

ROSETTE

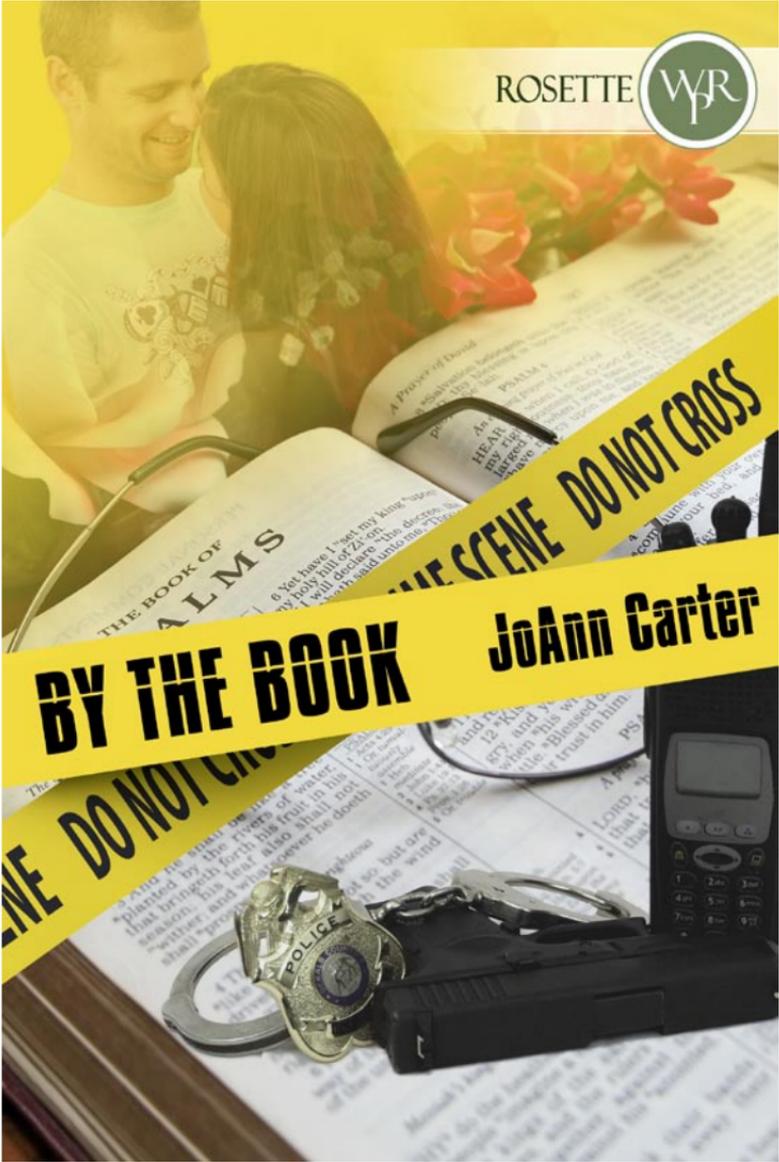


BY THE BOOK

JoAnn Carter

DO NOT CROSS

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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.

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing
a division of The Wild Rose Press
PO Box 708
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706
Visit us at www.whiterosepublishing.com

Publishing History
2007 By Grace Publishing
First White Rose Edition, 2009

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

Cheryl, thank you for helping me understand the roles and responsibilities of a police dispatcher, as well as a thousand other things. You're a wonderful sister.

I'd like to dedicate this book to God, my Savior.
To Him be the glory!

Praise for JoAnn Carter

"While on the lovely shores of Ocean City this weekend I was able to read JoAnn Carter's, BY THE BOOK. My opinion? "Buy the book!" Seriously, a very good story :)"

~Robin Bayne, Author

"...Ms. Carter writes a wonderful, inspirational story that I enjoyed immensely. Books like this can often be predictable, but this one flowed beautifully. Dylan and Sarah are an amazing couple, not only for

Dylan's perseverance, but also for Sarah's willingness to keep trying. She is hesitant, yet there has to be some change to make the story readable. I was elated with the ending and with the fully developed characters, warts and all. It made for a very relatable story!"

~Krista, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

"...This fast-paced read is wonderfully written and presents a dreamy love story! The actions and characters truly project a love of God; it also quotes enough scripture for the book to be life-changing! I loved, and recommend highly, this amazing book!"

~Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio.

"BY THE BOOK by JoAnn Carter, was a very light and romantic read. If you want a short, quick and lighthearted read for an afternoon, this one is for you."

