



The Christmas Ladder

by
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The snowflakes floated from the gray sky in giant clumps, landing softly and silently on the already white ground. Amber and Alex stared out the kitchen window. The old barn with its weathered gray siding, their favorite place to play, was almost lost in the falling whiteness. Neither of them spoke for a long time, standing there as silent as the falling snow. Sadness was the reason for their silence. This was not going to be a merry Christmas.

Amber and Alex were nearly inseparable. They were twins and had been close ever since their mother put them in the same cradle when they were born nine years ago.

“I wish we could go out and play,” Alex said, finally breaking the silence.

“Me too,” Amber replied.

They continued to watch the snow and the almost invisible barn.

“A kid should be able to go out and play in the snow,” Alex said.

Amber shook her head vigorously, “But we can’t, Alex. You know what Mom said. When she’s at work we have to stay inside, keep the door locked, and never let a stranger in.”

“I know,” Alex sighed.

Their mother worked at Carsten’s Café just down the street; six houses and the hardware store were the only buildings between the café and their house. She could be home in forty-five seconds, if need be. She had told them this. One day when they were with their mother they ran from their house to the café while she watched and timed them. It took them only thirty seconds, so they knew their mother, though much older than them but still able to run, could certainly do it in forty-five seconds. Their house was the very last building on the street in the small town of Farmersburg, Ohio. After their house the street changed into a gravel road.

“Do you want to play hide n’ seek?” Amber asked.

Alex shrugged his shoulders as he gazed out the window. “I don’t know. I guess not.”

The old farmhouse they lived in was big, with ten rooms, not including the bathroom and closets. The twins had counted them. There was a small basement, but it

was dark, smelly and scary, and they never went down there without their mother. A narrow staircase at the end of the upstairs hallway led to an attic. The twins loved exploring the attic because there were all kinds of things stored there that hadn't been removed by the people who had lived in the house before them.

Most of the rooms were empty because they had so little furniture with which to fill them. They had moved to Farmersburg in the spring, after their parents had gotten a divorce. Amber and Alex had only seen their father once since then. They didn't know why they ended up living in Farmersburg, a town they had never heard of before.

Amber and Alex liked the big old house because there were lots of places to explore. They missed their dad a lot and didn't like how sad their mother was, though she was sometimes happy since they started going to the little brown church fourteen buildings away (they had counted). They liked playing in the barn best. They didn't like being left home alone. They liked Christmas because of presents and Christmas trees and having lots of fun with relatives. They didn't like this Christmas, because they knew they would get few presents. Their mother had told them there wouldn't be a Christmas tree because they couldn't afford one. They would be no getting together with lots of family because they had always gotten together with their dad's family for Christmas, and their mother had said that wasn't going to happen.

"Well," said Amber, "if you don't want to play hide n' seek then let's at least go up to the attic and explore. There's that big pile of boxes in the darkest corner. We've never opened them." She put her hand on his arm and whispered, "There might be hidden treasure in one of them, or maybe some money somebody stashed away and forgot where they hid it."

"That's silly," Alex said.

"Aw, come on," Amber pleaded.

"Oh, OK. I guess so,"

"Beat you up there!" Amber was already halfway through the kitchen, running to the stairs to the second floor.

Amber squealed with delight, but shouted "Hey!" when Alex pushed past her on the stairs. Both ran down the upstairs hallway, Amber right behind Alex, then up the narrow stairs to the attic, making loud clomping sounds on the small wooden steps. Alex pushed open the door, reached for the light switch, and flipped it on with Amber right behind him.

They walked to the far end of the attic, in front of the stack of boxes, several of which were covered with a blanket. "There's probably nothing fun in any of these boxes. None of those boxes over there had anything good in them," Alex said, pointing to another corner where boxes lay opened with some of the contents strewn on the floor.

"You never know for sure, Alex. Here, let's start with this one."

The box opened easily and contained an old light fixture. "See, what did I tell you?" Alex complained. "I can see why the people who lived here before us left this stuff. It's all junk."

"We aren't done yet," Amber reminded him.

The next box held a rusty hamster cage that smelled. "Eeewww!" was all Amber said as she moved to the next box. It contained an old VCR that had been taken apart. Alex began to study the dismantled VCR in more detail.

Amber opened the next box and peered inside. “Oh! A nativity set, even a stable!” She pulled a camel out of the box.

“Let me see!” Alex said, pushing Amber aside.

“Hey!” she protested.

Alex quickly removed all the contents. There were three camels, three wise men, two shepherds, two sheep, a cow, a donkey, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in a manger. One of the camels was broken. Amber held the camel’s body in one hand and the head in the other and said, “We can glue it together.”

The two children spent the next few minutes arranging the nativity scene on the attic floor. Finally Alex said, “Let’s see what’s in the other boxes.”

