

SIDNEY SHELDON'S

ANGEL *of*
the DARK

Tilly Bagshawe

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*His wings are gray and trailing,
Azrael, Angel of Death,
And yet the souls that Azrael brings
Across the dark and cold,
Look up beneath those folded wings,
And find them lined with gold.*

—ROBERT GILBERT WELSH, “AZRAEL” (1917)

CHAPTER ONE

LOS ANGELES
1996

HE GOT THE CALL AT AROUND nine p.m.
“Unit 8A73. Come in, please.”

“Yeah, this is 8A73.”

The patrolman yawned into the radio. It had been a long, boring night making the rounds in West Hollywood and he was ready for his bed. “What’s up?”

“We got a 911. Female. Hysterical.”

“Probably my wife,” he joked. “I forgot our anniversary yesterday. She wants my balls in a jar.”

“Your wife Spanish?”

“Nope.”

“Then it ain’t her.”

He yawned again.

“Address?”

“Four-twenty Loma Vista.”

“Nice neighborhood. What happened, the maid forgot to put enough caviar on her toast?”

The operator chuckled.

“Probably a DV.”

Domestic violence.

“Probably?”

“The lady was screaming so much it was tough to make out what she was saying. We’re sending backup, but you’re closest. How soon can you guys be there?”

The patrolman hesitated. Mickey, his partner, had ducked out of their shift early to hook up with yet another skank on Hollywood Boulevard. Mickey got through hookers the way that other men got through socks. He knew he shouldn’t cover for him, but Mickey was so goddamn charming, saying no to the guy was like trying to swim against a rip tide. *What to do?* If he admitted he was alone, they’d both get canned. But the alternative—showing up solo at a DV—wasn’t an appealing prospect either. Violent husbands were not usually the LAPD’s biggest fans.

Fuck it.

“We’ll be there in five.”

Mickey’s skank had better be worth it.

FOUR-TWENTY LOMA VISTA TURNED OUT TO be a vast, sprawling, Spanish Mission-style 1920s estate, perched high in the Hollywood Hills. A discreet, ivy-clad gate set into a fifteen-foot wall gave little clue of the opulence that hid behind it: a dramatic, sweeping driveway and gardens so enormous and perfectly manicured they looked more like a country club than the grounds of a private residence.

The patrolman barely registered the fancy real estate. He was looking at a crime scene.

Open gate.

Front door ajar.

No signs of forced entry.

The place was eerily quiet. He drew his weapon.
“Police!”

No answer. As the echo of his own voice faded, from somewhere above him he heard a low moaning sound, like a not quite boiling teakettle. Nervously, he mounted the stairs.

Goddamn you, Mickey.

“Police!” he shouted again, more loudly this time. The moaning was coming from one of the bedrooms. He burst in, gun drawn. *What the fuck?* He heard a woman screaming, then the sickening crunch of his own skull as it slammed against the floor. The wooden boards were as slick as an oil spill.

But they weren’t slick with oil.

They were slick with blood.

DETECTIVE DANNY MCGUIRE FROM HOMICIDE DIVISION tried to hide his frustration. The maid was making no sense.

“¡Pudo haber sido el diablo! ¡El diablo!”

It’s not her fault, Detective Danny McGuire reminded himself. The poor woman had been alone in the house when she found them. No wonder she was still hysterical.

“¡Esa pobre mujer! ¿Quién podía hacer una cosa terrible como esa?”

After six years in homicide, it took a lot to turn Detective Danny McGuire’s stomach. But this had done it. Surveying the carnage in front of him, Danny was aware of the In-N-Out burger he’d eaten earlier fighting its way up into his esophagus in a desperate bid for freedom. No wonder the officer who’d arrived at the scene had lost it. In front of him was the work of a maniac.

If it weren't for the crimson sea of blood seeping into the floorboards, it might have looked like a burglary. The bedroom had been ransacked, drawers opened, jewelry boxes emptied, clothes and photographs strewn everywhere. But the real horror lay at the foot of the bed. Two bodies, a man and a woman. The first victim, an elderly male in his pajamas, had had his throat slashed in such a repeated, frenzied manner that his head was almost completely severed from his neck. He'd been bound, trussed almost, like an animal in an abattoir, with what looked like climbing ropes. Whoever killed him had tied his mutilated corpse to the naked body of the second victim, a woman. A very young, very beautiful woman, judging from the taut perfection of her figure, although her face had been so badly beaten it was hard to tell for sure. One glance at her bloodied thighs and pubic area, however, made one thing abundantly clear: she had been violently raped.

