

Christmas Angel

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THE SANCTUARY SPARKLES BRILLIANTLY. Twinkling purple lights peek from boughs of greenery. The tastefully festive adornment inspires a joyous atmosphere within the church. A single tall Advent candle flickers, casting a warm glow on the wooden creche next to it.

The first Sunday of Advent means we have arrived at my favorite time of year. The Christmas season is upon us. At last. I'm giddy with expectation as I try to focus on the celebration of the Mass.

For weeks now, I've looked forward to hearing festive carols fill the airways and watching sappy, romantic holiday movies. The youth group will hold its secret Santa party, and my family will take its annual outing to see *The Nutcracker* performed. Mom and I will soon spend hours baking and decorating dozens of scrumptious cookies. My mouth waters just thinking about the frosted treats.

Ah, truly the most wonderful time of year.

"I want to leave you with one final thought." Father Brady's baritone voice shatters my Sugar Plum Fairy reverie.

I straighten in my pew. Had I missed everything he'd said? *Come on, Meg, focus.*

His slow scan of the congregation fills the priest's dramatic pause. His roaming gaze seems to stop when he focuses on mine. "I encourage you all to pray and ask for God's guidance in how you can personally make this Advent more meaningful. Make this the year you truly keep Christ in Christmas."

With that brief but—at least to me—powerful line, he was finished.

Keep Christ in Christmas. I mentally kick myself for having daydreamed through the rest of his message. Well, at least I'd caught the recap.

I force myself to stay tuned in during the rest of Mass. As we exit the church, I turn to Mom. "The church is so pretty. It really put me in the Christmas spirit. When can we finish decorating?"

She shoots me a smile. "How about tomorrow after school?"

I shake my head. "No can do. I promised Rachael I'd go shopping with her. If that's okay."

She links her arm through mine. "Only if you promise to get me something spectacular."

I feign shock. "Don't I always?" I remember the numerous handmade creations I used to give her every year. "Let me rephrase. Haven't I given you something amazing the last few years?"

She smiles and leans her head on my shoulder. "You do a wonderful job of finding meaningful presents, but I do miss the days when you handcrafted my gifts with those precious little fingers. They'll always be some of my most treasured possessions."

I roll my eyes...but I do not doubt she means every word. Each year, she still brings out the horrendous decorations I crafted. The paper reindeer with antlers made from my traced handprints. The misshapen clay snowman that looks more like something the cat coughed up than a Christmas heirloom. The toilet paper rolls with glued-on scraps of material that were supposed to resemble a nativity scene—an especially embarrassing treasure.

I sigh, but I'm not really bothered by Mom's sentimentality. Reminiscing about all the decorations from Christmases past is another tradition of the season.

As Rachael and I stroll through the mall, my senses absorb the holiday atmosphere. Huge, shiny ornaments dangle from the towering two-story ceiling. Familiar, beloved tunes of reindeer and silver bells fill the air, and the scent of cinnamon makes me smile. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, indeed. Yet my contentment is shadowed somewhat. As I watch the growing line of kids waiting to see Santa, Father Brady's words at Mass pop into my mind. *Keep Christ in Christmas.* I never really thought about it before, but as festive as the mall feels, there is nothing that reflects the true meaning of Christmas. Not a Nativity scene in sight.

"Hello. Earth to Meg."

I glance at Rachael. “Oh. Sorry. What were you saying?”

“I was asking if you think I should ask Jackson to the sleigh ride.”

“Oh, sure. Good idea.” My friend’s crush *du jour* is the furthest thing from my mind.

Her eyebrows furrow. “You okay?”

I nod. “Yeah. Just distracted.”

“Okay. Hey, look.” She points to one of our favorite stores. “All their sweaters are on sale. I’ve been shopping for other people all afternoon. Maybe it’s time for a little something for myself.”

I glance one last time at the line of excited kids, their tired-looking parents, and the pointy-shoed elf handing out candy canes before I’m yanked into the store.

She heads straight for a table of fuzzy sweaters. I follow along and run my hand along the soft material as she sorts through them.

“Why are you so out of it today?” Rachael glances my way as she begins choosing sweaters.

“My priest said something at Mass on Sunday that keeps ringing through my head.” I don’t share the fact that it was really the only thing that I heard him say. “He said to remember to keep Christ in Christmas.”

She shoves the pile of sweaters into my arms, then turns to a rack of shirts. “That’s a cool saying.”

“Yeah, but I think Father Brady meant it as more than a saying.”

“What do you mean?” She scans a flowery blouse then flicks the hanger aside to check out the next selection.

