



CAROL JAMES

SEASON
OF
HOPE

Sometimes the hardest person
to forgive is yourself

Season of Hope

Carol James

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Dedication

To Lauren and Jordan, two of my greatest blessings in life. My encouragers, my supporters, my joys, my friends. You are beautiful women, and I am deeply blessed and grateful to be your mother.

*Praise the Lord for times and seasons,
Cloud and sunshine, wind and rain,
Spring to melt the snows of winter.
Till the waters flow again. ~Timothy Dudley-Smith*

Prologue

1969

He crossed off the last entry on the list. When he'd vowed to do this, he'd had no idea it would be so difficult. He'd called every entry in the phone book and every additional number he'd gotten from Information with no success.

He didn't have enough money to hire a private investigator, and even if he had the funds, he may not have enough information for the detective to be successful.

As the evening sun shone through the gap between his bedroom curtains, the gold chain and pendant sparkled as if mocking his efforts. Opening the small Bible, he placed the necklace back between its pages and slowly folded the covers closed. He was tired. Tired of war, tired of loss, tired of failure.

Father, it's in Your hands now. I've done all I know to do.

1

1974

As adrenaline surged through her body, Hope pushed her head back against the car seat and waited for the shaking to subside.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Her knuckles actually were white from gripping the steering wheel so hard in the battle to keep the car on the road. She glanced up into the rearview mirror. How Mattie had slept through the exploding tire was incomprehensible. The car had swerved from one side of the road to the other as it fishtailed and made a one hundred eighty degree turn. And yet, he slept.

But he was OK—they both were OK—and that was all that mattered.

The music of Elton John's latest hit filled the car. She pried her fingers from the wheel and, hand trembling, reached over and turned the radio off.

"Mattie, wake up, honey."

Mattie sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked out the window. "We're not at the church." Sleepy confusion

clouded his face.

“No. Not yet. We’re on the back road to Crescent Bluff, baby. We had a flat tire, so I need you to take a couple of your cars and go sit under that tree over there while I change it, OK?”

“Can I help you?”

“No. It’s too dangerous.”

“But, Mommy...”

“No arguing, Mattie. Please, just obey me.”

Pushing open the door, he grabbed some cars and then tramped up the small rise and plopped down under a live oak. He wasn’t happy, but he was doing as she’d asked. He’d always been obedient.

She pulled the owner’s manual from the glove compartment. The gravel along the shoulder crunched underfoot as she walked back to the trunk of the car. Years ago, when she’d first gotten her driver’s license, Dad had made her change a tire—just so she’d know how. That was the one and only time she’d ever done it, but she was pretty sure she remembered all the steps. How hard could it be, anyway? It was just a matter of unscrewing and re-screwing a few nuts and swapping out a tire.

She opened the trunk and lifted up the carpeting and the cover under it to expose the spare tire. Now she needed to find the jack and that wrench thing. There they were. She pulled them out of the trunk and placed them on the ground.

The lug nuts that held the spare in place came off easily with the lug wrench, but getting the tire out and not rubbing it against her sundress would be a trick. She took an old towel that was in the trunk, draped it over the tire, lifted it out, and then dropped it on the ground. So far, so good. She glanced up at Mattie. He

was still sitting under the tree.

"Excuse me."

She jumped and peeked around the trunk lid. A tall man wearing gray pants, a white dress shirt, and black wing-tip shoes stood by the front of her car. A black Mercedes was parked on the shoulder of the road several yards away. It was older, but still one of the expensive models. She'd been so engrossed in getting the tire out that she hadn't even heard the car pull up.

"Do you need some help?"

Here she was, on a deserted Texas road in the middle of nowhere with her five-year-old son. No houses within several miles, no service stations with pay phones where she could call for help. And now this stranger shows up. If she'd been alone, the answer would have been an easy "yes." But Mattie was with her, and she couldn't let anything happen to him.

Mr. Preppy had dark brown hair, a bit long on top, and the most striking blue eyes she'd ever seen. The combination was surprisingly attractive. He was handsome enough, all right, but he was also completely unfamiliar.

Crescent Bluff was a fairly small town, and she'd lived here long enough to know just about everyone. He wasn't from around here. She definitely would have remembered those Texas-winter-sky eyes. As he smiled, goose bumps covered her arms. That should have been an impossibility in ninety-degree Texas spring weather.

"Are you OK? I was a ways behind you, but I saw what happened. You did a great job keeping the car on the road and out of the ditch. You could have really been hurt."

