

THE
CHRISTMAS
ANGEL
PROJECT



MELODY
CARLSON



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Melody Carlson, *The Christmas Angel Project*
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2016 by Melody Carlson

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Carlson, Melody, author.

Title: The Christmas angel project / Melody Carlson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016011145 | ISBN 9780800722692 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Life change events—Fiction. | Generosity—Fiction. | Charity—
Fiction. | Christmas stories. | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3553.A73257 C455 2016 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016011145>

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Melody Carlson, *The Christmas Angel Project*
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Prologue

Abby Wentworth sighed with contentment as she leaned into the soft plush sofa. “I think this was the best Thanksgiving ever.” She smiled happily as her husband set another log on the already crackling fire. “I mean, despite not having any of our family members with us this year, it went really well. Don’t you think so too?”

“I’ll say.” Clayton chuckled as he closed the fireplace door. “In fact, that’s probably why it was so pleasant—no family feuds or old emotional fires to put out.” He brushed off his hands, then sat down next to her. “I’m well aware of how difficult some of my siblings can be during the holidays. Remember how Edith and Dorrie bickered over the cranberry sauce last year?”

“That’s right! Homemade versus store-bought—I almost had to hide the turkey carving knife.” She laughed.

“No drama like that today.”

“But I must admit that Grace and Joel seemed a little strained—although they hid it well. Did you notice?”

“Yeah, but I chalked it up to having young adult kids.” Clayton

slipped his arm around her shoulders, snuggling her closer to him. “The twins seemed like they were in a snit, like they couldn’t wait to get away from their parents.”

“I’ll bet that’s why Grace asked me to meet her for coffee on Saturday.”

“My little Abby Angel—the constant counselor.” Clayton gave her a squeeze. “What would your book group friends do without you?”

“You know that they’re more than just *book group* friends,” she reminded him. “Furthermore, what would *I* do without them? Those girlfriends have gotten me through a lot, Clayton.”

“Believe me, I know.” He leaned over to peck her on the cheek. “And I’m very grateful for them, Abby. I really am.”

She picked up her sewing basket from the coffee table, setting it on her lap as she opened the lid. “That’s how I’ve been feeling lately too. Very thankful for all four of them.” She removed one of the four Christmas ornaments that she’d been working on this past week. “That’s why I made these.”

He studied the ornament hanging from her finger. “I’m married to such a clever woman.” He gave it a twirl. “They’ll love these, Abs.”

“This is the last one. For Louisa.” She took out a needle and spool of white thread. “It’s nearly done. I think I’ll finish it up tonight.”

“Just so you know, I’m on KP. If I see you step one toe in the kitchen, you’re toast. You hear?”

“Thanks, hon.” She grinned as she put on her reading glasses. “Wouldn’t want to be toast . . . although I would like a cup of freshly brewed decaf. But it’s hard to make any if I can’t get into my kitchen.”

“One cup of decaf coming up.” He gave her a mock salute. “How about a little pumpkin pie to go with it?”

She laughed. “And here I thought I’d never be hungry again. Yes, please! Bring on the pie and coffee.”

As Clayton headed for the kitchen, Abby started to hum softly to herself. One of her favorite Christmas carols—and perfect for her sewing project. Before long she was singing the words aloud:

Hark the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn king!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.”

Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem!



Belinda Michaels was shocked to hear the news: her best friend, Abby Wentworth, had passed away in her sleep. According to Abby's husband, who called shortly after 6:00 a.m., Abby had gone to bed with a severe headache last night, the day after Thanksgiving.

"It's too early to say, but the medical examiner suspects an aneurism." Clayton spoke in a hoarse whisper that was almost unrecognizable. "I already called her dad . . . and the principal at her school . . . and now you."

Belinda was so shocked that she could barely form words, but she somehow managed to express her sincere condolences to Clayton. "If there's anything I can do—" Her voice cracked with emotion. "Please—feel free to ask."

"Just let the other book group friends know," he said sadly. "You women meant the world to her." Belinda promised to do so, telling Clayton that he'd be in her prayers. But as soon as she set down her phone, she fell completely apart. After a long, hard cry, her sadness turned to anger and she began storming

through her house. Ranting and raving, she shook her fist at the ceiling.

Why would God take Abby when she was only in her forties and the world still needed her? Abby had been a perennial optimist, loyal friend, beloved kindergarten teacher, and generally wonderful person. Why would God take her like that? Especially after Abby had fought and won her battle against ovarian cancer. Just two days ago, at their Thanksgiving get-together, they'd toasted to her six years of remission. And now she was dead from a brain aneurism? How could that be? How was that fair? And what would Belinda do without her?

