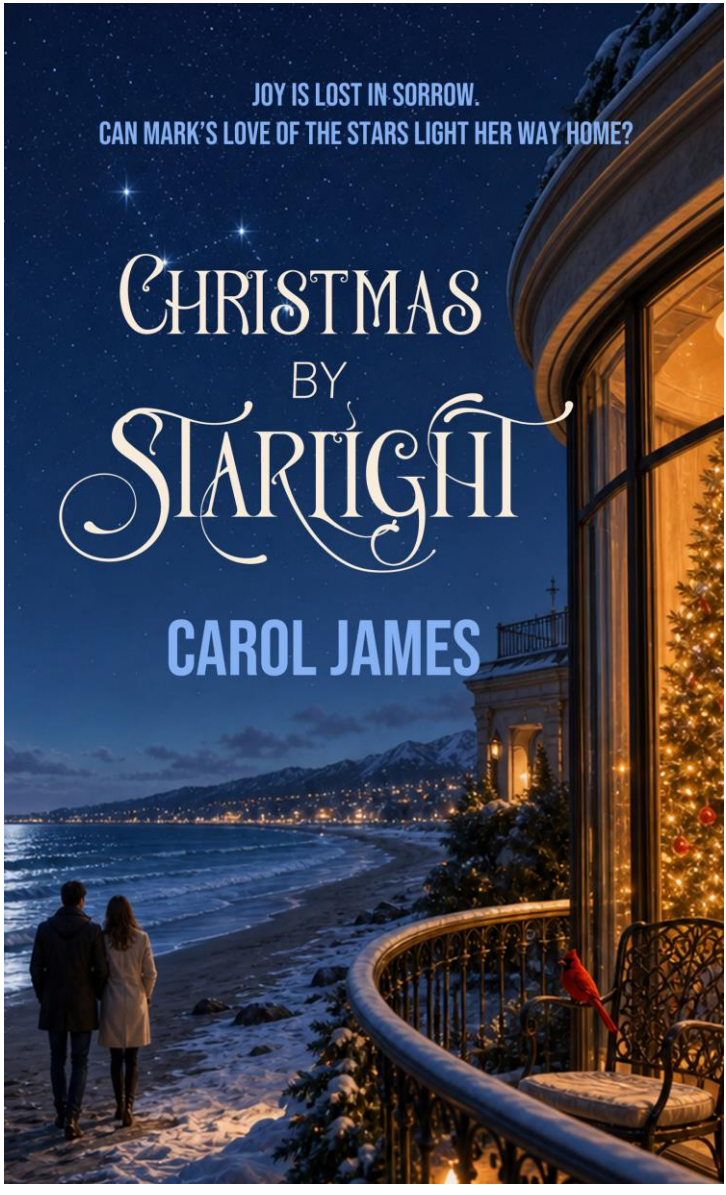

JOY IS LOST IN SORROW.
CAN MARK'S LOVE OF THE STARS LIGHT HER WAY HOME?
CHRISTMAS
BY
STARLIGHT
CAROL JAMES

Christmas by Starlight

Carol James

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Dedication

To Jimmy, the one who still shows me the stars…

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What People are Saying about books by Carol James

Carol James tells beautiful stores 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.*

I love all of Carol James books. She brings two broken people together to find love, not just with each other but with the One Who is love! *~Patti R., reader*

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Chapter 1

Let the morning bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You. Show me the way I should go, for to You I entrust my life. ~ Psalm 143:8

Shining through the gray branches of the leafless trees, rays from the winter sun pierced the glass panes of Joy Eaton's corner bedroom window. She snuggled back into the pastel chintz upholstery of the over-stuffed chair. Her reading nook. The spot where she began each day. The soft shadows streaking the bedroom walls had once reminded her of the delicate lines of a Monet painting. But a year ago, they'd transformed into the harsh, angular strokes that reflected the pain expressed in works by Van Gogh.

