

*Angel knew exactly who she was, or so she thought!*

## **SHADOW OF AN ANGEL**

by Lee Stevenson

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*of an*  
ANGEL

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## Dedication

To Gail, thank you for a lifetime of love, support and encouragement. You gave me the strength I needed to never give up on this dream.

## CHAPTER TWO: SHERLOCK AND ME

The next morning was both strange and familiar all at the same time. Teesha and I had not slept a wink all night long. But we didn't dare take a chance of reading the letter inside my house. What if my mother or father came upon us reading it? Things would really get, shall we say, rather interesting if that happened. We agreed to go someplace private and secure later that morning, to read it and examine every word for clues.

My mother was already up and in the kitchen. The scrumptiously familiar part of this Saturday, were those customary and irresistible smells floating through the house. Our appetites were even bigger than usual; given the mental energy we were burning up over the mysterious letter. Still, Tee and I hesitated about coming down for breakfast. My mother had this special brand of radar that could detect both guilt and lies instantly. Even faster than a guy in heat could tell you he loved you. Hoping that by saying those three little words all women long to hear, he would surely get the prize he sought. I just knew there was this huge "guilty" sign

written in big red letters, all over my face. My mother would have no trouble reading them either, as she has so easily done since I was a little girl. They would reveal the whole truth about our having intruded upon the privacy of my parent's bedroom. Even worse, I had taken someone's very personal letter out of the safe. And if all that wasn't bad enough, I planned to read it! Most people in our shoes, if they were being honest, would admit to being as curious as we are, to solve the mystery of the found letter. But can I live with the guilt? YES! Maybe a pair of large sunglasses might ward off Mom's radar. Not a chance, one look at me and my mom will surely know everything!

"Why don't we just skip breakfast", Tee chimed in, "I can't wait to read the letter anyway."

"Are you nuts? If we skip out on breakfast, it will be a dead giveaway. When was the last time you stayed overnight, and we didn't gorge out on mom's pancake breakfast the next morning? Never, that's when! The Spanish Inquisition would be on and we would be the conversion targets. I'll skip that very painful scene, if you don't mind."

We had to psych ourselves up to appear as innocent as doves. And somehow manage to keep the conversation away from our activities of the night before. We practiced our innocent looks on each other, and then in front of the mirror, until they were perfect. We could have been John Dillinger and his best gun moll standing in the middle of a bank, and nobody would suspect these faces of anything! We got showered, dressed, and went downstairs to try and enjoy breakfast, as we would normally do.

Mom greeted us. "I thought you two would have come down earlier to help, not just show up to eat."

"We were up late planning our party, and so we didn't get a lot of sleep. You know how that goes. Right mom?"

"Well, OK, but you can at least set the table for me."

Teesha and I let our eyes meet briefly, sending a silent message to each other that said so far, so good. While we were getting the place settings down, mom asked if our party plans had moved any closer to reality.



“We know our plans depend on what you and Tee’s parents are willing to pay for, but I do have some savings of my own that I could contribute.” “Me too”, Tee added. In her typical fashion, mom put her hand aside my cheek, smiled that reassuring smile of hers saying softly, “I’m sure we will work it all out.” Just then my Dad came through the kitchen door, rubbing his stomach. This was his usual gesture that signaled he was more than ready for the breakfast feast. He then started asking what I’m sure to him, were just innocent questions. “You girls, I mean young ladies, were still up talking when we got home last night. What do you find to talk about for so long? And what did you do while we were gone?”

Dad, I thought to myself, you have no idea what you are doing to us. I was terrified that his innocent little questions, and how we responded to them, would surely do us in. Mom’s super sensitive radar could no doubt instantly hone in on two such guilty sneaks. I decided to try a quick diversion response.

“Well, uh, you know Dad, we talked about a lot of girl stuff. The kind of things you would have no interest in I’m sure. You know how your eyes roll up in their sockets, when you hear Mom

and her friends doing the gossip thing. You would have the same reaction, if you knew what Teesha and I talked and talked about all night. As for what we found to do while you were gone, well, uh, we just did party planning stuff. You know. As a matter of fact, we went in Mom's closet so I could show Tee the kind of drop dead gorgeous gown, I want to have made for our party."

