



OVERCOMING THE PAIN OF LOSS.
CHOOSING THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS.

CHOOSING CHRISTMAS

CAROL
JAMES

Choosing Christmas

Carol James

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Choosing Christmas
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Dedication

To all my friends, parents, and fellow teachers at PCS.

The years we spent together were transformative.
Thank you for growing and encouraging me. "God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them." Hebrews 6:10

What People are Saying

Praise for *No Longer a Captive*:

“The storyline is terrific, the characters are captivating and the lessons learned are worth learning. Go ahead and break every chain and jump in feet first. Completely loved this story. Five Stars and highly recommend.” ~Dawn L.

“Carol James never fails to touch the heart of readers. She has a gift for writing three-dimensional characters who think, feel, suffer, and rejoice—characters so wide open that we see ourselves in them. Her ability to bring plots to conclusion carry life lessons, changing lives of both her characters and her readers. God’s love is woven through the pages in a natural and redemptive manner. Anyone who enjoys romance will love the works of Carol James.” ~Kathleen Neely, Author of *The Street Singer*

1

Static crackled from the old intercom box on the wall above the whiteboard. "Ms. Taylor, Dr. Jernigan would like to see you in his office."

"Thank you. Please tell him I'll be right there." Angie pulled her makeup bag out of the bottom desk drawer and ran her brush through her hair. She refreshed her lip gloss and powdered her nose. Then she stood and slipped on her suit jacket. Her students had teased her about being dressed up today, but they'd just have to get used to it.

Excitement fluttered her stomach as she headed down the hall. The school board had met last night and made their decision. She drew in a calming breath and forced back the tears. Grammy and Poppy would have been so proud.

As Angie entered the main office, Mary Jo winked from behind the front desk and then nodded toward the door behind her. "They're waiting on you."

Smiling, Angie walked across the office and rapped on the door. When Will opened it, she stepped inside. He nodded toward the sofa behind her. "Ms. Taylor, you remember John Carlton."

Not a surprise that the president of the school board would be here, too. She turned and offered her

hand. "So very nice to see you again, Mr. Carlton."

"And you, as well." He shook her hand and then gestured toward the sofa. "Won't you please have a seat?"

She perched on the edge of the cushion and folded her hands in her lap. Will dropped into the chair across from them.

Mr. Carlton smiled. "As you're probably aware, the board met last night to consider filling the position of assistant principal."

Angie nodded, her heart skipping with excitement.

"Thank you for your application. Your résumé's quite impressive. You're an excellent teacher and have been a faithful employee."

So far, so good.

"Unfortunately, we're unable to offer you the assistant principal position at this time. The school needs a candidate who has more experience in personnel management. Someone with an advanced degree."

She shot a glance toward Will. His eyes were fixed on his lap. Turning her attention back to Mr. Carlton, she countered, "I appreciate your position. However, my master's will be completed before this school year ends."

He nodded. "Dr. Jernigan reminded us, and for that reason, we'd like to offer you the newly created position of Upper Elementary Lead Teacher. It would mean a ten percent increase in salary beginning in January. I'll have the job description and salary

information sent to Dr. Jernigan before the end of the semester. With an updated contract, of course." He stood and shook her hand. "Pray about it."

Then the two men shook hands, and Mr. Carlton left.

This had not gone at all the way she'd expected.

Will slipped onto the sofa beside her and grasped her hand. "Angie... I'm so sorry. I tried."

Tears threatened.

"Say something." He sandwiched her hand between both of his.

"You know I'm qualified for that position even if I don't have my degree yet. I have the right experience. I know the curriculum backward and forward. I even helped write some of it." She would not cry. "You shouldn't have had to try anything."

"I know." He rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs. "Baby, the board felt...they thought the offer of the lead teacher position would be a good compromise. And maybe in a few years..."

"Good? For who?" She pulled away her hands. "And personnel management, really? Do they not realize exactly how many personnel I manage every day?"

"The board knows you're an excellent teacher... That's why they're creating this position for you. They don't want to lose you."

"They've already hired someone, haven't they?"

"Angie..." He shook his head. "I really can't say."

"Can't or won't?"

"Shouldn't." He broke eye contact. "Let's just say,

the board really didn't have much of a choice."

"People always have a choice."

