

A romantic couple embracing in a Christmas market at night. The man is wearing a dark jacket and a grey knit beanie, and the woman is wearing a red parka and a white knit beanie. They are standing in a cobblestone square with a large, illuminated church tower in the background. The scene is filled with warm lights and falling snow.

THE
UNEXPECTED
CHRISTMAS
GIFT

CAROL
JAMES

The Unexpected Christmas Gift

Carol James

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The Unexpected Christmas Gift

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Dedication

For Fran Bauman, friend, encourager, sister-of-the-heart, and gregarious world-explorer.

1

Flying was definitely not Holly's thing. In fact, that was the whole reason she took the inside sales position. No airplane travel. But now, due to her boss's scheduling mistake, she was taking his place and boarding an overseas flight to Germany. She'd be getting no sleep tonight on the plane, but she had several spreadsheets and lots of company profiles to familiarize herself with before the tradeshow.

She stepped from the jetway into the plane and crossed to the far aisle. Her seat was halfway back on the left. An aisle seat. She would have preferred the window, but she was flying in Randall's place, and his long legs always motivated him to get an aisle seat. So, aisle it was. Besides, it could have been worse. She could have been stuck in one of the center seats in the middle section.

She stowed her carry-on in the overhead bin and then peered around the seat toward her row-mates—a young woman close to her age with a little girl about two or three.

The child stood up in her Mom's lap and grinned. "What's your name? I'm 'Livia."

"Olivia, sit down and let the nice lady get settled." The woman smiled. "Sorry, she's quite the extrovert."

"I'm not an eggs-vert. I'm a girl."

As Holly stowed her purse under the seat in front

of her, she couldn't help but grin. She'd always thought this would be her at this age—married with a family—but two years ago that dream died, and she had no desire to resurrect it. She slipped into her seat and buckled the belt. "No worries. She's adorable."

Olivia placed her hands on her hips. "No, I'm not Dora. I'm 'Livia."

"Sorry about that, Olivia. I'm Holly."

"You guys OK up here?" A man behind her startled Holly.

"Daddy, this is Holly," Olivia continued.

A tall man with sandy blond hair and striking blue eyes held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Kent. Nice to meet you." He winked at his wife. "Let me know when you want to switch out." Then he smiled at Holly. "Tag team airplane-parenting." He made his way down the aisle to the back of the plane.

A nice person would offer to switch seats so the family could travel together. But then, who knew? Maybe they liked sitting separately so one could rest while the other watched 'Livia. Kent climbed into the middle seat of the center section in the last row, right in front of the wall separating the galley from the seating area. Holly had been assigned to that row on a plane several years ago. The seats wouldn't even recline all the way. With the proximity to the galley and the bathrooms, he probably wouldn't get much sleep.

"By the time we booked our tickets, we couldn't get seats together. We offered to change with one of the gentlemen beside Kent, but they wanted to be in the back." The young mother smiled. "I'm Marcy, by the way."

So, they definitely weren't sitting separately by

choice. And Holly never slept on a plane anyway. She needed to do this before she changed her mind or they taxied away from the gate. She grabbed her purse. "How about if I change seats with your husband?" She stood and retrieved her bag from the overhead bin.

Gratitude covered Marcy's face. "Thanks very much. You're so kind."

A truly kind person wouldn't have had to talk herself into changing seats. She would have done it immediately. "I'm happy to switch. Bye, 'Livia. I'll go get your daddy."

"Bye, Holly."

~*~

The soothing voice of a flight attendant came over the speaker, informing them the seatbelt light was off, and they were free to move about the cabin. The men on either side of Holly were already asleep. Apparently, the lack of reclining seats didn't affect them.

"Excuse me, miss." A flight attendant stood at the end of her row. "I'm sorry to do this to you, but there's an issue with this seat, and I have to ask you to move. Please get your carry-on and follow me."

What else could go wrong on this flight? Well, plenty when she was thousands of feet in the air. But this was a commercial jet. All things considered, changing seats for the second time was a relatively minor issue.

Holly retrieved her bag and purse and followed the attendant up the aisle. A quick scan of the cabin revealed no empty seats. She followed to business

class—which was also full.

As the attendant stopped outside at the curtains segregating first class, she turned toward Holly and winked. “I hope this substitution will be acceptable.”

They walked into a different world. The lighting was low, and big, cushy, leather seats lined a center aisle. The flight attendant stopped next to the row with the only empty seat. A window seat. “I saw what you did for that young family. One good turn deserves another.” She rested a hand on Holly’s arm. “Thank you.” Then she stowed Holly’s carry-on for her.