The next two boxes contained nothing of interest; the one had an old quilt eaten full of holes by a hungry mouse and the other an old toaster. When Alex opened the next box he exclaimed, “Christmas lights, some Christmas tree ornaments, and an angel, too, for the top of the tree!”

They spread out the contents. Amber put down the broken camel and reached for the angel, taking it in her arms with a hug. It was crocheted and stiff from being heavily starched, still white as newly fallen snow.

Alex dragged the string of lights over to an electrical outlet and plugged it in. “Oh, they’re beautiful, absolutely beautiful!” Amber exclaimed. The bulbs glowed brightly in the poorly lit attic, casting colors onto the floor. “All we need now is a Christmas tree to put the lights and angel on,” Amber said. “And the nativity scene could be put beneath the tree. There’d be plenty of room because there won’t be any presents.”

“We’re not going to have any Christmas tree, remember?” Alex said with sadness and anger in his voice. Amber said nothing, just turned her attention back to the angel in her arms.

Alex began playing with the two good camels, pretending to make them walk toward the stable. He finally set them down, leaned against a box, and watched Amber cradle the angel in her arms, pretending to put it to sleep. Then Alex noticed an old stepladder splattered with many colors of paint, leaning against the wall behind Amber. He had seen it before on their earlier visits to the attic, but he had never seen it in the way he was seeing it now. He stared at the step ladder, then at the nativity set, then at the glowing lights, then at the angel Amber was holding.

“I have an idea!” Alex exclaimed.

“Shhhhh!” Amber said putting her index finger to her lips.

Alex crawled toward Amber and whispered, “We don’t have a Christmas tree but there’s that ladder; it’s tall like a Christmas tree. We can put the lights and ornaments on the ladder, the angel on top, and baby Jesus and the camels and shepherds and stuff at the bottom.”

Amber laughed. “That’s silly, Alex. No one’s ever heard of a Christmas ladder.”

“I know, but remember what Miss Brown said in Sunday school last Sunday, about Christmas?” He reminded her of the main point of Miss Brown’s Sunday school lesson and then added, “Besides, I bet it would look nice when you turned off all the lights in the room with just the Christmas lights on the ladder turned on.”

Amber gazed at the ladder behind her, still holding the angel lovingly in her arms. She turned to Alex. “Let’s do it.”

They dragged the stepladder down the attic stairs, along the hallway, and down the main stairs to the living room. They piled the nativity scene back into its box and Alex carried it down while Amber carried the box of lights and ornaments. First, Alex climbed the ladder and placed the angel at the top. They spent the next hour winding the string of lights up and down the ladder and hanging the ornaments at different places on the ladder.

They set up the nativity scene at the foot of the ladder, including the camel with the broken-off head. "There, we're done," Alex announced. They took a couple of steps back and admired their work.

Alex glanced toward the window. "It's almost dark," he said. "Let's turn off the lights." He walked over and flipped off the living room light, made his way back to the ladder, and plugged in the lights. The ladder burst into light of all colors.

"Oh! It's so beautiful, Alex. It's just wonderful!"

Alex stood there gazing at the ladder with her. He nodded. "I think you're right. It looks pretty good. And I bet we're the only people in Farmersburg with a Christmas ladder."

"The only people in the world with a Christmas ladder," Amber whispered.

The front door opened. "What's going on here?"

"Mom!" Amber exclaimed. "It's a Christmas ladder!"

Standing with their mother in the doorway was Pastor Bill from the little brown church. He held a couple of wrapped presents in his arms.

Their mother and pastor Bill stood in the open doorway for a moment, taking in the unusual scene. "Come on in, Pastor Bill; sorry to leave you standing here like this," she said. "It's just that the kids really surprised me. Where did you children find the lights and nativity set?"

Amber described in detail what they had found in the attic and what they had done. She explained how the Christmas ladder made sense because of what Miss Brown had told them last Sunday in Sunday school.

When Amber finished Pastor Bill said, "I think that's the most amazing explanation of Christmas I've heard for many years. Your Christmas ladder only needs one thing."

"What's that?" Amber asked.

"Presents," Pastor Bill replied as he walked over to the Christmas ladder and placed the two gifts beneath the ladder beside the nativity scene. "I went over to the café to study my Christmas Eve sermon over a cup of coffee. I found out from talking to your mother that you might not have much in the way of Christmas presents this year, so I asked her if it would be OK if the church would give you each a Christmas present. She hesitated, but I insisted. I went over to the Save-a-Lot store, picked out a gift for each of you and walked back home with your mother to give them to you. But you must wait until Christmas morning to open them. That'll give you something to look forward to when you fall asleep tonight."

"Isn't this wonderful, Alex?" Amber said, "We even have presents to put under our Christmas ladder!"

"Well," Pastor Bill said, "I need to be going." But he didn't leave, he just stood there, gazing at the lit Christmas ladder. Finally he put his finger to his lip, and said, "I wonder if it would be possible to borrow your Christmas ladder for the Christmas Eve

service at the church tonight. Charlie Dobbs has a pick-up; we could carefully load it in that. We'd bring it back right after the service."

