

# Angelus

The phone chimed with an incoming message.

*Case OPEL 12182 ideal. Action cleared. Accelerate at your discretion. Details follow.*

Charon's teeth bared – at last. He'd been pushing this for over a year, but those old women at the department had been too timid. They must have finally gotten desperate enough. "Porcher!" he hollered as he tapped up the e-mail that contained the case details.

"What?" came the reply from outside the office door.

"Get in here – good news," Charon called back, scanning the e-mail.

"What good news?" Ron Porcher stuck his head in, looking scornful and sounding as sullen as always.

"We finally got clearance." Charon shoved the phone at him. "Seems they found the perfect case."

"Well," mused Porcher, as he examined the message. "Looks clean – but all the way over in Port Huron?"

"What do you mean?" Charon scoffed. "We can drive over, do the job, and get back within three hours."

"Okay, but..." Porcher trailed off.

"But what?" Charon goaded. "Don't tell me you're wimping out on me. You've got plenty of field experience."

"It's not that," Porcher protested. "It's just that – aren't we both getting a little high-profile for field jobs? I mean, if something goes wrong..."

"We're going to ensure nothing goes wrong," Charon interrupted. "This is the trial balloon, the proof of concept. I've been prodding them on this for months. If it goes smoothly – which it will – they'll give the go-ahead for the second phase, and we'll start seeing some real progress."

"Well – okay," Porcher replied skeptically. "When do you want to do this?"

"Tomorrow," Charon said.

"Tomorrow!" Porcher exclaimed.

"Sure, tomorrow. Why wait? It's not like conditions are going to get more prime than they are," Charon pointed to the text on the screen. "All we have to do is drive over, execute the simple plan, and drive back."

"All right, let's do it," Porcher said without enthusiasm – as if he had any choice.

"We're on, then." Charon started to compose a reply regarding various arrangements that had to be made.

Luciana's phone rang, and she saw it was the agency. Puzzled, she answered.

"Hi, Luciana?" came an unfamiliar voice.

"Yes?"

"Just to let you know, Mr. Holmes won't be needing you today. He called to let us know. You're still set for Friday, though, unless you hear otherwise," the voice said.

"Oh – okay," Luciana replied. "Thanks. Do you – are there any other jobs for me?"

"Not sure," the voice said. "Let me look into it and get back to you."

*Hmm*, thought Luciana as she tucked the phone away. That was odd. She'd been helping them for over a year now – first both of them and now, of course, just Mr. Holmes. During all that time, he'd never contacted her through the agency when there'd been a change in plan – he just called her directly. Part of her wondered if she should call him to see if everything was all right. But if he'd called the agency, he'd probably had his reasons, and wouldn't appreciate a call from her. Maybe she'd find out on Friday. In the meantime, it was a bother to lose the hours, but it freed up the afternoon. Maybe she'd get that haircut she'd been trying to find time for.

Glancing up, John Holmes saw that noon was approaching. With effort, he levered himself out of his chair and worked his way to the back door with the help of the quad cane. Luciana was starting to hint that a walker might be more suitable, but he wanted to hold off on that as long as he could.

He undid the chain and threw back the bolt with a little pang of sadness. He remembered when they'd never locked the doors,

day or night. Even when the neighborhood had started to decline, they'd still kept them unlocked during the day, more as a sign of defiant hope than anything. But now, with him alone in the house in his condition, it wasn't prudent to leave the doors unlocked. And "decline" was no longer the word for the state of the neighborhood – "decay" was more like it. There were no more kids playing in the streets, just lost youngsters driving noisy cars with the bass thumping.

He hobbled back to the living room. Shortly before noon now – almost time for the Angelus. Sometimes Luciana was here and would say it with him. He and Angie had always tried to stop to say the brief devotion, wherever they were. Of course, it had been easier once he'd retired and they could stand side by side. Now he was standing alone again, for a while, though he tried to imagine her pausing wherever she was to pray the familiar words with him.

He lowered himself into his chair. Luciana should be along any minute. He had a bit of an appetite today, which should please her. She liked cooking for him, and on the increasingly rare occasions he felt like eating, she'd go out of her way to make something delicious.

The back door opened – there was Luciana now. "Good morning! I'm in here!" John called.

But instead of Luciana, two strange men walked through the archway from the kitchen. One was large, with close-cropped black hair and a heavy jaw dark with stubble. The other was shorter – thin and gangly with stringy brown hair and a weak chin.

"Who – who are you?" John asked, alarmed. From their clothes alone, these men didn't look like street thugs, but there was something even more menacing about them, something about their eyes. The brown-haired guy never looked directly at him, but the eyes of the black-haired man were cold and dead.

"Luciana couldn't make it today, Mr. Holmes," the black-haired guy said, placing a small duffel on the dining room table and zipping it open. John noticed that both the men were wearing vinyl exam gloves. "So we'll be helping you instead." He tossed a handful of what looked like straps to the brown-haired guy, who swiftly walked behind John.

