

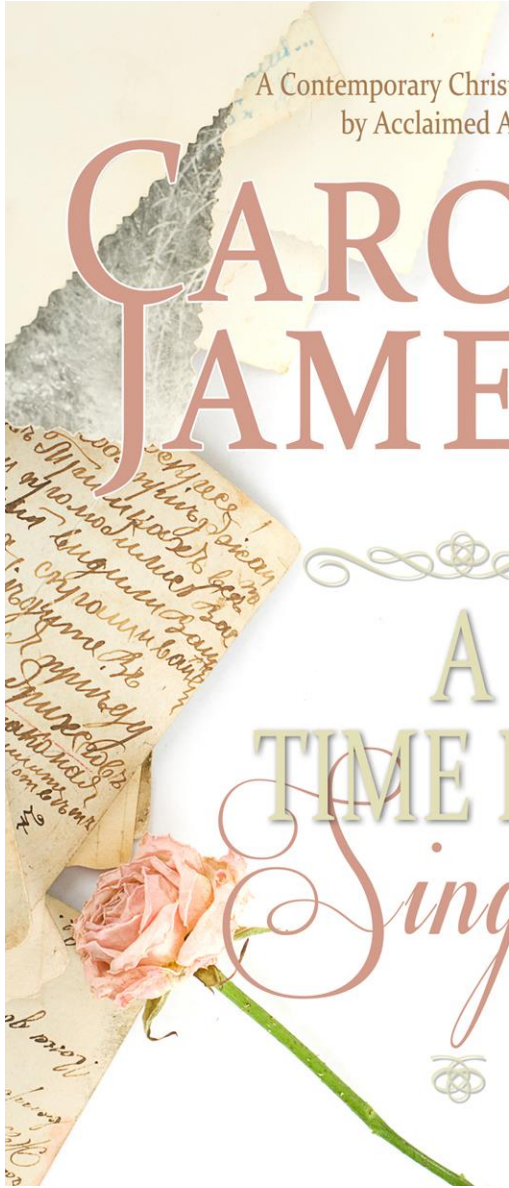
A Contemporary Christian Romance
by Acclaimed Author

CAROL
JAMES



A
TIME FOR

Singing



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Singing

Carol James

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A Time for Singing
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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.*

"One of the best romances I've read. The author's three-dimensional characters allow the reader to experience the joy, sorrow, pain, and love that Ethne and Daniel feel. I rode the roller coaster of emotions in every page of this book, through Ethne's troubled past and with each cautious step as she learned to trust. A five-star novel." *Kathleen Neely, author of The Street Singer*

"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. I would recommend this book to everyone." *Cynthia M., Reader*

"The storyline is terrific, the characters are captivating, and the lessons learned are worth learning. Go ahead and break every chain and jump in feet first. Completely loved this story. Five Stars and highly recommend." *Dawn, Reader*

Dedication

To my partners in crime... Iron sharpens iron.
The Suwanee Critique Group: Tony, Patty, Dawn,
Suzy, Cele, Jennifer, Robert, and Gord.

And the Saturday Morning Bagel Bunch: Ruth, Donna,
and Peggy. Thanks for your wise input and
encouragement.

“THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING, AND A
SEASON FOR EVERY ACTIVITY UNDER THE
HEAVENS.” ~ECCLESIASTES 3:1

1

So, who would it be tonight?

From her table in the back corner, Charlee Bennett surveyed the inn’s small dining room. The only empty chair sat across from her, a sure sign she’d soon have a dinner companion.

She smoothed the white linen napkin in her lap and sipped her water. Over the past few years, these monthly weekends at the Wayfarer Inn had become her favorites, times of pampering among the plodding.

A tall man who definitely wasn’t from Crescent Bluff stepped into the doorway and leaned on the old oak pulpit now serving as the hostess stand. Michael presented his best maître d’ smile and then consulted the reservations list. The new diner nodded. Michael gathered a menu and silverware and turned in her direction.

Perspiration prickled her face. Oh, no. Not this man. Anyone but him. Please...not a musician. She could spot them a mile away. After following Jake around for a year and then dating him for two more, she knew the look. PR. Painstakingly Relaxed.

Last month, she'd shared dinner with a trial judge from Amarillo, and the month before that, a retired humanitarian aid worker from Uganda. Not only had both men been fascinating, they'd also been safe. Both were old enough to be her grandfather. But as Michael led tonight's guest toward her table, only one word resonated within her.

Danger.

Taking a deep breath, she reached for her water glass and unsuccessfully attempted to swallow away the mass of nerves knotting her throat. She could do this.

Mr. PR turned his back and spoke to Michael. "When you said 'Charlie,' I just assumed... I didn't realize Charlie was a woman."

He probably thought she couldn't hear him...that he was speaking more quietly than he was. All those years of playing loud music had made Jake half deaf, too.

