

WHAT COULD BE DIFFERENT
THIS CHRISTMAS?
EVERYTHING.

CHRISTMAS
LIGHTS &
MOONLIT
NIGHTS

CAROL JAMES

Christmas
Lights and
Moonlit Nights

Carol James

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Christmas Lights and Moonlit Nights
COPYRIGHT 2024 by Carol James

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information:
titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R) NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2024
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0488-3
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my father, Lt Col Ralph Wilson; my father-in-law, MSgt. Carl James; my uncles, cousins, and friends who served in various branches of the United States military. Thank you for your sacrifice and your service.

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 *No Longer a Captive* – “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*

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. I would recommend this book to everyone.” Cynthia M.

1

WHO IS LIKE YOU, LORD GOD ALMIGHTY?
YOU, LORD, ARE MIGHTY, AND YOUR
FAITHFULNESS SURROUNDS YOU.
YOU RULE OVER THE SURGING SEA; WHEN
ITS WAVES MOUNT UP, YOU STILL THEM.
PSALM 89:8-9

Leah Davidson leaned against the headrest in her truck. She closed her eyes as the ferry rocked its way across the narrow inlet to the secluded island that had been her home for most of her life. Gulls circled overhead, calling and diving to steal the tidbits left behind by the ferry passengers. Once they docked on Palm Island, she'd drive her pickup off the boat and into Mom and Dad's garage, where it would most likely remain until she was ready to go back home.

She loved this island. It harkened back to a simpler, uncomplicated time. Peaceful, slower, trafficless. Such a contrast to Houston with its ribbons of highways woven over and under each other until Leah was certain they'd knot together.

The ferry slowed as Sam began the docking procedure. Leah breathed in the ocean air, heavy with the crisp, briny scent carried by the waves as they

lapped against the shore. She was home.

"Hey, young lady. Get a new ride?" Sam eyed the pickup.

She nodded. "My Christmas present to myself. Got it a couple of months ago."

"Great taste. Enjoy."

"Thanks, Sam." She handed him a tip, drove off the ferry, and turned left toward the last house on the right. Home. She pressed her garage remote, and when the third door raised, she eased her truck inside and cut the engine. The front door flew open and Mom and Dad, her welcoming committee, stepped out onto the porch. Dad balanced on crutches, his knee fat with bandages from his surgery...the whole reason Leah had come home early for the holidays. His passion was decorating for Christmas, and Leah intended to do everything she could to get all the decor placed to Dad's liking.

Mom squealed as she ran down the steps and gave Leah a hug. "We're so glad you're here."

"I'm glad I'm here, too." She hugged her mother and then her father. "And Dad, don't you worry. I'll get started on the decorations in a day or two."

He winked. "That's my girl."

"By the way," Mom said, "I invited the Cobbs over for dinner tonight. Their nephew, Jed, is visiting for Christmas. His parents went on one of those six month around-the-world cruises for their anniversary, and Mr. Cobb needed some help building some shelves for his office. So Jed came to spend the holidays with his aunt and uncle. From what the Cobbs say, he's quite

the carpenter.

“I don’t know if you remember him. He spent part of one summer with them years ago. Anyway, I thought you two young people might enjoy some time together, apart from us old folks.”

Oh, Leah remembered him. His red hair and pale skin had made him a favored victim of the sun. And he’d gotten quite a burn even with sunscreen slathered on thick enough to look like whipped cream. He’d been pudgy and afraid of the water, and Leah and her girlfriends had teased him mercilessly. But not Hannah. True to her nature, she’d been kind and tried to befriend him. But Leah hadn’t. Hopefully, he wouldn’t remember. But if he did, she’d apologize.

Mom gave her a hug. “Now, you better go freshen up.”

~*~

When the bell rang right at six, Leah opened the front door. The Cobbs stood there smiling. Leah peeked around the doorjamb. No Jed. Mrs. Cobb clasped Leah’s hand and winked. “Jed’ll be along in a minute. His flight got in late, and he’s just about finished cleaning up.”

As the Cobbs made their way inside, Leah was left to be the welcoming committee of one. She dropped into one of the wicker chairs on the porch and waited. Eventually, footsteps crunched against the gravel roadway, and then she saw him. Her breath caught. He looked nothing like he had fifteen years ago. Certainly

taller than she was. His orange hair had morphed into a rich auburn color, and he sported a scruffy beard. Normally, she wasn't a beard-girl, but something about his attracted her. It enhanced his jawline and gave his boyish face an air of maturity and mystery. He might have been forty. He might have been eighteen. He would have made a good spy.

She stood and offered her hand. "You must be Jed. I'm Leah Davidson. Welcome."

"Jed Price." He shook her hand. "I think we've met before...maybe in an earlier life?" He grinned.

"If you consider childhood an earlier life, then, yes."

Jed nodded. "Well, it sure feels like a different life. A lot can change after those years."

That was true, especially in his case. "Well, it's good to see you again."

"Good to see you, too."