The passenger in the aisle seat—obviously a man from the protruding pant legs and shoes—had covered his head with a blanket in an apparent attempt to sleep. Determined not to disturb him, Holly sidled toward the window.

The plane bounced and threw her off balance. Holly tried to right herself but she fell backward into her neighbor’s lap, and the blanket that had covered his face flipped forward over her head.

“Well,” a man with a bass voice greeted her, “hello to you, too.”

Fighting off the blanket, Holly stumbled as she stood. “Sorry.”

A chuckle rose from the man. “I don’t think I’ve ever been woken up in any more pleasant way.”

As the seatbelt lights flashed on, an alarm chimed. “We’re going through a little area of turbulence,” the calm announcer assured them. “The captain has requested permission to climb to a higher altitude. So, we should be out of this in a few minutes. Meanwhile, remain in your seats with your belts securely fastened until the seatbelt lights are turned off.”

“I wish they’d announced that a minute ago,”

Holly muttered.

“What? And spoil all my fun?”

She turned toward him. He had coffee eyes and meticulously combed, ebony hair, styled with enough product that, although her fall had yanked the blanket from his head, not a hair was out of place. He looked like a model. No, an athlete. Maybe an athletic model? Even though he was seated, the length of leg extending into the space between the seats gave evidence to his height. As his smile broadened, a dimple appeared in each cheek. He was offering his hand to her.

“Pardon?” she asked.

“I said, ‘I guess if you sat in my lap, we should at least exchange names.’ Eli Walker.”

Oh, brother. Maybe she should ask for her old seat back. She grasped his hand. “Holly. And don’t worry, I don’t plan to sit in your lap ever again.”

“Disappointing.” He grinned. “Do you have a last name, Holly?”

“Wood.” She paused and waited for one of the inevitable trite remarks that always followed her introduction.

He simply nodded. “Holly...Wood.” His eyes twinkled. “I’m sure you’ve heard it all, so I won’t make any additional commentary.”

“Thank you.”

His smile widened, and the dimples deepened. “But a question’s not exactly commentary, and I have a fascination with memorable names. How? Why?”

“I was born in December, hence the ‘Holly.’ I don’t think my parents thought it through really well when they named me. But I can tell you this, if I ever have children of my own, I’ll think long and hard about what names I give them.”

"So, you don't have children?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet? But you're planning to have some?"

"One of these days, after I'm married."

"Ah, so you're engaged?"

"No." Not anymore. What was it with all the questions? And she was answering them.

"Well, not being married is about the best reason I know not to have any children."

Time to turn the tables. "How about you?"

"I'm not married or engaged, and before you ask, I don't have any children, either."

A chime sounded, and the seatbelt light went off.

He grasped the blanket and leaned his seat all the way back into a cot. "That's my signal. Good night, Holly Wood." He covered his head and face.

Holly was amazed that his seat reclined down so far. She removed the pillow and blanket from the pouch in front of her and turned her seat into a cot, too. Eli seemed nice enough. He'd taken an awkward moment and put her at ease about it. Nice, but just a little too nosy. Well, the first-class seat/cot was worth putting up with almost anything for a few hours.

~*~

"Holly Wood."

She opened her eyes. Something smelled enticing. A warm hand gently jostled her arm. She raised up to look over her arm rest.

Eli Walker's eyes sparkled as his tone teased. "Enjoy your nap?"

She'd never fallen asleep on a plane before. "Sorry."

I was up late last night packing.”

“Don’t apologize. That’s exactly what you should be doing on an overnight flight. If you don’t, you’ll feel awful when we land tomorrow.” He glanced towards the galley. “I hope you don’t mind. I took the liberty of ordering dinner from Callie, our attendant, for both of us. After our rocky start, I didn’t want to do anything to make our relationship worse, so I didn’t wake you when they took dinner orders.”

Despite what he thought, they had no “relationship.”

Callie came out, her hand swathed in an oven mitt and holding a covered tray. With tongs, she delicately reached in and handed Holly a steaming fingertip towel. She did the same for Eli. They swabbed their hands with the hot towels in unison.

Callie stepped back into the galley and came out with a food tray.

“Chicken or steak?” Eli smiled. “And if you’re vegan, I’m sure Callie can come up with an acceptable option.”

“Yes, I can.” Callie came forward. “This is the chicken.” She waited expectantly.

“Chicken. Chicken is great.” Holly smiled and finger-combed her hair back into place.

Callie expertly flipped down her table and placed the steaming dish on it. She lifted the cover to reveal a meal that could have come from a four-star restaurant.