"You sure no other tables will be available soon?" the stranger continued.

"There's no guarantee, sir," Michael answered. "Friday nights are always busy."

Mr. PR shook his head. "I've got to be someplace in an hour. Can't take the chance."

Michael gestured toward the chair opposite her. "Ms. Bennett is always happy to share her table when we're busy. I assure you that you'll find her excellent dinner company. Please have a seat, sir. I'll send Joe right over to take your order. Enjoy your meal." Michael turned and walked away.

Before her, he stood tall and lanky with black hair, his face covered with a stylish amount of dark stubble. Empty piercings dotted his ears and maybe even his left eyebrow. But that one might have been a scar. She couldn't tell. The candlelight softened his features, making it impossible to know for certain.

Frayed spots decorated his tight jeans, and a black leather jacket hid all but the central portion of a black t-shirt. His painstakingly meticulous hairstyle, which could only have been achieved by applying gallons of product while primping for half an hour in front of the mirror, failed to match his relaxed wardrobe. Even the ever-blowing Texas wind hadn't ruffled his style. PR, for sure.

While she wouldn't describe him as classically handsome, he was totally attractive. Obviously, she'd failed to learn any kind of lesson from Jake's betrayal.

Despite her mind's pleading for caution, she smiled and offered him her hand. She would do this. After all, he apparently didn't want to be dining with her any more than she did with him. "Hello, I'm Charlee—with two *e*'s—Bennett."

He grasped her hand and flashed a warm smile that grew until it almost covered his entire face. She couldn't help but grin back.

"Nice to meet you, Charlee with two *e*'s. I'm Chance...with one *e*...Jackson. Thanks for offering to share your table with me."

She returned his firm grip. "No problem."

"Haven't been here in a while, and I didn't realize the place would be this busy."

She should let go, but for some reason, her fingers refused to obey. "It's always packed on Friday nights."

"Great news for the owner." Releasing her hand, he glanced back over his shoulder and rocked onto his toes and then back down.

"Please have a seat, Chance. With the kitchen as busy as it is tonight, you'd better get your food ordered if you're going to make your appointment."

A red flush crept up his neck and inched across his face. "I, uh, didn't know you could, I mean, I didn't intend..." He paused and took a deep breath. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'm sure I sounded petty and ungrateful, but I'm not. Thanks for your generosity." A softer smile warmed his face.

He pulled off his jacket and hung it on the back of the antique oak chair. A tattoo covered his left forearm—colorful scroll-work embellishing Greek characters. Just one more confirmation of his occupation in case she had the slightest doubt—which she didn't.

She pushed her words past the still-present lump in her throat. "Chance. I've never met anyone with that name."

Ignoring her comment about his name, he slid into the chair across from her.

"So, Chance, what brings you to the Wayfarer tonight?"

"Business. Came to Crescent Bluff to help out a buddy of mine."

"I see. And what do you do?" She held her breath, waiting to see if his reply would confirm what her

intuition screamed was true.

Staring down toward the table, he fingered the folded napkin before him. "I'm self-employed. Sales."

A few years ago, she would have taken his words as truth. But no longer. His response screamed dishonesty. Or at least, a lack of transparency. For some reason, he was deliberately being elusive.

His gaze crept upward and found hers. "How about you? What do you do?"

Not shirking his scrutiny, she smiled her most innocent smile. "I'm self-employed. Sales," she poked back.

He raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, and then his grin teased. "Oh, really? What a coincidence. Imagine that."

"Yes. Imagine that. I own a little boutique on Main Street."

Joe materialized beside their table, a pitcher of water in one hand and a pitcher of tea in the other. "Good evening, sir." He poured water into Chance's glass. "Would you care for some sweet tea? Or perhaps you'd like something else. A glass of wine? Something from the bar?"

"No, thanks. Nothing from the bar. Water and tea are fine."

Well, he was definitely from someplace around here. He'd requested the beverage of choice for central Texas.

As Joe left, Chance looked back toward her. "So, let's see. Where were we? Oh, yes, your store. Tell me, Charlee-with-two-e's, why would someone who owns

a business in Crescent Bluff, and lives here—I presume—be staying at the inn?”

Her gaze never wavering, she stared straight into his eyes. They were dove gray with amber flecks. “I think you may have jumped to an incorrect conclusion. I don’t believe I ever said I was staying here. Maybe I’m just having dinner.”

Holding her gaze, he placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Well, maybe you are. Just having dinner.” As the corners of his mouth curved up, his eyes sparkled in the candlelight, and the needle on her attractiveness meter inched higher.

Refusing to surrender, she placed her elbows on the table and leaned in just close enough to enjoy the delicious earthiness of his cologne. “But I’m not.” Her response was barely above a whisper. “I stay here one weekend a month when I balance the books for my boutique. I figure if I have to do something I hate so much, I may as well do it in the nicest possible setting. My own reward system.”