"But doesn't the church already have a Christmas tree?" asked Amber.

"Yes, but this is..." the pastor paused, then continued. "This is something very different, and very wonderful. Your Christmas ladder has a message that needs to be shared. Would you let me borrow it?"

"Sure," Alex said.

"Ooooh! This is so exciting!" Amber gushed.

Pastor Bill excused himself and within half an hour had returned with Charlie Dobbs. They carefully loaded the Christmas ladder into the back of the pick-up and placed the box with the nativity set and the angel in the cab. Alex and Amber's mother said she'd glue the broken camel and they'd bring it with them when they came to church.

Alex and Amber were so excited they could hardly eat any dinner. They quickly did the dishes, ran upstairs, and got ready for church. The snow was still falling as they ran ahead of their mother toward the church.

When their mother caught up with them at the entrance to the church Amber whispered excitedly, "Mom, look!"

There, at the front of the church, was the church's Christmas tree on the right side of the platform and the Christmas ladder on the left side of the platform, glowing brightly.

"It's beautiful, children," their mother whispered. The twins turned their gaze from the tree and looked up at their mother. Her eyes glistened with tears.

The three of them found a seat in the front pew, near the Christmas ladder. When the service began the little church was packed. The congregation filled the room with the sounds of Christmas carols. The Christmas story was read. Then Pastor Bill got up to speak.

He explained where the Christmas ladder had come from, glancing at Alex and Amber, who were both grinning. Then he walked over to the Christmas ladder and explained why he wanted it in church for the Christmas Eve service.

"The Bible says that God loved the world so much that He sent His own Son Jesus from heaven to earth. He did this because the world is all messed up with sin. We all need God's love and forgiveness. This is why He sent Jesus to earth in the form of a little baby. The baby Jesus grew up. He was a great teacher and He healed many people. He did many wonderful things, but the most wonderful thing He did was die on a cross so that our sins could be forgiven. That is why God sent Jesus. That is why Jesus came, to take away our sins so that we could be close to God here on earth and someday go to His heaven forever.

"A ladder is something you go up and down. This Christmas ladder has an angel at the top. The angels are in heaven, way up high and out there somewhere, is how we picture them," Pastor Bill said, pointing upward. Then he pointed to the base of the ladder and said, "And at the bottom of the ladder is the stable with a manger in it and the baby Jesus in the manger. Jesus left heaven where the angels are and came down to earth. He wanted to join us, to be one of us.

“Jesus came down to earth because He loves us. Jesus came down to us so that someday we can go up to heaven to be with Him. This is the message of Christmas. This is the message of the Christmas ladder.”

Pastor Bill concluded his message and the congregation sang another Christmas carol. Then Pastor Bill wished them all a merry Christmas and the people began to leave, though many of them came up to Alex and Amber and told the twins how much they appreciated their sharing their Christmas ladder with them.

When the twins and their mother returned home she told them to get into their pajamas; then they could come back downstairs, have a snack, and wait for Charlie Dobbs and Pastor Bill to bring back the Christmas ladder. They were eating their bedtime snack in the kitchen when they heard singing outside.

“Silent night, holy night...”

The three of them jumped up from the table and ran to the living room window. There in front of the house stood almost the entire congregation, singing. The twins’ mother quickly retrieved coats for the three of them from the hall closet. They put them on and she opened the door. The words of the Christmas carol *Silent Night* drifted into the living room through the open door, where all three of them stood wearing broad smiles.

When the crowd had finished singing, Pastor Bill stepped forward. “We brought back your Christmas ladder.” He looked at the crowd behind him and then back at Alex, Amber and their mother. “And we brought some Christmas gifts. Good thing the Save-a-Lot store was still open for late shoppers. After the service tonight a lot of the people were talking. They figured you should have a few more presents to put under your Christmas ladder to open on Christmas morning.”

Charlie Dobbs and another man came forward, carefully carrying the Christmas ladder. They placed it in the living room and plugged in the lights. Another man and his wife brought in the box with the nativity set and the angel and put the angel back on the top of the ladder, with the nativity set at the base of the ladder. Then people streamed in and piled presents all around the ladder.

Eventually the people left. Pastor Bill was the last to leave, wishing them a merry Christmas. The twins’ mother closed the door and leaned against it, her arms crossed, looking at the twins kneeling in front of the Christmas ladder with all the gifts. “Well,” she said, “this is turning out to be quite the Christmas.”

“That’s for sure!” Alex said, looking at all the presents.

Amber was busy rearranging the presents. “What are you doing?” Alex asked.

Moving another present behind the ladder, Amber replied, “I can’t see the baby Jesus because of all the presents. We have to be able to see Jesus, because He’s the best present of all!”