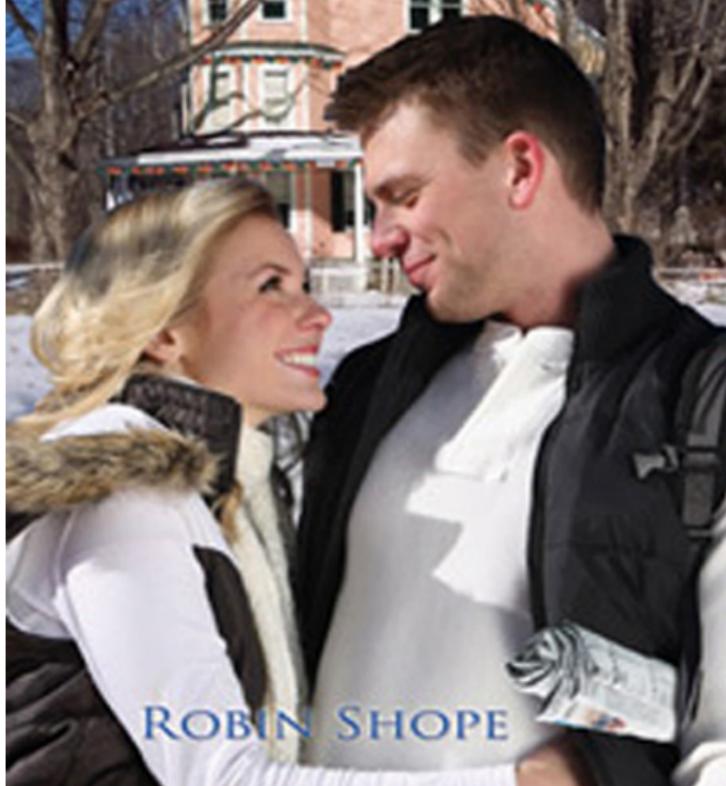


THE *Christmas*  
EDITION



ROBIN SHOPE

Last night Lucy slept peacefully—dreaming of the almost kiss, soothed by the hope of a first kiss. Today, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine his arms around her and his lips on hers.

“Thanks for asking me along today.”

“I must make a small correction. I didn’t just ask you along; we both have work to do and I need you.” Her blush was immediate. She noticed Joe’s eyes. They were soft gray, almost pale, but right now they were darker, emitting a strong emotion.

Joe pulled to the side of the road and got out. Lucy wondered if they had a flat tire and was surprised when he opened her door and pulled her out onto the snow. With tenderness, Joe drew her to him. She didn’t have the sense to look away. She was locked in this moment and knew she’d carry it to her grave. His touch made her melt into him. His arms kept her from falling. Joe brought his lips within an inch of hers. He looked into her eyes as if asking if this was all right. Her breath caught in anticipation of what the next moment would bring. She wouldn’t turn away this time. The sun was high now, casting them in winter radiance. “Joe...”

His mouth prevented her from saying another syllable. This was their first kiss, happening right here at the side of the road just under the snowy boughs of tall pine trees. Joe kissed each hand, her neck and then her lips. He used his lips as one would use their fingers when plotting the way to go on a map. Then he gathered her even closer. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him for all she was worth.

He stepped back and whistled. “We needed to get that out of the way.”



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Christmas Edition

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## **Dedication**

This series is dedicated to my husband Rick—  
your presence makes the world  
a far more interesting place to be.

Also to Kimberly and Matthew, who fill me with joy.

Special thanks to my editor, Lori Graham,  
for your hard work and encouragement,  
and to the real attorney, John Friedman,  
for your “legalese.”

Finally, a shout out to my friend, Phillip Tomasso,  
writing as Thomas Phillips.



## Chapter One

*December 1*

The usual winter blizzard blew into southern Wisconsin.

Lucy Collins carefully maneuvered her car through the snow that grew deeper with every gust of wind. She parked directly in front of her family owned business, The Turtle Creek Newspaper, just as her brother, Mike, was making his second pass at clearing away the snow from the drive with the snowblower.

"Hey, Mike! Help me carry these inside, will you?" Lucy called to him as she got out of her heated car. A sharp wind sucked up her words and nearly knocked her off balance.

Mike turned off the blower and cupped his hand around his ear. "What did you say?" His breath circled around his face in the frigid air.