~Maisha Walker, The Road to Romance

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me...All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Psalm 139:1, 16b (NIV)

Chapter One

Sarah’s watch alarm beeped as she jogged around the corner of the boxy, gray limestone building where she worked. She half-smiled, half-cringed as she thought about her coworker Helen, the matchmaker. *Will she ever stop? A man in my life is the last thing on earth I need.* Sarah slowed to a walk and entered the building through the double doors. She stretched her calves while her eyes adjusted to the light and then skimmed the sign on the wall of the lobby:

Central Communications:

Emergency Management Headquarters

EMT training, Fire Academy, Police

Academy, Firing Range,

County Forensic Lab, County Dispatchers

Sarah felt the familiar heady sensation as she read that last name. *That’s me,* she thought as she glided down the hallway, her head held high. Some days, she dreaded her job as a police dispatcher, but on the whole, she loved the high-speed twists and unpredictable days. She sauntered through her office

doorway, grabbed the loafers sitting under her desk, and took off her sneakers.

Helen pulled the phone piece away from her mouth. "Have a good break?"

"Yup." Sarah picked up her headset and nodded. "But I missed not having Ellen with me."

"Hmm." Helen's lips puckered like she had just eaten a sour lemon. "I don't know how you can insist running gives you energy."

"It does."

Helen's forehead wrinkled as her eyebrows rose to her hairline. "Whatever."

Sarah laughed as she unscrewed the top of her water bottle. She tilted her head and considered the nondescript white walls, multiple computer consoles, headsets, phones, and the door leading into the supervisor's room. "Helen, doesn't it feel good to work? It just gives you, I don't know, a sense of independence."

Sarah's radio sounded off, stopping any further conversation.

"Central." The radio crackled momentarily before the gruff voice continued. "This is Patten. Calling to clock out."

"Ten-four." Sarah picked up his time card and pushed it into the slot to be stamped. "It's taken care of, Officer Patten. I hope you have a great day off tomorrow."

"Thanks, Sarah! That's my plan. Did I tell you it's my son's birthday?"

"I think you did mention it to me last week."

She could almost hear the grin in his voice as he added, "Yeah, well, we're going fishing."

"Sounds great! Tell Ben I said happy birthday."

"I'll do that. Talk to you later."

Sarah swiveled her chair so she could face Helen. "Now, what were we saying?"

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farther on the bridge of her nose. "Independence," she said dryly. "Have you ever stopped to consider that being able to depend on someone other than yourself might not be such a bad thing?"

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Frank, the dispatching supervisor, popped his head around the door, and Sarah let out the breath she had been holding as he walked over.

"I'm glad you're still here." Frank pointed his thumb to the ceiling. "The rookies are practicing some calls. Is there any chance, Sarah, you could give them half an hour or so of your expertise?"

"My expertise, huh?" She hazarded a glance at

Helen. "I think what it really boils down to is you don't think it's probable Helen would agree to go."

"Probable?" They both turned toward Helen.

Helen batted her eyelashes.

Frank shrugged. "Guess you got me there."

Sarah laughed. "Okay, as long as I don't have to get in the squad car with any of them. The last time I did, well, let's just say it cured me for life!"

Frank chuckled. "You mean the time when the rookie, in his excitement, took the turn too quick?"

Just the thought made Sarah's head hurt where it had banged up against her door's window. "That's the one."

"Can't say that I blame you. Don't worry, though, they just need some help in the Academy's training room today." He raised his hand. "So, I'll take that as a yes?"

Sarah nodded in consent.

"The police force wouldn't be the same without you."

She waved him off. Instead of leaving, he cocked his head to one side. "So, what do you say I take you out to dinner to thank you?" Sarah sucked in a raspy breath, and Frank grinned. "Well, it never hurts to try. One of these days, you might take me up on the offer."

She ignored his comment and checked her watch. "I saved my break until so late in the day because I told Bill I'd cover for him. I'm expecting at least another two hours here, then I'll go up. "

"That's all right, you can go now. Bill called me a few minutes ago. His visit was shorter than he thought it would be. He was just leaving the dentist when I talked to him." Frank sat down to take over Bill's channels. "I'll hold the fort down so you can go on up."

Sarah picked up her hooded sweater and said to Helen, "Well, that's that."

Helen just had time to lift her hand in farewell as a call came through. Sarah slipped quietly out the door with a wave goodbye to Frank.

Sarah entered the training room where a rich baritone voice filled the air. She spotted two unfamiliar officers standing in front of the rookies. The officer with the deep voice lectured while the other held up a chart with a sample logbook entry. Sarah squinted her eyes for a moment. She couldn't quite place where they were from. Three different townships had similar uniforms, and at this distance, she couldn't read the name on the arm badge.

Central's Police Academy Trainer, Lieutenant Lewis, walked up to her. "Hello, Sarah."

"Hi, Lieutenant." She bit her bottom lip as she continued to study to officers.

"What's up? You look a little puzzled."