He huffed. "It's the nephew of one of the church elders. He just got his master's in admin and wants to move back here to be close to his mom. She's sick, and he needs to take care of her." He shook his head. "I've told you more than I should've."

Angie's heart ached for the nameless young man. "I am sorry." She drew her hands away and stood. "But I'll have to think about things. I'm not sure this is the future I want."

"Angie, don't make it any harder." Will stood and rested his hands on her shoulders. "I pushed all I could without making them suspicious. I understand you're hurt, but you should be grateful they created a new position for you."

Grateful? If she looked at it from his perspective, maybe. But from hers? It stung like a slap in the face. "I'm qualified. You shouldn't have had to push."

"In a perfect world...yes." He drew her close. "Go home. Take the rest of the week off and pray about it. I'll have Mary Jo get a sub." He whispered across the top of her hair, "Neither the school nor I want to lose you."

~*~

Angie breathed in the calming aroma of her chai. A latte this late in the day would keep her up all night. But maybe it wouldn't have mattered. She was so upset. She probably wouldn't get much sleep tonight

anyway. She'd tried to pray during the drive to the coffee shop, but her mind had been churning over today's disappointment.

When she'd started her master's, she'd been sure her decision to pursue a degree in admin had been the right one. But now? Maybe she'd misinterpreted things.

She should have never agreed to date Will. It wasn't the first time a teacher and an administrator had begun a relationship, but it put him in an awkward position. That was one reason she'd decided to pursue her master's. So they'd be on a more level playing field at work.

They'd been discreet. Careful. Going to restaurants and events in Dallas rather than staying in Fort Worth. Their contracts didn't forbid personal relationships between employees, but school policy certainly didn't encourage it. Other employees knew. Some of the board probably knew, too. But they turned the other way.

When they were at school or extracurricular functions, it was all about their jobs, their responsibilities to the school, their students, and their students' families. Neither of them would do anything to jeopardize that.

Only once had they run into some parents when they were out. The single comment Mrs. Jensen had made was, "It's very nice to see the two of you enjoying each other's company." They'd fully expected word to go zipping through the school family, but as far as they'd been able to tell, the Jensens had respected

their privacy.

Over the years, Angie had chosen to put her professional life above her personal life. And until today, she'd been satisfied. But now, she could only wonder if all her sacrifice had been worth it. And Will? She'd finally come to understand what her heart had been trying to tell her for several months now. He was a great guy. Just not the one for her.

She pulled her phone from her pocket. Today's verse from her Bible app popped up. "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18."

Could a person really see something that was unseen?

Yes. When she'd been in college, she'd been able to see the unseen. Her vision had drawn her toward teaching in a Christian school and touching the hearts and minds of children. Investing her life in the unseen. The eternal.

Maybe these last few years she'd been concentrating mostly on what she could see. What the Bible said was temporary...and she'd forgotten about focusing on the everlasting.

She'd go home and pray. But she'd also update her information on the professional websites.

2

Angie rolled over and glanced at the alarm clock. Ten thirty. She jumped up. The last time she'd slept this late was probably in college. She stretched, thankful Will had given her the rest of the week off. He was a considerate and kind-hearted man and boss.

She scooted her feet into her slippers, grabbed her laptop from the other side of the bed, and padded down the hall to the kitchen. She made a cup of coffee and grabbed some yogurt from the fridge.

Deciding to deal with e-mails first, she nestled down into a fleece afghan on the sofa and opened her laptop. She found a few reminders from the school about the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and testing schedules. Some junk. A "save-the-date" notice for the faculty Christmas party. A quick "hope you're doing better" note from Will.

And...an e-mail from Crescent Bluff Christian School. Crescent Bluff. A little town...someplace around Waco. She clicked on the email.

DEAR MS. TAYLOR,
WE CAME ACROSS YOUR NAME AND RÉSUMÉ
THROUGH AN INTERNET SEARCH FOR
POSSIBLE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL CANDIDATES.
WE WOULD BE VERY INTERESTED IN SPEAKING
WITH YOU ABOUT AN OPENING FOR NEXT

SEMESTER.

PLEASE CONTACT ME AT THE NUMBER
BELOW AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE. I'LL
BE HAPPY TO ADDRESS ANY QUESTIONS YOU
MAY HAVE ABOUT OUR SCHOOL.

