

Too Few Angels

Don Deveau

*May God grant you many years to live,
For sure He must be knowing
The earth has angels all too few
And heaven is overflowing.*

Irish blessing

The bigger they are the harder they fall.

Joe Walcott, the Barbados Demon, welterweight champion of the world from 1901-1904

Prologue

When Moira awoke to the terrifying noise she thought at first that she was back in Belfast, 1971, with the bombs going off and the streets in chaos everywhere. Her first thought was to run and hide, make for the “shelter,” which was little more than a hole in the ground behind their old tenement housing block. Actually, that was her second thought. Her first thought was, they finally got Uncle Pat, the bastards. It had been a continuous worry to her, for as long as she could remember. Everyone always said it was just a matter of time, that he could not run with the Army and expect no consequences. But Pat was her favorite. Of all her mother’s brothers, and there were seven of them, Patrick Sean O’Leary was the dearest, sweetest man she had ever known.

Oh, dear Uncle Pat , she sighed heavily, slowly becoming aware of her environment, awakening to the fact that he was gone, long dead nearly 30 years now. Belfast was just a distant dream, the nightmare of a 17-year-old girl. The bombs, the soldiers, the smoke, none of it could touch her any longer. She had gotten away, made the great escape, made her soul-wrenching journey through the muck and the mire, through the drugs and the sex, surviving and finally arriving on the other side, if not in one piece, at least at peace. She had not sought the Holy Grail, but rather had stumbled upon it. Or perhaps *It* had found her. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Holy Cross East Hermitage represented salvation, comfort and peace to Moira Sullivan. Convinced that it had literally saved her from death, it had been her sanctuary and her home, deep in the woods of Atlantic Canada, for many years.

So, what had jolted her awake so abruptly, disturbing her peace and arousing those black memories of Belfast and her youth? She had fought so hard for her peace, gone through so much

to find it, and Holy Cross East represented serenity itself. That serenity was soon to become a thing of the past. In the dawn's first light, Moira and the other monks stumbled out of their rough cabins, bewildered and confused. Like deer caught in the glare of headlights at night, their surprise was complete. By the time they had sorted out the sounds, it was already too late. It was not bombs exploding in the streets of Belfast, as Moira first thought. But the consequences would be just as devastating to their small world. The heavy trucks, bulldozers and tree farmers that had erupted upon this idyllic landscape were the beginning of the end. Holy Cross East was under siege. Some Goliath somewhere had decided that the forest surrounding the tiny retreat was absolutely necessary to the advancement and progress of the human race.

That decision had been made in a place that was commonly acknowledged as far more hallowed than any small slice of God's pristine wilderness. And it had come down from on high, as well – from the uppermost reaches of the newest and highest structure of glass, steel, and pride, rising above all its sister monuments to man's unbridled industry and avarice along Toronto's Bay Street, simply named the *McDonald Tower*. The man who had signed the decree, chairman of the board and grandson of the empire's founder, was John Porter McDonald, a mild-mannered executive type, who had hailed from the backwoods of Nova Scotia himself and who, everyone would readily agree, hardly resembled God in the least. However, whatsoever J.P. McDonald, III decreed, like his father and grandfather before him, was accepted and might just as well have been carved in stone. After all, who could refute the fact that the J.P. McDonald Company rivaled God Himself, when it came to providing for the souls of the faithful in Eastern Canada? As far as most Maritimers were concerned, God had long ago abandoned them to the wiles of fate and a climate that rivaled the remote Arctic for its harshness. J.P. McDonald's, despite its detractors, was Providence incarnate as far as they were concerned. Where was the

hand of a benevolent God when their kids were sick and there was no money for medicine?
Where was He when their kids needed shoes and Sam Cohen suddenly decided that he could no longer extend credit because he knew that there would be lay-offs coming at the Cotton Mill before school resumed in the fall?