“Well, what was he suggesting? How does a person keep Christ in Christmas?”

She shrugs as she continues to flip through the clothes. “Your family has a Nativity scene out on your lawn, and your mom always sends out religious Christmas cards. I’d say the Peterson’s do their part.”

I shift the pile of sweaters from one arm to the other and lean against the sweater table. “I don’t know.” I think back to the way Father’s gaze seemed to lock on mine. “Maybe he means we should act more like Jesus? You know, sacrifice ourselves for others. Do things we wouldn’t normally do to keep our focus on Christ.”

Rachael grabs another blouse, along with the pile of sweaters in my arms. She strides toward the fitting room, tossing words over her shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

I walk around the racks of clothes, lost in thought. How do you keep Christ in Christmas? What does that mean? Then I remember Father Brady’s suggestion of praying.

Okay, God, I would like to make this Christmas more meaningful. Can you help me figure out a way to do that? Give me a hint? Please?

The ear-piercing screams of a child interrupt my prayer. My head snaps up and toward the commotion. A young mother in line at the counter tries to console her near-hysterical daughter. The little girl strains against the confines of her stroller, her tear-stained cheeks bright red.

“Amelia, we’ll leave in a few minutes. Mommy just needs to pay, then we’ll head home for your nap.”

The little girl answers with another shriek. A slightly older woman ahead of them in line shoots the young mother a disgusted look.

The frenzied mom squats next to the stroller. That’s when I notice—amid the bundle of clothes in her arms, she’s holding a tiny baby. The poor lady has her hands full in more ways than one. “Shh... It’s okay, Amelia, you’ve been such a good girl. We’ll leave in just a few minutes.”

The exhausted toddler draws a small arm back and throws a sippy cup with all her might. Almost in unison, several shoppers gasp. The cup rolls across the tile floor and lands near my feet. In the loaded silence that follows, I glance at the cup, then at the mom. Her eyes fill with tears.

I pick up the impetuously discarded item and make my way to the line. The little girl grows quiet, her gaze wary as she watches me approach with her prized possession. I smile, and she snuffles in response. As I hand the cup into the chubby little fingers, I know what I need to do. I cast a wary glance around the vicinity. Is anyone I know looking on? Satisfied I’m a total stranger in the current crowd, I lean close. “Hi, I’m Megan. Want to hear a story?”

The little one nods, even as a single tear slips down her flushed cheek. I sit on the cold floor next to her and make up a tale about a polar bear. Her gaze fixes on me as the tale takes shape, and her mom inches closer to the front of the line. I demonstrate the polar bear's expressions, and the child giggles. Her sweet smile strengthens my confidence and the polar bear's antics grow even more elaborate.

Before long, the young mother returns and places her bag in the back of the stroller. I quickly finish the polar bear's adventure and tell my now-smiling young friend good-bye. When I'm on my feet, Amelia's mom wraps me in a long, tight hug.

"You are a Christmas angel," she whispers in my ear. "Thank you so much."

As she pushes Amelia out of the store, I suddenly have my answer about how I can keep Christ in Christmas this Advent. I will sacrifice of myself and do a good deed every day until December 25th.

"Meg, you're not being very helpful," Rachael whines.

We're in line at the local coffee shop a week later. I roll my eyes. Sometimes my friend's focus on herself is a little wearing.

"There's only a few days left until the sleigh ride," she persists. "Should I ask Jackson to go with me or not?"

"I already told you I think you should." My mouth waters as I eye the gooey cinnamon roll in the display case. I've been craving one all day.

I grow hungrier by the moment in the slow-moving line. We're sandwiched between an elderly gentleman behind us, whose black baseball cap indicates he's a veteran, and a guy at the front of the line with purposely messy hair that probably took much longer to style than mine.

"But do you think he likes me?" Rachael asks. "I mean, it would be weird to ask him to go if he just thinks of me as a friend."

"Just invite him to go with a group of us, then it won't be weird, and you'll get to know him better." Mr. Trying-Too-Hard-Not-To-Look-Cool still has not budged. He's too busy flirting with the cute cashier rocking a Santa hat to notice the long line behind him. Apparently, she's also blind to the waiting customers.

Rachael nods. "Yeah, that sounds good. Then there's no pressure."

Finally, the coffee-shop Romeo moves out of the way. The cashier shoots him one last, dazzling smile, the end of her Santa hat swaying with the turn of her head. "What can I get started for you ladies?"

