



A  
COVERT  
COWBOY  
CHRISTMAS

CAROL  
JAMES

A Covert  
Cowboy  
Christmas  
Carol James

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**A Covert Cowboy Christmas**  
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2021

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0359-6

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

In memory of Marjorie Nell Butler, one of my biggest fans and encouragers. We loved laughing together when we'd get asked if we were sisters.

## *What People are Saying*

“Carol James has a gift for telling stories of broken people and showing how they can be made whole through God’s love.”

~Karen Malley, author of *Following the Sparrows*.

“Carol James is one of my favorite contemporary authors because she writes characters that are easy to fall in love with and her stories honor the Lord.”

~Stacey Weeks, author of the Mistletoe Meadows series.

HE HAS MADE EVERYTHING BEAUTIFUL IN ITS  
TIME. ~ECCLESIASTES 3:11

# 1

Rebekah stepped into her fuzzy slippers and then hung the black-sequined bridesmaid's gown on a padded hanger.

*Never wear all white or all black to a wedding.*

Granny's twenty-five-year-old admonition still resounded in her memory.

*In white, you might look like you're trying to upstage the bride, and in black, people will think you're mourning her decision.*

"Yeah, well, what if black's the bride's choice?" she muttered. "What if she wanted black for her bridesmaids? Solid black." She grabbed the pink Cinderella's Formals garment bag and jammed the dress into it. Granny and her generation might have thought red a better choice for a December wedding, but black showed off the red roses in the bridesmaids' bouquets...exactly as Lizzie had wanted.

The zipper buzzed, its pitch rising as Rebekah jerked it upward, hiding the evidence. After all, Granny might be looking down and shaking her head. Black, white, red. People didn't really pay attention to those outdated social conventions nowadays, anyway.

Jackson had sweetly, yet firmly, insisted she spend tonight in his house rather than having to make the long drive home after the wedding. Between Braden and him, he'd always been the more thoughtful brother. But Jen and the kids had certainly sweetened up Braden.

She stepped into the living room and draped the garment bag over the back of one of the four leather recliners. Stacked boxes of Lizzie's stuff lined the dining room walls. A smile tugged at Rebekah's lips. Once the happy couple returned from their honeymoon, Lizzie would spend the first few months of their marriage redecorating this man cave.

Rebekah walked back to the hall and headed toward the guest room. Marilyn jumped off one of the chairs and padded along behind her. The cream-colored golden retriever whined. Rebekah sat on the guest bed, and the dog jumped up beside her, whined again, and snuggled close.

"I know." Rebekah scratched behind the dog's ears and spoke in the singsong voice she reserved for babies and dogs. "You miss Jackson already. Don't you, sweet girl?"

Marilyn placed a paw of confirmation on Rebekah's thigh.

"Well, don't you worry. I'll take good care of you while your daddy's on his honeymoon."

The Texas December wind howled outside. Rebekah drew back the covers and slipped between the sheets. Marilyn snuggled at her feet. The temperature had already started dropping from the unseasonable

warmth they'd been having the last couple of weeks. Maybe having a furry foot-warmer wouldn't be so bad tonight.

She rolled over to turn off the lamp on the nightstand, but instead, grabbed her phone. She scrolled through her photos until she found the picture of the six of them standing under the lilac arbor at church camp the summer after their senior year. The memory of the flowers' smothering, sweet perfume transported her back twenty years, awakening the past within her as if the picture had been taken yesterday. The summer they'd formed the Happily-Never-After Club.

The six of them had always been known as the brainy girls—the ones who took advanced calculus and had more time for schoolwork and each other than boys. They'd hugged and cried and vowed to the sisterhood that they'd never get married. They had too much to do. Too much to achieve. They'd be best friends for life, traveling the world together seeking fun and adventure. And for about ten years that had been the case.

But then, time passed and circumstances changed. Special men came into their lives, and one by one, they withdrew their vows to their friends and transferred them to their husbands. Jackson and Lizzie's wedding tonight left Rebekah alone. The sole surviving member of the sisterhood, the death-knell being sounded by her own brother.