“So, Holly Wood—”

“Just plain Holly’s fine.”

“So, just plain Holly, are you stopping in Dusseldorf or going on to another destination?”

She ignored his little dig. “Stopping in Dusseldorf. I’m participating in a tradeshow there in a few days,

but I came early to do a little sightseeing.”

“MEDICA?”

“Yes.”

“Exhibiting or attending?”

Here go the questions again. “Exhibiting. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you getting off in Dusseldorf or flying on?”

“Getting off and before you ask, I’ll be attending MEDICA, not exhibiting.” He grinned. “Maybe our paths will cross at the Messe.”

“The mess?”

“Yeah, the Messe. The exhibit hall.” He winked.

If he wasn’t so good-looking, he’d be downright annoying.

2

Eli followed the signs toward baggage claim. Although he'd left as quickly as he could, he'd still lost sight of Holly. Maybe they'd reconnect at the baggage carousel. Or customs. Sometimes it took a while to get through.

Too bad he'd slept through most of the flight. He would've liked to have gotten to know her better. She had that all-American, clean-scrubbed look. Long sandy hair, blue eyes, and peachy skin with a cute little freckle on her upper lip. If she wore make-up, it wasn't much. He hadn't even asked the name of her company, and the Messe was huge. The chance of finding her there knowing only her name, as memorable as it was, would be virtually impossible. Besides, he was here to work. Not for a few more days, though. Right now, he was on his own time.

He surveyed the baggage area and the people around Baggage Claim. His suitcase was there, but no Holly. He pulled his bag off the carousel and made his way toward Customs. It was early morning, and they were slow, so one quick check by the official, and he passed right through toward the exit to the cab stand.

As he walked out the doors, a loud female voice, full of obvious frustration, rang out. "*Wupper-tail*. Do you go to *Wupper-Tail*?"

Holly. Part of the problem was that, from his accent when he replied to her, the driver obviously wasn't a native German speaker. Eli grinned and walked toward the cab. This couldn't get much better. His German was rusty, but he'd give it a shot. "She wants to know," he said in plodding German, "if you'll drive her to Wuppertal," but he pronounced it "Vooeptall."

The cab driver nodded his head and smiled. "Ah, *Wuppertal. Ja, ja.*"

Eli turned toward Holly. "Yes, he'll take you to Wuppertal."

"Thanks. Wuppertal." She repeated the German pronunciation softly as if committing it to memory.

He couldn't completely read the look on her face. Frustration, embarrassment definitely, but also maybe relief. "Is there anything else you'd like me to ask him?"

"The cost."

Eli turned back to the cab driver and asked the fare to Wuppertal. Then he relayed the driver's answer to Holly.

She nodded. "Not bad."

"No, but I could make it even better. What about if we share a cab and split the fare? I'm staying in Wuppertal, too."

She paused a second or two too long, obviously not as sold on the idea as he was. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "OK."

As the cab driver loaded their bags in the trunk, Eli climbed into the backseat beside Holly and settled in for the half hour or so drive with his captive audience.

Apparently glad to have a German-speaker—

however much out of practice—in his car, the driver began talking about the weather, the traffic, his journey from his native Turkey to Dusseldorf.

“What hotel in Wuppertal?” the cab driver finally asked.

“I’m at the City Station,” Eli replied. “Holly?” He glanced to his left. Her eyes were closed, her head against the window. They’d have to wait to learn her destination.

~*~

“Holly Wood.”

She’d fallen asleep again. The cab was parked outside her hotel, according to its sign, and Eli was grinning at her. Something was up. She couldn’t remember ever telling him where she was staying, but he apparently knew. If he’d gone through her purse while she slept, he’d be in big trouble.

“Berat needs to know where to take you.”

So, not only was he on a first name basis with the flight attendant, but now also the cabbie. That seemed to be his thing. Getting to know people. But she must be wrong about his snooping. He didn’t seem to know where she planned to stay. Maybe this was the first hotel they’d come to and simply coincidentally they’d stopped here. “I’m where I need to be. The City Station Hotel.”

Eli opened his eyes wide, and he laughed. Then he said something in German to Berat, who popped the trunk open to unload the luggage.

Eli turned toward her. “Convenient coincidence, you and I are staying at the same hotel.” He opened

the door and got out of the car.

The same hotel. Really? This was getting a little strange. First the seat on the plane, then the cab ride, and now the same hotel in the same city. Germany was not a tiny country.

Her parents had always taught her God had a plan, that everything happened for a reason. And she'd believed that until Chad. She hadn't been able to understand how his death could have possibly been a part of God's plan. The only answer she'd been able to come up with was the consequence of a poor decision. Although hundreds, thousands of other people had made a similar decision and the outcome had been different.

