

# FALLING ANGELS

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## **Falling Angels**

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For my family and friends who helped  
even when they had no idea they did.

“A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry,  
but money answereth all things.”

—Ecclesiastes 10:19

## P R O L O G U E

She stomped down the narrow sidewalk toward the street with a grimace on her face. Dropping herself on the curb, she attempted to scrape off the flakes of dried blood from her knuckles and under her nails.

She didn't look anything like the eight-year-old angel that her parents had dropped off that morning. She had scratches on her hands. And on her face. Her new pink, striped shirt and matching shorts her mother had bought specifically for her first day of school were now brown. Her pigtail braids had come loose where the little pink balls had attempted to control the chaos.

Her eyes were red. Her face was red—not from tears, not from pain—but from anger.

Grinning, he sat down on the curb next to her. The angel and the devil sitting side by side.

He ran his fingers through the unruly black hair that hung to his shoulders.

He didn't look at the little girl sitting beside him. Instead his eyes patrolled the empty street in front of the school. Not a soul in sight.

She had fought well, he thought. For a girl. He found it amusing. Then he realized he was just so damn proud of her.

"Let me see your hands," he demanded.

She was still angry. He noticed the tightness in her face; the stiffness in her shoulders. But she relented and shoved her small hands toward him. They were bruised, but the blood on her hands belonged to Julie Clark, not her.

She didn't wince when he checked her fingers. She didn't complain of the pain that must have come from hitting a girl in the face. She was a strong little girl. Stubborn. Obstinate. Passionate. He liked that about her.

There was no hint of a fragile little girl.

“You did good. Don’t worry about your dad. I’ll talk to him. He’ll be proud that you defended yourself.”

At least he hoped so. Her parents had disagreed with sending her to the public school in the first place. Her mother knew it was a bad idea. It would only cause her to become ordinary like the other public school kids. Or unruly like him.

He pulled a cigarette from his tattered pocket and lit it. He blew the smoke away from her. She hated when he smoked around her. But he did it anyway. Not to annoy her. No, he would never do that. He did it only to prove that he always did what he wanted.

He wasn’t a bully. He never cared enough about the other children to spend time bullying them. He attended the school to be close to his only friend. He was there to take care of her, to watch over her, like she had done for him.

But his torn and dirty clothes and his malnourished and frail body had made him an easy target at the school. The teasing hadn’t lasted long. He refused to be teased. He refused to back down.

The other children didn’t see a normal eleven-year-old child when they looked at him. He was hardened from having survived the mean, cold streets for years.

He was a criminal now, promoted from homeless and hungry. The younger children ran from him, not wanting to catch his glare. The older children ignored him, knowing one day he would no longer be there. Even the teachers and counselors knew he was past saving.

She looked back at the quiet school. The rest of the children were in class. She should have been, too. Instead she sat in silence next to her best friend.

She glared at the cigarette in his mouth. He winked at her and smiled. She knew better than to ask him to put it out, although he knew she was about to. Unconsciously, he brushed a strand of golden hair away from her face.

She finally smiled at him. “Do you think I broke her nose?”

He pulled the cigarette from his lips and looked back toward the empty street. It was hot. Even the breeze couldn’t cool him down.

“Yeah, I think so.”

He remembered the blood and tried to hide his smile. It was strange to him how a child could cause so much harm and the only thing they could do was send her home.

“Good. She deserved it.”

“What did she say to you?”

She shrugged, yet he waited for an explanation.

“She said I should go back to private school where I belong.”

“Yeah, she’s probably right.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. He could feel the heat from her anger.

“I don’t want people telling me what to do.”

He put his hands up in surrender and smiled at her. Her parents had lost that argument. He wouldn’t rehash it.

“I didn’t need your help, you know,” she said.

“I know.”

Again, he found himself hiding his smile. He didn’t want to be the next victim of her powerful right hand.

He had watched the fight between his best friend and Julie Clark from a distance. He wanted to watch and still be able to keep an eye out for the teachers. He had no doubt she would win. She was small, but her determination was as strong as hell. And he knew firsthand that she had a right hook that could knock a grown man to the ground.

He had watched the two girls pulling each other’s hair with some amusement. But when he saw Julie’s friend rush in to help, he knew it was time to get involved. He believed in fair fighting. Two on one would have been interesting, but it wasn’t fair.

All he had done was hold the girl’s hands behind her back as she screamed for him to release her. Julie was already on the ground holding her nose, blood seeping through her fingers. He regretted missing his friend’s well-placed punch to Julie’s face. More so, he regretted losing his surveillance.

They were both suspended for fighting. She would be fine. She was still a sweet little girl from a respectable and wealthy family. A little scuffle on the playground wouldn’t change anyone’s opinion of her.

But he was accustomed to his own fights, his own violent outbursts. Her fight would be blamed on him, the troublemaker. The school was already plotting to discard him with the daily trash. Finding the switchblade on him hadn’t helped.

