

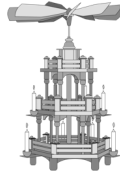
REJOICING
with **JOY**

Jenny Carlisle

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”
~ Matthew 2:10 (NKJV)

For Caddo Gap, Norman, and Paron.

Prologue



“Joy! Christmas Joy! Where are you?” Grandma’s voice carried from the bottom of the stairs to Joy’s favorite hiding spot in the church building.

“Coming, Grandma.” She carefully wrapped the wooden figure of Mary she was holding and placed it back into the crate where she’d found it. She still couldn’t believe her luck today. Imagine, a whole nativity set had been in this crate for who knew how long.

Her hand bumped one of the wise men, and she unwrapped it for another quick look. She loved hearing her grandpa preach about the baby Jesus when he was born in Bethlehem. These figures made the story come to life.

Who had made this set? Why was it hidden here?

One thing she knew—she could not tell anyone. Especially not her brother, Brannon. He was so clumsy. He would probably break it into a million pieces. But it was made of wood. Could it break?

Why had she never known this set was here? Now that she was ten, she was old enough to help decorate the house and

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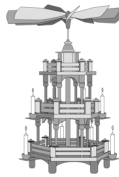
the church building. Even though her grandpa had stood in the pulpit her whole life and she'd grown up feeling very much at home here, she'd never noticed this box. Marked "Decorations," it had been hiding below one of the four huge windows in the tower of the old brick building.

If she didn't tell, she'd have to leave it up here in the church's attic. But the box was too big to carry downstairs, and where would she hide it?

There was one person she could trust completely. Someone who would understand how important this was. Someone who would help her protect the precious set from her overgrown ox of a brother.

"Grandma! Could you come up here, please?"

I



Nine years later

Joy Fredericks squatted on her heels, glaring at the extension ladder lying on the ground beneath her. Everyone inside her house was either napping or watching football, and here she was, stuck on Grandpa's roof. One more time, she'd plowed ahead with one of her crazy schemes, and look where it took her. Was there another way down? How long would she have to yell before someone heard her? At least she could take the string of Christmas lights to the roof's peak while she was up here. No need to worry about finding a way down until she finished her work.

She climbed slowly, her toes flexing inside her tennis shoes to better grip the sloping shingles.

"Hey," a male voice reached her ear. "Need some help?"

"Not right now," she yelled down. "But I will need that ladder pretty soon."

The top of the ladder peeked over the gutter below.

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“Thanks!” The word was barely out of her mouth before her lanky rescuer clambered up, joining her on the roof.

“Taking down the Thanksgiving lights, huh?” His blue eyes laughed at his own joke.

“Yeah. I thought I’d get some Christmas lights up while the weather was so nice. Thanks again. I’m Joy Fredericks.” She extended her hand. His handshake was firm, and so far, he resisted the urge to ridicule her.

“Junior Caldwell. So, I take it this is the roof of your house? Or maybe you’re a burglar, and I should call the cops.” He stood, picking up the string of lights that rested near her feet.

“It’s my grandpa’s house. His display usually brings people out from miles around.” She plugged the string of multi-colored lights into the extension cord that stretched over the corner of the roof. “I know he can’t manage it this year, so I wanted to get a head start.”

“If I help, could I ask you some questions about this little town?” Junior worked on unraveling another string of lights.

“Sure.” The sun warmed her face, and she was glad she had chosen a short-sleeved T-shirt to work in, even on Thanksgiving day. With this stranger’s help on the roof, she might not need to stay here long. “But me, first. Where did you come from? I didn’t hear anyone drive up.”

“That’s my bicycle over there by the diner.” Junior pointed. “I rode it from our ranch near Crossroads after dinner.”

“Did you expect the diner to be open on Thanksgiving?” That may have sounded blunter than she intended.

“No. I’ve had dinner already. I’m just checking out the route between Crossroads and Van Buren. We’re planning to sponsor a charity bike ride in the springtime. Roads with little traffic are best.” Junior handed her the next string, waiting for her to plug it in.

“If you’re looking for a place with no traffic, you found it.

The church and the diner are the only places still open. So, Sunday mornings and weekend evenings are the big days. Even those aren't huge." Joy stood taller as she surveyed the closed-up gas station and the other empty buildings leading up to the old school building on the hill.

"It's been a while since I've been out here. When I was a kid, we used to come to a live nativity scene at that church. I was always disappointed there was no snow in Snowville." Junior pointed in the general direction of the brick sanctuary.

"Yeah. I can only remember one or two times we had snow during the nativity. If we have any, it's after Christmas. Sometimes I wore shorts and a T-shirt under my angel robe. Last year, I did have to add a sweatshirt under Mary's dress." Joy tacked the lights down with a staple gun.

"Hey, I don't think Jesus would care what His mom wore. Those pageants were always great. I remember the animals most. Didn't you have a camel once?" Junior handed her another string of lights before following her down the back of the house.

"Yeah! That was quite a deal. There was some exotic animal refuge up north of here. I think the guy wanted us to pay him. We've always been volunteers. He only brought the camel once."

Joy watched as Junior stood, peering over her community. The wind ruffled his wavy blond hair when he removed his baseball cap to place it more firmly on his head.

"I guess that's all I need to do up here for now." Joy walked toward the ladder. "Thanks again. The diner will be open tomorrow, so you can come back if you want to talk to Big Ed about your fundraiser."

"Sounds good. I might do that. Maybe I'll drive my pickup next time." He turned in the direction of the old schoolhouse. "So what's the story? Why did the school close?"

“The state said we weren’t getting a proper education with so few students. They didn’t ask the kids. We loved the individual attention. And the food in the cafeteria was to die for. My grandma was one of the cooks. Most everyone who graduated got a scholarship to college if they wanted one. But, it closed, and we were loaded up on school buses for the long ride to the big, impersonal school in town.” Joy hung the staple gun on her toolbelt.

