

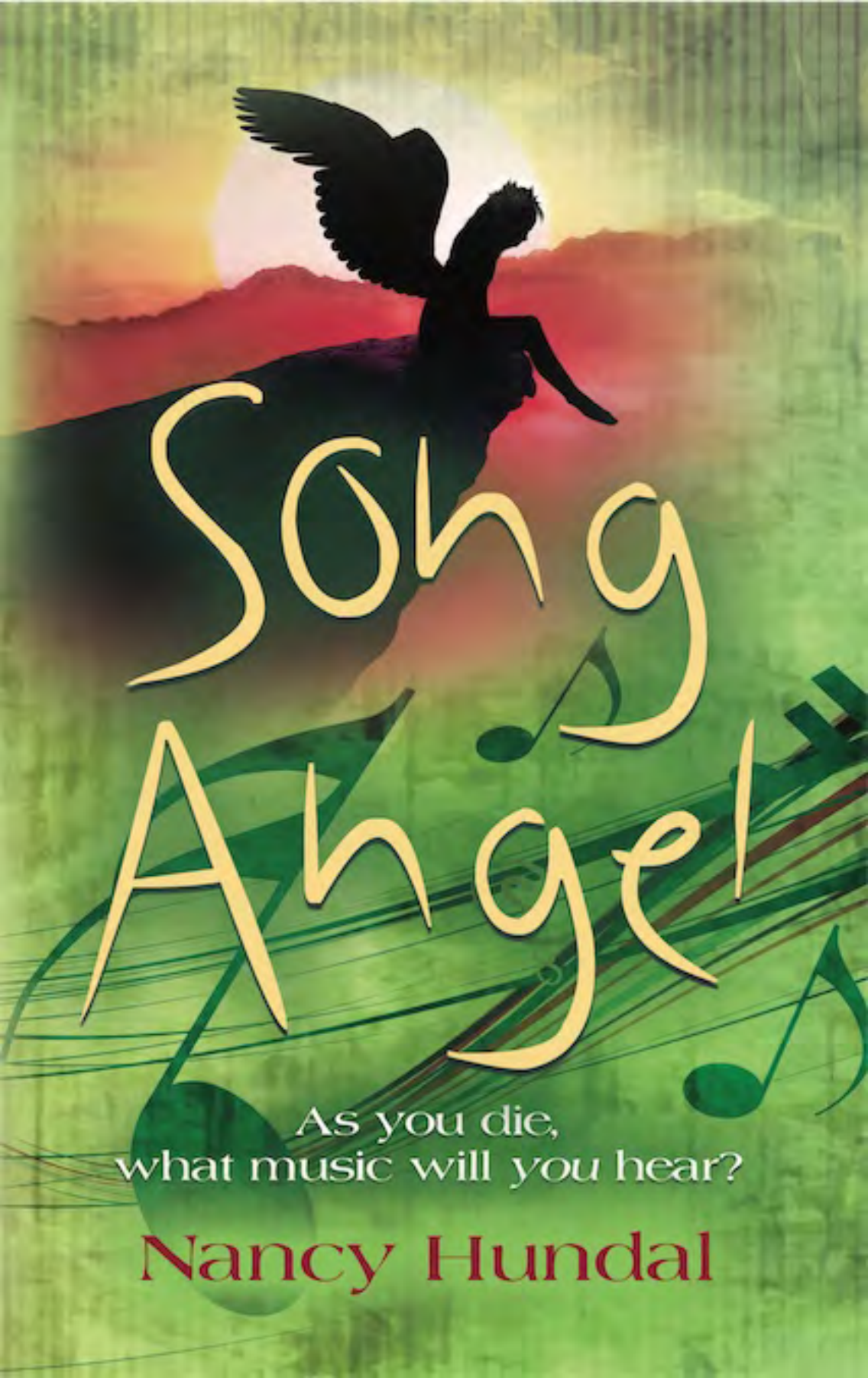
*As a song angel, Carmen's job is to find the perfect music to guide a human from life to afterlife. Easy? No. Amazing? Yes. But when troubling flashbacks of her own existence on earth begin, Carmen's life as an angel begins to nosedive. And for angels, nosedives spell disaster.*

## **Song Angel**

by Nancy Hundal

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# Song Angel

As you die,  
what music will you hear?

