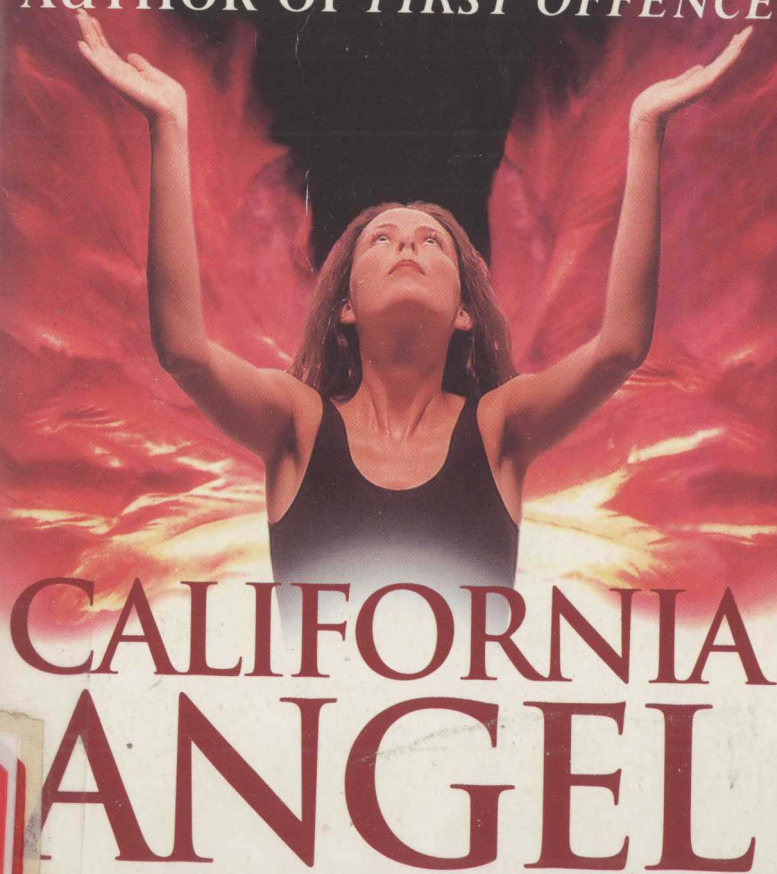


NANCY TAYLOR ROSENBERG

AUTHOR OF *FIRST OFFENCE*

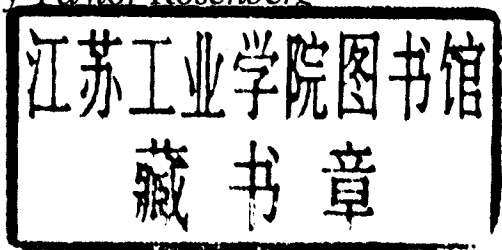


CALIFORNIA ANGEL

THE LAW TRUSTS IN LOGIC. AND TRUTH GOES ON TRIAL.

CALIFORNIA ANGEL

Nancy Taylor Rosenberg



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Shadows danced all around her, forbidding and ugly. Outside, the afternoon shower had suddenly turned into a torrential downpour. Rain splashed against the windows just as a loud crack of thunder rang out. A few seconds later, the entire loft was illuminated with a quick flash of lightning, revealing a poignant, surreal scene: the big bed in the centre of the open space, the solitary figure of a man. He was emitting soft moaning sounds while the images on the canvases poised around the room watched, all bearing identical faces. One life-size painting from years ago was propped up against the wall right behind Raymond's bed like a headboard. An angel, its enormous wings were stretched wide, and the angel's head was thrust forward away from its shoulders as if she were trying to step from the canvas to comfort the man below. The hair was a brilliant yet delicate shade of reddish gold, and the angel was dressed in a navy blue T-shirt, with the baseball team California Angels emblazoned on the front.

Nancy Taylor Rosenberg received a BA in English and worked as a photographic model before studying criminology and joining the Police Department. She has served as an Investigative Probation Officer in Court Services for the County of Ventura, where she handled major crimes such as homicide and multiple-count sex-related offences. Nancy Taylor Rosenberg is married with five children and lives in California.

