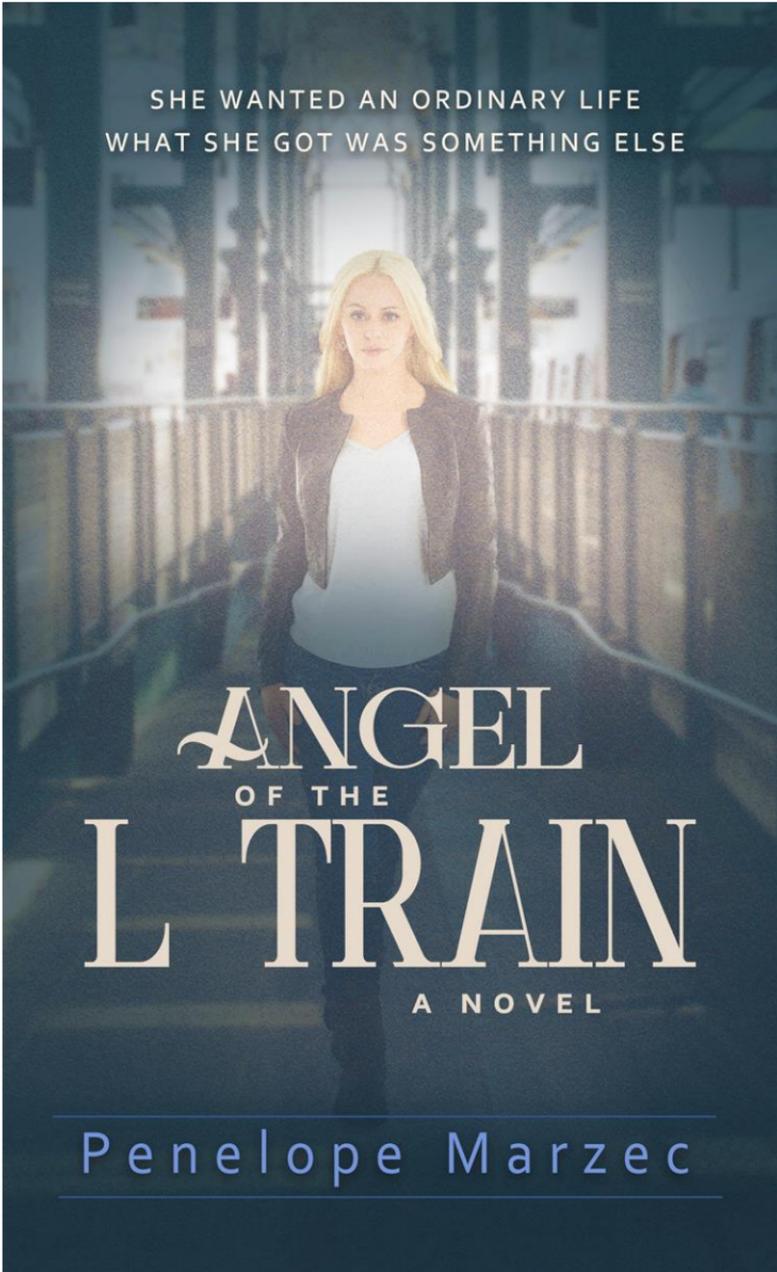


SHE WANTED AN ORDINARY LIFE
WHAT SHE GOT WAS SOMETHING ELSE



ANGEL
OF THE
L TRAIN

A NOVEL

Penelope Marzec

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Dedication

For Emil

For I will forgive their evildoing
and remember their sins no more.

~Hebrews 8:12.

1

Thea Ahern twisted her hands in her lap as she sat in front of the huge polished desk of LetSlip's CEO. The receptionist in the notorious gossip magazine's human resources office took one look at Thea and sent her directly to this office, which seemed odd. Still, this interview was the first one she'd managed to get, and while LetSlip's reputation might be unsavory, it was a job—and she needed money.

As the petite CEO studied Thea's portfolio, Thea glanced at the huge, abstract painting covering the wall on her left. She clamped her jaw together in an effort to prevent displaying any trace of emotion. Her mother created that work of art ten years ago or so. Sorrow pierced Thea as she remembered her mother's joy in splashing the canvas with the vivid colors. It spanned the entire wall, brightening up the otherwise drab office.

