

REDEEMING THE PAIN OF THE PAST.
RESTORING THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS.

REDEEMING CHRISTMAS



CAROL
JAMES

Redeeming Christmas

Carol James

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Redeeming Christmas
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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, 2020
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0326-8
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For my mother, Miss Lillian, who made Christmas a time of love and joy. Thanks for the wonderful memories, Mom.

Acknowledgement

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.

Other Titles by Carol James

The Waiting
Season of Hope
Mary's Christmas Surprise
The Unexpected Christmas Gift

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*

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.

Praise for *The Unexpected Christmas Gift*:

“This one is a real treat...or gift. Pun fully intended. Starting in Germany, the reader gets to explore the delights of a Christmas market with Holly and Eli... A wonderful seasonal story, in a box wrapped with bow.”

Clare Revell, author of
the *Say a Prayer* Series

1

Liv picked up the Pa-rum-pa-pum-pum Peppermint lotion from the seasonal display. Turning the bottle over, she pretended to read the back label, but she focused her attention on the male customer in the center of the store.

The salesgirl stuck to him like a piece of chewing gum on the sole of a shoe in summer. Gooley and annoying.

Liv couldn't blame her, though. He was tall with dark brown hair, meticulously combed back from his forehead. His olive skin enhanced his cleft chin. He wore a charcoal gray wool suit with a white shirt, a red and navy striped tie, and black wingtip shoes. Maybe he was an attorney.

Common sense told Liv to make her purchase and leave. Intrigue argued she should browse and gather more information. As "Jingle Bells" played over the speaker system, she ignored common sense and crept closer to observe.

His brown eyes studied every move the clerk made, as if he were considering her as possible dating material. But that made no sense. Essential Scents was a women's store. Why would he be sizing up one woman while he was shopping for another?

Because he wasn't shopping. A policeman. Maybe

he was an undercover cop posing as an attorney, trying to sneak some information out of the salesgirl. No, that couldn't be right, either. So far, the sales clerk had done all the talking. But then again, the best investigators were good listeners.

Miss Bubblegum rested a hand on his forearm while she gestured toward the mountainous display of home and body products in the center of the store. "And this is our most popular fragrance, Scent-uous. A wonderful choice to pamper that special lady in your life."

The man slowly stepped away and crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, I—"

The salesgirl turned and gestured toward the right-hand wall. "Or what about these? Air and Sun. Part of our new Earth Essentials, all-natural collection. Very popular among the professional crowd."

His gaze focused on the clerk. In silence, he nodded.

Liv recognized the look of panic in the girl's eyes. When she was in college, she'd worked on commission in a clothing store. The clerk knew she was losing the sale. But what she didn't know was that she wasn't losing anything. Because it wasn't a real sale.

The girl turned toward the other side of the store. "Or how about..."

Or a secret agent. Maybe he was a secret agent who'd ducked into the store to avoid the men who were following him, and he had no intention of buying anything. He was simply hiding. Liv glanced back over her shoulder. No fishy characters lurked outside the store entrance. But of course, professional spies looked just like a next-door neighbor. Nothing suspicious about them.

James Bond spoke, minus the British accent, "Hey, thanks for your help, but I think I'd just like to browse a little...if that's OK."

"Oh, sure. Of course. Enjoy looking around. I'm Candy, if you need anything."

And who would she be if he didn't need anything?

"Thanks, Candy. I appreciate your time."

As the chime signaled the arrival of a new customer, a new male customer, Candy dropped 007 like a sun-scorched rock and scooted across the store toward the entry.

The spy wandered through the tables toward the display framed by evergreen garland and white twinkling lights on the left wall. His jacket was cut full enough to hide his shoulder holster. He slid his hands into his pants pockets as he pretended to study the lotions and perfumes stacked to the ceiling.

This was her chance. Liv strolled up beside him. "Overwhelming, isn't it?"

He turned toward her. His brow wrinkled in surprise, and then a smile lit his face. "Sure is. Must be over a hundred different choices."