The photo blurred as Rebekah fought unbidden tears. For years, she'd been happy, content. She'd



earned every degree, achieved every goal, reached every milestone she'd set out to attain. But those achievements no longer filled the hole in her heart. She wanted something more. Something she never thought she'd want. She placed her phone on the nightstand and turned off the lamp. Snuggling into the pillow, she closed her eyes as the tears escaped. In six months, she would celebrate her thirty-ninth birthday.

The crashing of debris pelting against the window woke her. A loud boom vibrated the entire house. Jerking up, Rebekah struggled to focus on her surroundings through the murky blackness. Lightning flashed and thunder roared again. Marilyn climbed to the head of the bed and whimpered. Rebekah placed an arm around her. "It's OK, girl." December was not the usual time for thunderstorms.

She rolled over and twisted the lamp switch. Nothing. She glanced at the alarm clock. Blackness. No power.

She slipped out of bed and pulled her robe around her. The wind howled. Lightning split the darkness. Another rumble rattled the windows. Marilyn barked at the invisible intruder. "Don't worry, sweetie." She rubbed the dog's head, trying to sound calmer than she felt.

Jackson hadn't told her where he kept the flashlight or matches, and she hadn't thought to ask. Neither of those things had been on her mind as she'd prepared to house and dog-sit. She fumbled around on the top of the nightstand and grasped her phone. No service. She turned on its flashlight.

Rebekah inched her way along the hall and into the living room. She peered through the panes of the French doors. Ice pellets perforated the sky, pecking against the wooden deck. She'd never seen a combination thunder and snow storm. Didn't even know it was possible.

Lightning illuminated the landscape. A live oak was down in the yard. Lightning flashed again. Another tree lay across the grass. Thunder rolled long and loud. Lightning blazed once more. The storm had felled a third tree.

Her heart pounded. How had she slept through the earlier commotion? Fear rose up into her throat.

She made her way back to the bedroom and slipped into bed, eyes wide open. Marilyn paced back and forth in front of the doorway into the hall, alternating between rumbling a low growl and broadcasting a fierce bark. Everything would look better in the light of day...if they made it that long. Goosebumps covered her body, and her stomach churned. She drew her knees up to her chin.

*Father, please keep us safe.*

Rebekah began humming her go-to hymn for fearful times.

*My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;  
for Thee all the follies of sin I resign;  
my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou;  
if ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*

## 2

The slamming of the front door startled Rebekah awake. Marilyn barked, jumped off the bed, and ran out of the room. Morning light filtered through the blinds.

“Sis, you OK?”

She sat up. “Braden!” The syllables sounded garbled even to her own ears.

Rebekah glanced at her phone. Nine-thirty. She’d managed to fall back asleep once the storm stopped early this morning. She rolled out of bed, wrapped up in her robe, and headed out of the bedroom. “I’m fine. Just freez—”

One of the ranch hands waited a few steps behind her older brother in the entry hall. Rebekah drew the neck of her robe tighter and then ran her fingers through her hair to tame whatever wild animal it must have resembled. “I didn’t realize you weren’t alone.”

The cowboy pursed his lips in an unsuccessful attempt to hide a grin.

Braden patted Marilyn’s head. “Sorry. Guess I should have warned you.” He gestured behind him “This is...uh...” His eyes opened wide.

The ranch hand grasped the front brim of his cowboy hat and tugged it downward. “Dirk Sims,

ma'am."

Braden must be experiencing the first stages of senility. He couldn't even remember the name of one of his employees. But Rebekah remembered him. She scrounged up a smile. "Dirk...of course. Nice to see you again."

Dirk removed his hat. "No, ma'am. Don't believe we've ever met. But I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

He ran his fingers across the top of his head and loosened the dark blond hair which had been smashed flat by his hat. A reddish-brown beard peppered with silver highlights covered his face. And a telltale bulge below his lower lip revealed his participation in a habit common among the hands.

"Sorry, Dirk," Braden turned back to Rebekah. "He's, uh, fairly new."

"Not a problem, Mr. Kingston." Dirk nodded as he replaced his hat. He hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans.