"I'm impressed with your work." The woman stated from across the other side of the massive desk.

"Thank you, Ms. Capello," Thea gave a tentative smile as a sense of relief flowed through her.

"Please, call me Salvatora. We use first names only at LetSlip. We're all family here." The woman shoved aside Thea's portfolio. "You haven't lived in Brooklyn

for long. I can tell by your accent. Where did you grow up?"

"In south Jersey," Thea answered.

"Down the shore?" The woman tapped her well-manicured fingers on the shiny desk.

"Sort of, actually in the Pine Barrens."

"I've never been there." The woman turned her head to stare at the painting on the wall.

A strange chill slid up Thea's spine.

The woman returned her attention to Thea. "How do you like New York?"

Thea faltered. *It's too noisy—especially at night.* "It's lively."

A flash of humor crossed Salbatora's face. "Yes, that it is." The CEO folded her hands on the desk, her eyes seemed suddenly remote. "Can you tell me about a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills?"

Thea's heart pounded. When it came to dealing with stress and managing to cope, Thea considered herself the reigning champion. She believed she deserved a trophy. But she must not tell her problems to Salbatora. Not now. Not ever.

A minute ticked by. Thea stared at her hands as perspiration beaded on her brow. She needed to say something. She closed her eyes and remembered...a scary incident.

Thank you, Lord.

"When I went to college, pets weren't allowed in the dorm, but one of the guys kept a lizard in his room, using a heat lamp for warmth. Word went out about a

room inspection, and the lizard owner threw a blanket over the terrarium before he went to eat dinner."

"I see..." The words were a bare whisper.

Thea drew in a breath and continued the story. "The blanket caught on fire and smoke filled the hallway. The sprinklers went on, but the situation was chaotic for several minutes. Some of the students became hysterical about leaving their stuff, but I stayed calm and led them out of the building."

"The lizard?"

"He passed away, but none of the students were injured." Thea did not consider herself a heroine, but the event remained a traumatic memory. No doubt, it wasn't the sort of stress workers withstood putting together a gossip magazine. "At any rate, the campus police arrived quickly. Still, most things in the dorm were ruined by water damage."

"What did you lose?"

"My laptop, books, clothes, and bedding—like everyone else in the building." Thea shrugged. "But folks in my hometown helped me out afterward."

"How fortunate for you."

"Yes. The people in the town where I grew up are the best." Thea sighed. She missed her home.

"What town is that?"

"Woods End. It's very small. Out in the Pine Barrens, as I said."

"I guess that's why I never heard of it." Salbatora stood.

Thea swallowed hard and rose. Was she being dismissed? Did she fail the interview? Maybe the

example she gave didn't measure up to the CEO's standards.

Salbatora pressed a button on her phone. "Liz, please come in and show Thea where she'll be working."

"Right away." Came a reply.

Thea swayed and held onto the edge of the desk. *I got the job?*

"I'm sure you'll enjoy working at LetSlip. You'll be assigned a mentor for a few weeks."

Thea nodded. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. And don't ever hesitate to come to me with any questions."

A knock came at the door and Liz entered with a clipboard. "Follow me, Thea. I'll get you situated right away."

Thea reached for her portfolio. "Bye." She waved to Salbatora, but the CEO of LetSlip stood next to the painting on the wall and stared at it in utter fascination with a bemused smile lighting up her face.

An icy shiver slid down Thea's spine, but she ignored it attributing the sensation to the Arctic temperature of the room.

~*~

Thea sat in the small cubicle Liz assigned to her and ran a shaky hand over the cover of the brand-new laptop on the desk. Taking a deep breath, she opened the laptop, turned it on, and began the process of signing in.

Seeing her mother's painting in the office of the CEO continued to disturb her. The gallery who sold her mother's work catered to corporate offices because those buyers paid well, so it made perfect sense for the artwork to be on that wall. Yet, it seemed a rather odd twist of fate that this is where Thea landed a job.

She checked inside the drawers of the desk as the computer took its time devouring her information. Working at a publication famous for gossip wasn't exactly what she had in mind when she graduated. Publishing articles about celebrity gossip didn't sit right with her conscience either, but LetSlip's salary turned out to be more generous than she expected. At the moment, money was what mattered the most. Besides, no other company seemed interested in her. Other businesses wanted someone with more experience.

