

CAROL
JAMES

NO LONGER
A CAPTIVE

Can she unchain her heart
and gain the freedom
to trust the man she loves?

No Longer a
Captive

Carol James

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No Longer a Captive
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2021
Electronic Edition ISBN 9781522303442
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Mom and Dad, Jimmy, Lauren, and Jordan. Thank you for living out unconditional love and for loving me and each other well.

Acknowledgements

To the patient and perceptive Fay Lamb, thank you for working so hard with me over the years to make my writing the best it can be.

To the talented and creative Nicola Martinez, thank you for your encouragement and your beautiful cover designs. I have been blessed to serve together with you as a part of the Pelican family.

What People are Saying

“Carol James tells beautiful stories that will capture your heart. She has quickly become a go-to author for me, reliable and consistent with a clear message of hope.”

~Stacey Weeks, award-winning author of
In Too Deep and *The Builder's Reluctant Bride*

Praise for *The Waiting*: “I was captured from the beginning. I couldn't put it down... I love the characters, the mixture of serious and humorous moments. Carol James did a great job of showing that God loves us where we are.”

~Cynthia M.

Other books by Carol James

The Waiting

Season of Hope

Mary's Christmas Surprise

The Unexpected Christmas Gift

1

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

John 8:36

The gravel crunched beneath the tires as Ethne O'Connor steered the box truck onto the shoulder of the narrow country road. Today would be a scorcher. The clock hadn't yet reached nine in the morning, and already the numbers on her dashboard read ninety-two. The birth of another lovely summer day in Central Texas.

The heat waves rising from the pavement in front of her mirrored the waves of nausea that had steadily intensified since she'd left Fort Worth. She shifted the truck into park, flipped on the emergency flashers, and turned the air conditioning on high. Closing her eyes, she pushed her head back against the seat and begged the cold air to rush across her face and relieve her churning stomach.

She couldn't believe she was doing this. One May evening ten years ago, with her suitcase already packed in the trunk of her car, she walked across the stage in the high school auditorium, received her diploma, and made a promise to herself, a vow that

had never been broken...until today. Sean's pleading phone call on Monday had changed everything. She was returning home.

The nausea somewhat under control, she shifted the truck into drive, pulled back onto the roadway, and turned off the emergency flashers. One last mile to go. Anticipation was a funny thing. When she wanted something to happen, it took forever to come. If she dreaded an event, it arrived before she knew it. These last several days had gone by way too fast.

Slowing the truck, she turned left and began the journey down a meandering river of asphalt. As she rounded the final curve and her childhood home came into view, she gasped. In the ten years she'd been gone, absolutely nothing had changed. The two-story farmhouse was still painted white with black shutters. Large Boston ferns hung from under the edges of the front porch and swayed in the ever-present Texas wind. Even the flowers waving in the pots beneath them were the same—purple petunias.

Nine o'clock and no Sean, but she wasn't surprised. Punctuality had never been expected of him. On the other hand, Vaughn had always demanded she be on time. Even early. That requirement had served her well over the years, birthing in her the organizational skills that helped her successfully start and run her business.

She parked the truck at the top of the circular drive, and despite the heat, slipped on her sweater, and inched across the pavement and up onto the porch. She grasped the doorknob. As she expected, it was locked,

and she didn't have a key. Years ago, she'd thrown hers away because she would never need it again. If she'd kept it, she could have at least gone inside and escaped the heat.

She turned and walked toward one of the rocking chairs. A forgotten green turtle with a chipped front leg smiled at her from underneath one of the pots of flowers. She picked it up and slid back the door on its belly. A key fell out into her hand. When she was a little girl, she always believed the key was there for Sean and her—in case they got locked out and Vaughn was still at the office. That was certainly one of the reasons, but when she was eleven, she'd discovered another.

She returned the oblivious little turtle to his home and then inserted the key into the lock. Taking a deep breath, she turned the key and pushed the door open. Cool, silent darkness greeted her as she stepped into the spotless—Vaughn would have it no other way—foyer.