Just then Tee cleared her throat real loud, and gave me a strange bug eyed look. Oh no, I had just told them we were in mom's closet. That same closet where the letter came from, the letter we had no business having. And having even less business planning to read. That's it, game, set, and match. It's over, Mom will see right through me like a glass window. What can I do? I've got to change the subject. Talk about something else. Come on Angel think, think! I heard myself suddenly saying, "Dad why don't you tell us all about how you met Mom for the very first time." He smiled this great big smile. I knew he just loved being asked to tell one of his favorite stories. In fact, Dad liked being asked to tell any story.

Right on cue my father, who I could always rally to my cause, began to tell the story.

Whether daddy knew it was a cause or not, he had sure come through for us in a big way. My eyes cut a quick glance toward Mom. Was she buying any of this, or was she swooping in for the kill? I didn't want to turn my face fully towards her. All I could manage, was a quick peek out of the corner of my eye. I could see she had one arched eyebrow. Uh oh, here it comes. That classic eyebrow arch was always the ignition switch, for her super radar to kick in. We're toast, we're dead! I just know it! But to my relief and surprise, the one raised eyebrow was meant for my father. "James, please tell me you are not going to bore these girls with that old story again." Whew, we had just maybe dodged a bullet. Mom only called him James when she was disapproving of, or not quite in agreement with, something Dad was about to do. It was Jim, or honey any other time. Way to go Dad! The focus was now on him, and off the two of us.

We did it! Like Harry Houdini, we had just pulled off an impossible escape. All thanks to my Dad's love of telling stories. I had always been able to manipulate my Daddy. Sometimes I even felt a little guilty about how easy it was for me to get away with it. I mean when someone loves you so much that they are totally blind to your manipulating them. Well, it is sort of unfair to

keep tricking them. But there was no shame or guilt right now, not today. It was truly our saving grace on this day.

We all ate and listened to the tale of young love and romance, that was my folk's first meeting. Immediately after we finished eating, Tee and I helped clear the dishes. We then quickly grabbed our purses, and I retrieved my car keys from their usual perch. The giant wooden KEY sign affixed to the back of our kitchen door. "Mom, we're off to visit some of the best gown shops in town. I need to see if any of them carry, or can make, something even close to the kind of gown I have in mind."

A hug for my Mom, a kiss on my Dad's cheek, and out the door we dashed. Both Tee and I had these huge smiles on our faces. As my car pulled through our circular drive and out onto the street. "We are so good at this" Teesha blurted out. Once we were far enough away from the house that even Mom's radar could not pick up our conversation, I replied in a self-satisfied voice. "Yeah, we are pretty good at this cloak and dagger stuff, now over to the Library. It is the perfect place to read the letter, without drawing any undue attention. Everybody in

there is reading something already, and won't notice what we are doing."

I thought to myself as we drove, gee all that theory in my psychology classes actually had some relevance in real life. Go figure. I had every expectation that I would be using it to help people, once I started my career. I just didn't think it would come into play so soon, and in such an up close and personal way. One of the dynamics of human nature I had studied, is the guilt complex. When you feel guilty about something, you always think people know more than they actually do. You are certain they can see right into your brain, and read the secret thoughts you are trying so desperately to keep hidden. I flashed back to my having mentioned being in Mom's closet. Why did both Teesha and I feel that it was some kind of tragic Freudian slip? An admission that was certain to spell doom, and seal our fate. Like it was some sort of subconscious confession, if you will. It was a simple response to my Dad's question that had no more or less meaning, then the words themselves portrayed. Yet our imaginations, working in concert with our sense of guilt, told us we were dead meat. It is all so fascinating! No wonder I am looking forward to my senior year of psychology studies in the fall. We humans are

such complex and confusing beings, or put another way, we sure are strange. Small wonder there is an entire profession dedicated to helping us better understand our own selves, and each other. Besides, it was great fun putting one over on two such intelligent people as my parents.

After we left, and unbeknownst to us, my parents had their own revealing conversation. "Jim honey, you know we were just hoodwinked by those two, don't you? They are up to something. Since Angela was a little girl, she would always ask you to tell a story when she wanted our attention diverted."

