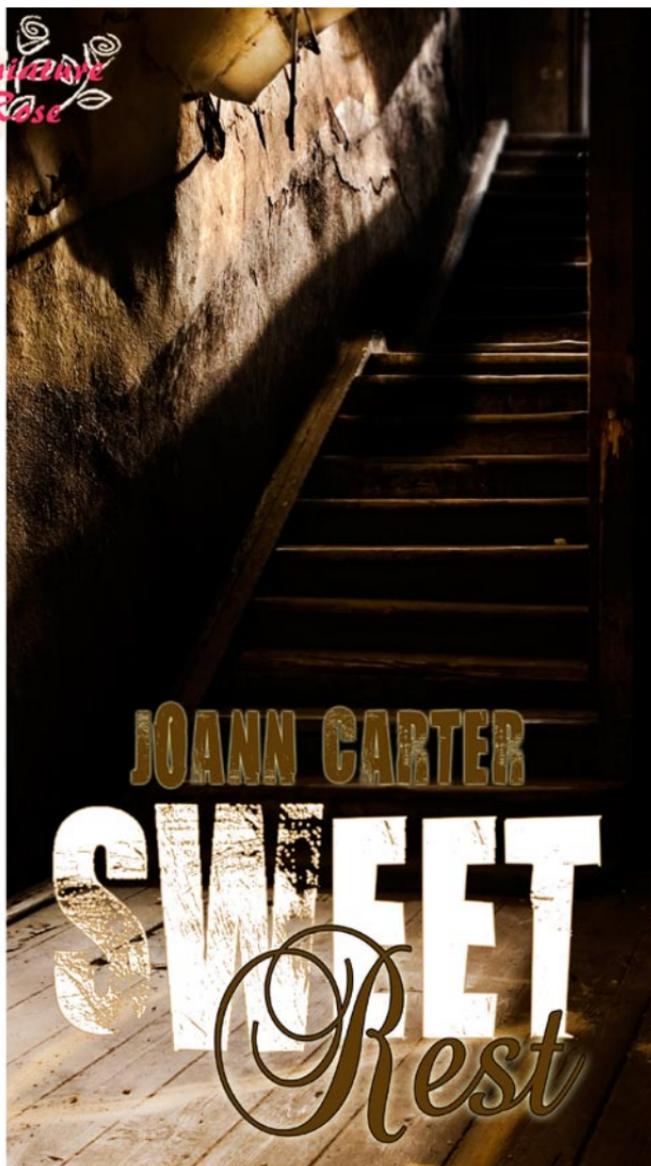


White Rose

Miniature
Rose



Her resolve was fixed. “I’ll come and help you.”

“No,” he said firmly as if he had already made up his mind. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

No one said ‘no’ to Leah. She jut her chin up. “I may be short, but I can take care of myself. Besides, I know I’ll be able to help you solve this mystery.”

Mike held up his hands as if in self-defense. “I’d feel responsible for you, especially since I’m uncomfortable with all of the unknowns.”

She put her hand on his arm and waited until his blue eyes connected with hers. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have any qualms about the project I asked you to shoot for me and *BeautyPlus*?”

He shook his head. “Not from the details you gave me.”

“Good. Then book me a flight because I’m going with you. Together we can find Bob.” Leah had to hand it to Mike. Not many could hold her stare for as long as he did. She hated the fact that she was the first to look away.

Mike sighed and she held her breath. After what seemed like a lifetime, he rose from the bench and said, “We aren’t professionals. Any sign of danger and you’re on the first flight home. Got it?”

Well, not really, but she wasn’t about to throw away her only chance. She nodded as if she were in total agreement with him.

With a resigned sigh, Mike softly said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Sweet Rest

by

JoAnn Carter

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.

Sweet Rest

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother-in-law, Luverna Carter, who fought a brave fight with cancer. She had such a big, generous heart-one that has taught me much. We will all miss her tremendously. But even now, in the midst of our sorrow, I have seen God at work.

Barbara, you've been a rock to Mom and the rest of our family. Thank you so much for all you have sacrificed. I know you'd be the first to admit you couldn't have done all that was required of you in those last months on your own. God was with you. Because of that, His grace was evident in your life.

In the same way God has been ever present for us, it's my desire and prayer that this story will shine the hope and glory of Christ. No matter what circumstance we find ourselves in, He can give us rest, Sweet Rest.

Praise for JoAnn Carter

Smuggler of the Heart:

"...A cozy story that makes you feel good when you read it. The ending is pure romance. I loved the story and the promise for tomorrow that is found at the end of it." Robyn; from *Once Upon A Romance* (<http://www.onceuponaromance.net/WinterWondersReview.htm>)

Mr. Beckman's Secretary:

"...Very inspirational, very uplifting--just an all-round satisfying read. Well done!"