She doubted he truly meant that...unless he'd forgotten how nasty she and her girlfriends had been to him that summer. How they'd teased him about not being able to swim or even enjoy wading out into the water. Kids could be so cruel. An apology loomed in their near future. But now wasn't the time.

She sat, and he followed suit.

He placed his hands behind his head and, leaning back in the rocker, eased backward and forward. "Nice evening. Hard to believe it's December."

"I know. It feels more like spring."

He nodded. "One thing I love about this part of Texas."

"Me, too." She turned to face him. "So where do you live now?"

"Virginia."

"Does it get cold up there? Get any snow in the winter?"

"Pretty moderate where I am. We might get a dusting of snow in January or February, but it doesn't usually last. Melts and then it's warm again."

"And what is it that you do in Virginia?"

He stared over her shoulder. "I'm in the Navy."

"On a ship?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

She nodded. "Sounds interesting. Travel much?"

"All the time." He jumped up and held out a hand. "Hey, I'll bet the others are wondering where we are. Better not hold up dinner any longer."

As she grasped his hand and stood, she studied his face. Definitely boy-down-the-block cute, but his broad shoulders and muscled arms confirmed he was no longer a boy. His eyes were the rich, golden brown of maple syrup, but instead of being warm and enticing, they were walled off. Distant. Despite his relaxed manner and easy conversation, his words seemed to be carefully chosen. Rehearsed. Almost as if he'd practiced what to say. And his face was unreadable. If he didn't want to be a spy, he'd make a great actor.

Mom opened the front door. "I was just coming to get you two. Dinner's ready."

Leah dropped his hand, and Jed followed her inside. Ever the matchmaker, Mom had seated the two

of them side by side. Jed held out a chair for her, and after she sat, he took the empty chair beside her.

Dad offered the blessing, and then he focused his gaze on Jed. "Glad you could be here with us tonight, son."

Jed angled away from her to face Dad. "Thank you, sir. I really appreciate you and Mrs. Davidson inviting me. Don't get many home-cooked meals."

"It's Mary and John. Try some of Mary's famous mashed potatoes." Dad nodded as he handed Jed the bowl. "So, your Aunt Becky tells me you're in the Navy."

Jed spooned potatoes on his plate and, without even looking at Leah, held out the bowl to her. "Yes, sir."

"What do you do?"

An unreadable expression covered Jed's face. "Whatever the brass tells me...as long as it's not illegal or immoral." As a soft chuckle spread around the table, Jed grinned. "Actually, I'm in Special Ops."

Dad set his fork on his plate. "Special Ops? As in SEALs?"

"Yessir."

Dad raised his eyebrows. "I didn't think you guys could divulge your occupation."

"A few years ago, I couldn't have answered your question completely honestly. But things have changed."

"Tough job from what I hear." Dad wrinkled his forehead and nodded slowly. "Lots of travel."

"It can be challenging. But it's also exciting...and

very rewarding. And yes, lots of travel.”

“Well, thanks for keeping us safe, son.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

~*~

Jed’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He slipped it out far enough to see if it was the base. He hated to be rude, but work took precedence over his social life...well, pretty much all aspects of life. His work was his life. And his life was his work. He’d reconciled himself to the fact that he’d never have a wife and family. He’d seen so many of his team brothers’ marriages die from neglect. He wouldn’t put a family through the pain of his constant absences and fear of his status.

“Excuse me a minute, please. Work.” He stood, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and walked over to the far corner of the living room. “Jed, here.” He listened in silence as his team leader laid out the basics of the assignment.

“Jed, Smith is still in the hospital. So, we need you here in his place by zero-eight hundred tomorrow. We gotta be ready for wheels up by eleven hundred.”

“I’ll get a flight booked and then let you know the schedule.”

His team leader answered, “Copy that.”

Jed ended the call and dropped the phone back into his pocket. This just reinforced exactly why he’d never wanted to get married and have a family. Too much of a distraction when it came to work. And

although he was careful and trusted the other guys on his team, no one knew the future. What if something happened to him? He didn't want to leave a wife behind to raise their kids alone. Nope. Staying single was the best solution to that problem. No one to worry about except himself and his teammates.

He turned and headed back to the table. "I apologize, but I have to leave. My team's being spun up, and one of the guys is in the hospital, so they need me to take his place. Gotta be at the base tomorrow by eight o'clock. Should be back by next weekend. Joe, I guess the shelves will have to wait until then."

Joe nodded. "No problem. You just stay safe out there."

Mary stood. "Let me get you some dinner to take with you. You can eat while you pack."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'd really appreciate that."

Becky and Joe stood, and Becky gave him a hug. "We'll see you in a few days, Jed." Joe grabbed his hand and shook it. "Be careful out there."

Jed nodded. "Will do. I'll try to let you know when I'm back in the States."

Jed made his way to Leah's dad. "Thank you for having me tonight, sir."

Mr. Davidson struggled to stand and shook Jed's hand. "Maybe next time you'll be able to stay for the whole meal." He grinned.

"That would be nice, sir."

Mrs. Davidson stepped back into the dining room, loaded a plastic plate, covered it with aluminum foil, and held it out to him. "Here you go."