Covering his mouth, Detective Danny McGuire moved closer to the bodies. The smell of fresh blood was overpowering. But that wasn't what made him recoil.

"Get a knife," he said to the maid.

She looked at him blankly.

"*Cuchillo*," he repeated. "Now! And someone call an ambulance. She's still breathing."

THE KNIFE WAS PRODUCED. GINGERLY Danny McGuire began cutting through the ropes binding the man and woman together. His touch seemed to rouse the woman. She began crying softly, slipping in and out of consciousness. Danny bent low so his mouth was close to her ear. Even in her battered state, he couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was, dark-haired and full-breasted with the soft, milky

skin of a child. "I'm a police officer," he whispered. "You're safe now. We're gonna get you to a doctor." As the ropes loosened, the old man's head lolled grotesquely against Danny's shoulder, like some hideous Halloween mask. He gagged.

One of his men tapped him on the shoulder. "Definite burglary, sir. The safe's been emptied. Jewelry's gone, and some paintings."

Danny nodded. "Victims' names?"

"The house belongs to Andrew Jakes."

Jakes. The name was familiar.

"He's an art dealer."

"And the girl?"

"Angela Jakes."

"His daughter?"

The cop laughed.

"Granddaughter?"

"No, sir. She's his wife."

Stupid, thought Danny. *Of course she's his wife. This is Hollywood, after all. Old Man Jakes must have been worth a fortune.*

At last the ropes gave way. *Till death us do part,* thought Danny as Angela Jakes literally tumbled free from her husband's corpse into his arms. Slipping off his overcoat, Danny draped it over her shoulders, covering her nakedness. She was conscious again and shivering.

"It's all right," he told her. "You're safe now. Angela, isn't it?"

The girl nodded mutely.

"Can you tell me what happened, sweetheart?"

She looked up at him and for the first time Danny saw the full extent of her injuries. Two black eyes, one so swollen that it had closed completely, and lacerations all over her

upper body. Scratch marks. Danny thought, *She must have fought like hell.*

“He hurt me.”

Her voice was barely a whisper. The effort of speaking seemed to exhaust her.

“Take your time.”

She paused. Danny waited.

“He said he would let Andrew go if . . . if I . . .” Catching sight of her husband’s bloodied corpse, she broke into uncontrollable sobs.

“Someone cover him up, for Christ’s sake,” Danny snapped. How was he supposed to get any sense out of the girl with that horror show lying right next to her?

“We can’t, sir. Not yet. Forensics isn’t finished with the body.”

Danny flashed his sergeant a withering look. “I said cover him.”

The sergeant blanched. “Sir.”

A blanket was draped over Andrew Jakes’s body, but it was too late. His wife was already in deep shock, rocking back and forth, eyes glazed, muttering to herself. Danny wasn’t sure what she was saying. It sounded like: “I have no life.”

“Is the ambulance here yet?”

“Yes, sir. Just arrived.”

“Good.”

Detective Danny McGuire moved away out of the victim’s earshot, beckoning his men around him in a tight huddle. “She needs a doctor and a psych evaluation. Officer Menendez, you go with her. Make sure the medical examiner sees her first and we get a full rape kit, swabs, blood tests, the lot.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tomorrow, Detective Danny McGuire would question Angela Jakes properly. She was in no fit state tonight.

“You’d better take the maid with you while you’re at it,” he added. “I can’t hear myself think with her wailing in my ear.”

A skinny, blond young man with horn-rimmed glasses walked into the room.

“Sorry I’m late, sir.”

Detective David Henning might be a card-carrying nerd, but he had one of the best, most logical, deductive brains on the force. Detective Danny McGuire was delighted to see him.

“Ah, Henning. Good. Call the insurers, get me an inventory of everything that was taken. Then check out the pawnshops and Web sites, see what shows up.”

Henning nodded.

