

PRAISE FOR JENNY CARLISLE

Saddle up and hold on tight for a rip-roaring good time at the Caldwell Family Rodeo. While Carlisle's steadfast heroine determines to honor and keep her mother's legacy intact, her bungling big-hearted hero strives to live up to the shadow cast by his big brother and clean up his messes while he's at it. Through twists and turns, they never saw coming, both learn what's really important when they let go and let God handle their happily-ever-afters.

— SHANNON TAYLOR VANNATTER, AWARD-WINNING, MULTI-PUBLISHED AUTHOR OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

This debut novel immediately makes you feel like you've known the characters and town forever. The sweet story is full of laughter, tears, and a reminder that even though it isn't easy to relinquish your hold on the reins of life, by letting God take them, only good will follow. Jenny Carlisle's first book has me looking forward to more to come.

— AMY ANGUISH MULTI-PUBLISHED AUTHOR OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

Real-to-life characters and a setting that brought back precious memories of my cowboy daddy's amateur rodeo days made Jenny McLeod Carlisle's debut novel, *Hope Takes the Reins*, one that I'll read over again. Filled with believable family angst plus outside conflicts kept me rooting for the family, yelling at the troublemakers, and swooning over the sweet interwoven romance. If you like modern-day westerns, you'll love this one. And even if contemporary fiction is not your cup of tea, try this one anyway. It will leave you wanting more.

— JULANE HIEBERT MULTI-PUBLISHED
AUTHOR OF HISTORICAL FICTION

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

For Bliss, Chessica, and Sherry

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

~ Romans 8: 38-39 NKJV

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. With the assurance that faith in Jesus gives me, I can live every dream.

I am so grateful that God placed James Carlisle in my path at Bryant High School. His support and love during 45 years of marriage have made all the difference in my life. So thankful for the positive energy of all of our kids and grands as well.

When two pillars of the Arkansas Chapter of American Fiction Christian Writers became the founders of a new publishing company, Scrivenings Press, I finally had the opportunity to get my stories into publication. Special thanks to Linda Fulkerson, who has also helped immensely with my website. Shannon “Dream Crusher” Vannatter encouraged me to abandon the tired old story I had been promoting and reach back for this one that had captured me years ago and wouldn’t leave me alone. Crushing that old dream to replace it with this new one was the best possible move for me. With Elena Hill as the editor who really connected with my characters and their story, I was finally set to bring it to life.

There is more than one community in Arkansas named Crossroads, but none are incorporated as a town. My town of Crossroads and all of its businesses are entirely fictional. There is no television station located in the Arkansas River Valley and plans for a casino there are still underway. During my research I found that there is a Caldwell Rodeo in Idaho, but this had no influence at all on my fictional Caldwell Family Rodeo.

Thanks to the Hull and Porterfield families for introducing me to competitive horse shows and the high quality young people who participate.

Thanks to Megan Earnhart for her help in coming up with some dastardly actions taken by the new business in town.

Here's hoping that your visit to small-town America brings you hope for your journey. Jeremiah 29:11.

PROLOGUE



O.D. Billings slid into his delivery truck. Why would Dad text mid-day?

Come home if you can. Mom needs us.

Blood drained from his face as his stomach went queasy. Since Mom realized there was an information blackout from the Middle East, all their thoughts were concentrated on his older brother. No confirmation, no details, no relief from the dread hanging over the Billings house. If they didn't hear something soon, it would be a long, hot summer in the Arkansas river valley.

"Yeah." O.D.'s boss answered his call quickly.

"George, I just got a text from my dad. Something is happening at home. He won't say anything. It can't be good." O.D. drove toward his next stop out of habit. Should he stop to respond to his dad?

"Go." George didn't hesitate. "What's left on your truck can wait."

On my way.

O.D.'s fingers shook as he pressed SEND.

Mentally he went through the list of notification protocols. Death notifications were made in person. Injuries were confirmed by phone calls, preferably from the soldier. So what could be happening at his house? Thankfully, Dad went home for lunch. Maybe whatever upset Mom hadn't found her alone.

A car ran a stop sign in front of him. O.D. braked just in time.

Find your head, Dee. Needs to be in the same place as your feet right now. His Grandpa's words rang in his brain, bringing calm reassurance. Just get home.

The big brown truck bounced down the bumpy driveway that led past the barn up to their house. Dad stood at the door of his truck with his phone in his hand. Mom was sitting on the porch swing, swaying a little harder than normal as her tennis shoes kicked the painted boards.

A familiar white SUV pulled away from the house as he arrived, their neighbor Hope Caldwell. Hope's mom waved feebly from the passenger side. A strange pang of jealousy popped into his mind. They had more information than him.

"Dad." O.D. stepped down from the truck.

"We still don't know anything." Dad squinted at the porch. "Your mom and Catherine Caldwell are worried about a news story about attacks in the Middle East. No names released yet. They didn't even mention a unit. But there is at least one dead with several injured. Mom is sure your brother was there. I'm debating whether to get Cody out of school."

O.D. glanced toward his mom again. Eyes closed in prayer, she stopped swinging.

"It's your call. It's hard to know what to do right now. I don't know if he'd rather be here fretting with us or just

waiting till we have something to tell him.” O.D. headed for the porch.

Thankfully, O.D. had decided not to follow John K. to the military. He’d trailed after his big brother so many times. But right now, maybe his place was here at home. It would be nice to feel a little more certain of that.