Curiosity fluttered her stomach. She'd get to the bottom of this. "So, are you shopping for anyone in particular?"

"A friend."

"I see. A good friend?"

He pursed his lips and looked far away as he constructed his cover story. He leaned his head to the side. "Not yet. But I'm working on it."

A vague response.

She nodded. "Age?"

"Mine?" He raised his eyebrows and grinned.

Trying to distract her with humor. A good ploy.

“No, your lady friend.”

“Whoa, there. I’ve learned never to try and guess a lady’s age.”

Slick. “I can suggest some general scents that would be popular with most women, but if you could give me a ballpark age, I can point you toward some that might be more appropriate.” She picked up a bottle of shower gel from the display in front of them. “For instance, this Cotton Candy scent would not go over well with a mature woman.”

As he removed his hands from his pockets, his brown eyes sparkled. “You’re right. OK. Seventy. Ish.”

“Seventy? Ish? Really?”

He nodded.

“Then this” — she returned the Cotton Candy gel to the display — “would be completely wrong. What you want is a classic scent.” She led him across the showroom to the back corner. Liv gestured toward the left side of the display like a gameshow hostess. “Lavender. In fact, that’s why I came into the store. To buy some as a Christmas gift for my grandmother.” She grasped the tester and spritzed some of the perfume onto a card. Then she waved it through the air for him to smell. “My nana loves it.”

He smiled. “Soft and old-fashioned. Classic.”

“This next one, Texas Rose, is my nana’s second favorite.”

He followed her farther back, “Do you work here?”

“Me? No. I’m just a customer.”

“Well, maybe you should,” he muttered.

Whether he intended her to hear it or not, she caught his barely audible response. She’d pretend she hadn’t heard him to give him a chance to elaborate.

“Pardon?”

“Sorry. Just thinking out loud. Thanks so much. You’ve been very helpful, and I don’t want to keep you from your shopping.”

She was dismissed. She’d failed in her mission. “You’re welcome. Enjoy.” She grasped a floral travel bag filled with an array of Luscious Lavender products and headed toward the register. Once she paid, her Christmas shopping would be completed.

~*~

Liv perched on the wrought-iron cafe chair outside the mall coffee shop and sipped her peppermint mocha. Her journal lay open on the table before her. This had been the last available spot, but she couldn’t have chosen a better one. Its placement was perfect for people-watching. A sea of mankind surged up and down the mall corridors. She loved shopping this time of year. Trips to the mall offered plenty of material for work.

A young father, most likely, with two preschool children nibbling on cookies sat a few tables over. He’d probably picked them up from daycare and brought them here to shop for a surprise Christmas gift for their mother. The cookies were bribery to ensure their silence.

Or perhaps he was a widower. This was the first Christmas after his wife had died. He was fighting to overcome past memories and make this season joyous for his children. But it was hard. Painful. How could he hold everything together? Liv’s eyes burned as tears threatened. The little girl had her mother’s blonde hair and blue—

"Hello, again."

Liv jumped at the greeting. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't noticed the attorney-cop-spy now standing beside her table. He held a paper cup from the coffee shop in one hand and a large shopping bag from Essential Scents in the other.

"Hi. Well, looks like you found something."

"I did. Thanks to you and your guidance." He scanned the seating area.

She looked again too. Still no empty tables. A captive audience could produce an abundance of information. "Please, won't you have a seat?"

"Thanks."

As he sat and placed his package on the concrete floor beside his chair, his suit coat fluttered open. No shoulder holster after all. His gun must be jammed in his waistband behind his back or in an ankle holster.

"I'm Gabe."

She grasped his offered hand—his smooth, well-manicured offered hand. Secret agenting must pay well. "Liv. Nice to meet you." She nodded toward his shopping bag. "So what did you decide on?"

"I went with the lavender."

"Good choice."

His gaze rested on her open journal. "Looks like you might be in the middle of something."

"People-watching. The journal's in case I observe something I need to record."

As he sipped his coffee, his chocolate eyes sparkled. "Private detective?" He grinned.

She returned his smile. "Writer."

"Really? Have anything published?"