Also by Nancy Taylor Rosenberg

MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES
INTEREST OF JUSTICE
FIRST OFFENCE
TRIAL BY FIRE

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR
NANCY TAYLOR ROSENBERG:

'Packed with suspense and keeping you turning pages far into the night' Andrea Newman, *Sunday Express*

'Gripping tale with a twist' *Today*

'Puts her plots together neatly, incorporating a cunning and unexpected twist towards the end, and uses a wringer to good effect on the reader's heartstrings' *Evening Standard*

'Fast-moving and captivating . . .
Unputdownable' Kate Bravery, *Today*

'A riveting and well-told portrait of a world in which truth and justice are sometimes opposites' *New York Newsday*

To Amy Rosenberg and Janelle Garcia:
miracles come to those who believe.
And to my own little angel, my first
grandchild, may your journey through
life be safe and smooth.

acknowledgments

Many people assisted in this book becoming a reality, and I would like to offer my appreciation. My agent, Peter Miller, at PMA Literary and Film Management, Inc., expressed enthusiasm after only listening to me spin this tale one evening; my editor and very special friend, Michaela Hamilton, at Dutton/Signet, who made the suggestion that my angel be a teacher and supported this project every step of the way; and to my husband, Jerry Rosenberg, who handled the kids, the business, the everyday details of our lives while I worked night and day. To Jennifer Robinson, of PMA, for her continual support and advice, and to my precious mother, LaVerne Taylor, who first introduced me to the world of angels. To Barbara King, a teacher at the Willard Middle School in Santa Ana, who served as my inspiration for the character of Toy Johnson, and to all the wonderful students at Willard, who have convinced me that they can make their way in the world regardless of the obstacles they must overcome. Of course, I must thank the man upstairs for providing me with the inspiration to create such a story. Next, I must thank Rabbi Bernard King for developing the 'Adopt a School' program at our temple and making me believe that I could make a difference.

But the one person who inspired me the most was Janelle Garcia, a child I have grown close to over the past three years. Janelle suffers from a rare disease known as MMA, and is presently the oldest living survivor with this condition. One day when she was very ill and confined to bed, I told her and her younger sister, Nettie, this story and was rewarded with radiant smiles of delight and wonder. From that day forward, I was determined to see *California Angel* in print, and was certain that within the pages was a special magic – not my own of course – but Janelle's. In her room, in her house, in her presence, the angels are always gathered to assist her in her battle against her illness. I should point out that she is doing quite well, even though each day is a struggle. With her tenacity and courage, her loving family and friends, her enthusiasm for life, and her celestial helpers, I'm certain Janelle will have a rich, full life.

I'm grateful to have such a wonderful family: Forrest and Jeannie, Chessly and Jimmy, Hoyt, Amy, and Nancy Beth. So many other wonderful people also work on my behalf: Alexis Campbell, my publicist and assistant; Elaine Koster, my publisher, as well as Peter Mayer, Marvin Brown, Judy Courtade, Maryann Palumbo, Leonida Karpik, Arnold Dolin, Alex Holtz, Lisa Johnson, Neil Stewart, and the complete staff at Penguin USA, I offer my appreciation for your hard work and support.

To my suspense readers, I thank you for taking this brief sojourn with me and hope you find it entertaining and meaningful. After looking hard at the dark side, I wanted to play on the other side of the fence a few moments before returning to my customary terrain. We may be in the midst of despair, but shouldn't we hold on to our hope for the future?

prologue

October 29, 1982: The leaves on the towering maple trees surrounding the Hill Street Baptist Church in Dallas were tinged with brown. Because the parking lot was full and the Gonzales family was late as usual, they had to park their ten-year-old Ford Fairlane on the street.

He was in the backseat, his eyes glued on the shiny mirrored strip of chrome running along the door frame. He wasn't looking at it but through it, or even into the chrome itself. Yesterday he had touched it with his thumb and now found himself fascinated with the outline of his fingerprint – fuzzy and milky on the outside, shiny and reflective on the inside. In his mind the fingerprint became something else, just as everything he touched or saw became something else. He was looking at a large lake, frozen solid, snow piled high all around. Overhead, the sky was gray, heavy clouds ready to spit forth more snow, and a fierce wind whipped across the icy surface. There were no people in his imagined landscape. There were never any people.

Noises drifted by his ears. He felt the vibration of the sounds against his cheek. In the front seat his parents were fussing, trying to find their prayer books, rushing so they would not have to walk into the sanctuary after the service had began.

‘Rosie,’ his mother said. ‘Hurry, get Raymond out of the car. We’re going to be late.’

Madonna Gonzales was a thin, dark woman who always seemed to be in a hurry, always late, always anxious. She no longer allowed people to call her Madonna, including her husband. Since her separation from the Roman Catholic church two years ago, she asked that she now be called Donna. She didn’t like the connotations of the name Madonna, she told people. It sounded too Catholic; Donna was now a Baptist.