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Three Months Later

A cool autumn wind bounced around, threatening to lift O.D.'s cowboy hat off his head. No time to worry about that as he helped Mom down from the passenger side of Dad's truck. She insisted they all ride to the airport together, though it would be crowded with three grown men in the back on the way home.

"Thanks." She hugged him after both her trademark high-tops were on the ground. "I can get out by myself, but you're sweet to help."

"Come on! We're in an unloading zone." Cody ran around from the driver's side, rushing them into the terminal as Dad went to find a more permanent place to park.

O.D. blinked as the clouds rolling overhead made the natural light inside the building flicker. The soft buzz of conversation increased as they approached the bottom of the escalator that brought passengers down from the secured area.

"Hey, it's Cody!" His younger brother was instantly

surrounded by teenaged friends. Several girls held homemade signs with phrases like “Welcome home, John K.,” “Our Hero,” and “God Bless the USA.”

“Oh my.” Mom stopped in her tracks. “I hope your dad gets here soon.”

“He’s on his way.” O.D. gently pushed his way through the crowds, trying to locate a good place for Mom to see the top of the escalator.

Light flashed from his right side—a television news crew stood nearby.

“We’re live at the Little Rock airport, where a group of soldiers is scheduled to land today to rejoin their families.” The reporter ignored the commotion going on behind her. “One soldier, in particular, has captured so many hearts in our state. Here’s the mayor of Crossroads, Arkansas, his hometown. Mayor Jones, why have so many River Valley residents showed up to greet this soldier today?”

O.D. turned to listen. The mayor of Crossroads? Really?

“John Kennedy Billings is the oldest son of a prominent businessman in our community. He’s been our hero back to the time when he was playing football in high school.” The mayor straightened his tie, standing tall in front of the camera.

“I understand there was a question about him ever coming home. Is that right?” The reporter thrust the microphone toward the round-faced man again.

“Yes. He was listed as missing in action for a few weeks. Then, he spent some time in a hospital recovering from injuries sustained in an IED attack.”

“Well, we can tell the whole town of Crossroads is happy he is coming home today.” A rousing cheer went up from behind her, stopping many suitcase-toting bystanders in their tracks. “We will have video of his arrival for you at six o’clock. Back to you, Joe.”

The camera light switched off. The reporter turned to find a spot near the escalator.

O.D. was flabbergasted. What a crazy day. Of course the community was proud of his brother, but wasn't this sort of extreme? John K. would love the attention. Mom crept up to a safe spot in front of Cody's group of friends. O.D. stepped back to look through the glass walls. His dad hopped across a parking lot curb.

"O.D.!" He turned toward the coffee kiosk, a familiar blonde waved. Next to Faith Caldwell, her sister Hope stood quietly, her honey-colored braid falling on her shoulder. She balanced a cinnamon roll in one hand and a large coffee in the other.

"Come sit with us." Faith pulled out a chair.

Walking over, he took off his cowboy hat, placing it in front of him on the table. He was a bit surprised to see them here. Faith's nervous energy contrasted with Hope's stillness.

"Hey, how are y'all?"

Hope didn't look up until she had finished sweetening her coffee.

"We're okay." Faith replied. "But how about you? Are you excited to see John K.? Do you know when his plane arrives?"

"Actually, I've been checking online. It looks like there was a weather delay at DFW. We may be in for a bit of a wait. Hey, Hope."

"Hey." Hope finally acknowledged his presence. "Cody and your mom sure look excited."

"You bet! The returning hero has the whole state in a stir."

She focused on her coffee again.

"We just dropped our grandparents off so they can fly back to Houston." Faith talked for both sisters.

"How's your dad?" O.D. couldn't imagine what his own dad would do in Smiley Caldwell's boots.

“He’s okay, I guess.” Hope met his eyes. Being quieter than her sister was typical, but he didn’t like the pain etched in her eyes.

“Speaking of dads, there’s mine. Excuse me, ladies.” He smiled at Faith but failed to catch Hope’s eye.

O.D. walked through the milling crowds, gently touching his dad’s sleeve as he approached.

“So, Dave, I guess you are pretty proud of your hero son?” The mayor faced them, pumping Dad’s hand vigorously.

“Of course. And let me introduce you to our other son.” Dad reached over the head of a teenaged girl to grab Cody’s arm. “Cody, have you met Mayor Jones?”

The other one. Not “the youngest.” Not “another of my boys.” The other one. O.D. stepped backward. He held his hat in his hands and stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over the crowd. Chants of “USA, USA” washed around him.

“There he is!” Cody pointed, then waved.

John K.’s smiling face lit up the top of the escalator. He strode down the moving stairway, a head taller than the other passengers. He waved at the crowd but locked eyes with their mom, pushing straight for her.

O.D. swallowed back a lump in his throat. Finally, Mom might start sleeping through the night again. Dad moved quickly through the crowd to reach his wife. He enveloped her and his oldest son in a huge hug.

John K. bumped into Cody as he took purposeful steps in O.D.’s direction.

“Hey, Squirt.” He pulled O.D. close. “How’s it going?”

Squirt. The nickname fit better now than it did when John K. deployed—even Cody towered over O.D.’s five foot nine.

“Welcome, home, bro.” O.D. grabbed a bag of chips John K was clutching. There was something distant in the blue eyes of

his long-time hero. Not fear but hesitation. Was something holding him back from this happy day?

John K. headed toward the flashing light above the luggage carousel. O.D. followed, as always. Could it truly be this easy for their lives to return to normal?