said Maria.

The children finished lunch, then went upstairs where the bedrooms were to "find" Angel's doll.

Richard had indeed taken Cassandra and hid her on Angel, and they both knew it was in his room.

David decided to try to get the mother's attention.

First, he tried talking to her, then hand gestures, then he stood in her way, but all in vain. Not only that, but she just passed right through him. The mother seemed completely unaware he was even there.

"I don't think she can see or hear us," said Maria.

Maria tried the same thing, but with the same results.

"We don't seem able to touch them, either" said David as he put his arm through the mother's upper abdomen.

"Stop that," said Maria, slightly amused and feeling weird about the whole thing.

"We can't touch objects, or people," said David.

"I feel so alone," said Maria.

David was about to say something when a cry came from upstairs.

"No!" screamed Angel, very upset, "Leave her alone!"

"Now what?" complained the mother under her breath.

The mother went upstairs to find out what was going on and David and Maria followed.

"Why are you being a brat?" asked Richard, when he heard his mother coming, "I'm just trying to help."

Richard looked at his mother then said, "I found the doll, and now she's screaming at me - some thanks!"

David and Maria looked at each other, doubting the boy's story.

"That's not true," said Angel, "he won't give Cassandra back, and he said he was going to feed her to Sassy."

The next-door neighbors, the Andersons, had a one-year-old female Cocker Spaniel named Sassy. The dog had earned her name, as she had the attitude. She liked to chew all sorts of things, though she was full-grown. Angel's dolls would make a nice, though not necessarily healthy, chew toy.

Richard rolled his eyes to his little sister's response in false exasperation, then said, "You know, I'm sick of this. You want the doll? Here!"

Richard threw the doll at Angel. It hit her in the chest, and she caught it after it bounced off her.

"Ouch!" said Angel, as she caught the doll.

"Okay, Angel," said the mother, "You have your doll. Now leave your brother alone."

"But he-" protested Angel.

"-No buts," said her mother, interrupting, "Go to your room, and stay there until your father gets home."

"Yes, mommy," said Angel.

Angel quietly went to her room. She entered the room, turned around and looked directly at David and Maria. She didn't seem sure of what she was seeing, so she closed the door.

"Did you see that?" asked Maria.

"Sure did," said David, "Her mother didn't even listen to her."

"That too," said Maria, "but I swear that little girl just looked right at us."

"Now that you mention it," said David, "I think she did too."

"You don't suppose she can see us, do you?" Maria speculated.

"There's only one way to find out," said David, as he approached Angel's door.

"You're not just going to walk into her room, are you?" asked Maria.

"Of course not," replied David, "I'm going to knock first."

David went to Angel's door and tried to knock on it, but instead of hitting the door, his hand went through it.

"I forgot," said David, "we can't touch anything."

A moment later, Angel opened the door.

She hesitated for a moment. It seemed as if she was trying to figure out what she was looking at. A few moments later, she closed the door.

"She can see us," said Maria, "Or part of us, at least."

"We're going to find out who else can see us," said David, "We know their mother can't… maybe only the children can see us. There must be a way to communicate with them."

David went to Richard's room. Richard's mother had long since gone downstairs to return to what she was doing. Richard left his room, closing the door behind him. He then walked right through David, and went downstairs. Maria moved out of Richard's way to prevent the same thing happening to her.

"That was weird," said David, a bit shaken by the experience.

"I think Angel is the only one who can seem to see us," said Maria.

"I think you're right," said David, "and yet, we were right in view, and she didn't even seem to know we were there."

"Maybe we weren't in sight, "said Maria, "I know she just looked right us. Maybe there's a way to communicate her."

"It's worth a try," said David.

The two went back upstairs, and David tried again to knock on Angel's door again, but got the same results. Maria then walked into the room, passing through the door. David followed her.

Angel looked up and stared at the couple for a while, as if she was trying to figure out if they were real or not.

"Who are you?" asked Angel, when she was sure of what she was seeing.

David and Maria quickly looked at each other with hope.

"I'm David Loft and this is my wife Maria," he said, "You can see us?"

"Kind of," whispered Angel, "Does my mommy know you're here?"

"I don't think your mommy can see us," said Maria.

"I can," said Angel, softly "Well, sort of. Why are you talking so soft?"

"We're not," said Maria, a bit louder, "maybe you just can't hear us very well. What happened here?"

"What do you mean?" asked Angel.

"I mean, our home," said Maria, "Who are you?"

"I'm Angel," she said.

"How long have you lived here?" asked David.

"Since May," said Angel, "You look… familiar."

"We do?" asked David.

"Yah," said Angel, "But I can't think of where from. Are you two ghosts?" asked Angel.

"I guess you could say that," answered David.

Angel was quiet for a moment.

"Are you here to haunt us?" asked Angel.

"No," said Maria, "In fact, we're trapped in the house."

"Can Richey see you?" asked Angel.

"No," said Maria, "Neither can your mother."

"I can," said Angel.

"You seem to be the only one," said David, then asked, "Where's your father?"

"Working," said Angel, "Are you sure you're not here to haunt us?"

"Well," said Maria, "It was our home, but I think we can get used to living with another family."

"Why don't you just leave?" asked Angel.

"We tried that," answered David, "but we can't. Do you want us to leave?"

"No," said Angel, "How come you're trapped here?"

"We don't know," said David.

"Well," said Angel, "you seem nice for ghosts.

"Thank you, I think," said Maria.

"Actually," said David, "I'll bet not all ghosts are mean. I'll bet a lot of them are just lost."

"We're not here to harm you or your family," said Maria, "In fact; we're not sure why we are here."

"Wait here," said Angel.

Angel pulled a small table and four chairs from against a wall and set them in the middle of her room. She then went to her play stove and sink, which had a play tea set, and set the tea set up on the table.

"Would you like some tea?" Angel asked the lofts.

"Sure," said Maria.

"Okay," said David

David and Maria took their places on the small seats next to Angel. Cassandra, a favorite doll of hers, had been placed on the fourth chair while Angel began serving the "tea" in the play cups.

"Thank you for joining us this afternoon," said Angel, "and Cassandra says thank you too."

"It's our pleasure," said Maria, as Angel finished pouring the pretend tea.

"Sugar?" asked Angel.

"Two please," said Maria.

"One for me," said David.

Angel put the pretend sugar in the teacups. Maria stirred her tea with a pretend spoon, and David followed suit. Maria seemed to be comfortably playing along with Angel, while David felt a bit odd playing teatime.

Angel, David, and Maria talked about different things while having tea. David and Maria played along with Angel when Cassandra "talked" to them.

"When does your daddy get home?" asked David, after tea.

"About six," said Angel.

"I see," said David.

David and Maria spent some more time with Angel learning about her and her family.

From what she told them, she was a four-year-old preschooler who had only one older brother and no sisters. Her older brother, Richard, was twelve and, for no apparent reason, despised Angel. He was always teasing her and trying to get her to do his bidding.

Her father, Michael, was some sort of Vice-C.E.O. for a big company. He worked most of the time, but tried to spend time with her when he was not busy. Michel's hours were usually seven in the morning to around six at night, Monday through Friday, and he often went on weekend trips for some sort of sales job.

Her mother, Rachel, was currently a stay-at-home mother and planned to go to work once Angel started regular school next fall. At the time, Angel was attending a private preschool, and Richard was in regular middle school. During the day, Rachel would get the housework and shopping done, and once or twice a week, would hang out with her friends.

Angel loved to go outside and play with her few select friends. She was unusually intelligent for a four-year-old and already knew much more than other preschoolers her age knew, not just academically, but about life too. She was small for a four-year old, which her brother constantly made fun of, so did not look her age. Angel loved to read and was already capable of caring for herself with limited adult supervision

"Well," said David, after a while of chatting, "it's been nice having tea with you, but we're going to take a look around."

"Okay," said Angel, "Hey, I got an idea. How about I show you around?"

"I thought you had to stay in your room?" asked Maria, trying to keep Angel from getting into more trouble.

"Oh, ya," said Angel, "I forgot."

"Don't worry," said Maria, "We'll be back. I'll tell you what; we'll take a look around and come back later."

"Okay," said Angel, "It's been very nice meeting the both of you."

"It was very nice meeting you too," said David.

"Wanna play with Stacy and Cassandra later?" asked Angel.

"Maybe," said Maria, "We'll see you soon."

"Okay," said Angel, and led David and Maria out, "Good-bye."

"We'll be back soon," said David.

"See you in a while," said Maria.

David and Maria left to inspect the rest of what used to be their house. Angel left her door open when they left.

"She's so sweet," said Maria, as she followed David downstairs.

"I can't believe anyone would treat her badly," said David.

"What do you mean?" asked Maria, "Her mother seems to treat her well. With the exception of some favoritism toward her brother, it seems she takes good care of her."

"It's not her mother, it’s the brother," said David, "I get the feeling he doesn't like her much, if at all."

"It's probably a bit of sibling rivalry," said Maria, "but you may be right. We should keep an eye on it, just in case."

"Are you sure it's our place to interfere?" asked David.

"If we don't," said Maria, "Would it be fair to Angel?"

"We'll keep an eye on them for now," said David, "but we won't get involved yet."

"Agreed," said Maria.

A few hours passed and Angel had stayed in her room, playing and waiting for her new friends to return. The Lofts had been trying to learn about the family, while trying to stay out of the way. Richard was now home and watching television.

Angel's family seemed normal, except for the way Richard treated his sister. At the time, though, David and Maria had agreed not to interfere or let the rest of the family know they were there.

By ten past six, when Angel's father got home, her mother had already set the table for dinner. She greeted her husband when he came in.

"Hi, Hunny," said Rachel,

"Hi, Rachel," responded Michael.

The two kissed each other.

"How was work?" asked Rachel.

"Good," said Michael," I'll tell you about it at dinner."

Rachel and Michael Louis were married for around twelve years. Michael was around six feet tall with short black, hair, and brown eyes. He was always well dressed and had a professional manner about him.

It had become a custom in the family to discuss events during the day at the dinner table. If there were non-personal problems, they were brought up during this time.

"What do you got?" asked Rachel, noticing Michel was hiding something behind his back.

"A little something for Angel," said Michael.

Rachel was about to ask Michael what it was he had for Angel, when Richard walked in from the living room. He greeted his father Michael and about then, Angel came from upstairs.

"Hi, Daddy!" said Angel, as she ran into his open arms.

"Hi, Angel," said Michael, as he hugged her with one arm still behind his back, "I Got something for you."

"What?" asked Angel.

"This," said Michael, as he showed her a play dog.

"A puppy for Cassandra!" said Angel, as she took the toy from Michael.

Angel hugged her father.

"Thank you," said Angel.

"You're welcome," said Michael, and then went to put his things away and change into normal clothes. He then joined the family for dinner.

David and Maria went to the kitchen to discuss if it would be a good idea to let the Louis family know they were there. Meanwhile, the Louis family sat down for dinner.

"How was school, Rich?" asked Michael, after the food was served.

"Okay," said Richard, "We had a test in geometry today. I think I did well."

"Good," said Michael, "I look forward to seeing the results."

"I talked to a couple of ghosts today," Angel suddenly blurted out.

There was a quick moment of silence that made Angel very uncomfortable.

Richard rolled his eyes, and said, "Oh, please, Angel. Not at the dinner table."

Rachel had frozen for a moment but quickly recovered herself.

"Really?" asked Michael.

"Yup," said Angel.

"Well, then," said Michael, humoring Angel, "why don't you tell us about these ghosts?"

"I think they lived here before us," said Angel, "They're really nice. Their names are David and Maria Loft."

Michael paused for a moment.

"What do David and Maria look like?" asked Michael.

"Remember that picture of the man and woman that was above the fireplace when we moved here?" asked Angel.

"Yes," answered Michael.

"Well, they look like them," said Angel, "I think they're the same couple. But they couldn't be, could they?"

"Well, I suppose if-" Michael started to say.

"-I don't think this is good dinner conversation," interrupted Rachel.

"Yah," said Richard, "who wants to hear about some imaginary ghosts anyway?"

"They're not imaginary," said Angel, "Daddy, you believe me, right?"

"I think we've talked enough about this," said Rachel, before Michael could respond, "Now, eat your dinner."

"But, you do believe me, Daddy," said Angel, "Don't you?"

"Yes, I believe you," said Michael, "Now, eat your dinner."

Rachel gave Michael a dirty look, and then went back to her dinner.

"So," said Michael to Richard, "Anything else happen at school?"

"Mister Ingleburg said we should be starting on ancient history next week," said Richard.

"That's good," said Rachel, "I know have a high interest in that subject."

"Yah," said Richard, "Especially ancient Egypt."

The family finished their dinner while they talked. Afterwards, Richard did the dishes while Angel cleaned the table. After that, the children went to play, while Rachel mopped the floor. Angel had finished cleaning before Richard had finished the dishes, so she already upstairs when he arrived. Angel was talking to David and Maria with her door open, but since Richard could not see or hear them, he assumed she was talking to her imaginary friends.

"At it again?" asked Richard, "How long are you going to keep this up? No one believes you."

"Daddy believes me," said Angel.

"Dad claims to believe you because he didn't want to hurt your feelings," said Richard, then with sarcasm, "You're 'Daddy's little girl', don't you know that?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Angel, "Daddy treats us equal, and he does believe me. He said so, and just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they don't exist."

"No one else can see them," said Richard, "because they're just in your imagination. You're nothing but a freak."

"I am not," said Angel, raising her voice.

Angel looked at David and Maria, and said, "Do something."

"Do something," mocked Richard.

"We can't," said David, "No one but you can see or hear us, and we just pass through anything we try to touch."

"Little Freak," said Richard, "there's no one else here to do anything. It's just you and me."

"You're a big freak," retorted Angel, becoming frustrated, "You're just jealous because you can't see them!"

"You know," said Richard, "they're going to lock you up if you keep this up."

"No they won't," said Angel, "I haven't broken the law."

"Not in jail, Stupid," said Richard, "In the insane asylum."

"I'm not crazy," said Angel, "you are; and you're ignorant."

"Big words from such a little girl," said Richard, "Do you even know what that means?"

"Yes I do," said Angel.

"What's it mean then?" asked Richard.

"You don't know?" asked Angel.

"I do," said Richard, "I just don't think you do."

"It means you don't know better, or don't want to learn," said Angel.

Wow," said Richard, sarcastically, "Little Freak learned a big word. Did Daddy teach you that word?"

"No," said Angel, "I learned it from the dictionary."

"Yah, right," said Richard, "You can't read."

"I can too," said Angel, "and big kid's books too."

Richard laughed at the idea.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Angel, "I can read big kid's books."

"Okay," said Richard, "Whatever, Freak."

Richard went into his room and closed the door, laughing at angel.

"Shut up, Richey!" yelled Angel.

Angel then went in her room and slammed the door close.

"How come you can't touch anything?" Angel asked David and Maria.

"We don't know," said David, "but it might be a good thing."

"What do you mean?" asked Angel.

"Look," said Maria, "it may not be such a good idea to let everyone know we're here. If people knew this house was haunted, there could be big problems for you and your family. Who knows what would happen? Solid proof of the afterlife would be big. Besides, you seem to be the only one who can see or hear us so there's no way of proving we are real. We think you should tell your family we're not real."

"But, you are real," said Angel.

"I know," said David, "but for now, let's just keep it between the three of us. Besides, no one seems to believe you."

"My daddy believes me," said Angel.

David and Maria looked at each other. They knew that the tone of voice Angel's father used at the dinner table said he did not really believe her, but he was trying to humor her. Angel had missed the subtlety, but David and Maria had noticed it.

David looked back at Angel and said, "Angel, we heard what your father said. He was just humoring you. He doesn't really believe you. I think he believes we are only real to you and that we are just part of your imagination."

Angel thought for a moment, and then asked, "Are you just part of my imagination?"

"No," said David, "We are quite real. It's too bad we can't prove it to the others."

"How can I tell?" asked Angel, "The imagination is a very powerful thing."

"Close your eyes and don't think about us," said David, "Just say to yourself we aren't real, then if we are just in your imagination, we'll go away."