After Rachael recites her complicated order, I ask for one of their seasonal specials, the Merry Mocha, and a cinnamon roll. The cashier rings up the order, and I reach into my purse for my wallet. Out of the corner of my eye I see the scuffed shoes of the elderly veteran behind us. I glance up over my shoulder. His wrinkled face crinkles even more with a crooked grin. I return the smile and turn back to the cashier.

With a final, longing look at the delectable treat in the display case, I place the money in her outstretched hand. "Um, actually, forget the cinnamon roll. Instead, would you please use the extra money to pay for the order of the gentleman behind us?"

The woman stares at me like I'd asked her to stand on the counter and sing a Christmas song at the top of her lungs. "Excuse me?"

I smile. "I'd like to pay for his order."

The confused worker's gaze drops to the money I'm offering. "Really?"

"Really?" Rachael echoes, equally astonished.

"Really." I smile at the cashier, then walk toward a high-top table near the front window.

Rachael sits across from me. "What was that about?"

I shrug. "It's just something I'm trying this Advent, helping others."

"Is this about that whole keeping Christ in Christmas thing?" She hangs her jacket on the back of her chair.

I watch as the cashier points our way and the older gentleman sends me a smile that warms my insides faster than a Merry Mocha. "Yeah. I took Father Brady's advice and prayed for a way to make Advent more

meaningful. I'm sure it's different for everyone. Maybe for some people it would be going to daily Mass or doing an Advent study or something. But this is the idea that came to me, doing little things for strangers."

Rachael tips her head to me. "Well, I know what a sacrifice it was for you to give up that decadent pastry. So, good job."

The sweet gentleman shuffles our way carrying three beverages in festive cups. He sets two down on our table. His watery eyes and crooked smile make me want to wrap my arms around him, but I resist the temptation to hug a total stranger.

"I asked the barista if I could deliver your drinks so I could thank you for buying my coffee this morning. What a wonderful start to my day."

"You are very welcome. Merry Christmas—and thank you for your service."

He tips his hat, then exits the coffee shop.

Rachael reaches for her drink. "So, you've been doing good deeds for over a week now and I didn't even notice? Why didn't you tell me?"

I laugh. "I'm not doing it for the recognition. I just want to help." While we enjoy our drinks, I tell her what I've been up to. Shoveling snow for my neighbor on that ridiculously cold day, missing part of lunch break to help my history teacher rearrange his classroom, giving up my seat on the bus, helping an elderly woman carry her groceries to her car.

"Wow. That's really cool. So, is it making Christmas more special?"

I freeze as I ponder her question, my coffee in midair. While I feel good about helping people, I can't decide if I'm really doing anything worthwhile. Can any of it be defined as keeping Christ in Christmas? I mean, Jesus really made a difference. He wasn't just nice to folks—He changed their lives. Am I missing something? "Um...yeah. Even though they're small gestures, I'm serving others, which makes me focus more on Jesus and not just myself. I don't know if it's really making any difference to the people I help, though."

Rachael sets her coffee on the table. "Why wouldn't it? Even small gestures can make a difference. You're letting people know that someone notices and cares about them. That's pretty amazing."

Her words remind me of a song we used to sing in Sunday school, "They will Know We are Christians by Our Love." Helping others was the idea that came to me after I prayed. My kind yet simple, loving gestures will have to be enough.

Rachael's eyes light up. "You know, it's such a great idea. Maybe I'll try it as well."

The days leading up to Christmas pass in a flurry of activity. Between the holiday fun of sledding, caroling, shopping, and the million other fun things that fill the season, I carve out time each day to do a good deed for someone—a hodgepodge of small actions to help others.

Sometimes I wasn't sure who to help, but then I'd feel a little nudge toward a particular person. A few times I tried to negotiate with God, like when the task I felt called to help with didn't really fit into my schedule. Like spending my whole Saturday baking, decorating, and delivering cookies to the firehouse. Missing an afternoon at the movies with my friends to help a fellow church member, a woman who'd broken her arm, wrap her Christmas gifts. But when those moments hit, I thought about all that Jesus had done for me. I mean, it was hard to complain about being a little inconvenienced when I knew how He died on the cross for me. I even began to tell people why I was helping—to keep Christ in Christmas. Amazingly, no one looked at me like I had three heads. Everyone said it was a wonderful idea and thanked me over and over again.

Christmas Eve finally arrives.

I'm seated at a café table waiting for Rachael. In a few hours, my family will enjoy dinner and game night before attending midnight Mass with my grandparents, our usual tradition. But no matter how much I look forward to the fun, I can't shake my distracted frustration.