She set the key on the console table beside the door and then tiptoed, for some unexplainable reason, further in. She paused and glanced first toward the living room to her right and then toward Vaughn's home office to her left. There was only one choice to make. She headed right and walked to the wingback chair next to the fireplace. Sitting, she nestled into the cushions. She pressed her nose against the fabric. Even after all these years, she could imagine the soft fragrance of Mother's perfume lingering in the ivory brocade.

Heavy draperies hung closed over the living room windows. A shaft of light shot out from the middle space where the panels failed to meet completely and illuminated a flock of dust motes as they floated in the bright morning sun. When she was five, Mother told her the particles were tiny fairies dancing in the sunshine, but they were usually invisible. Only the magic of the sun unveiled them.

One day, Ethne had asked Vaughn if she could borrow his magnifying glass to see the fairies, but he'd refused, saying Mother had filled her head with nonsense. Fairies weren't real.

Turns out, that was one of the few truthful statements he'd ever made to her. She now knew the "fairies" were nothing more than a combination of dead skin cells, fabric fibers, pollen, and dirt. He was right. Nothing magical about that.

As she walked over to the window and threw open the curtains, the fairies disappeared.

"So, the prodigal sister hath returned."

She jumped and spun to face the foyer. Her little brother spanned the doorway. He had grown up. The last time she'd seen him at his college graduation three years ago, he was at that stage where the calendar said he was a man, but his body was trying to catch up. He had certainly filled out, and he now sported a short, precisely-trimmed, chestnut beard. His hair, unlike hers, had deepened from bright copper to rich auburn.

"Sean. You're late," she snipped. This was not the way she'd envisioned their first meeting after all this time. She took a deep breath, reined in her emotions,

and smiled. "Or maybe I'm a little early. I have a reputation for that." She pulled him into a sisterly hug.

His grin answered hers. "Early, late, whatever. I'm just glad you came. I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever see you again."

"The road runs both ways, you know."

"Yeah. Sorry." He held up the key she'd placed on the console table. "I see you remembered the turtle. I figured I'd find you sitting on the porch in one of the rockers."

He set a small, black gym bag on the floor. "Where's your suitcase? Need me to get it out of the truck?"

"I'm not staying here. I've got a room in town."

"Eth, I can see how hard this must be for you." Tears filled his eyes. "Believe me. I know."

He really had no idea. The man he knew as Dad was not the same one she knew as Vaughn.

The doorbell rang.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Jackson Williams," Sean replied. He swiped away the tears with the back of his hand.

"What's he doing here?"

"He was the one who wanted us to meet today. Just a formality, I'm sure."

Sean opened the door to reveal a distinguished gray-haired man dressed in a blue seersucker suit with a white shirt and butter-yellow tie. No Stetson, no boots. He looked more like an attorney from the deep South rather than one from Central Texas. A brown leather valise hung over his shoulder.

Vaughn's best friend shook her brother's hand and then turned toward her. "Ethne, it's so good to see you again. What an accomplished young woman you've grown to be! I know your daddy would be proud."

Vaughn, proud of her? Definitely not. She offered her hand. "Hello, Mr. Williams. It's good to see you again, too."

"Please let me say how sorry Mrs. Williams and I are about your daddy. Our town has lost a great man. And I've lost a good friend."

No appropriate response would come. She'd lost Vaughn—no, Vaughn had lost her—long before she moved away from home.

Breaking the silence before it became awkward, Sean answered for both of them. "Thank you, Mr. Williams. We appreciate your kind words."

"Well, what y'all say we go into your daddy's office? There's a little chunk o' business we need to attend to." Without waiting for a response, he stepped across the threshold into the foyer and turned left.

As she looked up into Sean's eyes, he shrugged his shoulders. He was apparently as clueless as she was.

Although she hadn't been in this office for years, something was different. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, though. The large antique wooden desk and desk chair still faced the doorway. On the wall behind the desk sat Grandma O'Connor's buffet, converted into a credenza by Vaughn years ago. This would make a great piece for the store if Sean didn't want it. The framed originals of all Vaughn's diplomas and certificates and the Hippocratic oath

hung on the wall above it.

