

# **THE JUDAS DISCIPLE**

By Chrys Cymri

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Dedicated to

Peter and Margaret  
David  
Michael  
'Love is as love does'

and with special thanks to Zoë

who first sparked my interest in Judas

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## February

16 February

The Judas Disciple died today. They say the next one will be chosen from the Republic of England. We'll have months of talk shows trying to work out who it'll be. Well, maybe it'll give me something else to think about than the mess Ben's left me in.

You'd think I'd get some peace between coming home and going to this Conversion Concert. But as I got ready to go out, my mother stood in the doorway of my room, wanting to talk to me. Okay, yes, technically it's her room, since it's the spare room in her flat. I'm only living here until the house is sold and the divorce goes through. But still, I'm thirty plus years old. A bit past having to listen to lectures from Mum.

'So, you're seeing him again tomorrow night?' she asked. It's hard in a journal to put over the exact tone she used for 'him.' Mum made it sound like the Devil himself was going to meet me.

Okay, no she wouldn't, not as a paid up member of God's Gang. Maybe more like something you found clinging to your shoe.

'Yes,' I said, 'Ben wants to see me again. I thought you'd be happy about that? Aren't you GG people supposed to support marriage?' I was plucking brown hairs from my coat, so I was able to keep my face turned away from Mum. Just as well, because I was a bit teary. 'Maybe he's realised what a mistake he's made.'

'Corina--'

She only calls me that when things are really serious. And I was stone cold sober, so in no state to take serious. 'Mum, I've got to go. You don't want me to be late for the Conversion Concert, do you?'

That got Mum excited. 'It's not just any Conversion Concert,' she gabbled at me. 'Mercy Peter will be there. Oh, I could almost wish I wasn't already a member. They say she's a fantastic speaker. Just think, she sees Jesus almost every day!'

'Not every day,' I grumbled back. 'I mean, he's based in London, isn't he? Won't she be staying in Northampton for these gigs?'

Mum entered the room, and I stiffened. But she only patted my coat down and touched my arm. 'Have a good time, Corrie. And listen to the message, please?'

I ended up arriving early at the Concert, which means I've had to sit through thirty minutes of the latest praise band going on how wonderful it is to be a member of God's Gang. I think the worst song went something like 'I love the Gang, it gives me a bang'--and I wondered if they knew that 'bang' means something else out in the real world. It's got so bad that I went to the 'Holy Souvenir Table' and bought this notebook. Maybe if I keep writing I can avoid the Gang Greeters who keep coming to my seat to ask me if I would 'love to speak some heart truths.'

Jezebel's dogs! I've just looked at the front cover of this notebook. It's got a blue and pink teddy bear wearing a t-shirt saying 'Proud to be in GOD'S GANG.' I thought I'd picked up the less sickening one which only had the rising sun logo on it. The front pages list all the Peters there've been since the first, Simon Peter. I guess they must change the front pages from Concert to Concert depending which Disciple is present, since the Peter is heading up this one.

But that was the deal. I'm staying with Mum, rent free, and so here I am at the Concert. She even pointed out the food comes from God's Gang, after all. 'They've increased my allowance for you,' she said. 'They've even given us a voucher for a

bottle of wine every week.’

I decided it was best not to tell her that, when things were really getting bad between Ben and me, I was putting away a bottle of wine every night.

Oh, good, that band is finally leaving the stage. ‘We love you, we love Peter, and we love Jesus!’ they’ve just shouted to the crowd. It’s a big venue, could seat several thousand, and I guess there must be around four hundred of us inside. I’m in halfway seats, so I can see the stage quite well but I’m not close enough to get pulled on. Although these Gang Greeters spot you anywhere. I’ve just had to repel another one. They’re like hungry mosquitoes. I wonder if they’ve got some quota to fill, so many conversions per Concert? I do think the Gang should spend a bit more money on clothing them. You can tell the difference between a GG member and those of us who haven’t chosen between them or Devil’s Due.

Aha, now things are starting. A huge screen has come down, and the announcer is telling us how exciting it all is. We’re getting the premiere of the latest God’s Gang film. It was even filmed on location in the Holy Birth Land! Be still my heart. The lights are going down so my handwriting is going to get even worse than usual.

Okay, nice opening shot. Dry and dusty Israel. I wonder if anyone really visits there, or only God’s Gang people on package tours? Swooping shot across what I guess must be Jerusalem, with all the worship towers topped by the rising sun logo. Better than a blue and pink teddy bear, though.

Bethlehem. I know because they’ve put up a subtitle. A stable scene, a baby which is supposed to be Jesus along with his Earth parents. They all look holy. Even the donkey looks holy.

Now thirty years later. It must be Jesus playing himself, because we only get to see the back of his head, shaggy brown hair waving in the wind. I guess they can still use him when they get to his thirties, since he’s stayed like that, hasn’t he? Most be some advantages to being the Son of God, eternal youth being one of them. How old is he now really, what, nearly two thousand years?

We’re cutting right to the Victory Scene. There’s Lucifer, but according to the opening credits not the real one, just an actor playing him. I guess God’s Gang can’t afford the Devil’s appearance fees.

Jesus is talking about being hungry and thirsty, like he would be after forty days and nights in the desert. His clothes look too good, though, all grey and ivory swirly robes. Lucifer is wearing a black suit, looks high designer label to me. The real one has quite a few designers working for him, but then they say he is a bit of a clothes horse.

‘Forty days and nights in this desert,’ Lucifer is saying, standing right in Jesus’ personal space. Wonder how the actor felt being this close to the Son of God. Did they build any healings into the contract? ‘You must be so hungry. Why not change these stones into bread? You could feed yourself, and go on to feed everything on this planet.’

I think half the audience said Jesus’ lines with him. ‘It is written, “Humans do not live by bread alone.”’ Some wit in the audience has just shouted out, ‘A bit of ham and cheese goes down well!’ and people have laughed. I bet the God Greeters aren’t happy about that one.

A bit of special effects while Lucifer and Jesus fly over the desert and land on the top of the Grand Temple in Jerusalem. They’ve either removed or airbrushed out the rising sun logo which you usually see in photos of the Grand Temple. ‘Throw yourself off this Temple,’ Lucifer is saying. ‘You know that your Father’s angels will catch you before you hit the ground.’

Again, people around me are muttering Jesus' response. Even if you aren't a card carrying member of God's Gang, you've had all this in school history classes and you know it by heart. 'It is written, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."'

More special effects. Oh, they've gone a bit modern. Jesus and Lucifer are now standing on top of Buckingham Presidential Palace. I wonder if they use the White House for the Union of American States version? 'If you will acknowledge my ownership of this world's wealth,' Lucifer says, 'then I will give to you all the people who are baptised into your name. But I will remain the king of pain. I will remain the king of pain.'

All the God Greeters and lots of people in the hall start to cheer as the moment of Victory comes. 'I give you the world's wealth,' Jesus says, 'and you release to me all those who are baptised into the name of Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God. I claim Victory over you and all your dark works!'

Some people around me have got to their feet. The film has finished, and the lights are coming up. And there she is, the headline attraction, Mercy Peter herself. I remember the talk when she was appointed Peter, first time it's gone to a woman and a woman from Africa as well. Mind you, the lights on the stage even make her look a bit pale. She probably thought she could get by without any make-up. Bad call.

'Jesus has claimed the Victory!' she shouts into a microphone. Some of the crowd roar back, 'Jesus has claimed the Victory!' But I don't think I'm the only one who is scrunching back in her seat and wishing this whole thing was over.

'Jesus has claimed the Victory, he ended the struggle over poverty and suffering!' Mercy Peter is striding across the stage. Okay, yes, she has real presence. Her dreadlocks are quite fantastic, bouncing up and down like they have a life of their own. She even gets to wear something colourful, a black dress thing with the rising sun logo repeated over and over. 'You can join in this Victory. Join God's Gang, and you too will never again be hungry or be thirsty. You will never again be without a place to call home, or people to call family. And your name will go into the Lottery automatically every week. You might even win the Grand Prize of a healing from Jesus himself!'

Ugh. That's what my mother keeps telling me. 'And if you joined God's Gang you'd get your name into the Lottery. I'm not getting younger, Corina. Look at Martha, she has five children and all their names go into the Lottery. What if I get sick?'

There are times I really, really hate being an only child.

Mercy Peter is still going on, telling us why we should convert. I've heard it a million times. Mum became a recruiter a few years after Dad died, which makes about thirty years of me hearing her talk to Seekers about God's Gang. Join God's Gang and all your troubles are over. Food tokens, accommodation, clothes, health care and the Lottery. Just sign everything over to God's Gang. You might even get a token for a bottle of wine every week.

I can feel my liver suffering withdrawal symptoms even as I scribble. Maybe I should put it to a vote amongst my vital organs.

Here we go, a call to the front. A chance to convert in front of the Peter herself. Right hand woman of Jesus, second-in-command of God's Gang. Maybe you get a special sticker? Oh, if you convert today you will get two additional entries into the Lottery! After you've gone through the process and been baptised, of course. Not before then.

The God Greeters whoop and cheer for each person who goes forward. They're brought up on stage and get a hug from Mercy Peter herself. And second prize is two

hugs...

This could go on forever. The God Greeters are moving up and down the hall, looking to see if any more of us are going forward. The guy on my right is hunkering down, not meeting their eyes. I wonder why he's here. A pushy wife? Lost his job and wondering who's going to feed him? Maybe he did it on a dare. I heard a stag party invaded one of these and threw things on the stage. Devil's Due issued a full apology even though the men weren't signed up members of theirs.

Okay, looks like we're finally coming to an end. The new converts are being taken away for whatever they do to them. If any of them are local they might end up at my Mum's house. She does mentoring as well as recruiting. Time to go.

Later--and the evening got even worse.

Traffic wasn't too bad, and I found a space to park on the road near the HappyDaze complex. I decided to be lazy and took the lift up to my Mum's floor.

At least the Concert meant that I'd avoided one of her meetings. I could smell some perfume in the air as I opened the door to the flat. So it was a mentoring group. Only new converts would still be wearing perfume. There was a bottle of wine in the fridge. I tried not to look at the label so I wouldn't prejudge what went into my glass. The voucher might entitle you to wine, but Market Economy supermarkets have the best vintages. I've never been impressed with what you find in Kingdom stores.

I found Mum in the meeting room. She was watching 'The Kingdom of God,' that blockbuster movie which came out last year about the early years of the Kingdom. I hadn't realised the DVD was already available, but I wasn't surprised she'd rushed out to buy a copy.