"Sweetheart, don't you think I know that? One of the great pleasures of my life, has been letting that little girl of ours, twist me right around her baby finger. Allowing her to think she is actually getting away with it. That I am totally in the dark about what she's doing. Well that just makes it all the more fun. But I guess she is not so little anymore. Angel has grown into a beautiful young woman, hasn't she? I get sad when I think about how few days there are left, where we will have her all to ourselves. There is a big and wondrous world out there just waiting for her, and she is going to make one hell of a splash in it!"

“Cyndi, do you think she has any idea of what we are struggling with right now?”

“I don’t think so, but our conversation the other day had become so intense. We were in such deep discussion, that I had forgotten all about the time. She and Teesha were here and through the door, before I ever realized it was time for her to be home. But she didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. Thank God, she is so preoccupied with planning this big twenty-first birthday party of hers. I am still not sure about what we should do. I am certain that she has a right to know, but is now the right time?”

“Honey, I thought we had settled this a long time ago. What’s past is past. There doesn’t seem much point to going back over the whole thing. And telling her now won’t in any way change what happened back then, or the decision we made.”

“Maybe you’re right, but Jim this decision is close to being taken out of our hands. The call we got yesterday was the fifth one in three days. I could tell by her voice tone, she appears to be determined, to do this on her own timetable.”

“But Cindy we have made our position clear and besides, we are keeping our end of the deal. What else does she want? I will not have our lives turned upside down, not at this late date, not now, not ever!”

“James that’s unrealistic, everything comes to light sooner or later.”

“Well if you ask this ole Marine, the later the better. And never is better still, when it comes to this bit of truth. I just thought we would have more time to prepare. Actually, I was sort of convincing myself that we might never have to deal with this at all.”

“Jim I’m just not sure anymore, about what exactly is the right thing to do. And that isn’t like me, I’m used to being totally clear about what I should do.”

“Baby you shouldn’t keep going around and around in your head about this. I am sure that everything will be all right in the end. Let’s just have faith that it will. You have been there for so many people over the years. Poetic justice, if nothing else, would dictate that this all turn out the way you want it to. And don’t forget, like always we are in this thing together.”



“I know that, and I love you for it. But Honey so many people could get hurt, when this all comes out.”

“Cindy, you may very well be right, and we are two of those good and decent people, who are at the very top of that list. Getting hurt is certainly not what we deserve. But we will just have to deal with this straight on, and see what happens.”

“Agreed, but I don’t know if I’m ready to see her again just yet. I won’t know what to say to her, or do. How should I act, how can I explain what is in my heart? Jim, this is not going to be easy under any circumstances!”

While my parents were mulling over their dilemma, one I had absolutely no knowledge of at this point, Tee and I had arrived at the local library. After we got inside, I had to grab Tee’s coat and in a loud whisper, tell her to slow down! “You’re practically running and you know that old lady Librarian in charge on Saturdays, is a real prison warden type. She will throw us out of here before we can even get our butts into a seat.”

Tee replied while already in full library whisper, "I know, I know, but it's eating me up alive. Come on let's read it, let's read it right now." I had carefully put the letter that was still inside its original envelope, into an even larger envelope. The larger envelope I had folded in half, and placed it into a Lady Supreme hosiery bag. Then stuffed the hosiery bag into one of my bigger purses, where it would cause no suspicion if found.

We roamed around the library, until we found this quiet little corner table, on the third floor. We finally hit upon the perfect spot- the sixteenth century playwrights section. This insured us that hardly anyone would be around. And even if other people were there, they would probably be asleep, or dead from boredom. Who in the world would be reading sixteenth century plays? Unless they were absolutely forced to as a requirement for say, a college class. I began to free our secret cargo from the hosiery bag, and then its double layer of protective envelopes. But when I got to the original envelope that contained the letter itself, I froze.

I whispered to my partner in crime, "Tee we can't do this, it's wrong. You know what they say curiosity did to the cat."

“Yeah and you know darn well Angel, that satisfaction brought him back. Just give it to me, and I’ll read it. Your hands will be clean and if anything goes wrong, you can always blame me.”