To her right, floor to ceiling bookshelves lined the wall. Those on the left held his medical and scientific volumes arranged by topic. The ones on the right displayed literary classics arranged in alphabetical order. Despite the warmth of all the wood furnishings, the room was sterile, cold, impersonal. No family photos and none of the trinkets she and Sean had made in grade school as gifts for him were displayed.

Mr. Williams drew back the drapes and opened the louvers of the plantation shutters to brighten the room and, dropping his valise on the top of the desk, made himself at home in Vaughn's chair. He motioned to the chairs facing the desk. "Have a seat. We'll begin in a few minutes."

She followed Sean's lead and sat down. That's what was different. Three chairs faced the desk instead of two. The one from the back corner had been moved up.

The grandfather clock on the wall behind them gonged once for the half hour, and then the doorbell rang. The attorney smiled. "Right on time. Excuse me a minute while I answer that." He stood and walked back into the foyer.

As Ethne looked at her brother, this morning's earlier nausea returned. At least she wasn't alone. "Sean, what's going on here?"

"You got me. Your guess is as good as mine. All he told me when he called was that we needed to meet here today at nine thirty."

As voices from the foyer increased in volume,

Ethne stood and turned toward the office door. Mr. Williams was back, bringing with him a tall man with dark hair cut short on the top and even shorter on the sides. Although he was clean-shaven, a heavy beard shadowed his face. He wore a navy European cut suit with a tieless white dress shirt and a pair of tapered brown oxford shoes. Nothing about him was familiar.

“Daniel, I’d like you to meet Ethne and Sean O’Connor.”

The tall man held out his hand to her and smiled. His dark chocolate eyes sparkled with life. Heat radiated from his hand as he grasped hers. “Daniel Spenser.”

He released her hand, leaned across her toward Sean, and repeated the same scene. “Daniel Spenser.”

“Well, now that all three of you are here, we can begin. Please, sit down.”

Sean dropped onto his chair, but Daniel stood until Ethne sat, and then he unbuttoned his suit coat and sat in the one empty chair left. The chair next to hers. Whoever he was, he had nice manners. She grasped the edge of the left sleeve of her sweater and eased it back down to her wrist.

Mr. Williams opened the valise, pulled out two file folders, and crossed his arms on top of them. “Thank you all for coming today. I know it’s not always easy to rearrange your schedules on such short notice.” As he paused, his face reddened. “I’m deeply saddened by the cause of our meeting. Vaughn O’Connor was a fine man and will be sorely missed in our community.”

Ethne glanced left at her brother and then right

toward the stranger. The brows of both men were knit in apparent confusion. Obviously, Daniel had no more idea what was going on than she and Sean did.

"I am the executor of your father's"—Mr. Williams' gaze moved toward Daniel—"Dr. O'Connor's will. The will is straightforward, so I don't expect any snags in probate. But before I submit it, I wanted to meet with y'all. So, to honor Dr. O'Connor's wishes, I assembled the three of you—his beneficiaries—as soon as possible after his passing."

Beneficiaries? Sean's face registered the same shock that took her breath away. They were Vaughn's only children. At least the only ones she knew of. Her stomach began to churn again as she turned toward Daniel. Surely not. He looked nothing like an O'Connor. Nothing at all.

Daniel shot up. "Mr. Williams, sir, I think there must be a mistake. I didn't even know Dr. O'Connor."

Mr. Williams stood in response. "Have a seat, son."

As Daniel eased down into his chair, the attorney smiled. "Now, I can see how this is confusing to all of you, but if you'll give me a few minutes, I think I can set everything straight." He kept a matter-of-fact tone.

She'd made a mistake by coming here today. Sean had begged, and against her better judgment, she'd eventually agreed. But she shouldn't have.

Mr. Williams again sat in Vaughn's chair and opened the first file. Even upside-down, Ethne was able to read the words "Last Will and Testament." Then he removed what was obviously some sort of

contract from the other folder.