Holding up his hands in surrender, he chuckled, and the amber flecks danced. “I have to admit, I like the way you think.”

Her heart began to veer down a familiar road, one she could not permit herself to travel again, and she stomped on the brake. Easing back into her chair, she placed her hands in her lap. “You’d better order if you want to make that appointment.”

“Guess so, hadn’t I? Excuse me a minute.” He pushed the menu into the circle of candlelight in the center of the damask tablecloth. He studied the choices,

the fingers of one hand tapping against the tabletop, drumming some rhythm to what could only be an imaginary melody. The fingernails of his right hand were longer than those of his left. A guitar player.

Breathing slowly and deeply, she looked away and glanced over his shoulder toward the dining room entrance. A man with blond hair and a warm, though not magnetic, smile waited as Michael approached an older couple who now had a seat available at their table under the front window.

The man wore dress pants with a shirt and tie, topped off with one of those old-fashioned tweed jackets with suede patches on the elbows. For some reason, that style always made her picture an English lord surveying his estate. But that was certainly where his resemblance to old-fashioned aristocracy stopped. This guy could have doubled for that model on the front of this month's *Dallas Style*.

Michael motioned for him to follow. If only he'd arrived a few minutes earlier, she could have been sharing her table with him. He certainly had to be more interesting, and less dangerous, than Chance-Jackson-Mr.-PR-The-Musician. As Lord Handsome pulled out the chair, she checked for a band on his left ring finger. Nothing. Her gaze climbed back to his face in time to see him returning her look, and he winked.

Busted.

She turned back toward Chance.

He stared at her with raised eyebrows—obviously waiting for the response to a question she hadn't heard.

Her cheeks burned, and she didn't need a mirror to tell her they were bright red.

He glanced over his shoulder toward Lord Handsome, and when he turned back, a smirk covered his face.

Busted again. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I asked what your favorite thing here is. Food-wise, I mean. Like I said, I haven't been here in a few years."

The sarcasm in his voice set her whole face on fire, but the best move was to pretend she hadn't noticed it. "I'm having pork roast. It's an excellent choice, if you like pork."

"I do." He motioned to Joe. "At Ms. Bennett's recommendation, I'll take the pork, please. Oh, and you can bring me a piece of carrot cake as an appetizer."

"I'll have that right out for you, sir." Joe took the menu and headed toward the kitchen.

Chance flashed his immense grin. "You know what they say. Life's unpredictable. Eat dessert first."

His words hit her like a punch to the stomach. She couldn't breathe. The harder she tried, the more impossible it became. Clamminess crept across her face. Her heart pounded.

"Charlee? Are you OK?"

She nodded. Hand shaking, she reached for her glass, only to knock it over.

Water streamed toward Chance's lap. Attempting

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to stem the flow, she threw her napkin onto the puddle. But it only pushed the ice and water over the edge

Chance jumped up. The entire dining room turned toward them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "so sorry."

"It's OK." He smiled and shook his leg. "No permanent damage." He winked.

2

Charlee sat on the maroon velvet settee in the parlor, her stomach churning from having eaten so fast. She hadn't been able to get out of there quickly enough. Just sharing a table with Chance had been challenging. Then she'd made things worse by spilling ice water all over him. How embarrassing! But his comment about dessert had drawn her back in time, and she was sitting across the table from Jake.

That phrase had been one of his favorites. Yet he'd never actually done it as Chance did. Jake had only used it to justify doing whatever he wanted to do whenever he wanted to do it. But she'd dealt with Jake's rejection. She was over him...or so she thought. The dinner with Chance tonight proved otherwise. Ignoring something was not the same as dealing with it. And as painful as the truth was, she had to face it. She may never be completely over Jake.

She'd made a huge mistake sharing her table with Chance. She should have manufactured an excuse and had her dinner delivered to her room and eaten there. She should have obeyed the inner voice that screamed "Danger" when she saw Chance waiting in the entrance to the dining room.

Despite his evasiveness, her first impression of

him had been right. He was another Jake. And although her actions might have appeared rude, she should have never let him sit down at her table. Anyone else would have been fine. Just not him.

Charlee glanced at her watch. Precious minutes slipped away. If she didn't get to work soon, Sunday morning would come and the books would still be unreconciled.

She retrieved her bags from behind the front desk and headed down the hall toward the guest rooms. She stopped in front of the third door on the left, inserted the old brass key, and tried to turn it. Nothing. She compared the number on the key with the brass plate beside the door. Both were labeled the same: Room 5, The Nairobi Room. She tried again. Still nothing.

"So, you're the one who nabbed my room."

Jumping at the words, she turned to find Lord Handsome behind her leaning against the far wall.