"Help!" Lucy hollered. She popped the trunk and pivoted her body in an exaggerated fashion-the way models do when showcasing prizes on a game show. She stepped to the other side and waved her hands, palms up, along the food trays and her mother's crystal punch bowl set. Then she flashed her younger brother her biggest smile.

Mike galloped up to the car just as another gust of wind, hammered snow at them. "It's freezing out

here! Even my nose hairs are frozen solid. You go on in. I'll get these as soon as I'm finished shoveling the walk."

"Thanks." Lucy gave him a kiss on the cheek. To keep her balance, she gingerly walked across the crunchy ice crystals and into the warm building. Once inside, she tugged off one boot and then the other, dropping them under her desk. She hung her coat and scarf on the back of her swivel chair as she looked around at the decorations of wreaths and holly. A sprig of mistletoe hung over the empty desk at the back. *That would surely go to waste.* Music played loudly from her dad's old stereo inside his office.

Christmas used to be her favorite holiday, but after a disastrous end to her engagement, a couple of years ago, this particular holiday now only served as a dark reminder of broken promises. With prayer and a loving family, Lucy was ready to start her life again, which meant buying her own place right after the first of the year. Working and living with the same people was often stifling, especially when they were her parents.

Lucy's mom was the cheerleader as well as the gopher, making sure everyone had what they needed, whereas Lucy's father focused persistently on getting the next edition out and on time.

Each year at Christmastime, however, Harold Collins took off his publisher hat and donned something completely different. The weeks wedged between Thanksgiving and Christmas became about assisting others. She loved it all and nothing could ever take her away from this life.

The employees had finished packing up the last of the boxes from the food drive which were now

stacked neatly, ready to be dropped off at area shelters. Lucy wanted to acknowledge all the work they'd done. "For a small cluster of people, we sure accomplish a truckload of work, fast! These donations will help many people down and out this holiday season. Like all the other years we've worked closely together and done a great job." Christmas was about unbridled joy but today, try as she may, she still wasn't feeling it. Maybe she could fake it for everyone's sake. Lucy lowered her head in modesty and stated, "This is going to be a Christmas of miracles."

As if releasing faith into the air, everyone began to punctuate her words with applause. Right on cue, Harold Collins stepped out of his office wearing a hat something like one of the elves might wear. He even bobbed his head up and down to show off the cluster of bells that dangled at the tip of the loopy crown. Lucy couldn't help but have her first laugh of the day, along with the other employees.

"I know it's still weeks until Christmas but I thought you could use this now," Harold said as he produced a fan of festive red and green envelopes.

Squeals of delight resonated as they opened the envelopes and saw the amount written on the checks but none was as loud as Ulilla Langston. Lucy's dad had inherited her along with the paper. Ulilla was a beautiful, black woman with hair swept close to her head in a French twist. She carried weight around the place both literally and figuratively.

"Harold and Margaret Collins," she crowed, as her hand fluttered to her chest. "No way can you afford to give us this."

"Nonsense!" Harold blustered, and politely dismissed her words of protest with a wave. "It

should be three times this and you know it! You all have worked effortlessly and clocked in many overtime hours in order to get the newspaper out each week. I am the one who is grateful. Merry Christmas!"

The bell above the front door jingled as Mike walked in balancing the punch bowl along with the holiday trays. "Where do you want these, sis?"

"Let me help with that." Lucy took the top two trays. "Take the rest into the break room. I'll follow you in."

Margaret touched the sleeve of Lucy's cardigan. "Have you finished our Christmas cards yet?"

"I started a month ago and finally finished them last night. Not only did I hand write each one, but the envelopes are addressed and stamped."

"Which of the photographs did you decide on?"

"I thought I told you that all ready. Never mind, there's one in my desk I'll show you." Lucy set down the trays. From the desk drawer, she took a single envelope and handed it to her mother. "Here, I was looking for something that would embody a perfect form of truth when it comes to Christianity."

Margaret stared at the card. A country church was nestled into a hillside surrounded on all sides by fresh snowfall. Above, the sky was brilliant blue.

Lucy looked over her mother's shoulder. She scrunched her face, second-guessing her photographic choice. "Does it look okay?"

"It's a whole lot more than okay. This is simply breathtaking and looks professionally done. Lucy, you should have put your logo somewhere on this card so people would be aware that you are the one who took this photograph of our church." Margaret's eyes glistened.

