
Praise for Charles Lober and *The Riverside Club*

“ Being that I'm an incurable Christmasaholic, I mistakenly assumed I'd read every kind of Christmas story or novel there could be. Charles Lober's masterpiece, *The Riverside Club*, proves me wrong. I couldn't put it down. In short, it breaks every Christmas story template I've ever known. It is a brilliant construct; akin to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in that initially it appears to be merely a rambling collection of stories that appear to have little relationship to each other. Belatedly I realized that Lober had set me up: each story is composed of living, breathing, cradle-to-the-grave memories that are shared with raw trusting honesty. The room the stories are The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) told in is merely the stage set; and Christmas is the iridescent thread that weaves them all into a magical timeless package. For every other Christmasaholic out there, The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) *The Riverside Club* is a must read!”

— Joseph Leininger Wheeler, Ph.D., is author, The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) editor, compiler of 74 books, including the *Great Stories Remembered, Forged in The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) the Fire, Heart to Heart, The Good Lord Made Them All*, and best-selling *Christmas in My Heart* series (currently the longestrunning Christmas story series in America).

CHARLES LOBER

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This book was an endeavor beyond my capabilities, achievable only with God's guiding hand. So first and foremost, I want to thank my heavenly Father.

I want to thank my editor, Kathy Ide, who helped set my book on the right The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) path, as well as clean up that path. Other The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) contributors were: Carolynne Scott, Cheryl Robinson, and Kimberly Beauchamp.

I am grateful to my family The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) for their support. My wife Sandra's keen sense of plotting and characterization helped immeasurably. To my son, Jason, now a young man, thanks for putting up with my questions. While drafting one scene, I asked him, "Would you say a cappuccino machine makes a hissing sound?" to which he replied, "Yeah, Dad, whatever." Jason, you bring joy and sunshine into my life. The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) And thanks to my daughter, Nicole Alejandra, for keeping me on my toes. I have been abundantly blessed with this "new chapter" in my life, although she does like to run off with my pens and draw on my manuscripts.

To my parents —Charles and Claire—thanks for modeling faith in your lives and sharing your memories with me.

Thanks to Dave Doehrman, a Marine veteran who fought at Khe Sanh, for his technical guidance.

Then there are the many friends who offered suggestions, including, but not limited to, Sue Lowery, Kim Byrd, and Patti Geddes. And to Jim Beall and The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) Windoline Roberson, whether you realized it or not, your encouragement was invaluable.

I love Christmas, and for years I sent out hand-crafted greeting cards. I then began sending out short stories, which found their way into this book (along with some poems from my cards). So what's next? Who knows—maybe a CD with a Christmas jingle? I can hear Jason now: "Yeah, Dad . . . whatever."

1 Silver Angel

The minute I laid the small silver angel on Sarah's headstone, the sun broke through the billowy clouds, flooding the gray Appalachian landscape with yellow-orange The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) light. Bright rays of sunshine glistened on its face and wings, making the angel seem alive—as though its wings were fluttering in the air.

A sign perhaps . . .

I remembered what Sarah used to say, "God speaks most loudly through silence."

So I stood straight and gently closed my eyes, letting my muscles relax. I took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of pine, savoring the ripeness that filled the air.

"Be still," The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) whispered. But my mind raced with thoughts of my lover and best friend. How I missed being able to hold her, to run my fingers through her soft hair, to kiss her full lips. How I longed to see her infectious smile or laugh at one of her jokes. We would sometimes argue, but we The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) never went to bed mad at each other. I respected her unquenchable desire to learn and impart her knowledge to others. Most of all, I admired her steadfast faith in God. I wish I could say the same for myself.

?Be still,? I said again, repeating this phrase until my mind was clear. Then I listened.

After several minutes, I heard a rooster crowing in the hollow.

I opened my eyes and shook my head. *Some voice.* I turned my back against the cold wind and knelt on the ground. The dampness of the earth made me shiver.

