



SOMETIMES LIFE'S DETOURS
DELIVER THE GREATEST
BLESSINGS

JOANN
CARTER

DETOUR DESTINATION DETOUR

DESTINATION

*Abiding
Love*

Detour:
Destination
Abiding Love

JoAnn Carter

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Detour: Destination Abiding Love

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

I dedicate this story to every guy and gal who, as Paul states in Scripture, wants to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Some days running with perseverance seems so elusive! You may carry burdens of guilt and shame... perhaps complacency and doubt is weighing you down, where it's hard enough just to walk, let alone run.

I don't know what you may be struggling with today, but God does. Because of that, I pray that God may use this story in a special way to touch your heart—for His honor and glory.

Praise

Teacher's Plans ~ Mickey from You Gotta Read Reviews said, "It is wonderful when you can read a book and find enjoyment in it and uncover life lessons as well."

By The Book ~ T. Hall says, "Ms. Carter writes believable characters that I absolutely fell in love with from the first page."

Sweet Rest ~ Fiction with Flair Reviews says, "Carter delivers a tight, well-written adventure that I devoured it in one sitting."

Smuggler of the Heart ~ Seriously Reviewed said, "Have you ever read an Inspy that touched you so, that it left goose bumps and a warm, soft feeling in your chest? This is one of the few that made me feel that way. The way the author expressed the heroines feelings in her prayers to God left me with a wonderful ache."

Daniella ~ Minnie from Got Romance Reviews says, "I strongly recommend this heartfelt and heartwarming romance from the skilled pen of JoAnn Carter."

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ~ Romans 3:22-24

1

Sierra Sinclair had waited for this day for months. Still, it was the most nerve-racking morning of her life. Her pulse throbbed in her ears as she tried to swallow. She clenched her fists and realized why her mouth was dry. All the moisture had gone directly to her palms. The myriad of reasons she had wanted to come back to Daviston failed her. What had just days—even *moments*—ago seemed important enough to put her music career on hold, now felt like one more foolish choice.

And that was saying something.

Silence fell as she walked up to the front of the church.

She swallowed and risked a glance at Pastor Bill.

He smiled and gave an encouraging little nod.

Her knees shook as she gripped the smooth, wooden pulpit. *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* She forced a gulp of air into her lungs as she looked out over the congregation. The curious expressions she expected. The accusing stares, well... she couldn't blame them. But it was the hostility that

made her heart sink. Here in the church, she had dared hope to find a forgiving spirit. The mountain she faced to heal old wounds would be a grueling climb.

"I can see some of you remember me. For those who may not, my name is Sierra Sinclair. My father was a pharmacist here several years ago. Consequently, I am the daughter of the man who, by tampering with prescription drugs, caused the deaths of fifteen people here in Vermont, while countless others suffered pain needlessly."

An audible gasp sounded around the two hundred plus year old sanctuary.

Sierra took another deep breath. The smell of someone's musky perfume made her stomach revolt even more. She wrapped her arms around her middle, focused on the faded blue cushion of the front pew and forged on. "But he's not the only one guilty in our family of crime. While attending Mt. Daviston High School, I was introduced to a 'friend' who had connections in the city." She shuffled her feet, and then glanced up to the balcony at the back of the sanctuary. "To make a rather long and sordid story short, like my father whom I hated, I began doing the very thing that cost our family more than you can imagine; in every sense of the word. Unlike him though, I openly used drugs and stole to get money to pay for them." Her pulse pounded so loud in her ears that she could hardly hear herself speak, but she refused to quit now. "Even here in Daviston." She hung her head, the weight of the past pressed down upon her. *Thank You, Lord, that I am forgiven. Help me live in that truth.*

Sierra lifted her gaze and glanced around the congregation. "I despised my father and my own life. I did many things I'm not proud of, desperately trying

to fill the ugliness and emptiness inside me.” She pointed towards the music stand off to the left. “My only reprieve, the only constant in my life, was my violin. No matter how bad things had become, I could always get lost in the music I played. If I didn’t have my violin, I don’t know what I would have done.” Sierra licked her lips and gave a tentative smile. “That is, until five months ago when I met Jesus.”



Cole couldn’t take his eyes off the woman standing behind the pulpit. At first, her strange outfit intrigued him. It was some kind of wrinkly-textured blouse with puffy sleeves in a pattern of bright orange and brown. The neckline scooped down and exposed creamy skin, a bit more than usual for inside church, to say nothing of the tight, form-fitting pants he’d noticed as she made her way up to the front earlier.

