

A romantic couple, a man and a woman, are shown in profile, looking at each other and smiling. They are standing in a snowy winter landscape. In the background, there are snow-covered evergreen trees and a small white cabin. To the right, a Christmas tree is decorated with warm white lights and a bright star on top. The overall scene is festive and cozy.

# THE CHRISTMAS EDITION

A JOURNEY TO PARADISE

A decorative gold tinsel garland is draped across the bottom of the image, partially overlapping the author's name.

ROBIN SHOPE

The Christmas  
Edition:  
A Journey to Paradise

Robin Shope

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are 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: A Journey to Paradise**

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## **Dedication**

This series is dedicated to my children,  
Kimberly and Matthew. And also to Kingston, my  
grandson.

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





# 1

*December 1*

The usual winter blizzard blew into southern Wisconsin.

Lucy Collins carefully maneuvered her car through 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 a pass along 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 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. She gingerly walked across the crunchy ice crystals and into the warm building.

Passing the reception area, she made her way into the newsroom where the room's low ceilings were decorated with garland and lights. A miniature Christmas tree sat on each of the half-dozen desks in main work area. As she neared the break room, Lucy inhaled deeply, taking in the fresh pine scent from the large Christmas tree that stood in the corner of the break room. It cast out its scent among the other holiday smells of home baked cookies and pastries. She loved the smell of a real pine tree.

The drone of the newsroom chatter drew Lucy's attention. The employees—her friends, really—were busy readying the next issue and packing boxes for the food drive. The office excitement was like this every year—a tradition that kept Lucy's world in balance.

She smiled, acknowledging each person as she hurried past them. As she reached her dad's office, Lucy focused her eyes on the huge wreath hanging above the door where Christmas music played on an old stereo turntable.

Reaching her desk, she slowly drew in her breath as she hung her coat and scarf on the back of her swivel chair, and then tugged off her boots, dropping them under her desk.

She let out a breath as she noticed a fresh sprig of mistletoe hanging over the empty desk at the back. *That will surely go to waste.* Christmas used to be her favorite holiday, but after the disastrous end to her engagement a couple of years ago, this particular



holiday now only served as a dark reminder of broken promises.

With a shake of her head, she tried to whisk those thoughts out of her mind. She was not going to fall apart. Not this Christmas. With prayer and a loving family, it was time to start her life again. She'd already resolved to buy her own place right after the first of the year. Working and living with the same people was often stifling, especially when those people were her parents whose personalities matched as well as Jolly Santa and a stressed-out elf.

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 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.

She hardly had time to sit before the last of the food boxes from the food drive had been placed with the others. They were now stacked neatly, ready to be dropped off at area shelters, and Lucy wanted to acknowledge all the work the employees had done while she was out. "For a small cluster of people, we sure accomplish a truckload of work, fast! These donations will help many of our friends and neighbors who are down and out this holiday season. We've worked closely together and done a better job than ever before. You should all be proud of each other as I am proud of you."

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. "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, her father stepped out of his office wearing an elf's hat. He bobbed his head up and down to ring the cluster of bells that dangled at the tip of the loopy crown. Lucy enjoyed her first laugh of the day.

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

Squeals of delight resonated as they opened the envelopes and read 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 tirelessly and clocked in many overtime hours to get the newspaper out on the street each week. I am the one who is grateful. Merry Christmas! Now let's put the paper to bed so we can have some fun around here!"

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."

Her mother 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?"

"The one in my desk. I'll show you." Lucy set down the trays and crossed the room back to her desk. From the desk drawer, she retrieved an 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."

After a quick hug, her mother 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 OK?"

"It's a whole lot more than OK. This is simply breathtaking, and it 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." Her mother's eyes glistened.

"Not this time. I want people to focus on the birth of our Savior and the hope He gives 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 ours." Lucy choked back her tears and touched the simple silver cross she always wore at her neckline.

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

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

“Lucy!” Mike called from the break room. “I thought you said you were following me. I have absolutely no idea how this mess has just...appeared in here, but if you don’t get in here fast it’s gonna spread. I’m trying to get the food set up, but it’s not working.”

“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 let everyone go home early.”

“I will, but right now, I’m going to lend you a hand.”

Lucy and Mike uncovered the trays of fruit, cheese, and crackers while Mother 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 package of paper plates while Lucy poured the punch into the bowl and added scoops of sherbet. “We’re ready.”

Once everyone had gathered in the break room, her father asked them to join hands. Together they asked for the Lord’s blessing. Then they dug in.

Lucy sat on the edge of her chair as she sipped her cup of punch. It was fun watching everyone enjoy themselves as they filled their plates with shrimp-cocktail, rolled cold-cuts, decorated sugar cookies, and cinnamon rolls.

She closed her eyes and drank in their laughter. This is what she needed, to be surrounded by such

love, acceptance and joy.

The employees had all worked for her father for years, so she knew them not only as employees but also as friends. This is what she loved about the business. It wasn't work. It was family. At times, they even squabbled like a family, too.

When there were only a few squares of cantaloupe and crumbs of her mother's cake left, Lucy suggested they go around the room and name one gift each of them wanted for Christmas. "No limitations on the gift," she said. "Miss Ulilla, would you like to start?"