As she whispered Psalm 143:8 aloud, its words reached deep into her heart. "Let the morning bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You. Show me the way I should go, for to You I entrust my life." Each day she battled to find peace in these words. To be able to truly entrust her life to her Heavenly Father. She yearned to, but some days it seemed an impossible task.

Peter's death last year had changed everything. Life became a new normal…the old normal gone,

never to return. When the school had offered her a year's leave of absence from her teaching position, she'd been able to take it. Peter had been quite the investor, and with his sizable life insurance policy, she and Samuel would be able to get by for a few years without her salary, if need be.

But now the holidays were right around the corner. She'd made it through last Christmas, only because she'd been in a state of shock and unbelief. And she and Samuel had gone to her parents' house to spend the holidays. This year, though, that wasn't possible. Mom and Dad were celebrating their anniversary by spending the holidays on a boat cruising through several European rivers with their besties. They'd offered to reschedule so they could be home for Christmas, but Joy had refused. They'd wanted to do this for several years, and she wouldn't let her situation deny them this pleasure. As she'd learned, life was too short to put off fulfilling your dreams with the one you loved.

She and Peter had been blessed with a caring group of friends in the neighborhood and at church. Several had extended Christmas invitations to Samuel and her this year. But the last thing she wanted was to be a fifth wheel.

A soft knock sounded against her closed bedroom door.

Her heart warmed. "If it's someone I know, come on in."

The door inched open. "Mom."

"Good morning, Sammie. How's my favorite

second grader?" She patted the empty spot next to her. "Have a seat."

"It's Samuel, Mommy. Remember, I'm the man of the house now."

Pain wrenched her heart. When her father had bestowed that title on Samuel after Peter's death, she hadn't expected he would take the words to heart. That he would give up a portion of his childhood to play the role of the man of the house. But that was all part of who Samuel was.

He sat, snuggled against her, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Can we put up the Christmas tree this weekend?" He yawned.

Her stomach churned. "We'll see."

As he crossed his arms over his chest, he huffed out his frustration. "Before Daddy died, we always put it up Thanksgiving night. And now, it's too late. Christmas is three days away. Please, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, honey." She ran her fingers through his hair. Brown satin, just like his father's. "We are later than usual. We'll do our best to work it out. I promise." She tapped the tip of his nose. "But right now, I better fix your breakfast and pack your lunch. I'd hate for you to be late for school. Today's your class Christmas party."

~*~

Standing in the garage, Joy took mental inventory of all the boxes that were stacked on the shelves in the Christmas section of the storage area. An

overwhelming panic gripped her. She couldn't do this. Peter had loved Christmas. He'd always made it his job to get out the boxes of decor the day after Thanksgiving and stack everything in the living room so they could decorate the house that weekend. Last year, though, that hadn't happened. There'd been no Peter to unload the boxes. After his wreck it had taken all the strength she had to get dressed in the mornings. And some days, the sense of loss weighed so heavy on her heart, she'd stand staring through the doorway into her closet and, unable to discern one piece of clothing from another, crawl back into bed where she'd spend most of her day.

If it weren't for Mom and Dad, she wouldn't have made it. They'd stepped in and had been both Samuel's grandparents and parents. She'd never be able to thank them for their love and for the time they'd given to both her son and to her to heal. Now, a year later, although the pain had begun to dull, true healing had not yet come. And she couldn't see how she'd ever be completely over losing Peter.

The pain might have lessened, but would the wound ever truly go away? Maybe to a degree, but not completely. And if by some miracle it did, how long would it take? She knew only one thing for certain: if or when healing came, it would not be in her timing and by her strength. Only through God's.

Despite how hard she'd tried, she still wasn't ready to put up the tree or decorate the house. Ready or not, though, she'd have to do it for Samuel. Just not today. She closed the garage door and headed down

the driveway to meet the school bus.

