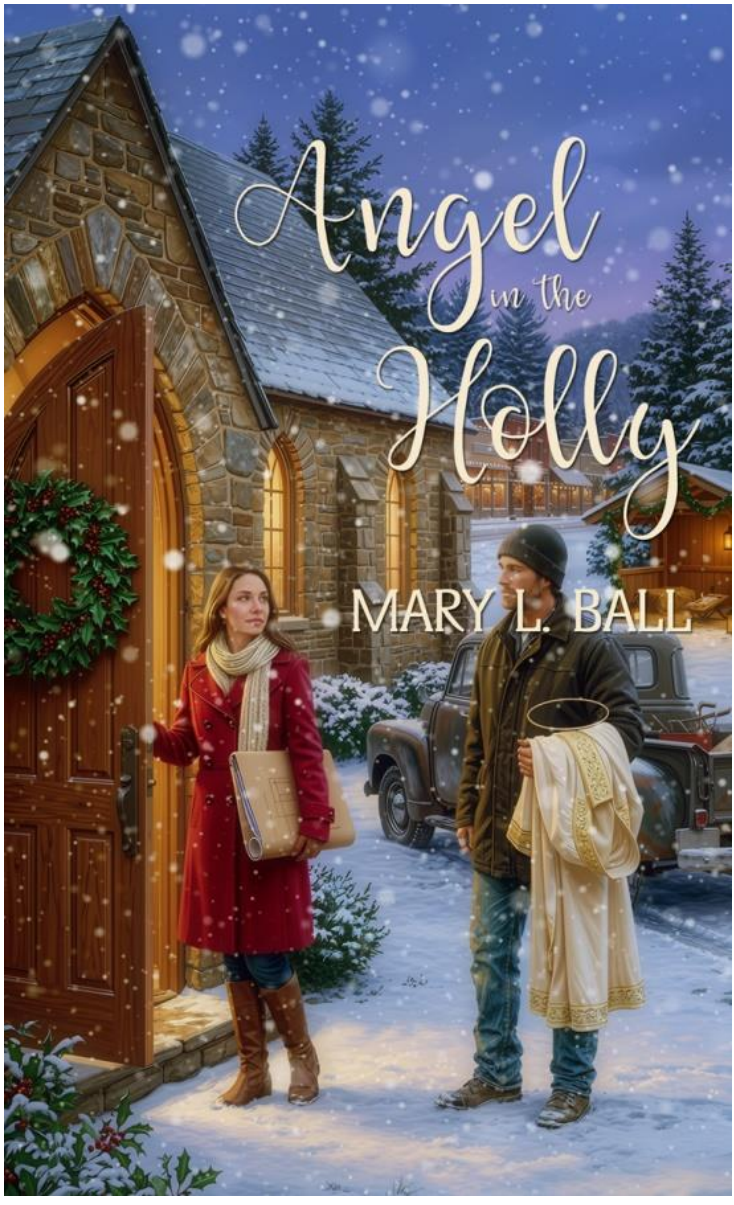

Angel
in the
Holly
MARY L. BALL

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Dedication

For anyone who's ever needed a reminder that grace still reaches for us. May you feel God's hand steadying your steps and His mercy meeting you in every valley.

Chapter 1

The windshield wipers of Lydia Thorne's sedan were losing their battle against the North Carolina sleet. Each rhythmic slap seemed to count down the miles. It wasn't her idea to come to Mark's for Christmas, but at least her brother didn't have any expectations. And at his house, there was no one to disappoint. Still, she shouldn't have come. The thought had been a repeated loop in her mind since she'd crossed the state line.

Mark's persistent voice over the phone was thick with a worry he tried to mask with festive cheer. She focused on his last words: "Lydia, don't spend this Christmas alone after everything you've been through. Please, come home."

"Home," Lydia whispered. The word fogged on the glass.