Her outfit may have made a bold statement and fallen a little short of appropriate, but it was nothing compared to how freely she admitted her past. Talk about bold and uncomfortable. How could he not admire the courage and determination he saw as she began her testimony? Now that he thought about it, he vaguely remembered his parents mentioning the Sinclair scandal, but he had been away at college at the time. Sitting here, he realized it wasn’t just some story.

It was real. It was this woman’s life.

Her slender frame and hands moved gracefully as she continued. “I can’t say things suddenly became easy after I met Christ. In fact, it’s been hard in different ways, but worth every second.” She pressed her lips together for a moment. The room seemed to

hold its breath. "I started drug rehab before I came to know Him, but now I realize that it has only been through His strength and power, that I've been clean for a little over a year." She laced her fingers and gazed around the room.

His heart banged against his chest. What would say next? Her gaze found his, and he couldn't look away.

"Honestly though, drug withdrawal is nothing compared to the detox Christ has been doing in my heart. As the Bible says, I am a new creation in Christ." Sierra glanced back at Pastor Bill. "It's because of that, and the work He's begun in me that I've returned to Daviston to what was once my hometown." Her voice quivered a bit. "I've come back to ask your forgiveness. I want to make retribution, as far as I am able, for what I have taken." By the time she was done speaking, her face was pale and she looked about ready to pass out.

Pastor Bill stood beside her and rested his hand on her shoulder. "Brothers and sisters, I want you to know this visit is a sacrifice for this gal. Sierra's been given an amazing opportunity to pursue a lifelong dream of hers, to work as a professional musician." His gaze encompassed the whole congregation. "But, she's delayed her move to New York City for three months. Instead, she chose to come here and live among us to mend these broken fences. I encourage you to welcome her with open arms and grant her the forgiveness she's asking, just as Christ has forgiven you."



Throughout the rest of the service, Sierra tried to concentrate on the message, but the effort was

pointless. The emotional toll of the morning left her feeling like a jellyfish. Her heart burned with a longing to belong. For the sense of fellowship she had when she played alongside other musicians. Why couldn't she feel it here, where she once lived?

The hope she had nursed in her heart, that she could somehow fix her past mistakes and make a new clean start within Daviston before she moved on to her career, broke in a million pieces like a glass dropped on the floor. Her eyes smarted as she prayed, *Lord, do I really need this detour? I mean, I'm here and I've asked for forgiveness. Isn't that enough? Can I move on now?* She waited for peace about that decision, but it wouldn't come.

Pastor Bill's sermon finished, and her head jerked to attention when he said, "Now, as the ushers come forward to receive God's tithe and our offerings, we have a treat. Sierra, would you share a song with us?"

Her face heated with humiliation at the thought of standing before the congregation again. Even though she knew she wasn't, she felt dirty again, unforgiven.

She sighed and picked up her instrument. It had been a mistake to come here.

A Voice echoed in her mind. *Not for them, but for Me.*

She made her way up front and tightened her bow. *Although I may seem a failure; obedience, faithfulness, and a surrendered heart is what true success is all about. May I not lose sight of that.* Sierra pushed her shoulders back and raised her violin to her shoulder. As she lifted her bow, she closed her eyes. "To the glory of the Lord." The peace that was so elusive mere moments ago flooded her heart as the bow caressed the strings. Beautiful music flowed from her smooth strokes,

echoing the music in her soul.

No longer did eyes rebuke her, no longer were lips pursed in disdain, for the song was between her and her Savior.



Sierra fixed her gaze upon the calming warm hues of the burgundy carpet runner and the deep red, maple hardwood flooring while she stood just outside of the sanctuary doors in the narthex next to Pastor Bill.

Two people walked past without even acknowledging her presence.

A shudder ran down her spine.

Pastor Bill leaned down. "Give them time," he whispered. "These hardy, independent, New England folks are good at making walls to protect themselves. They may be invisible to the eye, but don't let it fool you. The ramparts are as tall and thick as Jericho in the Bible." He winked. "But you know what happened to them with the Lord's help, right?"

Sierra's heart squeezed with gratefulness. Even though this morning had given her second thoughts about being here, she knew this was where God had wanted her to be. She wanted to be obedient like Joshua had been, even if the game plan He had given her seemed a bit odd. "I sure do. They crumbled right down."

A man cleared his throat.

Pastor Bill beamed and held out his hand. "Well, if it isn't Colton Smith. How's it going?"

Cole's clear blue eyes flickered, his gaze flashing from the Pastor to Sierra and back again. "I'm doing well, thanks." He tilted his head as he looked at Sierra.