I kept thinking my last good deed would be something unique and meaningful to mark the end of my Advent adventure—my own beautiful gift to Jesus on his birthday. But the Holy Spirit must already be celebrating the birth of Christ because I haven't received any inspiring internal prompts, and time is running out.

Rachael enters the room, quickly scans it, and spots me. She waves and makes her way through the crowded café. "Thanks for meeting me for lunch, Meg. I wanted to give you your present before Christmas."

She hands me a festive bag, and I give her the wrapped box I brought for her. We open the gifts and spend a few minutes *ooing* and *aahing* at what's inside. I immediately wrap my new oh-so-soft scarf around my neck. Rachael's present is one of the other sweaters she'd liked when she was able to buy only one.

"Oh!" Her eyes widen in excitement. "I almost forgot to tell you. Jackson and I have been texting back and forth all week."

"That's great." Judging by the starry look in her eyes, I'm not sure she even hears me.

"I mean, I still don't know if he likes me, but it's fun getting to know him." She lets out a dramatic sigh. "Just think, when near-disaster happened and I stepped on his hand climbing into the sleigh that night, I thought for sure all hope was lost! I mean, why would he like someone who nearly ruined his basketball career? But now it's kind of become an inside joke."

I only answer with a grin.

She rolls her eyes, then fills me in on her Christmas week plans to go skiing with her family.

The waitress comes and we order our soups and salads, then Rachael turns her attention to me. "So, have you finished your campaign to keep Christ in Christmas?"

My shoulders sag. "No. I really thought my final act would be something impactful. You know, some incredible grand finale. I've been praying about it, but the right idea just hasn't come to me."

She shakes her head. "You don't need a grand finale. This whole idea of yours has made a bigger difference than you realize. My random acts of kindness were all met with such gratitude that a few people decided to do their own good deeds. Without knowing it, you reached a lot of people."

"Really? That's amazing." Maybe that was the whole point of this process—to encourage people to forget themselves and care for others this season. By doing special things for others, I was drawn closer to Christ. What if, in some small way, my deeds had a ripple effect and brought others closer to Christ as well? That would be incredible.

My heart patters. I can't wait to tell Father Brady how his simple words made such an impact.

Rachael reaches for her water. "Well, now that Christmas has arrived, you can go back to your normal life."

I stare at her and realize that part of my unsettled feeling is a sadness that my good-deeds campaign is over. That grand finale I was expecting would surely make it all feel complete.

As the waitress delivers our food, the first thought bombards my mind—loud and clear, like silver bells and angelic trumpets in one big blast.

Pay for that woman's meal.

I actually look around to see who voiced the command.

"What's wrong?" Rachael glances around as well.

"Um...nothing. I thought I heard something."

I shake my head, reach for my fork—and it happens again.

Pay for the woman's meal.

Rachael dips a chunk of bread into her soup without a care in the world.

I slowly look around. Everyone else in the restaurant is eating, chatting, or laughing. They are all completely unaware of the commanding voice. *Am I the only one who heard that? Whoa.* A shiver runs down my spine.

Could the voice be...*God's*? But this is so different than the gentle nudges He's used to guide me all through Advent.

I slowly scan the crowded restaurant, searching for someone in need. The last of my hard-earned babysitting money sits in my bank account. Maybe someone needs it more than I do. But as I take in my fellow diners, no one appears to need help paying for their meal. Finally, my gaze settles on a woman a few tables away. Sitting

alone, she absently swirls a fork through her pasta. Her tailored suit and perfect, coiffed hair tell me it's unlikely she's in need of help. I must be misunderstanding.

Pay for the woman's meal.

This time I know it's Him. A twinge of fear is quickly replaced by a sense of calm, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I'm experiencing some kind of Divine moment. Something completely different than anything I've ever experienced.

I wanted my last deed to be something unique. Well, what could be more special than getting a calling from God on Christmas Eve? I focus my attention on the lone diner once again. French-manicured fingers slide her plate away. She dabs her mouth with a napkin then lays it on the table next to her discarded plate. All telltale signs that she's finished eating and the waitress will soon bring her check.

Pay for the woman's meal.

I swallow the lump in my throat. Okay. I set down my fork and motion for the waitress.

"Can I get you something?" Our friendly server responds at once.

"Umm...yeah. See that woman over there, the one by herself?" I discreetly point across the room.

The waitress follows my gaze. "Yes."

Rachael looks up. Soup spills off her spoon.

I ignore the surprised look on my friend's face and reach into my wallet. "I'd like to pay for her meal."