“Rather than take the time to read all this legal mumbo-jumbo, I’ll just summarize for y’all. If that’s OK, that is.”

~*~

Daniel waited for someone to jump out from behind the curtains and yell, “Gotcha.” But that didn’t happen. The two beside him, Dr. O’Connor’s rightful heirs, were in a state of shock. And who could blame them? He was, too. Something about this just wasn’t right.

Mr. Williams continued, “Well, Daniel’s father and yours went to college and medical school together, and none of you probably know this, but when they graduated, they came here and opened a practice together. They—”

“Vaughn—uh, my father—was never in practice with anyone else,” Ethne interjected.

Ethne...what an unusual name. He’d never heard it before. There must be a story there, but if her body language signaled anything, he’d never find out. At least not from her. Her right hand gripped her left forearm and her legs wound around each other, crossing at the knees and then again at the ankles. How did she even do that?

The attorney laid down the contract. Then he reached into one of the manila folders, produced three documents, and slid one copy toward each of the beneficiaries.

Ethne jerked hers off the table and leafed through it. "What is this?"

"As I said, when your father and Daniel's father graduated from medical school, they decided to open a practice together. Each man invested half of the money required with the understanding that if one of them ever chose to leave the practice, the other could buy him out."

Daniel drew his copy of the contract across the glossy surface of the waxed desktop and glanced over the first page. The language was standard legalese. *Party of the first part, party of the second part. Hitherto, henceforth, herewith.*

But Mr. Williams was right. This was not the time and place to read it line by line. He'd look over it later when he got back to the hotel. There was only one thing he wanted to see right now. He flipped to the last page, and there it was—Dad's signature right next to Vaughn O'Connor's. Whatever the terms of the contract were, Dad had agreed to them.

"Y'all turn to page two and go down to clause nine," the attorney continued.

Papers rustled as all three did what he asked.

"Basically, this says that if either party left the practice, the other would have the option to buy his interest in the partnership."

The attorney paused for effect to let his words sink in as if a jury had been sitting along the side wall gathering information to render a verdict.

"Well, Daniel's dad met this cute little filly, married her, and decided to move to Fort Worth."

Daniel had grown up in Fort Worth.

“And, they hadn’t been in practice long enough for your daddy—Ethne and Sean—to have earned enough money to buy out Daniel’s dad. So...” He reached into the valise again and produced an envelope. “Your daddy, Daniel, basically let Dr. O’Connor have his half of the practice with the understanding that he would pay him back when he could.”

The only sound in the office was the crackle of thirty-something-year-old paper as Daniel accepted the envelope from Mr. Williams, removed the folded page, and read it. Yes, that’s exactly what the letter said. He handed it to Ethne. She glanced over it and then passed it to Sean.

“So, long and short of it, Ethne and Sean, your daddy never paid off Daniel’s daddy. And, Daniel, to right that wrong, Dr. O’Connor named you as one of his beneficiaries.” He held up the will. “His wishes were that you inherit one third of his estate.”

2

Ethne hadn't been in The Perks in years. The last time was the week before graduation when she was studying for her final in senior English. But the place hadn't changed a bit. The decor was timeless. Warm wood-paneled walls enclosed intimate seating areas composed of booths, tables, and overstuffed chairs. The soothing aroma of coffee radiated from every inch of the café.

Her favorite spot had always been one of the leather chairs next to the rustic stone fireplace at the far end of the room. In the turmoil that had been her life, this place, with its warm atmosphere and serene classical music, had brought her peace. Today, though, the fireplace was dark and cold. Even with air conditioning, the Texas summer temperatures were too hot for a cozy fire.

"Well, that was a shock." Sean set the tray on their table and then slipped into the seat across the booth from her.

Just another one of Vaughn's little secrets. "Thanks, Sean." She picked up her iced coffee as he grabbed his latte and set a plate of scones onto the table. They looked delicious, but her stomach still churned from the meeting at the house.