"But," said Maria, "you have to try real hard. If we don't go away, we're real."

Angel tried David and Maria's suggestion. She closed her eyes and told herself that David and Maria weren't real. Then she tried not to think about them. After that, she opened her eyes, but David and Maria were still there, clear as day. They had not gone away.

"You're still here," said Angel. "That means you are real."

That's right," said Maria, "We are very real. I think you have a special gift to see and hear us; something that probably most other people don't have. You might want to think about looking into it."

"I'm glad you're not just in my imagination," said Angel.

Later that evening, after both children were in bed, Rachel decided to talk to Michael.

"Michael," said Rachel, as they sat on the living room couch, "We need to talk."

"Sure," said Michael, "What's on your mind?"

"I'm concerned about Angel with her imaginary friends," said Rachel, "I don't think it's a good idea to encourage that sort of fantasy, especially since she thinks it's so real. I'm also quite concerned about her behavior as a whole. Angel's beginning to isolate. She's been starting trouble with Richard and has been defiant to me. This can't be healthy for her, especially on this level. If this keeps up, we may have to have her start seeing a counselor or someone."

Michael thought about everything he had observed in the past couple weeks for a moment, then said, "I don't know. So far, it seems harmless. She's not doing things and blaming it on her friends and it doesn't seem to be interfering with her life outside the house or her preschool. I think she may be unhappy here, or bored, and has created these friends to help her deal with it. As far as the rest of her behavior, I'll have a talk with her and set her straight."

"But," said Rachel, "if she's using her imagination to escape real problems, how can she deal with them?"

"She is only four-years-old," said Michael, "I don't know many four-year-olds that have concrete coping skills. Besides, most children her age have imaginary friends. I know Angel's are a bit unusual, but I wonder if this is her way of trying to understand what happened to the couple who lived here before us."

"Angel doesn't know that much about them," said Rachel, "None of us does. All she knows is they died in an accident. You know, I think she's made these friends because you aren't around a lot. I know you have a lot of work, but there's only so much a mother can do. Angel needs her father too. And not to mention Rich has been having a bit of trouble with his grades lately. I think you need to spend more time with your family, and honestly, I've been missing you a lot lately."

"You know how things are at work," said Michael, "I can't control everything. Besides, I do try to spend time with you and the children every chance I get. If Rich is having trouble in school, maybe he just needs to apply himself a bit harder, or maybe he needs a tutor. As far as Angel's behavior toward him goes, I think it's because she's looking for attention from him. He does tend to shun her a lot. I bet if he paid more positive attention to him her behavior would improve."

"I don't know, Mike," said Rachel, "Angel gets plenty of attention from Rich. It seems the more she gets the more she wants. I think she's being very selfish and these friends of hers are another way of being the center of attention. You were there at dinner. Rich hadn't even finished talking when she just interrupted and expected everyone to pay attention to her."

"What if these ghosts of hers are real?" asked Michael thoughtfully, "What then?"

"Hunny," said Rachel, "Angel's ghosts are not real. If they were, there'd be signs."

"Still," said Michael, "What if, hypothetically speaking, what if Angel can see real ghosts? Maybe we're missing the signs."

"Michael," said Rachel, insistently, "there are no ghosts in this house. If there were, we would know. Have you seen or heard, or noticed anything unusual that would even the slightest hint that there might be spirits in the house?"

Michael thought for a minute, and then said, "Not yet."

"And you won't either," said Rachel, "because there is no such thing as ghosts. You know it's just in Angel's imagination. When someone dies, they don't stay on Earth. You know that."

"You're right, of course," said Michael, "but I still don't see anything wrong with Angel having a couple of imaginary friends, even if they are a bit unusual.

"A bit?" asked Rachel, "Hunny, I've never even heard of a normal child having dead people as imaginary friends."

"What bothers me," said Michael, "is Angel said they look like the couple who lived here before us. We don't even know what happened to them. The family kept it quiet. All we know is they died. I don't think either of the kids know that."

"What if some of the other kids know?" asked Rachel, "One of them could've told Angel and now she's using as an excuse to claim her friends are real."

"I don't know," said Michael, "I think there's more to Angel's friends than we think. Besides, so far it seems harmless. I think we should just monitor the situation for now."

"If we just let this go," said Rachel, "It'll just get worse. Pretty soon she'll be doing things then saying her friends did them, or told her to do them."

"Well, she hasn't yet," said Michael, "I think we should just watch things, for now."

"I don't think that's wise," said Rachel, "The sooner we take action, the better. She needs to be grounded, and she daydreams enough as it is. The last thing she needs is an imaginary distraction."

"I know," said Michael, "but she is just four. I think we should just see where this leads first."

"Okay," said Rachel, giving in, "but it's on your shoulders when she's talking about imaginary things instead of facing reality."

After they talked, Michael and Rachel went upstairs for the night.

# Chapter 2

The next day was a pleasant Saturday. The sun was out and it was supposed to be in the low eighties.

Angel woke up before the rest of her family. It was sunrise and she played quietly in her room until her father came upstairs to get her. She had heard her mother downstairs earlier, but decided to wait until someone came to get her. Angel was usually the first to be up in the morning, but always stayed in her room until someone came and got her for breakfast.

"Daddy," Angel called, with excitement when she saw him.

Angel went over to her father and hugged him.

"Good morning, Sunshine," greeted Michael, "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes I did," said Angel.

"Good," said Michael, "Now, get dressed and come downstairs. Your mommy's making breakfast."

"What's she making?" asked Angel, "I smell bacon."

"That's right," said Michael, "and eggs, and hash-browns."

"Yummy!" exclaimed Angel, with excitement.

"That's right," said Michael, "Now, go get dressed,"

Angel went to her room, while Michael went to wake Richard. After Richard was up, Michael went downstairs.

Richard and angel finished dressing within seconds of each other, and both headed downstairs for breakfast. On the way down, Richard pushed Angel into the stairway wall and she almost fell downstairs. She was used to this kind of treatment from her brother, so did not complain.

Richard would often do things to Angel when their parents were not looking, or not around, then pretend to love her when they were around or watching. Angel had tried several times to tell her mother of how Richard treated her, but she did not believe her. She had tried her father, who seemed to consider what she said, but then her mother would convince him Angel was just being overdramatic.

There had been a few times when Richard actually hurt Angel, but he had made it look like an accident that Angel caused. At first, Richard would just tease Angel, but then later Richard started to threaten her. He would force her, under duress, to do various tasks for him, like stealing, lying, and covering up for him when things went wrong, or taking the blame herself.

Richard seemed to be determined to cause Angel as much grief as possible. He had despised her from birth, feeling she had taken his place in the family. He felt he was being treated differently than her, and felt Angel was spoiled.

The truth was actually different. Angel's mother had wanted only one child, and Angel had been a surprise. Rachel loved Angel, as a mother was supposed to, but only to a certain extent. She favored Richard over Angel, and saw her as nothing more than a troublemaker who was too smart for her own good. She felt Angel was a burden, but did not want to cause her harm.

Richard had the upper hand with his mother, but his father, Michael, treated the children more equally, though with a bit of favoritism toward Angel.

Michael treated the children according to their age and sex. Angel was a soon to be five-year-old girl, while Richard was a twelve-year-old boy. Though Michael did favor Angel in his heart, he loved both equally, and tried to treat them fairly.

Though Michael was busy a lot, he still tried to spend time with his family, though lately, that had seemed nearly impossible.

Despite all her troubles, Angel seemed to be a happy child. The problem was she could take only so much of her brother's abuse, and now she was starting to retaliate and defy him. This could potentially become very dangerous for Angel, as Richard was capable of many things, both good and evil.

It was now early summer, and school had gotten out the week before. Angel was still talking and playing with David and Maria. All attempts for David and Maria to communicate with the other family members had so far failed, but they had not lost hope. Richard continued to tease Angel about talking to David and Maria, and even told her friends. That, however, backfired on him. Instead of seeing Angel as an outcast, as Richard had hoped they would, they thought it was cool, and stayed friends with her.

One day during that week Angel and Richard were playing outside in their backyard. It was still early in the day, after breakfast, and the chores had just been finished. Richard had been teasing Angel to the point of tears again.

"…you're just a stupid, little freak," Richard finished.

Angel stood quietly for a moment, wishing she were not so scared to just punch Richard in the face, while tears were starting to build in her eyes. Then, one teardrop fell from her left eye. She quickly tried to dash it away, but Richard had already seen the teardrop, and noticed the action.

"Awww…" mocked Richard, "the little freak's gonna cry."

Angel stood, shaking, trying to fight back tears of anger and humiliation as Richard continued to mock her.

"Come on, Little Freak," continued Richard, "Cry for me. Waaaahhhhhh!"

Richard made mock crying motions, making fun of Angel. Then, Angel began to feel something she did not know how to describe. It was like a burn, worse than anger, and started from deep inside, burning its way out of her. It grew stronger and stronger as Richard continued to make fun of her. Another tear fell, this time it was burning hot, unlike any other tear she had cried.

"What's the matter, little baby?" asked Richard, "Can't handle the truth? You're nothing but a big baby freak. You know what I should call you? Freaky Baby. That sounds good; kinda has a ring to it. What do you think, Freaky Baby?"

Suddenly, it happened. Angel could take no more. It was like an explosion of built up anger and frustration. The fire turned into an inferno, and she released it on Richard. Every ounce of pain and humiliation and grief Richard had caused her, came out. For the first time in her life, Angel really wanted to hurt her brother.

She charged at her brother, full force, but Richard saw it coming and threw her to the ground. Angel landed hard. First, her shoulder hit the ground, followed by her head. She was stunned for a moment, but then she started to cry hard.

"Serves you right, Stupid," said Richard, triumphantly, while Angel got up, "You know better than to mess with me. Now, that so called attack of yours is going to cost you."

"I'm not doing anything you say!" yelled Angel, defiantly, as she got up.

"Shut up and stop crying like a baby," commanded Richard, "I could've pushed you a lot harder. That was just a play push."

Angel suddenly charged at Richard again, this time plowing right through his defenses. Richard caught her, and they both fell to the ground with Angel on top of him.

Angel immediately started punching Richard in the face. She got in a few good shots before Richard was able to hit her on the side of her head. Angel fell off, dazed but still conscious.

Richard got up and brushed himself off. He wiped blood from his lip, and spat some on the ground. He then turned to angel, who was trying to get up herself.

"Get up, Freak!" ordered Richard, "Get up, or I'll pull you up by your hair!"

Angel started slowly to get up. Richard thought she was moving too slow, so he pulled Angel to her feet by her hair.

"Ow!" exclaimed Angel in pain, as she was pulled upright.

Angel stumbled a bit, but steadied herself.

"You think you're smart?" asked Richard, "Well, you're not. This is gonna cost big, you stupid bitch. Don't worry, I'll think of something special for you."

Angel swallowed hard, now regretting her attack. She still was shaking, but at least she had stopped crying.

Richard thought for a moment then said, "I know just what I want you to do. I need twenty dollars, and you're going to get it for me. I want you to take it from mom's purse and give it to me. If you don't, I'll pound you to the ground. Oh, and you better not tell anyone or get caught; got it?"

Angel nodded.

"I want it by tomorrow after lunch," said Richard, "If not, you're dead. Got it?"

Angel nodded again.

"Now, quit bobbing your head and get outa my face," commanded Richard as he shoved Angel to the ground.

Angel got up and ran toward the house, glad to get away with her life. She ran inside and to her room, closing the door behind her. She then took a small, white, bear from her bed. It was a white bear with a dress and angel wings. The words "I'm an Angel" was written across the front of the dress. It was Angel's favorite stuffed animal and she slept with it every night. She would try to bring the bear with her wherever she went. Even though her mother forbade bringing it outside the house, Angel would still try anyway.

Angel took the bear from her and sat against the door, blocking it. She held the bear close to her, frightened. Her brother had really scared her this time. Her brother had scared her before, but this time it was different. Though he had been violent toward her, this was the first time he had actually hit her. Usually, he just slapped her around a bit, or pushed her in a casual, uncaring manor. This time, he seemed genially to want to hurt her. He was usually not that vicious either, and it had Angel frightened of him.

David and Maria had noticed Angel when she came inside and how upset she was, so they followed her upstairs, concerned. When they got there, David tried knocking on Angel's door but his hand just passed through as usual.

David gave Mari a small, quick, sheepish grin with a shrug of his shoulders that said he tried. Maria smiled back. David tried knocking again, and this time with success. He knocked three times, but got no response.

Maria decided to look inside the room by sticking her head through the door. She looked around the room for a moment, and then looked down.

"Oh," said Maria, "There you are."

Angel looked up and Maria smiled at her. Angel just looked down again.

"May we come in?" asked Maria.

"Is Richey out there?" asked Angel.

Maria looked around then stuck her head back through the door.

"All clear," said Maria.

Angel got up and opened her door. David and Maria went into the room, and Angel closed the door.

"Boy am I really glad to see you two," said Angel.

Angel tried to hug Maria, but went through her instead.

"Oh, ya," said Angel, disappointed, "I forgot I can't touch you."

"Is everything okay?" asked Maria.

"Not really," said Angel.

"What's wrong?" Asked David, "Did something happen?"

"Why don't you sit down and tell us about it?" said Maria, gesturing toward one of Angel's chairs.

Angel sat down, still holding her bear tightly. It was clear she was frightened.

"Well," said Angel, "I was outside playing tea-time with my dolls and minding my own business when Richey came over and tipped the table and chairs. Then he threw Stacy across the yard. I just started to pick everything up and put back the table. Then he said something about me being stupid or something. I called him stupid, so he pushed me. I called him an idiot. Then he started to call me a freak and make fun of you. Then he said I was nothing but a liar and I made you two up for attention. I tell him he didn't know what he was talking about. Then he calls me a freak and pushes me down. I got up and said he was stupid for not knowing the truth. Then he said I was a mistake of life and Mommy and Daddy never wanted me. He told me they just tolerate me to keep the peace.

"I told him he's a liar. He said he heard Mommy say it one day to herself. Then he pushed me again and made fun of me for being short. Then suddenly I started to cry. I don't know why, but I did. After that, I don't know what happened. There was something about-"

Angel stopped herself, remembering what her brother told her.

"About what?' asked Maria.

Angel thought for a moment then decided to tell David and Maria about what her brother told her to do.

"About twenty dollars," said Angel, "He wants me to steal it from Mommy, or he's going to kill me. He said he wants it by after lunch tomorrow."

"You should tell your parents about this," said David.

"No!" exclaimed Angel, "I mean, I can't. If I do, it'll be the end of me for sure."

David and Maria could tell Angel was genuinely frightened by her brother or at least by what he said he would do to her. This was unacceptable to David and Maria but at the time, they could do nothing about it.

"He can't be allowed to keep treating you like this," said Maria, "Something has to be done about it."

"But if I tell, Richey will kill me," said Angel, "He said He'll feed Angel to Sassy, then rip my arms and legs off and beat me with them until I die.

"You shouldn't steal," said David, "That would be wrong and if your mother catches you, how is she supposed to trust you?"

"I'm not going to steal the money," said Angel, "I'm going to tell Richey she didn't have it."

"Maybe you should tell your daddy," suggested Maria, "He might believe you."

"Daddy can't protect me all the time," said Angel, "and he works a lot too. Richey'll just wait until he's gone. Richey may be a bit slow, but he's not stupid. He'll wait until he gets a chance, then he'll get me."

"There must be something we can do," said David.

"Ya," said Angel, "Leave well enough alone before it gets worse."

"Alright," said Maria, realizing Angel was not going to tell anyone else no matter what she said, "but we still think you should tell someone that can do something about this."

"Not without risking my life," said Angel.

The three continued to talk for a while and it was now noon. Angel felt better after talking to David and Maria, and Angel had decided she was not going to steal the money for Richard, despite his threats. The rest of the day went without incident. David and Maria had lifted Angel's spirits, as they always did. They were concerned for Angel, but for the time, there was nothing they could do.

The next day came, and it was time for Angel to meet Richard outside next to the roses. Angel was afraid he might hurt her for not having the money, despite her reasoning.

