

As Wings Unfurl

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*If there are such things as angels,
I hope that they are organized along the lines of the Mafia.*

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *The Sirens of Titan*

Prologue

The Prudential Building, Newark, New Jersey, 1975

Jason tucked in his shirt and ran his stubby fingers through the graying remains of what had once been jet-black hair. He bent forward to take a closer look at his distorted reflection on the smooth office-door window. A mosaic of a shadow danced across the opalescent glass. He backed up as the door handle turned.

A woman stepped inside, forcing him to take a step back. She held her head high, an unnecessary affectation because she stood a full half-foot taller than him. Dark eyes with dilated pupils darted from him to the room beyond. Her oval face was framed by a tight black coif with a solitary strand nearly covering one eye, giving Jason the unsettling impression that she was a pirate. A single silver earring took the image further.

She sniffed the air. “And you are?”

“Like it says on the door, miss, MacKenzie Investigations. I’m Jason MacKenzie. My secretary, Viola, she’s not in yet. Who might you be?”

She looked familiar, but his sleep-deprived brain spun in place and couldn't find her name.

She pointed to Viola's visitor settee. "May I sit here?"

She sat, crossing her legs and giving her tight black miniskirt a tug. Jason leaned back against the edge of Viola's desk.

He coughed to clear his throat. "How can I help you? Do I know you?"

"I doubt you know who I am, and it's of no importance. However, you *can* help me."

"Are you sure you're in the right place, miss?" Jason was sure he had no clients scheduled this early in the morning.

She nodded at the inner door. "That is your office?"

"Yeah, but we can't go in. There's broken ceramic on the floor. I dropped my coffee cup ___"

She marched inside. Jason shuffled after her. An odd scent wafted into his sinuses, a mixture of flowers and something else—oil? He heard her stilettos crunch their way around his desk. When he caught up, she pirouetted, taking time to give the room a complete three-sixty.

"Please watch your step, miss. What are you here for?"

She strode to his desk chair and sat.

"Suit yourself." He pulled up a chair from the corner to face her, waiting for an explanation, wondering if it would ever come.

She ran a finger along an exposed page atop an open folder.

"Hey, that's confidential business. If you don't tell me why you're here, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

She reached into her oversized patent-leather purse and pulled out a manila envelope. A black-and-white eight-by-ten glossy slid out onto the desk. “I believe you know why I am here.”

Jason stiffened. “That picture... that picture doesn’t belong to you.”

“I’ve come for the rest. There must be more, and don’t forget the negatives.”

“Did the monsignor send you?” His voice shook. Only the monsignor knew about the pictures. “I thought he was coming here himself... with the money.”

“Money? He didn’t say anything about money.”

“That was our agreement. These pictures prove the monsignor’s suspicions.”

“Oh? And what were they?”

Jason knew he had said too much, but there was something about the woman that made it hard to keep quiet. “I can’t tell you. That’s between the monsignor and me.”

Her smile sent ice-cold fingers tapping across his abdomen. “Oh, didn’t you hear? Monsignor Touhy passed away this morning—something to do with his heart, I believe.” Her teeth, gleaming white, seemed to erupt from her crimson lips. “Where are they, Jason?”

Jason began to tremble as she rose from his chair. “You’re the one... with the cardinal in the photos.” He stood, teetered, then braced himself on the desk with both hands. “There aren’t any other pictures. My deal was with the monsignor.”

“Perhaps you don’t understand.”

Jason saw only a blur—a brief passing of a shadow between them. Something moved on the desk—a pear rolled out of his lunch bag and split into two halves, the freshly cut pieces seesawing.

“How did you do that?” Jason’s eyes were locked on the rocking fruit. His bowels started to quiver.

The pitch of her voice descended. “Where are the negatives?”

“Your stupid magic trick doesn’t scare me, and you can tell your cardinal boyfriend to screw off. If the monsignor is really dead, I’ll be going to the press. That’s what he’d want me to do. Now scram.” Jason edged toward the door.

A sharp pain stabbed at his right hand. He jerked it up, leaving a trail of bright-red oval droplets along the doorjamb. His eyes widened. The tip of his right forefinger was gone. Squealing half in anger and half in terror, he pinched the bloody stub with his other hand.