"What – what do you want?" John's voice squeaked as he tried to rise, but they were too quick for him. A heavy hand on his shoulder forced him back into the chair, and a wide band of some sort was thrown around his chest. The brown-haired guy pulled the band tight, pinioning his torso and upper arms, and he heard the ripping sound of heavy Velcro being secured. Then swift hands reached around his sides, pulling his wrists down to the chair arms and securing them with smaller straps.

"We're happy to fill in, though," the black-haired guy kept talking as he pulled more things out of the duffel, arranging them on the table. "As it happens, today is going to be a big day for you, Mr. Holmes. A really big day."

John's heart was pounding and his mouth was dry. Whatever was going on was serious – much more serious than a simple robbery or even a beating. Whatever these briskly efficient men had come to do was bad – very bad.

Yet as even as this realization fully dawned, and his body began sweating and shaking, calmness rose within him. Something was clearly going to happen, but he could do nothing about it. It was out of his hands. There was nothing these men could do to him, anyway, not really. Peace suffused his mind and heart, and he stopped struggling against the bonds.

The black-haired guy was busy prepping something which John recognized when he handed it to the other guy. It was an old-style jet injector. He'd used those when he was a corpsman back in his Navy days. The brown-haired guy brought it over and pulled up John's sleeve. This was all about whatever was in the vial loaded in the gun, and John couldn't do a thing to stop the injection. But as he felt the cold tip press against his skin, he tightened his arm muscles, just as he'd once instructed his patients not to do. The gun gave its muffled pop, and his tensed muscles stung a little. There. Whatever it was, was now done.

"Yes, Mr. Holmes," the black-haired guy said, coming over and putting a prescription bottle on the small table beside the chair. "Today is the day you commit suicide."

John's heart was hammering, but he said nothing and just looked at the man.

"Yes, suicide," the man continued as if John had spoken. "It's been a hard few months for you. Luciana's been quite concerned."

"She has, has she?" John almost whispered. Over at the table, the brown-haired guy was breaking down the gun and packing it away.

"Oh, yes," the black-haired guy said. "You've seemed so depressed, what with your wife's death, and the advance of the Parkinson's, and your arthritis. You haven't been eating or sleeping well. You seem to have lost all interest in life."

John said nothing, but kept looking at the man. He was starting to feel lightheaded, which certainly meant that whatever they'd injected him with was starting to take hold.

"Water. From the kitchen – any glass will do," the black-haired guy instructed the other as he picked up the pill bottle. "Yes, Luciana was glad when you took your neurologist's advice to go see Dr. Daniels. She even drove you to a couple of the appointments."

"She did, did she?" John slurred.

"Oh yes – at least, that's what she'll tell any investigators, should they ask. She was also concerned when you called to tell her not to come today, but she figured you had good care."

John's vision was blurring and his muscles were starting to spasm.

"But Dr. Daniels, Dr. Daniels," the man continued theatrically, shaking his head. "Forgot that amitriptyline isn't the first choice for a suicidal patient. But then, he might have discerned what you were truly seeking: relief from the trials of life, relief that would reunite you with your wife – relief that your archaic morality would deny you." The man turned and smirked at the crucifix hanging on the wall.

Following the man's gaze, John spotted the two frames on the mantel and had an idea. Though his throat was tightening and he was losing control of his muscles, he jerked his head toward the frames.

"Picture," John croaked.

"What's that, Mr. Holmes?" the man asked.

"Picture," John repeated. "Give me picture."

"Picture? You want the picture?" the man asked, picking up the frame holding the photo of John and Angie at their fiftieth anniversary party. "Oh, that's a nice touch – slipping away while holding a picture of your wife."

"No," John struggled, shaking his head jerkily. "Other picture."

"Other picture?" the man asked skeptically, putting down the anniversary photo and picking up the other frame. It held a picture of a round-faced smiling man wearing some outfit thick with gold embroidery. "You want this picture?"

John nodded, his neck muscles tightening painfully. They'd given him more than just amitriptyline – it was working far too quickly. His vision was nearly gone and his hearing was fading. He felt the man tuck the picture frame beside his leg.

"Not a full glass, you idiot," the man was berating his partner. "Drink about half of that, then go dump most of these pills down the toilet and flush it twice. This needs to look convincing."

John's vision had whited out now, and he could feel his muscles straining against the straps. Roaring was beginning to fill his ears when another sound cut through. It was the chimes from the clock on the mantel, the chimes sounding noon. Then he realized they weren't just the clock chimes. These were tower bells, a full set of them joyously pealing out the call to prayer. Reflexively, John bowed his head as best he could and recalled the familiar words.

"The angel of the Lord declared to Mary," he whispered through quivering lips.