Unease wound through her. Once, her mother had been a famous screen actress, but she gave up her career to raise Thea in the anonymity of the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. No one ever suspected Althea Ahern was the famous, Oscar-winning Paris Hulette.

Over the years, her mother's royalties dwindled to a sad pittance, but Mom's paintings sold on a regular basis and all was well until the awful time when Mom stopped painting. A lump welled up in Thea's throat. She pressed her lips together to keep the emotion at bay. This job at LetSlip was a blessing. Since she prayed fervently for help, LetSlip must be the answer to her prayers.

She closed her eyes while the computer updated

the software. Instead of the Manhattan skyscrapers outside the window, she envisioned a bright blue sky where neat rows of corn ripened in the sun. She wanted to reach up and pull an ear of sweet corn off the stalk. A sudden whiff of the pungent aroma of mint invaded her nostrils. She opened her eyes and focused on the computer screen.

“Good morning, Thea. I’m Dan, your immediate supervisor,” a gruff voice rumbled directly behind her.

She turned. A burly man glared at her and handed her a sheaf of papers. “Fill these out and get them back to me as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My name is Dan. Don’t call me sir again.” The man stomped off with his thick Cuban heels pounding the floor like a kettle drum.

Thea took in a ragged breath. She thought she was being polite. How could she already annoy her supervisor?

“Dan’s trying to stop smoking.” Another voice whispered behind her. “He gnaws on sugarless mint candies constantly. They don’t sweeten his disposition, but you’ll be aware when he’s peeking over your shoulder.”

Thea swung around. A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired reporter smiled at her. The reporters at LetSlip were easy to spot. Both the women and the men wore navy blue blazers with the company logo emblazoned on the pocket.

He was handsome and surely not from New York, judging by his accent, and not from New Jersey either.

Her cheeks grew hot under his steady gaze.

He leaned on the top edge of her cubicle. "I'm John, your official tour guide and mentor here at LetSlip."

"Pleased to meet you." She nodded and smiled, but she couldn't help being wary of him. A reporter could be dangerous. She didn't want anyone to discover her mother's former identity.

"Salbatora asked me to show you around so you'll be familiar with LetSlip's layout."

"But...Dan needs me to fill out all these papers." She glanced at the thick stack. It must be at least twenty pages.

"I won't take up much of your time." He sounded rather laid-back for a reporter. Weren't reporters always shouting questions at people?

She twisted the end of her long braid. If Salbatora wanted John to show her around, she should go with him. "All right." She pasted on a smile and stood to follow him. It startled her to realize he must be six inches taller than her. His chiseled features lent him a handsome but somewhat rugged appearance—more typical of a man who enjoyed the outdoors instead of an urban, New York City journalist.

She glanced at the time on the computer screen before leaving her cubicle. In seven hours, she'd promised to meet a stockbroker in the coffee shop off Seventh Avenue. She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm her nervousness.

John didn't chat as he led her through the maze of cubicles, leaving her to deliberate on whether dating a

stranger she met on lonelysinglesoulmates.com was wise. For the past three hundred and fifty-seven days, she'd dated nobody. However, this particular stockbroker seemed like a decent sort. He swore dating a woman with a high IQ did not bother him at all. He also claimed he thought living on a farm might be interesting. He said he never watched old movies, and he never told dumb blonde jokes.

The cynic in her doubted him. While she did not dress in provocative clothes and wore her blonde hair in a simple braid, most men who saw her pale gold strands of hair assumed she was arm candy and nothing more. Now that she worked for LetSlip, the huge soulless, media conglomerate, she wondered if she should dye her hair brown.

"We'll go up to the roof first," John said as they reached the elevator.

Inside the elevator, she blinked her weary eyes. She'd spent the night tossing, turning, and worrying about her dwindling bank account and the cost of her mother's care. She'd also fretted about the stockbroker she was meeting later. Maybe not dating for three hundred and fifty-seven days damaged her psyche.

Perhaps she needed to practice talking to men. Especially with the date looming ahead tonight. "How long have you worked for LetSlip?"

"Four years."

"Where did you go to college?"

"The University of Delaware."