“Bitch! What the hell?” His eyes darted to his desk. The Smith and Wesson might as well have been a thousand miles away. He didn’t see a knife. His knees began shaking.

“Jason, calm down. Tell me where the negatives are, and this unpleasantness will end.” She held up his fingertip, wiggled it at him, and tossed it into her mouth.

“Son of a bitch.” Jason ran into Viola’s office. Surely there would be someone in the hallway. Several paces short of the door, his head lurched forward. His hands flailed at his neck. He was lifted off his feet and dragged back.

A button popped off as his collar cut into his neck so deep he couldn’t breathe. The edge of his desk dug into his spine, firing off a jolt of agony through his thighs to his toes. He heard his phone crash on the floor as she stretched him out atop the desk. He reached back with his hands, hoping to break her grip. He gasped and sputtered, straining to get air back into his lungs. The blood from his finger ran across his chin. A murky curtain lowered over his vision.

A moment later, he was seated at his desk, slumped over with his head resting on the blotter.

“Jason?”

A man’s voice. Jason straightened up. A blur wavered before him.

“I told you...” Jason swallowed as a figure emerged.

For some reason, he expected something very different, something out of a nightmare. Instead, a very familiar individual stood before him.

“Monsignor Touhy. It’s you. And you’re alive.”

The cassocked figure came into focus. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I was told... I mean...” Jason wasn’t sure why he’d had such an odd thought.

“When I came in, you were asleep. Perhaps a bad dream?”

Jason held his head in both hands—his intact hands. “A whopper, Monsignor. I must have dozed off.”

The monsignor sat across from him. “I received the photo. It would appear my suspicions were correct.” He sagged into the chair and brought up the picture to the light. “The cardinal and a woman... in his private office.”

“Any idea who she is?” Jason felt a twinge and rubbed his fingertip. The woman in the photo seemed to be staring at him. The dark hair, the oversized bangs—he knew the woman.

“She isn’t relevant. The cardinal is a disgrace. The Church needs to be informed. Cardinal Michaels will be forced to step down.” Monsignor Touhy placed the photo back in its envelope.

“Now, what about the negatives? Surely you took more photographs?”

Jason fought down a sudden urge to run. He couldn't understand why he was so nervous.

"Actually, that's the only one that came out in focus. The negative isn't here."

The barest hint of a grimace flashed across the monsignor's narrow face as he prodded Jason with a raised chin.

"It's no problem, Monsignor. I can get it for you."

"But I must have it now."

Jason jumped at the staccato delivery. His finger began throbbing.

The monsignor relaxed his mouth and smiled. "Sorry about that. I am meeting with the diocese office this morning. That is the reason for my insistence. I was hoping to show them the proof of his promiscuity—his breach of a sacred oath."

"When I didn't hear back from you right away, I put it in a book and gave that to a friend of mine to hold onto—Saul Wharton. Maybe you know him. He's the owner of Wharton's Books near the train station. I figured until we had a chance to meet, that would be a safer hiding place than this office."

Monsignor Touhy stood. "Yes, I know the store. I think our little conversation has come to an end."

At fifteen floors up, the morning sun bore through the window blinds, sending bars of light across the desk and bright stripes over the monsignor's black cassock. The striations blurred and reformed as if painted onto a moving canvas. Jason watched the light show with mild interest as his body floated above the monsignor and wafted back down onto the surface of the desk like a gently settling autumn leaf. He tried to sit up, but his legs were numb, and his body

seemed distant and disconnected. He shut his eyes tight, wishing it were a nightmare and hoping to wake

“Jason.”

His eyes snapped open, and his heart stuttered. The face of an angel stared down at him with bright, smiling eyes. Her mouth twisted into a grin. She was the cardinal’s bitch and something more, something that made his stomach turn. Her bangs moved aside, and he saw himself reflected in her enlarged black pupils. Her lips parted to reveal a long, thin tongue. When a silver earring came into view, Jason screamed.

