



THERESE M. TRAVIS

ANNABELLE'S

Angel

A CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE

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Angel

Therese M. Travis

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2014

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-457-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Claudia, who inspired me, and for God, Who is
Inspiration.

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left,
your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying,
"This is the way; walk in it."*

Isaiah 30:21

1

Sometimes, Annabelle Archer thought she'd have done well in an old-fashioned novel, a bit like the one she was reading aloud to her youngest sister and two of her brothers. It would be written in an early 1900's style, about the spinster older sister who sacrificed her dreams of career or marriage to help raise her orphaned siblings. Of course, no one would write it, because who wanted to read a story in which nothing ever changes?

Gasping—because she hadn't indulged in self-pity for months—Annabelle stifled the mangy, creepy-crawly feelings and turned the page of the storybook. She shifted so everyone could see the line drawing. Then, in her best voice, she continued to read. "The children lay on their backs in the cold, fresh snow. They each flapped arms and legs until Ned called, 'Time;' then each sprang to his or her feet to survey their new snow angels.

"Bitsy's was the smallest, of course, and a wreath

of fallen pine cones formed a tiny halo just a few inches above her snow angel's head."

Brody tugged on Annabelle's sweater. "What's a snow angel?"

"Duh." Matt poked Brody's ribs. "It's an angel you make out of snow."

"Like a ice sculpture?" Brody asked.

"An ice sculpture," Annabelle corrected. "No. It's something people make in the snow."

Victoria clapped her hands. "Like a th'nowman."

"Not quite." Annabelle turned the book so the three youngest could see the picture again. "See? You lie on the snow and flap your arms to make the wings."

Faith, pretending to read her own book, but obviously listening, said, "So it's really a no-snow angel."

Annabelle laughed.

Matt pushed against Annabelle's arm. "You ever made one, A'belle?"

"No. I've never been in the snow."

"Then how do you know 'bout them?"

"Because I read." A lot. Too much, probably. She ought to pay more attention to her brothers and sisters.

The two oldest boys stormed down the stairs, their shoes drumming like a herd of fifty horses on a boardwalk.

Annabelle winced. "Guys, quiet. Grandma's asleep."

Their grandmother would not be pleased.

"We know." Liam tiptoed the last three steps. "That's why we asked coach to come pick us up. So you wouldn't have to load all the little kids in the car."

Instead of the usual protests of being called "little"

(Faith or Brody) or pleas to go for a ride (Matt and Victoria), all four of the said "little ones" looked at the front door.

"Where is he?" Victoria asked.

"Not here yet." Joe jerked his head at Liam. "Let's get snacks and water. And Annabelle, you'd better get the door. None of the little kids know the coach."

"I don't know him. Not that well." Although she'd seen him plenty of times, at church.

"But you're a grownup," Faith pointed out. "It's OK if you talk to strangers." She closed her book and got to her feet, stretching her lithe fourteen-year-old frame.

Mattie tugged Annabelle's sweater again. Most of Annabelle's clothes were a bit stretched out of shape because of his habit. "Can you ask him if he's made a snow angel?"

Ask the handsomest man in town—the one who had no idea Annabelle Archer existed—anything? "No."

"Then can you introduce me, so I can ask him?"

"No, Mattie. He'll be in a hurry."

The bell rang, and Annabelle looked around. No Liam, no Joe, and no Faith, and three wide open pairs of eyes waiting for her to protect them from strangers.

Usually she'd have to tie up any one of them to keep them from answering the door. They never made such a fuss over a simple act.

Sighing, Annabelle stomped across the hall to jerk open the door.

Rick Stockton was just as good looking as he'd been the last time she'd stared at him during a church service. Longish dark hair and a short goatee, and blue eyes that managed to twinkle even from across the

sanctuary. They were much closer now. Too close.

Annabelle stepped back, one hand going to her cheek to make sure her hair covered her eye and eyebrow.

"Hi. I'm Rick." He held out a hand. "Joe and Liam's coach."

"Right. Liam said you were picking them up." She engineered a half-second shake before she backed away again. "Come in for a minute. The boys are getting food."

He nodded and shut the door behind him.

