

Angel in Training

An Abraham Noonan Novel

By Terry DeMarco

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Printed in U.S.A

ISBN

Imprint: Independently published

FOR NICK

CHAPTER ONE

The night air was cold and damp. The city was eerily quiet. The place looked like a scene from a movie; a movie without a happy ending. Abandoned cars and trucks littered the streets. Old discarded raindrops dripped from the eaves and merged with the puddles formed by the heavy rainfall from earlier in the day. The people were gone. Some had escaped, most had not. Only one was left and she was running for her life.

Nell splashed through puddles as she frantically looked for a way to escape. She didn't look back. She knew the demons were closing in. She saw an alley up ahead and prayed that it would be an escape route or at least a place where she could hide. It was neither. The alley was a dead end. She skidded to a stop. There were no doors or fire escapes. There wasn't

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even a dumpster to hide behind. She found herself surrounded by three brick walls. She turned and started to run back the way she came. She was too late. The only way out was blocked by hideous drooling creatures with razor sharp teeth, wild eyes, and talons that could cut through steel.

She ran back into the alley. The two side walls were a part of neighboring apartment buildings, but the third wall was just a wall. It was maybe twenty feet high, but it might as well have been a thousand. She clawed at it trying desperately to scale it somehow. When that failed she jumped as high as she could, straining her arms to try to reach the top but it was too high. She fell in a heap on the cold wet asphalt. She raised her head and looked around. She hoped to find a box, a garbage can, or a piece of junk; anything she could stand on to bring herself within reach of the top of the wall. If she could just get over the wall, maybe she could get away; maybe she could find another survivor; maybe she would be safe. But she was not safe. There was nothing in the alley she could use to boost herself over the accursed wall. She was trapped and she knew it.

She jumped up when she heard the scraping and scratching of demon claws against the brick and the pavement. They stopped hissing and their screeches fell silent. They also knew that she was trapped. Their prey was trapped with no means of escape. All they had to do was go in and get her. They were savoring

the moment, approaching ever so slowly like a lioness creeping silently through the reeds before pouncing on an unsuspecting herd of wildebeests.

But Nell was not unsuspecting. She knew what was coming. She knew what was stalking her and she was terrified. She had seen what the demons could do to a person. Her heartbeat was racing. She looked around the alley to see if there was something she had missed; some weapon she could use or someplace she could hide, but again she found nothing. She felt her attackers getting closer and she pressed her back against the wall as if trying to will her body to go through it. Her breathing was heavy and it came in short gasps. As the demons drew closer the panic inside her welled up and the scream that was trapped in her throat suddenly burst free. It was a terrible piercing scream.

“Help me!” she cried. “Somebody please help me!”

The alley was dark, but the moon shown on her like a spotlight. She could see dozens of red eyes glowing eerily in the darkness. As they got closer and stepped into the light, their sharp teeth gleamed in wide deranged smiles. They were hungry and Nell would make a tasty meal. She whimpered as she turned her eyes away from them. Her body crumpled to the ground as if all her bones suddenly dissolved. She wept and shook with terror as the menacing creatures grew ever closer.

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“Please,” she said softly between sobs. “Please.”

The demons were close enough to touch her. One reached out with its gnarled hand and spikey claws. She felt it touch her hair. She stopped believing that help would come, her only wish now was that this torment would be over quickly.

The demons screeched and howled madly. Nell’s body tensed and her eyes clamped shut. She waited for the first blow; the first cut. She knew it was coming. She knew this was the end. Suddenly, something slammed into the wall with a splat. Her body spasmed and she let out an involuntary shriek. The object hit the wall inches from her face. It bounced off her knee on the way to the ground. She opened her eyes and saw that the thing that had touched her knee was a demon’s severed hand. She screamed wildly as she tried to push herself away from it. Its clawed fingers twitched and clenched as if it was still connected to its master’s arm. The beasts continued to shriek, but they were not squealing in triumph. They were crying out in pain and anger. She forced herself to turn her head so she could see what was happening. What she saw was unbelievable. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. One man was fighting off hundreds of demons. He was surrounded by a golden aura which he could extend from his hands to use as a kind of energy blade.

The air hummed as demon after demon fell; slashed to pieces by the laser-like glowing sword

wielded so skillfully by this man; this strong, brave creature of the light. When the horde of monsters were whittled down to fifty or sixty, the man retracted his sword and fought them off by hand. The few brutes that survived scurried away as fast as their battered bodies could carry them. Nell's savior scanned the alleyway to be sure no foolish demon lingered there.