For Lydia, home was supposed to have been a house in the suburbs with a man named Richard. But all his promises turned out to be hollow. She adjusted her grip on the steering wheel until her knuckles ached. She'd spent two years trying to be the perfect fiancée for a man who valued his corporate image more than her.

A sudden gust of wind shook the car and sent a

spray of icy water across the road. Lydia slowed down. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She was deep in the mountain passes with no cell service. The pines loomed like jagged shadows against the gray sky.

"I should have stayed in South Carolina." She glanced at the tall, ice-covered tree limbs, nerves jangling. "Please, Lord," she whispered her first honest prayer in months. "Just let me get there in one piece. I'm tired of things in my life breaking down."

She reached for the defroster. Her gaze left the road for just a heartbeat. That was long enough for a ribbon of black ice to claim the tires. The sedan didn't just slide; it pivoted. Lydia gasped and pumped the brake as she'd been taught, but the car was no longer under her control. Everything became a chaotic blur of white. Tires screamed against the asphalt and then came a sickening weightlessness. Her heart pounded as the car crested the shoulder and plunged nose-first into the darkness of a ravine.

A crunch of metal followed by the explosive pop of the airbag echoed through the wooded area. The side window shattered like a thousand diamonds. And then…total silence.

Lydia was crumpled against the seat. Her head throbbed with a pulsing, hot pain. The scent of rubber and cold metal filled her nose. Cold air blasted through the broken window. She shivered and a jolt of white-hot pain made her see stars. After what seemed an eternity, Lydia tried to move her arm. Through the red haze of pain, she looked out of the broken window. The woods were still, but through the falling ice a light

appeared.

Lydia blinked to clear her double vision.

A figure seemed to glide over the drifts as it descended and was visible through a thick holly bush adorned with bright red berries.

She squinted. The figure was draped in white so bright it shimmered under the moonlight. Behind his shoulders, massive wings arched toward the stars.

"Oh," she mumbled. As the cold began to numb her limbs, a sense of peace washed over her. She wouldn't see Mark, but maybe she would see her heavenly home.

The angel walked closer. His face appeared in the shattered frame of the door. He was strong-jawed, with a kindness that shone as brightly as his wings, but his eyes were wide with concern. Why would an angel be concerned for her?

"Don't close your eyes," the angel's deep voice commanded. "I've got you. You aren't alone, Lydia."

How did he know her name? She wanted to ask, but darkness pulled at her even as powerful arms reached into the wreckage and unbuckled her seatbelt. He lifted her. Lydia felt the soft brush of feathery wings against her cheek. "An angel," she rasped. Her hand brushed his chest before her world went black.

~*~

Bryan Montgomery adjusted the heavy wooden staff in his left hand and tried to ignore the way the wire frame of his wings poked into his shoulder

blades. Why had he agreed to be in a Christmas play? He shook his head. It was done now and he had to see it through. He stood on the covered side deck of the church's fellowship building determined to learn his part. "I bring you tidings of great joy," he muttered. His breath left a cold white cloud. "No, that's not formal enough. 'Behold, I bring you...'" He stopped at the edge of the deck and looked up at the moon.

Silver Falls Community Church had gone all out for this year's "Living Nativity." Bryan was the tallest man in the congregation and had the deepest voice. So he'd been volunteered for the role of the Archangel Gabriel.

Usually, he didn't mind helping. But tonight the costume felt like a lie. How could he stand on a riser and proclaim great joy when his own life felt like a series of closed doors? It had been three years since his wife died. Three years of trying to convince himself that being alone was the same thing as being at peace. *It's only a play. Do the lines. Help the kids. Go home.*

As he turned toward the warm yellow light of the building a flash from the road caught his attention. It was on the treacherous mountain curve that the locals called Devil's Peak. He stared through the cold, falling rain at a pair of headlights. Instead of moving along the road the lights seemed to dance in midair, and then they spun in a circle.

Bryan's heart sank, and he stood frozen. The lights performed a sickening arc, pointed toward the sky, and then disappeared over the ridge. A muffled thud echoed through the valley followed by the sound of

snapping branches.