The movie was about half an hour in. Jesus had already won the Victory in the desert and picked his original twelve Disciples in Galilee. They were riding into Jerusalem in gleaming horses, and the streets were lined with people cheering Jesus on as 'Son of David, Son of God!'

Mum turned the sound down. 'Did you meet the Peter?' she asked. That was her way of asking whether I'd been converted.

'No,' I said. That was my way of telling her that I hadn't.

'Oh.' Mum sighed. 'But what did you think of her?'

'She was interesting.' That wasn't entirely a lie.

On the TV screen the Hollywood actor portraying Jesus was marching up the Temple steps. The priests were out in force to welcome him as their new leader. The actor smiled at them, teeth rather too perfect for the time period. I'm also not convinced by the blond hair and blue eyes, but I suppose they wanted someone with international appeal.

I should have realised that Mum wasn't going to let go of our earlier battle. 'About meeting Ben--'

I hate the way my stomach does a sudden flip-flops when I hear his name. How can anyone feel excited, nervous, hopeful, and angry all at once? 'Yes. Tomorrow evening.'

Mum was only angry. 'After the way he's treated you--'

'But maybe he's changed his mind,' I said. The wine was shivering in the glass. 'It's only been a couple of months since he told me, maybe he's realised he's made a mistake.' I wished Mum would shut up. The movie was getting to my favourite bit, where Jesus goes to see the Roman Emperor and convinces him that he is the Son of God. The miracle where Jesus heals the Emperor's daughter is one of the best scenes in the whole film.

Another sigh. Sighs are Mum's specialist subject. 'Corina. I was here the last time he phoned. Remember? When he told you all the reasons why Helen was better than you.'

'Only because I asked him to,' I protested. I put the wine glass down to stop me from spilling any. 'I thought you God's Gang people believed in forgiveness.'

'We do. We're also strong on faithfulness.' Mum leaned forward. Now that she's let her hair go grey she can look really fierce when she wants to. 'And even more so when it's my own daughter.'

'We were having a trial separation--'

'A man who tells my daughter he's not coming back to her after fourteen years of marriage is not the man I want for a son-in-law.' Mum shook her head. 'Have you forgotten that night, that weekend? I haven't.'

Great, now we'd missed the controversial scene where Jesus persuades the Emperor to outlaw crucifixion. 'After all,' the movie had Jesus say, 'in different circumstances you might have crucified me.' That had caused all sorts of uproar last year. The idea that the Son of God might have died, when it was clearly God's plan that he would live forever as the leader of the Kingdom of God on Earth! Even worse, that he might have died like the worst of criminals. People chanted protests outside of cinemas about that one.

'This argument,' I told her, 'isn't helping.' So I picked up my wine and headed to my bedroom. Anyway, the movie gets boring after that. All the political stuff about setting up the Kingdom Economy and the first Disciples building their portfolios. Although the scene in which Jesus' mother dies is quite touching. They had a whole bit where Jesus agonises that he's going to live forever while everyone dies around him.

Anyway, I'm sitting here on the bed, wishing I'd brought the whole bottle of wine with me and reading through my break-up journal. Or maybe it won't be break-up. Lots of couples try living apart, even meet up with other people, then realise that they're meant to be together, don't they? And all those reasons he gave why Helen is better than I am. I've lost about twelve pounds over the last month, so I can't think she's much skinnier than me. We can talk about housework and holidays. We can make it work out.

Mmph. Got to get to bed. Work tomorrow.

17 February noonish

Lunch break. This isn't a bad office, I've worked in worse. My first manager collected pigs and we often said he aspired to be one. The manager I work for now has been pretty good about being nice to me but not asking every five minutes if I'm coping okay. They all know about Ben. Well, it's hard not to know when I had a major crying breakdown on the phone about two weeks ago. I'd just looked at our bank account on-line and saw a huge debit on our joint credit card from a jewellery store. I made the mistake of ringing Ben from my desk and he was just so logical about it. 'We want to get married as soon as possible,' he told me. 'So of course Helen needs an engagement ring.'

'Engagement ring?' I'm surprised my voice didn't break glass. 'But we're still married!'

Note to self: Don't try to talk to your husband while at work.

All the talk today, between customer phone calls and doing paperwork, is about the Judas Disciple. We actually have a few God's Gang people working at our branch.

Most GG people who work in insurance choose firms like First Ethical, but we have some here at MidPro. They seem to work as hard as anyone for their bonuses, though I never understand why, when it all goes into the central God's Gang account.

Anyway, it was after that engagement ring incident that another assistant, Jane, took me into one of the manager's offices and told me that I had to file for divorce. 'Is everything in joint names? Then you've got to get out. Corrie, look, okay, maybe this will fizzle out and he'll realise what a mistake he's made. But in the meantime he's spending money like there's no tomorrow, and you're jointly liable for that debt. Get out before he cleans you out.'

'But if we get divorced,' I said, 'then it's harder for him to come back to me, isn't it?'

Jane looked at me like I'd sprouted horns or something. 'You still want him back?'

'We've been married for fourteen years.' I think I might have sniffled. 'Doesn't that count for something?'

'You would think so,' Jane replied in her best 'don't lie to yourself' tone of voice. 'I want you to promise me, you'll go home tonight and order the papers to file for a divorce. Promise? You've got to look after yourself, Corrie. He certainly isn't looking after you.'

So here we are, papers filed, and Ben wants to see me. Well, the papers can be stopped, can't they? Maybe he's remembered that we were pretty happy together. Well, until lately, the last year or so, when he started being so different. Mid-life crisis, that's all it's been. That's why we decided to have some time apart.

Okay, back to work. My manager has a meeting to agree a large policy, and I have to be there to take the minutes. I need to think about something other than tonight.

18 February 9pm

Okay, all confused now. Don't know where we are in all this.

I drove over to the house--our house--as agreed, and Ben answered the door. He looks well, although I can't get used to the ponytail being cut. I liked his blond hair long. It was the first thing he got rid of when he moved out to a flat. Also not sure of his new, expensive clothes. Old sweatshirts out, smart jumpers in. Cashmere, I think. The wedding ring is gone, of course.

The house looked mostly the same, though it had that smell of a place which has been empty for awhile. As usual it was me who made the mugs of tea. Ben and I sat down in the lounge.

Ben took a sip of his tea. 'Helen's joined a reading group here in Daventry.' At my look he added, 'No, not a God's Gang group. You know that stuff always turned me off. Anyway, she'll be there for a couple of hours, so I thought we could meet up.'

'Because?'

Ben leaned back into the armchair. 'Work is such a bitch right now. They're doing all sorts of cut backs in funding, and I'm supposed to run the marketing campaign on half the budget I had last year. And then yesterday Jack said--remember Jack, the Jackass?--Jack said that I was creative, I'd cope. And then I said--'

I must admit I tuned out around then. This is how we used to talk when we were still living together, when we still wore our wedding rings on our fingers. Finally we got a point when he took a breath and drank some tea, and I asked him, 'Why are you telling me all this?'

Ben looked at me as if I were the weird one. 'Corrie, you've always been the one I can talk to. I know things are a bit messy right now, but we've been friends for years.'

When things have settled I really want you to meet Helen. She's such a great person, you'll really like her.'

His ring finger was empty, but I still wear my wedding ring on a chain around my neck. I showed it to him. 'Ben, you're still important to me. Remember, if this doesn't work out, the door is still open if you want to come back to me.'

Ben looked away. I think he wiped a tear from his eye. 'I do love you, Corrie, you know. But you were right about us separating. And now I've met Helen, and I'm in love with her. You understand, don't you?'

I left soon afterwards. Will this thing with Helen last? I hate waking up alone. I hate not being in our house and looking forward to him coming home to me. I hate going to bed alone. I miss Ben terribly. It wasn't this bad when he'd had to travel with work. It wasn't even this bad during our supposedly trial separation. I knew that he loved me from afar. We talked to each other every day. Seeing him like tonight is so hard, it hurts so much. But I still want him back. Am I being pathetic?

21 February

All the talk on the radio is about the Judas Disciple. I wish they'd just dedicate a separate channel for all the gossip so I could ignore the whole thing. Sooner or later Jesus and the Peter will sit down and pick someone. The Judas handles the money so they'll probably pick someone from the finance sector. That would be fun, not, if it's someone I know. Mum would be too excited to live with.

Jane was a volcano of anger when I told her about the talk with Ben. Good thing she's not a member of God's Gang, not with her swearing.

Devil's Due are running a recruitment drive. I know all of us who aren't in God's Gang are part of the Market Economy by default, but they do like people to be signed up members. It's a rather clever campaign. 'Why be a Judas when you can be a devil?' Just for the hell of it I filled out one of the cards shoved under my car's windscreen wiper. You get a voucher for use in a Market Economy supermarket, and I'm getting tired of the cheap wine Mum gets in. Anyway, the voucher will come with lots of bumpf that I can just throw away. Or leave out to frighten Mum.

25 February

Just a regular blah week, couldn't think of much to write. And now only one day to the weekend. I used to look forward to them. Ben and I would have a bottle of wine or two Friday night, sleep in Saturday, go out somewhere Sunday. No point getting up early on a Saturday, so many things are shut so God's Gang people can go to Temple.

Ben asked me to meet him again. Looks like he plans to make this a habit on Helen's book night. I make cups of tea, and Ben tells me how bad work is and what pressure he's under.

Ben brought several bags of stuff from the cottage in Devon. 'It belongs to my parents,' he reminded me when we were drawing up the financial agreement. 'Helen and I'll use it, but you won't now, will you?' Tonight my spare clothes and toothbrush were in the bags. Ben gave me the stuff, then made a funny cough. 'We had some good times together, didn't we?'

If they were such great times, why did he decide to leave me for Helen? But I kept quiet. Maybe Ben will realise how stupid he's being. That's what I hope. Sometimes. And sometimes I just want to cut his head off.

I remember once hearing a woman on the radio talking about when her husband

left her. She said that when you're in a relationship it's like a third person is built up between you. This third person is built up out of all that you've shared together, all your memories, your special rituals, things which only you two know about. And when the relationship ends it's like watching this third person slowly die. Ben and I had a whole story going with our lives, a story which we'd built up together over the years. All of that will die. The story will die, unless he and I get together again. People like Jane, like my mother, just don't understand. As long as there's still a hope, I'll keep seeing Ben while Helen is doing her book stuff. There's seventeen years' worth of history at stake here.