And so she went to the roses and waited for her brother. Richard showed up about two minutes later. They had already had lunch, so the afternoon was free or at least until snack time at two.

"You got the money?" asked Richard when he met up with Angel.

Angel hesitated then cautiously said, "Mommy didn't have it."

"Wada ya mean, she didn't have it?" asked Richard.

"Just what I said," said Angel, "She didn't have it."

"You didn't ask her for it, did you?" asked Richard.

"No, of course not," said Angel, "I looked through mommy's purse and the money wasn't there."

Richard thought for a moment. Angel was hoping he would buy her story, given the fact she did not usually lie, she figured he was more likely to believe her. After giving it some thought, Richard decided Angel was telling the truth.

"You're lucky, Freak," said Richard, "This time I'm going to let you go. Next time I tell you to get something you'd better deliver. Now get outa my face."

Angel went back inside where she felt safer while Richard left to go to a friend's house.

As the days passed, Richard would force Angel to do his dirty work or find ways to get her in trouble. A couple days later, Angel was her room talking to David and Maria. Richard came upstairs and overheard her talking to them. He decided that it was a good time to start trouble.

"Are you talking to your 'friends' again?" asked Richard, "You know, if you keep this up they're gonna lock you up with the rest of the crazy people."

"I'm not crazy," said Angel, in a casual matter.

"Don't argue with me," said Richard, "or are you calling me a liar?"

"Neither," said Angel, "I'm just saying-"

"-Be careful, Little Freak," interrupted Richard, "I might just call those nice men in white to come and take you to the funny farm. That is where you belong, you know."

"Just because you can't see or hear someone doesn't mean they don't exist," said Angel.

"And just because you're the only one who can see them, don't mean they're real," said Richard, "You know, crazy people see and hear things no one else does, but it isn't real; only to them. It's all in their head. You're probably one of those people. Think about it, Freak. No one else but you can see or hear these so-called ghosts of yours but you, and you think they're real. Just like a crazy person."

"But I'm not crazy," said Angel, "I don't know why no one else can see or hear David and Maria. Maybe I'm just special."

"Yah," said Richard, "you're special all right; crazy special. It's okay. There's help for you. I don't know about hope, but supposedly, almost everyone can be helped. Wait, I bet you're one of those people that can't be helped."

"I don't need any help," said Angel, "There's nothing wrong with me."

"Prove it, then," said Richard, "Tell me how to see them, or prove they're real."

Angel looked at David and Maria then looked back. The three knew that for now there was no way to prove Angel right.

"I can't," said Angel, "I don't know how."

"That's what I thought," said Richard, "Nutty as a fruitcake. It's a shame because Dad has such high hopes for you. Too bad you're going to be locked up."

"You suck," said Angel.

"Oh, ya?" asked Richard.

"Ya," said Angel, "You suck."

Richard backhanded angel across the face.

"Now, I want you to go downstairs and break the eggs Mom's using for the cake," demanded Richard.

"Or?" asked Angel.

"Or…" started Richard, as he showed Angel his closed fist.

"Okay," said Angel, afraid of being hit, "I'll do it."

Angel stood still for a couple of moments.

"What are you standing there for? Get going," commanded Richard.

Angel went downstairs to the kitchen where her mother was. She stopped at the doorway, unsure of herself. She then casually walked in to the kitchen and up to the counter. She took the carton of eggs that were on the counter and threw it to the floor.

The results were unexpected. Instead of the sound of breaking eggs, she just got the plop of an empty egg carton.

"Oops…" said Angel, quickly covering up for her deed.

Rachel had looked as soon as she heard the sound.

"You're lucky the carton was empty," said Rachel.

"Sorry," said Angel.

"Well," said Rachel, "Don't just stand there, pick it up, and throw it away."

Angel obediently picked up the empty carton and put in the trash.

"Now," said Rachel, "go watch TV or something, and stay out of the kitchen.

Angel went to the living room and picked up the television remote. She then sat on the couch. Angel had learned to use the television remote at the age of two, though she was just learning her numbers.

Richard had followed Angel and witnessed the whole incident. He was disappointed there were no eggs in the carton, as it would have been fun to watch Angel have to clean up egg, but he was satisfied she had gotten a scolding for it.

Right now, every little thing counted to Richard. The more he could get Angel to do, the bigger things she could do for him. Angel was at just the age to start doing those things, but she needed a bit more training.

Richard went upstairs to think for a while. There was a certain videogame he wanted, and he was considering having Angel steal it for him. He wanted to test her to see if she could pull it off without being caught. She was already getting good at stealing small things like cookies and candy, but this job would require much more skill. There was store security and security tags to consider. Richard was considering having Angel steal a used one so there would be less security to worry about.

Over that weekend, the Louis family went out, but not to the right stores for Richard. In the end, Richard decided Angel was not ready for the task and bought the game himself with money he had earned.

Days passed on and Richard was hard on Angel. He seemed to enjoy tormenting his little sister, and would frequently get her in trouble. Normally sweet, even to her brother, Angel was beginning to exhibit negative behavior towards her brother and her mother.

Angel was now beginning to defy her mother and started hitting Richard back. Unfortunately, Rachel would take Richard's side of the stories and it would look like Angel started the incident, or hit Richard for no reason.

Angel's defiance and tantrums were not in her character, and Rachel was becoming concerned about her. She began to suspect that Angel thought because she was older she could get away with more. Rachel was determined to prove her wrong.

Neither Rachel nor Michael believed in spanking a child, and Angel was beginning to resist other forms of punishment. This new behavior was concerning to Rachel, and she hoped it was just a phase that Angel was going through. Soon, Rachel decided to talk to Michael about it, and hoped he would be able to talk to Angel and get her out of this behavior pattern.

Rachel and Michel were relaxing in bed one night when she decided to bring up the subject of Angel's behavior.

She gave a somewhat distraught sigh to subtly get Michel's attention.

Michel looked over at Rachel.

"You okay?" asked Michel.

"I'm fine," said Rachel, "It's just I'm concerned about Angel."

"What about her?" asked Michael.

"It's her behavior lately," said Rachel, "I don't know what's been with her, but she's been a handful. She's becoming defiant, she talks back to me, and she's been hitting her brother without cause. She's usually trouble, but not like this. This is getting serious. I try to punish her for her bad behavior, but she's starting to resist it. She's usually not violent or defiant."

Michael thought for a moment.

"I'll talk to her," said Michael, after thinking, "Something's probably bothering her."

"I hope that's all it is," said Rachel.

The next day after dinner, Michael decided to talk with Angel. He found her sitting on the couch in the living room.

"Angel," called Michael, "Come here."

Angel went over to her father.

"Yes, Daddy?" asked Angel.

"Follow me," said Michael.

"Am I in trouble?" asked Angel.

"No," said Michael, "I just need to ask you something."

Angel followed her father in to his study. When they got in the room, Michael closed the door, and motioned for Angel to sit in the chair in front of his desk. He sat in his desk chair. This was all fine, except now Michael could not see Angel, only the top of her head.

Michael got up, motioned for Angel to get up, and when she did, he put a couple of books on the chair to boost Angel to a height where he could see her face from behind the desk. He then sat back down.

That was better. Michael liked to see whom he was talking to.

"Angel," said Michael looking directly at her, "you know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Yep," said Angel.

"And if something is bothering you, you can tell me, right?" asked Michael.

"Right," responded Angel.

"Then I want to know if there is anything bothering you, or if anyone is bothering you," said Michael.

"No," said Angel, lying.

"Nothing at all?" asked Michael, hoping to get something out of angel.

"Nope," said Angel, "Nothing. Everything's fine. Richey treats me good."

Michael noticed the way Angel mentioned Richard. She said that almost like she was defending him.

"Are you sure?" asked Michael.

"Yep," said Angel, "everything's fine.

Angel fidgeted nervously for a moment.

"That's good," said Michael, "So, why have you been being naughty lately?"

"What do you mean?" asked Angel.

"I mean your recent behavior," said Michael, "like defying your mother, causing trouble, and hitting your brother."

"You know what they say," said Angel, "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. It's not like I want to be bad, sometimes I don't have a choice."

"Who's making you do these things?" asked Michael, "Is it the ghosts?"

"No," said Angel, "They would never make me do things I don't want to."

"Then who?" asked Michael.

"I have to be strong," said Angel.

"Strong for what?" asked Michael, "Angel, what's going on?"

"I can't say," said Angel, "There's too much at risk."

"Like what?" asked Michael, "What's at risk?"

"Things," said Angel.

Angel was usually concrete in what she said, and now her answers were vague. Michael was not sure what to make of her answers. He felt she was trying to tell him something, but he could not figure out what.

"Angel," said Michael, "You can tell me. It'll be just between the two of us."

Angel shook her head, and then said, "I think I already said too much. I'll be good from now on, I promise."

"Angel," said Michael, "if something is bothering you, you need to tell me."

"I can't," said Angel, "Besides it's fine. Everything'll be okay."

"Is there anything you can tell me?" asked Michael.

"No," said Angel, "But I will try to behave from now on."

Michael studied Angel's expression for a moment. Realizing he was not going to get anything else from her, he decided to end the conversation.

"Okay, then," said Michael, "You can go. But if there's anything you want to talk about, I'm here."

"Okay," said Angel, then got up from the chair.

Angel left Michael with more questions instead of answers as she left the room to go upstairs.

Richard intercepted Angel at the top of the stairs, and blocked her way.

"Where you going, Shorty?" asked Richard, mocking her.

Angel was smaller and smarter than most other children her age, but Richard never acknowledged her intelligence, and frequently made fun of her for her size.

"It's Angel, not Shorty," she responded, "and I'm going to my room."

"Not just yet," said Richard, "There's a little something I want you to do for me."

"What is it?" asked Angel.

"Get me some candy from the jar," commanded Richard, then I'll let you go to your room.

Angel stood on the stairs, contemplating with herself just how much she wanted to go to her room. She did not need to go there, and did not want to steal the candy. Besides, candy jar was up high for her, and she would have to climb to get to it.

"Well," said Richard, becoming impatient with Angel's indecisiveness, "What'll be, Tiny?"

Angel turned around and headed back downstairs, saying something about watching TV. She did want to play in her room, but did not think it was worth stealing for.

Later that evening when Angel and Richard were in bed, Michael and Rachel decided to relax on the couch together.

"Did you get a chance to talk with Angel?" asked Rachel.

"Yes I did," said Michael, "and she says there's nothing wrong, but I suspect otherwise. She tried to tell me something, and I think it was important, but I didn't get it. I think there's something going on with her. Something she's afraid to talk about."

"Maybe if you were home more for her," said Rachel, "Then she might open up to you more. I think she just needs sterner discipline. I'm doing all I can here, but she's becoming incorrigible. I don't understand where I'm going wrong."

"Truthfully," said Michael, "I think her behavior and whatever has been bothering her are related."

"Well," said Rachel, "something has got to be done about it."

Michael made a decision.

"I think I'll take some time off from the office," said Michael, "Two weeks in August should do it."

Rachel could hardly remember when Michael had taken more than a day or two off from work, and that was when he was too ill to work. She was pleased to hear he was taking a vacation.

Michael knew something was wrong with Angel, and planned to find out what it was during the time off in August. He planned his vacation for the second and third week of that month. Meanwhile, Richard continued to tease Angel and make her do his bidding. Angel was seeing and hearing the Lofts much clearer now, and her behavior started to improve slightly. Richard liked to drive Angel to her edge so it would seem she was misbehaving. Rachel felt it was just some sibling rivalry between the two, and Angel was somehow jealous of her brother and instigated the incidents.

Angel kept trying to prove she was not crazy just because she could see the Lofts, and because of this, Michael thought counseling would be good for her. Neither he nor Rachel believed that Angel's ghost friends were real, and they both thought there was a deeper problem. Michael figured if Angel would not open up to him, maybe she would to her counselor. Rachel just wanted to find the underlying cause of Angel's ghost stories.

August came, and on the second week, Michael started his vacation on the second week of that month. Angel was now seeing a woman counselor, which Richard would make fun of her for. He would tell her she was crazy and it just proved his point that she was going to be locked up with the rest of the crazy people. He would try to scare her by telling her counseling is where it starts. After that, they would lock her up unless she stopped the ghost charade. Angel knew better, but asked her counselor about it anyway. Her counselor told Angel she was not crazy and would not be locked up. She told Angel that people are not locked up unless they are a danger to themselves or others, or can't take care of themselves. None of which was true for Angel.

Angel enjoyed her counseling session. She found it a time to express herself without being judged or made fun of. Her counselor was nice and seemed to understand Angel, except for why she kept seeing the ghosts. Although Angel's counselor was skeptical about the Lofts being real, she seemed to have more of an open mind than Angel's parents and brother did.

Although Angel's behavior became less defiant, she began to isolate. She started spending more and more time alone, and seemed to be losing interest in things she enjoyed, like going outside and watching television.

Angel still went outside to play with her friends, just not as much. Since she was only four, she was not allowed to go far, and was not allowed to cross the street, even though there was little traffic on their street.

Michael noticed this behavior, and decided to talk to Angel's counselor about it. He had not had the chance to meet her yet so this seemed to be a good opportunity to do so. The meeting went well, and it was suggested that Angel might have been becoming depressed.

The Louis Family lived in a quiet, suburban neighborhood that had only a handful of children around Angel's age. They ranged from Angel, who was almost five, to a six-year-old girl who was almost seven. Angel had been the last child born in the neighborhood.

Angel's neighborhood friends consisted of four boys named Frank, Randy, David, and Steve. The six-year-old girl was Mary. The neighborhood was close-netted, and all the parents looked out for the children. There was a small neighborhood watch to ensure safety.

Angel's friends noticed her behavior changes, and became concerned. They asked her if things were okay, but she would simply tell them she was fine and they did nothing wrong.

Angel wanted to tell her friends about how her brother treated her, but was too afraid. Her brother's death-threats were serious enough to scare her into keeping quiet.

Richard had made death threats and threatened to destroy Angel's favorite possessions if she did not do his bidding. To show he was serious, he had hurt her and destroyed one of her favorite dolls.

Every now and then, Richard would remind Angel of the consequences of telling. He would usually give her a verbal threat, or threaten her with physical harm when he felt she was going to tell someone about how he treated her.

Michael watched Angel's behavior and on a couple of occasions tried to talk to her about it. When he talked to Angel, she would tell him everything was fine, and would not tell him what was going on. Michael also noticed how Angel was treated around the house. He noticed some favoritism toward Richard from Rachel. He knew in his mind, though would not admit it top anyone, even himself, that Rachel resented having Angel. Despite whatever resentment she had, Rachel seemed to treat Angel fairly and with love. She seemed to treat Angel like one of the family.

Angel's birthday came in the second week of August. David and Maria were the first to wish her a happy birthday. When she got downstairs, she had breakfast. Her mother had made her favorite – chocolate chip pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream. Angel's favorite fruit was the strawberry, and she loved chocolate, so this was her favorite breakfast. During breakfast, her mother reminded her of her party that afternoon.

The issue of David and Maria attending the party had been discussed. It seemed that no matter how hard Angel tried to advocate, Rachel would not have them there. She did not want imaginary people at the party. To Rachel, it was a way of trying to break Angel of her imagination. This was a big disappointment for Angel, and she thought she should bring it up one last time.

Angel thought about what to say during breakfast. If she were going to convince her mother to let David and Maria to come, she would have to be careful.

"Mommy," said Angel while she picked up her dishes from the table, "How many kids are there going to be at my party?"

"About seven," said Rachel.

"And how many adults are there going to be?" asked Angel.

"Four," answered Rachel, "Why?"

"I see," said Angel, "Can we have two more adults? They're real good friends and I think they would like to come."

"Really?" asked Rachel, skeptically, "and who might they be?"

Angel hesitated, and then answered, "David and Maria Loft."

"We already discussed this," said Rachel, "No imaginary friends; remember?"

"Yah, but they aren't-" Angel started to say.

"-No buts," interrupted Rachel, "They are not invited."

"All my other friends are invited," said Angel.

"Your other friends are real," said Rachel.

"So are David and Maria," said Angel, "They're just dead."