“But I will know the truth, and the truth is I stole this from my parents safe. From the privacy of their bedroom closet, a place they have every right to feel is secure. Knowing that their privacy will be protected. I’ve changed my mind; the first chance I get I’m putting this letter back. I wish it had never been visible in the first place. Actually, I wish we had just found the stupid gown and nothing else.”

“How can you say that? We didn’t go rummaging through your parent’s things, it was right there just asking to be looked at.”

“Maybe so Teesha, but whoever wrote this letter, they also have their right to privacy. Once we start messing around in other people’s lives, there is no telling what could happen. No, it’s better to put the darn thing back, and just forget we ever saw it. Besides we have much better things to do, like planning the party of the year, the birthday bash of the century!”

“Angel, I’ve known you for a long time and that is a load of crap. Yeah, you may be concerned about having ignored your parent’s right to privacy. But there’s a lot more to it than that. What are you scared of? What are you afraid the letter will say? Are you concerned about how your parents may be involved here, or perhaps another one of your relatives? Maybe it’s a close friend of the family? Because it’s a pretty safe bet, that only someone in your family or a really close friend, would have given this letter to your folks for safekeeping.”

“It doesn’t matter who it is Tee, I had no right to take the letter. And we have no right to be reading it!” But Tee continued pushing her logic and pressing any button she could, in an effort to make me change my mind again.

“Hey, maybe there is really nothing to it. No big deal. Nothing sinister or even interesting about the letter. But if we don’t read the whole thing now we’ll never know one way or the other. You already read the very first part so what’s the harm?” Are your parents really drug smugglers, jewel thieves, kidnappers or something?

“And what makes you think this involves my Mom and Dad, or someone in or close to my family? This letter could have been written by anyone. It could very well be about anybody, anybody at all, maybe even about you!”

“Don’t bite my head off, I was only thinking out loud. Don’t you see Angel that is why we have to find out what this is all about? How many times do you get handed a first-rate mystery just begging to be solved? Do you think Sherlock Holmes and Mr. Watson would ever in a million years, simply put the letter back? Wash their hands of the whole thing and just forget about it? Are you nuts? Aren’t you just dying of curiosity, anticipation? Can’t you see that we were chosen by some higher power to find this letter? We must read it, and read it now!”

I glared at Teesha with the most, and who do you think you’re kidding expression I could conjure up. “Now who’s shoveling a load of crap? Tee, you are just dying to read this letter, period! And would say anything in order to get me to go along with doing just that.”

“How many times do you come across a really great mystery you ask? Well let’s think about that one. Once or maybe twice in a

lifetime, if you're lucky. And I know what you're thinking, Holmes and Watson, those legendary professional snoops, would never pass on a chance like this. They would never, ever just put the letter back without reading it. I feel like some hapless witness on the stand in court. With you peppering away at me with questions, in machine gun like, rapid-fire succession? Girl I swear, you are going to make one heck of a lawyer some day. You are my very best friend, and I hate the Lawyer part of you already. Remember what my dad always says Tee, the only people that are despised more than Lawyers, are Insurance Agents, Used Car Salesmen, and Undertakers. Not necessarily in that order."

"OK, OK Angel, you can stop stalling by insulting me or my soon to be profession. Let's just read the damn letter!"

"I have a really bad feeling about this Tee. I now know how Pandora must have felt just before opening that stupid box. But anyway, here goes. Let's just do it!" I removed the letter from the envelope and unfolded it. Tee and I scrunched in close together, forming a shield around the pages with our hands. Making sure to avoid any loose or prying eyes. Which when you

think about it was rather silly. The only other person in this mausoleum area of the Library, was some guy hidden behind a two-foot high stack of dusty books. We both began to read the letter silently to ourselves, and the words that lay before our eyes were these . . .