"Excuse me?" Had this been a regular hotel, an unfamiliar man standing outside her room might have made her nervous. But not here, not at the inn.

He straightened and took a couple of steps toward her. "I always request room five when I come to Crescent Bluff. However, this trip, I was forced to stay in another room because someone else reserved this one first." He winked just as he had earlier.

She grinned at his feigned impatience. "Well, the reason I had to take this old room is because someone had already gotten room seven, my usual room."

His eyes sparkled. "Fair enough. So, that lock can be a bit touchy. Insert the key, and turn it as you pull

the knob toward you and upward.”

She followed his instructions, and the door opened. “Thank you very much, Mr...?”

“Doctor...Noah Walsh.”

She offered her hand. “Charity Bennett.” She hadn’t used her formal name since she signed the contract to purchase her shop, but he seemed like a formal-name type of guy.

His grip was strong, but his skin was soft. Definitely not a man who made his living working with his hands...unless, of course, he was a surgeon.

He was exactly the type of man she should be interested in. Not some musician.

As he flashed his non-Chance smile, excitement tingled her stomach. She glanced down at her arms. Goosebumps.

“Charity. I like that. A lovely, old-fashioned name.”

“I’d say Noah’s even more old-fashioned.”

“Touché. Well, since this is your first time staying in room five, I don’t suppose you’re a member of the SDS.”

She’d heard Grandma and Grandpa talk about that. “Students for a Democratic Society? I’m a little young for that. Besides, does it still exist?”

“Not that SDS.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

The goosebumps multiplied. “There’s more than one?”

“You strike me as an intelligent woman. I’m certain you’ll figure it out.” Crooking his finger, he

motioned her closer. "Your room is full of hidden treasure." He spoke in an exaggerated whisper. "Good luck on your quest, Miss Charity. Oh, and be certain to check the desk."

"Thank you for your help with the key." She answered his whisper with one of her own.

He made a slight bow. "To have left you standing out here in the hall all night would have been massively un-chivalrous. Will I see you in the morning at breakfast?"

"Probably. Good night, and thanks again."

She stepped into the room and turned on the light. She wouldn't have exactly described the trinkets scattered around the room as treasure. Oh well, one man's trash...

Packed with souvenirs Colonel and Mrs. Clark must have brought back with them from their safaris and other overseas trips, "The Nairobi Room" bore an appropriate name. Its dark brown and green color scheme along with the various animal skin rugs and statues gave the room a masculine feel. No wonder this room appealed to Noah. But with its white linens and delicate mosquito netting canopy, the bed provided just the proper balance of femininity to make the room welcoming to her.

After setting her overnight bag on the chest next to the small fireplace, she opened the French doors facing onto a small private patio. The primitive outdoor furniture was made of bent twigs, not white wicker like room seven. If tomorrow's weather was warm, this would be the perfect place to work.

She closed the door and placed her computer case on the desk. It was nothing special, just an old oak secretary. And yet, Noah had encouraged her to check it out.

Five small drawers and surrounding shelves at the back of the desktop would have supplied the original owner with plenty of organizational space. She opened and closed the tiny drawers. A piece of folded paper popped up from the bottom one. Removing it, she carefully flattened it. Delicate handwriting that most likely belonged to a woman covered the sheet of Wayfarer Inn stationery. Charlee read,

Welcome, member of the SDS.

The same initials Noah had used.

Last night I heard the sound of crying in the hall. When I opened my door, I saw her, Elizabeth Graham, the Lady of the House. She was sitting in the corner, her face marked by sadness. She called, 'John, where are you? Please come home.' I hated to intrude upon her privacy, but I called her name. A shocked expression crossed her face as she looked my direction and vanished. Now, in the light of day, I wonder if what I saw was real.

Well, someone had been taken in by the old myth of the ghost of the inn's original owner. The note was dated ten years earlier, and the paper was softened from being unfolded and refolded over the years. Obviously, Charlee was not one of the first patrons to have discovered the letter and read its account. Amused, she refolded the note and returned it to the tiny drawer to leave it for another guest to find. Maybe this was the treasure Noah referred to, but nothing in

the letter explained the meaning of SDS.

She lifted up the writing surface to reveal the desk front, two drawers—one at the top, and one at the bottom—with a panel in between. She opened the top drawer. Stationery, envelopes, and pens. She closed it and then reached down and pulled out the bottom drawer. Empty.

She stared at the front of the secretary. No other piece she'd seen before was designed like this, without a center drawer. She pushed her hand against the panel. It shifted. She ran her fingers along the outside edges of the panel. Two latches. One on each side. Excitement fluttered her stomach. She pushed the hooks backward. The panel shifted again. She forced her fingertips into the indentations behind the clasps and eased the panel toward her.

A secret drawer!