"In that case," said Rachel, going along with Angel, "they wouldn't have much fun. They can't eat anything, or have anything to drink, or play with the others. Besides, I don't think everyone else would react well to them. No, Angel; you need to spend time with your living friends."

Angel fell silent, realizing that she had once again lost the argument. She knew her mother had already made up her mind and now she was sure she could not change it. Her mother did not believe David and Maria were real, and that was that. Realizing this, Angel decided not to bring the subject up again.

Angel was very intelligent for her age. She could already do some fourth-grade work. Her particular interest was in science, more specifically, physical science. Angel was always asking the question why. She always wondered why things were the way they were and why they worked the way they did. She was always studying her environment, trying to answer questions normal for-year-olds would not even think of asking. Angel loved to experiment with things in many ways. She had even gotten into trouble on several occasions because of this. Sometimes her scientific curiosity would get the best of her.

Angel was intelligent enough to be classified as gifted. Some people thought her to be a genius, or at least borderline genius. This only added to her brother's despise of her.

Richard hated Angel from her birth. At first, he tried to hurt her, but when his parents started to catch on, he changed his tactics and acted as if he was starting to love her, while secretly making her life miserable. At first, Michael did not buy the new behavior, but after a while, he dismissed the old behavior as temporary jealousy. The truth remained that Richard still hated his little sister and felt much jealousy toward her.

To Richard, Angel seemed so perfect. She was kind, loving, caring, cute, and always sweet to everyone around her. She was always so affectionate and social. Everyone seemed to fuss over her, always dressing her pretty and giving her all the attention. They would say how adorable she was, and commented how she would hardly fuss, even as a baby. She had a captivating smile with her pretty eyes. Everyone but Richard seemed taken by it.

Richard saw Angel as a deviant worm sent there to displace him from the family. To him, he, and he thought maybe his mother, were the only ones who saw her for what she really was.

Richard saw himself as plain and common compared to his sister. Beside her, he felt inferior. He felt she was too perfect and had to be brought down.

Rachel saw Angel as being in the way of her ambitions. She saw her as trouble, spoiled, and as a little girl who got too much attention for her so-called gifts. Rachel felt Angel abused her gifts and used them to manipulate people into giving her what she wanted. Though Angel seemed sweet and nice, Rachel saw that as just a front to hide her true nature.

Michael saw things a bit differently. Though he worked a lot, he did try to be involved with his family when he was home. He perceived Angel as an innocent little girl. He saw her as being very cute, kind, and very smart for her age. Though she was smaller than most children her age, being in the fifth percentile for growth, she was strong and built solid. Angel seemed to be generally happy, but he could tell something was troubling her, though she did hide it well. Michael could see it deep in her eyes, and there was small behaviors, like the way she would sometimes stare into space, as if looking for something, but not knowing where to find it. There also seemed to be a certain sadness in her eyes that Michael could not identify.

The time for Angel's party came. She got many nice gifts and cake and ice cream were served. Angel had fun with her living friends; though she wished David and Maria could have joined. She did not let that ruin her party, though, and she planned to bring them some cake and milk later and show them the gifts she got. They would have their own private party as special friends.

Angel's party lasted to around six at night. At that point, almost everyone had left. Her grandparents on her father's side were the last to leave.

Later that evening, when everything had settled down, Angel set her plan into motion. It would be risky and she would have to be particularly careful of being caught by Richard, but she believed she could pull it off. Besides that, she did not see it as stealing because it was her cake.

Angel mentally went over her plan and waited for the right moment. Then it came; Michael and Richard were watching television and Rachel had just gone into the shower. Angel decided the time was right to take some cake to her room for David and Maria. She knew she was not supposed to have food in her room, but she could not think of a better plan. She did not like the fact they were not invited to her party and felt bad they had to miss it.

Angel quietly went in to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. The remainder of the cake was put away on the middle shelf. She took the cake out and placed it on the counter. It was a bit of a reach for her, but she managed it without dropping the cake. Angel got a stool and placed it in front of the counter where the cake was. She felt time working against her, knowing that someone could just walk in and catch her in the act. Angel climbed on the counter, went into the silverware drawer, and took out two forks and a knife. It was at this time she saw the cake was already cut in pieces. Angel put the knife back in the drawer and took out two small plates from the cupboard above the counter. She then put a piece of cake on each plate, each with a fork. She then climbed down from the counter, put the cake away, and brought the plates to her room.

When she arrived in her room, Angel placed the plate on her little table, and set places for David and Maria. She did not want any cake, as she had had her fill at the party, but she felt David and Maria would still enjoy some. It was at that moment that Angel realized two things; one, that he forgot to bring milk; and two, that neither David nor Maria were around. She was beginning to wonder where they went, as she had not seen them all afternoon.

Angel went looking for her friends, and found them in the pantry talking. She did not hear what they were talking about when she called for them.

"Angel," said David when Angel found him, "Did you have fun at your party?"

"Yah," said Angel, "It was great. I got lots of stuff and it was fun. Come on, I'll show you what I got today."

Angel led David and Maria to her room. She showed them the gifts she had received that day, and then sat them down at the table.

"Is this for us?" asked Maria, touched by the offer.

"Yup," said Angel, "Sorry I forgot the milk, though."

"It's okay," said David.

David and Maria looked at each other. They thought the gesture was sweet, but they had to tell her they could not eat the cake. They knew it was going to disappoint her, especially since she must have gone through a lot of trouble to get it for them.

"Is everything okay?" asked Angel.

"This is very nice of you," said David, "but unfortunately, we can't eat it. You see, we can't touch anything without going through it."

Angel thought for a brief moment. She thought of everything her mother had told her about David and Maria not being able to eat the cake, or interact with other people.

"That means you can't eat anything either, right?" asked Angel.

"Exactly," said David, "Not that we seem to need to either. We don't get hungry and we haven't eaten since before you moved here."

"Sorry," said Maria, "but this is a lovely gesture and very sweet of you."

"Wait a minute," said Angel, "If you go through everything you touch, then how come you don't go through the floor, or how come you can sit in a chair?"

"We don't know the answers to that," said David, "but watch."

David tried to pick up his fork, but went through it instead. He tried the same with the cake, and got the same results.

"See?" said David, "Right through it. Maria and I have been trying to find answers to this and a lot more. I wonder; do your parents have any books or material we can look at about the afterlife or anything like that?"

"No," said Angel, "Mommy and Daddy don't believe in stuff like that. I think they think when you die you go to heaven or hell, but you don't stay here on earth. Obviously, they're wrong."

"Well," said Maria, "They may not be entirely wrong. There could still be a heaven and a hell. This could be what they call purgatory for all we know. Maybe we're still here for a reason, and until that purpose is fulfilled, we can't move on to wherever we're supposed to go. We don't really know. At this point, we don't even know why we're here."

It was at that moment when Angel noticed Richard standing at her doorway watching and listening to everything she was doing.

"I'm telling Mom what you've done," said Richard, when Angel looked at him.

Richard headed downstairs to find their mother. Angel quickly got up and followed him. They both found their mother watching television in the living room.

"Mom?" called Richard.

"What?" answered Rachel.

"Does Angel have permission to have food in her room?" asked Richard.

"No," said Rachel, "Why?"

"So, I guess she's not supposed to have cake in there, right?" suggested Richard.

"Angel," said Rachel, not liking what she was hearing, "what did you do now?"

"It's for David and Maria," said Angel, innocently, "I gave them some cake. I was just being nice, since they missed out at the party. None of it was for me, honestly."

"You stole cake from the refrigerator and brought it to your room for your pretend friends?" confirmed Rachel.

"Not exactly," said Angel, "I didn't steal it. It is, after all, mine. And they're not pretend, they're very real."

Angel did not understand that what she did was wrong. From her perspective, it was her cake, so she had every right to it, just like her toys or her clothes. The cake even had her name on it, so it was hers to do as she pleased. If she wanted to share a couple of pieces with her friends, then it was okay.

"I thought we settled this," said Rachel, clearly upset with Angel.

"But I thought-" started Angel.

"-You know not to steal things, don't you?" interrupted Rachel.

"But I didn't steal it," said Angel, "After all, it is my cake. How can I steal something that's mine?"

"Don't talk back to me," warned Rachel.

"I don't understand," said Angel, "How can I steal my own cake?"

"It's only yours when you're allowed to have it," said Rachel, "and you know better than to bring food to your room, and you know you aren't supposed to go in the refrigerator. Not only that, but you took the cake without permission. As far as everything's concerned, that's stealing."

"But what about David and Maria?" asked Angel, "Aren't they allowed to have some?"

"No," said Rachel, "and enough about them. Richard, go get your father."

Richard went to get his father.

"Angel," said Rachel, "come with me."

Rachel led Angel upstairs to her room. David and Maria were no longer there. A couple of minutes later, Michael and Richard joined Rachel and Angel.

"What's all this about?" asked Michael, when he saw the cake and chairs, "Are we having company?"

"It's for David and Maria," said Angel, "I thought they would like some cake, since they weren't allowed at the party."

"She's insisting her pretend friends are real again," said Rachel, "Michael, this has gone too far; now she's stealing for them."

"First," said Angel, "they didn't ask me to get cake. I did that on my own. Second, how am I stealing it if it's mine in the first place?"

Angel still did not understand that what she did was considered stealing because she did not have permission to have cake.

"You took it from the fridge without permission," said Rachel, "That's considered stealing."

"But Richey takes things from the fridge," said Angel, "and no one says that's stealing."

"First," said Rachel, "don't bring your brother into this. Second, he's older and has permission, so it's not stealing. And third, he doesn't sneak food to his room."

Michael though Angel's little setup was cute, and it seemed her reasoning was logical, at least to her. It was true that the cake was hers, technically. It was also true that she was not allowed to just go and get it whenever she pleased, and true that she was not supposed to have any food in her room, even if it was for her friends.

Michel knelt to Angel's level so he could talk directly to her

"Angel," said Michael, "You know that you aren't supposed to have food in your room. Also, if ghosts were real, they couldn't eat anything anyway. How would your friends enjoy cake they can't eat?"

"I didn't really understand that until David and Maria showed me," said Angel.

"I told you that this morning," said Rachel, "And I thought we agreed that there are no such things as ghosts."

"You agreed," said Angel, "I didn't. And if they aren't real, what do you call what's inside us keeping us alive? Even you believe we have a spirit of some sort."

"Yes," said Rachel, "but it doesn't stay behind when you die."

"Then how do you explain David and Maria?" asked Angel, then added, "and don't tell me they're just part of my imagination. I know the difference between the two, and I know they're real; everything inside me says so."

"Angel," said Michael, "sometimes things that are not real can seem very real and so nice that we want to believe they are real. You'll just have to trust us that these ghosts are not real, no matter how much you want them to be. Now, let's clean up your room and have no more of this."

Angel said nothing more on the subject, and she and her father cleaned up the cake and put the chairs and table away. Richard and Rachel left the room, and when Michael and Angel were done, Angel went to look for David and Maria. Richard had gone to his room and put music on, and Michel went to join Rachel downstairs.

While she was looking, it was David and Maria who found Angel.

"Angel," said Maria, "I hope you didn't get into too much trouble."

"Not really," said Angel, "and I don't think I'll be doing that again. Let's talk in my room."

David and Maria both followed Angel to her room. When they were inside, Angel closed the door.

"Are you sure everything's okay?" asked David.

"Ya," said Angel, "It's just that Mommy and Daddy keep saying you aren't real, and that it's just my imagination and you should both be ignored. I know you are both real. I can feel it in my stomach and heart. Anyway, sorry you missed the party, and sorry about the cake. I think you would've had fun at the party, though."

"It's okay," said Maria, "it wasn't your fault."

"Besides," said Michael, "we were there. We just stayed out of the way."

"So, you were there?" asked Angel.

"Kind of," said Maria, "we were just outside the room and outside, we were nearby."

"Good," said Angel, "That makes me happy that you didn't really miss it."

"We wouldn't have missed it for the world," said Maria.

The three talked for a while longer and Angel played with Maria and David. The day ended, and angel was feeling better about the party, now that she knew David and Maria was there after all.

# Chapter 3

Time passed on, and Angel continued to talk to and play with David and Maria. As the days passed on, David and Maria noticed Angel seemed happier around them. She seemed to get a certain brightness in her eyes when she saw them. For the time being, they played games and talked to angel about her troubles. Some of the games were more like charades or word games, and most consisted of things that didn't require touching things on David and Maria's part. Some were finding games, like Hide-and-Seek, or I-Spy, and such. They would also verbally help Angel with her puzzles and help her with her schoolwork.

David had a sense that he and Maria could touch things without passing through them. It was only a matter of how to figure out how. Then one day, it finally happened.

It was after the family had dinner and everything was put away. The Louis family was watching a family movie, so there was no one in the dining room, so David had been working on trying to push a saltshaker across the table. That evening, he pushed the shaker. It was only a couple of inches, but it was enough to confirm his suspicions. He tried to push it again, but this time he passed through the shaker.

Whatever he did before, he must have done it differently that time. Taking mental notes, and doing some self-analysis, gave him a feel of what had happened, so he kept trying.

It was then that Maria came in the room. She watched David work without success for a while before saying anything.

"It's okay," said Maria, when David finally gave up, "We'll figure it out."

"I just moved it a few minutes ago," said David, "It wasn't far, but I did it."

Maria believed David, and felt hopeful.

"How did you move it before?" asked Maria.

"I'm not sure," said David, "I just focused real hard on it, and from deep inside somehow I felt the saltshaker, then I pictured myself pushing it," David went through the motions as he spoke, "Then I did it."

As he tried to move the shaker, his fingers went through, and it did not move at all.

"Maybe if you were more relaxed it would help," said Maria, getting behind David, "You know what's really strange?" she asked.

"What's that?" asked David.

"We can touch each other," said Maria as she gently massaged David's neck and shoulders, "but we can't touch anyone or anything else. That and we don't fall through the floor or chairs when we sit."

"That is odd," said David, as he relaxed, "I wonder why."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" said Maria.

"I think we can touch each other because we're both spirits," said David, "and not physical like everything else. As far as sitting or not going through the floor, that I can't even begin to guess at."

"Try to focus again," said Maria, after a couple of minutes.

Maria stopped massaging David, and stood by him. David looked at her and gave her a loving smile, then turned back to the saltshaker. He tried to focus and move it again, but without success. He tried it a few more times, but with the same results.

"I'm not even sure how I got it to move in the first place," said David.

"It's okay," said Maria, "At least now we know we can touch and move things. All we have to do is figure out how."

"True," said David, "At least we know; and who knows? Maybe I'll do it again soon."

David tried a few more times, but still without success. He tried the next day, but without success. It was on the following day that he succeeded again. This time he remembered how he did it, and tried again. He was able to move the shaker a little more.

Now that David had learned to push objects, he tried it on other things until he had it down to a science. He tried the same technique to pick up things, at first without success, and finally succeeded.

It was at the end of the week, after David had been practicing all week how to move and pick up objects, when he decided he knew enough to teach Maria. David went looking for Maria and found her standing in the living room watching whatever was on television.

He approached her, and said, "Maria, I've got something to show you."

"What is it?" asked Maria.

"Follow me," said David.

Maria followed David in to the dining room. David turned and faced Maria in front of the dining table with the salt-and-peppershakers on it.

"Remember how I told you that I pushed the saltshaker the other day?" asked David.

"Yes," said Maria, then asked with hope, "You did it again?"

"Yep, I did," said David, "and now I think I've got it down pat."

David faced the table, and said, "Watch."

David took a moment to gather himself, then pushed the saltshaker across the table. He then pushed the peppershaker in the same fashion.

"It gets easier the more you do it," said David.

Maria was smiling, happy that they now had a way to move things.

"That's great," said Maria, "How did you do it?"

"Come here," said David, "I'll show you."

Maria went and stood by David.

"Okay," said David, "first focus on the saltshaker."

Maria looked at the saltshaker and focused on it with her eyes.

"Now," said David, "clear your mind of everything but the saltshaker, and relax."

Maria did what David said.

"Now," said David, "reach deep inside and put all your feelings together. Push them way down."

Maria pushed her feelings down inside her.

"Now," said David, "picture yourself pushing the saltshaker."