Matt bumped Annabelle from behind and got right under Rick's feet, staring upward, his eyes wide and awed. He didn't run into many men, not up close like this, although Joe, at sixteen, was galloping up on six feet, Liam not far behind. But this guy had quite a few inches and plenty of pounds on them.

"Do you know how to make a snow angel?"

"Oh, Mattie, he's not interested in—"

But Rick held out his hand. "Yeah, actually, I do. I used to live near Chicago. My cousins taught me."

"Could you show us?"

His lips twitched. "Do you have any snow?"

Matt shook his head and went on staring.

Rick looked at Annabelle, his eyebrows quirked in a question.

"I was just reading them a story, so they were wondering," she said.

"You should take them up in the mountains one day and show them how to make one." Rick smiled at all three of the kids gazing up at him.

"She doesn't know how." Brody's voice dripped scorn. "You'd have to teach *her* first. Unless *you* take us. Then Annabelle could stay home. Annabelle always

wants to stay home."

And sometimes, she wanted to strangle a younger brother or two.

Before Rick could answer, Liam and Joe pounded out of the kitchen, as noisy as ever. Annabelle shushed them and shooed them out with one motion.

"How come I never see your parents?" she heard Rick ask.

"They died."

The bald answer from Liam sent shudders through Annabelle, and she risked another look outside.

"Our Grandma lives here, too," Joe said.

Before Annabelle shut the door, she saw the look on Rick's face. Pity. She wouldn't tolerate her own pity, why would she accept someone else's?

~*~

Rick stumbled off the curb before he managed to get his car door unlocked. Was she watching? He managed not to peek back at the house to check, and the meaning of Joe's last words hit him. "Both your parents? They both died?"

"Yeah. They were in a car accident."

Liam, as usual, had more to say on the subject. "Grandma was driving, and Annabelle was in the car, too. And this truck ran into them. *Bam!*" He shut his car door before he demonstrated the accident with his hands. "We never even got to see the car after that. Annabelle made them junk it."

"It still bothers her to think about it," Joe said.

"Does it bother your grandmother?"

"Well, yeah. That's why she doesn't drive." Joe scratched his head. "Annabelle's as good as a mom,

though. Especially to the little kids."

The more he heard about her, the more Rick realized their oldest sister was something else. Pretty, even with her straight blond hair covering half her face. "Your sister's name is Annabelle?"

Joe nodded. "That's her."

"I've never met her before."

"Sure, you have. She takes us to practice and the games most of the time."

"Oh." He started the engine and pulled onto the quiet street. "I got the idea she didn't leave the house."

"She does, she just doesn't like to. 'Cuz of—" Joe made the same gesture Annabelle had when she'd opened the door, sliding her hand against the hair covering her eye.

Liam poked him.

"Because of what?"

"Just stuff." Joe stared out the window.

Right. Now Rick really wanted to know. Or maybe it was that he wanted to know Annabelle.

After the game, which ended in a defeat brought on by the coach's appalling lack of attention, Rick took the Archer boys home. They argued the entire way over whose fault the loss was.

"Quit blaming everyone else. You know it was me," he bellowed.

The boys gaped at him as they got out in front of their house.

Finally, Liam mumbled, "No one said it was you."

"Then they should have."

The front door opened and all four of the younger kids tumbled outside, laughing and calling something about cookies.

Rick's stomach growled.

"You wanna come in?" Joe offered. "Annabelle's a really good cook."

Rick looked at the six children in the front yard, and his empty stomach protested again. "There's probably not enough."

"Are you kidding? Annabelle's been feeding us for years. There's always enough."

They led him through the back door and into the kitchen. Plates overflowing with cookies obscured the counters and a small table.

"I should eat some real food first," Rick mumbled.

"You sound like Annabelle. You'd better eat dinner with us then." Liam yelled into the kitchen. "Annabelle, Coach is staying for dinner."

"Hey, hey, wait. I didn't say that." But Rick was talking to an empty room, at least, until Annabelle walked in.

She stopped, making the same protective gesture over her face. He'd seen that move before, in church. And to his shame, he'd never given a second thought to the woman behind it.

"Your brothers seem to think I invited myself to dinner."