Belinda finally found herself standing in front of her stone fireplace, just shaking her head. On the solid oak mantle were several framed photos. Mostly of her daughter Emma at various ages—from birth to her twentieth birthday last spring. But it was the old black-and-white photo, taken back in the thirties when Belinda's mother had been a toddler, that caught Belinda's attention now. Her round-faced mother had been seated on her great-grandma's lap. Belinda had known since childhood that the wrinkled old woman, simply known as Granny, had been born into slavery. "She's why we got to be strong," Belinda's mother used to tell her as a child. "We gotta make Granny proud."

Attempting to steady herself and be strong, Belinda took in a deep breath as she looked at the clock next to the old photo. Surprised to see that it was nearly 7:00 now, she knew it was time to call the other book group friends. Louisa and Grace and Cassidy needed to hear the news. But how do you say something like this? Talk about a bad wake-up call.

Knowing that Louisa Van Horn was Abby's oldest friend and mentor, as well as an early riser, Belinda decided to start with her. She quickly blurted out what Clayton had told her.

Not surprisingly, the older woman broke into soft sobs, each one wrenching through Belinda's already hurting heart. Louisa was barely over losing her husband last winter—and now this.

"I can't believe it," Louisa declared in a husky voice. "Our sweet Abby is gone? How can that be?"

Belinda shared what little information Clayton had given her and then, in an attempt to end the painful conversation, she explained that she still needed to call Grace and Cassidy.

"I think we should all meet," Louisa said suddenly. "Abby would want us to be together right now." They agreed to meet at the Coffee Cup later in the day. Belinda told Louisa goodbye, then prepared herself to call Grace.

As she waited for Grace to answer, Belinda wished that she felt closer to this woman. It bothered her to remember how she'd sometimes been jealous of Grace—often worried that Grace was trying to steal Abby's friendship from her. Not that it had ever happened. Now she felt guilty for her juvenile feelings. Grace answered her phone in a sleepy voice and Belinda quickly told her the distressing news, followed by Louisa's suggestion that they meet later in the day. Then she tried to cut the conversation short by explaining that she still needed to call Cassidy.

"Poor Cass," Grace said. "Abby was like a mom to her."

"I know." Belinda winced to think of how Cassidy would take this. It would be the most difficult phone call to make.

"I feel so lost now." Grace sniffed loudly. "I can't believe I can't just text her—can't believe Abby's really gone."

Belinda attempted to say words of comfort, but knew they sounded as stiff as a poorly written sympathy card. "I better call Cass," she finally said. "I promised Clayton I would let everyone know."

"I'll see you this afternoon," Grace said.

Belinda told her goodbye, then pushed the speed dial for

Cassidy's number, taking in a deep breath as she waited for the young woman to answer. Since it was Saturday, it was possible that she'd already be at the veterinary clinic. She'd probably have her phone in her pocket to check texts, but Belinda didn't want to text her with this kind of news.

"Hey, Bee," Cassidy said cheerfully. "What's up?"

Belinda quickly broke the news about Abby, but when Cassidy didn't respond, Belinda thought maybe she'd lost the connection. "Cassidy?" she said loudly. "You still there?"

"Yeah—I'm here—I—" Cassidy's voice broke. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe it. How can she be dead? We just saw her on Thanksgiving. She was perfectly fine."

"I know, honey."

"I feel like I can't breathe."

"Sit down and take some deep breaths," Belinda said slowly.

"Abby was—was like a mom to me. I mean, she wasn't old enough, but you know what I mean."

"I know, Cass. She loved you so much. She was so proud of what you've made of your life."

"What will I do without her?"

"You've still got me," Belinda said meekly, although she knew that she could never replace Abby—no one could. "And you've got Louisa and Grace too." Now she told Cassidy about Louisa's suggestion. "Three o'clock at the Coffee Cup—can you make it?"

"Yeah, I get off work at two."

"Maybe they'll let you have the day off. I mean, considering—"

"No, I'm the only vet here until Dr. Auberon comes in at two."

"Well, go easy on yourself, honey. Take lots of deep breaths. And remember how much Abby loved you."

"Yeah—it's just that—that I will miss her . . . so much. I don't know what I'll do without her."

“We’ll figure it out,” Belinda assured her.

By the time Belinda hung up the phone, she felt like a dishrag that had been completely twisted and wrung out—thoroughly drained. And she still felt miffed at God. Didn’t he know how many lives would be devastated by Abby Wentworth’s death? Not only her family and close friends either. All of Lincoln Elementary would feel the loss.

For that matter, many of the residents of Pine Grove, Minnesota, would feel it as well. And just before Christmas too. How could any of them expect to have a good Christmas now?