Chapter 1

Newark, New Jersey

A Day Later

Apple Bogdanski looked away from the window and folded the letter. He still couldn't get over it. A damn car accident, and his parents were gone. He had read the letter over and over on the flight from Vietnam. It was impersonal, written by some lawyer's aide. Never having had the chance to say good-bye was like a knife turning in his gut. He slipped the letter back into its yellowed envelope and dropped it into a coffee-table drawer. The knife continued turning.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and his gaze wandered over the dim interior of the apartment. The memory of his parents lived in every room, in every piece of furniture, even in the sound of dishes clattering in the sink. On quiet nights, he still heard Mom in the kitchen and the rustling of a newspaper being folded in his dad's easy chair. His father had talked about sending him to college and a future full of other possibilities when he finished his tour.

How screwed up is that?

His hand eased down to his left calf and caressed the wooden prosthetic. The war had cost him everything below his left knee, and in return, the army had given him a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. Apple shook his head and smirked. Fair trade. He was a coward then and a morphine addict now.

He turned back to the window. The park across the street was a pastoral haven in an urban Newark jungle. When Apple wasn't working, he often sat and watched memories play out

on the ball fields. The ghosts that ran the bases were always gone by supertime when the fluttering vestiges of sunset disappeared behind the tree-rimmed fields. Night brought with it long, restless battles with demons, leaving him exhausted and covered in sweat as he welcomed the rising sun.

Apple slipped on his jacket. He didn't want to be late again. The part-time job was a mile away at a small bookstore. He loved books. Customers were rare, but at least while he worked, his mind would be occupied reading about people whose lives had made a difference. Self-pity was as addictive as the morphine that coursed through his body.

He had no car and hated the stink of buses. Walking the distance without crutches was both exercise and penance. The route wended through the neighborhood of his youth, which included a convenient stop to pick up his fix from a guy everybody called Joe.

Along the way, Apple caught scents of dinner—garlic and potatoes—spiraling through the narrow alleys between houses. He recalled his mom's cooking and her high-pitched voice as she announced supper was ready. His dad would fire off his own verbal volley, too, because Apple was almost always upstairs, lost in his own world and immersed in comic books. He suppressed a laugh. Those were good times, damn good times. He scrunched up his jacket against the evening air.

The elm trees lining Lafayette Street covered the sidewalk with a fresh blanket of brown-and-yellow leaves, which morphed into interlocking gray puzzle pieces beneath the cold shadows of street lamps. Apple gave the narrow black canyons between apartment buildings a wide berth, angling close to the edge of the sidewalk—a leftover military habit, a residue of survival that he wished was unnecessary in a neighborhood he'd known so well as a child.

A thin whisper emerged from a nearby alley, and he limped across the street to check it out. He thought back to better times. *We watched out for each other.* Hugging a line of parked cars, he kept low and moved from shadow to shadow, from tree to tree. Apple paused at the sound of a thud and the whoosh of air leaving a frayed set of lungs.

He stepped out of the shadows. “Hey. What do you think you’re doing?”

There were two of them, sporting black jackets with wool caps drawn over their foreheads. One had his arm wrapped around a wisp of a gray-haired man in a suit, arms hanging limp at his sides. He threw Apple a smile highlighted by a gold front tooth.

“Whatta we got here? A hero? Maybe you want to join the party?” Gold Tooth reached into his jacket and flicked open a switchblade. It caught the streetlight as he waved it. “You gonna do somethin’ stupid, or you gonna be smart and shove off?”

He stepped toward Apple, leaving the old man to drop to the ground in a heap. Apple’s wooden limb wobbled and he stumbled.

“Hah. Get a load of the cripple. Get lost before I carve you up, gimp.”

Apple jumped at Gold Tooth and grabbed his knife hand. They careened into the shadowy embrace of the alley. He shook the knife loose, pulled off the wool cap, and gripped Gold Tooth’s collar with both hands, dragging him into the light.

Apple said, “I know you. You live down the street.”

He heard the other one approach from behind. Dropping to one knee, he held Gold Tooth up by his jacket, trying to catch sight of the boy’s accomplice. Something moved from the shadows in the alley, and all went black.

* * *

A red blur blinked on and off. The sound of a siren danced with the light then faded.

Apple shivered.

A far off voice asked, “Dead?”

Then from nearby, “Sir, you all right?”

It occurred to Apple that the question was being addressed to him. His head hurt. The words were slow to emerge. “Yeah... I’m all right.”

“Medic!”

The red light continued its almost mesmerizing blinking. A haze dropped over everything. Men in white hovered in the air.

* * *

“How are we feeling this morning?”