Her smile was small. "No, they think *they* invited you. And, of course, you're welcome. The little ones are setting a place for you now." She waved toward a hallway behind her. "I hope you like meatloaf."

"Love it."

"And don't have any allergies."

"Not a one."

"That's good. We're a little worried about Mattie. We're not sure if he's reacting to food or if something else is going on."

What he could see of her face went red.

"But you don't want to hear all that."

"Why not? He's the second to youngest, right? The one who wanted to know about snow angels?"

She nodded.

"He's what, eight? And already Joe says he's turning into quite an athlete."

"He is." She looked up, obviously entranced with this subject. It was probably one of her favorites. "But he likes soccer better than football."

"So do I but mostly in the spring." At her blank stare, he said, "That's when soccer season doesn't conflict with football."

By this time, they'd entered the dining room. Until that moment, Rick hadn't thought to wonder how seven kids and one grandmother fit around the standard four-or-six person table.

But theirs was far from ordinary. It was a huge table, as long as one from a church hall, made of carved, polished and somewhat scarred wood. It made him think of old-fashioned floor length dresses and stringing cranberries and popped corn for the Christmas tree.

The snow angel boy—Mattie—yelled, "I'm sitting next to the coach!" all the while jumping up in the air and clapping his hands.

"No, you're not. Why should it be you? He should sit with me and Liam." Joe gave Mattie a dark, narrow-eyed glare.

"He should sit next to Annabelle. And someone else can sit on his other side and someone else can be across the table." This was uttered by a tall teen who looked a lot like Annabelle, other than the hair in her face.

Rick glanced at Annabelle.

She'd be gorgeous if she'd just tuck some of that glossy blond blanket behind her ear.

He slid into the chair indicated and watched as each child brought in a dish or serving platter.

The youngest, a tiny thing who reminded him of Cindy-Loo-Who, brought butter and condiments.

"Annabelle baked the bread," the middle girl told him. "She says it's healthier if it's homemade—no chemicals or anything unnatural."

"Except for Mattie." The other of the younger boys climbed on the chair next to Rick. "We're keeping him gluten free 'til we know if he's 'lergic."

"I see." He looked into unblinking brown eyes. "What's gluten?"

"It's what holds bread together. And sometimes it makes people sick. But not everybody. It prolly won't make you sick."

"No. Probably not." Rick grinned, impressed. The kid couldn't be more than eight.

Once again, Annabelle's face had turned red. "I'm sure Mr. Stockton doesn't want to hear about all our worries."

The tiniest one tugged Annabelle's sweater. "Who'th Mr. Thock-the-man?"

No one laughed, and Rick had to fight his grin into hiding. "That's me. But I think everyone should call me Rick."

He tried to get Annabelle to look at him, but she was too busy rearranging her silverware.

"You don't know how much I appreciate this, Miss Archer. I haven't had homemade bread since my last Christmas with my family, and that was a long time ago. My grandmother made it." He glanced around. "Speaking of grandmothers..."

"Sometimes Grandma doesn't come down for dinner," Liam explained. "We'll take her some soup up in a while."

Joe smiled at Rick. "It's my turn, but do you want to say grace?"

"Uh, sure, if you don't mind?" He directed the question at Annabelle.

For an answer, she folded her hands, so he thanked God for the food and the family who had invited him to share it.

One thing he couldn't figure out. Every time Annabelle's arm brushed him, or he caught sight of her hands as she ate, something stirred inside. He wasn't sure what it was, other than disturbing. And she kept offering him food. Of course, there was nothing wrong with a hostess offering her guest food, but this guest had a problem telling her no. So he ended up taking everything and eating far more than he really wanted. At this rate, he wouldn't have an inch of room left for any of those cookies.

Better to think about cookies than try to figure out what about this woman disturbed him so much.

2

Rick Stockton was sitting in her dining room, eating food she'd cooked, almost like she'd been dreaming for the last two years it would happen. Except he had just compared her to his grandmother.

So much for dreams coming true.

She stood, reaching for her untouched soup bowl. "I'll take this up to Grandma right now." She gave Rick an apologetic half-glance. "Dinner is a little late tonight, and she likes to keep to her schedule."