“Can I have a cigarette?” she asked.

“No,” he snapped.

He didn’t want to get into another argument about his smoking. He flicked the cigarette into the street and watched it bounce into the gutter. The heat floated from the asphalt. He liked the heat.

“I’m a tough girl now,” she said proudly.

“No, you’re not.”

He refused to think of her as tough. If she were tough, she wouldn’t need him to protect her. It would give him pride to know he could protect her, shelter her from all the bad in the world—the bad that often found him.

“You’re too pretty to be a tough girl.”

“I want to be a tough girl,” she insisted.

“Nice girls don’t argue,” he challenged.

“My dad says I can be whatever I want.”

“You can be whatever you want. But you can’t be a tough girl. You’re too sweet, too smart, too...rich.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I don’t have a choice. I can either be a fighter, or I can end up dead.”

She didn’t respond. She watched him while he debated lighting another cigarette. He looked down the empty street. Church bells rang in the distance.

“You don’t have to wait with me,” she said finally.

“But I will. At least till your dad comes.” It was his responsibility, the only one he took seriously. He didn’t want to go home anyway. It was always so cold in that tiny run-down apartment.

“It might be awhile,” she said, looking out at the deserted street.

“Then I guess I’ll be waiting awhile.”

“What if he doesn’t come until tomorrow?” she teased.

“Then I’ll wait until tomorrow. I’ll wait until the end of time for you.”

“Liar. You’ll leave the first time a pretty girl walks by.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, probably. But I won’t ever be that far away.”

“Just remember, I may not wait for you to come back.”

She looked down the street and watched her father’s black Mercedes approach.

## C H A P T E R 1

*Tuesday, November 2, 2004*

*5:28 PM*

*Washington DC*

At the same time a young man was being shot to death in Southern California, I was holding an impromptu batting practice across the country.

The crack of the bat echoed in my ears. I searched my trusty Louisville Slugger, checking for any splits in the wood. It was beginning to look old. It had seen a lot of action. There were new scratches and a few dents, but I was pleased to see it was all still in one piece.

Maybe I should have joined the baseball team in high school instead of trying out for football. I probably would have been pretty good. Baseball coaches probably didn't yell as much. I hated being yelled at.

I tightened my old gloves and took another long look at the bat. One more swing and then I had to get moving. It was getting late and a cold breeze was chilling the air. I brought the bat behind me and took another major-league swing.

The sound of crushing bones made me smile. The bat still had some power in it. I ignored the screams. Yeah, I could have made the majors.

I zipped up my jacket. Rain would be coming soon. Snow would be waiting around the corner. I hated winter. It was just too damn cold here. Not like LA.

I looked down at the mess at my feet.

"First rule. If you make me repeat myself, you ain't leavin' this alley," I said calmly. "Your name?"

The crumpled heap moved slightly and muttered, "Marcus."

The distant cry of traffic loomed down the empty alley. As I expected, the screaming was ignored. No one wanted to play hero in this neighborhood.

“Now, Marcus, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” I said, laying the bat down.

The man clutched at his swelling ankle but didn’t respond. His head rested on the hard, cold concrete; his eyes closed. He smelled like a wet dog; he looked worse. His nappy hair hung down, covering most of his bruised face. These bruises weren’t from me.

He seemed young, but I knew you could never tell the age of someone who survived on the streets. I watched him fight the pain with little more than a grimace. He was determined to not let me see his pain. He reminded me of a younger me.

I searched the pockets of his jeans and found nothing. I grabbed the backpack I had caught him with. His eyes finally opened, glaring at me.

“Hurts like a motherfucker, huh?” I laughed.

I dug out a wad of cash. I counted \$154, pocketed it, and continued my search. I threw a pick on the ground.

“You’re one stupid crook. If I was a cop, you’d be in handcuffs right now.” I glanced at him and smiled. “I bet right now you wish I was.”

“I wasn’t stealing nothin’. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m only a kid.”

“How old are you?” I asked as I pulled a nine millimeter from the bag.

“Sixteen.” The kid attempted to wipe the sweat from his face but only succeeded in spreading grease and filth.

“Don’t move. So you’re young and stupid.” I took the bullets out of the pistol and tossed it in a nearby dumpster. It was useless to me.

I learned a long time ago that guns were ineffective on criminals. We don’t care about dying. We all end up in the ground sooner or later. Some of us can’t wait to get there.

As a kid, I used to carry a gun. And when some asshole pulled a gun on me, my thought was to die like a man.

Only once had someone fired. The three bullets missed me completely. Some said I was lucky. I never thought so. I would have done anything to feel that lead pierce through my flesh, to feel the blood rush from my body in gushes and spurts. To feel alive for just a split second before death engulfed me.

“Who do you work for?” I asked.

“No one,” the kid insisted.