"She a friend of yours?" the waitress asks.

I shake my head. "No. I've never met her."

The girl's quizzical look only lasts a second, then she takes my card. "Okay, sure thing."

She disappears, and Rachael sets down her now-empty spoon. "Why that woman? She doesn't exactly look needy."

My shoulders raise and lower in a shrug. "I don't know. I just know that she's the one I'm supposed to help today. I guess she's the grand finale."

My friend glances at the woman, obviously thinking the same thing I had—that this woman is an odd recipient of my final good deed. "I thought you were hoping for something special."

I sigh. "Me too, but this voice inside my head keeps saying she's the one."

Rachael's eyes widen. "Whoa."

The waitress brings back my card. "That's a really nice gesture. Maybe I'll have to do an act of Christmas kindness myself today. It's a great idea."

"Thanks. Please don't tell her who paid for the lunch. I'd rather keep it anonymous."

"Really?"

I nod. "I'm not doing it for any kind of recognition. I'm just trying to keep Christ in Christmas."

She tilts her head. "Sure, whatever you say."

She heads over to tell the woman someone paid for her meal. Expecting a smile or a surprised look, I'm totally unprepared when the recipient of my final good deed bursts into tears.

The waitress glances at me.

Oh no. Bewildered, I shrug in response. The poor waitress obviously has no idea what to do and slowly slinks away. The elegant woman's shoulders shake as she sobs. People at nearby tables turn to watch the unexpected outburst.

I look at Rachael as panic washes through me. "I didn't mean to upset her. What do I do?"

My friend slowly shakes her head. "I have no idea."

All I'd wanted was to make someone's day a little better. Not ruin it. Leave it to me to misread a decree from the Lord. I glance back at the woman. "I guess I should go 'fess up and apologize."

With a deep breath, I gather my courage and force myself to walk across the room, ignoring the curious faces of the other customers. As I approach, the weeping woman glances up at me. Her perfect makeup is now streaked with tears.

Afraid I'll upset her even more, I slowly slide into the seat across from her. "I'm so sorry. I'm the one who paid for your meal. I didn't mean to upset you. I've just been doing a good deed for someone every day of Advent."

Her expression is so blank that for a moment I wonder if she understands English. Then she reaches for her napkin and dabs her eyes. "I don't understand." She clears her throat. "Why did you choose me?"

Is she upset because she thinks I assume she needs help? I glance down at my hands then back at her. "I don't really know. I just had this overwhelming feeling that I was supposed to pay for your meal."

The woman's face pales and her eyes fill with tears again. I long to flee the uncomfortable situation but I can't abandon her.

She takes a few deep breaths as she gathers her composure. "My daughter died earlier this year." She twists the napkin with trembling fingers. "I've been so devastated and didn't know how to go on. This morning I prayed for a sign that we both would be okay." Her teary eyes meet mine. "You are my answer to prayer."

My breath catches in my throat. "Me? An answer to prayer?" It never dawned on me that God might be using my acts of kindness to answer other people's prayers.

She gives me a small quivering smile. "God works in mysterious ways." She reaches out and places her beautifully manicured hand on mine. "You are truly my Christmas angel."

Now, even as I return the lady's smile, I'm the one blinking back tears. Talk about a grand finale! This woman needed a sign from God, and I was the instrument He used to deliver it. Wow!

Thank you, Lord!

The most incredible feeling flows through my entire being as the pieces of my Advent journey suddenly all fit together. God loves us so much that He sent His precious Son as a babe in a manger on that first Christmas so long ago. Jesus Christ is the most precious gift we've ever received, and the most precious gift we can give. If we are willing to keep the love of Christ in our hearts and lead others to Him through acts of love, we are indeed keeping Christ in Christmas.

I sigh, and give my new friend a smile. Just because Advent is over doesn't mean my good deeds need to end. By serving others through Him, I can keep Christ alive all year long.

LESLEA WAHL is the author of the award-winning faith-filled teen mysteries [*The Perfect Blindside*](#), [*An Unexpected Role*](#), [*Where You Lead*](#), and [*eXtreme Blindside*](#). Her journey to become an author came through a search for value-based fiction for her own children. She now not only writes for teens but also has become a reviewer of Catholic and Christian teen fiction to help other families find faith-based books. Leslea lives in beautiful Colorado with her husband and children. The furry, four-legged members of her family often make cameo appearances in her novels. Leslea has always loved mysteries and hopes to encourage teens to grow in their faith through these fun adventures. For more information about her Young Adult mysteries please visit www.LesleaWahl.com.