Into the still dawn I whispered, ?Sarah, it's me, Horace. Tomorrow's Christmas, The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) you know, and I wanted you to have a present. No peekin' now.?

My eyes were drawn to the dates engraved in granite: May 15, 1930–June 21, 2001.

I had replayed the events of that hot summer morning a thousand times in my mind. The doctor said her heart simply stopped. He tried to assure me there was nothing I could have done. I wasn't so sure. The The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) thought wouldn't escape my mind: *there must have been something I could have done to save her.*

In a split second, my life was forever changed.

Holidays were especially hard without The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1)

Sarah. The July Fourth picnic at Riverside The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) Village—the retirement community that was my place of employment and our home for almost thirty years—passed without the traditional watermelon fight that Sarah always instigated and blamed on me. Thanksgiving with my daughter Amy's family seemed incomplete without Sarah's gratitude prayer; also absent were her fried green tomatoes and fluffy biscuits.

Now it was Christmas.

Sarah and I had met at a Christmas party. I never knew anyone who loved Christmas like that woman. And during all the years I had known her, Sarah's enthusiasm for Christmas never waned. She delighted in picking out gifts, sending cards, and decorating our house.

But most of all, Sarah looked forward to celebrating her Lord's birth. She cherished our family traditions, commencing with the hanging of the Advent calendar and culminating with our reading from the gospel of Luke. And every year, we looked forward, with much anticipation, to the Christmas Eve meeting of the Riverside Club.

Danny Greenfield, who passed away in February at the ripe age of ninety-five, had originally come up with the idea for the Club. We were chatting about the upcoming holidays. Danny commented that Christmas was a particularly difficult time for many of Riverside's residents.

?I hate to see people lonely,? Danny had said to me, scratching his scraggly white beard. ?Why don't we have a party on Christmas Eve? We could play games and serve refreshments.?

?Sounds good to me,? I replied, intrigued by the idea. I too had noticed that the demeanor of some residents changed as Christmas approached. Wearing sullen expressions, they withdrew from their normal recreational activities. Loneliness could be a heavy cross to carry. Danny had hit upon something. Maybe a friendly get-together would help folks.

The first year, we invited all the residents and staff to the recreation room on Christmas Eve.

About thirty people showed up. We served punch and sandwiches. Emma Harris made her mouthwatering divinity and several other women brought pies and cookies. Danny came up with some questions for a Christmas trivia contest. After the contest was over and folks had settled down, we handed out door prizes.

Frank Sparks, one of the winners, said his prize, a small wooden sculpture of a wren, reminded him of a present he had received as a child one Christmas. Tears came to his eyes as he talked about the hand-carved bird his father had made for him.

?Our family didn't have money for fancy gifts,? he said. ?For months, Dad worked secretly at night, carving the figure from a The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) block of

basswood and then painting it—all so I would have a gift to open on Christmas morning. When I saw his handiwork, I was at The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) a loss for words. The life-sized cardinal was perched on a tree branch, strutting its bright red plumage. I jumped into Dad's lap, thanking him over and over. I still have that sculpture. It's a little worn and its colors have faded, but my father's labor of love will never fade.?

Frank's tearful story opened a floodgate of memories. A woman recounted a humorous Christmas story from her childhood. Then another person shared. I believe we could have gone all night telling stories. People's eyes lit up with excitement.

Danny glanced at me. ?You know, there are a lot of rich memories in this room. Next year, why don't we skip the games and just have folks tell their favorite Christmas stories??

And so The Riverside Club was born. Danny recruited people to tell their stories and I acted as moderator—making sure we stayed on track and finished on time. Sarah's job was to keep *me* on schedule.

It seemed ironic that I was now one of those lonely people the Club was intended The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) to help. Still, the idea of attending without Sarah repulsed me. ?I can't go to the meeting,? I remarked to Sarah's grave, ?not without you.?

I stood and gazed out over the gently rolling meadow dotted with headstones—some tall, The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) some flat, some grandiose—most small and simple like Sarah's, each with its own special story. I fixed my eyes oncemore upon Sarah's marker.