*“To my darling baby, it has only been a week since you were born, and I don’t know how I will manage to let you go. I guess when you are only sixteen and scared about what has happened to your body and your life, it is very hard to know exactly the right thing to do. Long before you were born everyone was telling me that I couldn’t possibly keep you, because of what people would say. How it would bring shame upon me, and my entire family. Well when I look into those beautiful eyes there is no shame in me, not for giving life to someone as wonderful as you.*

*I have only held you for a few moments at a time this past week, but I already know how very special you are. You are such a beautiful baby, and I do want you to have the best that life can offer. I cannot give you that myself, and so I must be strong enough in my love for you, to let you go. This is the hardest thing I have ever tried to do and somehow, I know it will be the hardest thing I will ever have to do in my life.*

*How will you ever know what you truly mean to me? And that a large part of my heart will always be yours and yours alone. How will I face the coming years wondering where you are, if you are all right, are you being loved the way you deserve to be? What will you be like as you grow up? What things will you enjoy, and what will you excel in? When they come, and take you from my arms tomorrow, these are the questions that will linger in my heart for years upon end. Like strands of a mystery, the great unknown, that will torment my soul every waking hour of my life. These questions will be like tiny little ghosts, haunting my every dream.*

*The mother and father that have been picked out for you are very good people, and I made absolutely sure this was true. They have tried for quite a long time for a child, but can't have one of their own. They are able to provide for you in ways I can't right now. Perhaps in ways I never would be able to, if my goals are pushed aside by the responsibilities of trying to handle being a parent, right now. We have agreed, and in fact have made a pact. That at some point in time, if it is the right thing to do, I will come and see you for myself. See what kind of person you have grown to be, and try to explain somehow, why it was best for me to give you up now. Your new mother and father have promised me that they will not stand in the way of this, unless you would somehow be hurt by*



*it. And if it is what both you and I want. I have promised them that I will wait until they think the time is right.*

*It will be tomorrow soon, and time for you to go with them. And while I dread the very thought of it, I know in my heart that it is what's best. The truth is that with each passing hour, it becomes harder and harder, for me to stick to my decision. Maybe there is a way for us to be together now, but for the life of me I don't see how. We would need an instant miracle, and my life is simply fresh out of those.*

*The place on the form I will be required to sign is labeled birth mother. As if there could actually be some kind of distinction made, as to categories or degrees of motherhood. I am your mother you little miracle. The one who was chosen by blessed fate to give you life, although under less than ideal circumstances. Nothing can ever really change that, or make it as if it were not important.*

*This kiss I give you now is our permanent bond. No matter where I go or what I do, some time, some moments of every waking day, will bring me thoughts of you. May God watch over you little lamb, and may his holy spirit protect you always.*

*With love for you that will last forever,*

*Mother"*

It seemed as if time had stood still. Tee and I had both finished reading the letter, and yet there we sat motionless. With no words being spoken. After what seemed like an eternity, I looked up at Teesha and she stared back at me. Big watery tears were streaming down both our faces. The intense and tragic emotion of the letter had us so transfixed, that we did not even wipe the tears away. We just sat there and let them flow. The sound of our teary droplets hitting the pages of the letter quickly brought me back to reality. I jerked the letter away from under the path of our downpour. And proceeded oh so carefully to place it back into the envelope.

While at last wiping away the old tears, as new ones fell, I finally managed some words. "Well, we now know what the secret is all about, and in a way, I wish we didn't. Can you imagine the heartbreak of having to give up your own baby?" "Nonsense", Tee responded while in full wiping motion with both hands, whisking away her own non-stop supply of tears. "We hardly know anything at all, except that whoever wrote this letter was in a great deal of pain! Being too young and who knows whatever else was in

play, for her to keep her child. Can you imagine having to make a decision like that?"

"No, it's an impossible situation, I don't know if I could do it."

"Angel we have just got to find out who this mother is or was, and what happened to her baby. Hell, we don't even know how long ago the letter was written. There is no date on it. It could have been last week, ten years ago, or maybe even one day this week! Let's go and ask your mother. She has to know the whole story. After all, the letter was entrusted to one or the other of your folks for safekeeping."

"Tanisha Griffin, have you lost what little mind you have left?! This whole thing has gone way too far, and it stops now. I mean right now! The letter is going back in that safe as soon as we can get it there. Come on, we're going back to my house and wait for a chance to put this thing back where we found it. And if we're smart, we will forget we ever saw it!"

Tee had learned over the years that whenever I used her full name, and a certain tone of voice, all further debate was useless. I had just used both her full name and that

particular tone. We then left the dank, high brow, literature section of the Library. Where we had hidden while doing our dirty little deed. We made our way back to my car and as we drove along, I could feel Teesha gaze at me from time to time. Probably trying to figure out some way to engage me in conversation, about what I knew full well she wanted to do. Follow the mystery trail.