"Lord, no," Bryan breathed.

He didn't think about the cumbersome white robe or the six-foot wingspan attached to his back. He didn't take notice of the bad weather. He just dropped his staff, and ran toward the dangerous slope. The ravine was steep and jagged. Bryan scrambled up the ridge. His boots slid on the icy wet slush. At the top, the path of destruction was a jagged scar in the brush that led down to a dark, crumpled car.

He went down the embankment on his haunches. Briars tore through the fabric of his costume. When he reached the car, the smell of hot oil and smoke reeked. The driver's side was crushed. He hurried to the passenger side and let out a sigh of relief when he saw the door wasn't too badly damaged. He bunched up the hem of his robe, pulled a small penlight from his jeans pocket, and shined it inside the car.

A woman was slumped against the airbag, her dark hair matted with blood at the temple. Her face was as pale as snow, fragile as fine porcelain.

The metal groaned as Bryan wrenched the door open. "Hey! Can you hear me?"

Her eyes drifted open, unfocused, and glassy. She looked at him and then glanced past him as her gaze tracked something. A look of peace crossed her face. "Am I... home?" she asked in a whisper.

"What?" Bryan stared at her aghast until he remembered his costume…and his wings. That explained her look. "You're safe," he said in a soothing tone. He checked her pulse. It was faint. A spilled

purse was on the floorboard. Bryan glanced down at the driver's license that had slid out. Lydia Thorne. "I've got you. You aren't alone, Lydia." He unbuckled her.

Her fingers grazed the white fabric of his sleeve. "Angel," she rasped and then went limp.

Bryan pulled the woman close to shield her from the blustery wind. He began the grueling climb back to the road. Twice the wings on his back caught a gust of wind and tried to pull him off balance. He'd spent months asking God for a purpose, but not like this. "Lord, please let me get her help."

The climb was the hardest thing Bryan could remember doing. Lydia was a small woman, but unconscious. She was dead weight. "Stay with me, Lydia," he grunted. His lungs burned from inhaling the cold air. One arm was under her knees and the other supported her back. He was unable to grab onto saplings for leverage. He struggled to climb the ravine while his wings acted like sails and threatened to yank him backward with every gust.

He scraped against a tree limb and heard a loud rip. The harness snapped, and one wing dropped and then dragged in the mud like a broken limb. Bryan didn't have time to care. He kicked his toe hard into the frozen earth to carve out makeshift steps. "Almost there," he whispered. He could feel the faint heat of her breath against his neck.

Halfway up his foot slipped on ice-covered moss. He went down with his knee hitting a buried rock hard. "Ouch!" he gasped and tightened his grip on

Lydia. “Lord, give me strength.”

For a second, his forehead touched hers. She smelled like vanilla and rain. A reminder that she wasn’t just a rescue. She was someone’s daughter and maybe someone’s sister.

Lydia stirred. “The light...” she murmured. “Bright.”

“It’s the moon, Lydia.” It took every bit of strength he had to stand again. “We’re almost there.” With a final surge of effort, Bryan topped the hill. He hurried to his truck. His fingers were numb as he fumbled with the handle, but it finally opened. He put her in the passenger seat, buckled the seatbelt, closed the door, and then ran around to the driver’s side to start the car. A touch of a few buttons and heat filled the cab.

In the dome light, he saw her clearly. Even with a bruise blooming on her temple, she was beautiful. His hand trembled as he brushed a lock of hair from her face. He had felt like a ghost for so long, disconnected from the world. His heart beat loud and fast. He pulled out his phone, but then looked toward the church. The town doctor was right there in the parish hall. “Hang on, Lydia,” Bryan said. “I’ll drive next to the church doors and get you some help.”

The broken wing of his costume flapped against the rear window. The wire and cloth was a tattered reminder that Lydia Thorne saw an angel, even if he was only a man.