Rosie circled to the rear passenger door and peered at her brother through the window. At eleven years old to his thirteen, she was smaller and far more childlike. Her golden brown skin had a warm, healthy glow, and she was wiry and active like her mother. She reached for the door handle and then sighed, watching her brother’s face, the detached look in his eyes, the pronounced stare. Why couldn’t he talk to her? Why couldn’t he share things with her? Why couldn’t he go to school like she did every day, maybe even walk with her to the bus stop?

Ever since she could remember, Rosie had been asking her parents the same questions. ‘Raymond is sick,’ her mother would say. For Rosie this was a difficult concept to grasp. Her brother’s body was strong and well developed. He was big for his age, while Rosie was small and delicate. He never coughed or upchucked in the bathroom. He never ran a fever or broke out with spots as Rosie had last year when she had come down with the chicken pox. But Raymond was sick. And Rosie knew he was sick. He was sick in his head.

‘Get out, Raymond,’ Rosie said softly, taking his

hand and pulling, while his eyes remained fixed on the door frame. Quickly she moved her free hand in front of his eyes, breaking his eye contact. Sometimes this worked. His eyes would follow her hand, and his body would follow his eyes. Today it didn't work. She leaned back with all her weight and pulled on his hand. 'Momma,' she yelled, frustration and annoyance in her young voice, 'I can't do it. He won't move.'

While Roberto Gonzales stood by the driver's door, his arms limp by his side, an unconcerned look on his face, his wife ran to the back door and tried to get her son out of the car. Her eyes would find her husband's and narrow, as if to say, Why can't you help me? Then she would yank Raymond's arm with all her might. 'Please, Raymond,' she exclaimed. 'Get out of the car. We're late for church. Don't you want to go to Sunday school? You can color. You know how you love to color.'

He didn't answer. She didn't expect an answer. Her husband always gave her that look when she tried to communicate with their son. He had long ago given up.

The pond disappeared from his mind like a slide from a projector, and he quickly found another vision: a forest, a blur of vibrant emerald green mixed with a soft cocoa brown. His lips spread in a smile as he dived inside the colors, felt the warmth of the brown caress his skin, heard the rushing of the green like water in a small stream. Then his eyes expanded and his breath came faster. Sounds were echoing around him, but he didn't hear them.

'Raymond,' his mother said. Her voice was loud now, insisting. She had managed to pull him to his feet, but he was still firmly planted and would not

move, his head tilted back and his eyes trained on the leafy branches of the maple tree.

Inside the tree was a blue bird. He had never seen anything so lovely in his life, so mesmerizing, so blue. The bird was perfectly still, strangely undisturbed by the people beneath the tree. He let the blueness fall over him like a blanket on a cold winter day. Suddenly the blue changed to many colors, all of them fluttering. The green rushed and twittered, the brown throbbed, the blue shook as the bird cleared the tree branches and took flight.

'Roberto, help me,' his mother pleaded. This time her husband responded, slowly walking around the front of the car and grabbing his son around the waist. Roberto Gonzales was a large, heavy-set man who made his living with the strength of his body as a furniture mover for Bekins Van Lines. He had a look about his face like a beagle, long and sad, his eyes large brown orbs in his expressionless face. Carrying his son under his arm like a sack of potatoes, his eyes down in embarrassment as other congregants hurried to the sanctuary, he set him down on the steps in front of the church and walked away. Roberto had done his job, done what his wife had asked. That was all he was capable of doing. He'd yearned for a son to help carry the workload of the family as he had done when he was thirteen, a son to laugh with and discuss the things a man should discuss with his son. Sometimes on sleepless nights he found it difficult to believe that this strange being was really his child. He had even gone so far on one occasion of accusing his wife of being unfaithful.

Rosie was dressed in her best dress, the white one with the red sash at the waist that she was allowed to

wear only on Sunday. It was almost too small now; she had received it several years ago, a gift from the social worker who came about Raymond. And her skinny legs were getting longer. Tugging at the hem of her dress, she shuffled along behind her mother and Raymond, her father having gone on ahead. They would drop Raymond off at the Sunday school classroom; Rosie would go inside the sanctuary. She would have preferred the Sunday school class but her mother insisted that she listen to the preacher. That's where it would occur, her mother always told her. If it was going to happen, it would happen inside the sanctuary, during the prayers.

Rosie had liked their old church. She had liked the smell of the incense, the robes of the priests, walking to the altar with her hands in a praying position to take communion at the rail. Right after her First Communion, when she was so proud and happy, her mother had suddenly decided to attend the Baptist church. She had sat Rosie and her father down one day and told them why.

'I have prayed and prayed,' she told them, tears streaming down her face. 'I have asked God for a miracle for Raymond. I have asked the priests to pray for a miracle, but they tell me I have to accept this – the way he is – that it is God's will. I cannot do that,' she said, her head jerking upright and the tears drying on her face. 'I can't accept that this is God's will, that God wants my child to be this way.'