Mother was in our library reading a book, when we arrived back at my house. She looked up, peering over the top of her reading glasses. And with a smile she said, “well that had to be the shortest shopping trip I can ever remember you two having. What happened?”

“I don’t know what it is mom, but we just couldn’t get into the shopping thing today.”

“But What about that perfect gown of yours, are you giving up on finding just the one you want?”

“No Mam, we’re just going to regroup. And besides, I’m hoping that both of us can find our perfect gown at the same store. After all, our dresses have to be just right. No, they have to be perfect! Nothing less will do, for the best

welcome to adulthood party ever given in recorded history. The whole town will be talking about it for years, and years to come. You just wait and see. Where's daddy?"

"I have no doubt it will be an affair to remember dear. You young ladies have certainly put enough time and thought into it. How could it turn out any other way, then just the way you want it to? Angel you know that I am with you all the way honey, but within reason of course. You must be mindful of how expensive things are, and try to stay within a reasonable budget. Your father is in his study; I think he had some work he wanted to do."

"Come on Tee, let's see if we can make some more progress on finishing our party plans, and then I'll take you home. Mom we should be ready to go over all of it with you, daddy and Tee's folks real soon. We want to make sure every detail is just perfect first. And as you just said, make sure that it doesn't all cost too much of course."

As we got to my room and quickly shut the door, Tee started to say something. But I put my hand over her mouth, raised a finger to my lips and whispered shhhhhh. I then opened the door

of my room slowly, and looked both ways down the hall. Just to make sure neither of my parents was suddenly within earshot. I quietly closed the door back, and locked it.

“We don’t dare take the chance of putting this letter back in the safe, while my parents are in the house. But I think I have a plan. Tomorrow is Sunday. I will come up with some excuse for driving myself to church, instead of riding with them. And you know what best friend, old pal of mine? My excuse is going to be you. I’ll tell my folks that you and I are going gown shopping, since today was such a bust. And since shops will be closing early on Sunday, we need to leave right after services. Therefore, it makes perfect sense for us to drive together.”

“Yeah Angel that sounds like a plan, but how does it help us get the letter back into the safe? Not that I agree with you one little bit, about walking away from this mystery.”

“You have made that pretty clear but just listen to me. You and I will leave services a little early. You know how my folks like to talk to Pastor, and their friends, after services. Well, that will give us a chance to get back to my house

before them. Giving us plenty of time to put the letter back in the safe. We can then take off, and they will think we are shopping, just like we said." I paused as the last few words of my devious plan drifted out of my mouth, and found myself feeling a little sad.

"What's wrong now?" Teesha asked.

"I find myself doing things I never used to do, and it doesn't feel very good. I intrude upon my parent's privacy by rifling through Mom's closet. Going through personal papers, making off with a letter that is none of my business, or yours for that matter. And now I am telling one big lie after another. I know better. They raised me to be a better person than this! I feel like any minute now I'm going to just die from the weight of all this guilt. How did I get so deep into all of this anyway? How did it all get so sordid and out of control? I just want out, and I want out NOW!"

"Angel, take it easy, you make it sound like we just took down the World Trade Center Towers or something. A little melodramatic don't you think? You're not going to Hell just because you tell your parents a few little white lies."

I snapped back at Tee saying, "Lies don't have any color that makes them any more or less an awful thing to do."

"I know that Angel, but hey you don't have a lot of other options at this point. Unless you think we should tell your Mom the whole story, and place ourselves on the mercy of her court."

"Oh, no you don't Tee, that is just what you would like for us to do. That way, you think we could keep following the trail of this so-called mystery. What a great idea, let's just bring my mother into the middle of our mess! I am sure she will be proud of her daughter for all I have been up to, these past few days. Not on your life sister, we'll just stick with this plan. One day I will make all of this up to my parents. I will find some way to make amends. God, I wish that stupid letter had never been peeking out. I wish we could again just concentrate on the party, and nothing else."