Maria formed a mental image of her pushing the saltshaker with her fingers.

"Now," said David, "focus all your emotions on the shaker and move it, using the mental image you have of it moving."

Maria followed David's directions, and pushed the saltshaker about an inch before passing through. David was pleasantly surprised she got it so quickly. It had taken him many tries to do what Maria had done the first try. But then again, David was trying to figure how to do it in the first place without guidance.

"It worked!" said Maria, excited.

"We should try this on other things," said Maria.

"I was thinking," said David, "if we can move things, maybe we can pick them up too."

"Yes," said Maria, "Maybe we can."

Maria then tried to push the peppershaker. This time she pushed it halfway across the table before going through.

"It does get easier as you go," said Maria.

The two practiced on various things for a while before stopping for the day. Though they had figured how to push things around with their fingers, there was still much work to be done.

The weekend was typical for the Louis family. Richard was a bit more subtle in tormenting his sister, and Rachel continued to ignore or deny it. Michael, though on vacation, worked from home, making it almost seem that he was not on vacation at all. It appeared he was more dedicated to his work than his family.

Meanwhile, David and Maria got closer to Angel. They began treating her as their own daughter, caring for and comforting her in whatever way they could. They would play with her, exchange life stories, and read her nighttime stories before bed.

Though they could not be sure, David and Maria began to feel that Angel had something to do with why they were there, and had not moved on to the next life. They also thought that this could be the next life for them, or maybe they were only there for a short time before moving on to whatever was next. No matter how they saw it, there was not a way to be sure why they were there.

Even though Michael worked during his so-called vacation, he still took some time to observe Angel's behavior and talk with her. He began to realize that she was not the spoiled little brat she was portrayed to be by her brother. There seemed to be some rivalry between her and Richard, but Rachel seemed to handle it smoothly with a bit of favoritism toward Richard.

Michael saw that Angel was not a typical five-year-old child. She acted older than her age, though she looked younger because of her small size. It was as if her body was developmentally behind, and her mind was developmentally advanced. She seemed to have the typical emotions of a five year old, though she managed them better than most children her age did, and she seemed to understand more about life and academics than they did. Academically, she was well advanced for a five-year-old, reading books years ahead of the typical reading level for a child her age, and she seemed to excel in the sciences.

Though she was intelligent, her mother and brother seemed to take little notice of it. She was not easily influenced, as Rachel believed, and she questioned everything. Angel was very curious about the world around her, and wanted to know why things worked, not just how.

Between all the reports he had been given, and his own observations of Angel, something was not adding up to Michael. Angel did seem troubled, but Michael felt it was something deep. Angel did seem a bit defiant toward her mother at times, but Michael was not sure Rachel was always being fair at those times. In the end, though, Angel would do as her mother said.

Michael thought of the relationship between his wife and children. He had noticed that she treated Richard with a bit of favoritism, which seemed a bit odd to Michael considering she claimed to love each child the same. He also noticed a curious sadness in Angel's eyes, as if something was not right with her. He made a note to ask her about it some evening.

That evening, Michael decided the time was right to talk with Angel. He went looking for her, and found her in the living room, reading.

"Angel?" Michael called.

"Yes?" responded Angel, looking up from her book.

"Come with me, please," said Michael.

Angel put the book down on the coffee table and followed her father.

"Am I in trouble?" asked Angel.

"No," responded Michael, "I just need to talk to you about something."

"Oh," said Angel, as she followed her father to his study.

When they arrived in the study, Michael closed the door and sat at his desk in his usual chair. Angel followed him, and stood by his chair on his right side.

The study was set up like a cozy home office. The carpet was a beige color, and the walls were off-white with pictures of the family on them and a couple of framed certificates. There was a desk with a chair in front of the window where Michael would sit. In front of the desk were a couple of chairs, and to complete the office was a bookcase on the left wall full of technical books and a set of encyclopedias and a small, comfortable couch on the right.

"I'm going to ask you something," said Michael, "and I need you to be completely honest about your answer. Okay?"

"Okay," said Angel.

"Good," said Michael, "Has anything or anyone been bothering you in any way?"

Angel thought for a moment. She did not like lying to her father, but was too afraid of what Richard said he would do to her if she ever told anyone about the way he treated her. She was literally afraid for her life.

"No," Angel finally said, lying.

"Are you sure?" asked Michael, "Because if there is, you can tell me."

"I'm good," said Angel, "Nothing's bothering me. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering," said Michael, realizing that Angel was not making direct eye contact when talking to him.

"Oh," said Angel, "Everything's good. How's things with you?"

"Good," said Michael, "No complaints here."

"That's good," said Angel, "I do have one small question, though."

"What's that?" asked Michael.

"How come you're always so busy?" asked Angel.

"Because," said Michael, "there are a lot of things to be done. Daddy's a very important man to the company, and when you're that important, you're responsible for many things. It's how I support you, your mother, and your brother."

"Oh," said Angel, "I want to be important someday too."

"You already are important," said Michael, "At least to this family, and maybe someday you will be a big boss that tells a lot of people what needs to be done. You have a good head on your shoulders, and you are very smart. What you decide to do with it is up to you. Just, don't waste your talents.

"Thank you, Daddy," said Angel, "I won't waste them."

"Good," said Michael, "I guess that's it, then. If you're sure everything's okay, then you can go back to your book."

Angel gave her father a quick hug then left to go downstairs and find her mother. She had an idea and she wanted to run it by her.

"Mommy?' said Angel, when she found her.

"What is it?' asked Rachel, "I thought you were watching TV."

"Actually," said Angel, "I was reading. Speaking of which, I was wondering something."

"What?" asked Rachel.

"Can I have some harder books?" asked Angel.

"Like what?" asked Rachel.

"Like big kid books," said Angel.

"You have big kid books already," said Rachel.

"The ones I have are too easy," said Angel.

"They're third and fourth grade books," said Rachel, "They should be hard enough."

"I know," said Angel, "but they're easy. I'd like some harder books, like high school books."

"Angel," said Rachel, "You wouldn't be able to read high school level books."

"Sure I would," said Angel, "I can already read some adult books."

"Where did you read adult books?" asked Rachel.

"At the library," answered Angel.

"Were you in the adult section at the library?" asked Rachel, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," said Angel, "But I only did it once."

"Why?' asked

"I was bored of the children's books," said Angel, "They're too easy."

"First," said Rachel, "I find it hard to believe you understand adult books. And second, you know you're supposed to stay in the children's section at the library and not wander."

"It only happened once," said Angel, "It'll never happen again. I promise."

"It better not," said Rachel, "or I'll cancel your card."

And that was that. Angel realized she was not going to get any harder books for the time being; at least not from her mother. She intended to ask her father, and if that did not work, there was school.

Richard was jealous of his sister. He felt learning came easy to her, while he had to struggle all the time. The downside to her intelligence was Angel did not have many friends she could relate to. Children her age did not understand her, and the older children did not want to hand around with a five-year-old.

Rachel had always favored Richard, and resented having Angel. Angel had not been planned, and Rachel felt she was getting in the way of her ambitions. Rachel hid the resentment well from Michael, but showed some of it to Angel.

Between it all, Angel felt pushed around and aside. Her Mother favored her brother, her brother tormented her, and her father was always busy. She received positive attention from her father, but felt she had to fight for her mother's attention, and it would frequently result in negative attention. Her brother was rarely positive toward her, except when he had to be to prevent suspicions about his treatment toward his sister.

The rest of the day went without incident, and the next day Michael received an invitation to his brother Will's wedding. That evening, he was discussing it with Rachel. The whole family had been invited to go to Florida for the event, and Michael wanted to go. As he was talking to Rachel, Angel got out of bet to get a drink, and overheard part of the conversation.

"… and I thought he was crazy before," finished Rachel.

"I heard she's really nice," said Michael, "A bit strange, but nice. Besides, they seem to love each other."

"I still think it's a bad idea to go," said Rachel, "That and I don't want him around the children."

"Look," said Michael, a little offended, "Will may be a bit unusual, but he's not dangerous. I don't believe he'd harm anyone, especially the children."

"I'm not worried about him hurting the children," said Rachel, "It's just I'm worried about Angel. You know how she thinks of her pretend friends, and with what he believes in; I'm afraid it'll only serve to further confuse her, or feed into her fantasies. I'm afraid it'll only lead to disaster for her. Besides, Florida is a long trip from here."

"I agree Will is a bit strange," said Will, "but we could always ask him not to discuss his beliefs about the paranormal around the children. I'm sure he'll comply."

"I don't know, Mike," said Rachel, "Florida is still a long way from here, and it would be during school. The children would have to miss school for this, and considering Rich's grades, I don't think that'd be good for them."

"We've got the money, and I can take the time off work to go," said Michael, "The only problem would be the kids' school."

"We can't do this," said Rachel, "I'm not having the children out of school to go to someone's wedding they don't even know that's hundreds of miles away."

"Well," said Michael, "he's coming down and I have the feeling he's probably going to stop by. Why don't we think about it and come up with an answer before he leaves."

That was the end of that conversation. There was some talk about sending Angel to a private tutor, but Rachel felt it was better she remain in public school around other children her age. Michael mentioned getting a babysitter while he and Rachel went to Florida, but Rachel did not like to leave the children with strangers.

Rachel had always been adamant about raising the children at home. They did not go to day care, though they did go to preschool. Rachel felt strongly that it was the parent's responsibility to raise their own children, and did not trust anyone else with them. Not even with Richard. In fact, she had not worked from the time Angel was born to the time she started preschool. Rachel had held a part-time job since then, but was currently laid-off. She was now between jobs.

Angel decided it was time to move on before she was caught eavesdropping on the conversation. She went to the bathroom and got a cup of water. She drank it then went back to her room to bed, making a mental note of the conversation she overheard. She now had questions she needed answering.

From what Angel understood about her uncle, he was her father's crazy brother who had some sort of belief in the paranormal. His fiancé apparently had similar beliefs, and she suspected they were some sort of experts on the subject, or they believed in it like a religion or something along those lines. Angel was not entirely sure what the paranormal was, but she thought it had something to do with life after death. From what little she was able to read about it, she thought she was connected to it somehow. Angel also felt her uncle and his fiancé might be able to help her understand more. She was also hoping they could bring some answers to why she could see David and Maria, but no one else could.

Angel thought about it for a while before falling asleep. She made a note to talk to her parents about it, though she thought she might not get very far with them.

The next morning, Angel decided it was time to ask her parents her questions, and therefore went looking for them.

"Mommy? Daddy?" called Angel, when she found them.

"Yes, Angel?" responded Michael.

"Can I ask a question, after this one?" asked Angel.

"What is it?" asked Rachel.

"What's the paranormal?" asked Angel, "I read it in a book once, and I don't know what it means."

"Don't worry about it," said Rachel, "It's just some made up foolishness meant to scare people."

Michael felt a better explanation was needed.

"Well," said Michael, "that's part of it. Basically, the paranormal has to do with things like spirits and their communicating, or interacting with the living. What it says is there are spirits that roam the earth and haunt places and houses and such. It's a made up science that has no actual proof it exists."

"But," said Angel, "David and Maria are spirits and they are very real."

"Only to you," said Rachel, "That's called your imagination."

"But they seem so real," said Angel, "I can talk to them and they talk to me."

"What kind of things do they say to you?" asked Michael.

"Nothing bad," said Angel, "They say they're stuck here and can't leave the house. They don't know why they're here, or why they can't leave, but I know they're not here to hurt anyone. They're real nice people."

"Angel," said Michael, "you know the difference between real and pretend, right?"

"Yes," said Angel.

"Then you know that these ghosts are pretend, and not real," said Michael.

"I think," said Angel, "no, I know David and Maria are real."

"Maybe you've been reading too many ghost stories," said Rachel.

"I don't read ghost stories," said Angel, "They're stupid. If David and Maria aren't real, and there's no such thing as ghosts, then what happens when you die?"

"No one really knows," said Michael, "Different people believe different things, and different religions teach different things, none of which anyone has actually proven. There's no evidence to say anything about life after death."

"What about reincarnation?" asked Angel, "Is that real?"

"That's just a belief too," said Rachel.

"Again," said Michael, "There's no proof of that either."

"Then why do people believe in it so strongly?" asked Angel.

"The same reason people believe in anything they can't prove," said Michael, "They want too, for whatever reason they feel they should. Some people feel it brings them inner peace, some are gullible enough to believe in anything, and others have been brainwashed into believing what they have been told is real."

"Then why can I hear and see David and Maria?" insisted Angel, "I'm not brainwashed, and I can't prove they exist, except that I see them and can talk to them, but no one believes me."

"Like you've been told," said Rachel, "It's all in your imagination. I'll bet when you accept that, the ghosts won't be so real anymore."

"I don't know about that," said Angel, "As far as I know, you can't really talk to your imagination. I mean, you can pretend to, but it's not real. When I talk to David and Maria, it's like talking to you, or Daddy, or someone else."

"Yet," said Rachel, "there's no way your friends can be real. How do you explain that no one else can talk to or see them?"

"I can't, yet," said Angel, "Except that they must be real. I know you say they aren't, but maybe that's just because you can't see them. What if I'm the only one who can? Just because you can't see or hear something, doesn't mean it's not real. Like, for instance, bacteria; we can't see it, or hear it, but we know it's real. If there were no microscopes, would you say that doesn't exist either?"

"That's Different," said Michael, "We can see what bacteria do without a microscope. There's clear evidence it exists. Can you provide any physical evidence that your ghosts are real?"

"Can you provide any that they're not?" asked Angel.

"Yes," said David, "There has been nothing unusual, to prove that there are ghosts. We can't see them, and there have been no events or otherwise to prove they do exist. They're just beliefs people have."

"There has been evidence," said Angel, "Me. I can see and hear them, and when I talk to them, they answer. And what about those things about demons and angels and stuff?"

"The mind is a powerful thing, and not well understood," said Michael, "When you believe something hard enough, it can seem so real, but it's not. People have believed in spiritual stuff for centuries, and often used it to explain things they don't understand. However, there is no evidence to support them. It's just a bunch of beliefs, and nothing more."

If there were someone else who could see David and Maria," asked Angel, "Would you believe me then?"

"It would make your story more plausible," said Michael.

"I've heard that someone in our family might be able to help," said Angel.

"Who?" asked Rachel, "Not your uncle Will. He's just crazy and not reality based. His so-called theories can't even be proven in any way."

"Speaking of whom," said Angel, "Is he getting married?"

"Yes he is," said Michael, "Why?"

"Will I ever get to meet his wife?" asked Angel.

"I certainly hope not," said Rachel, "You're confused enough as it is."

"If you did meet her, what would you say to her?" asked Michael.

"I would tell her and Uncle Will about David and Maria," said Angel, "I would see what they thought about them."

"That's enough about that," said Rachel, "You need to start grounding yourself in reality and stop pretending your imaginary friends are real. They are not real. Having your head in the clouds like this is very unproductive and unhealthy for you. If you keep this up, you won't be able to succeed in life and you'll miss out on a lot. Pretending never helped anyone to prepare for the real world, and things like college and a career. You do want to be successful in life, don't you?"

"Well, yes," said Angel.

"Then you need to stop pretending," said Rachel, "and ground yourself in reality. Reality says there is no such thing as ghosts."

"But I'm not pretending," insisted Angel, 'David and Maria have to be real. I can't believe that it's all just an imaginary thing. It's too real."

Michael decided to drop the subject for the time being, considering Angel was not about to be convinced. Rachel, on the other hand, decided to keep trying to convince Angel of what she saw as the truth.

"Angel," said Rachel, "If there really where ghosts, you wouldn't be able to see them. You see, the living can't see ghosts."

"But, I can," said Angel.

"No," said Rachel, "you think so because your mind is playing tricks on you."

Angel did not believe her mother or her father. She was sure beyond doubt that David and Maria were as real as she was.

"Then, why can't anyone else see them?" asked Rachel.

"I don't know," said Angel, "Maybe they aren't looking hard enough."

"Where are your friends now?" asked Rachel, trying a different approach.