26 February

I was so bored I actually went with Mum today. Yes, me, in a Temple. I used to go when I was a kid, had no choice really. That's where Mum was and when you're young you just get taken to places by your parents, don't you? It wasn't that bad, really. They always had separate sections for kids, and we got to hear stories about the patriarchs (I always loved the one about Elijah being fed by ravens) and colour in pictures of King David. Every so often we'd have a quiz to see if we could remember Jesus' family tree, the one which proved that he could be traced back to David. Even when I was little I thought it was weird that the family tree ended at Jesus, that he'd never decided to have a wife and kids. But when I asked a teacher once she looked shocked. 'He's the Son of God,' she told me. 'He's devoted himself to building the Kingdom here on Earth. He's not here to have a wife and children.' She did get a bit kinder. 'And what would it be like, for him to watch his family grow old and die? He's immortal, and they wouldn't be.'

I do wonder what must it be like for Jesus, watching all of us grow old and die. Even the Disciples die eventually. The Lottery proves that he and the Twelve can heal lots of things, but we all wear out eventually. Even members of the Twelve die, and they have access to Jesus all the time. Maybe that's why most of us see so little of Jesus. Maybe he prefers to only get close to a few people, if he's always going to outlive them.

Anyway, Temple is a bit more boring if you're an adult. My Mum's Temple is a Traditional, with trumpets and harps and lots of slow singing. They must be used to non-members coming, because near the end they sang the recruitment song. The line that always sticks in my head is, 'The vilest offender, the moment he believes, a full entry to the Lottery receives.' The Lottery, the chance to meet one of the Twelve for healing, must be more attractive as you get older. Can't see the Lottery helping a broken heart.

Hmm, okay, that sounded bitter. Must stop.

They've done a new translation of the David hymns. I tripped over 'The Lord's my Shepherd' when 'your rod and staff comfort me' were changed to 'your smart phone and email check on me.' I found myself wondering why God's Gang never do product placement. 'Buy the smart phone Jesus uses!'

Readings from The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah and the Prophet Elijah. Various people stood up to give their interpretation of what the readings should be telling us today. Even Mum stood up to say a few words, and I pretended I didn't know her. Fortunately the cantor came in after twenty minutes. Sometimes these interpretation sessions can go on and on.

There were biscuits and coffee afterwards. The coffee was powdered stuff so I had tea instead. Can't stand instant coffee. Most of the conversation was about getting

ready for Passover. They're decorating the Temple hall to welcome those who can't get back to their families for the festival. Oh, no, I just realised that Mum will be expecting me to share Passover with her. I won't be able to get away with just dropping by and then going back to Ben.

I'd better start learning the responses again. She probably thought all those years that Ben and I were keeping Passover together.

## March

1 March

Came home from work to find two bits of post waiting for me. One was the paper telling me that the Decree Nisi was in place. Makes me feel like paperwork is rushing me off a cliff.

The other post was a card telling me that a special delivery had to be made to me. Personally. It was in the black and red colours of Devil's Due, and had their double D design on the back. Good thing I got home before Mum. But why do I need to arrange with them to be in at a particular time just to get their literature and my supermarket voucher? The woman on the phone, when I rang up to book the time, wouldn't tell me. Anyway, I need to leave work early tomorrow to be in for a five o'clock delivery. What a nuisance. Well, if I look all teary in front of my manager he'll just assume it's about my divorce and tell me to go early.

3 March

Solomon's Wisdom!

I left work and only just got home at 5pm. So I was just getting out of my car when I heard the sound of a car engine pulling up behind me. I turned and I think my jaw might have dropped. I certainly came near to drooling. There it was, one of those multi-thousand pound Devil's Due sports cars, looking like the ones given to their Formula One drivers. All curvy lines and shining black with red trim. I'm not usually a car person, but I could have made an exception.

The door opened, and a man uncurled from the deep seat. I inhaled the smell of deep, rich leather. The young man was dressed in a suit which must have cost as much as one of the car seats, all tightly fitting and elegant. Part of me noticed that he was drop dead gorgeous. Another part of me decided to ignore this as much as humanly possible.

'Corina Maria Foster?' The man pretended to be asking, but it was obvious he knew who I was.

'That's me,' I said, trying to ignore the fact that his voice was also gorgeous.

'You are invited.' With a flourish the man bowed and held out a small platter which gleamed in the sun. Gold? It looked like solid gold. On the platter was a small envelope, all black and red again. I reached out and took it, hating the fact that my hand was trembling slightly.

The man straightened, gave me a smile which made my heart skip several beats, and then he slipped back into the car. 'Wait!' I called out to him. 'You said I'm invited. I haven't given my reply yet!'

'There's no need.' He looked up at me from inside the car. 'No one has ever declined this invitation. Not even Jesus himself.'

Then he was turning around in the drive, the engine throbbing wonderfully. I watched him leave, the envelope clutched in my sweaty hand. I hurried inside.

Mum wasn't home. There are times when I am lucky. I knew it was early but I felt I deserved a glass of wine after all that excitement. That, and maybe a cold shower. But first the envelope.

After a few gulps of wine I went into my bedroom. The envelope felt warm. It was

sealed with red wax, and the double D logo stood out. I slipped a fingernail underneath and lifted off the seal.

Inside the envelope was a card. Yes, you've got it, red print on black. And it was printed, the whole thing, not handwritten. I stared at the words, trying to take it in.

*Corina Maria Foster is hereby invited to dinner with the Venerable Lucifer, Emperor of Hell and King of Pain. Eight of the clock on the evening of Saturday, 12 March. A car will call at HappyDaze complex at seven of the clock to conduct you to his illustrious presence. Dress is formal.*

Dinner with the Devil? There were no contact details, nothing about either accepting or declining the invitation. What had Gorgeous said? No one ever declined.

What am I ever going to tell my mother?

So I've just been looking at this invite. If you can call it an invite. No contact details for a RSVP. Obviously His Impressiveness just assumes that no girl can say no to a date with the Devil. Or boy. Does he also invite boys? He must do.

Why me? How did I get picked for this? What've I done to get an invite from His Illustriousness to dinner? Formal dinner, even.

Or maybe there will be lots of other people there too. Doesn't say I'm the only one. Maybe everyone who filled out that form asking for more information has received this sort of invite. Could be that lots of streets in Daventry had a visit from that gorgeous car today.

But it's still a bit of raw cheek, to just assume anyone invited will go. I mean, I could have arranged a hot date that night. I might have had tickets to a London show. I might have a life, rather than just the hobby I seem to have made of my life.

What if it is just His Darkness and me? Well, it can't be a date. I've never heard of Lucifer having a girlfriend. A wife. Or a boyfriend. Or even a pet hamster.

I've just read over the drivel I've been scribbling away. Okay, okay, I'll go. It'll be some sort of crowd thing, the Devil's Due equivalent of a Conversion Concert. Have to say though that it's far more stylish.

4 March

Weird at work. People were all talking about their weekends and what they planned to do. I kept wondering if anyone else had a DD invite at home. Well, not God's Gang people, of course. And you can tell who they are, even if they're not wearing the sunrise logo somewhere. I think all of them must get their clothes from the same store, all samey and just on this side of not being crappy. But it's harder to know who is a paid up member of Devil's Due and who, like most of us, just get included automatically in the Market Economy because we're not God's Gang.

So I couldn't work out how to ask anyone. 'Hey, did a great sports car come to your house the other day?' How about a very subtle, 'Have you seen anyone gorgeous lately?'

No, can't ask, can't tell. Maybe at the dinner there'll be lots of people from the office and we'll stand around and have to pretend that we don't know each other. Like GG people do when they're caught in a Market Economy supermarket, with money they've managed to get from somewhere.

Around to the house again tonight. Just to talk while Helen does her literary thing. Ben went on about our 'all our wonderful years' and that I am 'still very precious' to him. He seems to view our life together as something great from which he's moving

on to something greater. He doesn't seem able to see any of this from my point of view. Because of those 'wonderful years' I can't understand how he can leave me for someone he only met a few months ago. He must come to his senses. He has to.

9 March

Came home to the smell of baking. That's always a bad sign. Mum only bakes when she's nervous, and usually she's nervous when it's something to do with me. There are times I really wish she'd had other children, so she could worry about someone other than me from time to time. Maybe I should have gone ahead and given her grandchildren.

We ate dinner together and I decided not to escape to my room. Might as well get it out into the open. So we went into the lounge, me with my glass of cheap wine, her with a cup of tea. She stirred the spoon so many times I thought the metal might dissolve. But I was going to make her speak first.

'Corina...' Mum did one of her major sighs. 'Corina, I'm really worried about you seeing Ben every week. It's just not good for you.'

'I'm over thirty, Mum,' I reminded her. 'I'm a big girl now. I can look after myself.'

'Be careful.' Now she met my eyes. 'It's times like this, when people are vulnerable, that Devil's Due try to recruit you. I've seen it before.'

Good thing she doesn't know about the invite hidden under my mattress. But her attitude still annoyed me. I couldn't help myself. 'What if they did?'

'Corina, I'm a recruiter--'

'So what, that means I can't make up my own mind on things? I've grown up with it, with all that God's Gang stuff.' I was amazing myself with what was coming out. 'All those people coming into the house, evening after evening. Having to wear those cheap clothes that they give you, only going to Kingdom stores, Kingdom schools, never having holidays abroad--'

'We look after our own,' Mum cut through. 'If I were ill we would still have a place to live, food on the table, and healthcare through the Kingdom hospitals. And there's always the Lottery.'

'Have you ever known anyone to win the Lottery?' I shot back. 'The only person I know was Aunt Jean, and all she won was five minutes with the Matthew. He healed her busted knee but she still died of cancer a year later. Why, Mum? I've never got it. Why does anyone want to be in God's Gang?'

There was a long silence before Mum spoke again. 'When your father died,' she said quietly, 'I felt like I'd lost everything. I loved him so much, and we had such plans for our future, our family's future. Suddenly my career didn't matter anymore. I had a house filled with expensive clothes, nice food, lovely furniture. But none of that was important, because the house was so empty. All I had was that emptiness, and a young child.'

'But--'

'Quiet, Corina.' I was so shocked at her soft order that I obeyed. 'I found myself going to Temple a few weeks later, with you in a pushchair. The people there were lovely. They just took me in. They made sure both of us were fed, and one woman helped me to sort out the financial mess your father had left behind. They were very kind to me, so I started to think that perhaps the God they followed might be kind as well. It was a gradual thing, Corina. But I found that I had a new family, and I wanted to be part of that family. That's why I joined the Kingdom.'

I waited until I was certain that she'd finished. 'But you've never met Jesus, or any of the Twelve, have you?'

'It would be nice to meet one of them,' Mum agreed. 'But I have my Kingdom friends, my family. We look after each other. That's what's important in life, Corrie. The people you love, and who love you. Not clothes or cars or careers. I thought you might have realised that lately. What you own doesn't matter if the person you love isn't around anymore.'