**Nancy Hundal**

Music rippled and crashed through Carmen's brain. Opera, her favorite.

She pulled out an earbud, listening for the train. No rumble yet. She reached for her wristwatch, always there. But today, it wasn't. Just as well.

Fingers buried again in pockets, she listened. She had been spoon fed opera since birth, even named after an opera character. It was how she had started. It was how she would end.

The opera blocked out thought and guilt. It frightened away the maggot of self-loathing that fed on Carmen's heart.

In the train's blackened cave, a warning tingle snaked up her legs. It was coming.

She cranked the volume, then curled her fingers around the ledge dividing bored passengers from gleaming metal track.

She let the music's throb boost her gently onto the ledge. She balanced there easily. Busy with books and bytes, no one around her noticed. Carmen's face burned cold.

As the train exploded into view, she began to rock back and forth, merging with the voice pouring into her ears. It was her favorite aria; the clown with the broken heart, pretending to be glad.

Lights blazed ahead, smacked her eyes. The train was here, finally.

It thundered at her. She gave one tiny push forward and let go. Hands reached out, too late.

Then there was music. Cold. Flight.

Nothing.

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-928-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2018

First Edition

# Chapter 1

Blossoms pink as bubblegum drifted over the old woman's tufty hair. They settled on the wattled skin of her arms, on the battered slippers half-buried in spring's sweet grass. At times, she swatted them impatiently from where they landed on the quilt she sewed; at others, she let her head drift back against the chair, feeling them make their laughing way across her withered cheeks.

From the window ledge in the church tower where Carmen watched, the music was so faint that it sounded like memory. But she knew the old woman could hear it. Sometimes the hand holding the needle paused in the air over the quilt, and she angled her head toward her cottage door, from where the music floated.

Gripped tight around the ledge, Carmen's fingers ached. These heights still bothered her, although in another way, the bird-and-sky part of this job was elation. Carefully, she uncurled one hand at a time, wiggling the fingers and her heavy shoulders, then replaced each hand. Only then did she look down again.

The quilt splayed across the woman's lap was a circus of color. From where Carmen watched, it was like miniaturized farm fields through an airplane window, neat rectangles of one color stitched to the next.

The thought of an airplane caught at Carmen's breath; like many other things, her airplane days were over. A lonely cry from above lifted her eyes upward, where a single bird wheeled and tumbled in the breeze. It was heavenly here. Just a little warm, just a little windy, and high up enough that everything on Before

seemed perfect. If only she could see the quilt a bit better. She did, after all, have work to do.

*Bong! Bong!*

The sound crashed in her ears, her bones, her skull.

*Bong! Bong!*

The shock of it loosed her fingers. Instinct made her push away from the source... anything to free herself from that soul-rattling reverberation. She fell forward, away from the church bell, into the waiting air.

At first, forgetting, her throat opened and a cry almost escaped her. Then she felt the air pull into the pockets behind her shoulders, thrusting her wings outward. Instantly they caught the wind, and Carmen remembered that she'd never have to fall again. She pulsed them wide, loving the power to guide the wispy feathers and sinewy muscles.

And once more, the unbelievable thought floated into her brain...*I am an angel. I, Carmen Michaelson, am a flying-in-the-air, halo-over-head, gossiping-with-God angel.* She twisted a little in the air so she could see the wings from the corner of her eye. She caught a glimpse, but then her body pulled the wings out of sight behind her. Suddenly she knew what a cat chasing its tail felt like. But there must be a way, if you just twisted your head really fast and kind of snuck up on the wings, then...

Forgetting the old woman altogether, Carmen twirled in the air, twisting her head up, down, peeking between her legs, anything to glimpse those wings in action. The woman glanced up, feeling a whorl of energy over her head. Seeing nothing, she went back to her quilt.

"Drat!" Carmen mumbled. "Never get to see these things. Mirrors don't work, can't see back far enough without breaking my angelic neck..."

## *Song Angel*

“Carmen!” Ooooh. There was the voice again, like maple syrup laced with chili peppers. Carmen ceased to twirl, a washing machine agitator slowly losing its spin.

“Um...yes, Zeke?” She could almost see the stern but kindly face, with an expression of...well, the kind of expression an angel commander would have when he sent a recruit off on an angelic mission, only to find her practicing mid-air pirouettes directly above the Electus.