"A few novels."

"Anything I might have heard of?"

"I doubt it. No offense, but you're not exactly my target audience. I write romance."

"Oh, so I get it. Men aren't romantic."

"My heroes are very romantic."

"But not real men."

"Let's just say romance is not the genre of choice for most 'real' men. Action, sci-fi, mystery. Stuff like that. But a smart man could learn an awful lot about women by reading a romance novel or two."

"I'll keep that in mind." He nodded. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the display. "Duty calls."

Definitely an undercover cop.

He inserted his hand into his inner jacket pocket and extracted a business card. He held it out to her. "In case you ever want to change careers and go into sales, my company's always looking for good people. From what I saw earlier, you'd be quite a success."

She studied his card. *Gabriel Winter, CEO, Sales Solutions, Placing people in perfect places.* "Your busy season, huh?"

"Not really. The last thing my customers want to see this time of year is some sales rep coming in to take them away from their buying customers."

She winked. "I meant your name."

"Oh. That." Smile lines radiated from his eyes. "Most people don't even catch it, but of course you would. Your life's all about words." He stood. "Would you happen to have one of your cards on you?"

She reached into the side pocket of her purse, withdrew a business card, and offered it to him.

He studied the rose and gray rectangle. "Olivia St. Madeleine, Novelist, *Creating Beauty from Ashes.*" As he raised his eyebrows, his gaze met hers. "You were

destined to be a romance writer from birth. Your parents chose the perfect name."

"Actually, my agent did. My real name's Olivia Slootsky. Don't get me wrong. It's a fine name, but I ask you, who's going to believe a person with that last name writes romances?"

He chuckled. "Well, Olivia St. Madeleine Slootsky, thanks again. Running into you has been the best part of my day. Have a happy holiday."

As he turned and walked toward the exit door, she reached for her journal and her pen. *His mahogany eyes blazed with merriment. The warmth of his smile sent delicious shivers down her spine.*

2

Twilight forewarned the approach of night as Liv inserted her key into the lock and slowly opened the kitchen door. A soothing potpourri of cinnamon, peppermint, and Nana's chocolate pie swirled around her. She was five years old again and standing on a chair making Christmas cookies with Nana. The pungent fragrance of spicy chili bubbling on the stove drew her back to the present. It was good to be back home.

Carols played softly on the old stereo in the living room. Clutching the Essential Scents gift bag with one hand, she rolled her suitcase through the door with the other.

"Nana?"

No answer. Dirty dishes filled the sink. Nana would have never left the kitchen in such a mess unless something was wrong. "Nana? It's Livy."

"Joy to the world..."

Liv grabbed her stuff and walked through the den and into the hallway. What if Nana had become sick? Or had fallen and hit her head? Or? "Nana? Are you OK?"

She peeked into Nana's bedroom. The bed was empty, still neatly made.

Liv threw her suitcase and the gift bag into the

guest bedroom and continued her investigation. So far, other than the kitchen, the house was neat as a pin. No signs of foul play, but also no signs of Nana.

Heart pounding, Liv raced into the living room just as a rousing rendition of “Deck the Halls” began. A huge gift basket of Luscious Lavender products, twice the size of the one she purchased, sat on the coffee table. Her heart fell. Maybe she still had time to exchange her comparatively modest set for a Texas Rose collection.

Right now, that was the least of her problems. Her eighty-year-old grandmother was missing.

She walked on into the dining room. The table was set with three place settings of Nana’s Christmas china on one end, while pieces of the barely begun jigsaw puzzle were scattered across the other.

Liv pulled her phone out of her pocket and called Nana’s number. An old-fashioned ringing floated down the hallway from Nana’s bedroom. Nana didn’t have her phone with her.

Twilight had grown into evening as darkness descended. Nana’s car was in the driveway, so she hadn’t driven anywhere. Maybe something was going on at the church, and a friend had taken her.

No, she would have left a note. And she wouldn’t have left the chili simmering away.

Something was not right here.

Maybe she’d been kidnapped.