The door to the mailbox was slightly ajar. She hadn't remembered to check the mail in several days. That had been Peter's job. Since most of their bills came electronically, the envelopes and fliers that filled the box were usually junk, nothing important. She opened the door all the way and withdrew the stack of political ads and real estate promotions. As she flipped through the envelopes, she came across one addressed to Peter from the Oceanside Sands Hotel on Padre Island. Her breath caught. The hotel where they'd spent their honeymoon…ten years ago. She should put it with the rest of the junk mail, but she couldn't. The postmark was a few weeks old. It must have gotten lost in the mail.

She ripped open the envelope and glanced at the printing on the page. It wasn't junk. It was a letter addressed to Peter. A confirmation of a half-price offer for a two-week getaway to celebrate their tenth anniversary. A Christmas gift from the love of her life. She bit her bottom lip to fight back tears. This was so Peter. He'd been tenderhearted. Thoughtful. This was absolutely something he'd want to do. But he was no longer here to celebrate with her.

The school bus rounded the corner at the other end of the street. There was another man in her life. A young man who could accompany her on this trip. One whom she loved with all her heart and who loved her. She took a deep breath to compose herself. Maybe a getaway was exactly what they both needed.

As students emptied at each stop, she prayed she

was making the right decision. Prayed that getting away from the house for Christmas would seem an adventure to Samuel and help her escape the ghosts of past Christmases…past years…that filled her heart and haunted her memory.

When Samuel stepped off the bus, she ruffled his hair. "How was your party?"

"OK. Are we going to put up the Christmas tree tonight?"

"No."

His face fell, and tears filled his eyes.

"We're going to do something even better."

~*~

Joy pulled the car into one of the parking spaces in front of the main hotel doors. It had been the only beachfront property they could afford to stay in for their honeymoon ten years ago, and it obviously had undergone some major renovations since then. The hotel was taller and sleeker than it had been, or maybe she simply hadn't noticed. At that time, her mind had been on more important things than hotel architecture.

The clock on the dashboard read ten o'clock. Thank goodness she had the letter confirming their reservation. She reached into the backseat and squeezed Samuel's knee. "We're here."

He unfastened his seatbelt, stood up, and peered out the window. "Whoa, look at how close it is to the ocean, Mommy."

"I think we're going to have a wonderful time.

Now, let's go check in."

The design of the lobby had obviously been updated since their honeymoon. Mirrored walls, sleek black leather furniture. Plants…plants everywhere.

"May I help you?" A young, nicely-dressed man, Ryan Bolton according to his name tag, smiled at her from behind the desk.

"Yes, please. I have a reservation for the Peter Eaton party."

He stared at the computer screen for what felt like an eternity. "Eaton, you say?"

She nodded. "E-A-T-O-N. Two weeks. It was a promotional offer."

He pressed keys. Scrolled with the mouse. Stared some more. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I don't find a reservation for Eaton. Perhaps it was made under another name?"

"Maybe this will help." She reached into her purse, pulled out the envelope holding the letter of confirmation, and offered it to him. "Peter Eaton." Her heart beat hard enough that she wouldn't have been surprised if he could hear it.

As he removed the letter from the envelope, she glanced over her shoulder at Samuel. He was slowly circling the giant Christmas tree, obviously mesmerized by the lights and decorations.

She glanced back toward the clerk.

He held out the letter to her. "I believe I've solved the mystery. We have no record of receiving a reply to this invitation, so unfortunately no reservation was ever made. Would Mr. Eaton have any additional

communication from the hotel?"

Her eyes began to burn as she shook her head. "My husband passed away several months ago." She'd been stupid to drive all this way without calling ahead to confirm the reservation. "It sounded like a confirmation. I thought he'd… I uh… I'm so…"

"Please accept my condolences. If you'd like, I can call some of the other hotels on the island and see if any of them have had any last-minute cancellations."

"Excuse me, Ryan." A tall man with dark hair and eyes the color of chocolate fondue stepped out of one of the office doors behind the desk and approached them. "Forgive me for interrupting. My office door's open, and I couldn't help but overhear. I have good news. We've just received a last-minute availability. Number 24A."

A puzzled look crossed the clerk's face. "Number 24A?"