He took the offered food. "Thank you, ma'am. See you all in a few days." He touched his fingertips to his forehead, gave a relaxed salute, and then left.

~*~

The rest of the meal was uneventful. Relaxed chit-chat between friends who'd known each other for many years filled the room. Yet, Leah couldn't keep her mind on the conversation. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Jed. She never would have guessed that the awkward boy she'd teased years ago, the one who couldn't swim and was afraid of the water, had become a Navy SEAL.

So, he'd left for who knew where, he'd be back who knew when, and he'd made a point of telling everyone good-bye...except her.

2

Leah snuggled down onto her beach towel. The weather was beautiful...warm and sunny. Today felt more like May than the end of November. The temperature was too cool to get in the water, but it was perfect for lying out on the shore. She closed her eyes and soaked in the warmth of the sun as it radiated from the sand over her skin, the gulf breeze keeping her from getting too hot.

Although she'd told herself she needed to relax, she was basically stalling. She really should start decorating the clubhouse, but the job would keep a little longer. She could even do the interior at night. Hannah had always been Dad's decorating pal, while Leah had always been Mom's baking buddy. Well, she had a week until she officially had to have everything done. And she couldn't ignore today's beautiful weather. It was almost December, and nothing guaranteed the warm temperatures would continue past today.

She rolled over onto her tummy and propped up on her elbows so she could watch the tiny boats on the horizon and the waves as they somersaulted onto the shore. The ebbing and flowing of the water soothed her. When she was younger and she was upset about

something, she'd sit on the beach and watch the waves. She'd imagine them grabbing hold of her problems and then ushering them out to sea.

Beyond the breakers a shape caught her attention. It was big enough to be an adult shark. They weren't unseen this time of year, especially with the warm weather they'd been having here, but they rarely came this close to the beach. Struggling to see clearly because of the sunlight sparkling and bouncing on the waves, she stood to get a better view. The shark swam parallel with the shoreline, back and forth between her house and the Cobbs' house. As it swam, it adjusted its route so that it came nearer to the shore with each pass.

As the waves flowed over the sand, the shark came closer. No. It wasn't a shark but a person. Very few people swam along this portion of the beach...even in the summer, but especially this time of year. As beautiful as today was in the warm, December sun, she'd never get in the water. It would be way too cold to swim as far as she was concerned.

The swimmer came close enough to the shore to plant his feet in the sand and walk out of the waves. His wetsuit enhanced his muscular build. He wore a mask and snorkel and sported a back pack.

He pulled his mask up onto the top of his head. "Hey. Come on in. The water's fine." Jed grinned.

Her heart raced.

Yes, the young boy had certainly become a man.

"No, thanks. What in the world are you doing swimming right now, anyway? Aren't you freezing? The water can't be that warm." She patted the space

next to her. "And what's the backpack for?"

"Just getting some exercise. And if you move enough in the water, you warm up." He pulled off his flippers and eased down beside her onto the edge of the towel.

They sat in awkward silence for a few seconds as she browsed through her thoughts trying to find something she could say. "How was work? Your trip? I didn't realize you'd gotten back." Well, that was novel...

"Same ol' same ol'." He turned and stared at her. "Uneventful...just the way I like it. Everybody home safe."

"What did you do?"

He cocked his head. "It's classified. If I tell you, I'll have to kill you. Or at the least imprison you." He motioned her closer and whispered. "But if you watch the news, you might be able to figure it out." He grinned. "How about you? Got anything going on today?"

"I need to start decorating the clubhouse and the outside area around it for Christmas. It's usually my dad's job, but he can't this year because of his knee. Mom can't climb a ladder, so it only makes sense that I take over for him. In fact, that's the whole reason I came home this early. But I can't seem to get motivated. It's too beautiful out here."

"I hear you." He picked up his gear and stood. "Sounds like a big job. Don't let me hold you up." He placed his fingers against his forehead in a casual salute. "See you around."

She stared at his back as he headed toward his aunt and uncle's house. Having another person to help would be nice. Especially one as attractive as he was. She turned away. She shouldn't be thinking these things. She didn't even know if he was married, or engaged, or had a serious girlfriend. But all that aside, she could use some help with decorating.

She stood. "Jed." She called loudly enough for him to hear her over the crashing of the waves.

He turned back and raised his eyebrows. "Huh?"

"You're right." She closed the space between them. "It is a big job, and I could really use your help." Great. She was begging. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. You're probably exhausted, and I'm sure you've got stuff going on."

"I do. I have an appointment with my pillow. Hardly slept in two days." He shook his head. "But I plan on remedying that in a few minutes."

Heat crept up her neck and covered her face. She shouldn't have asked him for help. "Oh, sure. I didn't think about that."

"No problem. Hope you find somebody to help. Don't work too hard."

"I'll try not to."

He turned away and continued to his aunt and uncle's house.

She watched his form as it got smaller with each step. None of those muscles had been evident in the shirt and pants he'd worn to dinner the other night. Yes, he certainly filled out that wetsuit.