Apple opened his eyes and was greeted by a smile. His head ached.

The nurse cocked her head. “It’s time for your breakfast, young man.” She reached down and turned a crank beneath the mattress. The backrest swiveled up, easing him into a sitting position. “There now. That’s better.” She swung a table over his lap and deposited a tray of food. “There’re some gentlemen here to talk to you. Do you feel up to it?”

The sight of soup and bread triggered a rumble in his gut, but his hunger went deeper, and it wasn’t for food.

The nurse glided out of the room, and a suit and a uniformed police officer entered.

“Mr. Bogdanski?” asked the suit.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Detective Sanchez, and this is Officer Santora. We’d like to talk to you about last night.” Both were dressed in gray with identical black ties.

Detectives. Last night. Apple sifted through his tattered recollections of the previous night—walking home, someone in trouble. He told the men what he remembered.

Sanchez said, “You know, you saved that old man’s life.”

“Is he okay?”

“A couple of broken ribs, maybe a concussion.”

“And the two kids?” Apple asked.

“We got ’em, thanks to you.”

“Seriously? I don’t remember much about last night.”

“A neighbor called. By the time we arrived, the two boys were tied up with their own belts. Their victim was out, and you weren’t doing much better.” Sanchez’s eyes looked up at Apple’s forehead, which was wrapped in bandages. “Hit your head on something?”

Apple ran a finger over the head wrap.

Sanchez asked, “Army? Marine?”

“Army. Got back from ’Nam a few months ago.”

Sanchez looked at the prosthesis propped up in the corner of the room. “Sorry about your leg. But damn, you must be good at hand-to-hand.”

“Why?”

“Those punks said you went nuts. You had them trussed up like rodeo calves, tied up with their own belts. Man, I would’ve loved to see that.”

Apple stared at Sanchez. He remembered Gold Tooth—and someone else in a gray coat with long dark hair.

“Nice work, Mr. Bogdanski. I shouldn’t say this, but if there were more like you around, our jobs would be a whole lot easier.” Sanchez winked, and the two detectives left.

The night passed slowly. By morning, Apple was convinced he’d had help with the kids who’d jumped him, but couldn’t figure who would bother. He was happy that the old timer had survived. The feeling of helping someone out was one little joy in an otherwise morbid world. The image of a woman kept surfacing but made no sense. *Who would be nuts enough to jump in and help me?*

* * *

A day later, Apple was released. No concussion. The fall weather had mellowed. He was happy to get out and away. The hospital held too many painful memories. Besides, his phantom leg was gnawing at him, and he was getting jittery. The crisp aroma of fallen leaves might have eased his mind, but his body demanded medication.

He was still thinking about getting to Joe when, at an intersection, his sleeve was pulled. His artificial leg dangled over the curb, and he almost lost his balance as a bicycle scooted past. The rider threw him a one-fingered Jersey salute.

“Close one, Apple.” The voice was female. “Sorry about grabbing you, but I was sure you were about to get clobbered by that bike.”

She was tall, radiant, and wrapped in a gray coat. When she lowered her arm, brown hair cascaded over her shoulders. The smile was honest, and her deep-blue eyes stared straight through him. *The gray coat.*

“That’s... that’s quite all right. Thanks. I should have been watching where I was going.”

She chuckled.

They stared at each other. Apple, oblivious to the pedestrians veering to either side, said, “You know my name. I’m sorry, but do I know you?” For a second, he thought she might be a family friend from years ago, but it was the coat that held his attention. *She was the one.*

“You’ll have to forgive me. I’m kind of new at this.”

“New at what?” *New at saving my life?*

“It’s a long story. Maybe over a cup of coffee?”

A cramp muddled his thinking. “Some other time.” Apple hated himself for saying that, but he had serious business that needed attention. Besides, he’d promised Wharton he’d be in on time that day. He started across the intersection but glanced back. She was still standing at the curb. Her knowing smile was starting to irk him. *She has to be the one.*

“Hey, what’s your name? And how about a rain check for that coffee?”

“It’s Angela. Don’t worry about the coffee. I’m in the neighborhood. I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.”

Apple stepped onto the curb. Maybe a cup wouldn’t be a bad idea. Friends were rare, and a life saver was even rarer. When he looked back, she was gone.