The last thing Liv wanted to do was call the police and come across as some emotional woman with an overactive imagination when there was a logical explanation. If she’d only left the mall earlier instead of people-watching for so long probably none of this would have happened. She would have been here to

take care of Nana.

She glanced at the time on her phone. Six fifty-seven. In three minutes, she would call the police.

A *whoosh* sounded as the kitchen door opened. "Livv?"

"Nana!" Liv rushed into the kitchen. She pulled Nana into a hug. "Where have you been? It's dark outside."

"I'm sorry I wasn't home when you got here. I was out delivering Christmas goodies to the neighbors, and time got away from me."

"I thought something terrible had happened. I was seconds away from calling the police."

Nana stroked Liv's hair like she had when Liv was a little girl. "Poor thing. Sorry I worried you."

"I called your cell phone but..."

"I forget about that thing."

"Nana, you should always take it with you in case you have an emergency. What if you'd fallen? Or someone had...had attacked you?"

"You and your imagination. What would I have done if I'd had that thing anyway? Thrown it at the culprit? Or asked him to wait while I dialed 9-1-1?" She slipped her hand into her coat pocket. "Besides, this would be much more effective." She drew out a canister of pepper spray. "Plus, I took a self-defense class down at the senior center."

"But, Nana, you're—"

"Old?"

"I was going to say, not taking me seriously, but since you broached the subject, what other adjective would you use to accurately describe an eighty-year-old woman?"

"Spunky? Wise? Charming?" Nana laughed. "But

yes, I'm old. And I'm also just fine." She released Liv and then gestured toward the living room. "You should see the gift my new neighbor gave me."

"I saw it."

"Such a thoughtful man. Didn't seem right to accept his gift without giving him something in return. But cookies are hardly enough. Maybe you could take me out shopping, and we could pick him up a little something else."

"Sure. If that's what you want." Liv turned away to hide her smile. Nana had a boyfriend.

"You remember Mary Lou from church? He's her nephew."

Ah, a younger boyfriend.

"He bought the Collins' place next door and aims to spruce it up for his mother, Mary Lou's sister." Nana shuffled over to the stove, lifted the lid on the chili, and stirred the bubbling pot of comfort.

Liv's stomach groaned in anticipation.

"Oh, and he'll be joining us for dinner in about" — Nana glanced toward the teapot clock hanging above the kitchen door — "thirty minutes. You better go freshen up."

~*~

Gabe really could have used the time tonight to work on the wallpaper in the bathroom, but he'd accepted the dinner invitation because it was a start at getting to know the neighbors. Establishing relationships with them would make the transition easier for Mom when she moved in.

His growling stomach suggested the other reason. This afternoon's coffee and muffin were long gone. So,

when Ruth invited him for dinner, he hadn't put up too much of a fight. After all, he'd never been known to turn down food. Especially home-cooked. And the last thing he wanted to do was insult her.

He'd barely had enough time to shower after Ruth left. He scaled her front porch stairs, took a deep breath, and ran his fingers through his still-damp hair. Then he pressed the doorbell.

In response to the chime, the porch light flashed on, and the front door swung inward. Ruth smiled and pushed open the storm door. "My lands, young man. What're you doing coming to the front door?"

"Well, I..."

"Front door's for strangers. Next time come to the kitchen door. That's for friends and family."

"Yes, ma'am. Sure will."

She gestured toward the foyer. "Well, come on in before we let any more heat out. And look at you with your hair all wet. You're liable to catch your death of pneumonia."

A smile tugged at his mouth. All Texas women must take the same classes in child rearing. Mom and Granny had said those same words all his life. He stepped into the foyer and closed the doors behind him.

"You can hang your jacket on that hall tree."

"Yes, ma'am." He slipped off his leather jacket and draped it over one of the four sets of iron hooks framing the mirror in the oak antique. "Nice piece."

"Belonged to my husband's great-aunt Dolly. She owned the first theater here in Crescent Bluff, and it used to sit in the lobby. She never married, and when she passed, my husband, Bill, ended up with it. Now that he's gone, it'll go to my granddaughter."