?I'm being put out to pasture,? I whispered, feeling my throat tighten, like I was wearing a dress shirt one neck size too small. Hot tears trickled down my cheeks. ?Several months ago, Riverside was purchased by Health View Corporation. A skinny kid with glasses paraded into my workshop. He looked like he The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) could have been in high The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) school. He dutifully informed me that the company has a mandatory retirement age of sixtyfive. I thought I'd have some fun, so I pointed out to him that I still had two more years to work. Well, you should have seen his face. It turned beet red. He pulled my personnel file from his briefcase and actually showed me my birth date. Can you imagine that? Kids don't respect their elders like they used to.?

I clenched my fists and then relaxed. No sense getting my blood pressure up because of some boy who was still wet behind the ears.

?I may be seventy-six,? I continued, ?but I'm a darned good building manager, if I say so myself. And The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) I can still keep up with my crew—well, almost. What do corporations know about running retirement facilities??

I paused, thinking about how my job had been my anchor since Sarah died. I enjoyed getting my hands dirty maintaining Riverside's buildings and grounds. So I stayed busy, taking on tasks I would normally assign to one of my younger assistants. Now my anchor was being cut loose, leaving me adrift in uncharted waters.

?I'll be working through the end of the year,? I continued. ?Then I'm moving to Maryland. I'm looking forward to being near Amy and her family. The kids are growing up fast. Faith is developing into quite an artist. Her watercolor landscapes are filled with vibrant colors.? I chuckled. ?She still tries to boss me around, but she's got a heart as big as yours. And John is developing into an athlete. As starting wide receiver on his football team, he caught two touchdown passes this past season. He's solid as a rock and has boundless energy.?

I ran my fingers over her name engraved in the granite. ?I hope you'll understand if I don't visit

as often. I'll have Manuel or Jeremy put fresh flowers on your grave.?

I looked once again at the silver angel. Sarah was fond of angels and had collected many different types, from sturdy mahogany to delicate white lace. She had even decorated our Christmas tree one year in white lights and angels. The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) Silver angels were her favorite because, to her, they looked the most divine. ?And I'll have them keep your silver angel polished.?

I looked towards the heavens, wincing as the chill wind slapped at my tear-streaked face. The rolling clouds had already swallowed the sun, draining the life from the land. Into the silence, I cried out, ?Where are you, God??

2 Riverside

A half hour later, my old pickup truck was climbing the winding driveway that ascended to a cluster of buildings surrounded by tall pine trees. Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians, near the small town of Beckett, Georgia, Riverside The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) Village was a quiet, peaceful place that looked more like a resort than a retirement center. Numerous hiking trails fanned out from the The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) main building, leading to cove forests, rambling streams and thundering waterfalls. A "little piece of heaven on earth," Sarah had called The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) it.

As my truck crested the hill, the main facility —hewn from local stone and timbers—came into view. Manuel and Jeremy had done a commendable job of putting up pine wreaths on the front doors and windows. After parking my truck around back, I headed to the cafeteria.

Sipping my coffee, I listened to the breakfast crowd. The topic this morning was the weather. The local The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) newspaper, *The Beckett Tribune*, had even printed a front-page article on the anticipated The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) snowfall. I couldn't blame them—a new traffic light was news in these parts. What really had Riverside residents talking was *when* we were expected to get it—on Christmas Day. Folks were saying they could smell the coming snow in the cool mountain air and see it in the grayish-white clouds that blanketed the Georgia sky.

When it snowed, the grounds at Riverside —more than twenty acres of hardwood forest—took on a mystical appearance. The last time it snowed Christmas Day was back in '91, when we got over a foot. The snow blanketed the land in a thick, white quilt, muffling the The Riverside Club (The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1) sounds of the forest in an eerie silence. Sarah had acted like a kid, insisting we build a snowman, then initiating a snowball fight with me. But this year, snow for me would be another reminder of Sarah's absence.

The Riverside Club The Christmas Club Trilogy Book 1

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