He was right. They were late, and she'd been

going way too fast on this little country road when the tire blew. The outcome could have been tragically different. As the emotions she'd been trying to keep under control suddenly burst loose, tears filled her eyes. Maybe he'd think they were from the acrid smell of burnt rubber still lingering in the air. Quickly looking away, she took a deep breath. "I'm fine."

"I imagine the whole thing was pretty scary. Why don't you let me change that tire for you?"

If only she'd agreed to go to the church early with Dee, they wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

"I appreciate your offer, but I'm perfectly capable of changing a tire," she answered with a confidence she didn't entirely feel. "This won't be the first time I've had to. I'm sure I can handle it just fine." More than anything, she wanted him gone.

"Mommy, who's that?" Mattie tugged on the hem of her dress.

"Mattie, go back to the tree and stay there."

The stranger's eyes widened. "I didn't realize you had a passenger with you." He bent down and smiled at Mattie. "Hello there, young man. How're you?"

Mattie's brow creased. He looked first at Hope and then back at the man. "My mommy won't let me talk to strangers."

Hope's face burned with embarrassment. She certainly didn't want to offend this man who'd stopped to help. But then again, she didn't know him, and people couldn't be too careful nowadays. Especially after last week when that woman and her daughter from Waco were assaulted by a man who'd offered them a ride when their truck ran out of gas. He'd been driving a black car, and the police still hadn't caught him.

"Your mother's a very wise woman. That's a good rule to have." The man stepped toward them and then knelt down on one knee, smiled, and held out his hand. "Let me introduce myself so we're not strangers. I'm Josh."

Mattie grinned, took the stranger's hand, and pumped it up and down. "Hi, Mr. Doss. My name's Mattie."

"Nice to meet you, Mattie. Now we know each other." The ex-stranger winked, stood, and turned toward Hope. "Now, how about that tire?"

She grabbed Mattie's hand and pulled him back beside her. "Thanks for the offer, but we're fine. Besides, it looks as if you're headed to some appointment, and I certainly wouldn't want to hold you up."

When he glanced at his watch, the gold emblem on the face shone in the afternoon sun. If he was a criminal, he was a successful one.

That was an unsettling thought.

"I've got time."

"Well, Josh, I don't. I hope you won't think me rude, but I'm in a hurry, so if you'll excuse me, I need to get this done."

Giving her a thumbs-up with his right hand, he smiled again. "Gotcha. Well, I guess I'll head on. Nice to meet you, Mattie, and you, too, Mattie's Mom."

"Bye, Mr. Doss."

Josh waved and then walked back toward his car, his shape distorted by the heat waves rising from the asphalt. The car, the clothes, the watch. Not many men his age around these parts could afford stuff like that.

Maybe Mattie sitting by the tree wasn't such a good idea. She wouldn't be able to see him while she

was changing the tire. "Mattie, you can come here with me as long as you sit in the grass and stay off the shoulder of the road."

"Thanks, Mommy."

As the Mercedes inched past them, Josh's voice sounded through the open window, "Don't forget to place the jack in the slot."

"Oh, the slot. Yeah, sure, the slot. Absolutely." She stood stone still. She wouldn't position the jack with him watching.

"It's closer in."

Suddenly her mind and her heart began arguing. She didn't need to prove anything. She could change this tire if she really had to, but she didn't. Josh seemed very willing. Yet, she didn't know him. He did have a black car—of course, so did millions of other men—and she couldn't take a chance with Mattie's safety. He was all she had left.

But then if something happened and she got hurt or she couldn't change the tire, being stranded out here might prove more dangerous than taking a chance with Josh.

"But I'm sure you knew that."

"Knew what?"

"About the slot."

"Oh, of course." As he began to roll up his window, she blurted out, "Wait. I think maybe I've changed my mind."

"Your prerogative." He grinned as he pulled forward and back off onto the shoulder of the road. He stepped out of the car and removed his dress shirt. His form-fitting white t-shirt accentuated muscles the roomy Oxford cloth shirt had hidden.

She glanced at his license plate and committed it to

memory. Taking Mattie's hand, she bent down and looked him straight in the eyes. "Mr. Josh is going to change the tire for us. You stay right beside me, sweetie." She forced herself to smile and kept her voice even so he wouldn't see she was nervous.

As Josh squatted down to position the jack, Mattie jerked free from Hope's grip and jumped over beside him. Taking in every movement, Mattie asked, "Whatcha doing? Can I watch?"

"Mattie, leave Mr. Josh alone." Her voice sounded strained even to her own ears. She moved to bring Mattie back.

Josh flashed a smile up at her. "He's fine." He turned to Mattie. "In fact, I could use some help. How about if you hold the lug nuts for me? We don't want to lose them."