The tall man nodded. "Yes, Ryan. Would you like me to help with the luggage, or can you take care of that?"

"I'd be happy to arrange for a bellman, sir."

"Great idea. Thank you." The tall man turned toward her. "Please accept our apologies for the confusion. The hotel will be happy to cover your room charges in addition to two meals a day for each of you to help ease any discomfort caused by this misunderstanding." He turned and walked back toward his office.

Shock froze Joy in place as she wondered about the motivation for what had just happened. Pity. Guilt.

She had no idea. But maybe it really didn't matter. They'd gotten a room…and some meals…for free. Standing in silence, she thanked her Heavenly Father for His care and provision.

~*~

When they reached the twenty-fourth floor, the elevator doors slid open. She and Samuel followed the bellman out of the elevator and onto the flat roof. As the sea breeze floated through her hair, its briny scent called up memories of when she and Peter had stayed here for their honeymoon. Overhead, the sky formed a navy canopy dotted with twinkling stars. Along the beach horizon, the low-hanging moon painted a silver path toward the shore as it shone above the rolling ocean waves. The penthouse…they were staying in one of two apartments on the penthouse.

The door to their apartment, 24-A, was in the center of the wall spanning the left side of the rooftop. The door to another apartment, 24-B, mirrored theirs on the right. A large swimming pool with a hot-tub area next to it filled a good portion of the center space between the two apartments. Tall evergreen bushes planted against wrought-iron fencing that faced the parking lot below offered both security and privacy. Shorter bushes planted against the fence on the back side, allowed an unrestricted view of the beach.

The bellman rolled the luggage cart up to the apartment on the left and then stepped back, gesturing toward the door handle.

This had to be some sort of a mistake. The manager must have thought she was someone else. "Are you sure this is the right room?"

"There's only one way to find out for sure." He nodded toward the keycard she held.

As she tapped it against the plate on the door, a click sounded.

He grasped the handle and pushed the door open. "Yes. This is the correct apartment. May I place your bags in the primary suite?"

"Yes, thank you."

The bellman nodded. "I'm assuming the dinosaur suitcase should go in the secondary bedroom."

"Your assumption is correct. Thank you."

When he smiled at her, she relaxed and grinned in response.

As he headed down the hall, she studied the living area. To her left was a kitchen nice enough for any professional chef to use. And to her right was a huge living room with a wall of glass overlooking the beach. A floor-to-ceiling rock fireplace surrounded by book shelves filled the left wall. In the center of the glass window stood an undecorated Christmas tree that had to be at least twelve feet tall. Boxes of what could only be decorations were stacked beside it. For the first time since they left the lobby, Samuel spoke. "A Christmas tree! Please, Mommy, can we decorate it?"

"I…I think so. But not tonight. It's late. How about tomorrow?"

The bellman rolled the empty cart back into the living area. Then he handed her a business card. "Feel

free to decorate the tree, but if you'd prefer not to, we can make arrangements for housekeeping to take care of it."

"Oh, no. We're already making decorating plans." Excitement flushed through her.

He smiled and then gestured toward the kitchen. "There's a pad of paper on the island. List whatever groceries or other items you may want or need, contact the front desk, and our shopping service will purchase them for you. It's included in your stay."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wad of bills…all the cash she had…and offered it to him. "Thank you very much."

He held up his hand to signal no. "Everything's been taken care of, Mrs. Eaton. Contact us if you need anything at all. Have a relaxing stay and a happy holiday."

Confusion and disbelief glued her in place. There was no mistake. He called her by the correct name. "Yes, thank you. You, too."

As the bellman closed the door, Samuel hugged her. "Thank you, Mommy. This is gonna be the best Christmas ever."

CHAPTER 2

Joy yawned and turned over to face the window. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly. Maybe it had something to do with the luxurious mattress or the silky softness of the sheets and the coziness of the down comforter. Or maybe it was being away from the memories at home.