As he turned toward an awestruck Nell, he brushed a demon hand off the shoulder of his tailored suit. He swaggered toward her and stepped purposefully over the headless torso of a fallen monster as the moonlight glinted on the polished leather of his Italian made shoes.

Nell sat motionless. She stared up at him intensely. Her eyes were wide and her jaw dropped as he approached her. His dark wavy hair was slightly mussed. He grinned a half smile and crouched down. She followed his eyes with hers until they were eye level to one another. He gingerly lifted her chin to close her mouth.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a gleam in his eye as he held out his hand to her.

She nodded and took his hand.

She eyed him carefully as he helped her to her feet. There was not a speck of dust or a spot of blood on his dark blue Armani suit. His Gucci shirt and tie were also clean and unruffled.

"Who are you?"

He cocked his head and with a confident smile he said, "My name is Noonan, Abraham Noonan. I am an angel first class."

"The demons..."

"They won't bother you anymore. They know I'm here to protect you."

"W-what happened to your weapon? It seemed to give out in the middle of the fight. I thought you were a goner for sure."

"No, it didn't give out, I just turned it off."

"Why?" she asked astounded.

"Well," he said modestly, "since there were only fifty or sixty left, I thought it would be more sporting that way."

"S-sporting?"

"Yes, I didn't want to give myself an unfair advantage."

Her eyes rolled back and the angel in the Armani suit caught her as she swooned. He lifted her up in his strong arms. As he carried her out of the alley, he walked past the dismembered bodies of the once powerful demons. He winked his eye and they slowly turned to ash and disappeared in small wisps of smoke. No one would ever know what happened here this night.

“What are you doing, Abraham?”

I slammed my notebook shut with a bang. My pen flipped up and landed point first in the sand.

“How long have you been standing there, Al?”

“Long enough to see you bash Star Wars, James Bond, and Dudley Doo Right.”

“I did not bash... wait, Dudley Doo Right?”

“Nell?”

“Nell just happens to be a good name for a damsel in distress.”

“What happens in chapter two? Do they tie her to the railroad tracks?”

Al is a good boss, but he could really be a pain some times. I shook my head and reached down to pull my pen out of the sand. The day started out to be perfect. I was sitting on a beach in Chicago just off Lake Shore Drive. It was early and the sun peeked out over the waves of Lake Michigan. It feels good here. The place is beautiful. The morning sun's rays dancing on the water have a calming effect. I love the feel of the warm sun combined with the cool breeze on my skin.

When I arrived I made myself comfortable on a large piece of driftwood that was perfectly placed. It was close enough to the water so I could enjoy the soft slapping of the waves on the shore, but far enough away so that the spray would just miss my notebook which I had promptly opened and began writing. This seemed like the ideal spot to work on

my memoirs. At least it did until Al showed up. I thought I might catch a break between assignments but an angel's work is never done.

"Your memoirs?" Al asked with surprise when I told him what I was working on.

"Yes. I wanted to write a book about my adventures."

Al smiled.

"I don't seem to remember that particular adventure."

If anyone else said that, you could argue that he may have forgotten it. Al, however, is an archangel who remembers everything. His real name is Azrael. Like I said, he's my boss. He's also the Archangel of Death. While his title sounds really ominous, he's not the grim reaper. His actual job is to act as a guide to the recently deceased. He helps some souls find their way to Heaven right off the bat and he gives other souls who are on the fence between good and evil a second chance for redemption. Those who are beyond all hope... well, all he can do is watch with a heavy heart as Lucifer leads them away to the other side. He also has a sideline where he helps the living by comforting and advising them during times of crisis.

He doesn't do this alone of course. He has a team of angels (me being one of them) who report to him. He gives us assignments and then checks on us along the way to see if we need any help. He generally

lets us handle things our own way although he has been known to put a little pressure on us if he thinks the assignment might be going south. He's actually a great boss. It's just that he has this annoying habit of sneaking up on you. It always derails my train of thought.

"Let's face it, Al," I said with a sigh. "All we do is lead souls to Heaven, nudge folks back on track when they go astray, and convince the occasional bully that hurting people is not the right way to get respect."

"That's true. So what's your point?"

"My point is that a large part of our job is pretty...well...mundane."

"Mundane?"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise which is a surprise in itself since this guy is almost never surprised.

"It's not mundane to the people we help."