“And someone get on to the security provider. A house like this must be alarmed up the wazoo, but it looks like our killer just strolled on in here tonight.”

Officer Menendez said, “The maid mentioned that she heard a loud bang of some sort around eight p.m.”

“A gunshot?”

“No. I asked her that, but she said it was more like a piece of furniture falling over. She was on her way upstairs to check it out, but Mrs. Jakes stopped her, said she’d go up herself.”

“Then what?”

“Then nothing. The maid went upstairs at eight forty-five p.m. to bring the old man his cocoa as usual. That’s when she found them and called 911.”

His cocoa? Danny McGuire tried to visualize the Jakeses’ married life. He pictured a rich, lecherous old man easing his arthritic limbs into bed each night beside his lithe, sexy

young bride—then waiting for his maid to bring him a nice cup of cocoa! How could Angela Jakes have borne being pawed by such a decrepit creature? Danny imagined the old man’s bony, liver-spotted fingers stroking Angela’s breasts, her thighs. It was irrational, but the thought made him angry.

Did it make somebody else angry too? Danny wondered. *Angry enough to kill?*

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, DETECTIVE DANNY McGUIRE drove to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. He felt excited. This was his first big murder case. The victim, Andrew Jakes, was a scion of Beverly Hills high society. A case like this could propel Danny’s career into the fast lane if he played his cards right. But it wasn’t just his career prospects that Danny was excited about. It was the prospect of seeing Angela Jakes again.

There was something uniquely compelling about the young Mrs. Jakes, something beyond her beauty and that violated, made-for-sex body that had haunted Danny’s dreams last night. All the circumstantial evidence suggested that the girl was a shameless gold digger. But Danny found himself hoping that she wasn’t. That there was some other explanation for her marriage to a man old enough to be her grandfather. Danny McGuire loathed gold diggers. He did not want to have to loathe Angela Jakes.

“How’s the patient?”

The duty nurse outside Angela Jakes’s private room eyed Danny suspiciously. “Who’s asking?”

Danny flashed her his badge and most winning Irish smile

“Oh! Good morning, Detective.” The nurse returned his smile, surreptitiously checking his left hand for a wedding

band. For a cop he was unusually attractive: strong jaw, lapis-blue eyes and a mop of thick black Celtic curls that her own boyfriend would have killed for. “The patient’s tired.”

“How tired? Can I question her?”

You can question me, thought the nurse, admiring Danny’s boxer’s physique beneath his plain white Brooks Brothers shirt. “You can see her as long as you take it easy. She’s had some morphine for the pain in her face. Her left cheekbone was fractured and one of her eyes is quite badly damaged. But she’s lucid.”

“Thank you,” said Danny. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

For a hospital room, it was luxurious. Tasteful oil paintings hung on the walls. A Wesley-Barrell upholstered chair stood in the corner for visitors, and a delicate potted orchid quivered by the window. Angela Jakes was propped up against two down pillows. The bruises around her eyes had faded from last night’s uniform plum to a dark rainbow of colors. Fresh stitches across her forehead gave her the disconcerting look of a dressmaker’s dummy, but still she remained quite astonishingly beautiful, alluring in a way that Danny could not remember ever encountering before.

“Hello, Mrs. Jakes.” He held up his badge again. “Detective McGuire. I’m not sure if you remember. We met last night.”

Angela Jakes smiled weakly. “Of course I remember you, Detective. You gave me your coat. Lyle, this is the policeman I was telling you about.”

Danny spun around. Standing stock-still against the wall behind him was probably the most handsome man Danny had ever seen this side of a movie screen. Tall and olive-skinned, with the perfect, aquiline features of a hunter, jet-black hair and blue eyes, flat and almond-shaped like a

Siamese cat's, he scowled at Danny disapprovingly. He was wearing an expensively tailored suit, and when he moved it was like watching oil spread across a lake, smooth and fluid, almost viscous.

Danny placed him instantly. *Lawyer.* His upper lip curled. With a few honorable exceptions, Detective Danny McGuire was not a fan of lawyers.

"Who are you and what are you doing here? Mrs. Jakes is not supposed to have any visitors."

"Lyle Renalto." The man's voice was practically a purr. Walking over to Angela Jakes's bedside, he placed a proprietary hand over hers. "I'm a family friend."

