

Angel Sister Excerpt

Kate climbed the fence in behind the church and looked over toward the back door. It was closed. That was a sure sign Grandfather Reece wasn't at the church yet. She'd go around to the front door and sit on the steps to wait for him. The steps would be in the shade this time of the morning.

When she came around the corner of the church building, a little girl was already sitting on the steps. She looked around at Kate and said, "Are you an angel?"

"Me? An angel? Far from it. Just ask anybody," Kate said with a laugh as she squatted down in front of the steps.

The little girl pulled her faded red dress down over her knees as though she wanted to hide as much of her small body as she could from Kate. Little bare feet crusted with dirt stuck out below her dress. The child pushed her dark curly hair back from her face and dropped her chin down on her knees to wait for whatever Kate was going to say next. Tear streaks ran down her cheeks, but she wasn't crying now. Kate had never seen the child before. "Are you lost, sweetie?" Kate asked.

"No." The child mashed her mouth together and tears filled her dark chocolate brown eyes and overflowed to slide down her cheeks. She didn't bother wiping them away as she stared up at Kate with a mixture of fear and hope. "You have to be an angel. Please."

"Why do I have to be an angel?" Kate moved over to sit down beside the child. She started to put her arm around her, but then stopped. She didn't want to frighten the little girl.

"Because my mommy said that if I sat here and didn't cry an angel would come take care of me and love me and bring me something to eat. I tried really hard. Just like I promised Mommy." The little girl looked down at her feet. After a few seconds she went on in a tiny, sad voice. "But I couldn't keep all the tears in. They just came out."

"Where is your mommy?" Kate asked softly.

"She left. With Daddy. She had to." The little girl pulled her dress down farther over her knees until the hem touched the top of her feet. She curled her toes under as if to hide them too.

"Why did she have to?"

"Because of the baby in her tummy. Daddy, he's gonna' find work and then they're coming back for me. But Daddy said this looked like a good place. He said it had gardens and apple trees and two churches. Most places only have one. They kept Kenton because he's sick. Nobody wants a sick boy.

I told them I might be sick too, but they said the angel wouldn't care. That she'd make me feel better. They're coming back for me. Mommy promised."

The little girl looked up at Kate as if she needed Kate to say it was true, so Kate said, "Then they will as soon as they can." The little girl let out a long breath and scooted closer to Kate. "Can I touch you or will my hand go right through you? You know like a ghost. I've never seen an angel before."

"You can touch me. I'm not a real angel. Those you might not be able to touch." Kate put her arm around the child and drew her close against her. Her shoulders felt very bony under her dress. "My name's Kate. What's your name?"

"Lorena Birdsong. Mommy told me to say my name every morning when I get up and every night when I go to bed and that wherever she is she'll be saying it too. My name. Lorena Birdsong." The little girl looked up at Kate. Her lips trembled a little and she blinked her eyes very fast before she went on. "Names are very important, you know. Mommy told me never to forget that."

"Your mommy is right." Kate squeezed her shoulders a little.