Angel looked around the room, but neither David or Maria was there. She then started looking around the rest of the house for them. Rachel let her go, and waited for her to return. A couple of minutes later, Angel found David and Maria conversing in the kitchen. They had just finished when she entered, and she did not hear what they were talking about.

"David? Maria?" asked Angel, "Can you come with me? My mommy doesn't believe you are real, and I need to get her to see you."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said David.

"What do you mean?" asked Angel.

"Some things are best left a mystery," said Maria, "Like life after death."

"But Richey makes fun of me," complained Angel, "and mommy and daddy say you're just in my imagination."

"We know," said Maria, "but we think it's best this way."

"What if someone we know can help you?" asked Angel, "What then?"

"You know someone?" asked David.

"I'm not sure," said Angel, "and I don't think my parents want to discuss it, but I think my uncle might know something."

"We'll think about it," said Maria, "If someone can help, it might be worth people knowing about us."

"Yes," said David, "We'll see what happens, but for now, it's best to keep this a secret between us."

Angel made a frustrated sigh, then went back to the living room. She felt sad and frustrated as she sat on the couch. Even if she could prove David and Maria were real, she was not sure if she would be believed.

"No ghosts?" asked Rachel, "Where did they go?"

Angel suddenly got an idea.

"Can I talk to Uncle Will?" asked Angel, not answering her mother's last question.

"Absolutely not," said Rachel, "You're already confused enough. He'd only confuse you more. I don't want you talking to him."

Angel made a decision, then got up to talk with David and Maria.

When she found them, she hesitated, then approached.

"I'm sorry," Angel said to David and Maria, "but I've got to make Mommy and Daddy believe me. I'll make sure they don't treat you bad. I promise."

"We do need help," said Maria to David, "and if Angel and her family can help us, then I think we should give them a chance."

David thought it over for a moment, while Angel stood waiting for an answer.

"You're right," said David, "We should give them a chance."

"Thank you," said Angel.

"How are you going to go about making them believe?" asked David.

"I don't know, yet," said Angel, "but I'll figure out something."

Angel went back to the living room to try to convince her parents that her friends were real. She had not an idea of how she was going to do that, but she knew she had to try. Angel sat next to her mother on the couch. Her father was in his chair, and Richard was over a friend's house. They were watching the news, so Angel waited for a commercial before saying anything.

"I talked to David and Maria in the kitchen," said Angel, "They need our help."

"Angel," said Rachel, We agreed that your ghosts aren't real."

"No," said Angel, "you said they weren't. I never agreed. David and Maria are very real, and they need our help."

"There are no such things as ghosts, Angel," said Michael, firmly.

"I swear I'm telling the truth," said Angel, "And they're not in my imagination. I do know the difference."

"I these ghosts of yours were real," said Michael, "don't you think there would be other signs?"

"I thought you believed me," said Angel.

"I believe you believe these ghosts are real," said Michael, "but you have to understand they are only real to you."

"That's because you haven't seen them," said Angel, "but I'll find a way to prove it to you."

"Angel," said Rachel, tired of the subject, "You can't prove something that's not real. These ghosts are in your imagination. You can't just wish them into reality. Remember how we told you that your imagination can seem so real?"

"Yah, but-" started Angel.

"-Well," interrupted Rachel, "this is one of those times. I think it's time you were seen by someone."

"Like who?" asked Angel.

"Like someone who can help you understand that your imaginary friends are just that – imaginary."

"I don't need help," said Angel, "I know what's real and what's not. David and Maria need help. They're trapped and don't know why they're here."

"That's exactly why you're going to see a counselor," said Rachel, "This has to end somewhere, and the sooner, the better. Don't you agree, Michael?"

Michael hesitated, but felt Rachel was right.

"Your mother's right, Angel" said Michael, "This has to stop."

"But nothing's wrong with me," said Angel.

"Well," said Rachel, "we'll see."

Angel got up, frustrated.

"Someday you'll see I'm right," said Angel.

Angel went to her room and closed the door behind her. She felt frustrated and ignored by her parents. She could not understand why they were so stubborn and were refusing even to consider she might have been telling the truth. It was as if they had a mental block or something preventing them from being capable of doing so. She did not care for the fact they thought she was making it all up, liked even less that her parents thought she needed counseling. Richard was not helping the situation by making fun of her for talking to David and Maria.

Someday soon, thought Angel, I'll show them I'm not lying.

However, at the time, Angel did not have any physical evidence to prove David and Maria existed.

Unless her Uncle Will could help. Angel felt she had to talk to him, someway, somehow.

# Chapter 4

Two days passed. Richard would tease Angel every chance he got, and he was doing that at the time.

"Did you talk to your imaginary ghosts today, Freak?" taunted Richard.

"My name is Angel," she said, "and I've told you before, they're not imaginary."

"So you claim," said Richard, as he stood outside Angel's door, "I know what you're really up to."

"Yah," said Angel, "Trying to prove to Mommy and Daddy David and Maria are real, and not just to me."

"You're too stupid for that," said Richard, "You're so stupid, you couldn't prove you exist."

"Actually," said Angel, "I'm very smart for my age."

"You wish, Freak," said Richard, "You know, you're insulting real ghosts. In fact, if I were you, I'd be careful; they might start haunting you."

"David and Maria are real ghosts," said Angel, "and I wouldn't exactly call it haunting. In fact you better be careful, you might be the one haunted."

"By who?" asked Richard, "Stupid imaginary ghosts? Your so-called ghosts are so stupid, they couldn't haunt themselves."

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard," said Angel, getting annoyed.

"No," said Richard, "your ghost stories are the dumbest thing. You know, you could at least make them scary; at least then it might be believable, or at the very least entertaining."

"If I did that," said Angel," I'd be lying. David and Maria are friendly, not scary."

"Yah," said Richard, "but that's not believable. What's the difference if they're scary or not? You're lying anyway. Might as well make it entertaining, or at least make Mom and Dad nervous."

"I'm not lying," said Angel, "and I won't. David and Maria are nice people. I'm not going to make them to be monsters."

"Okay, smart-ass," said Richard, "Prove they're real. I bet your dumb-ass ghosts can't even touch anything."

"Duh," said Angel, as if it were obvious, "They're ghosts."

"I've seen those shows about real ghosts and real hauntings," said Richard, "and the way you describe your so-called ghosts is nothing like it. If your stupid pretend ghosts were real, why would they waste their time talking to you anyway? Oh, excuse me; you're the only one who can hear them. What a crock of shit. You couldn't hear ghosts if they did decide to waste their time and actually talk to you. You're too stupid for that."

Angel was sick of being insulted and belittled by her brother. She felt she had put up with it long enough.

"You're so stupid," continued Richard, "you can't even make up a decent ghost story. You're just a stupid, little freak who only wants to be the center of attention. All you care about is yourself. That's the truth; isn't it?"

"You wish," said Angel.

"No," said Richard, "I know."

Angel had enough. She picked up a nearby doll and threw it as hard as she could at Richard while calling him a liar.

Richard saw the doll coming, but could not dodge it in time. The doll hit him in the head, bounced over him and the railing behind him, landing on the stairs.

"Ow!" said Richard, when the doll hit him.

Angel felt satisfaction in hurting her brother, but at the same time afraid, knowing he would retaliate.

"Now I'm gonna rip the head off your stupid bear," threatened Richard.

Angel picked up a teacup on her table, seeing it was the nearest thing to her. She did not know exactly what she intended to do with it, but it seemed like a good weapon.

Richard approached Angel in a very threatening manner. Feeling the threat, Angel threw teacup at him. The teacup hit Richard ion the arm, and bounced to the floor.

Richard ignored the teacup and went straight for Angel. Angel went to grab a chair, but was too late. Richard had already reached her, and he grabbed her by the arm. Having a grip of her, Richard pulled Angel around, and then threw her to the floor.

Angel fell on her stomach as Richard took her angel-bear from her bed.

"Give her back!" yelled Angel, as she got up.

"Stop yelling," said Richard, as he shoved his sister back down.

Richard went out to the hall to taunt Angel as she got back up.

"You know what I'm going to do to this thing?" asked Richard, "I'm going to feed it to Sassy. But, first, I'm going to rip its stupid little arms off; then I'm going to rips its legs off; then, I'm going to rip its head off. Then, I'm going to feed Sassy this ugly thing one piece at a time. Oh, I'll pull the stuffing out too, so it'll be easier for to digest, but I'm sure she'll like that too."

The anger inside Angel was enough to make her start crying.

"Aww…" Teased Richard, "The little baby freak is crying; poor freak."

Richard laughed at Angel and went into his room with her bear. Angel ran after him, trying to get it back, but Richard shoved her down to the floor and held the bear out of her reach.

"You want this bear back?" taunted Richard.

"Yes," said Angel, "So give it back."

"Not so fast," said Richard, "I want you to beg for it."

Angel hesitated. She did not want to have to beg for what was rightfully hers, but she also did not want her brother to destroy it. She felt the sooner she had the bear back, the safer it'd be. She debated for a moment on what to do.

"I said, beg!" demanded Richard, being impatient.

Angel finally gave in.

"Can I please have Angel back?" pleaded angel in a sweet tone.

Though she was furious at her brother, Angel was more concerned about the safety of her bear. Therefore, for the time being, she complied with her brother's demands.

"On your knees," commanded Richard.

Angel swallowed the fury inside her, then slowly got on her knees. At the time, she felt she had no other choice, except to lose her precious bear.

Angel had the bear since she was a baby, and had grown quite attached to it since. Sometimes she would treat it as if it was alive. She loved her Angel bear and would do almost anything to protect her.

"Now, beg nicely," commanded Richard, enjoying humiliating his sister.

"Please, Richey," begged Angel, sweetly, "Please can I have Angel back?"

"Hmmm…" said Richard, pretending to think about the answer, "No."

"That's it!" exclaimed, Angel losing her temper.

Angel suddenly got up and charged at Richard, hitting him any way she could. Richard fended off the attack, then hit angel hard on the side of her head, stunning her for a moment. Richard took advantage of this, and shoved his sister back down to the floor.

David tried to verbally interfere with the fight by yelling at Richard, but was not heard by anyone but Maria. Angel was too focused on Richard to hear David. When David physically tried to stop the fight, he just passed through Angel and Richard. Maria had tried to get Angel's bear from Richard, but without success. The results had been the same as David's, and they both felt helpless to do anything about the situation.

Angel stood up in front of her brother, who was now back in the hallway, with his room to Angel's back. She had lost control of herself, and it made her feel helpless and embarrassed. It was a feeling she did not like.

Stop giving in to the anger, Angel thought to herself, as she regained full control over herself.

"That was very naughty of you," said Richard, "I was thinking of changing my mind and giving you back your pathetic bear, but now, you can say goodbye to it."

Richard was holding Angel's bear over his head with one hand, with the other ready to fend off any attack from Angel.

Or so he thought.

Angel suddenly and very quickly went up to Richard and kicked him as hard as she could between his legs.

The results were a lot better than she expected. Richard's first reaction was surprise and shock, quickly followed by stiffening up to pain. He dropped Angel's bear, and then fell to his knees, holding his crotch where Angel had kicked him, and moaning in pain. He then fell to the floor, cursing incomprehensibly.

Rachel had come upstairs to investigate the commotion just in time to witness Angel kick Richard. She immediately went over to Richard. Angel took the opportunity to rescue her bear. She picked up her bear and brought her to her room. She then closed the door, and held Angel close to her, secretly swearing to herself that Richard would never get her bear again.

Meanwhile, Rachel was trying to see if Richard was okay.

"Rich?" asked Rachel, "Are you okay?"

Richard nodded as he sat up.

"Can you stand up?" asked Rachel.

Richard slowly got to his feet, still in a lot of pain.

"It's okay," Angel told her bear in the meantime, "Richey can't hurt you now."

At that time, Angel's mother called for her, so she put her angel bear on her bed, and went to the hallway, closing the door behind her. Richard was starting to recover from being kicked.

"What happened?" asked Rachel.

"She came to me demanding I play with her," said Richard, "Then she shoved her stupid angel-bear in my hands. I told her I didn't want to play, so she started to yell. I went to give the bear back to her, and she just kicked me."

"Why is there a doll on the stairs?" asked Rachel.

"That?" asked Richard, "She threw that at me to get my attention. That's one of the reasons I didn't want to play with her in the first place."

"You're a liar!" Angel said in anger.

It was bad enough that Richard had tormented her, now he was making it worse by lying about it, and making the whole incident look like it was Angel's fault.

"He came up to me," continued Angel, "and started making fun of me, asking if I talked to my friends today. He called them stupid, and said I was stupid and making them up. I got upset and threw my doll at him. Then, he came in my room, pushed me to the floor, and took Angel from my bed. Then he threatened to tear her apart and feed her to Sassy!"

"Stop lying," said Richard, "You know, you've been a lot of trouble to everyone lately. Mom, she's just making things up again, like she does with her pretend ghosts."

"I'm not making anything up!" insisted Angel, "Not this or David, or Maria. I swear it's the truth."

Angel felt her self-control slipping away again. The last thing she wanted to do was act out, but her emotions were overwhelming.

Maria was very upset over what was happening. She and David both felt helpless to do anything about it.

"There must be something we can do," said Maria.

"We tried," said David, "but I guess it was too late to get Angel's attention, and no one else can hear us; not to mention we just pass through everything and everyone we try to touch. If only there was a way – there must be a way. This kind of treatment is wrong."

"And she's getting blamed for the whole incident," said Maria, "I mean, sure it was wrong for her to throw things and kick her brother, but he did provoke her."

Maria tried to grab a hold of Rachel's arm to get her attention, but passed through her instead.

"I don't understand it," said Maria, "We were moving all that stuff before."

"Maybe this is different," said David.

"Angel," said Rachel, "you know better than to lie. And you know you aren't to be throwing things, especially at people. You also know better than to hit people. You're grounded for the rest of the weekend. Now, go get your bear and apologize to your brother."

"Why?" asked Angel, feeling she was being treated unfairly, "After what he did, he should apologize first."

"Angel," said Rachel, "don't argue, just do it."

"But-" started Angel.

"-Do you want to be punished more?" interrupted Rachel.

"No," said Angel, "It's just that Richey got what he deserved. I'll say sorry if he does."

"Yah," said Richard, "except I didn't do anything wrong."

"Yes you did," said Angel, firmly.

"No I didn't," said Richard, "you started the whole thing."

"That's a lie, and you know it!" said Angel, with anger.

Angel was getting frustrated because she felt her mother was not even listening to her, which was partly true. Rachel heard what Angel said, but believed Richard.

"Angel, enough!" said Rachel, " Richard, go get your father."

Richard went to get his father while Angel stood her ground. She felt mad enough to defy God himself, though he would have given her fairer treatment, and she had more respect for God than for her mother. A couple of minutes later, Michael arrived followed by Richard. The few minutes it took to come get her father gave Angel the opportunity to cool off a bit and regain control of herself. She was now feeling less defiant, and more cooperative.

"What's going on here?" asked Michael when he got upstairs.

"Angel threw her doll at Richard and kicked him," said Rachel, "She says he started the fight, but I seriously doubt that. Richard has been minding his own business, and Angel tends to start trouble with him."

"Where and why did she hit him?" asked Michael.

"She kicked me between the legs because I wouldn't play with her," said Richard.

"Angel!" said Michael, surprised, "Never kick someone there."

"Sorry," said Angel, "but I didn't know what else to do. He was teasing me bad, and he took Angel and wouldn't give her back. Then he threatened to rip her apart and feed her to Sassy. I tried to get her back, but he wouldn't give her back even after I begged for her. I was so mad, I just kicked him."

"That's not even close to the truth," said Richard.

"Yes it is the truth," said Angel.

"Angel," said Michael, "go get your bear."

Angel went to her room and got her bear while Michael picked up the doll on the stairs.

"Is this the doll?" asked Michael, when he came back.

"Yep," said Richard, "and she threw that teacup too."

Michael picked up the teacup from the floor as Angel came out of her room with her bear.

"Give me the bear," said Michael.

"But I didn't throw her," complained Angel.

"Regardless," said Michael, "you still kicked your brother because of it. Until we have a meeting, the bear will be taken."