Eli held open her door and offered his hand. "Unless you're headed back to Dusseldorf, I suggest you get out of the cab."

She grabbed her purse and stepped onto the sidewalk. "How much should we give him, including the tip?"

"Taken care of."

"The agreement was we'd split it."

"It's OK. Already done. I would have had to pay this much, anyway."

"Well, so would I, and my company will reimburse me for it. It's a travel expense."

"Mine, too."

Berat shook Eli's hand, said something in German, and then nodded toward her and said something else.

"He thanks us for our generosity and prays we will be blessed with long life and many children."

"But we're not ..."

"*Danke*, Berat." Eli's next words were spoken through a smile. "Just thanking him for his kindness.

And, I'd be OK with a long life and many children. After I find a wife, that is."

As the cab pulled away, they rolled their luggage down the sidewalk toward the doors into the hotel lobby. "Really, Eli, I insist you let me pay half the fare. That was our agreement."

"You can pay the return fare." He held the door open for her.

A bellhop greeted them as they stepped into the lobby.

"What if we don't leave at the same time?" She waited for him to see the obvious flaw in his reasoning.

"Are you flying back to Dallas next Thursday morning?"

She nodded.

"There's only one flight, so we'll both be on it."

"Checking in?" The young blonde behind the desk obviously had overheard enough of their conversation to realize English was their language of choice.

"Yes." Holly answered.

Eli grinned and leaned against the front desk.

The clerk, Gretchen, according to her nametag, smiled back at him.

Holly cleared her throat.

Gretchen turned toward her. "Passport and credit card, please."

Both she and Eli produced the requested documents, slid them across the desk, and waited. Lightheadedness and nausea swept over Holly as jet lag set in full force. She needed to get some real sleep. Soon.

"We have assigned both of you rooms on the same floor. Ms. Wood, you are in 307, and Mr. Walker, 319." She handed them back their documentation along with

key cards. "You're checked in, but your rooms won't be ready until three o'clock."

Holly's legs were rubber. If she didn't sit soon, she'd fall down.

Eli straightened. "Any idea where we could get a bite to eat, Gretchen?"

"We have a fine breakfast buffet." She reached under the desk. "Here are a couple of vouchers for this morning. But the breakfast is included during your stay. I'll have the bellhop put your bags in the closet behind me. You'll need your identification and room number to pick them up."

"Danke, Gretchen."

Holly eased into one of the low-slung white, leather chairs. Food was the farthest thing from her mind.

"Breakfast time."

Her stomach rolled. "I think I just want to nap." She laid her head against the back of the chair.

"Don't do it. You'll feel like crud." He dropped onto the sofa across from her. "The best way I've found to fight jet lag is to stay up as long as you can and go to sleep as near to your new bedtime as possible." He stood and offered his hand. "C'mon. I promise you'll be glad you did."

She struggled to her feet. "I'll hold you to that."

As they headed for the dining room, Eli leaned close. Even after the hours of travel, the spicy scent of his cologne wrapped around her like a warm blanket. "Have a seat over by the window, and I'll fix you up."

She sat at the table he'd indicated and opened her purse to replace her identification and room key. This was the first time she'd traveled internationally. At least she'd have one stamp in her brand-new passport.

She opened the book, and Eli's image stared back at her. Gretchen must have mixed them up when she handed them back. A quick flip through revealed a bounty of stamps. He was quite the international traveler. Maybe she should be more trusting of his advice on jet lag. She turned back to the front of the booklet and studied the picture. He had no place teasing her about her name.

"Bananas and oatmeal. Great jet lag foods. And hot tea, especially since they have some with ginger in it." Eli set a tray between them. "What's so funny?"

She'd been less casual than she'd thought. She cleared her throat to suppress a giggle and then held out the passport to him. "Gretchen must have switched our IDs. I got yours, so I'm hoping you have mine."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out the navy booklet, and offered it to her. "And that's funny?"

"Well, I didn't know this was yours until I opened it and saw the picture."

"I never thought it was that bad."

She shook her head. "The picture's fine." Her cheeks ached from grinning. "But I don't think you have any reason to tease me."

As he returned her smile, his dimples popped. He leaned across the table and whispered, "You're right about parents not thinking things through sometimes. My mom's maiden name was Skye. Hence the middle name. I mean, all they needed to do was say it out loud one time. Right?"

"Eli Skye Walker," she whispered back.

"Yes, Holly Wood. Now hurry up and eat your breakfast. We need to be someplace in an hour."

~*~