Danny looked at the two preposterously attractive young people holding hands and drew the inevitable conclusion. *Yeah, right. And I'm the Queen of Sheba. Family friend, my ass.*

"Lyle was Andrew's attorney," said Angela. Her voice was low and husky, nothing like the frightened whisper of last night. "Conchita called him last night to let him know what happened and he came straight here." She squeezed Lyle Renalto's hand gratefully, her eyes welling with tears. "He's been amazing."

I'll bet he has. "If you're up to it, Mrs. Jakes, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Lyle Renalto said curtly, "Not now. Mrs. Jakes is too tired. If you submit your questions to me, I'll see that she answers them once she's rested."

Danny instantly bridled. "I don't believe I was talking to you, Mr. Renalto."

"Be that as it may, Mrs. Jakes has just been through an indescribably harrowing ordeal."

"I know. I'm trying to catch the guy who did it."

"Quite apart from witnessing her husband's murder, she was violently raped."

Danny was losing patience. "I'm aware of what happened, Mr. Renalto. I was there."

"I didn't witness Andrew's murder."

Both men turned to look at Angela, but her attention was focused wholly on Danny. Feeling a ridiculous sense of triumph, he moved toward her bedside, edging Renalto aside.

"Would you like to tell me what you *did* witness?"

"Angel, you don't have to say anything," the attorney butted in.

Danny raised an eyebrow at the endearment.

"Angel was my husband's pet name for me," Mrs. Jakes explained. "All his friends used to call me that. Not that I am an angel, by any means." She smiled weakly. "I'm sure I could be quite a trial to poor Andrew at times."

"I highly doubt that," said Danny. "You were telling me about last night. About what happened."

"Yes. Andrew was upstairs in bed. I was downstairs reading."

"What time was this?"

She considered. "About eight, I suppose. I heard a noise from upstairs."

"What sort of noise?"

"A bump. I thought Andrew might have fallen out of bed. He'd been having these spells recently. Anyway, Conchita came running in, she'd heard the noise too, but I said I'd go up. Andrew was a proud man, Detective. If he were . . ." She searched around for the appropriate word. "If he were incapacitated in any way, he wouldn't have wanted Conchita to find him. He'd have wanted me."

"So you went up alone?"

She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, bracing against the memory.

Lyle Renalto stepped forward. “Angel, please. There’s no need to upset yourself.”

“It’s all right, Lyle, really. The detective needs to know.” She turned back to Danny. “I went up alone. As I was walking into the bedroom someone hit me from behind. That’s the last thing I remember, the pain in my head. When I woke up, he was . . . he was raping me.”

“Can you describe the man?” asked Danny. He knew from experience that the best way to calm emotional witnesses was to stick to the hard facts. Once you started with all the “I know this must be distressing for you” bullshit, the floodgates opened and you’d lost them.

Angela Jakes shook her head. “I wish I could. But he wore a mask, a balaclava.”

“What about his build?”

“Most of the time he was behind me. I don’t know. Stocky, I guess. Not tall, but he was certainly strong. I fought, and he hit me. He said if I didn’t let him keep doing it, he would hurt Andrew. So I stopped fighting.” Tears streamed down her swollen cheeks.

“Where was your husband at this time? Did he try to help you? To raise the alarm?”

“He . . .” A look of confusion came over her face. She glanced at Lyle Renalto, but he looked away. “I don’t know where Andrew was. I didn’t see him. On the bed, maybe? I don’t know.”

“It’s all right,” said Danny, sensing her anxiety levels rising. “Go on. You stopped fighting.”

“Yes. He asked me for the combination of our safe and I gave it to him. Then he raped me again. When he’d finished, he knocked me out a second time. When I came to . . . the first thing I remember is you, Detective.”

She looked Danny in the eye and he felt his stomach

lurch, promptly forgetting his next question. Lyle Renalto smoothly took advantage of the silence.

“Conchita, the Jakeses’ housekeeper, told me that all Angela’s jewelry was taken and a number of valuable miniatures. Is that correct?”

Before Danny could respond that he wasn’t in the habit of leaking sensitive information about a murder inquiry to “family friends,” Angela blurted out angrily, “I don’t care about the damn jewelry! Andrew’s dead! I loved my husband, Detective.”