~*~

The smell of floor wax and rubbing alcohol woke Lydia. Every muscle felt as if it had been tenderized with a mallet.

"Easy now. Don't try to sit up."

The voice was deep and familiar. Lydia opened her eyes to the harsh lights of a hospital.

A man sat in a plastic chair by the bed. He wasn't wearing white silk. He was in a forest-green flannel shirt and faded jeans. His sandy-blond hair was rumpled.

She looked into his eyes, the same intense, kind eyes from the ravine. "You," she rasped. "The...the angel."

The man turned red, and a sheepish smile tugged at his mouth. "Not exactly. The name is Bryan Montgomery."

Lydia's brow furrowed as memories returned in jagged shards. The ice. The spinning. "The wings. I saw wings."

"Cardboard, wire and feathers, I'm afraid." He reached for her, hesitated, and then pulled back. "I'm playing the Archangel Gabriel in the church play. I was in the costume when I saw your lights. I'm sorry if I gave you a false impression of where you were headed."

Lydia let out a shaky, painful laugh. "Yeah, I thought I'd died. I thought I was being carried home."

"You were," Bryan said seriously. "Just not the home you were thinking about. You have a nasty concussion, but you'll be fine."

"The car," Lydia groaned. "Mark will be worried."

"Your brother is on his way. He should be here in an hour."

A comfortable silence settled between them.

Lydia noticed the dark circles under Bryan's eyes and the smudge of mud on his jaw. "You stayed," she realized. "You stayed…all night?"

"Yep. Couldn't leave Gabriel's first rescue mission unfinished." He grinned. "Besides, you kept asking for the light. I figured I should stick around to explain."

Lydia felt a warmth spread through her chest. For months, she'd felt invisible, a trophy to Richard, a machine to her coworkers. But this stranger had ruined his costume and risked his own life to drag her out of a ditch. He looked at her as though she truly mattered. "Thank you, Bryan. For everything."

"You're welcome. I should let you rest. And I need to see if I can salvage my wings. The director will have my head if I show up to rehearsal as a one-winged angel." The chair scraped the floor as he stood. At the door, he paused. "I'm glad you're OK, Lydia. I think God had us both in those woods for a reason."

The door closed.

Lydia looked at the tinsel on the wall. Her faith had grown cold in the shadows of heartbreak, but now, she felt a flicker of hope. It wasn't just the miracle of surviving the crash. It was the miracle of being seen as someone special again. Someone worth saving. She smiled and then grimaced as her head pounded. She'd been saved by the Angel Gabriel…whose name was actually Bryan.

CHAPTER 2

The door to the hospital room swung open with the force of a man who had spent the last hour worried as he drove through an ice storm in a panic. Mark Thorne couldn't get to his sister's hospital room fast enough, but he had to take care on the dark and icy road. "Lydia!"

"You smell like cold air and pine," Lydia said. "Like Christmas."

In three strides he stood beside her. He scanned her face with a mixture of fear and relief. She probably looked pale and her hair was still tangled.

"I'm OK, Mark. Just a bit banged up."

Mark let out a long, shuddered breath and sank onto the edge of the mattress. "I was worried sick. The sheriff called and said your car was…he said it was a total loss. When I drove by that ravine on my way here, I thought…" His words choked off as if he couldn't finish the sentence.

Lydia squeezed his arm. "I'll be fine. A man named Bryan Montgomery found me."

Mark raised his eyebrows. "Bryan? Bryan Montgomery pulled you out of the ravine?"

"Yeah. You know him?"

"Almost everyone knows Bryan," Mark said.

"He's the best contractor in the county. Quiet guy, though. Lost his wife a few years back and pretty much buried himself in work and the church. I didn't know he was out that way last night."

"He's a widower? That explains the shadow in his eyes," Lydia murmured and leaned back against her pillow. "He has the look of someone who knows how fragile life can be. He told me he was practicing for a Christmas play. He's the Angel Gabriel. He was wearing the costume…with wings. But I thought..." She stopped as the heat rose in her cheeks.

