



Mary's
Christmas
Surprise

CAROL
JAMES

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Dedication

To my friend Diane. My life was enriched by having known her. And to Beverly Parrish, gourd artist extraordinaire, for her artistic inspiration.

1

"I'm home!" Mary's words echoed in the silent darkness of her parents' house. Her announcement was living proof that, as Mom said, old habits die hard. For a few seconds, she'd forgotten no one was home.

An excited bark sounded from the kitchen. Well, no one was home except Riley.

Stepping into the foyer, Mary set down her suitcases, turned on the light, and then made her way into the kitchen as a playful yip greeted her.

Riley was in his crate. On the counter, his leash and box of treats sat beside a piece of paper inscribed with the vet's phone number and care instructions in Mom's handwriting. So, maybe coming home would do some good after all. Keeping Ri crated while Mom and Dad were gone bordered on cruelty, but Mary understood. Leaving him at the kennel for weeks while they were on their anniversary trip would have cost a fortune. Tomorrow, Mary would call the neighbors and let them know she was home and could take over the Riley duties.

She squatted and struggled to unlatch the door of the now rocking crate. Before she could pull the door open completely, seventy pounds of black lab bounded out, knocking her to the floor and covering her face with dog kisses. "Hey, buddy. I've missed you, too." As she pulled him close, he nuzzled her shoulder and

whimpered. At least one man in this world, besides Dad, loved her.

"C'mon, Ri. Tonight and for the rest of the Christmas holiday, you're bunking with me. No more sleeping in that jail."

~*~

Something startled her awake. Her bedroom door had been pushed open. She reached her hand out to Riley's side of the bed. It was empty but still warm. Where was that dog? As she rolled out of bed and put on her robe, a series of rhythmic slaps sounded below. Someone, definitely not Riley, was walking across the tile floor in the foyer. An intruder. Anyone who'd been watching the house would know her parents had been gone for weeks. Her heart pounded, the blood throbbing in her ears. Dad had always said Riley would probably lick any burglar into submission. But Ri should have at least barked or whimpered with joy while he was doing it. She'd heard nothing. The truth rose up in her throat. Riley was probably drugged or dead somewhere.

She grabbed her phone and tiptoed as lightly as possible toward the closet. After silently closing the door, she crouched in the far corner. Heart racing and fingers shaking, she managed to dial the police.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

"Someone's broken into my house, and they're still here. I think they've killed my dog," she responded, her voice barely above a whisper. As the spoken words hit home, tears filled her eyes.

"What's your name, and where are you?" the

operator asked, her voice steady.

"Mary Sherman. I'm at 865 Saddle in a closet in the back bedroom upstairs."

"Good, Mary. Stay there. A patrol car's been dispatched. Now describe yourself to me."

"What? I..."

"So I can relay it to the officers."

"Dark brown hair, past my shoulders. Brown eyes. Five feet eight. About one thirty. Hurry! Please hurry!"

"We will, Mary. I'll stay on the phone with you until the officers arrive. Do you have any weapons?"

Weapons? "No."

"Great, Mary. That's perfect."

Maybe not. What if the police didn't make it in time? What if he found her first? She absolutely needed a way to protect herself.

In the far corner behind some prom dresses stood her old tennis racket. That would be her best choice of weapon should the intruder find her before the police arrived. She crawled over, sat, and placed it diagonally across her body. Some shield this would make, but it was better than nothing. She wouldn't give in without a fight.

"Mary, are you still there?"

"Yes." Her whole body trembled.

"Good. You're doing great. The officers are on your street, so they'll be there any minute. For your safety, please stay where you are. They'll come get you when everything is under control."

"OK."

The minutes seemed like hours before commotion rumbled downstairs and a familiar bark sounded. Tears she'd been holding back rolled down her cheeks. Riley was OK.

"They're here. Thanks so much."