He must be used to being around children. Maybe he had some of his own. She glanced at his left hand to see if he was married. She'd be less nervous if he was. No ring, but that didn't really mean anything. Some married men never wore a wedding band.

Josh seemed nice enough, but a cautious voice sounded in her mind. Letting her guard down could get them in trouble. She'd never forgive herself if she lost Mattie. Her breathing matched her racing heart. He was too close to "Mr. Doss."

"Mattie, did you hear me? We need to go back over to the shoulder right now, young man!"

"But, Mom, Mr. Doss needs me to help him."

"Mattie..." She reached down to take his hand.

"It's OK. Thanks, buddy. You better mind your mom. I'll be done in a minute."

Frowning, Mattie put down the lug nuts and trudged over to the side of the road with her. He

pulled his hand free, plopped down a few feet away, and sulked.

Besides being muscular, Josh was very tall, well over six feet. She was five ten, and he towered over her. She couldn't protect Mattie if she needed to. If they'd been in Dee's truck, she could have used the pistol in the glove compartment. But they weren't.

If Josh were going to harm them, he probably wouldn't go to the trouble to change the tire. She searched the roadside for something she could use as a weapon should she need one.

Josh already had the spare tire on. Obviously, he'd done this before. He reached for the lug wrench and tightened the bolts. Turning back toward her, Josh smiled. "Almost done. You'll need to get some air in that spare. You can drive it for a short distance, but it's pretty low." He set the lug wrench down, picked up the jack and the blown tire, and threw them into the trunk.

Hope grabbed the lug wrench and hid it behind her back.

When Josh returned, he scanned the ground. "Let's see. Where'd I put..."

"Um, thank you very much for your help. I'm sorry you got so dirty. Here, you can use this to wipe off." She tossed him the towel to avoid stepping any closer.

As he caught it, his gaze went toward her right hand.

She pulled the wrench farther behind her.

His forehead wrinkled, and he opened his mouth as if to speak but then stopped. Instead, he smiled, cleared his throat, and took a few steps back.

Her heart rate slowed as the space between them

widened.

"Thanks for the towel. This'll be fine until I can get to a service station to wash up." He moved away from her toward the back of her car and slammed the trunk lid shut.

"Can I pay you something for your trouble?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. Just wanted to help. If my sister and her son had gotten stranded like this, I hope someone would've stopped. You know, this day and time, stopping to help people can be dangerous. You have to be careful. You just never know what might happen. Take care." He tossed back the towel.

Josh smiled, and turned toward Mattie. "Bye, buddy. Thanks for your help." He raised his hand to his forehead in a relaxed salute.

Mattie stood and saluted back. "Bye, Mr. Doss."

Josh walked back to his car, climbed in, and headed on down the highway toward Crescent Bluff.

Relief flooded over her as she vacillated between laughing and crying. She tossed the wrench and towel onto the back floorboard, and then she and Mattie climbed into the car to head toward the church.

If she hadn't promised Lynn and Dee she'd come to the dinner, she would've turned around and gone back home. She hadn't wanted to go to church tonight in the first place, and now she would be late to meet the new pastor.

2

The minute Hope stepped under the pavilion, Lynn came running over. "Where have you been? We were worried sick about you. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about coming."

Hope paused at the beverage table and poured a glass of tea. The combination of the late afternoon heat and the lingering butterflies from the earlier excitement had completely erased any appetite she should have had. "Sorry I scared you. We had a flat tire." She briefly related the story of the attractive Good Samaritan. "You've lived here all your life. Do you know who he is?"

Lynn shook her head. "Doesn't sound familiar to me. Probably somebody from Dallas just passing through."

As Mattie tugged on her skirt, Hope held her cup down to him. "Sorry, baby. I'll bet you're thirsty."

Mattie shook his head. "Mommy, can I go play with Kurt and Kevin at the playground?"

"Not now, honey. Maybe in a minute when I can

come to watch you.”

Mattie’s face was crestfallen, but he didn’t say a word.

“Oh, come on, Hope. It’ll be fine. Bobby’s there watching our four. What’s one more? And you can see the playground from the pavilion.” Lynn rested a hand on Hope’s arm. She was a good friend. She meant well.

“OK, I guess. But be careful.” Mattie was gone before her words were finished. He was probably too excited to eat anyway. “So, what’s the new pastor like?” Hope searched the picnic tables under the pavilion for an unfamiliar face but saw none. “Where is he?”

“He’s not here yet. Bobby figures he must have gotten lost. Oh, wait. Looks like he just arrived.”

Hope turned to look at the food tables. Doug Carter was going through the serving line with a tall man. She could see only his back, but it was definitely the new pastor. No one else would wear a blazer to an evening dinner-on-the-grounds on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend.