“Not this time. I want people to focus on the birth of our Savior and the hope He gives for our lives. Mom, in the past year, I have become more appreciative of the upbringing you and Dad gave Mike and me and how you shared your faith which has now become mine.” Lucy choked back her tears and touched the silver cross she always wore at her neckline.

“Those words are the best gift you could ever give to me.” Margaret hugged her daughter. “I want nothing more this season than to see you happy.”

Lucy hugged back tightly. “I’m working hard on that.”

“Lucy!” Mike called from the break room. “I thought you said you were following me in. I’m making a mess of things trying to get the food set up.”

“Ah, I better go rescue the food from Mike and start the punch.” Lucy picked up the trays. “By the way, it’s getting worse outside so could you suggest to Dad that we should let everyone go home early.”

“I will, but right now, I want to lend you a hand.”

Lucy and Mike uncovered the trays of fruit, cheese, and crackers. Margaret took her home baked pastries from the refrigerator and arranged them on top of doilies set on antique dessert plates. Mike dumped plastic forks from the box into a basket and then tore open the plates while Lucy poured the punch into the bowl and added scoops of sherbet. “I think we’re ready.”

Once everyone had gathered in the break room, Harold asked one and all to join hands. Together they asked for the Lord’s blessing. Then they dug in; plates were quickly filled with condiments, the

routine appetizers, rolled pieces of meat, decorated sugar cookies, and cinnamon rolls. That was just for starters. Margaret kept laying out more and more food.

Lucy sat at the edge of her chair and sipped her cup of punch. It was fun watching everyone enjoy themselves. She closed her eyes and drank in their laughter. This is what she needed, to be surrounded by such love and acceptance.

The employees had all worked for her father for years, so she not only knew their names but their spouses and children. This is what she loved about the business. It wasn't work. It was family. At times they even squabbled like it, too.

When there were only a few squares of cantaloupe and crumbs of her mother's cake left, Lucy suggested, "Before we go home for the weekend, let's go around the room and name one gift we want for Christmas. No limitations on the gift. Miss Ulilla, would you like to start?"

The society column woman was clearly pleased to go first. In her world, this was the correct order of the universe and she didn't even try to suppress her smile. Instead she brushed crumbs from her bosom, cleared her throat and stood to her feet. "Since Lucy removed the limitations, what I really want for Christmas are tickets for a Caribbean cruise under my tree this year."

"That's sounds exciting. I feel pretty confident you can talk Abe here into going along with you." Lucy gave the elderly custodian a wink. It was no secret Abe had been after Ulilla for as long as she could remember, but Ulilla always put him off.

Abe stepped right in without being asked, "The gift I am wishing for is that I can buy those tickets

for Ulilla. One for her and one for me. Separate cabins, of course." He turned beet red.

After the laughter died down, Lucy went on to ask her best friend, "What about you, Monica?"

"I'm hoping for money. Lots and lots of money."

"Here I thought you'd ask for perfume. The French kind," Mike said. His lips slowly curled into a slow smile. For the first time, Lucy caught something in the air between her best friend and her brother and it wasn't perfume. French or otherwise.

Harold set down his plastic plate with a hollow thump. "The gift I want this year cannot be found under my tree."

"Harold." Margaret touched his arm. "This isn't the time."

"I think it is, Maggie. After being a family owned business for the last fifty years, first with my Papa and now on my own, it's no secret I want to keep that other newspaper from coming here. Living in a small town like Turtle Creek, we can't withstand the extra competition. We can barely make it as it is. We need to come up with some ideas of how we're going to generate more sales, increase our advertisers and get more subscribers." He pulled off his elf hat and lowered his eyes. His thumb rubbed a finger as he spoke. "Or this might just be the last time we stand together like this for Christmas." To everyone's dismay, Harold had spit out his worrying words. They spread across the room.

Lucy frowned. Everything her dad said was the truth. They all knew it.

"My turn!" Lucy picked up her father's hat and pulled it down over her ears. Everyone laughed. "My Christmas gift is to hire a new editor who will knock

the socks off our readers with his fresh ideas and perspective!"

"And how will you know this editor when he comes through the front door?" Carol from advertising asked.