'Ben's not dead,' I reminded her. Part of me couldn't help thinking that things might have been easier to deal with if he were.

For a moment both of us thought she'd say something. Then Mum just did another of her sighs. 'Corrie, please, be careful.'

'About Devil's Due or about Ben?'

'Both.' She shrugged. 'I'm your mother. I worry. It goes with the territory.'

I had the urge to make some sort of cutting pun about geography, but nothing came to mind. 'Right, okay, I'll be careful.' I got up and headed to my room. I'm doing perfectly fine, I don't need to have my mother fretting about me.

12 March

Yes, went to see Ben last night. It was the usual him-talking-me-listening. He and Helen are looking at houses in Northampton, near to where they both work. 'We saw a really nice one the other day,' he told me. 'I'll bring the plans next week so you can see them.'

Now I'm getting ready for this dinner. I've decided on smart business suit rather than a fancy dress. Never was one much for little black numbers, probably because I don't think it works on people who are on the past size 12. Plus it would show up the grey hairs already spreading through the brown. Can't decide if I need to take cash. Maybe just a bit, just in case. Like catching an early taxi home if I get tired of the crush.

Mum's just called. There's a limo waiting for me. Time to go...

12 March 11pm

No crush. No crowd. King David's testicles!

The shiny black limo whisked me away. Just black outside, red leather inside. It was a stretch job, and I tried to relax, all alone, in the back. There was an open bottle of vintage champagne waiting in an ice bucket, and I poured myself a small glass. Didn't want to be too tipsy when greeting His Darkness. After smiling and nodding, I thought, I could just slip away to the back of the room and find some more drink.

Did I mention the lack of crowd?

It took us about thirty minutes, but then there aren't that many posh places in this area of Northamptonshire. We headed towards Coventry, and then some location outside the city centre. The limo pulled up outside a small place with an even smaller nameplate. George's. Even I've heard of George's. People travel up from London just to have a look at George's, hoping one day they might be able to afford to get inside. That's when I started to wonder about the whole crowd thing.

I don't think my fingers ever got near a door. Each one seemed to open magically in front of me, from the car through the entrance to the restaurant to the small side room. I think there were tasteful and expensive pieces of art on the light walls. I think the carpet was thick and soft. I think there were about three tables in the room. The

reason I only think rather than know is that all I could look at was His Rebelliousness himself. There he was, the Devil, rising from his chair as I walked over to him.

Much to my embarrassment, I found myself saying, 'You don't look anything like your official photographs.'

That made him laugh, low and deep. 'Certainly not. How else should I be free to wander the world, walking up and down your streets, and remain unrecognised?' His voice was deep and cultured, with an accent I couldn't place, suiting his tanned skin and dark hair. His black jacket was precisely tailored and looked very expensive. A huge diamond glittered in a ring on his right hand as he waved at the chair across the table from his. 'Ms Corina Foster, I am so pleased to make your acquaintance. Please, do take a seat.'

He didn't offer me his hand, and I wouldn't have taken it if he had. That's the quickest way to join Devil's Due--shake the hand of Satan.

We were the only two people in the room. Maybe we were the only two customers in the whole restaurant. I suddenly wished I'd had more of the champagne. I took a seat on the antique chair, and suddenly a waiter appeared to help me get settled at the table. Lucifer took his seat, although he did a sort of wriggle as he sat down.

'Ah, indeed, my back,' he said, noticing my stare. 'Those are my wings. Or, rather, the remnants of my wings. When I was cast out of Heaven, flesh and feathers were consumed in the fall through Earth's atmosphere. The remnants do pose quite a challenge for my tailors.'

'Did it hurt?' As soon as the words were out of my mouth I felt stupid for asking. But His Winglessness didn't seem to mind.

'Indeed, yes.' Lucifer nodded slowly. 'To fall away from the brightness of God's presence, leaving the glory that is Heaven, that was pain enough. Then the stripping away of my angelic powers as I fell to Earth, losing the wonder of flight, that too was challenging and, I believe, rather undeserved. However, I have made a home for myself in Hell. And there are splendours here on Earth. On that note, shall we have some wine?'

I do like good wine, but I've never been able to afford what the waiter brought to the table. It was at this point that I hoped the bill was on the Devil, because it looked like this meal would cost as much as one week's salary. At least.

There were no menus, no ordering. Each of the five courses came out in turn, and each was terrific. It was like you'd expect from such an expensive place, small portions on smart plates with lots of careful arrangement. Sometimes I weren't sure whether I should eat it or put it in an art gallery.

'Ms Foster...' Lucifer smiled. He wasn't really handsome, but he wasn't hard to look at either. There was something around his mouth that made me uneasy, like the way Ben's lips would go when he was working up into one of his tempers. 'May I address you as Corrie? I believe that is the name you offer to friends.'

'I didn't know we were friends,' I said.

'I hope that we shall be.'

'Then what should I call you?'

Again that low, dry laugh. 'I have had many names. Dinner companions call me Lucie.'

'Okay, Lucie.' I decided it was time to stop acting dazed. I was only having dinner with him, after all, not booking a one-way ticket to Hell. 'Oh, thanks for inviting me to dinner.'

'And no doubt you wonder, why me?' He helped himself to some caviar. I was still trying to decide whether I wanted to eat fish eggs. 'Our organization always

investigates the files of those who request our literature.’

‘Files?’ I repeated. ‘You have files on people?’

‘We have files on everyone.’ He shrugged. ‘Nearly everyone. We have not been granted access to information pertaining to members of the Kingdom. But for our own members, and those have not joined the Kingdom, we have much to choose from. So much easier these days with modern technology. You humans leave such an IT trail of telephone calls, emails, internet postings... In the old days my demons had to spend hours tracking people. Now all of you litter the virtual world with your lives.’

‘But why invite me?’

‘You are an interesting case.’ Lucie pointed his knife at me. ‘Corina Maria Foster, born thirty-five years ago to Judith Foster and Gerald Stone. Intriguing that your mother decided to change your last name to hers after your father died. Mother not only a member of the Kingdom, which recently underwent a name change to “God’s Gang” in order to appeal to the younger generation, but she has also been recruiter for over twenty-five years. I must admit that we have lost some good people due to your mother. Yours has been a steady if unspectacular career in MidPro after leaving university with a first class degree in history. You specialised in the Victorian period, but from the tone of your final papers I believe you regretted it. Married Benjamin Stokes three years after meeting him and were together for fourteen years. You had a trial separation and now he enjoys the company of a woman ten years your junior and about two trouser sizes thinner.’

‘Only one size by now,’ I said, ‘or do you want me to throw this expensive claret over your even more expensive suit?’

Lucie grinned. ‘I do like fire, both at home and in my associates. You appear unconcerned that I possess so much information.’

I took a casual sip of wine. Kept my cool. ‘Like you said, you could pick up all of that from public records. Nothing secret in any of that. But keep on trying to impress me. The wine is great.’

Lucie leaned back in his chair. ‘Shall I quote text messages to you? They become rather steamy from November onwards.’

The fork dropped from my fingers. I’d always suspected that he gotten serious with Helen in November, but I’d never known for certain. I stared at Lucie, and felt like my brain had frozen.

‘What I have been trying to decide,’ Lucie went on, his deep voice very soft, ‘is whether Ben decided to jump before he was pushed.’

‘I would never have pushed,’ I protested. Then my brain scrambled back into action. ‘I thought you of all people would approve of betrayal.’

‘I’m not people. I’m not human.’ His Darkness grinned. ‘Yes, mine was probably the first betrayal. But at least I was a rebel with a cause. And I had some style. Look how the Kingdom writes about me--I’m compared to a dragon!’ Lucie gave me a toothy grin and I could see why. ‘But if you are determined to have a mid-life crisis, at least do it properly. Pick a young woman to drape over your sports car or to accompany you to Tahiti. Why chase after someone only ten years younger and, I think you’re right, she is only one trouser size down from yours. Where did he find her again? Oh, yes, she lives in the same apartment complex. If only you two hadn’t agreed to that trial separation...’

The next course had arrived. I carved into what I assumed was some small game bird. Like many members of God’s Gang my mother hardly ever cooks meat. For several minutes we ate in silence while I tried to work out whether I was furious with His Illustriousness or whether I wanted to cheer him on. Finally, I said, ‘No one’s said

that to me before. I'm trying to work out if you're trying to make me feel better or feel really rotten.'

'Oh, Corrie, how you feel is not my concern. And I would have no understanding of your emotions at any rate. I'm an angel. I may be a fallen one, but I'm still an angel. I let Jesus do the becoming human angle, for whatever good this has done him. Two thousand years living like one of you... I cannot comprehend how he endures the sensation.'

'My mother says he did it for us.' I waved my fork at him. 'I mean, for us humans. So he could win the Earth back from you and set up the Kingdom. By the way, you might be an angel, but I can always tell when someone's laughing at me.'

'What do you expect?' he asked. 'Now you are so angry that you're defending Jesus. Be careful. Next you know, you will apply to join God's Gang.'

'It would be an interesting application form,' I said. 'Question One, "What has led you to apply for God's Gang?" Answer, "I had dinner with His Darkness."'

Lucifer was suddenly very serious. 'Remember that. It may be a good answer.'

Now it was my turn to laugh. 'I can't see me ever using it.'

We finally talked about other things. Lucie told me a bit about Hell. Every member of Devil's Due goes there, of course, but lots of them don't believe that they deserve to when they get there. 'The lawyers are the worst, they always try to find a legal loophole in the contract.' Members of God's Gang end up in Sheol. It's a bit less certain with people who haven't signed up to either. I didn't like the sound of that. I mean, I don't want to be a member of God's Gang, but I don't see why that should land me in Hell. I'm basically a good person, after all, I pay my taxes and I try to be nice to my mother. I never forget birthdays and I've never cheated on an exam. Hell is for other people, like people who drown kittens.

Dinner over. Cheeses like I'd never seen or smelled before came out with biscuits. And port so old that I felt like a baby sitting next to the bottle. The first glassful made me wish I'd eaten less food to leave more room for port.

'The port appeals to you?' Lucie asked. I suppose I was holding my glass like it would have to be prised from my dead fingers.

'It's okay,' I said. There, I thought, read that emotion, you fallen angel you. How clever are you, really?

We had a good laugh about a new TV programme. It's meant to be about two detectives, but it's so obviously designed to help recruit people to God's Gang that no one's watching it except people already in God's Gang. 'And the walk on part by the Peter,' I added, 'was so obvious! Of course she's going to be the one who gives them the major clue.'