"Most folks call me Cole."

He didn't need to tell her his name. She remembered him. Who wouldn't? He had been a few classes ahead of her in school, and the star quarterback for Mount Daviston High School. Every girl had a crush on him at one point or another, and she had been no exception.

She nodded, "Hello, Cole."

Blue eyes sparkled at her. "I really appreciated your honesty this morning, and I'd love to talk to you some more. Would you happen to be free to join me at the Village Bistro for lunch?"

Before Sierra could answer, a woman behind him gave him a pointed glare.

Although he looked over his shoulder, he didn't seem bothered. "Oh, sorry, Sierra, this is my mother and father, James and Paula Smith."

"Hi." Sierra held out her hand, only to be left grasping air. As nonchalantly as possible, she lowered her hand to her side and picked a nonexistent piece of lint off her blouse. "It's nice to meet you."

Ignoring Sierra's greeting, his mother grasped his arm. "Colton, if you happen to have spare time today, your father would love to have help on his campaign." She looked at Pastor Bill. "You know it takes many hands to prepare for the gubernatorial race."

"I'm sure it does."

Colton shrugged. "I'd be glad to help after lunch." He turned back to Sierra. "So what do you say?"

"I..." She took another quick peek at his mother. Cold gray eyes shot daggers at her. Sierra swallowed hard.

"I'd really like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind," he said.

Sierra sighed. How could she ever try to right her wrongs if she wasn't willing to take risks? Besides, running from trouble had never been her bent in life. "Sure, I'd be happy to."

His smile would do a toothpaste commercial proud. She realized that, although they were no longer in high school, he still had the ability to make her think of romantic dreams she had neither the right—nor any desire—to pursue. She needed to be careful.

Her visit had a singular purpose, and aside from the pastor and his wife, and a few handshakes from Church members, Cole was the first person who seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say. How could she not pursue this opportunity? Perhaps at least one more person would accept her for who she now was in Christ, a girl with a past, yet forgiven. She was a girl who, with God's help, desired to build bridges to cover over the muddy waters of the past.

"Great." He looked down at his watch. "Can I meet you there in about a half hour?"

She swallowed hard and prayed she was listening to God's desires and not merely her own. "Sounds like a plan."



"Colton Troy Smith, we need to talk."

He hadn't even made it out the white, double-wide wooden front door. His heart sank and his stomach churned at the tone of his mother's voice. He hated how lately she tried to make him feel like he was twelve again. He tried to keep his tone calm and even. "About?"

His father waited until the door was closed behind

them. “Do you really think meeting with that girl is a good idea?”

Cole didn’t have the chance to open his mouth before his mother answered for him. “Of course it’s not a good idea!” She shoved her purse strap farther up her arm as she stomped down the slate steps to the sidewalk. “Colton, we raised you to use your head when making decisions. Clearly, for whatever reason, that’s not happening now.” The door opened behind them and she lowered her voice to a hiss. “Therefore, we forbid you to go meet that...that...”

Cole stiffened and stopped short. He’d been dealing with his mother’s ever shortening temper for some time. Often the balancing between honoring her, as he had been taught in church, and preventing her from trying to control everything, felt like a tightrope act. “Whoa. Wait just a sec.”

“Paula, let’s discuss this later,” his father said, resting a hand on her arm.

“But later is when he’s going to the Village Bistro.”

“Look, I don’t have time to discuss this.” Cole tried to keep the sound of exasperation out of his voice. “I promised you I’d help with the campaign later this afternoon, and I will, but,”—he softened his voice to take the edge off—“I’m a grown man and will decide how I want to spend the rest of my day.”



Cole’s pulse sped up as Sierra closed the bistro’s door behind her. She glanced around the cozy coffee shop where small round tables dotted the room. The color of her eyes reminded him of his favorite sun-bleached football. Her gaze settled on him. He grinned

and stood, holding onto her chair back. "Thanks for coming."

"I hope I haven't caused friction between you and your folks."

Cole waved away her concern. "Ah, don't worry about it. My parents have been tied in knots over my dad's campaign. Lately it seems to have taken over their lives." He glanced out the back window, but hardly noticed the meadow or the thin line of the lazy river. Instead, he thought about his parents' lack of manners this morning. It was not only out of character, but puzzling. Ever since his father decided to run for office, his parents had been sure to keep up a good face for the public. Yet this morning, his mother fell just short of making a scene in the church narthex. He sighed and rubbed behind his neck. This wasn't the time to try to figure it out, though. "Hey." He pointed to the counter. "Shall we order some lunch?"