"Good. Now stay on the—"

She tapped "End" on her phone and waited. Maybe she should go downstairs. No. What if the criminal had overcome the police? She'd wait. Her fingers were numb from gripping her racket so tightly.

A muffled voice sounded through the door. "Mary? It's Officer Jenkins. You can come out now."

How did she know "Officer Jenkins" was actually a policeman? It could be the killer trying to find her. But then a murderer probably wouldn't know her name. Unless he had stalked her all the way from the Atlanta airport. Her pounding heart jerked her entire body.

"Mary? Are you OK?"

She couldn't spend the rest of her life—however short—in her closet. *Please, Father...* She opened the door and inched out into the bedroom. A policeman stood inside the doorway to the hall, his hand on his gun.

"Drop the racket," a voice hiding in the darkness behind her commanded.

She jumped and did as she was told.

"Hands on your head."

"What's going on?" She struggled to keep her voice even as she complied.

Ignoring her question, the officer in the doorway flipped on the light. "OK, Jake. Does she look familiar?"

A tall man with longish, dark brown hair and an even darker lumberjack beard stepped into the room and stared at her in silence. With brows knit, he slowly shook his head. "No...wait, yes. Yes, she kind of looks like the girl in some pictures downstairs."

They thought she was the criminal? "Of course, they look like me! They are me! I'm not the intruder. He is! This is my parents' house, and I'm the one who called nine-one-one. Someone please tell me what's going on."

"Looks like there's been a little mix-up," the voice behind her chuckled. "We'll be on our way, and ol' Jake here can clear things up. I imagine he can answer any questions you have."

~*~

"Ol' Jake" pulled a bag of coffee out of the canister next to the stove. "How about some decaf?" He opened the cabinet by the sink and grabbed a couple of mugs. He certainly knew his way around Mom's kitchen.

"Sure." She was trying to appear calmer than she felt. This whole thing was unreal. Surely, any second now, she'd wake up and find herself upstairs in her bed.

As she sat at the table, her reflection came into view in the back window. Her hair looked like a family of spiders had been weaving little webs and had gotten off course. She reached up and quickly tried to smooth the tangled mess.

Riley padded over and placed his head in her lap. His eyes sparkled, and his tail wagged. Ri was a good judge of character, and nothing about this seemed to concern him. But the truth was that she had no idea who "Ol' Jake" was or what he was doing in her parents' house. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Sorry about this whole thing." Jake set the mugs on the table and slipped into the chair across from her.

"I'm staying here, and it kinda freaked me out when the police came to the door and told me someone was hiding upstairs. I had no clue anyone was here. I mean, nothing was out of place in the house."

"Neatness is not grounds for arrest." Even she could hear the defensiveness in her voice.

"Neither is taking the dog out. And just in case you've forgotten, you were the one who called the police."

"But shouldn't you have figured out something was up when Riley was loose?"

"The other day, he pulled a Houdini and got out of his crate. I assumed I just hadn't closed it right again." He blew across his coffee and then took a sip. A slight smile crossed his face. "So-o-o-o, where's your car? If I'd seen a vehicle in the driveway, I'd have known something was up."

"I took a cab from the airport," she shot back.

His eyes twinkled. They were hazel with golden flecks in them. "Gotcha."

She tasted the coffee. Some cinnamony-chestnutty blend. "Thanks for the coffee. It's good."

"You're welcome."

"Look, Jake. My parents didn't expect me to come home for Christmas. Actually, I didn't expect to either." She glanced at the diamond engagement ring on her left hand. "It was kind of a last minute thing. Anyway, now that I'm here, there's no need for you to stay. I'll see that my parents pay you for the whole time when they get back. You can go home."

"I am home."

Surely, she hadn't heard him correctly. This was, and always would be, her family's house.

He leaned back in the chair and smiled. "I'm

renting the guest room from your parents."