Sam Cohen was always happy to offer credit to anyone who could show him a pay stub from J.P. McDonald's. It made no difference whether the customer worked as a lowly logger or an oil delivery man or an executive in the branch office of the pulp and paper mill, the *Cohen Brothers Clothing and Footwear Store* would not hesitate to outfit the entire family for the upcoming school term, from head to toe, from baby to senior, not a penny down and not a question asked, Gentiles or Jews made no difference. Anyone on the payroll of J.P. McDonald had approved credit with them. It had been that way since anyone could remember, at least for the past three generations. Even when God seemed to have forsaken them, you could count on McDonald's. The company was not just some fairy dust concoction of sparkling promises today and gone tomorrow. Nor was it, despite its corporate address in the heart of Toronto's financial district, a company built on paper and the whims of a fickle stock market. It was a company that actually produced things, including all the ticker tape paper that was swept daily from the floor of the TSE itself.

J.P. McDonald's took the raw stuff of the earth and transformed it into products that were not only useful, but most would agree had become indispensable to our modern way of life. Imagine a world without paper, from newspapers to napkins, libraries to lunch bags, catalogues to cookbooks. It was unthinkable, especially when considering its place next to every toilet in the civilized world. And paper, although only one of many products comprising its vast and impressive portfolio, was the very foundation of the McDonald corporate structure. A handful of

sniveling monks in a remote and insignificant backwoods hermitage could not seriously expect to think that they had a snowball's chance in hell at stopping the goliath that was J.P.

McDonald's.

Granted, the newest captain at the helm of this ship of industry was not a fool. He would be the first to admit that times had changed. He could no longer use his grandfather's tactics of the old days, when it would have been a simple matter to knock a few heads together, burn down a hut or two. He had grown up on family stories of union busting and election rigging, and still remembered fondly the sense of excitement that surrounded his grandfather's visits. A mere child then, he always seemed to know that he was destined to take up the cause, champion what he early on determined quite accurately to be the family legacy. Even before he knew the meaning of such things, he knew that it would be up to him some day to continue the tradition of wining and dining judges, provincial legislators and Members of Parliament. He had continued his grandfather's traditions, of course, his home a continuous revolving door for politicians and civil servants of every persuasion. His open hand was a continuous source of the "little extras" that made up for all the shortcomings inherent in public office for those who certainly deserved better. Only these days, there seemed to be a diminishing return for an escalating investment. Oh, well, that is the cost of doing business, he mused, reaching for the phone on the solid mahogany desk that was unique in its construction, a family heirloom and one of the few things that he felt he truly loved.

The connection was clear and immediate, the voice at the other end calm and confident, in full command of the situation. The days of union busting and strike breaking may have been long over, but there was certainly no shortage of goons more than happy to continue to take up the cause. J.P. McDonald, III had no doubt whatsoever that the man who answered his call was

capable of getting the job done—no matter what was asked of him. The low, raspy voice was all business, quick to get to the point and professional. There was no job too big or too small and there was absolutely no assignment refused. The only thing debatable was the price. And for what J.P. was asking, the price was going to be very high indeed.

Maira would never see it coming.

Chapter I

Moira Sullivan had not come to Holy Cross East by any easy road or straight path. Her journey had been roundabout, through switchbacks fraught with thorns and pitfalls of every kind. She had grown up on the rough streets of Belfast, eventually escaping to find herself among the rough alleys of London's East End. In 1971, it was easy to believe in a brave new world. Flower power would certainly prove stronger than atomic power and the arms race. Love is all you need was the anthem of the day and free love was, well... it was free. To be 18 in 1971 in the east end of London was to be in a perpetual state of bliss. Even for a Catholic girl from Belfast, happiness was possible. It only took a simple act of forgetfulness. And waiting in the wings, there always remained a simple act of contrition to fall back upon. Even mortal sins would be forgiven in the end. But before the end arrived, there was a whole lotta living to do. For a teenaged Catholic girl from Belfast, fresh off the boat, flaming red hair and innocent green eyes, not only was the love free, so was everything else.