"I'll take it. It's my turn, anyway." Faith, who had never before "remembered" it was her turn to deal with Grandma, waved Annabelle to sit. "You stay and talk to Rick."

Annabelle gawked at her sister until she disappeared up the oak staircase. Then she turned, caught sight of an entire tableful of people staring at her, and fumbled for a change of subject. "Who won?"

"The other team." Liam shrugged. "It's OK, though. We're still in second place. And we still have the best coach."

"Oh, come on, now," Rick protested.

Annabelle passed him the bread again. "The boys are always telling me about your great strategies."

He shrugged, slathering butter onto the first slice. "I try to play up their strengths."

Joe and Mattie had their heads together, giggling.

Brody was daydreaming as he rolled buttered peas

in mashed potatoes with sticky fingers, and Victoria leaned against Annabelle's side so hard she almost shoved her off her chair.

"Liam and Joe is strong," she said.

"*Are* strong," Annabelle corrected.

Rick stared at the little girl. "She understood? I mean, she got that from my saying their strengths?"

"Sure, she did." Annabelle grinned at Victoria. "Our Torie's good at words."

"I guess she is." Rick nodded.

"We're all good at something." Brody spoke through a mouthful of potatoes and peas. "I'm good at stories and pictures. Tori remembers words, and Faith is good at dancing and boys. Joe likes math and trains and running, and Liam wants to be an actor. And Matt's good at people."

"People, huh?" Rick chuckled.

"Yeah, and schemes. You gotta be careful about Mattie."

Rick grinned. "Gotcha. What is Annabelle good at? Besides cooking and baking, I mean."

In the second of silence that followed, Annabelle died at least three times. Then the other five started talking at once, so fast she didn't hear a word they said. She only knew they left Rick laughing.

"That's a lot to be good at," he said, slanting Annabelle a look she couldn't interpret. "Maybe I should make a list."

"Don't bother. They exaggerate." Boy that sounded rude, even to her own ears. "But I'm glad you like the food. Would you like anything else?" She backpedaled.

He took small helpings of everything, including another slice of bread.

Annabelle decided she'd make two loaves the next game night and then mentally jeered at herself. Unless he was desperate for another home-cooked meal—and he might be—he'd be sure to avoid this situation again.

Still, two loaves wouldn't be a bad idea.

~*~

Rick went to bed remembering the taste of homemade bread and the sparkle of old-fashioned ornaments tied to a real pine garland wound around a bannister. He dreamed of making snow angels and of children laughing and trying to catch a glimpse of a woman whose face he couldn't see. He woke thinking he'd scheduled the next practice too far in the future for his taste.

But Wednesday evening finally came, and he offered to pick up the Archer boys again. He also got to their house fifteen minutes before he'd promised.

The house had to be around a hundred years old, a good track record for a home in Southern California, and the old, polished wood inside suited the age of it. Outside, gardens that would grow even lusher come spring and an oak that retained most of its leaves finished off the slightly old-fashioned air of the place.

He strolled up the walk, his hands in his pockets, desperate to hide the hurry that got him there so early. As he passed under a branch of oak, he felt something—a rush of something—flowing over his head and trickling under his jacket collar.

"What?" He slapped at the back of his neck, and his hand came away with a sheen of glitter clinging to his palm.

Giggles made him look up.

The three youngest were stretched on the branch.

Rick batted at his neck again and tried to scowl. "What was that?"

"Sugar." Mattie flipped off the branch, swinging from his hands for a moment before dropping to the ground.

"You want to tell me why you poured sugar on me?"

"To turn you into a snow angel."

"He'th already a th'now angel." Victoria watched Brody follow Matt's example. Then she held out her arms to Rick. "Help me down, pwease."

She tumbled out of the tree, and he barely managed to catch her before she hit the dry grass. When he set her on her feet, she grabbed his hand.

It felt—nice. He'd held children's hands before, but that had been entirely different. This was—trust. Liking. Simple and human and humbling. He hadn't had much connection with small girls. Even in sports, he tended to coach the older ages, but he found Victoria's actions endearing.

She tugged him up the walk, to the front door this time. "Grandma wants to thee you."

He stopped so fast one of the boys ran into him from behind.