"Sure." As she made her way up to the cashier, she glanced from the floor to the photographs lining the walls. "The Village Bistro has changed a bit, but it still has the same homey feel and beautiful rustic colors."

"Spoken like the artist you are."

She grinned. "Guess you can tell by my clothing that I appreciate lots of styles."

"I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I noticed the top you were wearing earlier today in church."

"I thought about wearing something more traditional, but," She scrunched her pert little nose. "It's just not me." She read the specials on board. "I used to love their chicken Panini. Do they still sell them?"

"You mean the one covered in mushrooms and onions where the Vermont cheddar cheese oozes out

over the sides?"

Sierra licked her lips. "That's the one."

His stomach growled, and grinning, he placed his hand against his abdomen. "You bet, and I believe my stomach is telling me it's the perfect thing to have."

She laughed. "There will be no argument from me."

As he waited for the person in front of him to finish her order, he peeked into the glass display case. "Can I tempt you with a goodie, too?"

"Hmm...that napoleon does look delicious."

He nodded, thankful there was at least one female not afraid of food. "Great. It's settled, then."

The customer before them moved off to the side counter to pick up some napkins.

The cashier called out, "Hi, Cole. What can I get you?"

He winked at Sierra. "We'd like a double order of the chicken Panini along with two napoleons."

She scribbled the order on her pad. "Anything to drink?"

Sierra stepped forward. As her shoulder brushed up against his arm, he caught a soft whiff of the clean fragrance she wore. What was it about Sierra that made him so aware of her presence? Since church, he couldn't get her, or what she had said, off his mind.

"Just water for me, please."

"Make that two."

The cashier stepped to the register. "Sure thing."

As she totaled their bill, Cole leaned toward Sierra. "I've got this covered. Why don't you keep our table from being taken?"

Sierra placed her hand on her purse. "It's OK. I can pay for my half."

“No, please, let me. I’m the one who asked you to come. The least I can do is pay for your lunch.”

Her clear brown eyes bored into his as if she were seeking something. Exactly what, he had no idea, but she must have found whatever she was looking for because she gave a quick nod. “OK, but if there’s a next time, the treat’s on me. It’s not like this is a date or anything.”

He wouldn’t have minded if it were, yet she seemed to be making it clear that she wasn’t interested. “I can handle that, and if it’s up to me, I can tell you right now I’d like there to be a next time.”



Sierra scooted away from Cole as quickly as possible without being too obvious. She was beginning to wonder if he had heard what she said in church. One thing was sure; his parents had. They wanted him to stay away from her. Yet, here was Cole, insinuating he’d like to get together again. It was...well, more than a little awkward. Granted, she was thrilled for his overtures of friendship, but the question that began to eat at the lining of her stomach was, would the town folk accept her if they thought she was trying to corrupt someone’s son? Besides that, she didn’t want to cause any further animosity between Cole’s family members. God had given her a task—seek reconciliation. Now if only He had given detailed instructions. *Lord, I’m trying. I really am.* She took a deep breath to calm her frayed nerves. Between the morning’s events, and this lunch date, she was sure it was only a matter of time before a migraine hit.

Her fingers itched for her violin bow. Perhaps

then, as the music flowed, she could process everything and figure out what was going on. Or at least gain some perspective through prayer.

"Here we are." Cole set a large, red plastic cup of water in front of her. "Sue will bring our food out when it's ready."

"Thank you." She looked up from beneath her lashes as she felt, more than saw, him occupy the seat next to her. "It was kind of you to buy my lunch." She took the white linen napkin off the table and tucked it onto her lap.

He grinned and an alluring dimple appeared on his cheek. "To be honest, I do have a motive."

"Oh?" Her voice cracked. *What motive? He couldn't be romantically interested in me, could he?*

Cole broke the paper off his straw and tapped it on the table until the straw was free. He slipped it into the ice water. "As I mentioned in church, your testimony left me with some questions."

Her lungs filled with sweet oxygen once again. Questions about her faith were something she'd feel comfortable talking to him about. The other subject, well, she wouldn't even go there. "Sure, shoot. I'll answer whatever question you have, if I can."

Cole clasped his large fingers around the cup. His hands were so big she just stared at them for a moment. It looked as if he could handle anything, but she knew all too well strength was just an illusion. Her dad had been strong at one time. She was his little girl, but so much had changed. Clearly, even the strongest of men could buckle under the right circumstances. Only one didn't—Jesus. He was the only person who was one hundred percent human and one hundred percent God.