I awoke to a Sunday morning of clear blue skies, and all of the sunshine one could ever hope for. Well, that's just perfect I thought to myself. It would have to be this picture perfect, beautiful day. When I am on such a rotten streak of luck. But let's be honest here, it isn't bad luck that has



me in this spot, or in this mood. It was my own bad decision making. Hey, did that just come out of my mouth? Those are my daddy's words! That is exactly what he would say to me, if he knew about all of this. It's OK, it's OK Angel don't panic now. Tee thinks this is all no big deal, but she's wrong. I just need to follow my plan, and all of this will be over today. I did the shower, make-up, and dressing thing in record time. Gave Mom the lame excuse as to why I needed to drive myself to church, just as Tee and I had planned. I couldn't really look at her eye to eye, and that could have been a mistake. For her famous radar had to have detected my level of discomfort. Yet I had no choice now but to press on, and so out the door I went. With the smoking gun evidence of my guilt and shame, still tucked carefully down in my purse. I picked up Tee and we arrived at church on time. But according to our plan, not in time to sit in a pew with my parents, who were already there.

Oh, great! It was as if God wanted to really make sure I felt maximum guilt, and that I would never do something like this again. The sermon this Sunday was entitled "Honesty, a cornerstone of the Christian ethic". How could Pastor have any idea about what has been going on with me, and what I've been up to? Angel just stop it silly,

he wouldn't do a sermon just to add to your torment. It is a coincidence of course, but man what a coincidence. It's like that song says in the old movie "The Color Purple". God is trying to tell me something!

I fidgeted through most of the sermon, as the Pastor's words spelled out the meaning of honesty. And how it related both to ancient biblical times, as well as to our present-day lives. Is it just me, or is this sermon taking forever? He ended by stressing that the path of dishonesty is a slippery slope. And once you travel too far along that path, it is very difficult to make your way back. But it can be done if you really work at it.

The sermon now thankfully over, this was the perfect time for Tee and I to slip out, without my parents noticing. The Tithes and loose offering collection would be next, then the doors of the church would be symbolically opened to let new members join the congregation. After that the final hymn. You add the after service visiting by Mom and Dad, and my plan would work out perfectly time-wise. Even if it now meant I was some ways down that path of dishonesty. I just hope I haven't yet reached the slippery slope point of no return.

I drove home like the proverbial bat out of hell. It was a good thing this was Sunday, there were a lot fewer police out looking for speeders. Tee and I literally ran all the way from my car, into the house, up the stairs, and into my parent's bedroom. Where I slammed, and locked the door. Tee looked around the room as usual and started to say something, but I cut her off abruptly. "Don't start with that stuff about the bedroom you nut, this is no time to go through all that again! You go over to the window and keep an eye out."

"But Angel, the window faces the back, I'll never see your folks from here."

"Never mind, then just keep your ears glued to that door. And let me know if you hear even the slightest peep of a sound that might be my parents."

My heart was pounding and my hands were all sweaty, as I bolted into Mom's closet. I went straight to the back wall where the safe was. It was then that I suddenly remembered something that posed yet another challenge. I had been so caught up in the frenzy of devising a plan, and then executing it in order to return the only evidence of my crime. So much so, I now

couldn't remember the combination! I needed the combination to the damn safe! As it was closed and no longer ajar.

"Pssst, pssst Teesha", I hissed from the closet while frozen with panic and fear. She didn't hear me. "Pssst Tee!" I hissed in a louder tone. She still didn't hear me. "Tanisha", I shouted in a loud voice, and then suddenly returned to the slightest whisper, once she turned and looked in my direction.

"The combination, I don't have it."

"Well what are you telling me for," she whispered back, "I sure as hell don't have it. It's your house and your safe, why don't you have the freaking combination? And why are we whispering anyway? There is nobody in the house but the two of us." She said, returning to a normal voice tone.

"I don't go in this safe hardly at all, and surely don't have the combination memorized. Mom did give it to me however, just in case of an emergency. I wrote it down and I keep it in a secret place, inside Mr. Unbearable."

“You keep it inside Mr. Unbearable?!” Tee shouted. “It’s a stupid stuffed bear, given to you by that dork you were dating eons ago. Why would you still have that silly bear?”

“Not that it is any of your business Ms. Nosy, and not that we have time to play twenty questions. But he is adorable and cute, the bear I mean, not the old boyfriend. And the sentiment of how he came to give it to me was so nice. Remember, I went away that summer and he sent the stuffed toy by mail, all the way to where I was. The card read, “Being separated from you is just un-bear-able”! Get it?”