She frowned. For a reporter, he lacked a variety of verbiage. On the other hand, she was the one asking

questions. Maybe he resented her inquest.

She rubbed her eyes.

"Tired?" he asked as the elevator doors opened.

"I didn't sleep well." *I was anxious because I really needed a job.*

"So, you'll probably sleep good tonight." His half-hearted smile didn't appear very sincere. He walked into the hallway and she stumbled after him. "There's a wonderful view from the roof garden." He opened a door and sunlight streamed in along with the earthy smell of freshly cut grass.

Her heart lifted as she stepped into a marvelously manicured paradise of grass, small trees, bushes, and flowers. There were benches and several tables where a few people were working on their laptops.

"We've got WiFi up here," John pointed out.

"It's...nice." A sudden wave of homesickness hit her. She'd never given a thought to how she would deal with living in New York City. She'd assumed it wouldn't bother her, but it did. The noise got to her. There weren't many trees or grassy areas—except in parks, which were far more crowded than the ones back home. There were homeless people everywhere. There seemed to be no peace anywhere, at least not the kind of absolute silence available deep in the Pine Barrens. Well, it wasn't absolute silence. There were crickets and cicadas and sometimes the screech of the Jersey Devil. That thought brought a weary smile to her lips. She'd spent some time with her friends trying to photograph the elusive devil but never succeeded.

"I come up here often to take pictures of the

skyline," John broke into her memory. "Sunsets, dawn, clouds, and that sort of thing."

She stared out at the view. It didn't interest her. It was simply more buildings, streets, and the river in the distance. "I think I'd come up on a regular basis to breathe in more oxygen."

He shrugged. "Yeah, there's that. Not many trees around here. But it's an improvement compared to methane from cow burps."

Her interest sparked. "Did you grow up on a farm?"

"Yes, and I hated it."

At the dark finality in his tone, she took a few steps back.

"So...where did you grow up?" he asked.

"Woods End, New Jersey," she replied. "It's a little town in the Pine Barrens—"

"*Hmphf.* Never heard of it." He turned away from her, leaned against the wall, and gazed out over the city.

"Are you done showing me around? I need to get back and fill out those papers for Dan."

"Um. No." He cleared his throat. "There's still the cafeteria, the gym, the conference room, the theater..."

"How long will this take?" She pulled out her phone and checked the time.

"A half hour or so." He rubbed the back of his neck, straining the fabric of his jacket.

She could envision him working on a farm. His physique lent itself to lifting hay bales. A funny tingle shivered along her shoulders. She wouldn't mind

being in a barn and working with him. But it wouldn't happen. He wasn't going back to farming.

She supposed the cow burps got to him. She and Mom raised chickens, and while chickens also burped they were considerably smaller than cows. The methane from a chicken came from its droppings, which was also smaller than the manure of a cow.

She hurried after him as they returned to the elevator.

"Are your parents still in Woods End?" he asked once the doors to the elevator closed.

"No, I—we sold the farm. My mother is in Brook Grove now. My parents divorced right after I was born. I never met my father."

"That's sad."

She shrugged. People always said that. "It never bothered me. Mom and I did very well without him." *Don't ever, ever talk about that man. Don't even mention him. You are far better off without a father.* Her mother made no secret of the fact that she hated the man and with reason. Her mother bore the scars of bullet holes in her leg and thigh. Her father caused them and got away with it.

Again, they exited the elevator. John showed her the gym. "I'm here at least three times a week. It's open late—until ten most nights."

Thea shook her head. "I'd rather ride my horse."

"I thought you sold the farm," he questioned.

"I board Rainfire at a stable. Mom gave him to me when I was fifteen. I'll buy a farm again someday."

He grunted. "Guess you like mucking out stalls."

She tilted her chin up and gave him a bright smile. "There's nothing wrong with honest physical labor. I love Rainfire, and he loves me." She worried about him missing her—or worse forgetting about her.

John remained quiet for a while. They quickly toured the conference room and the theater. When they entered the cafeteria, he offered to buy her lunch.

"No, thank you. I brought my lunch today."

"How about sitting with me? I can introduce you to a few friends."

She accepted his offer. After all, it would seem rude otherwise. "Can I meet you here in about twenty minutes?" She hoped she could finish filling out the forms for Dan in that amount of time. Twenty pages. One page a minute.