"Your grandmother?" Yeah, who else would she be talking about? "I can just wait out here until Joe and Liam come."

"No, you can't. Grandma thaid." And the tiny child dragged him up the steps, across the porch, and into the house, and he could do nothing to resist her.

He didn't know what he anticipated—nothing terrible, really. How could a monster produce such a wonderful family? But she still exceeded his

expectations. But this was no monster. Mrs. Archer was a gentle-faced woman, and Rick couldn't imagine her anywhere but with a gaggle of adoring grandchildren around her.

"So you're the boys' coach." Her emphasis on the word *you're* made his knees quake a bit. So did the gleam in her eye, the almost unlined face, and almost all blonde hair. "They think you're absolutely wonderful."

"Grandma." Joe came into the living room and plopped onto the couch next to her. "But he's a great coach."

"Of course he is. The church would never pay him if he were no good." She nodded as if she'd just won an argument.

"Um, they don't pay me." Rick managed to hide his smile. "It's a volunteer position."

"Seriously?" Joe, who'd bent over to pull on his socks, straightened. "You do all this for free?"

"Sure." Rick shrugged. "Why not?"

"I don't know. It just takes a lot of time."

It did. Rick liked the amount it took. Because what did he have otherwise? Some friends from the county engineer's office who didn't understand his reluctance to go partying? Distant relatives back in Chicago who still tended to view him and his parents as black sheep? Parents who actually acted like said black sheep, and were hiding out somewhere in Mexico, last he'd heard?

The kids he coached were his family.

Funny he'd never realized that before.

Here he thought he was doing something noble and giving and admirable, and he was just feeding his own needs.

"Where's Liam?" he asked. "We need to get going." Despite the fact that they still had plenty of time.

"Getting ready."

He nodded, crossed his hands in front of him, and rocked heel to toe.

Victoria grinned up at him. "Hey, Grandma, did you know Mr. Thock-the-man is a th'now angel?"

"Is he? That's nice, dear."

Was he? Well, from the feel of it, he probably still had half a cup of sugar filtering down his back.

Annabelle came through from the hallway. "OK, who spilled sugar all over the kitchen?"

Mattie and Brody burst into laughter, and Victoria bent her head. "Thorry, Annabelle."

"Come help me clean up, all right?" She held out her hand, and Victoria took it.

Rick felt a twinge of jealousy. Whose hand he wanted to be holding right then, he didn't know, but he wanted someone's.

"What were you doing with the sugar, anyway?"

"Making th'now angels."

Rick watched them go, grinning as the two younger boys collapsed on the floor, unable to stand under their laughter.

"Maybe someday you'll explain?" But the kids' grandmother only sounded amused, not angry.

Rick turned. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Archer. I think they were playing a trick on me."

"Really?"

Before he was forced to go into more detail, Liam pounded down the stairs. "Never fear, for I am here." He looked around, stepped over Brody's leg, and headed for the front door. "What are you all waiting

for? Let's go."

They went.

Rick spent most of the drive laughing at the boys' antics, his thoughts taken up by the elusive and alluring Annabelle.

When had she become important?

As he drove the two home Rick expected a lot of celebrating, rough-housing, general teenaged insanity. Instead, he got a few subdued agreements to his praises.

Finally, looking much younger than his fifteen years, Liam poked his brother. "Ask him."

"I'm gonna."

"Ask him *now*."

Rick stopped at a light and gave Joe a glower, pretending severity. "So ask," he said and grinned. "Come on, Joe. You know you can ask me."

The tip of Joe's dirty sports shoe dug into the car mat. "The thing is—"

"Yes?"

"It's Annabelle."

At first, Rick thought the kid was about to ask him to date his sister, and a huge part of his heart leaped to attention and hollered, "Yes!" Then his ears started working again, and he heard something about how Annabelle always organized all the Christmas gifts for the Archer kids, and while they each managed to get her something little, she never had the amount or the kinds of gifts to open that the rest did.

"Even Grandma gets more presents than Annabelle," Liam said. "And no one ever noticed until last year."

"Yeah, Christmas morning, when it was too late."

"I see." Rick pictured Annabelle, too shy, or