“Yeah, I get it. And the two of us will also get it, if you don’t GET that combination, get the safe opened, and get the letter back in the safe, before your parents get home!”

“You’re right, you’re right I’m on my way.”

I dashed to my room, got Mr. Unbearable down from his shelf home, and unzipped the small section of his flat bottom. The zipper section is not noticeable since he is always sitting on it. I reached inside, and pulled out a piece of paper with the safe combination typed on it. I threw my prized bear on the bed, and ran back

down the hall to my parent's room. I turned the door handle and pushed on it, but all I got was a hurt shoulder. The door was locked. "Teesha, open this door!" I yelled while banging on it with one hand, and rubbing my hurt shoulder with the other. The door then suddenly opened.

"What did you lock me out for?"

"I don't know; this whole caper has made me a little jumpy. But anyway, that's not important right now. Girl you just get busy opening that safe."

I used the numbers from the paper, and spun the dial counter clockwise two full revolutions, coming to rest at ten. Next I spun it clockwise to eight, and then finally counter clockwise back to the number two. Hallelujah! The safe was open, and I wasted no time in placing the letter back. Back into the brown accordion like folder from which I first noticed it peeking out. It had only been two days since we first came upon the letter, but it sure seemed more like two years, or even longer.

I carefully closed the safe door, making sure it was locked. And then giving three or four healthy full revolution spins to the dial. "Whew",

I sighed upon reaching where Tee was standing. She still had her ear plastered against the locked bedroom door. "Let's get out of here. I'll put the combination back where it belongs when I get home later today."

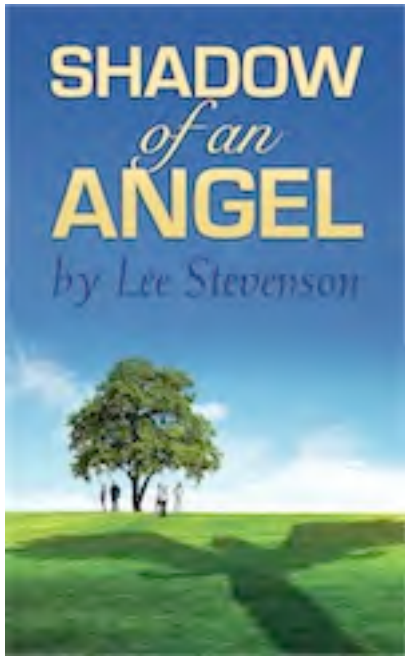
We ran all the way to my car, and I sped out of the driveway, and down the street. Tee and I looked at each other in silence. Then as if on cue, we burst out with laughter. But it was a rather nervous laughter. You know, the kind of laughter that has at its core, a sense of great relief. We had yet again gotten away clean. But I wasn't feeling nearly as smug and self-satisfied as yesterday. When we went off to read the letter.

Tee and I had decided to really go and do some gown shopping, now that the crisis was over. Why not make at least some part of my carefully woven story true. As I began to make a right turn off of our street, I glanced into my rear-view mirror. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I could swear I saw my daddy's car pulling into our circular drive.

Sherlock Holmes and Watson eh? I think Tee and I should leave the sleuthing to those who really know what they're doing. We had nearly

gotten to the point of a nervous breakdown, at least I had. Tee, now that I think about it, was different and appeared to take it all in stride. She seemed to really thrive on all the drama. That is except for when we were sneaking the letter back into the safe. She pretty much came unglued then. I don't think it would be wise to ever say this out loud in front of Teesha. But way deep down inside, I am really curious about that mother, and the baby. Gee, I sure would like to know if the baby was in fact given away. And where in the world is that baby now? What is life like for it? But no use dwelling on it now, the best thing to do is just forget all about this mess I made. The letter is back where it belongs. The mystery, if it is really one at all, can just remain unsolved. And we are back on course where we should be. Best girlfriends, planning our twenty-first party together. It will definitely be the party of the century. Life is good again!





*Angel knew exactly who she was, or so she thought!*

## **SHADOW OF AN ANGEL**

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