'At least that was preferable to the Andrew appearing as an informer,' Lucie said. 'The Peter can act. The Andrew simply cannot. I do wonder why Jesus has chosen these people. I am far more discerning in my choice of associates.'

'Whatever.' I couldn't care less about the Twelve.

'This Judas will be different.' Lucie gave me a look I couldn't read. 'It will be very different this time.'

Soon after that I was escorted off the premises. The limo purred me back home, and I'm staying up far too late trying to get over the wine (and that port, especially that port!) and writing all this down. Good thing tomorrow's Sunday.

15 March

I let myself into the flat, tired from a long day at work. One of our major clients

had decided to leave us, and it was all hands on deck while we tried to convince him otherwise. Didn't work, of course. When someone decides to go, they just go.

My mother was in the kitchen, busy talking to someone on the phone. She tried to wave a message to me but I didn't understand it until I went into the lounge. Then I saw that she had a visitor.

He stood up as I came in. Okay looking, face a bit rounder than I like in men, with short hair which was trying to look blonde. Not quite European looking, skin was a bit brown or maybe he'd just come back from a sunny holiday. Something about him seemed familiar, but then lots of people come through Mum's flat. I must have seen him in one of her many meetings. 'Hi,' he said, sounding like seeing me must be the highlight of his day, if not the entire week. 'You must be Corrie. I'm Joshua Davison. I'm going to mentor some of your mother's new recruits.'

'That's nice.' I was going to go through to my room when I saw what was resting on the table. 'Did you bring that?'

'Oh, no, it was here when I arrived.'

I took a seat and pulled the bottle over. The dust and old label told me, even before I looked closely, that it was a twin to the bottle of port I'd been enjoying Saturday night. And which I hadn't regretted, despite the ache in my head on Sunday morning. A card was attached, and when I'd opened it up and read it I laughed out loud.

'What's the joke?' Joshua asked.

It seemed rude not to tell him. 'It says, "And don't share it with the jumper. He has no style."''

'And who is this styleless jumper?'

'My husband.' I'd answered without thinking. I looked up at Joshua, ready to make some cutting remark about minding his own business. But there was something about his face, sort of old and young, worried and relaxed at the same time. It didn't make him any better looking, but it did make him look interesting. 'It's just something someone said to me the other night. If Ben were going to leave me, at least it could have been for a much younger model.'

'And that would make you feel better--how?' Joshua was rapidly moving from interesting to annoying, and at my look he held up his hands. 'Sorry, just intrigued. Does this someone expect you to see your husband again?'

I just stared at him for a long moment. Joshua had a point. Did Lucie know that I still met up with Ben? I hadn't told him, but then those files of his seemed quite thorough. 'He probably knows that I do.'

'Oh.' Joshua coughed. 'I've never been through a break up like that, so I don't know how it is, but if someone had left me for another person, I don't know if I'd want to keep on seeing them.'

'It's Ben who wants me to keep coming.' I'd had a long day, I was tired, and it seemed easier to stay and talk than to get up again. Besides, Joshua was a mentor. It's their job to listen. 'And as long as he does, well, that means he's not sure about leaving, is he?'

'Does he talk about you and him?'

'Well, not really.' I had to fight an urge to open the bottle and swallow at least two hundred pound's worth of port. 'He talks about problems at work, and about the houses they're looking at...' I took a deep breath. 'He told me the other week that, in three months or so, "when the dust has settled," he wants the three of us to have dinner together. He says that I'll really like Helen, she's such a nice person.'

'Would you like some advice?' Joshua asked quietly. I nodded, deciding that I could always ignore it. 'Sounds to me like you're still giving Ben the emotional

support he had from you when you were together. He gets to do all the happy things with Helen, and he comes to you with the difficult things. Tell me, what do you think is the main gift of marriage?’

‘Sex?’

Joshua smiled. ‘A marriage can survive without sex.’

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘But it’d be rather boring.’

‘The main gift in marriage, the contract between husband and wife, is that they will listen to one another. That they will give the gift of attention.’ Joshua leaned forward, his blue eyes very serious. ‘By leaving the marriage Ben has forfeited that gift. Why do you keep offering it to him?’

‘He might come back to me.’ My voice sounded very small. ‘He still loves me. He’s said so.’

‘So that’s what he’s said,’ Joshua said softly. ‘I’ve long thought that those words can come too easily. If you love someone, surely that will affect how you act towards them? Love is as love does.’

At that moment Mum came trilling into the room. ‘Sorry, Joshua, that was a long phone call! But I’m glad it gave you and Corrie a chance to meet. Joshua’s an experienced mentor and he’s just moved to Daventry. Isn’t that wonderful?’

‘I’m sure it is,’ I said as I got up. Joshua looked like he had earlier, a youngish man who needed a better haircut. You wouldn’t have thought he could be so intense just a moment before, the way he now grinned up at Mum. Maybe all mentors are like that.

Me, I’ve got some rather nice port to drink after dinner. It should help me forget how I felt after Joshua’s last sentence. Ben loves me. He said so. He’s the person who knows me best in the world. Of course he loves me, he just needs time to find his way back to me.

16 March

Okay, yes, I cried last night. I managed to muffle it with a pillow so Mum wouldn’t hear. I just don’t understand what’s happened. We had a good marriage, even Ben admits that. We weren’t rowing or falling out or threatening to leave each other. We were only going to have a short break from each other, that was all, and then we’d be back together again. He said he’d work things through. I didn’t see us being apart meaning that he’d find someone else.

Styleless jumper.

But I did feel a lot better afterwards. Maybe I’ve needed a good cry.

17 March

It’s everywhere. Billboards, radio, TV, posters in pub windows. Pub windows, for the love of Solomon! The big reveal about the Judas Disciple. Don’t know who God’s Gang use for their marketing people, but the two hands holding an envelope isn’t the greatest ad ever. On the radio you get the different Disciples gasping ‘All will be revealed--or will it? Tune in Tuesday to the God Channel!’

Mum’s so excited. She’s going to have a big party in the flat, with as many recruits as she can cram in. I don’t remember all this fuss before when there was a new Disciple. An announcement in the papers, and then there he or she was, smiling through multiple interviews. Not all this build up.

I planned to thoroughly avoid it. Maybe let myself into the house and get drunk. But Lucie thought I should watch it. He said it was important.

Well, yes, Lucie. We had lunch today. It was much more low key than that dinner experience. I got an envelope delivered to my desk at work. The sheet of paper inside had a street map of Daventry and The Thistle was circled. On the other side was written, 'Lunch? Lucie.' And that was it. Talk about being a demon of little words.

Lucie was already there when I arrived. Still in that black suit, still taller than anyone else in the room, but the people who glanced at him probably did so because of his height. It's not like he shows his horns in public. If he has horns. Maybe he keeps them for special occasions.

Lucie rose to his feet as I came to the table. That got a few more people interested. 'Corrie, I am so pleased you could join me.'

'It was a bit short notice,' I agreed. 'Did you just happen to be in the neighbourhood?'

'Of course not. Why would I wish to visit Daventry?' Then he had to break off because a man was wandering over to us. 'What do you want?'

The man coughed. 'Um, my mother, you see, she's not well and she needs to see a doctor. I mean, I'm right, aren't I? You're Lucifer. You can help me out, can't you, help my mum get treatment?'

'Let's keep this quiet, mortal,' Lucie said to him softly. 'You may have recognised me, but most in this place have not. Have a seat and we can speak.'

The man slumped into a chair. 'My mum,' he said again. 'Help my mum get treatment.'

'Claim on her insurance,' Lucie told him.

'But she doesn't have any insurance,' the man said. 'She couldn't afford it, and mine won't cover her. She needs help. I think it's--I think it's cancer.' His eyes were wet, and I looked away, feeling embarrassed. 'She means everything to me, my mum.'

'If she wants access to full medical treatment then there are two options,' Lucie shrugged. 'Both sides look after their own. She could join Devil's Due.'

'She'd never do that.'

'Then there is God's Gang.'

'No, she can't stand Temple.'

'Then she is most likely on her way to Hell anyway,' Lucie smiled, and I was again reminded of a hungry dragon. 'She may as well join us.'

'She's not going to Hell,' the man insisted. 'She's a good woman, my mum. She's looked after us all for years. I'd do anything for her.'

'Anything?' There was a coldness in Lucie's voice which I hadn't heard before. 'Anything at all?'

'Anything.'

Lucie stood up. 'Then you join Devil's Due, and we will arrange treatment for her.'

I'd never seen anyone go so pale before. The man stared at Lucie a long time. Then he shuffled to his feet. 'Okay, yes, I'll do it. I'll join you, and you sort out my mum.'

Lucie held out his hand. The man's hand jerked up, and shook as his fingers came near Lucie's. Then he slid his hand into the offered hand, and palm pressed against palm. Lucie smiled as he let go. Then he pulled a mobile phone from his coat and activated it. 'The Thistle, Daventry, man for collection. Process him and then arrange medical care for his mother. He will give you the details.' Lucie slid the phone away. 'Wait outside. The car will be with you in a few minutes.'

The man wandered out, looking dazed. Lucie sat down again. 'Small fry,' he grumbled. 'Perhaps I'm just too soft on these little people.'

‘That’s a bit weird,’ I said. ‘How quickly he just said yes.’

‘Oh, he was already ours. He simply had not realised it.’ Lucie gave me his dragon grin. ‘Most people are ours, after all. They discover this truth when it is far too late. You cannot join God’s Gang once you’re dead. The trip through the gates of Hell is a one way journey.’

‘But you get out.’

‘I have a permanent pass. I’m permitted to go to and fro across the Earth, and walk up and down it. It was part of the deal I made long ago.’ He grimaced at the menu. ‘Are any of these options remotely edible?’

‘You own Hell,’ I told him. ‘You’ll survive the Thistle’s cooking.’

He threw the menu down. ‘Salad. I shall have to order salad. Can’t get salad wrong, can they? And I do not own Hell. I only lease it.’

‘I’ll go order,’ I said, and got up before he could say anything. I needed time to work through the info dump I’d been experiencing. I didn’t like his assumption that most people were Devil’s Due, I’d never heard that he had some deal with Jesus, and what did he mean about leasing Hell? But as I ordered our food and got in some drinks--I decided he would survive a glass of house red--I knew that there was one question I really had to ask.

I waited until Lucie had spluttered over the Australian merlot before I leaned into his personal space. ‘Why dinner? Why lunch? Why me?’

‘I don’t like people in my face.’ Lucie spoke softly, but something in his dark eyes made me all but slam myself back into my chair. Then he was normal again. ‘Yes, why you? Well, why not? Perhaps we can consider this market research. Here we have Corina Foster, low grade insurance officer, on her way to a divorce, living once again with her mother. Why are you not a member of God’s Gang?’