Her stomach jumped. Those pants, those shoes, that hair—they were all very familiar. Hope gasped and began choking on her iced tea.

“Are you OK?” Wide-eyed, Lynn waited for her response.

Surely, she wouldn’t run around the table and begin beating Hope on the back as she would one of her boys.

Catching her breath, Hope whispered, “It’s him! The guy who changed my tire.” Crickets evicted the butterflies and took residence in her stomach as the two men turned and headed straight toward them.

Mr. Doss was their new pastor.

“Ladies, meet our new preacher, Joshua Lewis,” Doug said.

Lynn stood and offered her hand. “Hi, Pastor Lewis. I’m Lynn Walker, Bobby’s wife.”

Josh set down a plate mounded high with food. “Lynn, it’s nice to meet you. Please, call me Josh. I’ve enjoyed talking with Bobby on the phone over the last couple of weeks. He’s been a great help, catching me up on the church’s background and plans for the future.” He smiled as they shook hands.

“And this is Hope Stockton,” Lynn spoke up. “I believe you two already know each other.” She teased as Josh grinned.

Hope shook her head. Perspiration prickled her forehead as she offered Josh her hand. The faint scent of service station hand soap made its way to her nose. “No, I don’t know him.”

“Mattie’s Mom,” Josh answered at the same time but paused at Hope’s negative reply. Then he continued. “Well, I guess she’s right. We haven’t been formally introduced.” As he took her hand, he winked. “Josh Lewis.”

Thank goodness he didn’t know that less than thirty minutes ago she’d thought he might be some sort of criminal.

He glanced down at their hands and then back up at her face. “Glad to see that wrench hasn’t become a permanent part of your ensemble.” His blue eyes danced.

Just another in her long line of indelible first impressions. Right now, she wished she could disappear, but crawling under a picnic table would only make matters worse.

“Oh, so Hope’s the one who made you late.”

Doug's fatherly hug did nothing to ease her discomfort. "Well, some people'll do almost anything to be the first one to meet the new pastor."

The other three laughed, and Hope should have, too. She obviously hadn't offended Josh. But she was too embarrassed. Embarrassed because he knew she'd been afraid of him. It seemed ridiculous now that she knew who he was.

Three pairs of eyes were trained on her, waiting for some witty reply, but as usual, no clever words came. So she said nothing. Josh would probably think her aloof, but that was better than making some stupid comment and being thought an idiot. The best she could do was remain silent, an empty smile frozen on her face. Sometime this evening the perfect response would pop into her mind. Too late, as always.

"So, you're Hope." Josh broke the uncomfortable silence. He paused as if he wanted to say more but had changed his mind. He smiled. "It's a real pleasure to officially meet you. I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

Doug placed a fatherly hand on Josh's shoulder. "Well, we better move on. There's a whole congregation waiting, Pastor."

As Lynn and Hope sat back down, the two men picked up their plates, and Doug led Josh over to sit at a table with the deacons.

Grinning, Lynn dug her elbow into Hope's ribs. "What a nice man. Handsome, too. And unmarried," she whispered.

"I can't believe you. Josh is our pastor, for Pete's sake!" Lynn must be crazy.

"Exactly. A pastor, not a priest." Lynn placed her hands on her hips in triumph.

“Lynn, I don’t know him, but even if I did, you know I’m not interested in dating. And certainly not a preacher.”

“Well, I know you haven’t been, but don’t you think it’s about time you moved on? Six years is a long time.”

She couldn’t. She’d loved once with disastrous consequences. While love had been a part of her past, it would never be a part of her future. She’d had her chance, and that was more than many people had.

Lynn gently placed her hand on Hope’s and smiled. “He seems like a great guy, that’s all.”

As Josh told some story, laughter rose from the deacons’ table. His smile was warm and formed attractive little crinkles at the outer corners of his eyes. How could she have thought he might harm her or Mattie?

Mattie. She’d forgotten all about him. Heart pounding, she jumped up and looked toward the playground.

“He’s OK. Nothing will happen. Bobby’s a pro. He’s had lots of on the job training.” Lynn read her mind.

Mattie was just fine, sitting in the sandbox. Lynn was right. If anybody could take care of Mattie, Bobby could. Four little boys under the age of seven. How much longer would Lynn and Bobby continue their seemingly pointless quest for a daughter?

“There you are. The prodigal niece. The food’s almost gone.” Dee set two plates on the table. “I was wonderin’ about you. Thought maybe you’d changed your mind at the last minute.”

“Sorry to worry you, Dee. Mattie and I had a flat tire.”