"Well, knowing Bryan he probably didn't even realize how heroic he looked." Mark gave a weary huff of a laugh. "Bryan is the kind of guy who would rescue a kitten from a tree and then apologize for taking up the kitten's time."

"He stayed all night," Lydia whispered. "Until he knew I was awake."

Mark's protective gaze softened. He'd been the one to pick up the pieces when Richard walked away and left Lydia convinced that she was only worth as much as her perfect performance. Did Mark see the crack in the armor she'd put around herself because of Bryan's kindness? Something had definitely loosened in her heart. She wasn't ready to put a name to it, though.

"Listen," Mark stood and then tucked the blanket around her. "The doctor wants you under observation for another few hours. I've got the guest room clean with fresh sheets on the bed. The fireplace is ready to warm you for a few weeks while you rest. You don't

need to do anything but putter around the house until New Year's."

"But my car. It's…" She frowned.

"It's nothing but metal and glass, Lydia. It can be replaced. You can't." He kissed her forehead, and then paused. "Tell you what. I'll find Bryan and thank him properly. I bet he's still down in the cafeteria trying to find a cup of coffee that doesn't taste like battery acid."

"Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell him...tell him I'd like to see the wings again. When they're fixed."

"I'll tell him." Mark grinned as he went out of her room to find the hospital cafeteria.

Lydia had taken three weeks of vacation, but there was no schedule. She wondered what she would do once she was out of the hospital. She snuggled closer to the pillow. Maybe she'd bake cookies for Mark. Her thoughts turned to that icy slide down the ravine and her angel. Bryan. Whatever this Christmas held she'd found hope in this second chance. "Thank You," she murmured. Lydia closed her eyes. *Lord, I don't know why You put him in that spot at the same time I had the accident but thank You for sending an angel who saw me and knew my name.*

~*~

Bryan was seated at a table. He looked at Mark, and then took a drink from the cup he held.

Mark strolled over to the table. "Hey, Bryan."

"Hey, Mark. Is everything all right with Lydia?"

"Yeah, she's resting. I wanted to thank you for rescuing her."

"No thanks needed. I was at the right place at the right time as they say."

"I know, but I hate to think about what would've happened if you hadn't been there. You saved my sister's life." Mark gestured to the steaming cup in Bryan's hand. "The least I can do is buy you a decent cup of coffee. That stuff tastes like battery acid."

"I appreciate it, but the important thing is she's OK. And I should probably head home. I haven't slept much." Bryan offered a tired smile.

"Lydia told me you stayed the whole time. I'm grateful, Bryan. Really." Mark paused. "And she'd like to see you…after your wings get fixed."

~*~

Lydia followed Mark as he unlocked his front door. She'd been released from the hospital with a paper full of instructions. Since she intended to lounge around anyway, most of them would be adhered to by default.

The room was as she remembered. Mark always liked a cabin feel and his cozy cottage portrayed him perfectly. A stone fireplace covered all of one wall except for a nook which held a desk, a lamp, and a laptop. A kitchen was separated by a center island. Gingham curtains hung from the windows. Her brother was a rugged guy, but he liked modern

conveniences. Stainless steel appliances lined the kitchen. If she cooked, it would be as effortless here as it was in her town house.

"Are you sure you want me around?" She grinned at Mark.

"Yes. I wouldn't have asked you to come if I didn't. Besides, it's been a while since we spent longer than a weekend together at Christmas. And if you feel up to it, maybe you can bake one of those recipes Mom used to make. Like cookies."

"Yes, I think I can do that." She laughed. "What do you do for meals when I'm not here?"

"See that microwave over there? I can make anything that comes in a box. Now, sit down in the living room, and I'll get you a cup of hot chocolate." Mark was treating her like fragile china.

"I'm OK, really, Mark. But I won't say no to hot cocoa." She sank into the leather reclining sofa.