No one had told her. "Mom and Dad would never rent out a room." Unless there'd been some sort of financial disaster. Maybe Dad had lost his job. But no, they wouldn't be on that cruise around the world if that were the case.

"I moved to town about three months ago, and the pastor knew they had space and asked them if I could stay here until I find a place of my own. I was the one who insisted I pay rent."

"But now that I'm back, couldn't you stay somewhere else temporarily?"

Sipping his coffee, he stared at some point over her shoulder. "I guess I could stay at the shelter downtown."

The shelter? She wouldn't wish that on anyone. The other choice was for her to rent a hotel room, and she didn't have the money for that. So she couldn't leave.

But they couldn't both stay in the same house. Or could they? When she was in college, she and Eric had shared an apartment simply for financial reasons. They'd been strictly friends, and it had worked out fine. The main difference was that she knew Eric from the student mission group. She didn't know Jake. But Mom and Dad did, and they obviously trusted him. "OK, I have an idea."

"Shoot." He took another sip of his coffee.

"We're adults. We can both stay here."

As coughing overcame him, his face reddened and his eyes filled. He'd gotten strangled.

"Are you OK?" The last thing she wanted to do was run around the table and beat him on the back like Mom used to do when she was a kid.

He held up a hand and nodded his head as the attack subsided. "That's exactly why we can't stay here. Because we're both adults."

"No, listen. I'll move downstairs to Mom and Dad's room." It had a private bath and a lock on the door. "And you can stay in the guest room upstairs."

"Mary, I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of reasons that's a bad idea. You and I will know nothing's going on, but no one else will." He took a deep breath and then continued. "It's really late, so I'll stay tonight. But tomorrow, I'll find someplace else."

2

After pulling on some jeans, a sweater, and her pink fuzzy slippers, Mary ran a brush through her hair and twisted it into a knotted bun. The image staring back at her in the mirror was acceptable enough. And even if it weren't, it would have to do. She was starving. The little bag of airline pretzels that had served as last night's dinner were long gone. She unlocked the door, stepped into the foyer, and listened. The house was silent except for the whir of the heater fan. "Hello? Riley? Jake?"

Silence greeted her.

She shuffled into the kitchen. A plate covered with foil with a note beside it sat on the stove. *I made a little too much for breakfast. Help yourself if you're hungry. Riley's with me.*

Of course Riley was with him. That dog had been with him since last night when Ri had pressed his nose to the crack under her parents' bedroom door and whimpered until she'd finally let him out. He'd flown upstairs—to Jake's room she presumed—and she hadn't heard another peep out of him.

As she lifted the foil, the comforting aroma of scrambled eggs with onions, peppers, and mushrooms along with bacon and toast greeted her, and her stomach responded with a rumble of gratitude. She microwaved the plate for a few seconds, poured a cup

of the coffee he'd left warming, and then sat at the table. She could get used to this. Too bad he couldn't stay.

This morning she got it. Last night, when she'd suggested they both sleep here, her brain must have been oxygen deprived from the flight. Yet asking him to leave when he was paying rent felt cruel, although he'd been the one who'd insisted on leaving, not her. And that was really the only option. She had no other place to go. But then, neither did he.

Bright winter sunlight shone through the kitchen window, reflecting off her engagement ring and painting little rainbows around the room. Their electric colors were a stark contrast to her gray mood. Being alone for Christmas was not what she'd planned. She'd had a place to go until last Friday. She was supposed to be in Aspen with Drew and his family right now. Until he'd decided to call off their engagement.

At first, she'd tried to give back the ring, but he'd insisted she keep it for "all the trouble" he'd put her through. She'd agreed, but not for that reason. They'd broken up several times over the years—one other time right before Christmas. Then, Dad had muttered something about Drew not wanting to buy her a Christmas present. But Drew had always come back. Always. And he'd come back this time, too.