"But, I didn't throw her," repeated Angel, holding her bear close to her.

"Angel," said Michael, firmly, "Don't argue. Give me the bear."

Angel reluctantly gave up her bear to her father.

"Good," said Michael, "Now, both of you are to go to your rooms and stay there until your mother or I get you."

"Can I please have Angel back?" pleaded Angel to her father.

"Not now," said Michael, "we're going to have a meeting first."

"Can we have the meeting now?" asked Angel.

"We’ll have the meeting later," said Michael, "now, go to your room.

Angel started to protest, but changed her mind. She had more respect for her father than she did for her mother. Instead, she went in her room and slammed the door closed. Michael and Rachel decided not to do anything about the slamming of her door that time. Meanwhile, Richard had gone to his room, closed the door, and put some music on.

Later that day, a family meeting was prepared. Michael got the children while Rachel set up the living room. When everyone was seated, Michael was the first to speak.

Michael stood and said, "This meeting will come to order."

He hesitated to be sure he got everyone's attention.

"The purpose of this meeting," continued Michael, "is to address some of the issues between Angel and Richard, more specifically, the fighting and arguing. In addition, this meeting is to attempt to bring light and truth to Angel's recent negative behavior. Everyone will have an opportunity to talk. There is no speaking out of turn, and no interrupting the speaker. If you wish to speak, raise your hand, and when you are recognized, you may speak. This is called taking the floor. The person speaking must stand, and when it's someone else's turn, they must sit down. If you are not speaking, you will be sitting and listening. Are there any questions?"

No one spoke or raised their hand.

"Good," said Michael, "As this is not our first family meeting, I expect this to go smoothly. Now, who would like to speak first?"

Rachel was the first to raise her hand. She was followed by Richard and Angel.

"The floor recognizes Rachel," said Michael, and then sat down in his chair.

Rachel stood and faced the family. She felt all eyes on her, and felt comfortable.

"First," said Rachel, "I'd like to address Angel's behavior. It has become unacceptable. In most cases when a fight breaks out between her and Richard, she is the instigator. She takes things too far. Today is just one more example of this behavior. I'm not saying Richard is completely innocent, but Angel does tend to instigate quite often. She then tries to play the victim when all Richard was doing was minding his own business. Disciplining Angel is becoming increasingly difficult, and I do try.

"Rich loves his little sister, but she needs to understand that he's twelve, and not interested in the same things she is. That and he's a boy. Boys generally don't want to play girl's games. I'm not saying Richard shouldn't compromise a bit, but Angel can't expect him to constantly entertain her either.

"Angel is constantly trying to be the center of attention, which is why I think she's taken her imaginary friends so far. I also think that's why she's being so difficult."

"That's all I have to say on the matter."

With that, Rachel sat down on the couch. Richard was next to stand up and take the floor.

He stood and said, "Mom's right. I do love Angel. She's the only sister I have, but she can be a pain – literally. I don't know why she does the things she does. One of the reasons I don't play with her is she acts like a brat most of the time.

"Like today; she throws a doll at my head then demands I play with her. She practically forced her bear in my hands, and when I told her no, and tried to give it back, she kicked me. I don't know what to do. I don't want to spend time with her if she's going to be a brat. Not only that, but she's five and a girl. I don't want to hang with a five-year-old girl- even if she is my little sister. That's all I have to say about the matter."

Finished, Richard sat down. Angel was feeling like she was being ganged-up on. She was the victim, and she was being made out to be a villain. It was true she should not have kicked her brother, and she felt bad about that, but her mother was not even there. How could they do this to her? She felt that even if she did try to defend herself, she was outnumbered. It would be her word against her mother's and Richard's word.

"Angel," said Michael, after Richard sat down, "do you have anything to say?"

For a moment, Michael really thought she might say something important. She looked like she wanted to; but instead, she stood up and ran to her room, slamming the door behind her. Rachel shook her head in disappointment, as if she expected Angel to do what she did.

Michael felt there was something wrong with Angel. Even if she was the spoiled brat she was portrayed to be, something was not right with the way she ran off like that. She seemed to be genuinely upset, as if something was eating at Angel, and Michael felt he needed to find out what it was.

Michael got up and followed Angel to her room. When he got there, he knocked on her door and waited a couple of moments for a response. Since he did not get a response, he slowly opened the door.

At first, he did not see Angel, but after carefully looking around her room, he spotted her in a corner. She was almost completely buried in her stuffed animals and dolls - mostly her stuffed animals. Angel was holding her favorite doll, which she had named Cassandra, and was talking to her.

"I won't tell anyone," Angel told Cassandra, "I made a promise, and besides bad things will happen if I do."

"Angel?" Michael gently called.

Angel looked up at her father, and he went to her.

"What's going on?" asked Michael, "and don't tell me 'nothing'."

Angel did not respond. She just sat in her stuffed animals, scared and unwilling to say anything. She did not want to lie to her father; in fact, she wanted to tell him everything that was happening to her. However, her brother had threatened to harm her or her angel-bear if she did tell, and she was afraid he would do what he promised.

"Has someone been doing or saying something to you?" asked Michael.

"I swore I wouldn't tell," said Angel, by accident.

"Who did you swear to?" asked Michael, "and what is it you can't say?"

"I can't tell you," said Angel.

"Why not?" asked Michael.

"Because Angel will be destroyed if I do," said Angel, "or worse."

"I'll make sure nothing happens to your bear," assured Michael.

"How?" asked Angel.

"I have my ways," said Michael, "I can make sure no one hurts you or your bear."

"Richey'll get me when you aren't around,"

Angel immediately covered her mouth with her hand to prevent herself from saying anything else. Michael was beginning to put the pieces together. Angel's negative behavior was a result of her holding something serious inside herself. Richard must have been doing something or have said something real bad to her, then made her swear not to say anything to anybody.

Michael thought of the possibilities, and felt a chill run up his spine. Richard did not seem like a bad kid; in fact, until then, Michael thought he was a good kid. Now, he did not know what to think.

Whatever the problem was, Michael could tell it was tearing Angel apart inside. He felt she would either have to talk about it and deal with it, or her behavior could potentially get worse.

"Has Richard been threatening you?" asked Michael.

Angel did not respond, and Michael took her silence as a yes.

"Angel," said Michael, as he knelt to her eye level, "you know you can tell me. I can make sure Richard doesn't hurt you or your bear."

Angel looked away from her father, not willing or ready to tell him about what Richard was doing to her. Michael realized Angel was not going to tell him what he needed to know.

"Angel," prodded Michael, "if it's that bad, you need to tell someone."

Angel looked down, still silent.

"Well," said Michael, giving up for the time, "if you're not going to tell me what's going on, I can't help you."

Angel opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but then closed it and remained silent.

"Very well, then," said Michael, as he got up, "come downstairs so we can finish."

Michael waited while Angel got out from her corner. He then escorted her downstairs to the living room. When she got there, Angel sat down on the couch next to her mother.

"Okay," said Michael, when everyone was quiet again, "this meeting will now resume. Does anyone else have anything to add?"

Richard raised his hand.

"Yes, Rich?" asked Michael, flatly.

"I have one question," said Richard, "Did Angel have anything to say? I mean in her defense."

"Not yet," said Michael, looking at Angel, "Angel, do you have anything to add?"

"No," Angel softly said.

"Are you sure?" asked Michael, "How about you tell your side of the story?"

Angel had already decided on what she was going to say. She felt it was safer and healthier for her to go along with what her brother said had happened.

"There's really not much to tell," said Angel.

"Well," said Michael, "let's hear it. If you have something to say, now's the time to say it."

"Well," said, Angel, "It was like this. You see, Richey and me were arguing and I lost my temper."

"Who started the argument?" asked Michael.

"I don't remember," said Angel, "It was over something stupid. I got mad and threw my doll at him. He took Angel, and I kicked him. That's all."

Michael waited a short moment to give Angel the opportunity to add anything else to her statement. He then continued.

"Very well," said Michael, "Angel, since you have admitted to throwing the doll at your brother, it will be taken for a week. The bear in still under question, but considering everything said and how much it means to you, it will be returned. However, whether or not you keep it, will depend on your behavior. Now, I want the both of you to apologize to each other."

"Sorry, Angel," said Richard, sounding sincere, but not being sincere.

"Sorry," said Angel, sincerely.

"Very good," said Michael, as he gave Angel back her bear, "Now, this is not to happen again. Angel, no more throwing things or hitting your brother. If Richard does something to you that you don't like, tell your mother or me. Richard, you need to be nice to your sister. She's eight years younger than you are. The both of you need to get along, and if you can't, stay away from each other. Do you both understand?"

"Yes, Dad," said Richard.

"Yes, Daddy," said Angel, at the same time as Richard.

"Does anyone have any questions, comments, or further concerns?" asked Michael.

No one spoke or raised their hand.

"Then I motion to end this meeting," said Michael, after a moment, "Anyone second that?"

The rest of the family raised their hand.

"Then, this meeting is adjourned," said Michael.

The children went to do their own thing, while Michael and Rachel fixed the living room back to normal.

The rest of the day went by without incident, however the next day, in the back yard; Richard decided to grill Angel to see if she said anything in private to their father.

First, Richard called Angel over the where he was by the tree.

"Yes?" asked Angel, when she got there.

The yard was about an acre square, and had a few trees spread out over it. One of them was next to a fence, and there was nothing but forest behind that.

Richard was at one of the far trees, where remnants of an old tree house stood.

"I've got something to ask you," Richard said.

"Okay," said Angel, not entirely trusting the situation.

"When you and dad were alone yesterday during the meeting," said Richard, "You were up there for a while, and dad came back, I don't know – different. Did you tell him anything that might cause this?"

Angel blinked a couple of times, not knowing what Richard was getting at.

"I don't know what you mean," said Angel after a couple seconds of thought.

"He's been different towards me," said Richard, "Like he's suspicious or something."

"I'm sorry, Richey," said Angel, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll bet you don't," said Richard sarcastically.

Richard, suddenly grabbed Angel by the arm, and pulled her around, so her arm was behind her back. Angel started to struggle, but Richard twisted her arm to hurt her. He was in a good position break it with ease, if he chose to.

"Ow!" exclaimed Angel.

"Keep fighting me," said Richard, "and I'll break it."

Angel tried to turn around, but Richard only pulled up harder on her arm. To Angel, it felt as if he could break it, and it was her dominate left arm.

"Ow!" Angel yelled in pain.

"Stop fighting," warned Richard.

Angel calmed down, and stopped resisting her brother.

"That's better," said Richard, letting up on some of the pressure on Angel's arm.

"Now," said Richard, "I want to know exactly what you told dad yesterday."

"I didn't tell him anything," said Angel.

Richard pulled up slightly on Angel's arm, and she let in a gasp.

"What if I don't believe you?" asked Richard.

"I – I," stammered Angel, "I didn't tell him anything. I swear it. Please don't break my arm. I'm telling the truth."

"Then what took so long?" asked Richard, "and why did you run off like that?"

"I don't know-" started Angel, before Richard jerked up slightly on her arm

"-Ow!" exclaimed Angel, feeling the pain.

"I don't know is not an answer," said Richard.

"I meant," said Angel, "I just did. I felt scare, so I went to my room and hid. Daddy came up, and asked me questions, but I didn't tell him anything. After a while, he just told me to come back downstairs, and I did. I swear that's the truth."

Richard hesitated. Angel sounded convincing, but he wanted to be sure.

"Then why is daddy acting strange toward me?" demanded Richard.

"I don't- I mean I'm not sure," said Angel.

Richard hesitated for another couple of seconds.

"You better be telling the truth," warned Richard, "or I will hurt you so bad, it'll take months for you to feel right again."

"I am telling the truth," said Angel.

Richard shoved Angel forward, while letting go of her arm. Angel stumbled a bit, but did not fall.

"You better be," said Richard, "Now get the hell outa here."

Angel went back to the house, holding her arm. If anyone would ask, she would tell them she fell. After a little while, her arm stopped hurting, and she resumed her normal activities for the day. No one else noticed her arm, and Richard had not left any bruises or marks to be noted.

And so a couple of days passed. One afternoon there was a peculiar knock at the front door. Being his day off, and being at home, Michael answered the door and was surprised at who he saw there.

"Will?" asked Michael, not quite believing he saw whom he saw.

Will was Michael's younger brother. The two had not seen each other since shortly after Angel was born. Will had moved to Maine, and though they had kept in contact, they had not seen each other since.

The reason why they had not seen each other was primarily that Rachel and Will did not see things the same way. Rachel was strongly opinionated, and Will had some beliefs in the paranormal, that Rachel strongly disapproved of.

Though Will was considered to be somewhat of an expert on the subject, Rachel and Michael did not believe in the paranormal. Rachel was more against the subject than Michael, and did not like Will because of his strong belief in it.

When Will met Victoria, his now fiancé who was a true expert on the subject, he moved to Maine to live with her. The two had originally met at a convention and soon fell in love. Since then they had been dating, and now were engaged.

Rachel thought both Will and his fiancé were crazy, especially Victoria who could also communicate with spirits, though differently than Angel did. Despite the fact that neither Rachel nor Michael believed in the paranormal, Michael accepted his brother the way he was. He did not agree with his beliefs, but accepted him anyway. Rachel, on the other hand, was intolerant of Will's beliefs, and thought he and his fiancé were in need of some serious help.

"Mike!" said Will, then gave him a big, brotherly embrace, "Good to see you."

"Good to see you too," said Michael, letting his brother in the house, "Come in."

Will entered the house just as Rachel came to see who was at the door. She was not pleased when she saw who it was.

"Will?" said Rachel, when she saw him.

"Rachel," greeted Will, calmly and happy to see her.

A short awkward silence followed.

"So," said Michael, before things got too awkward, "What brings you down here?"

"I'm on my way to Florida to marry," said Will, "I thought I'd stop by and invite everyone down."

"Who's the lucky lady?" asked Michael.

"You remember Victoria, right?" asked Will.

"Isn't she the reason you moved to Maine?" asked Michael, "and the one who thought she could talk to spirits?"

"Yes," said Will, "and she can."

"You're marrying her?" asked Michael, a bit surprised.

"Dare I ask why?" asked Rachel, not so surprised.

"Because," said Will, "we love each other and want to spend our lives together."

"How long have you two been together for?" asked Michael.

"Almost five years," said Will, "We figured it was time to make it forever."

"How long are you going to be in town for?" asked Michael.

"A few days," said Will, "I figured I'd spend some time with family before going down to Florida. Of course, you'll be at the wedding; right?"

"I don't know," said Rachel, "This is so last-second, and we're not sure if we can make it."

"We'll talk about it later," said Michael, "Where are you staying?"

"At a motel," said Will, "It's only for a few days, and no trouble for me."

At that time, Angel and Richard came into the room. They were wondering who was at the door and in the house.

"Rich!" said Will, happy to see his nephew.

"Uncle Will?" asked Rich, not sure if he was who he thought he was,

Will gave Richard a quick hug.

"You've grown," said Will, then turned to Angel.

"And you must be Angel," said Will, "The last time I saw you, you were just a baby. I'm your Uncle Will."

"Hello, glad to meet you," said Angel, and gave her uncle a quick hug.

The family went to the living room to sit and talk.

"Where are you from?" asked Angel.

"Originally? Right here," said Will, "But I moved to Maine after I met Victoria. That was shortly after you were born. Now, we're moving to Florida."

"I thought you were just getting married there," said Michael, "Why the move?"

"Well," said Will, "Victoria has to move for family reasons, and I figured I'd go with her and we could get married while we were there."

"Does her family know about her?" asked Rachel.

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"You know," said Rachel, "her illness."

"Victoria isn't ill," said Will.

"Oh," said Rachel, "So she's been cured?"

"What do you mean 'cured'?" asked Will.

"Cured of her illness," said Rachel.

Will had no idea what Rachel was getting at. Victoria did not have any illnesses that Will was aware of. Rachel, on the other hand, thought Victoria was seriously mentally ill because she claimed she could talk to spirits.

"What illness?" asked Will.

"She doesn't still think she can talk the dead anymore, does she?" asked Rachel.