Mark had a Christmas tree standing in front of a window with a box marked 'Christmas décor' beside it. Other than that, everything was the same. Her brother was a very nice, but serious man, and faithful. Why hadn't he found his true love? Well, her relationship hadn't turned out well either. Maybe love wasn't in the cards for her or Mark.

"Here you go, Sis." Mark placed a mug on the side table close to the recliner.

"Thanks, Mark." She sipped and glanced at him. "Are you still seeing Vickie?"

A faraway look crossed her brother's face. He took a sip from his mug and shook his head. "No. She went

back to the big city. You know me. I'm a county boy at heart. Vickie wanted city life with all the flavor it offered. She wanted me to use my degree in accounting and get a job in an office setting. I wouldn't be happy in an office or big city."

"No, and you only went to college to please Mom."

"Yeah, but I don't regret it. Mom died knowing her children had college degrees and a good start in life."

"She did, but if she were still alive she'd still be proud of you. You're doing what you enjoy. Working outside. Horticulture suits you."

"I can't imagine anything else. And I owe that to getting a part-time job when I was in college. It sparked my passion for doing tree and lawn work."

"And knowing accounting you keep meticulous records on your clients." She grinned.

"Well, I guess I'm using my degree after all." He stood. "Speaking of work, I have an early day tomorrow. Good night, Lydia. You know where everything is."

"Yeah, good night." Lydia sipped on her beverage and made a mental note to decorate the tree and make the cabin look festive tomorrow.

~*~

The next morning Lydia showered and put on her favorite sweat shirt and jeans. In the kitchen she found a note Mark had scribbled.

"Lydia, should be home by dark. Call me if you need anything. Remember to rest."

Sweet brother. She was grateful Mark had brewed coffee before he left. It would go well with the French toast she planned to make.

By the afternoon Lydia had the living room decked out with everything that was in Mark's Christmas box. The tree shined with silver and gold, balls of various colors, and a double string of lights. She watched the blink, blink, of the lights and admired the sparkling, glittery tinsel. There was something special about Christmas lights. She sat on the couch for a few minutes and just enjoyed the twinkle of the tree as it glowed brightly.

Lydia took one last look at her holiday masterpiece. The room was welcoming and cozy. She had to admit that Christmas with her brother in the small town they grew up in was where she needed to be. She glanced at the clock. Two hours before Mark would be home. She had time to make Mom's meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

After dinner she sat in the living room with Mark.

"Thank you for decorating." He looked at the tree and seemed lost in the twinkling lights just as she'd been earlier. He glanced at her, propped his legs on the ottoman, and patted his stomach. "That was a good meal, Sis. But while you're here, I don't want you to think you need to cook all the time. I'm used to microwave dinners."

"Don't worry. I won't. But making one of Mom's recipes was nice for a change."

"I do have to admit a home-cooked meal is great. And your Christmas decorating beats mine anytime. You have a knack for decoration. I see why you always wanted to do it for a living."

"Thanks. Mom used to say the best holidays are the ones that come from the heart. A beautiful Christmas doesn't always come from color charts and textures or patterns. I'm glad you have some of our handmade Christmas baubles."

"Like those reindeer we made out of popsicle sticks for Mom and Dad." Mark pointed to the tree.

"Exactly. I think nostalgic ornaments make a holiday. When we made those, Mom gave us the glitter and glue. When I finished, I had red and green sparkles, and glue all over my shirt."

"Yeah, I even had glue on my shoe laces. It took Mom forever to get my shoes off."

"And she didn't even fuss at us." Lydia smiled at the memory.

"No, she said it was worth it to have our homemade ornaments." Mark let out a sad breath.

"I miss them. Mom and Dad always made the holidays fun." Lydia glanced at the tree.

"They died too early."

"I agree. And I know the families of the others that went down in that plane feel the same. Every year on the anniversary I say a prayer for everyone that plane crash affected."

"That's good." Mark glanced away.

"I think I'll go to my room, now. I'm a little tired." Lydia stood.