All he had to do now was sigh and he could be Mum. ‘Cheap clothes and cheap wine. You only get the size of home which matches your family size. A car if you need one, but a bicycle or bus pass if they decide you don’t. I may be a low grade insurance officer, but at least all my money is my own. I don’t have to sign it over to anyone.’

‘There is the Lottery.’

‘And Sheol.’ I shrugged. ‘Can’t see the draw of Sheol. Sounds like a grey sort of space.’

‘Sheol has its charms. Heaven can be seen from the shore.’ Lucie sounded almost wistful. ‘I should think any human would prefer it to Hell.’

Our food arrived, which gave my brain another chance to catch up. I could hear Lucie stabbing without enthusiasm at his salad. ‘Not even a single blade of rocket,’ I heard him mutter under his breath. Then he said, without any sort of warning whatsoever, ‘You should join God’s Gang.’

My fork flew out of my hand and clanged on the stone floor. Half the pub looked around, and I just smiled and shrugged at them. ‘Oops.’

A new fork was brought to me. I put it down on the table. ‘That’s the last thing I’d expect you to say. Don’t you want everyone to join Devil’s Due?’

‘Join God’s Gang.’ He pushed the salad away. ‘Only members are permitted to enter the Competition.’

‘Competition? What Competition?’

‘All will be revealed. Besides,’ he added, wagging a finger at me, ‘what do you have to lose? Without the jumper’s income you will find it difficult to afford those clothes, that wine, a car, or a good house.’

Now my appetite was definitely gone. ‘Ben said he was going to make sure I’m

okay. He said I'd get a good settlement.'

'Men are fickle, and love is blind.' Lucie laughed. 'No, I have not glanced at text messages nor court records. I have spent thousands of years observing you humans. From early on in your evolutionary history you learnt to look after yourselves first. Covenant breakers, all of you. Ben will choose his own happiness first.'

I had a sudden flashback to that terrible evening, our last together at the house, Ben like a boy in a sweet shop as he decided which woman he wanted. 'We agreed to a break,' he'd reminded me. 'We've been apart long enough for me to realise that I have to choose. I could be happy with you. Or I could be happy with Helen. I have to choose what's best for me, don't I? Or we'd back to what we had before.' He had once stood in a Temple and promised to be faithful to me until either of us died, not only until we'd moved into separate homes. How could I rely on any other promise he had made to me?

Lucie smiled. 'Trust me. The Competition will be your ticket to a shiny new life. That will show Ben how mistaken he was to leave you. Wait and see.'

My hour off was nearly up. I paid for the meals and left Lucie to his limo. That drew some glances, pulled on the kerb on Temple Street. But plain black, no red markings. Lucie seemed to be doing things low key.

Join God's Gang? Why on Earth would he suggest that?

18 March

I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. How could he? What's happened to Ben?

I'd gone over, like I do on Fridays. I'd just sat down when Ben said, 'Look, I need to talk to you about the financial settlement. I know you and I agreed that you'd have a larger cut of the equity. But we need to get a bigger house. Helen's mum isn't very well, and so we'll probably have to take her in.'

'But--'

'Come on, Corrie, you know how important family is. You'd do the same for your mother.'

Brain caught up now. Okay, Corrie, stop thinking of this as Ben, husband, lover, friend. Stop thinking about the great holidays you used to have and concentrate on looking after yourself. I tried not to remember that Lucie had only warned me about this yesterday. 'No,' I said. Then again, 'No, I'm happy with the financial agreement we made. And you're going to have two incomes. I've only got mine.'

'But we'll only have one if Helen has to start caring for her mum.' Ben's smile slipped. 'I thought you'd understand.'

'No,' I said again. 'I'm sticking to what we've agreed.'

Ben rose to his feet, and I came to mine. A mistake. I'm only a couple of inches shorter, so I had a good view of his flushed face. He could always get angry very quickly, particularly when he didn't get his own way. 'I can't believe this. When I've tried so hard to be kind to you, and this is how you treat me.'

'Kind?' I choked on the word. But his fists were clenched, and I suddenly wondered who he really was. So I only said, 'I'm going to leave now. And don't bother asking me to see you again.'

For a moment we stared at each other. Then I turned and strode down the hall. Only when I heard the door slam behind me did I realise that I'd been holding my breath. Then I hurried home to find wine and my bedroom.

Well, I'm not going to join God's Gang just because my life's fallen apart and everything's crap.

21 March

Spent the weekend with a couple of friends. They're doing very well for themselves, both high flying jobs, company cars, share options, all the stuff I thought I'd be headed for. Some people just get all the career breaks, don't they? Unlike me, stuck in--what did Lucie call it? I was a 'low grade insurance officer.' But then I'd never planned to work in a company or anything else. I was going to continue my studies, get a PhD and write books about Queen Victoria. But I'd met Ben. He wanted to live in the Midlands to be close to his parents, and he didn't want to live as poor students while I slaved for years over a PhD. So I found a job at MidPro. End of story.

I joined Pam and Euan for their house hunting. They've decided it was time to move up, a bigger place in an exclusive development. We visited one house that had the thickest carpet I've ever trod on. They laughed when I bent down to give it a pat. It was like walking on a large fluffy cat.

It was weird to see them without Ben. They've tried to contact him, but he's not returned their calls. Pam's decided to stop trying. 'I've got enough friends in my life,' she said, 'that I don't need to chase after someone who's decided he doesn't want to know me anymore.'

Lucky her. Lots of friends. Ben always wanted things to be just the two of us. Pam and Euan are in my small handful of friends. We would see each other twice a year and Ben always felt that that was enough.

Mum's already getting the flat ready for the Big Announcement on Tuesday. I came home to find posters up of the Twelve, with ribbons decorating the one of the recently departed Judas. And she's got a new TV, a big widescreen thing on one wall. Seems God's Gang decided that all of their recruiters should have an upgrade to handle the rush of people who will want to join. They're expecting big things to happen because of the Announcement.

22 March

Yes, the NIGHT OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT. The flat is full of recent recruits, piled onto the couch and armchairs and spilling across the floor. I grabbed a chair in a corner and I've got my notebook on my lap. They probably think I'm taking notes, not realising I'm Recording Events for Prosperity. And trying hard not to laugh.

First thing which got me were the t-shirts. All of them are wearing the face of their favourite Disciple. This seems to work better on the guys. On a couple of the girls it gives the Disciple very broad shoulders. All of them are represented, except for the Judas. A couple of people are wearing a t-shirt with a large question mark, which I suppose is meant to represent the next Judas. 'The Judas? Judas who?'

The coffee table is lined with drinks and nibbles. They're all in a party mood. Well, even MidPro gave us a half day off so we could all go home and get ready. I'm trying to remember when Sergei Matthew was announced. Did we get a national holiday?

The TV is already on. There's some documentary about the last Judas, a sort of greatest hits about his life. Most of them are ignoring it. They're having too good a time drinking and laughing together. I like the clip from Judas addressing the World Economic Forum. All these men and women in sharp suits, and there he is in God's Gang threads, telling them off for their economic policies in Africa.

Okay, we're on the hour, and the room's gone all quiet. Oh, snazzy opening music.

Sounds like they've used a God's Gang pop group to put together something just for this. 'Who, oh who will it be?' is the refrain. 'Is it you, is it me, who will it be?'

Up comes Richard Longheart. I'm a bit surprised by that. Yes, he's the number one talk show host, but he's not a member of God's Gang. Wonder how they got him on board. Those all too white teeth of his flash as he waves at the camera. 'Welcome, welcome everyone who's tuned in tonight. To all our viewers across the world, especially those who've stayed up late or got up early to be with us! Tonight is a most exciting night, one we've all been waiting for.'

The camera swings around to the Peter. Mercy is in full on colourful mode, wearing a dress covered with bright swirls. I wish I'd put on my sunglasses. The recruits wearing her t-shirt cheer. 'And we have Mercy, the Peter, here to start us off. It's an exciting night, isn't it?'

'Very exciting, and it will only become even more exciting. I will introduce my fellow Disciples.' The camera pulled back to show all of the Eleven were in two rows of chairs. 'John, the John. Alice, the Andrew. Robert, the Thomas. Sergei, the Matthew.' There was cheering from the audience and in the flat in the pause after each Disciple was introduced. 'Atal, the Greater James. Amadou, the Lesser James. Akiko, the Simon. Wayne, the Philip. Tlate Hiin, the Bartholomew. Magaskawee, the Jude.'

'And there's one missing, Mercy Peter.'

'Sadly, yes,' said the John. He pointed at the empty chair in the front row. 'This is the place which needs to be filled. We need a new Judas.'

Back to Richard Longheart, flashing his teeth as he announces, 'Let's look at the history of the Judas Disciple.'

Up comes a short film. Paintings of the earliest Judas Disciples come up with a voice telling us their accomplishments. We move on to photos and video for the most recent, sometimes standing next to heads of nations and other financial leaders. A list of the greatest accomplishments of Judas Disciples, like Food Banks and Swap Outfitters.

'Wow,' Richard is saying. 'That's quite a history to live up to. So, what's the plan for the next Judas?'

'Well, he or she has to be able to handle the Judas portfolio,' Robert Thomas says. 'So we're hoping someone from the financial sector might be willing to take on the Judas role. It might be quite a large ask.'

'I made the move from corporate life,' says Tlate Hiin Bartholomew. 'I was CEO of a major skin products company before I followed the call to become the Bartholomew.' I'd forgotten about that, and I still use Hiin Daily Moisture Solution.

'The Judas is responsible for overseeing the economic policies of the worldwide Kingdom organisation,' Richard reminded us all. 'What else does the next Judas need to be?'

'It is time for another Disciple from Europe.' I've always loved Sergei Matthew's Russian accent. 'We are seeking a man or woman from the Republic of England.'

'A woman, perhaps, Sergei Matthew?' Richard asks with a smirk. Sometimes people talk about the Matthew as being Most Eligible Disciple. He's shown no sign of marrying. A bit too dark and handsome for my taste, but the recruit wearing his t-shirt is leaning towards the TV screen and hanging on his every word.

'We keep hoping he'll settle down one day,' the John says. And the Eleven all laughed and nudged each other. So did the recruits. They all like each other, really like each other, the Eleven in that studio and these recruits in my Mum's flat. I didn't think of that before. Must be nice to have so many friends.

‘The last Disciple, the Andrew, was found--’

‘Called,’ Mercy Peter corrected rather firmly.