"Sure. That will be great." His smile appeared somewhat warmer, but there was a definite wall of reserve between them.

She walked away and wondered how anyone could grow up on a farm and think of it with such disdain. She missed the farm so much it hurt.

Twenty minutes later, she returned to the cafeteria with her insulated lunch bag in one hand and her phone in the other. She checked her messages but there weren't any from the stockbroker. Yesterday, he sent her messages every hour. Today, not a single message. Not even an emoticon. Was it a busy day on Wall Street?

Rounding the corner in the hallway, she crashed into a solid object.

"*Ooophf.*" She lost her balance and pitched toward

the floor, but the victim of the collision grabbed her arm and prevented her from a hard landing. Still, her phone went flying in the air, hit the wall, and landed some distance away.

“Why did you do that?” John asked as his strong grip steadied her.

“I was testing the proper trajectory for a shooting star.” She blinked her eyes to clear her vision.

“Huh. Shooting stars.” His brow creased with furrows. “Stars are invisible in this city. Too many lights. Used to see plenty at home on the farm.”

She rubbed her tender forehead. Would she develop a bruise? What would the stockbroker think when he met her? *Would he assume she was a dumb blonde?* She couldn’t allow that to happen. She would buy some concealer on her way to the date.

“Did you hurt your head?” He peered at her forehead.

“No. I hurt my phone.” She walked to the place on the tile floor where her phone lay. Myriad fissures fanned out from the screen in every direction. She picked it up and scrolled through her favorite social network. Apparently, the phone remained operational, though it was difficult to read through the cracks.

“You need a new phone.”

“This still works.” She shoved the phone in her pocket. “I’m saving my money for a farm.”

He shook his head as he led her to an empty table in the cafeteria next to a window. The Hudson River glinted in the distance with the summer sunshine, but there weren’t any people at the nearby tables.

"I thought you were going to introduce me to your coworkers."

"It's hard to pin them down. Some are out in the field. Some are on deadline and chained to their desks. But if anyone wanders in, I'll wave them over."

She sat and took her sandwich out of her bag.

"I'll grab a tray and get my lunch. Are you sure you don't want anything else? A soft drink perhaps?" he asked.

"I brought milk." She held up her little carton.

A worried frown marred his forehead. "Did you check to see what dairy it came from?"

"It comes from a cow."

He took the carton from her and pointed to a small area on the side. "There's a code, which indicates where the milk comes from." He studied the numbers. "Local milk. It'll be fresher." He gave it back to her.

Somewhat amazed, Thea supposed he should be an expert in all things concerning milk—and cow burps.

"At any rate, it's cold." She quipped as she opened the carton. "The perfect addition to my peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

He made a face as if the thought of eating peanut butter and jelly was disgusting. He went off to choose his lunch from the menu.

~*~

An hour later, John paced in Salvatora's office. "I don't like it," he grumbled. The air conditioning ran at

full blast, but it didn't help his anxiety. He rubbed his wet palms down his slacks and settled in front of Salbatora's giant desk. His mouth was dry as dust. "I'm not a babysitter, not to mention I haven't a clue about the workings of the graphics department."

"I simply asked you to establish a rapport with her and find out a few details." Salbatora passed a photograph across her desk. "That is Paris Hulette. I wanted to be her when I was eight years old. She was tall, blonde, slim, and beautiful—everything I wasn't. The most handsome men in the world fell in love with her."

John frowned as he stared at the photo. Thea bore a clear likeness to the woman—except for the hair. Thea wore her long, blonde hair in a single thick braid. "So...Thea is a clone of Paris Hulette, but that doesn't mean the former film star is her mother."

"That's what you'll find out."

"Why didn't you ask her when you hired her?"

Salbatora steeped her fingers. "Some things need to be handled delicately. However, I asked her where she grew up. After she left, I searched the Internet for all the information I could find on the little town." She stood and walked toward the huge canvas on the wall. "And now I understand more about this painting."

John turned his gaze toward the painting on his left. "A cow with a paintbrush could do a better job."

Salbatora laughed. "You should take an art appreciation course. After researching a few details about the Pine Barrens, I understand this painting." She pointed to a bright red-orange orb in the painting.