To forestall another of those patient-for-now lectures, Carmen saluted quickly, thankful that there was no real halo to get in her way. She made sure that her lifechain was settled correctly around her neck. “Sorry about that!” She let herself drop gently to the ground. “I’ll get on it.”

“Yes. Excellent idea.” That was all he said. How could he manage to make those three words sound like the strictest principal’s warning and a grandmother’s coo, all at the same time?

Then the voice was gone, and the feeling in her head that she had company was gone too. Would she ever get used to that? Would the day come when the fact that Zeke had his own channel in her brain seem normal?

A rolling snore pulled her away from brain channels and back to her Electus. Carmen knew her name was Marion. Her head had tipped to one side, hands were folded in her lap, her eyes had closed. Her time in First Life was nearing an end, and she was tired, Carmen knew. She watched the old woman from a distance for a moment, until the bright colors of the quilt drew her eyes downward. Then she tiptoed in for a closer look, never quite convinced that she was invisible to humans.

The quilt was strips of flaming red beside rainbow polka dots, and a chocolaty brown beside a piece of tiny pastel handprints. The patterns and colors seemed endless and random; it wasn’t like other quilts Carmen

knew of, with many fabrics but an overall plan and color scheme. This one's glory lay in its rambling quality. Like a long story unfolding, it spun itself out from start to finish with a beautiful meander in between.

There was one swatch of fabric: a rich purple combined with velvety green, and a shimmering of something gold through it. Carmen had seen that before. Slowly she closed her eyes, trying to remember. And before she could stop it, her mind became a dark, echoing hallway. She forgot her Electus, the job she'd been sent to do, even Zeke. So many doors! Where was she? What was this place?

But that one door was open, just a crack, so she moved toward it. From inside the door she could feel a pull, like someone holding a fishing rod, reeling her in from the hook caught in her flesh. Then she heard music, two male voices swooping and ducking around each other until they crested on two notes, soaring together. The music became the fishing line, pulling her in, tugging at her heart and her memory. What was that music? Where was it taking her? Carmen's body ached to slip past the door.

No. Carmen stepped back from the door and, opening her eyes, felt the door close, the hallway fade. *I don't need to be there. Where I am, this is enough.* She concentrated on the warmish air and the smell of earth in her nostrils until the men's voices bled completely away. She was careful to avoid looking at that elegantly-colored fabric. Best not to go there again. Wherever "there" was.

Beside her, the woman was stirring. She found the needle that had dropped in her lap and resumed her patient stitching. Then she stopped again, looking toward her cottage. Carmen realized then that the music



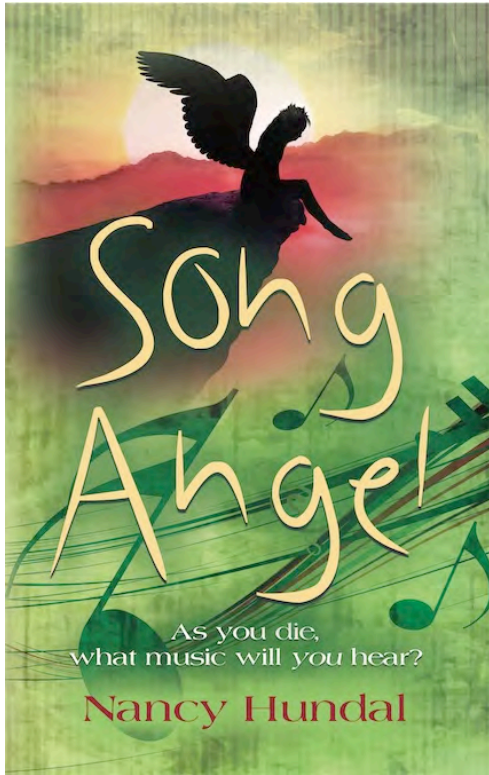
## *Song Angel*

had stopped. It had stopped at the exact moment that the men's melody had ceased in that hallway...could it have been the same song?

"Ah, time to go in," the woman murmured. "My opera is done."

*Opera, opera.* Carmen knew that word. She could go inside the cottage – she was an angel, she could go anywhere! – but she decided against it. The woman had been listening to opera; that was discovery enough for one day.

Carmen lifted her eyes and the tips of her wings toward the clouds, breaking free of Before and its memories.



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