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"...Ms. Carter has written such unique characters that are so real their lives touch you. This is a book that deserves a recommendation as a must read."

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Brenda Talley; *The Romance Studio*

*“If you look around you, you’ll be distressed.
If you look within you, you’ll be depressed.
If you look at God, you’ll be at rest.”*
Corrie TenBoom

Chapter One

Premonitions

The shiny black counter was littered with some pens, multiple work orders, the cash register, and his computer system—everything that filled the small office off of Mike’s garage, faded into the background as Mike tucked the phone under his chin. “Let me make sure I’ve got this straight,” he said, nearly missing the stool as he sat down. “This is Leah Rizzo, from Union High?”

A sweet feminine voice answered. “The one and only. Can you believe it’s been ten years already?”

Mike pictured Leah as he remembered her from school. She barely reached his shoulders, but she was beautiful, no doubt about that. Even now he could see her long, dark hair. What she lacked in height, she more than made up for with a determined, extroverted personality. Needless to say, she had driven him crazy.

“Mike, are you there?”

She always seemed to bounce off the walls with energy.

“Mike?”

“Humm, uh...” The room snapped back into focus. He scowled at the rack overflowing with automotive magazines on the gray walls. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Just thinking.”

Leah laughed. “You sound the same. You always were slow to answer any questions. I can still remember when I found out you were valedictorian. It floored me. I mean, don’t take this wrong. It’s just

I've never met anyone who took so long to answer questions."

Mike fidgeted on the stool, feeling once again like a lanky teenager with two left feet.

"Still the quiet type?" Leah did not wait for an answer this time. "Anyway, did you get the invitation for our ten-year reunion at the Beach Club in Green Pond? It's next Saturday, and according to our records you never did *Répondez, s'il vous plaît*."

The phone seemed to be charged with electricity as she waited for him to answer. "Mike, did you get it? All you have to say is yes or no."

She hasn't changed, he ran his fingers through his hair. *Do I want to go? She babbles so fast; it doesn't give a guy time to think. Besides whoever heard of an Italian speaking French... Répondez, s'il vous plaît? Whatever happened to plain old RSVP?*

"Well?"

Finally, Mike grunted, "I did, but I forgot all about it."

"I know the invitations were sent out kind of last-minute, but when Emily...do you remember her? She was the cheerleading captain—now she's our reunion chair...well, when she called the Beach Club, it was the only Saturday not booked for the whole summer. Will Saturday work for you?"

He felt like asking her how many cups of coffee she had that morning or if she ever stopped to breathe when she spoke. "I'm working that day."

"I usually do, too, but a ten-year reunion doesn't happen everyday. Everyone's entitled to a day off now and then, don't ya think?"

"Not when you own a business."

"Really?" Mike could hear the surprise in her voice. "You own your own business? What do you do?"

Mike had never been ashamed of his shop, but for some reason, her opinion mattered. He tucked

the phone under his chin and pulled out the cloth that hung from his back pocket, wiping off his hands.

Before he could answer, she added, “Not that I should be surprised. You always could do anything you set your mind to.”

“Thanks. I own a shop, Mike’s Auto Body and Repair.”

Her flat, “Oh...” echoed in his ears. For once, she seemed speechless.

“What do you do?” he countered.

“I work in New York City as a beauty consultant.” Pride was evident in her tone.

“So you don’t live in Jersey any longer?”

“Oh, I do. I’m just one of those commuters. Working in my field in the city is a very demanding, but rewarding job. You could say I’m an artist. You wouldn’t believe some of the clients I’ve had.”

“If you say so.” Mike looked out his shop window and saw an old Ford with rust spots in need of his sander and grinned. “I think our jobs must have quite a bit in common.”

“How’s that?”

“You try to make something look attractive; so do I.”

Leah chuckled. “Good try, but nowhere near the same. Now, about the reunion...”

She reminded him of a dog with a bone, unwilling to let it rest. “The committee figured we should call the members of our class who haven’t responded since it’s happening so soon. We divided the calls up between the six of us, so it’s do-able.”

Mike looked at his work log. He had a ton left to do before he could call it a day and get together with the band. He was more than ready to hang up. Talking to Leah even for five minutes made him more exhausted than an hour at the gym. “Give me your number and I’ll call you back.”

The phone seemed to be ringing off the hook all day. Mike glanced at the clock and groaned wishing, for the hundredth time, that his receptionist was there. *Of all the days for Sally to take off.* He tossed his wrench into the tool caddy and ran toward the phone in his small office. By the time he picked it up, the answering machine had clicked on. “Rats,” he mumbled as he tapped the off button and tried again.