Three days after her Uncle Pat's funeral, Moira escaped from Belfast, sailed from the shores of Ireland without a backwards glance. Three days after that, she found herself at a party in a small modern flat on Wheaton Street in London. She never could remember afterwards how she got there. It seemed so natural at the time and she did not have the heart to tell her companions that she was new to such a scene. Besides, everyone was doing it and, after all, it was the dawn of the Age of Aquarius, and it was also the first day of spring and what better time to embark upon a new life. The Lysergic Acid Diethylamide that Moira ingested on the eve of that particular spring equinox was as pure and robust as the original concoction cooked up in the California basement laboratory of Dr. Timothy Leary. It would be many years later, of course,

and a mountain of research before any kind of definitive study would more-or-less prove that, for some initiates, dropping acid only once was enough to permanently and irrevocably alter the geography of the brain. Moira just happened to be one of those people. When she woke up the next morning, cold and naked, lying on the banks of the Thames in the heart of the great city of London, nearly blue with cold from the late March winds that blow down the river from the gray Atlantic; she knew immediately that she had survived something. It took her much longer to understand exactly *what* she had survived. On that particular gray, cold and damp morning she knew that whatever it was, something also told her that she would have to experience it at least one more time.

One more time turned into any time she felt like it, or felt like she needed something more, or felt like the world was just too gray, too blah. At some point the high from the acid was just not high enough. By then however, Moira had discovered the bliss of cocaine. On a whim, she had embarked upon a psychedelic cruise to America, on the coattails of a friend she had met only once at a party in London's posh district. Once again she had no memory of how she had ended up there. She had accompanied a friend of a friend who happened to have a friend in the art world. It was the premier exhibition of a young artist, new on the scene and extremely hot in the art world – something to do with flying camels dying of thirst in the desert of ideas – totally symbolic and “nouveau” and, of course, every painting worth thousands of pounds. The patron and benefactor of the struggling artist, no longer able to cope with his own lack of creativity and impotence, suddenly decided to forgo any further patronage (especially since the young artist no longer needed him, anyway), jumped ship and headed for the promised land of America, and more particularly, Hollywood. His destination was inspired by a clutch of American movies that starred a former British subject, one Archie Leach, who went by the name of Cary Grant.

It did not take him long to realize that Hollywood was nothing more than a continuation of the London party scene that had already managed to bore him to tears. The only difference was perhaps the degree of reckless abandon and nihilistic enthusiasm, with which the young American debutantes indulged. Hollywood of the Seventies represented a unique universe in some ways, however. Around each star there revolved a complete solar system of bizarre satellites. The firmament of bright lights was as fickle as it was irresistible and, all in all, a terrific fireworks display to watch. The meteoric rise and fall of its stars created an atmosphere that was both exciting and uncertain, a wild rollercoaster ride of extremes. But for every star that crashed and fizzled in the surf of Malibu there was certain to be a new one on the rise by the next day. The star making machinery was as insatiable and as industrious as a black widow spider, and just as tyrannical. Above all, Hollywood demanded freshness and the next project always had to be bigger and better than the last, the next face the freshest. The bistros and restaurants, massage parlors and spas, the secretarial pools and burgeoning acting schools and talent agencies were bursting with thousands of girls just waiting to be discovered by the undisputed world capital of glitz.

As in any serious endeavor, of course, the key that opened any door of substance was usually offered – or accidentally discovered – in the most casual way. The gardener with the dark good looks, just arrived from a small town in New Mexico and recommended by his cousin to the mother-in-law of the sister of the producer of the current hottest day-time soap, could suddenly find himself thrust in front of the camera and into instant fame, because he was exactly what “they” had been looking for – “they” meaning the sponsors of the program, who decided that the time was right to target a certain Spanish-American element of the viewing public, who needed to be made aware of their need for a new laundry detergent. Then there was the runaway

from Boise, Idaho, pale skin and huge blue eyes, thirteen but going on twenty-three, awkward but with legs up to her chin. Serving burgers while waiting for her “chance,” defiantly and with great panache tossing her soiled apron at her boss, with the confidence of someone much older than herself and with the air of a disdainful princess, quitting her job on the spot. She had been discovered.