"That may be true, but I wanted my story to be more exciting, you know. I wanted it to have a little pizzazz."

"Pizzazz," he said indifferently.

"Right, so I took a little artistic license."

"I see," he said with a frown. "So, 'artistic license' is just another name for 'tall tale'."

"I fought demons," I said defensively.

"Not with an energy blade and certainly not perfectly coifed in an expensive tailored suit. Come on, Abraham, how many times have I told you..."

“Angels don’t wear Armani,” we said in unison.

“Yeah, I know.”

I’d heard that line a thousand times.

“Besides, he wasn’t ‘perfectly coifed’. I said his hair was mussed.”

“Exactly.”

I looked at him quizzically.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You just said his hair was mussed.”

“So?”

“*His* hair, Abraham, not *your* hair. The person in that book is just a figment of your imagination. It’s not you.”

He sighed and looked at me like a dad about to give his son a pep talk.

“Look, Abraham, you’ve done some amazing things in your time as an angel. Your work is important. It has made such a difference to souls both living and dead.”

He paused and I waited a tick. It didn’t take long for him to arrive at the inevitable ‘but’.

“But you’re not James Bond or Han Solo. You’re Abraham Noonan, angel first class. That’s something to be proud of. If you want to tell your story, tell it like it is. You don’t need an artistic license.”

“Okay,” I mused. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good.”

“I have been working on that energy blade thing, though. If I could channel enough power from my

aura into a weapon, I could make that energy blade happen.”

“I’m sure you can. In the meantime, I have an assignment for you.”

I tucked my notebook under my arm and stuffed my pen in my pocket. I was grateful that the subject had changed.

“Fire away. What’s the assignment?”

“First tell me why you’re writing a book.”

So much for changing the subject. I hesitated for a moment before giving him an answer.

“I just...”

He waited without saying a word.

“I just wanted to put something down in writing so I could look at it and see that my existence has meaning. I guess I just got a little overzealous.”

He looked at me in disbelief. His tone softened as he said, “Abraham, you’re an angel. You comfort people in life; you save souls and lead them to Heaven. How can you feel your existence has no meaning?”

“Yeah, I get that, I really do, but I feel like I can do more.”

“Like what?”

“Like... like... maybe I could be your lieutenant or your advisor or something. I’ve been a field angel for a long time.”

His eyes widened. “A long time? Most angels have been doing their jobs for millennia. You’ve been

an angel for what, a few years? Once you've done the job for a few *hundred* years then you can say you've been an angel for a long time. Right now you're not even close."

"What I lack in experience, I make up for in creativity," I offered.

He chuckled.

"I can't argue with that. You are most definitely creative."

I wasn't exactly sure if that was a compliment or not, but I decided to be positive.

"Thanks."

"Are you bucking for a promotion?"

My eyes brightened.

"A promotion would be nice."

Al just shook his head.

"Look," I said, "I love doing angel stuff."

"Angel stuff," he repeated.

"Yes, angel stuff; saving souls, helping people; I love it. I really do. But I know I can do more."

"What do you suggest?"

"Maybe you can move me into a new position like say... middle management."

There was an awkward silence while Al stared at me.

"Well?" I said. "What do you think?"

"This isn't a corporation, Abraham. There's no such thing as angelic middle management."

"Okay, how about a team leader? You know, you

give me assignments; I dole them out to other angels, follow up on them and report back to you. There's a lot going on in the world. I can be a big help to you."

"I've been doing fine without a team leader for a very long time."

"Come on, Al. The world is getting bigger and more complicated. I can help you. What do you say?"

Al considered for a moment. That was a good sign. I was getting my hopes up.

"Let's talk about this once you've finished your assignment."

And just like that my bubble of hope burst. I should have figured he would say that; typical upper management.

"Okay," I sighed, "what's the assignment this time?"

Al held out his hand.

"May I borrow your pen?"

"My pen?" I asked.

"If you please."

I eyed him curiously as I reached into my pocket, retrieved my pen, and handed it to him.

"What are you going to do with it?"

He didn't say a word. He just held the pen in the palm of his hand with his fingers outstretched. He bounced it a few times checking it for weight and balance. Then he carefully rolled the pen around with his fingers until he was satisfied that he had the proper grip. He looked out into the distance as if

taking aim at a target. I looked over his shoulder to see what he was aiming at, but all I could see was miles of empty beach.

“What are you...”

“Shh,” he said. “Step back, please.”