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

"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 he'd known her, 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, and everyone laughed.

After the laughter died down, Lucy moved on to 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.

Her father 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 owned and run by my papa and now by me, it's no secret I want to keep that other unmentionable newspaper from coming here. This town is too small for two newspapers. If they start up, it's likely both papers will die. We can barely make it as it is. We need to come up with some ideas on how we're going to generate more sales, increase our advertisers and get more subscribers." He pulled off his elf hat and lowered his gaze. His thumb rubbed a finger as he spoke. "Or this might just be the last time we stand together like this for Christmas."

Her father's worry spread across the room. Lucy frowned. Everything her dad said was the truth. They all knew it, but now wasn't the time to dampen spirits.

Lucy picked up her father's hat and pulled it down over her ears. "My turn!"

Everyone laughed.

"The Christmas gift I want is to hire a new editor who will knock the socks off our readers with fresh ideas and perspective! That'll bring new subscribers."

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

"I'll just know." 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 lure businesses to grab ad space and make readers buy our paper." She touched the cross on her necklace. *I have my faith in You, Lord.*

The bell over the front door jingled.

"Hey, guys, I think Lucy's gift just arrived. There's an awesome looking guy standing at the front counter." Monica stared out into the office. "You may be on a roll. Quick Lucy, say another prayer while you have God's attention."

Lucy playfully shook her head at her friend and then walked out of the break room with shoulders squared, back straight.

The man stood on one foot, tapping one shoe against the other to knock off the snow. His sandy brown hair glistened with beads of melted snow. Unintentionally, she began to stare as she wondered if she had just proved the power of prayer. Her reverie snapped shut as he glanced up and she caught a glimpse of cool gray eyes. Cherry cheeks, too, thanks to the frosty weather. Monica was right. He was a looker.

Lucy approached the counter as he switched feet and began to knock snow from his other shoe.

She gently folded her hands together and leaned across the counter. "How may I help you?"

He looked up and captured her with his intense gaze. "I'm looking for Lucy Collins."

"You've found her," she managed to say, but his unsettling gray eyes took her breath away, and she had to fight to concentrate.

Laughter broke out behind her, and she turned to see the break room doorway crowded with faces. All eyes were pinned on her and Mr. Mystery. Of course,

she had to put on a good show for them.

Lucy turned back around and faced him. "I know why you're here."

"You do?" He seemed startled. The discomfort she had felt shifted to Mr. Mystery, and she found herself unable to suppress an interested smile.

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

His chin dropped, and he was silent for a moment. "You're...absolutely right. I did see it advertised." The man set down his briefcase and popped it open. He hunted around inside, and papers rustled.

Finally, he looked up sheepishly. "I seem to have forgotten my resumé. Not a good way to start a job interview. By the way, I'm Joe McNamara," he said as he extended his hand in full businesslike fashion

She studied him, wondering how anyone coming for a job interview could have possibly forgotten their resumé.

Lucy shook his hand and then reached under the counter for an application. She clamped it to a clipboard, slipped a pen underneath the clip and handed it to him. "I don't need your resumé, 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 turning just so the gawkers from the other room could see that she was all business. Inwardly, she wondered if he was the answer to her prayer or the prelude. Either way, he certainly was charming.



Joe nodded and then looked around. 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.

While she waited for him to complete the paperwork, Ulilla and Abe came out of the break room, the first of the Turtle Creek Newspaper employees to 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.

Trying not to gawk at Joe, Lucy focused on the break room. Her parents and brother were cleaning up, evidently too busy to pay any attention to her, but occasionally Monica peeked out, giving Lucy a sly grin.

Finally, Joe stood and handed the clipboard and pen back to her. Then, he slid the paper across the counter to her.

She looked at it. Maybe she'd 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." As Lucy turned, she caught her reflection in a window. She snatched off the elf hat. Static electricity popped around her head like a

lightning rod. The heat of a blush crept up her cheeks, and she really hoped he wouldn't notice.

Lucy watched as his long fingers flew across the keyboard. Her keyboard. The tips of his 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 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," her father 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," her father answered, shooting bits of cookie from his mouth like falling stars.

"Yeah, right," Mike panned as he tossed the garbage bag on top of the others.

"You know you have to start at a small paper and work your way up to get into a big city paper," Monica said as she slipped on her winter coat. 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.”

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

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

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

As he spoke, the words flashed brilliantly in her head. She thought for a moment that Joe *could* actually be the answer to her prayer; a Christmas miracle would be most welcome.

She held the editorial 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 emanates 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 when I faced a scary, yet Brave New World with Huxley? I've done more than read 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 suddenly announced it would be going out of business and closing its door, I made it a point to stop by.*

*The room was busy with faithful shoppers who felt this place was a stabilizing force 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. She had known when she had woken up this morning that things for the paper were about to take a turn. She never imagined things would take a turn for her, too.

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 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 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?” Her father stepped forward and asked. “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. She couldn't help but wonder if she could be a part of his new start.

“You know, Harold, there is the small apartment