Sliding her long legs into the passenger compartment of the silver Corvette convertible, the leather seat suddenly cold on her bare thighs, she disappears into the Hollywood night with her new champion, her bleached blonde hair blowing in the wind behind her. And so what if tomorrow morning she finds out that her companion, the producer, turns out to be just one more rich punk kid from Beverly Hills, looking for kicks and with no connection to the business. At least the party would have been a blast, the blow usually of exceptional quality and she could always get another job. Maybe the next offer would be for real.

Moira was different. She might have just got off the boat and she was certainly not one to pass up the opportunity for a good time, but she was smart. Growing up on the treacherous streets of Belfast, if nothing else, had given her a certain healthy skepticism. And she had learned to be a survivor. With her natural good looks and in her school girl uniform, her long red tresses unbound or loosely clipped with a plastic barrette, she learned to use her innocence and her guile at a very young age, passing through checkpoints of the British soldiers at any time of day or night.

“Me Mom’s sick and I’m goin’ to fetch Doctor O’Neil,” or “I’ve been sent to bring my brother, Tom, home from the pub,” were common entreaties. More than once she had managed to bring a message to her Uncle Pat, related to British troop movements or IRA activity. More than once she had “done her part.” It never occurred to her as unusual that she should be

involved in such activities, even at the tender age of twelve or thirteen. Things changed however, when she watched in horror on the six-o'clock news as a young British soldier was shown handling a package that blew up in his hands. It turned out that he was just eighteen and he would never be the same again. The incendiary hidden within the package was small but extremely effective. It was made to ensure that the recipient would forever lose the use of both hands. The loss of one eye and partial deafness in both ears was considered as an added bonus. The explosion was triggered by the simple act of releasing a single drop of hydrochloric acid, which quickly and efficiently ate through the layers of brown paper to the black powder within. The release of the acid took the slightest effort, little more than a tug on a flimsy ribbon. Moira recognized that ribbon as one from her hair, which Tim O'Brien had requested as he finished wrapping that parcel earlier that day in her own mother's kitchen. She was not so sure at first, but by the third time they had shown the grizzly scene she had little doubt of her own involvement. Moira was seventeen, just a year younger than the Brit. It was only the previous day they had buried her Uncle Pat.

By the next day, she was on a southbound train headed for Dublin. Up until then, it had all been just a game, playing at some kind of holy war, pretending to be a part of some great cause, all in the name of justice and sanctioned by Holy Mother Church. Up until then, she had never given much thought to the consequences of her own actions. Whatever part had been hers, small and inconsequential it all seemed at the time – a message delivered now and then, a minor flirtation with a check point soldier, perhaps just bending over to retie an ankle boot, an innocent ribbon from her hair – she had never really taken any of it to heart. From her earliest understanding of language, she had learned of the tyranny of the Brits. The bogeyman was named Harold Wilson. By the time of her first communion, she knew more about politics than

any eight-year-old child should ever need to know. By the time of her confirmation at thirteen, she was already considered a veteran, not only in the army of Christ, but in the Republican Army, as well. The two armies were considered synonymous to everyone in her neighborhood. The common enemies were the Protestants and the British Army. If Moira had ever given much thought to it, she would have been hard pressed to describe these enemies, which she had adopted heart and soul, as little more than generalities. When she was finally able to identify a specific enemy, he turned out to be a baby-faced eighteen-year-old boy, who would never again have the pleasure of experiencing the tactile world for as long as he lived. His name was Billy Marsden and he did not seem such a formidable enemy after all.

By the time she reached the shores of Malibu, Moira was done with enemies. She wanted nothing more to do with politics, with the Church, or even with the Irish. She was sick of it all. She began to despise all things Irish, including herself.