‘--called,’ Richard continued with a slight frown, ‘after a long search process in Canada. Have you started the search in England?’

The recruits have quieted down. This is it. The BIG ANNOUNCEMENT.

‘It my great pleasure, tonight,’ the Peter is saying, ‘to announce our intention to run a national competition for the position of Judas.’

Absolute silence, in the studio and here in the flat. Even Richard doesn’t seem to know what to say. ‘A competition?’ he repeats. I actually feel sorry for him. He was probably hoping that the new Judas was going to be walked out on stage and he’d get to be the first to interview him. Or her.

‘It will be an eight week selection process,’ the Peter says. She’s turning to the Simon. ‘Akiko Simon will outline the process.’

There’s a stifled groan in the room. Akiko struggles a bit with English, but she has the marketing portfolio so I can understand why she’s doing the talking.

From what I’m working out, she’s saying that the competition will be televised. Anyone who lives in the UK can apply through a special website, set up for the competition, which is going live this evening. You’re supposed to take a video of yourself, saying why you’d be a great Judas, and upload it to the website along with your CV. The Eleven and Jesus will review the videos and CV’s, and the eight best ones will be invited to the competition. The competition will take eight weeks, and each week will be televised so people can watch what the candidates do and why the Eleven decide who stays and who goes home.

Oh, thank Earth, it’s now over to Alice Andrew. Canadians are so much easier to understand. There’s an interesting reaction in the room and the studio. The Andrew is the one with the mission portfolio. ‘The competition is not limited to those who are already members of the Kingdom--God’s Gang,’ she says. ‘If you’re willing to undergo an accelerated recruitment process and join God’s Gang before the start of filming, we would welcome applications even from those who are not currently members.’

Wow, what a reaction. In the room and in the studio everyone seems to be talking at once. I don’t think God’s Gang has ever done this before. The Disciples have always come from long term baptised members.

Mum is shushing the recruits, and Longheart is doing the same in the studio. Now he’s smiling again. I guess he thinks that this is even better than trotting the new Judas. A major competition, announced on his show. ‘So, even someone like me could apply?’

‘If you have the necessary calling and experience,’ the Andrew tells him.

‘I certainly know how to spend money!’ Then Richard turns to Mercy Peter. ‘And I think you have one final surprise for us?’

The Eleven come to their feet. All of us in the flat do so as well. This can mean only one thing. The Peter bows her head. ‘We have a message from Jesus.’

Wow. This is big. I think the last time we heard from Jesus was about a year ago, when the earthquake hit San Francisco. I’m trying to write this while standing, which isn’t easy.

Over to the message. There’s the usual photo of Jesus which they bring out, all artistic and in semi shadow. Shaggy brown hair, beard, hard to tell but I think untouched by grey. Well, he is immortal, after all. I remember that he was on a plane crash when I was about seven years old. Most of the others died, but he walked away without even a scratch. Something about only he could decide whether he lived or

died.

'My dear friends,' he is saying, in that quiet Middle Eastern accent of his. 'May I thank you for joining us on this important occasion. We are all called to service in the Kingdom of God. For many this is in the daily acts of kindness at work and at home. For a few this is as one of my Disciples, one of the Twelve. Please consider whether my Father is calling you to this service. Is God asking you to be one of the Twelve?'

The audio is fading out. Some people are sighing. Even I know how they feel. We get to see Jesus so little, but then, he does need to save his strength. I remember stories of how he used to exhaust himself early on, and that was when members of the Kingdom numbered only in the thousands, never mind the millions of people they have today.

'Well, folks, there you have it,' Richard is saying. 'The website will be listed at the end of this programme. Any last words, Mercy Peter?'

The Peter is giving the camera a big smile. 'The application process ends just after Passover, on 26 April. So if you think you have the calling and the experience need to be the next Judas, please send in your competition entry!'

The programme is ending with that catchy theme tune. 'Who, oh who will it be? Is it you, is it me, who will it be?'

Mum has switched the TV off. Drinks and nibbles are going around while they talk about the competition. They're all agreeing how clever it is, how it should bring a lot more people to join God's Gang. Probably will. I hope they've upped the staffing in Recruitment Centres to cope.

One person in the room, wearing a t-shirt of the Thomas, is the only one who's not entirely happy. 'Is it a good idea?' she's asking. 'To let people go through some sort of accelerated recruitment? How loyal would that person be if things get tough?' But the rest of them are telling her 'Don't be such a Thomas.' Nothing's going to ruin their party.

24 March

'King David's testicles!' I'd pretty much said the same when I'd looked at the letter from Ben's solicitor, but it's always far more gratifying to hear someone else swear on your behalf. Jane looked up at me. 'When did you get this?'

'Today,' I told her. 'I picked up the post on the way to work.'

'No wonder you've been distracted all morning.' We were eating sandwiches in the empty boardroom. 'I thought you said he was going to give you more than half.'

'That's what he promised.' I was trying to keep my voice steady, but I felt like screaming. 'He said he wanted me to be okay.'

'Do you have anything in writing?'

I shook my head. 'Of course not. He'd promised. I thought I could trust him.'

'When he'd already decided to move out permanently?' Jane touched my arm. 'Sorry. I know that doesn't help. Let me look at this letter again.'

The paper was high quality, ivory stock, heavy and official. The firm's name was embossed on the top. I'd looked at it so many times already that I nearly knew it by heart. The main point came half way down. Ben was applying for half of all our assets. So much for giving me extra money, the money which was going to buy me a new life when the nightmare of divorce was over. How could he?

'I'm no lawyer,' Jane said, 'but I think it comes down to where you were married. Were you married in a civil ceremony?'

I shook my head. 'We were married in a Temple.'

Jane winced. ‘And so you promised--how does it go--“all that I have I share with you”?’

‘That was in the vows. Just like staying faithful to each other.’

‘Then I think you’ll find that Ben does get to claim half of everything, never mind what he’s said to you before.’ Jane pushed the letter back to me. ‘Why did you get married in a Temple anyway?’

‘The pretty windows and the candles,’ I said. ‘That’s all. The local civic hall was so ugly. I never thought it would lead to this.’

‘It does seem so unfair,’ Jane said. ‘You always thought he’d to come back, didn’t you?’

‘Always,’ I acknowledged. Then I pushed away my sandwiches, no longer hungry. ‘Well, that’s the end of having a nice house, buying new furniture--he’ll be all right, on two salaries.’

Jane bit her lip. ‘How much were you depending on getting most of the equity?’

‘Without it...’ I laughed bitterly. ‘I’d probably be better off joining God’s Gang.’

‘You’d probably be no worse off. I looked at it once.’ I stared at her. No nonsense Jane, who spent more on shoes in a week than I did in a year? ‘Oh, there’s a website where you can work out your entitlements as a member. Or you could enter that Competition. Disciples are well looked after, aren’t they?’ Then she laughed at her joke.

I didn’t laugh with her. There was another bit of post for me this morning, which I did not show to Jane. It was a single piece of paper, a map of Daventry, with a circle drawn around the Recruitment Centre. There was only one word on the paper.

‘Competition?’ And it was signed ‘Lucie.’

27 March

Went to Temple yesterday. Not my mother’s. This is some ‘New Expression of Temple’ in another part of Daventry. One of people in my mother’s recruit group told me about it. I think the building used to be an ambulance station. It’s now been carpeted and there’s a large screen above the stage. A set of pop group wannabes played jazzed up versions of psalms and songs. As usual anyone could read out the lessons from the Scriptures, but in this Temple the person who has just read does an interpretation, and then everyone in the building asks questions or makes comments. It made the service last about twice as long as in the more traditional Temples, and I was gasping for my cup of (instant!) coffee by the end.

It was a younger crowd than at Mum’s Temple, and they looked like the type who’d be well dressed if they weren’t stuck with the God Gang’s clothing allowance. I did see some nice shoes, though, so I think some of them were recent converts.

The clocks went ahead this morning, which always puts me in a bad mood. I’m in town, did a bit of shopping, and I’m now at a coffee shop. Real coffee, not powdered muck. The Recruitment Centre is just a few doors down. Posters are up advertising the Competition for the Judas Disciple. ‘Is it you, is it me?’ seems to be the catchphrase. ‘Come inside and find out!’

I’m cheering myself up with a chocolate muffin.

In the time I’ve been sitting here I’ve seen three people go into the Recruitment Centre. They all look normal, though I think one was already a member of God’s Gang. Oh, look, one’s come out again. He looks really happy, despite the fact that he’s just signed away all his money and income forever. If he’s joined, that is. Maybe he’s happy because he’s escaped.

I gave up so much to marry Ben. I had plans for my life. I was going to do research. I was going to become the person who knew everything about Queen Victoria. But Ben didn't want me to 'waste our time and money' on a PhD. He resented the time I tried to spend on writing, so that never happened either. He's gone on to a high salary and I'm stuck in a low end insurance job and living with my mother. I gave up everything for a man who decided to leave me. 'If it's any consolation,' Ben told me one evening, 'I never meant to find someone else. It just happened.'

No, it's not any consolation.

29 March

Looked up the Competition details on the website. Nice graphics open up with that 'Who, oh who will it be? Is it you, is it me, who will it be?' jingle. A running total of entries received thus far. Over two thousand already!

The good stuff is scattered around. A clip from Mercy Peter, telling you how important the Judas is to the whole operation. Photos of Iscariot House. Lots of rooms for entertaining economists and politicians. I love the gleaming kitchen with the marble tops. Seems the last Judas liked to cook personally for his guests, but a cook is normally provided as part of the 'support package.'

A photo gallery shows previous Judas Disciples doing important visits all around the world. I like the one on Passover Island, standing next to the moai. The last Judas was tall and wide and I felt like doing a 'spot the difference' between him and the stone statues.

Each Disciple had done a quote on how much they missed the last Judas, Reginald, and how much support they would give to the new one. More photos here, and a few video clips, showing the Twelve mucking about and having fun. The one of them all trying to surf made me smile. I tried to learn once, and it was fun falling off into the ocean. The Disciples do look like they enjoy being together. Every so often there would even be a shot with Jesus in it--just the back of his head, of course.

I've also looked up what I'd get as a member of God's Gang. You put in your details, like marital status, number of dependents, work location, and so on. The website takes a moment, then comes back with something called 'Your Personal Allowance.' I'd get a one bed flat with utility bills paid, extra money for business clothes, a basic mobile phone (no smart phone!), a laptop, and an allowance for food which includes a modest amount for alcohol. A very modest amount. I'd lose my car, because I could catch the bus or walk to work and I don't have any dependents.