"Why are you still here, anyway, Braden?" Rebekah asked. "I thought you were going to visit Jen's parents for Christmas."

"I am. Jen and the kids flew out with them last night after the wedding. I'm staying a few more days to tie up some loose ends. Then I'll fly to Santa Fe."

She nodded. "Thanks for checking on me. As soon as I pack up my stuff, Marilyn and I'll be on our way."

"Sorry to say that ain't likely gonna happen, ma'am." Dirk shook his head. "Leastwise not for a couple o' days at best."

"Yeah, Bek," Braden agreed. "All the county roads are iced over, and the bridge is out. Plus, have you seen your car?"

Her stomach vaulted into her throat. "My car?" Her brand new, two-month-old car?

She ran to the front door and flung it open. The entire yard looked like a disaster zone. Trees uprooted. Broken branches strewn about. Rocking chairs on the front porch overturned. And her car...a fallen tree blocked her car. But not even a leaf rested on the vehicle itself. "I think I can get it out if one of you could watch for me."

"Bek, you didn't hear me. The roads are impassible. I called the county. We're on the list, but they couldn't even give me an estimate of when they'd be able to get to us. It's bad all over, and they have much bigger fish to fry. Plus, the temperature's not supposed to get above freezing until next week."

"But Mom and Dad are expecting me."

Braden shook his head. "I'm sorry." He rested an arm on her shoulder. "You've got two choices: stay here in the cold and dark or come to the main house where we've got a generator, a big fireplace, and lots of wood." He squeezed her arm. "C'mon, Bek-Bek."

He hadn't called her that in years.

"I can't leave my little sister here to freeze."

"Doesn't seem I have much choice." She jammed her elbow into his ribs.

He grimaced. "That's the Bek-Bek I know and love. Give me your car keys, and we'll get the rest of your stuff while you pull on some clothes."

~\*~

Ethan followed Braden out the door and down the front steps.

When they got away from the house, Braden turned back and raised his eyebrows. "'Dirk?'... Seriously? Is that the best you could do?"

"Yeah. Dirk." Ethan wasn't surprised Braden was giving him a hard time. If the situation had been reversed, he'd have done the same. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's lame. How'd you come up with that, anyway?"

Ethan shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't. It's the name of my character in the film."

Braden shook his head.

"Hey, man, I don't name 'em. Just play 'em. At least I wasn't a deer in the headlights." He opened his eyes and mouth wide.

"Whatever." Braden squeezed the key fob, and the trunk popped open. "So, *Dirk*, how about loading her stuff into the UTV."

"Yessir, Mr. Kingston," Ethan drawled. He grabbed two suitcases from the trunk of Rebekah's car as Braden walked back into the house. In the twenty-something years since they'd met in college at Sul Ross, Braden had never mentioned he had a sister. And a really good-looking one, at that.

Ethan spit the gum out of his mouth and ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip. Dipping snuff was one part of the role he couldn't even pretend to

enjoy. How did people use that stuff, anyway? Maybe he could persuade them to cut that part of the story.

He bungeed the suitcases onto the UTV's cargo box and walked back to the car. The only thing left in the trunk was a canvas shopping bag filled with wrapped Christmas gifts. No need to get those out. He slammed the trunk lid closed.

The front door opened, and out came Braden, Rebekah, and Marilyn. Marilyn. What a weird name for a dog. Braden carried a pink garment bag, and Rebekah a small suitcase.

Rebekah had transformed. She'd tamed her hair into a honey-colored bun and pulled on some jeans and an oversized sweater.

As Braden headed toward the car, Ethan took a deep breath to get back into character and sauntered toward Rebekah. "Here, ma'am. Lemme git that."

Her cheeks pinked. "That's not necessary, Dirk."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, it is. My mama'd skin me alive and hang me out to dry if she ever found out I let a lady carry her own suitcase." He held out his hand. "Now, would you wanna git me in trouble?"

A soft smile warmed her mahogany eyes. "Well..."

He took the suitcase. "Thank ya, kindly, ma'am, for helpin' keep me in my mama's good graces."