“Oops. Didn’t mean to hit a sore spot.” Junior took a step toward the ladder.

“That’s okay. The timing was rotten, though. If it stayed open for one more year, I could have graduated here. Instead, last May I walked across a huge, cold stage with a bunch of strangers. My dad and I have been trying to make good use of the building. We started a community organization that keeps the lights on for a few events. But hardly anyone shows up.” Did this stranger care about sad little Snowville?

“Get a load of that gym.” Junior pointed. “Looks like it’s in great shape.”

“Not bad for almost a hundred years old.” Joy climbed down the ladder first. Junior scrambled down quickly, right after her. This afternoon had turned out to be much more interesting than she had anticipated.

He reached down to touch a pile of boxes at the foot of the ladder. “Looks like you’ve still got quite a job ahead of you.”

“I need to sort through that stuff to see what goes on the house and what goes inside.” Joy retied the bandana that held back her wavy brown hair. “This one goes in, for sure.” She picked up the small plastic tub that contained her favorite nativity scene. This would be the first year Grandma wouldn’t be here to see it displayed. Maybe Joy would leave it in the box.

“Let me help. I’m not in a big hurry. I have a headlamp for my bike if I don’t get home before dark.” Junior took the

container from her. Joy used her foot to push a cardboard box full of greenery under Grandpa's front porch roof.

"Come on in. You'll need something to eat before you ride all the way home. I owe you at least a sandwich for rescuing me before I had to admit to everybody else what a dunce I am." Joy ran ahead, bouncing up the Craftsman-style front porch steps in front of her parents' house, next-door to Grandpa's.

"Okay. You convinced me. Riding all this way by myself was not the world's smartest move." He juggled the box from one hand to the other as he navigated the steps.

"There you are, Christmas Joy." Grandpa opened the front door. "I thought I saw you on my roof."

"Just getting a head start on your decorations." Joy held the door open for Junior.

"Grandpa, this is my friend, Junior Caldwell, from Crossroads. He is on a long bicycle ride and could use a sandwich to take back with him." She heard herself introducing this guy as if she'd known him for a long time. It seemed that way, honestly.

"Caldwell. Like the Caldwell Rodeo?" Grandpa followed them into the entryway. "I hated that they went under. Great entertainment."

"Thanks." Junior held the box toward Joy.

"Hey, you brought your old nativity scene from my house. Where should we put it?" Grandpa grabbed the box from Junior. Unfortunately, it immediately crashed to the hardwood floor, spilling the contents at their feet.

"Grandpa!" Joy cringed. She hadn't intended to sound so harsh. Grandpa stepped back, wobbling a little before leaning against the door frame.

"Honey, I am so sorry. Here, let me help." Grandpa bent his knees, reaching toward the floor, but Joy caught his arm.

"No, Grandpa. It's okay. I can get it." She blinked back

tears. The trembling that had become more prevalent lately was only part of the reason he was moving from his own house to an assisted living apartment in town.

“Joy, you haven’t introduced the rest of us to your friend.” Mom stepped in from the kitchen.

“This is Junior Caldwell. He’s from Crossroads. He rode up here on his bicycle.” Joy nudged Junior, who was reaching under the entryway table for a wise man.

“Well, come on in. Joy can pick up those pieces. They have survived much worse over the years.” Mom led the way to the kitchen, where her brother already assembled a sandwich.

Joy retrieved the pieces of the nativity scene from the entryway floor. She was glad Grandma had helped her wrap each piece in bubble wrap before packing the set away last year. That extra bit of cushion had protected them once again. She placed each one back in the plastic box. Mom had a much newer set that she would display in the living room. Maybe she’d clear a spot on her dresser for this one. She wondered again about the story behind each mismatched figure. How many hands had held the precious pieces, wrapping them carefully before they were packed away again?

Junior stood next to her with a brown paper sack.

“Did Mom fix you up?” Joy placed the plastic crate in a chair just below the hat rack.

“She wanted to send more food with me, but I told her I could only carry so much in my backpack.” Junior squatted near the doorway to the living room. “What’s this?” He held up a piece of white cloth wrapped around a wooden clothespin.

“Oh. That’s my homemade baby Jesus. The more official one has been lost for a couple of years. Grandpa promised to carve me a new baby, but ...” She took the makeshift figurine from his outstretched hand.

“Life happens.” Junior smiled at her. “This one serves the purpose, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Joy placed the clothespin baby in the top of the box. “I guess you want to get started back before dark.” She opened the front door, walking out to the front porch.

“I’ll be back tomorrow to talk to Big Ed. This would be a good place for our bike ride to stop for lunch.” Junior punched the brown sack into his backpack.

“Great. I’ll be around. I can clue you in on what to order. But everything Ed makes is delicious. Besides the live nativity scene, his diner is the only thing that keeps Snowville, Arkansas, on the map.”

“Okay, then. It’s a date.” Junior mounted his bicycle and headed to the two-lane highway in front of the diner. “See you around noon tomorrow.”

Joy looked up the hill toward the empty schoolhouse. No kids playing on the old metal slide or launching feet first into space on the swings. No matter how many Christmas lights she installed on Grandpa’s house, life would never be the same around here. Her mom and dad didn’t let Grandpa stay in his house alone, so it sat empty most of the time. She wished he could be content living with them, but he didn’t seem happy anywhere now.

Without Grandma’s presence, all the spirit seemed to be gone from the family’s celebration. Loneliness was building in this little town.

She forced a smile as she waved at Junior. His red ball cap faded into the distance. He had promised to return, but only a few people ever did.