I did as he asked. Then he squinted his eyes and shuffled his feet until he found the perfect stance. He raised the pen above his head and pulled his arm back over his shoulder. He moved the other arm forward for balance. Then with one swift motion, he hurled the pen like a miniature javelin. The pen flew straight and true until it hit its mark about ten feet away from us. That is to say the pen stopped in mid-air since there was no real target to hit. I watched the pen hang there for a moment. Slowly it began to vibrate. Then a faint glow surrounded it. I looked at Al. He seemed to be enjoying the show. I turned my attention back to the pen. It got brighter and brighter until finally it began to disintegrate. The pen dissolved slowly from the back of the barrel all the way to the nib. Then it vanished and all that was left was a tiny dot of light. Sparks flew from that point and a small dark hole appeared. The sparks outlined the opening as it quickly grew into a hole big enough for a person to walk through. My jaw dropped as I stood there staring at the gaping hole that floated just above the sand. I turned to Al, who had a very satisfied look on his face.

“Al.”

“Yes?”

“That was my favorite pen, Al.”

“It’s a small price to pay for saving the world.”

“Saving the world from what?” I asked.

“Your version of Star Wars meets James Bond.”

I hesitated for a moment before the realization hit me. I eyed him and said, “You didn’t need to use my pen to open that portal, did you?”

He didn’t look at me. He just smiled and stepped toward the opening. Without another word he vanished into the darkness. I tossed my notebook over my shoulder. It bounced once on the driftwood before it was swallowed up by the sand. I’d come back for it later.

“I can get another pen, you know,” I said as I followed him into the portal. Once I passed through it, the doorway quickly spiraled closed behind me. The beach was once again quiet and peaceful.

CHAPTER TWO

Portals can be unpredictable. Sometimes they are long passageways where it feels like you are walking forever. Other times a few steps get you to the other side. This time, I was over the threshold in one step. I felt a cold chill run up my spine when I realized where the portal had deposited us. Since Al didn't tell me where we were going I figured it could be anywhere on Earth. I figured wrong. We were most definitely not on Earth. I was staring at a vast desolate wasteland. There was no sun and yet there was light. It was not a warm welcoming light. It was cold like the fluorescent light you would see in a museum. I looked up at the cloudless sky. I knew the light would be there until it was not. In the time it takes to snap your fingers it would be gone. It could happen at any time without warning. And when the

light was gone, there were no eerie statues to keep you company as there are in a museum at night. There were no long dimly lit, menacing hallways of the kind Stephen King writes about. There was only darkness; complete and total darkness. There were no sounds. There was only you and your imagination dwelling on what could be sitting right next to you waiting to pounce at any second. You could not depend on your memory of the terrain to navigate through the darkness. Your next step could be on solid ground, quicksand, or off a mile high cliff; and although you can't die here, you can experience the suffocating loss of breath or the pain of landing on the rocks. And all the pain you feel would be there until it's not; just like the darkness. Everything that happens here is at the flip of a switch. You just don't know who is doing the flipping and when it's going to be flipped.

The ground was mostly dirt with patches of dry grass. There were large rocks scattered over the landscape. Some were as large as boulders. Others were about the size of small tree stumps. The most noticeable and perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this place is that everything is quiet and deathly still. There was no wind, not even a breeze. Nothing moved at all. All around you, as far as the eye could see, there was more and more of the same lonely desolation. The silence was worst of all. It was deafening. There were no animals howling; no plants rustling; and no insects buzzing. There were no

sounds at all. The temperature was neither cold nor hot. Still... standing in this place made me shiver. It was vast, desolate, incredibly lonely and... very familiar. Al was standing a few steps in front of me, staring off into the distance. I looked at him.

“Azrael,” I said nervously, “why are we here?”

“I see you remember this place,” he said impassively without returning my gaze.

Oh yeah, I remembered this place. Once you’ve been there, you don’t forget Purgatory... not ever. This is where I ended up after I died. It’s where I first met Al. It’s where he saved me. Now, I couldn’t help but wonder why he brought me back here. An awkward silence hung low and heavy in the air. As far as I could see, Al and I were alone. I hesitated a beat before I asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

He looked at me quizzically. He must have seen the concern and perhaps a bit of fear in my eyes.

“No,” he said softly, “of course you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why are we here?” I asked, releasing just a bit of the tension I felt when we first arrived.

“We’re here so that you can meet your next assignment.”

TO BE CONTINUED...