“I’m sure you did, Mrs. Jakes.”

“Please find the animal who did this.”

Danny cast his mind back to last night’s crime scene: the blood-soaked floor, the old man’s all-but-severed head, the disgusting, obscene scratches on Angela Jakes’s thighs, buttocks and breasts.

Animal was the right word.

THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THE pretty nurse outside Angela Jakes’s room. As Danny stood waiting for the elevator, Lyle Renalto oiled up to him. “You don’t have a very high opinion of attorneys, do you, Detective?”

The lawyer’s tone had switched from hostile to ingratiating. Danny preferred hostile. Nevertheless, it was an unusually perceptive comment.

“What makes you think that, Mr. Renalto?”

Lyle smiled. “Your face. Unless, of course, it’s just me, personally, whom you dislike.”

Danny said nothing. Lyle went on.

“You’re not alone, you know. My father hated lawyers with a passion. He was crushingly disappointed when I graduated law school. I come from a seafaring family, you

see. As far as Pa was concerned, it was the United States Naval Academy or nothing.”

Danny thought, *Why’s he telling me this?*

The elevator arrived. Danny stepped inside and pressed *G* but Lyle stuck an arm out to hold the doors. His film-star features hardened and his cat’s eyes flashed in warning. “Angela Jakes is a close friend of mine. I won’t have you hounding her.”

Danny lost his temper. “This is a murder inquiry, Mr. Renalto, not a game of twenty questions. Mrs. Jakes is my key witness. In fact right now, she and her maid are my only witnesses.”

“Angela didn’t see the man. She told you that already.”

Danny frowned. “I thought Mr. Jakes was a close friend of yours too. I’d have thought you’d want us to find his killer?”

“Of course I do,” snapped Lyle.

“Or perhaps you weren’t *quite* as close to Andrew Jakes as you were to his wife. Is that it?”

This seemed to amuse Lyle Renalto. “For a detective, I must say you’re a pretty poor judge of people. You think Angel and I are lovers?”

“Are you?”

The attorney smirked. “No.”

Danny desperately wanted to believe him.

“This is a triple felony, Mr. Renalto,” he said, removing the attorney’s arm from the elevator door. “Rape, robbery and murder. I strongly suggest you do not attempt to obstruct my investigation by coming between me and the witness.”

“Is that a threat, Detective?”

“Call it what you like,” said Danny.

Renalto opened his mouth to respond but the elevator doors closed, denying him the last word. Judging from his

twitching jaw and the look of frustration etched on his handsome face, this wasn't something that happened very often.

"Good-bye, Mr. Renalto."

FIVE MINUTES LATER, BACK ON WILSHIRE Boulevard, Danny's cell phone rang.

"Henning. What have you got for me?"

"Not much, sir, I'm afraid. Nothing in the pawnshops, nothing online."

Danny frowned. "It's still early days."

"Yes, sir. I also checked out Jakes's will."

Danny brightened. "And?"

"The wife gets everything. No other family. No charitable causes."

"How much is everything?"

"After taxes, around four hundred million dollars."

Danny whistled. *Four hundred million dollars.* That was quite a motive for murder. Not that Angela Jakes was a suspect. The poor woman could hardly have raped and beaten herself. Even so, Danny thought back to the words Angela had murmured repeatedly to herself last night: *I have no life.*

With four hundred million in the bank, she certainly had a life now. Any life she wanted.

"Anything else?" he asked his sergeant.

"Just one thing. The jewelry. A little over a million bucks' worth was taken from the safe and Mrs. Jakes's jewelry box."

Danny waited for the punch line. "And . . . ?"

"None of it was insured. Seven figures' worth of diamonds, and you don't add it to your homeowner's policy? Seems strange, don't you think?"

It did seem strange. But Danny's mind wasn't focused on Andrew Jakes's insurance oversights. "Listen," he said, "I want you to run a check for me on a guy named Lyle Renalto. *R-E-N-A-L-T-O*. Says he was Old Man Jakes's lawyer."

"Sure," said Detective Henning. "What am I looking for, exactly?"

Detective Danny McGuire said honestly, "That's the problem. I have no idea."