Much better lifestyle if you're a Disciple. But what else is new? You always get more at the top. Can't expect it to be any different in God's Gang.

All my income would go over to God's Gang, including the proceeds from the house. But when I looked at what I'm going to have to pay out in rent or mortgage, food, bills, etc. etc. then I'm probably no worse off. Not now that Ben has decided to take half of everything.

But I don't want to be just a member of God's Gang. The more I look at it the more I wonder, why couldn't it be me? Maybe I could be the Judas. I took a wrong step fourteen years ago. I gave up all that I wanted to be in order to be what Ben wanted me to be. But this might be my second chance, my chance to be more than a low grade insurance officer. I could have that house, those frequent flyer miles. I could be part of that group, people who have holidays trying to learn how to surf. That could be my shiny new life. Like Lucie said, that would show Ben.

I wonder if you can join the Gang and then come out again. I can't find anything on an Internet search. Join, and try to get into the Competition? And if I don't get in, then pull out?

Would be great to see Passover Island.

# April

1 April

Okay, there was a bit of fun in the idea of going into the Recruitment Centre on April Fool's Day. No sign of much fun in the goody bag the Recruitment Centre gave me. Buried under a Judas Competition t-shirt (logo of a large question mark and the 'Is it you, is it me?' catchphrase) and a poster of Mercy Peter is another notebook. It's the same blue and pink teddy bear one, probably left over from the Conversion Concert. Wonderful. At least my journals will match.

The Recruitment Centre was bigger than I'd expected. You go through the doors into a big open plan space with couches at one side and desks on the other. There were glossy books about the various Disciples on coffee tables and a nearby coffee station. There were a number of people there sipping at a post work cuppa.

Not that I was given time to look at books and drink coffee. As I glanced around a man who looked like he'd only left school the day before came up to me. 'Hello, welcome to our Centre,' he said. We exchanged a rather weak handshake. 'My name is Carl. Can I help you in any way?'

Now that I was actually inside my nerve was failing. Was it really worth all the hassle, just to enter the Competition? But then something came back to me. I remembered how the Disciples had looked so happy together, and how I'd seen that same sort of togetherness with my mother's recruits. It would be great to meet some new people instead of spending all my evenings in Mum's flat. 'Yes,' I said. 'I'm thinking of joining God's Gang.'

Much to my relief Carl took this calmly. 'Is it because of the Judas Competition?' 'The Competition?'

'Well, we're getting a lot of enquiries from people who want to enter the Competition.' As he talked he steered me over to one of the desks. 'You have just enough time to go through the Accelerated Programme to qualify before the closing date.'

The idea of an Accelerated Programme definitely appeals. We both took our seats and he turned to his computer. 'I'll need to take some information from you. If you don't know the answers to any of my questions then you can send me the details later.'

I arranged my shopping beside my chair and got comfortable. 'I didn't realise there would be paperwork.'

'We don't do this just on a handshake, you know.' He grinned as he said this, and I suddenly thought of Lucie, gaining a man's soul in a pub. It seems far simpler to go to Hell.

Much of what Carl wanted was standard. Name, contact details, career. He was able to look up my employment history and bank accounts, which made me a bit uneasy. Then he wanted details like house ownership and equity, value of other property like furniture and collectables. Then we got on to my car.

'I calculate that you live less than two miles from your workplace,' Carl said. 'You have no dependents. We would classify you in the non car owning category.'

I'd known this from my own research, but it was still hard to hear it. 'You're going to take my car away?'

Carl leaned back in his chair. 'Corrie--may I call you Corrie? Corrie, God's Gang

will meet all your needs from the moment of your baptism. You will be housed, fed, clothed, and even more importantly you will be part of the Kingdom and have new family to call your own. God himself will be your Father. I think you'll find that you won't miss your car.'

This wasn't going well. I could feel my face getting warm. It's bad enough when my mother lectures me, but a spotty teenager! I was beginning to think this was all a bad idea, and my legs were twitching for me to get up and walk away.

A hand touched my shoulder, just lightly, but I felt myself calm down. My face cooled and my legs settled. A familiar face followed the hand, and Joshua moved past me to stand behind Carl.

'Hi, Corrie. Nice to see you here.' Joshua looked as ruffled as the other time I'd seen him. Mentors obviously don't get a high clothing allowance.

'Hey, Josh.' Carl gave him a big smile. 'Nice to see you here too. You've met Corina?'

'Oh, yes, at her mother's flat. Her mother is a recruiter.' Joshua tapped at the computer screen. 'Where've you got to?'

'Car ownership.' Carl sighed. 'She wants to keep the car.'

'And there's no identifiable need?'

'No. She's in walking distance to work and there are no dependents.'

'Hello, still sitting here,' I interjected.

Joshua laughed. 'And so you are. How rude of us.' He cocked his head. 'Are you entering the Competition?'

'I was thinking of it,' I said, not wanting to look too eager.

'We're using different recruiters for the Accelerated Programme than the normal entry,' Joshua explained. 'For your meetings you'd have to go to Northampton. That qualifies you to keep the car, at least until your baptism.'

It wasn't great, but it was better than losing my car immediately. 'Definitely entering the Competition,' I declared. Joshua laughed again, but I didn't mind. He's got a nice laugh. Pity mentors are pledged to celibacy.

'Oh, one more thing.' Carl suddenly looked embarrassed. 'It's, well, um...'

Joshua was the one who met my eyes. 'Have you supped with the Devil?'

I coughed. 'Well, okay, once maybe. He was in Daventry.'

'Just the once?' There was something challenging in Joshua's blue eyes.

'That's all it says on here,' Carl said quickly. He looked embarrassed, and I wondered if he had his own history with the Prince of Darkness. Certainly made him more interesting.

I spoke before Joshua could say anything. 'I thought I should, well, check out both sides. Does that mean I can't join?'

Carl laughed. 'Oh, no, it means we're even happier to have you with us!' He shrugged. 'There's another form to sign, stating that you've renounced the Devil and all his lies. Okay?'

'Fine,' I said relieved.

The forms were completed, and a printer churned out the pages. I looked through and signed both copies. I asked Carl to do two photocopies. I've since written a letter to Ben's solicitor, explaining the change in my financial situation and enclosing the second copy. I was so tempted to add at the bottom, 'And Ben can go join Egton', but more rational sense prevailed. Ben has moved on in his life. Now he can see that I've got plans too.

Right. It's done. Now I need to work out how to do this video and application for the Judas Competition.

Did the cooking tonight. Don't know why, it just came to me when I got home that maybe it's not fair that Mum always does it. And once the casserole was in the oven I even did some cleaning. Mum was so grateful that she gave me a kiss and then we talked about all sorts of things. 'Thanks for a lovely evening,' she said as we headed off to our rooms. 'Let's try to be like this more often?'

5 April

Okay, that was totally unexpected. I came home from work and there were all Mum's recruits. 'Surprise!' they shouted. Big banners were up across the room stating 'Congratulations!' and somehow they'd found a way to have champagne, REAL champagne, along with posh nibbles. My mother all but hugged my breath out of me. They all wanted to pat my back and made a big fuss that I've converted.

It was all rather nice. I won't pretend otherwise. But I couldn't bring myself to tell them that the Devil had made me do it.

6 April

Paperwork has come through. I'm to attend recruitment meetings in Duston, starting next Thursday. We've got two evenings together, and then I'll be baptised on Passover Saturday in the main Daventry Temple. My mother's thrilled about the last bit. Her own daughter, in her own Temple. A baptiser is coming out from Coventry just for me.

In a separate envelope I've had through the instructions on how to enter the Judas Competition. Oh, look, how exciting, they've written a whole page on how to put together a CV. I can get the video done at any Recruitment Centre or do one myself. Great. Maybe I should just let them take the car now.

Jane was appalled that I've joined God's Gang. 'Jezebel's dogs!' she swore when I told her. Then, much to my horror, she immediately apologised.

'You've never worried about swearing in front of me before,' I told her.

'But you're one of them now,' she said.

One of them now!

8 April

Just a coffee with Lucie today. We met after work, and he seemed happy enough with his 'tall iced coffee in grande cup with extra ice, three pumps hazelnut, two pumps classic, an inch of non-fat milk, with a dome lid and a venti straw.' This was after he'd a quick chat with waitress over bean types and roasting times. 'It's true,' I said to him. 'You really are in the details.'

Lucie sniffed. 'I prefer to think of myself as a purist. But if you are to be excluded from Heaven for the rest of your eternal, you may as well enjoy a few good things on Earth.'

'Are there only angels in Heaven?'

'Other than God.'

'Oh, yes, other than God.' Sometimes Lucie reminds me of Ben's less likeable traits.

'Of course.' Lucie shrugged. 'Heaven is vast, and I have never understood why it should be so empty. It was as if we were waiting for more tenants.'

'So no humans?'

Lucie laughed, long and hard. Can't say it was pleasant. Finally he managed to stop. 'Oh, Corrie, you have the most wonderful sense of humour. Humans in Heaven! There's no divine spark in any of you. One look from God and you would all shrivel in the divine light.' He leaned over and pinched my arm. 'Matter, animal matter, that's all you are. The only human who is divine on this planet is Jesus, and he shows no sign of returning to Heaven. Perhaps he detests the singing as much as I do. I've banned singing in Hell.'

'I was just wondering.' My arm hurt where he'd pinched it, but somehow I'd stopped myself from slapping him.

'The soul is eternal,' Lucie was carrying on. 'Each human travels either to Sheol or to Hell upon death. But Heaven? That is beyond you.'

Before he could start laughing again I told him, 'I've converted. I've joined God's Gang.'

'The process has begun,' Lucie corrected me. 'You must be baptised to be a full member. And the Competition?'

'I need to get the video done,' I admitted. 'I'm trying to work out what to do.'

'The Disciples cherish children and animals. I personally cannot understand why anyone would wish to possess a pet. The only animals I like are well done and served on a plate.' There was that toothy grin again. 'Borrow a kitten or a puppy from somewhere. Ensure the creature appears in your video.'

I took a long sip of my Americano with shot of non-specified milk. 'And why is the Prince of Darkness helping me?'

'Why should I not? It may be useful to have a person on the inside.'

'I'm not one of yours,' I pointed out. 'I'll eat with you, I'll drink coffee with you, I'll even pretend I like your jokes. But I'm not shaking hands with you. Ever.'

For a moment I thought he was going to laugh again. But he caught himself in time. 'So they always say,' he said softly, looking like a dragon again. I felt like a maiden in distress without any knight nearby. Which annoyed me, because I stopped being a maiden years ago and I like being my own knight, thank you very much. 'Shiny new life, Corrie. It's out there waiting for you.'

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