"Because..." Lucy tapped her chin in thought. "The man I have prayed for will write with heart." Unexpected tears gathered along the edges of her eyes. The end of her nose tingled. "Anyone who can move an audience with words is going to increase circulation which will attract businesses to grab ad space and make readers buy our paper." She touched her cross. *I have my faith in you, Lord.*

The front door jingled. Monica looked out into the office. "Hey, guys, there's an awesome looking guy standing at the front counter. I believe Lucy's gift just arrived. Quick Lucy, say another prayer while you have God's attention."

Lucy walked out of the break room with shoulders squared, back straight. There he stood. Tall, with sandy brown hair and wickedly wonderful eyes. Cherry cheeks, too, thanks to the frosty weather. His gray eyes were unsettling. He stood on one foot and tapped one shoe against the other to knock off the snow. Then he repeated the process with the other shoe. Monica was right. He was a looker.

"How may I help you?" Lucy folded her hands together and placed them on the counter.

"I'm looking for Lucy Collins." He stared her in the eyes.

"You've found her." Lucy heard laughter. She turned around to see the doorway to the break room was crowded with faces. All eyes were pinned on them. Of course, she had to put on a good show for

them. Lucy turned back around and faced him. Feeling cocky, she said, "I know why you're here."

"You do?" he seemed startled.

"Yes, you're here about the ad I placed in this week's paper for an editor."

His chin dropped and he was speechless for a moment. "You're...absolutely right. I did see it advertised." The man set his briefcase down and popped it open. He started shuffling around the inside of it. Papers rustled. Finally, he looked up sheepishly. He had worried eyes. "I seem to have forgotten my resume. Not a good way to start a job interview. By the way, I'm Joe McNamara."

Lucy shook his hand and then reached under the counter for an application. She clamped it down on a clipboard, slipped a pen underneath and handed it to him. "I don't need your resume but I do need to know if you can write. When you're done filling this out, I want you to write an editorial for me." She slid a blank piece of paper toward him.

"On what subject?" He scratched the end of his nose.

"You're the editor so you get to decide." She slapped her hand down on the paper.

Joe nodded and then looked around for a place to sit. He chose a chair from the waiting area. Lucy watched him as he read the application and then thoughtfully filled in the blanks. Every now and then he looked up and caught her staring at him. He smiled but she quickly looked away.

The Turtle Creek Newspaper employees began to quickly leave. "Don't stay too long, Lucy, or you'll be trapped in here for the weekend," Abe warned her on the way out. For the first time ever, Ulilla was on his arm.

“I won’t be much longer. I am dreaming of a cozy fire with hot chocolate.”

“That’s only one of the things I’m dreaming of!” Ulilla gushed as she plunged through the doorway. Shocked over Ulilla’s sudden change of heart, Lucy couldn’t help but stare.

Finally Joe stood to his feet and handed the clipboard back to her, the pen returned to the same position as when she had handed it to him. Now it was Joe’s turn to slide the paper across the counter to her. Lucy looked at it. Maybe she missed something. She flipped it over. Both sides were blank. She looked at Joe quizzically.

“May I?” he asked nodding toward one of the computers.

“Be my guest.” Lucy granted permission and then caught her reflection in a window. She quickly pulled off the Santa hat. Static electricity popped around her head like a lightning rod. She knew she was blushing and really hoped he wouldn’t notice.

Lucy watched as his long fingers flew across the keyboard. Her keyboard. The tips of the fingers hit the center of the keys with great accuracy. Tap-tap-tap the keys sank and rose again. She was close enough to see the words without her glasses and didn’t see any red squiggly lines. At least the fella could spell.

“Psst!” Monica called from the break room.

Lucy turned around. “What?” she mouthed silently.

With frantic movements, Monica motioned for Lucy to come talk to her. When Lucy walked into the room, everyone huddled around. “We need details.”

Lucy gave a deep sigh happy to oblige. “His name is Joe McNamara. According to his

application, he's from Chicago, so I guess he must be relocating. He's trying out for our paper by writing an editorial for me."

"Good idea," Harold said while cramming the last sugar cookie into his mouth.

"Why would he want to apply for a job with us?" Mike asked suspiciously as he tied the top of a plastic garbage bag closed.

"That's easy to answer. We are the best newspaper in the entire southern lakes region," Harold answered shooting bits of cookie from his mouth like falling stars.

"Yea, right," Mike panned as he tossed the bag on top of the other bags.

"You have to start at a small paper and work your way up to get into a big city paper," Monica explained as she slipped on her winter coat. Then she winked at Mike. "He's getting his start right here with us."