“Mike’s Auto.”

“Mike, thank goodness you’re there.” Tim’s voice sounded strange, like when he had his rare asthma attacks.

“Tim, what’s the matter, bro? You sick?”

“No, there’s been an accident here.”

All kinds of scenarios filtered through Mike’s mind; apparently, his imagination was working overtime. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. What he needed were facts. “What happened?”

“I don’t have details.” Tim sighed. “The only thing I know is Bob, well...he had a fall.”

What’s that suppose to mean? Either he did or he didn’t. Mike tried to place who Tim was talking about. “Bob? You mean the carpenter from the missions agency?”

Tim grunted.

For some weird reason, Mike, who was always a very steady, non-alarmist, felt a prickly chill go up his spine. “Is he all right?”

“No one knows. He’s missing.”

An eerie silence penetrated the call. “What do you mean missing?”

“I mean, he went to the hospital, was put in traction and then poof—gone.”

Mike was trying his best to understand, but it just didn’t add up. “I don’t get it. How could he leave?”

“He couldn’t, at least not by himself.” Tim’s voice

shook a little. “Then when I got in tonight, there was a weird text message on my phone from Bob’s cell phone.”

Mike reached for the stool, grabbed a notepad, plucked a pen out of the jar and clicked on the top. Poised to copy the message he said, “What did it say?”

“SOS.”

“That’s it?” Mike croaked. He didn’t even bother to write that down.

He heard his brother’s exasperated sigh over the line. “Nothing else.”

Mike placed the pen back in its holder. “Can you trace the call to a location somehow?” Mike could hear muffled, hurried voices in the background.

“I can’t talk right now.” Tim whispered. “I’m not sure if it’s safe or who I can trust. I’ll call back as soon as I can.”

“Did you call the police?” The dead phone line buzzed in his ear.

Mike threw the phone back on the receiver. “Oy! What next?”

Ever since his grandpa taught him some chords on the guitar as a child, a whole new world had opened up for Mike. It had given him a sense of freedom as well as a way to express himself that carried through into his adult years. Even now, twenty-some-odd years later, every Monday evening, Mike and the band got together. Usually, it was the highlight of Mike’s week, but tonight was anything but usual. Between the mission trip he was preparing for, the decision about the reunion looming over his head, and now Bob...

Al put his drumsticks down. “Mike, what’s wrong, man? You’ve been zoning out all night.”

Mike hung his head. *I need to talk to Tim again.* “I know. Got a lot on my mind. My mission trip’s coming up in two weeks and my brother called to say one of the staff members was hurt and is now

missing.”

Bug-eyed, Larry asked, “What?”

“Yeah, that was kinda my reaction, too. Unfortunately, I really don’t know much more than that. Tim’s going to call later.” Mike sighed. “Then there’s the reunion...”

Larry chuckled. “You’re still worried about that reunion?”

“I wouldn’t say *worried*.” Mike shrugged his shoulders as if to brush it aside. Larry jabbed him in the side with his elbow. “Ah, come on. Is it the reunion you’re not sure about or this *Leah* you and Al mentioned?”

They thought they knew him so well. Granted, Leah had caught his eye as a teen, but he’d grown up a little since then. It wasn’t that he was never interested in a woman, but the thought of dating and the time commitment that type of venture would require wasn’t a luxury he could afford right now. Frankly, it scared him. Most of his friends had married, and in his opinion, some of their wives seemed more possessive than a straight jacket. *No thank you!*

“The reunion, of course.” Mike tried to lighten the mood. “Besides, haven’t you ever heard women like the strong and silent type until after they are married. Then they wonder why we never talk.”

Tim guffawed. “That’s a good one.”

Larry joined in. “Yeah, and you definitely fit into *that* classic male category.”

Mike knew Leah was anything but silent. All the more reason to keep his distance. His father once cautioned him, “Opposites attract, but the question is, can they live together?” The evidence of broken families around him made him wary of any romantic relationship, let alone one with a chatterbox. He couldn’t help but wonder though, would he feel as attracted to Leah as he had in high school?

Frustrated over his thoughts, he ran his fingers

through his hair and reminded himself, for the tenth time in the last hour, that soon he would be gone on his trip. Then he could help Tim find out more about what happened to Bob, and the things, which plagued his mind now, would be gone like a puff of smoke. Of course, that would include the foolishness of indecision over a class reunion.

But this wasn't then, it was now. Al's basement suddenly seemed sweltering. The unseasonably hot and humid June day settled like a blanket as Mike pulled on the neck strap to adjust his electric guitar. If he had just kept his mouth shut about his reservations concerning this reunion, his friends wouldn't be grilling him now.