For now, though, here she was. She'd come home seeking the comfort of the familiar, the constant, the memories of Christmases past. But everything had changed. Mom and Dad were gone, a boarder was living in her childhood home. Even Riley wanted to be with someone else. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was the way she'd envisioned it a few days ago. She swallowed the urge to cry.

The kitchen door opened and Riley bounded in with Jake right behind him.

"Morning. I see you found the break—" Jake stopped, a shadow of concern replacing his morning smile. "I, uh... Are you OK?"

Mom had always said that Mary trying to hide her feelings was as effective as using a clear, plastic shower curtain as draperies. Her face always betrayed her heart. "Sorry. Yes, I'm OK. Just tired." She forced a smile.

As he sat across the table from her, warmth replaced the concern. "Oh, good. Not good that you're tired. Good that it wasn't me. I thought it might have been something I did. That maybe you were vegan or something and hated the breakfast."

His comment was obviously an attempt to lighten the mood, so she followed suit. "Nope, I'm a Texas girl through-and-through. Although I'm still a little tired from last night. Not only was it unbelievably late, but it was also emotionally draining. You know, practically getting arrested in my own home and all."

"Now let me make sure I remember everything correctly. Who exactly called the police?" As he grinned, his gaze captured hers, and the golden flecks in his eyes sparkled.

Enough moping around. It was decision time. She could become a casualty of circumstance, or she could get going and do something about it. "Well, it certainly wasn't the intruder."

"I think we should call it a draw and just leave it at that."

She took a bite of the eggs. "These are delicious, Jake. Thanks so much."

"Sure. Anytime."

"I may take you up on that." An awkward silence crept into the space between them.

"I, uh, hope it was OK that I took Riley with me to the store. I needed some supplies for a project I'm working on, and he loves getting to go in the truck."

She'd forgotten how much Ri loved a car ride. "Of course it was OK."

"Great."

He drummed his fingers on the table. "Well, I guess I better get to work. Thanks again for letting me stay here last night."

"Sure. Thanks for letting me stay here, too. What about tonight? Any ideas?"

He stood and winked. "I'm workin' on it."

~*~

Jake followed the sidewalk to the back of the house and climbed the stairs to the garage apartment he was renovating for the Shermans. Mark and Anne had never mentioned how good looking their daughter was. The pictures around the house didn't do her justice. Most of them were taken years ago when she was just a suggestion of the woman she'd become. But why would they think to call attention to her? She wasn't available. The huge rock on her finger broadcast that message loud and clear. Besides, he wasn't looking anyway.

He dropped the air mattress on the floor. He'd pump it up later. When he'd compared sleeping on it to sleeping at the shelter or in his truck, the air mattress had won, hands down. The renovation of the

apartment was pretty much done except for painting the last of the trim and laying carpet in the bedroom. Here he'd have running water, electricity, and heat. The stove and refrigerator in the kitchen were functioning. What more could he need?

As he headed back down the stairs, Riley met him halfway. "Hey, buddy. You ready to do some supervising?"

Wagging his tail, Riley barked his "yes."

That dog, it was as though he really understood English.

Jake raised the garage door and flipped on the light. December, and the high today would be in the sixties. A perfect day to work with the door up. His notes and sketches were tacked to the wall behind the table saw. The stable was next on the list.

He picked up some of the old wood he'd scavenged from the Carters' ranch when they tore down their old horse barn and built a new one. Most people just threw old barn wood away, and their loss was his gain. Finding this aged wood was like finding an oyster with a pearl in it. He loved planing off the rough, outer layer to reveal the beauty and personality of the wood underneath. Like life. Some of the most beautiful hearts lay hidden under the roughest exteriors. That was one of the things he loved about volunteering at *Reclaimed*. Chipping off the outer roughness to get to the jewel inside.

He got out his tape measure and began marking the pieces for the cuts.

"What in the world are you doing?" Mary had changed clothes and put on a little makeup, although she really didn't need it.

"Just working on a project."

"Oh. I thought you were leaving." She avoided looking at him as she peered past him into the garage.