Looking like a much younger version of his father, Samuel sprawled across the other side of the king-size bed. He hadn't wanted to sleep alone in the other bedroom, and she understood. After Peter's death, learning to sleep alone had been a painful adjustment for her.

Signaling the beginning of a new day, a pink tinge framed the closed bedroom curtains. She eased out of the bed and tiptoed through the lush carpet to the windows. Then she quietly slipped behind the draperies. Below her, sapphire and jade waves ebbed over the tan sand. A semi-circle of an orange orb made itself known above the horizon. How long had it been since she'd seen…really seen…the beauty of God's creation? The glory, the new life of a sunrise? She glanced at the date on the face of her phone. Three hundred and eighty-six days. That's how long.

She grabbed some sweats from the suitcase she

had yet to unpack and slipped into the bathroom to change. She returned to the bedroom and eased into her slippers. After dropping her phone into her pocket, she picked up her Bible from the nightstand. Silently, she eased down the hall and into the living area. Still surrounded by boxes, the dark green tower of the unadorned Christmas tree waited. This would be the first thing on their agenda…right after breakfast.

As she stepped outside, the salty, earthy scent of the beach greeted her just as it had last night. She made her way to the table in the corner next to their apartment and nestled into one of the wrought-iron chairs. She eased back into the shadow and watched as the sun grew larger and the chattering seagulls swirled and dived over the ebbing waves.

How had she ended up in this lovely penthouse apartment? All she'd hoped for was a standard beachside hotel room. Nothing more than a simple place to escape the pain of the coming Christmas. But her Heavenly Father had given her so much more.

One of Peter's favorite verses warmed her heart. "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!" she whispered.

Yes, this was more than she would have ever asked for or imagined receiving. And yet…here she was. Only by the grace of God. Even though she didn't understand all that had happened in the past day, a sense of peace filled her.

The sun hadn't risen enough for her to read her devotion, so she bowed her head and closed her eyes. She wasn't sure she was even capable of praying right now. No words came to mind. But her Father knew her heart.

A loud splash drew her from her reverie. She turned away from the ocean and back to face the pool. A man was swimming away from her toward the opposite end. When he reached it, he flipped and headed back in her direction. Maybe he hadn't noticed her.

She withdrew against the wall to hide in what was left of the slowly disappearing shadow. If she'd realized she wouldn't be alone, she never would have come out here. When he flipped to head away from her again, she picked up her Bible. She'd try to get back into the apartment unseen.

Before she could make it to her door, he was headed back toward her. She dug in her pockets for the keycard, and when she couldn't find it, she returned to search the tabletop.

"I believe what you're looking for is under the table."

She spun to face the pool. He looked kind of like the man from last night, but his hair was curly instead of being neatly combed back into place. And black stubble shadowed his face.

He nodded toward where she'd been sitting. "That table."

The card lay on the ground. "Thank you." She picked it up and dropped it into her sweatpants

pocket.

"Sure." He boosted himself out of the pool and then draped a towel over his shoulders. "I, uh, didn't anticipate you'd be outside this early. If you'd like, we can work out a pool schedule, so we don't interrupt each other's routine."

"That's thoughtful, but since I'm on vacation, why don't we plan around your work schedule?"

"Seems we have a problem." He shrugged. "I'm on vacation, too. Yesterday was my last day until after New Years." As the rising sun reflected in his eyes, they twinkled.

So, it was the same man. But the cold professional who'd stepped out of the back office last night seemed to have nothing in common with this man…nothing except his hair color. She nodded. "Yes, I can see where it could become a problem. What if I take seven and you take seven-thirty. Would that work?"

"Yep. Absolutely."

As he pulled off the towel and dove back into the pool, she turned and went into their apartment. She eased the door closed.

"Mommy, where were you?" Samuel stood in the living room. His eyes glistened with tears, and his lips trembled as he fought to hide his fear. He made his way to her and snuggled against her.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie." She drew him closer. "I went outside to have my devotion, and I met our neighbor. I thought I'd be back inside before you woke up."

They stood in silence for a moment. He was upset,