The e-mail was signed Isabelle Thornton,
Principal, Crescent Bluff Christian School.

As Angie closed the laptop, tears filled her eyes. She'd prayed for wisdom and guidance before she went to bed last night, so why should she be surprised? Maybe because her prayers had lacked expectancy. In truth, she'd prayed mostly out of habit and routine. But even so, her Father was faithful when she wasn't.

Angie clicked on the link to the school's website. It was K through 8. No high school. Small, but charming. The children in the images appeared happy and engrossed. Not sitting still in their desks like little robots, but learning hands-on. Many of the images were taken outside. Something about it felt as if she'd stepped back in time.

She took a deep breath and entered the phone number.

"Isabelle Thornton. May I help you?"

Angie hadn't expected the principal to answer.

"Hello?"

"Yes. Sorry. Mrs. Thornton, this is Angela Taylor.
I—"

"Ms. Taylor. Thank you so much for calling so promptly. As I said in my e-mail, our school is looking for an assistant principal to begin as soon as possible. I

saw your credentials online and feel your background could be a good fit for our little school. I'd love to talk with you about the position...if you're interested, that is."

"Yes." The same bubbly excitement that had filled her when she'd gotten her first teaching job percolated through her again. "I'm very interested."

A warm chuckle answered. "Perfect. I thought you would be."

She thought Angie would be interested?

"Now let's set up a day for us to meet and for you to come visit the school. And of course, time is of the essence. The end of the semester is just around the corner."

"Well, I...I mean, I know it's short notice...but I could come tomorrow. I'm already taking a personal day." She bit her bottom lip and held her breath.

"And perfect, once again. I'll e-mail you an application and the school address. So, shall we say nine o'clock? Could you be here by then?"

"Wonderful. Thank you." The bubbles multiplied. "And Mrs. Thornton?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Your e-mail couldn't have come at a more perfect time."

"God's timing is always perfect. See you tomorrow."

The principal ended the call, and for a few seconds, Angie stared at the phone. When she was a little girl and disappointments had overcome her, Grammy would always say, "Maybe God has

something better in store." She picked up her mug and breathed in the cinnamon-y warmth of pumpkin-spice. "So maybe He does."

~*~

Crescent Bluff was nestled amid the undulating fields of central Texas. In mid-spring, the landscape would be covered with the sapphire and gold of Texas bluebonnets. But this time of year, summer grass that had outlived its season carpeted the countryside in golden brown as far as Angie could see. The gnarled silhouettes of leafless mesquite trees gave the landscape a Van Gogh-esque feel. Only the green of an occasional live oak or juniper provided evidence of life.

Her GPS said she should be at the school a little before nine. Even now, the question that had kept her awake most of last night swirled through her mind.

What in the world was she doing?

Spontaneity had never been one of her personality traits. She was slow to make decisions, methodical, evaluating the possible outcomes from all sides. She hated the thought of making a wrong choice. But after yesterday's phone conversation, an unfamiliar urgency prodded her on.

She hadn't mentioned this personal field trip to Will. No need to ruffle the waters without reason. Last night when she'd chased sleep, unable to catch it, she'd made a mental list of pros and cons. Two cons pretty much overshadowed any of the pros. Finding a place to live on such short notice and her current teaching

contract.

Mrs. Thornton's words from yesterday swirled through her mind. "God's timing is always perfect." Perfect, without flaws, ideal, lacking nothing...perfect.

Following the GPS prompts, she turned off the highway and drove through the quaint town of Crescent Bluff. On the outskirts, she passed a large church campus. Then she made a left turn and pulled into the parking lot of a small, red brick building which, judging from the steeple, was once a church.

"Arrived." The electronic voice from her phone confirmed what the sign in front of the building stated, Crescent Bluff Christian School.

Angie turned off her car and took a deep breath. She picked up the envelope containing her completed application and a copy of her résumé. This whole thing was so out of her comfort zone. As she walked toward a pair of glass doors, her heart whispered, *Father, Your will be done.*

Following the instructions on a sign next to the door, she pressed the doorbell and waited. A grandmotherly woman, short with gray curly hair, opened the door and smiled. "Angela?"

"Mrs. Thornton?"

"Please, call me Isabel. There are no children around." The principal offered her hand.

"And please call me Angie." They shook hands.