They walked in silence to the UTV. He offered her his hand, and after she and Marilyn climbed into the backseats, he stacked the small suitcase onto the other luggage and re-strapped the bungee cords across the top.

Ethan headed toward the driver's seat but then stopped and turned back. "Ma'am, you got a coat?"

"It's packed in my suitcase. I'll be fine. It's not that far."

She was going to freeze. He shrugged off his jacket and held it out. "Here, ma'am. Take mine." Now he was going to freeze. After living in L.A. all these years, he'd gotten soft.

"I can't do that. It's a short drive. I'll just snuggle up with Marilyn, and I'll be fine."

"Now, ma'am, like I said, my Mama'd—"

"OK, OK." She rolled her eyes, took the jacket, and slipped it on.

Ethan held back a smile. At least she seemed to buy his explanation. He jumped into the driver's seat, and Braden climbed in beside him.

Braden fastened his seatbelt. "Let's go, Dirk."

"Yessir." Ethan started the UTV, and they headed back toward the main house. He'd grown up in West Texas. That landscape was stark—flat as far as anyone could see. This area of the state had a simple beauty. The smattering of tall pines and shorter live oaks, the rocky outcroppings, the gnarled mesquite trees that mimicked contemporary sculptures. Right now, white blanketed the ground, but in the spring, an ocean of bluebonnets would cover the softly rolling hills from horizon to horizon. Winter often painted the dome of sky overhead a deep sapphire. But not today. The aftermath of last night's storms had left nothing but a drab gray.

His nose and lips ached from the frigid wind



created by the movement of the vehicle. He licked his lips. The wetness only made them colder. But he'd done the right thing.

He pulled in front of the main house and parked.

Braden turned toward the backseat. "Bek, you and Marilyn go on in. We'll get your stuff."

She stepped onto the ground and slipped off his coat. "Thanks. You'll need it for the walk to the bunkhouse."

Braden glanced toward Ethan and then looked back at his sister. "Dirk's, uh, staying at the big house. He's going to watch it for me while I'm gone. Besides, the bunkhouse doesn't have a generator...or a fireplace."

"Oh, yeah." Her face flushed red.

Ethan slipped on his jacket. "Now y'all go on in, and I'll git the luggage."

She had that all-American, outdoorsy look. Clean. Pure. Timeless. Maturity suited her. She even had smile lines radiating from her eyes. Been a long time since he'd seen those on a woman of any age. Nothing fake about her.

And yet his life was all about being fake—pretending to be something, someone he wasn't. He'd come to hate the phoniness of the Hollywood scene. Years ago, he'd tried to blend in, become one of the crowd, but he couldn't...wouldn't. After all these years, he was still an outsider, unwilling to conform to the social expectations.

In another time and another place, he might have asked her out. But not right now. That would be

inappropriate. She was the “boss’s” sister, and he was just a ranch hand.

He grabbed the suitcases and carried them into the house. If he ever built a country home, he’d want it to be just like this one. Pine-paneled walls, oak floors, and an Austin stone fireplace that reached up two stories. Warm, masculine, homey. Braden had done well for himself.

“Bek’s upstairs in the guest room on the left.” Braden squatted down and began laying wood in the fireplace. “Knock before you go in.”

“Yessir, Mr. Kingston. Thank ya kindly for the advice. I’d a never thought of that on my own.”

Braden snickered.

He was having way too much fun with this.

Ethan climbed the stairs, set down the suitcases, and knocked.

She opened the door and stood in the doorway.

“Ma’am? Where’d you like these?”

“Thanks, Dirk. I can take it from here.” She smiled up at him.

“Now, ma’am, my—”

“Look, I’ve never met your mama”—she stuck her hands on her hips—“but I’m going to guess she wouldn’t want you walking into a lady’s bedroom, either.” She locked her gaze on his.

Everything in him wanted to grin, but he needed to stay in character. “No’m. You got that right.”

“So, which is worse? Not delivering the luggage, or entering my bedroom?”

“That’s a mighty tough one.” Feet planted in the