"Later."

"Does my father know you're using his tools? Do you have his permission?"

"Yes."

"Because he's very particular about who uses them."

"I know."

"If he comes home and finds out someone's been messing with them..."

He set down the tape measure and the pencil. "Let me show you something." He headed up the stairs to the garage apartment and gestured for her to follow behind. Opening the door, he motioned for her to enter first.

She stood in silence and then slowly walked into the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom, and then back to him. Wonder filled her eyes. "Jake, did you do this?"

He grinned. "You like it?"

"It's absolutely gorgeous." For the first time since they'd met, she smiled, really smiled. She was beautiful.

"I still remember it as my hangout when I was a kid. Fluorescent green and pink walls. Cracked tiles in the kitchen and bathroom. Drop ceilings. Brown and orange shag carpet from the seventies left by the previous owners. And you really did all this?" Her expression was alive.

"Yep. With your dad's tools and his permission. He figures when it's all done, he'll be able to rent it for some extra income."

"Absolutely. It's gorgeous. I had no idea you were so talented."

Mary's Christmas Surprise

There was a lot more she didn't know about him. "Could be I'm just a little better handyman than I am burglar."

~*~

Mary backed Mom's car out of the diner parking lot. She had thought for sure Greg would give her a temporary job, but all the slots during the Christmas break were filled with students. Just as they'd been when she'd worked there during high school. Money was somewhat of an issue, but much less one than needing something to do. She'd been home for less than twenty-four hours, and already she was bored. If she didn't find an activity to keep her busy during the next few weeks, she'd go crazy.

Greg had suggested she contact the church secretary, Diane. They were planning some huge Christmas extravaganza and needed volunteers. She'd call the office when she got home. As long as she didn't have to sing, she was in.

3

While pay was not a great benefit of working for a private school, time off was. Having a little extra money from working at the diner would have been nice. But what Mary really wanted was something to fill her time rather than her pocketbook.

Diane had thanked her profusely for calling, especially when she found out Mary was available to help during the day. "We have plenty of volunteers who can be here in the evenings, but the bulk of the work needs to be done during the day."

Happy with the prospect of having something to do, Mary was heading to the church right after breakfast.

She had no idea where Jake slept last night. But it wasn't in the house, and it wasn't with Riley. He'd worked on the carpentry project all day yesterday and then asked if he could "borrow" Ri for the evening. About midnight, an aromatic Riley had slipped into bed with her. Something about his scent painted images of trees and forests. And now at eight o'clock, he was gone again.

As she jammed her arms into the sleeves of her bathrobe, she ran downstairs to the kitchen. Riley lay with his nose pressed against the crack at the bottom of the back door. Jake's pickup was in the driveway, but

the doors to Dad's workshop were closed. She walked back to the foyer and then tiptoed up the stairs. The guest room door was open, but she peeked in anyway. The bed was made. No Jake. So, true to his word, he must have found somewhere else to sleep last night.

She followed Riley's moan back down to the kitchen. "Need to go out, buddy?" As she opened the back door, Riley ran straight to the garage, flew up the steps, and began pawing on the door. What was wrong with that dog?

The apartment door opened, and in he went. The image of a deflated air mattress in the corner of the bedroom flashed into her mind. So that's where Jake was sleeping.

~*~

"Good morning. You must be Mary." A middle-aged woman with a warm smile greeted her at the double glass doors of the church office.

"And you must be Diane." Mary smiled and extended her hand.

"Nice to meet you. Your parents are in my Sunday school class, and they talk about you all the time. You're even more beautiful than they say. Have you heard from them? I hope they're having a wonderful time."

"Nice to meet you, too. Thank you so much. You're very kind. Yes, they're having a great time."

"I'm so glad." Diane smiled and grasped Mary's hands. "And we're especially glad you called. The church is doing a live nativity the week before Christmas, and we need some help painting and