"I'm so glad you could come today. I've arranged for you to observe in one of our first-grade classes this morning. Then two of our school board members would like to meet with you, and after that, I'll treat

you to lunch, and we'll talk."

Angie followed Isabel down the hall. Prints of classic art hung on the walls, encircled by what were obviously student reproductions. Angie paused at one she recognized—Monet's Japanese Bridge. The reproductions were primitive, but the students had captured the essence of the original.

Isabel slipped up beside her and stood in silence for a few seconds. "Aren't they lovely?" Her tone was hushed, almost reverent. "Our kindergarten reproductions from one of their picture studies."

"Beautiful," Angie whispered back.

They moved down the hall, and then Isabel stopped and tapped on the door labeled "Mrs. Clark's First Grade." She opened the door.

As they stepped inside, Mrs. Clark stood. "Class, this is Ms. Taylor, the visitor I told you about. Please welcome her." The children spoke their greetings.

"Boys and girls," Isabel responded, "Ms. Taylor has come to learn about our school. You'll have to show her all the things we do."

Mrs. Clark gestured toward a chair in the back of the room, and as Isabel left, Angie settled in. The students gathered on the floor around the teacher, while she opened a copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and began reading aloud. After a passage, she stopped and asked some of the students to tell back what she'd read. Their recall amazed Angie.

Then they discussed the ideas expressed in the passage they'd read. These children were actively listening, thinking, and commenting. They weren't

simply putting letters together to make words, but they were drawing ideas from the words that were being read. Their minds were engaged, and they loved it. Angie loved it.

One little girl raised her hand. "You know, Mrs. Clark, just because something's old doesn't mean it's bad, does it?"

Mrs. Clark began discussing what makes something valuable and where people find their value.

A lump rose in Angie's throat. Something about this place beckoned to her. She was home.

~*~

Angie studied the classic books on the shelves in Isabel's office. The cherry furniture and Winslow Homer prints on the walls gave the room a traditional, homey feel. Not the cinderblock and linoleum coldness of Hope Christian School.

During the interview, the school board members had been warm and their questions thorough.

Isabel stepped into the office and sat in the chair next to hers. "Well? Your thoughts. Questions?"

Angie pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. She would not cry. "This is what I've always believed education should be but never knew such a place, a philosophy, existed. I loved it."

"The board members were very impressed with your résumé and your answers to their questions." A smile warmed Isabel's face. "We've been praying for guidance since our assistant left last summer. And we

believe you may be an answer to those prayers...”

Isabel picked up an envelope from her desk. “Pending the results of your background check and responses from your references, we’d like to go ahead and present you with an offer.

“And now the hard part.” She handed Angie a sheet of paper with a salary proposal printed on it. “We’re a small private school, and even though we’re well-endowed, our salaries can’t compete with those of larger schools. Most of our teachers work here not for the money, but because they feel called and are willing to make financial sacrifices to serve the children and their families.”

Angie reviewed the proposal. The figure was about two-thirds that of her current teaching salary and half what she would have made as an assistant principal. Her budget was already tight, and even though Crescent Bluff was a smaller town than Fort Worth, the cost of living here couldn’t be low enough to make up the shortfall. Disappointment settled over her. No matter how interested she might be, this arrangement could never work.

Out of politeness, she continued scanning the rest of the offer including retirement and insurance benefits, and then she came to a line item labeled “housing package.” She rested a fingertip on the words and looked up at Isabel. “Housing?”

“Yes, the salary package includes housing. The school has access to a small house. Furloughing missionaries have used it over the years. And we’d like to offer it to you...including utilities and

maintenance...if you need it and are willing. It's less than a mile from the school. You could even walk or bike to work."

Angie did some quick mental math. She added the cost of her rent and utilities. Now the salary the school was offering exceeded her current income. She took a deep breath. "I'm interested. Very interested. I certainly want to pray about it, but I think this might just work."

"Of course. But before you decide, I'll give you the address of the house, and you can run by and take a look at it. Adam's there today doing some painting and routine maintenance. I'll text him and let him know to expect you." She picked up a canvas bag and held it up. "Here are some books about the educational philosophy we follow. I hope you'll glance over them before you make your decision. And, please let me know if you have any questions."

Isabel stood. "Now, let me treat you to a delicious school lunch, and we'll discuss what you observed."