I granted the kid a hard kick to his kidney and he screamed in pain. Both his ankles were possibly broken, and now he was going to be pissing blood for a month. He looked up at me with desperate eyes. I waited for him to beg for his life, but it never came. I wondered if he had lied to me about his age.

“Tell me who you work for, or I move the bat up to your kneecaps. Your ankles will heal. But once you lose a kneecap, you’ll spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair.” I threw the now-empty backpack in the dumpster.

The kid spit, wiped his mouth, and stared at me. This kid was no amateur. I was just like him at sixteen. Too skinny and too dirty. But stronger than hell. His arms revealed his heavy workouts. His eyes showed regular abuse. The threat of the bat wasn’t cutting it.

I drew my knife and held it to his face. He tried to focus on the large blade. I could take his eye out in one swift move.

“Remember rule one? Don’t make me repeat myself.” I placed the tip of the blade under his right eye and watched it waver. Pain is always a worse threat than death.

“Louis. His name is Louis.”

“What is Louis’s last name?” I said pulling the blade slightly away.

“He doesn’t have one.”

Because I don’t like making idle threats, I always make it a habit to follow through. Since Marcus wanted to play games, I ran the blade along the kid’s cheek.

The crimson drops burst from the cut as the kid shrieked in pain. Not a man’s scream, this time. His hands attempted to grasp at his face, but I stopped them.

“What is his fucking name?” I asked again.

“I only know Louis. I don’t know his last name. He hangs on Thirty-Fourth Street. He runs these streets. He told me to steal the car. That’s all I know.”

Committing the name to my list of enemies, I wiped the blood from the blade on the kid’s torn jacket and put it away. The kid’s new screams would bring the police in a matter of minutes.

“You tell Louis that the cars on these streets belong to me. If he wants one, he needs to talk to me first.”

Taking one more look at the kid, I put the bat back in my gym bag, followed by my gloves. I don’t normally beat up on kids. But Marcus had committed the cardinal sin: trying to steal what I already had my eye on. He would pay. Louis would pay. And the Porsche would be mine by morning.

Sirens screamed in the distance. I pulled out my cigarettes. Only one left. I would have to stop for more. Hopefully before the rain started. I looked up to the graying sky.

“I’m gonna give you a choice. A choice I was never given.”

My bag rang. I snatched the cell phone from it.

“Speak,” I barked. Marcus didn’t move.

I lit my last cigarette. It did little to keep the cold away.

“Luc, it’s Mattie.”

My stomach plunged to my feet. The tension and anger dissolved.

“Hi, sweetheart.” My voice was sweet now. Gentle.

More sirens. I didn’t look at the kid.

“What’s up?”

“Spencer’s gone.” She stated it simply. Charlie barked in the background.

I didn’t understand. Her voice wasn’t normal. Pitchy. Strange.

“What do you mean?”

The sirens grew louder. Closer. I slung the bag over my shoulder and sprinted down the alley.

Disappear. Blend.

“He’s gone. He disappeared. I don’t know…” Her voice trailed off.

She was crying. I couldn’t remember the last time I had heard her cry. She didn’t cry when she fell from her tree house. She didn’t cry when she broke up with Carl. She didn’t even cry at her own wedding.

“Mattie, tell me what’s going on.”

I eyed the pedestrians on the street. No one looked at me. I kept moving. Sirens. Close.

“He didn’t come home last night. I thought he was working late. But he never came home.”

I looked at my watch. It was almost six o’clock. Three in LA. Five-hour flight. I was too far away. She was still crying. Shit.

“Mat, I’m coming out there. Have you called the cops?”

“Yes. They’ve been running through the house all morning. They keep asking me all these questions and I just don’t know.”

“The cops have been there already?”

I slowed my pace. I was moving too fast. Too obvious. Think.

I had spent my entire life studying cops. This was not standard procedure. Alarms blazed in my head.

Lightning flashed above me.

“When did you call them?” I asked.

“I called them this morning when I woke up, and he wasn’t here. Luc, they want me to take a polygraph.”

Polygraph. For what?

“Mattie, calm down. What did the cops tell you?”

“Nothing. They won’t tell me anything. They just keep asking me questions. I’m so scared. What if something happened to him?”

She paused, and I could hear her talking to someone. I flicked the cigarette into the gutter and kept moving.

“I have to go, Luc. They don’t want me talking to anyone.”

And there it was. All my anger returned. No one got in the way of me talking to Mattie.

Thunder shook the buildings. Umbrellas opened and people ran for cover.

“Mattie, listen to me. Tell the cops to get the hell out of the house. Tell them you won’t talk until I’m there with you.”

“They said they have to look through his things.”

“Tell them to come back with a fucking warrant!” I screamed.

People stared. Mattie cried. And then the sky opened and the rain fell.

“Tell them to get out. Now. If they refuse to leave, call your father. Stay in the house and wait by the phone. I’m on my way.”