"And she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit," answered a beloved voice, strong and clear. In joy and shock, John jerked his head straight up, his eyes wide open, searching for the voice.

"Angie?" he whispered.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee," the voice continued the familiar words, and he could dimly see a figure descending the steps to his right. "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners," John gasped, "now and at the hour of our death."

And there she was, his Angie, coming across the room to him, not hunched over with arthritis or swollen with diabetes, but straight and strong and smiling and beautiful.

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord," John whispered with his last earthly breath.

"Be it done to me according to thy word," Angie sang, reaching her loving arms out to him.

"Wow," Porcher said as he put the pill bottle on the table next to the glass of water. "More convulsing than I expected."

"Good to know," Charon noted. "Next time we'll pad the straps. We don't want any strain bruises."

"How – ah – quickly is this supposed to work?"

"Straight to the bloodstream? The tech said ten, fifteen minutes. Listen to his breathing – he's going already," Charon replied.

"What's with the picture?"

"He wanted it," Charon explained. "No harm, and a nice touch of authenticity – fading away holding a favorite photo. I don't know why he wanted that one instead of the one with him and his wife."

The two men watched in silence as the spasms slowed and their victim finally slumped over against his bonds.

"Is that it?" Porcher asked. "I can't hear any breathing."

Charon took one of his wrists. "If there's a pulse, it's too weak to detect. He's gone enough for us – he won't recover from here." He began stripping off the straps.

"Will he – fall out of this?" Porcher asked as he undid the chest strap. The upright hard-backed chair didn't seem the best for holding a corpse. "Should we lift him into the recliner?"

"Nah – the less we mess with things, the better. He died here, we prop him here. If he falls out, he falls out. Let's go."

Back in the car, they stripped off their exam gloves. "There you go," Charon announced as he backed the car down the drive and headed for the expressway. "Less than twenty minutes from entry to exit, without a hitch or delay. We haven't lost our touch."

"Should we have locked the door?" Porcher asked.

"No matter," Charon shrugged. "The worst thing that could happen is some local punks walk in. If you were a punk who walked into an unlocked house and found a corpse, would you stick around?"

"Not hardly," Porcher admitted. "What if someone runs a full tox eval of his blood and finds more than the amitriptyline?"

"Will you stop fretting, dammit?" Charon snarled. "You're starting to sound like those spineless pukes in D.C. When they find this case, they'll see a depressed old man with a degenerative illness who couldn't take the grief anymore and put himself down. They might do some cursory investigating, but that's what our covers are for. We show them what they expect to see, and nobody's going to want to look any further."

"All our covers are in place, then?"

"Just one more, and I'll tackle that tomorrow," Charon assured him. "You message in and tell them we're clear."

The next morning, as Charon was finishing his post-job writeup, he remembered his final task. He picked up his phone and tapped up the application that allowed him to overlay the source number with one of his choosing. Using that, he dialed Luciana's number.

Luciana was cleaning up Mrs. Jamison's breakfast when her phone rang. The display said it was the agency again. Answering it, she heard another unknown voice, a man this time.

"Listen carefully," the voice said, sharp and harsh. "Do not interrupt and ask no questions. I will say this only once. If you do not follow instructions, the consequences for you and your family will be severe."

"Who is this?" Luciana asked instinctively.

"No questions!" the voice barked. "If you are asked, John Holmes called you yesterday and told you not to come. He had seemed depressed, and had been going to a doctor who had prescribed medicine for him. Just say that, and nothing will happen to you. Say anything else, and trouble will find you." The line went dead.

Luciana gasped and leaned against the sink, her heart pounding. Mr. Holmes! She'd known something was not right!



Who was that menacing voice? Suffocating fear rose within her. Someone at the agency? That made no sense. The only men at the agency were Tony, Philippe, and James, and none of them sounded like that. The voice had threatened her and her family. What should she do?

Luciana bustled about tending Mrs. Jamison, barely thinking about what she was doing, her mind was racing so quickly. Trouble had found her. She'd done her best to live quietly and not make a fuss, but trouble had found her regardless. What should she do? Nothing? But would that cause even more problems? And what of Mr. Holmes? Might he be in danger? She was scheduled to visit him on Friday – what would she find? She didn't want to walk in on more trouble.

Something was wrong, she just knew it – something was badly wrong. Luciana felt she should do something. Should she call the police, or would that just make things worse for her? Didn't they have an anonymous tip line? No good, no good, they could always tell the number you called from. Wasn't there some way to make a call that masked the calling number? She thought there was, but didn't know how. What could she do?

Gary! Gary who worked at the Community Food Depot. He was friendly and helpful and knew everyone and everything. He could be discreet. She'd call him, and then he'd call the police, and then he'd forget that she'd ever been involved. She pulled out her phone and keyed the number for the Food Depot.