He felt closed in and trapped. He took off his guitar and tried to shake the feeling. "Anyone up for a swim?"

Al flipped through his music. "This looks like a good place to take a break." For Mike's ears alone, he added, "Susan and I are going to the reunion, so let me know if you want a lift."

Mike said distractedly, "Sure, thanks." But, what he really meant was, I doubt it. He wasn't going to end up a statistic. He made up his mind then and there. If he did decide, and that's a big if, to go to the reunion, he would steer clear of Leah with all her tempting charms.

Chapter Two

Lady In Waiting

Leah loved her job, but even more, she loved working in New York City. Living in New Jersey kept her close to her family, and although commuting was sometimes a hassle, it was something she could never see herself giving up. Besides, she really didn't mind spending time in her little purple car. It totally fit her personality, compact, with a punch.

She pulled into a tight parking garage space, grabbed her purse and attaché case, and headed toward the elevator of the tall corporate building in which she worked. She sashayed into the lobby and called to the receptionist, "Good morning, Mandy. How are you doing today?"

"Good morning, Ms. Rizzo. I'm fine."

"Any changes in today's schedule?"

Mandy looked at the appointment book. "No, but Mrs. Mills called. She'd like to set up an appointment with you for next Tuesday."

"Is that a problem? What's the day look like so far?"

"Booked."

Leah snapped her chewing gum, "All right, I'll handle it. Pull her number for me, please. I'll be in my studio getting ready for my first appointment, if you need me."

Mandy's tentative voice asked, "Ms. Rizzo?"

Leah looked over her shoulder. "Yes?"

“Would you mind if I left for lunch a little early today?”

Now that was an unusual request for her receptionist to make. She had always been so faithful and dependable. She wouldn't be looking for another job, would she? Leah furrowed her brow trying to remember the last time she did an employee review and gave Mandy a raise. “Why?”

Mandy's face flamed. “Mark and I wanted to try that new restaurant out on Fifth Street.”

Leah felt her shoulders sag in relief. Some days, like today, Leah felt much older than her twenty-seven years. Romance. Who has time for it? She sighed. “That's fine, Mandy. You hardly ever ask for anything. Don't worry about rushing back.”

“Thank you!”

Leah clicked her door shut in reply, flipped the light switch, and turned on her laptop before she grabbed her favorite purple teacup. The inter-office line rang and she picked up the phone. “Yes?”

“Ms. Morrison from BeautyPlus is on line one.”

“Thank you, Mandy.” Leah pushed the button on her phone's base. “Good morning, Paige.”

“I've got the break you've been waiting for your whole life!” Paige rushed on. “Clear your lunch hour and meet me at the Duchess Café at one.”

Leah's curiosity piqued. “What's up?”

“I can't talk now; I'm headed to a board meeting. Can you meet me?”

Leah could only speculate what scheme her friend was concocting now. “I'll be there, but can't you even give me a hint?”

“Nope,” Paige laughed. “See you soon.”

The morning had been a buzz of activity, but that wasn't what had Leah's head spinning. Paige continued with her proposal. “*BeautyPlus* wants a video and some pamphlets distributed to every department store where their products are

represented.”

Leah chased her salad around the plate. “Paige, I’m a *personal* beauty consultant. My clientele is from all over New York City.” She leaned closer to the table. “And I don’t work in a *store*.”

Paige rubbed her forehead. “Leah, you have a degree in Business with a minor in Lay-out and Design.”

“So do you.” Leah knew Paige was thinking she was bull-headed just by how she was acting, but what was Paige getting at? “What’s that have to do with anything?”

Paige threw up her hands. “Everything! This is huge, Leah. It will bring together two things that you’re brilliant at—clients and product representation.”

Leah took a sip of her lemon water. She was beginning to feel a little like Eve being tempted with a piece of fruit. “I don’t know...”

“This kind of opportunity won’t knock on your door every day. We’re talking good money and free publicity.”

The publicity part caught her attention even more than the money. It wouldn’t hurt to hear her out, would it? “What would I need to do?”

“*BeautyPlus* is going for a new look. We need you to demonstrate the use of our products for a client in a video setting. The purpose would be to show the public basic beauty tips and how to apply makeup.” Leah nodded as Paige continued. “As for the pamphlets you’d design, they’ll help the customers be able to chose the right products.” She gestured with her hands. “You know, so they can make the most of their appearance tailored to their age, lifestyle, skin type, and so forth.”

Leah’s passion was aroused and she could feel butterflies begin to dance in her stomach. Perhaps she wasn’t being tempted, but rather given an opportunity straight from heaven. She took the