"That's not an illness," said Will, "It's a gift; and yes she still can talk to spirits. In fact the gift runs in her family, and somewhat in ours."

"Cool," said Angel, "I can talk to spirits too. In fact I see and hear them, well, at least two of them anyway."

"Angel," said Rachel, "What do we know about lying?"

"Not to," said Angel, "But I'm not lying."

"It's not nice to say things that aren't true," said Rachel, "especially when there's company."

Angel decided to drop the subject for the time being, but planned to talk with her uncle about it later when her mother wasn't around. If this were something that ran in her family, it would have meant she was not crazy. She also wanted to know more about the subject. For the time, though, she would remain quiet about it.

Will took note of the conversation and planned to have a private conversation with Angel when he could. He could tell by her tone, that Rachel would not discuss the subject, or even let Angel discuss the subject.

"You know," said Michael, "since you're staying in town for a few days, why don't you stay here with us?"

"Michael," said Rachel before Will could answer, "can we talk – now?"

"Sure," said Michael, then to Will, "Make yourself at home."

Will and the children stayed in the living room, while Rachel led Michael to the kitchen to talk.

"So," said Will, as he sat on the couch, "how are things here?"

"Good," said Angel.

"Well," said Richard, "pretty much."

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"I don't know if I should be telling you this," said Richard, "but maybe you can help."

"Go on," said Will.

"Well," said Richard, "Angel has been acting up a lot lately and everyone's concerned she may be getting worse."

"What kinds of things does she do?" asked Will.

"She's destructive," said Richard, "she steals things, whines when she can't get what she wants, and she hits me. Just the other day she kicked me because I wouldn't play with her. Basically, she's been acting like a brat."

"How are your parents handling this?" asked Will.

"I don't know," said Richard, "I mean, Mom tries to punish her, but Dad pretty much spoils her."

"It's not like that," said Angel.

"What's it like then?" Will asked Angel.

"I try to be good," said Angel, "but sometimes I have no choice."

"We all have choices," said Will, "We can choose to do good, or we can choose to do bad. We can choose what we know is right, and if you're not sure, ask your parents."

"That's not always true," said Angel, "Sometimes we have to make the wrong decisions for a better life, and there're some things we can't tell our parents."

"What are you talking about?" asked Richard, "No one makes you do wrong. That's something you do on your own."

Richard then addressed his uncle.

"This is another thing she does," said Richard, "she makes up things and expects everyone to believe her, no matter how ridiculous it is."

"You know," said Will, "sometimes there's other reasons why someone might behave so-called badly."

"Yah," said Richard, "she's spoiled. Everyone's always spoiled her since she was born. Mom, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa; everyone. And the worse of it is she takes advantage of it."

"I don't think I'm spoiled," said Angel, "Honestly, I try to be good, but sometimes I really have no choice."

"If you feel forced to misbehave, maybe you should tell someone," said Will.

"I can't," said Angel.

"Why not?" asked Will.

"I just can't," said Angel, lowering her eyes and head.

"I see," said Will, not quite understanding what Angel was getting at.

It was not helping matters that Angel was being vague at what she was saying, but Will had the impression Angel felt she could not say what she wanted to. He also took a mental not of that. He decided to observe and judge for himself whether Angel was spoiled or not.

"Why are you moving to Florida?" asked Angel, changing the subject.

"To marry Victoria," said Will, noting the sudden change in conversation.

"Why doesn't she come up here to marry you instead of you going down there?" asked Angel.

"Actually," said Will, "We're both moving down there. Victoria's family is going through some things, and we need to be there for them. It's only for a little while. When things are settled, Victoria and I are going to move to California."

Angel thought for a moment, then decided it was a good time to bring up David and Maria. However, as she started to, Michael and Rachel came back from their talk in the kitchen.

"Will," said Michael, "Rachel and I have discussed it and we'd love for you to stay here while you're in town. You can have the spare room."

"I wouldn't want to impose," said Will, "I can stay at the motel."

"You're not imposing," said Michael.

"Have you already paid for the motel?" asked Rachel.

"Just for last night," said Will, "I'm paying by the night, since I won't be but a couple of days."

"You're more than welcome to stay here," said Michael, "At least it'd be cheaper – you wouldn't have to pay for a room, and the children haven't seen you in almost five years."

"Please stay with us," said Angel, "We'd really like it if you would."

"Only if all agree," said Will, looking directly at Rachel.

"It's alright," said Rachel, "You can stay."

"Okay," said Will, "Then I'll stay here."

"Yay!" exclaimed Angel.

"Cool," said Richard.

Later that day, Angel tried to talk to her uncle Will, but things were busy with him settling in and with dinner and the rest of the family. Angel came up with a plan to talk to him before she went to bed that night.

"Uncle Will?" angel asked when it was her bedtime.

"Yes Angel?" said Will, "What can I do for you?"

"Could you tuck me in?" asked Angel.

This was unusual for Angel. She would normally tuck herself in bed at night, but Will did not know that. Angel's plan was to talk to him while saying goodnight.

"Okay," said Will, then followed Angel to her room.

When they got there, the covers had already been neatly pulled back. Angel got in bed and lay down letting her uncle tuck her in. As he did, she began to ask him her questions.

"Uncle will?" asked Angel, "Did you really mean that stuff about talking to ghosts and stuff?"

Will thought for a moment to recall the conversation.

"Oh, that?" asked Will, "Yep. She really can. And I hear you may be able to also."

"I think so," said Angel.

"What makes you say that?" asked Will.

"Well," said Angel with hesitation, "This might sound crazy, but I can talk to two of them. They live in this house, and their names are David and Maria. I know, it's crazy, but I really can see and talk to them. Everyone says it's just my imagination, but I don't think so."

Will listened carefully, assessing the situation.

"I've been talking to them for a while now," continued Angel, "and no matter what I say or do, Mommy and Daddy keep saying I'm just making them up, or I have an overactive imagination. Richey makes fun of me because of them, and I don't know what to believe."

"Well," said Will, "there are ways to test these things. For example, do David and Maria look like anyone you know?"

"Not really," said Angel, "I mean, I didn't know them when they were living, but they do look like a picture I saw once. It was of a couple at their wedding. I'm more than sure it's the same people. I also hear they used to live here, but something bad happened to them. I'm pretty sure they died. Do you think they came back here, and are trapped here?"

"Trapped?" asked Will, "Why do you say trapped?"

"Because," said Angel, "they once told me they can't leave, even if they wanted to. I think they tried, but couldn't. I don't want them to leave, if they're real, and it seems they can't anyway."

"Interesting," said Will, "What else have they told you?"

"Lots," said Angel, "We talk all the time. I can see them almost like I see you now, and can hear them plain as I can here you. They're real nice and we're good friends."

"I see," said Will, "Well, I can tell you this; I'll be willing to bet these ghosts of yours – David and Maria – are probably real and not just part of your imagination. From what you tell me, and what I've seen, it seems you have a very special gift, though I've never heard of it emerging in someone so young."

"Is that a good thing?" asked Angel.

"It could be," said Will.

Angel felt a level of relief, but still wondered about a few things.

"Mommy says you are crazy because you say you can talk to ghosts too," said Angel, "Does this mean I'm crazy?"

Will shook his head in disbelief. "No, Angel," he said gently, "You're not crazy. The reason your mother thinks so, is because she doesn't understand and is not willing to either."

"Oh," said Angel, "That's good to know, but if David and Maria are real, how come I'm the only one who can talk to them?"

"I'm sure you're not the only one," said Will, "It's just you're the only one here who can. You see, you have a gift to see into what is called the metaphysical plane, or loosely put, the spiritual world. Most people either can't or won't see into this world. Most who have the gift are usually suppressed by others through medication or therapy. They're considered to be crazy, or mentally ill."

"Like Victoria?" asked Angel.

"Yes, like Victoria," said Will, "You understand that these people aren't really sick, though. Oh, there are those who think they talk to spirits, but are actually sick, but some aren't."

"So, how can you tell?" asked Angel.

"It takes an expert in the field to tell," said Will, "That and, as in your case, younger gifted children don't have those kind of illnesses."

"So, if I'm not crazy," said Angel, "and it's not just my imagination, then that can only mean that David and Maria are real."

"Exactly," said Will, "Why don't you tell me about David and Maria? I'd like to know more about them."

Angel knew deep inside herself that her uncle was speaking the truth. It seemed to her he was the only one who knew what she was talking about, and it felt good to know that David and Maria were as real as she thought.

"Okay," said Angel, feeling safe, "Their names are David and Maria Loft. They're just like living people, except they don't eat or drink and they can't touch things or people. They just pass through as if it's not even there. I seem to be the only one who can talk to them. Am I weird because of that?"

"No, Angel," said Will, "You're not weird, no matter what anyone else says. You're not weird, or strange, or crazy, or anything else they might call you. You are, in fact, very special. You have a special gift that only a few possess. You must never think of it as wrong or as a sickness. You should embrace it and explore it."

"You're the first person that ever said that to me," said Angel.

"Really?" said Will, "That's unfortunate."

"I just wish I could get Mommy and Daddy to believe me," said Angel, "If I could-"

Angel suddenly stopped, realizing her mother was at the door, listening. She had come upstairs to check in on Angel and had overheard the last part of the conversation. She was not happy, and looked very upset.

"Will!" scolded Rachel, "How dare you? How could you encourage such things? It's bad enough you believe in that garbage; we don't need you instilling it on Angel. She's very impressionable, and now you tell her it's a gift? She doesn't need those lies."

"It's not garbage," argued Angel, "It's very real. You should listen to-"

"-You know better than that," interrupted Rachel, "You know it's fantasy. Now, go to sleep. No more talking about pretend ghosts."

Rachel turned to Will, and said, "Come with me."

Rachel left the room.

"Good night, Angel," said Will, as he left, "We'll talk again."

"Good night," said Angel.

Rachel escorted Will out of Angel's room, closing the door behind her. She then escorted him downstairs to the living room.

"Tell me," said Will, on the way down, "Why do you shut her up like that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Rachel, "Angel doesn't need that sort of fantasy; she needs reality. She's confused, and you just made it worse."

Michael and Richard were watching Television when they got to the living room.

"Richard," said Rachel, "Go upstairs to your room. I need to talk with your father for a while."

"Am I in trouble?" asked Richard.

"No," said Rachel, "I just need to discuss something with your father."

"Okay," said Richard, then went to his room.

"Michael," said Rachel, when she was sure Richard was out of earshot, "we need to talk."

Will decided it was a good time to leave the room, and went to use the bathroom.

"So I figured," said Michael, "What's on your mind?"

Rachel sat next to Michael on the couch.

"I overheard your brother and Angel talking," said Rachel, "They were discussing her imaginary friends. Can you believe he actually suggested to her that they're real?"

"No kidding," said Michael, not particularly surprised.

"No, I'm not," said Rachel, "He suggested she should look into it, and even told her she has some sort of gift because of it. Honey, I don't want him around the children anymore. He's a very bad influence, and is only feeding into Angel's delusions."

"I don't think he's that harmful," said Michael, "but I will talk to him about it and keep an eye on him while he's here. I don't see him intentionally harming the children, but he is strong in his beliefs, and his intentions may be good, but I can see it doing harm."

Rachel thought for a brief moment. She felt Will was not a physical danger, and he seemed kind, but as long as he was going to be talking about his beliefs as if they were real, she saw him as being harmful.

"I just don't want him pushing his delusions on our children," said Rachel.

"I know," said Michael, "and I will talk to him about it."

"Thank you," said Rachel.

A few minutes later, Will returned from the bathroom. He sat down in the living room, having a lot on his mind. He was concerned about Angel's situation, with her gift and no one believing they were real. He was also concerned that she was being portrayed to be something she was not.

Though Will felt it was not his place to say anything about these concerns, he felt something needed to be done before it was too late to do anything at all for Angel.

Michael spoke before Will could make any decisions on what to do.

"Will," said Michael, "We need to talk about something important."

"Okay," said Will, "I'm listening."

"Rachel and I," started Michael, "don't think you should be discussing your beliefs about the paranormal with the children. We believe that it's only going to be harmful; especially for Angel, who is already so confused. I don't know where she got the idea from, but telling her something's real that is not is not healthy for her."

"I agree," said Will, "which is why I tell her the truth. Telling her otherwise is indeed harmful."

Michael hesitated. He was not expecting such a direct response.

"To you the paranormal is real," said Michael, "but we know it is not real. Angel needs to know the same."

"David and Maria are very real to Angel," said Will, "and who's to say they aren't? She's awful young to have an illness, and the way she describes them is very much like they are alive and real. Maybe you should listen to her more closely, and with an open mind instead of automatically saying she's just imagining them. Maybe you could learn something from her; just a thought, I'm not telling you how to raise her."

"And you must understand that we don't believe in ghosts and the paranormal, and we are trying to raise our children with the same beliefs."

"I understand the desire to have your children believe the same things you do. However, in Angel's case, and with all she's going through, I think it's going to be very hard to instill those beliefs on her. She really believes David and Maria are real."

"And with you telling her they are, it's only confusing her," said Michael, "The main point is, we would like for you not to discuss the subject with or around the children."

"I'll tell you what," said Will, "I won't bring it up, but if they ask, I'm not going to lie to them either. I won't ignore a quest for knowledge. I'll share my knowledge and your beliefs, but to tell you the truth, it doesn't matter what any of us try to tell them, they're going to choose their own paths. However, if the children don't ask about it, I won't mention it. That's all I can promise."

"That's not good enough," said Rachel, "We don't want Angel further confused. If she asks just at least tell her to talk to us or that you can't discuss it with her."

"Angel has questions that can't be ignored, or diverted. She sees and hears David and Maria, there's no doubt about that, and if everything she's saying is true, they are probably the people who lived here before you."

"Are you actually saying this house is haunted?" asked Rachel in disbelief.

Will hesitated, then said, "Yes, I suppose you could say that."

"That's ridiculous," said Rachel, "There are no such things as hauntings or ghosts."

"Well," said Will, "you're welcome to believe that, but Angel does see them, whether they're real or not. Like I said, I won't bring it up, but if I'm asked, I will tell her the truth."

"If she asks," said Rachel, "send her to us."

"I'm not going to keep the truth from her," said Will, "Doing so, would only serve to confuse her more. Angel sees these ghosts, whether or not you believe she does."

"I see," said Michael, "So, that's your final word?"

"Yes, it is," said Will, "Angel needs to know the truth now more than ever. She's at a crucial part of her life right now, and we can either make this easy on her, or make it very hard for her. I personally choose to make it as easy as I can by telling her the truth about what she knows already to be true."

"But," said Rachel, "It's not the truth. Angel doesn't really see dead people. That's impossible."

"She believes he does," said Will, taking a different approach to the subject, "And they're very real to her. Despite what we three believe, Angel believes that David and Maria are real, and that is what we should be focusing on."

"We are," said Michael, "and we are trying to guide her in the right direction."

"I think you should let Angel decide if what she sees and hears is real or not," said Will.

"They're delusions," said Rachel, "and to the person who experiences such things, they are very real, though they are not."

"Don't you think Angel's awful young to be having delusions?" asked Will.

"That's why she's in therapy," said Rachel, "To find out why she's making this up, and sticking to her story so firmly. There's obviously a problem, and Michael and I want nothing more than to find out what that problem is. Angel is a very imaginative child, and these ghosts are probably her imagination running wild."

"I don't know about that," said Will, "I believe there's more to this than we know."

"That's my point," said Rachel, "and why Angel's in therapy."

"That's not what I meant," said Will, "I feel like this is real. I have experience in this field of work, and people who just think they see ghosts are different from ones who actually do see and hear them. I truly believe Angel is the latter, and should not be silenced because you can't believe it's possible."

"Angel can't see ghosts," said Rachel, "because there are no such things."

"There are a lot of people who would disagree with you," said Will.

"And a lot of people who agree with me," said Rachel.

"Still," said Will, "Angel sees and hears what she sees and hears. To her, David and Maria are very real, and from the way she describes them, I believe they are the very same people who lived here before you. After all, something happened to them, and if my research is correct, they died. It's very likely Angel has been somehow communicating with the same David and Maria Loft that used to own this house."