A week later, a doctor recommended by the Social Services Agency had diagnosed Raymond's illness, giving it a name none of the family had ever heard before: autism. Rosie couldn't pronounce it. Her father shook his head; his son was not right. That's all

he knew. Names meant nothing. But his mother was certain her son's affliction was a curse, a possession by evil spirits – that only by being close to religious people, only by prayer could her son ever be free of the demons that held his soul captive. If they believed, she told them, if they prayed for a miracle, then possibly it would occur. The people who attended this church believed in miracles. They also believed in the devil and his power to destroy innocent lives. Within these walls, Raymond's mother was certain she would find God and He would cure Raymond.

After depositing Raymond in the Sunday school class, Rosie and her mother made their way to the sanctuary. Her mother liked to sit in the front row. Her father's job was saving them a seat. One of the church's deacons nodded to them as he walked in the opposite direction, accompanied by a strange-looking young woman. Donna Gonzales stopped and stared. For a second, her eyes met the woman's and she felt a chill, wrapping her arms around her body and clasping Rosie's hand even tighter. She had never seen this woman before today. She knew most of the members now for she tried to attend every function possible: the Wednesday prayer meetings, the coffees held for the altar guild, the Friday morning gathering that was specifically for the purpose of healing. She had even learned how to pray for a miracle. She had been told that she should not ask, but rather thank God as if the miracle had already occurred. This way she was affirming it, Reverend Whiteside had said, demonstrating her faith.

While Rosie was pulling her toward the door leading to the sanctuary, the church's organ already playing a hymn, Donna stared at the young woman and the

deacon. The woman wasn't dressed appropriately for church, even for someone her age. Wearing a navy blue T-shirt with the words California Angels emblazoned on the front and a large letter A crowned by a halo, blue jeans, and house slippers, the woman looked very different from the women and girls who attended the church every Sunday in their finest dresses, their best shoes, carrying their nicest bags. The woman's bright red hair flared out around her face as though she was standing in a strong wind. The face, however, was enthralling. Donna stared, watching as the woman's lips moved, her words too soft to be heard.

Her skin was soft and pink, unlined and unblemished; her eyes were distinctly green, not blue-green or gray-green or hazel, but the very essence of green. Her prominent forehead showed a widow's peak, a little point in the front where her hairline dropped down. Donna thought it was like an arrow, pointing at the rest of her lovely face. Her nose sloped evenly but was small, almost snipped off at the end. It was the kind of nose that sometimes made an Anglo person look stuck-up, as if they thought they were better than everyone else. Her mouth was pale pink, like the skin of her face, and as compact and perfectly formed as a rose. High cheekbones delineated her face, and in the center of her chin was a small dimple.

'Mom,' Rosie pleaded, pulling harder on her mother's hand, 'I hear the preacher talking. Everyone's going to look at us when we walk in. Please.'

Donna pulled her eyes away from the woman and followed her daughter into the sanctuary.

Deacon Miller pulled Mrs Robinson out of the Sunday school class after entering and depositing the woman

in one of the small chairs designed for children. 'Who is she?' the teacher asked, puffing up her chest, thinking Deacon Miller was bringing in a new teacher.

'She didn't tell me her name,' Deacon Miller said. 'She just walked in off the street, and someone found her roaming around in the halls. She says she's from California. She wanted to see the children.'

'Why are you leaving her here?' Mrs Robinson could hear the children laughing and making a ruckus inside the classroom. She needed to return before complete pandemonium broke out. She was an older woman, in her late sixties. A retired schoolteacher, she had been teaching the Sunday school class at Hill Street Baptist Church for over fifteen years, never once missing a Sunday.

'Look at how she's dressed. I don't think it's a good idea to take her into the sanctuary. She may have walked away from a mental institution or something. She doesn't appear to be coherent. All she said was that she was from California and she didn't know why she was here, and then kept asking me to take her to the children.'

'Well,' Mrs Robinson said, sighing, her hand on the door to the classroom, 'maybe she's drunk or on drugs. How old is she anyway? She looks so young. Why don't you call the police?'

Deacon Miller grimaced. Tall, emaciated, dressed in a dark suit, the sixty-nine-year-old man resembled an undertaker. His skin had a pasty, almost waxy appearance. 'This is a church, Mildred. If a person can't come here when they need help, where can they go?'

'Did you offer her money?'

'Yes,' he said, running his hands through his thinning gray hair. 'She said she doesn't want money. She only wants to spend time with the children.'