"Whoa, first I have to hire him, and once he hears what the pay is, he may just hop back on the Interstate."

"Finished," a male voice spoke.

Everyone turned to see Joe standing just feet away, holding out his paper.

Lucy hoped he hadn't heard everything. She snatched the paper from him and furrowed her brow. "That was fast."

"Not when you have something burning inside that you feel passionately about."

She held it between her fingers and read aloud.

*Saying Goodbye*

*by Joseph McNamara*

*What will I ever do without Café Books?*

*Ever since the announcement that the independent bookseller was going out of business, I've been a mess. The big chain stores serve a purpose, sure, but they don't contain the atmosphere and warmth that emulates from the owners of Café Books. When I walk into their shop, it's like visiting family. Mr. and Mrs. Myers always greet me and everyone, with a genuine smile, and when are they not armed with a recommendation for a new title they know I'll enjoy? Just for me. They notice me. Me.*

*Café Books is where I first went whale hunting with Melville and frog collecting with Steinbeck. How can I forget all the murderous adventures I shared with my good friend, Mike Hammer, or faced a scary, yet Brave New World with Huxley? I've read more than books on the leather sofa at Café Books. I've made friends. Lived a million different lives. Cried countless tears. And have laughed out loud so often, and so hard, that my stomach still aches from the memories alone.*

*How does one say goodbye to such a place?*

*I started patronizing Café Books just off Kenzie Avenue in Chicago about two years ago. And so when the owners announced suddenly it would be going out of business and closing its door yesterday, I made it a point to stop by.*

*The room was busy with faithful shoppers who felt this place was a stabilizing source in their community. Lexie Jacobson, a 28-year-old hairstylist, scooped up discount novels and a couple of CDs. "I'm sure going to miss this place," she said with a shake of her head. She was not alone with this feeling.*

*"It's hard to find bookstores that are not part of a national chain," 35-year-old school teacher Samantha Jones said with a sigh.*

*The sentiment was expressed again and again by dozens of patrons.*

*In the never-ending search for bigger and better, give me the small and unique. Meet me at Café Books. Help me say goodbye.*

No one spoke. Lucy couldn't take her eyes from the page. The words evoked warmth and sentiment. It was more than she had hoped for. He was it. This was her Christmas gift.

It wasn't the first sight of him that did it. It wasn't the endearing way he drummed his thigh with the pen when he was nervously trying to figure out what to write down on his application that formed her opinion. Nor even his calm manner as he slid his fingers across her keyboard that made the difference. It was his words. These words. They were simple and brilliant. Words that had taken the breath from her soul. She looked up at him with new eyes. He got her—yet how could that happen when they only met minutes ago.

"Wow." She gulped.

"Well, it was spontaneous." Joe uneasily tugged at his collar. "If I had more time, I could have done much better."

They smiled at each other as if there was more to the words that hung in the air. Her mind was wandering where it shouldn't. "I need to clarify something."

"Clarify away, Ms. Collins."

"Lucy."

"Lucy," he repeated in a sweet tone.

"Um, we can't afford to pay you much. It's obvious you're quite gifted so I'm not sure we're what you're looking for in a newspaper."

"The experience is what is valuable here."

"How much notice do you need to give your old place?" Harold stepped forward to ask. "The sooner you can start the better."

"Dad!" Lucy cut in as blood rushed to her face.

"Ah, my schedule is pretty well wide open, sir. I can start as soon as I'm needed, that is if I am hired. I really don't need much—a roof over my head and...a new start."

Lucy saw it in his eyes. He wasn't kidding.

"You know, Harold, there is the small apartment above our garage. Mr. McNamara could stay there until he finds another place," Margaret reminded him.

"I'll take it," Joe was quick to accept.

A gust of wind whipped through the building when Monica opened the door. "Better get a move on, people. I just heard on the radio that the Interstate is closed down. The town is pretty well socked in. It's time for us to lock up and head for our homes. I love you all but no way do I want to be stuck in here with you."

Everyone went for their coats.

"I better take you home, so I know you made it safely," Mike told Monica.

"If you shovel my walk too, there might be a reward in it for you." Monica winked as she nudged his side with her elbow.

"I love rewards."

"Mike, don't be long. There are Christmas boxes in the attic I need for you to get down for me," Margaret said following her son out to the parking lot. "We're decorating the tree tonight and you can't miss it." She shut the door behind them.