"Me?" Sarah laughed. "It's kind of silly, but I always try to match the uniforms with the voice over the radio. But I don't think I know them. Their voices don't even sound familiar."

"They're from Hampton. Second Lieutenant Eldredge and Officer Briggs."

Sarah snapped her fingers. "That explains it. That's not one of my regularly scheduled townships."

The second lieutenant, who was lecturing, looked up and spotted her. His eyes rested on her for a moment, and his words came to an abrupt halt as he stood with his mouth half open. His words weren't the only thing that stopped, for time itself seemed to hang in the balance for Sarah. The only exception happened to be the wild hammering of her heart. He was watching her like a fox watches a rabbit.

Officer Briggs cleared his throat. The second lieutenant turned his eyes away from her and spoke

to the rookies as if he had never stopped.

Lieutenant Lewis's baritone voice broke into her musing. "Thanks for the hand. The rookies are having a hard time with the sequence of calls."

Sarah turned and nodded, grateful to focus on something else. "Glad to help."

"They're almost finished with the lecture. When they're done, I want to pull out about three at a time. Could you give each group a ten-minute practice session?"

"Sounds good. I just need to be out of here by a quarter to six." Sarah walked over to the practice station and willed herself not to look at the speaker again. *Ah, just one more peek.* She chided herself as her gaze locked with his once again. *Bad move!* Why did his glance unnerve her so? He wasn't the first nice looking man she had ever seen. She shook her head, hoping to clear it of all thoughts of the man.

The last three rookies surrounded Sarah's small makeshift workstation. She put on her headset and addressed the man closest to her with the case scenario. "Let's suppose we have a collision at Pearl and Main Street." The rookies' pens flew. "I'll be receiving the call from a bystander. We'll take it from there, okay?" With a nod of their heads, they were off, chased by a final comment, "Remember, whenever you're on a call, we need to be in contact with your patrol car every five minutes."

A shadow fell over Sarah's computer screen as soon as the group finished. She glanced over her shoulder. It was like seeing an instant replay in slow motion as her gaze met green material and gold buttons. She followed the buttons upward past the broad shoulders, square chin, generous mouth, and straight nose to once again encounter the brown eyes she had met earlier.

He smiled. "Boy, you fellows are lucky. I wish I'd

had such a pretty instructor when I was a rookie.”

Sarah’s mouth grew dry like cotton. Now, what was she supposed to do with that line of baloney? Ignore it. That’s what she’d do. Jumping up, she cleared her throat. “I’ve got to run.” Without further explanation, she prepared to leave with a small wave at Lieutenant Lewis.

Before she made it to the exit, she heard the second lieutenant ask, “Who ever said that a uniform can melt a girl’s heart?”

The rookies laughed, and she snapped the door firmly closed behind her as her face grew warm. *Well, as Grandma Heitzenroeder always said, “Good riddance to bad rubbish.”*

Sarah practically ran to her car, as if chasing her thoughts away. She punched the speed dial on her cell phone to firm up plans for the evening.

After two rings, her best friend, Ellen, answered. “Hello?”

“Hi! I wanted you to know that I’m on my way.”

Ellen’s strained voice filled the line. “Sarah, I can’t go home yet.”

After the kind of day she’d had, why should she be surprised her evening plans were falling through? Something in Ellen’s voice told her she wasn’t the only one who’d had a stressful afternoon. “Why?”

“Rooms have been booked for the officers coming up for that seminar thing.”

Sarah put her key in the ignition. “Yeah?”

“They’re not ready yet.”

“Well, are you almost done?”

Ellen broke down at that question. “Mrs. Barton just told me if all the rooms are not clean by seven, I’m out of a job.”

“What? Whoa, I don’t follow you. Start at the beginning.”

Tension radiated through the phone. “Do you

remember me telling you the township police booked rooms?"

"Vaguely."

Ellen continued with a shaky breath. "Well, Mrs. Barton told me when she showed the chief of police his room, not only was it unprepared, it was really filthy. Then she pointed her finger at me and told me that I knew those rooms were to be ready at one o'clock."

"Did you?"

"Of course I did! I'm the head housekeeper."

Sarah tapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Silly question, sorry. So what happened?"

Ellen gulped. "Two girls quit earlier today. I finished all the rooms on my work order, and had just started on the others when Mrs. Barton said"—she mimicked the hotel owner's squeaky voice—"If those rooms are not clean, and I mean *clean*, by seven when the rest of the officers are due to arrive, you will be fired."

Sarah's mouth dropped open. The word "fired" rolled through her brain like a marble in a pinball machine. She could only imagine how that made Ellen feel. "How can she do that? You've been so good to her."

"Then I told her that I was working alone for the rest of the day and that I'd do my best, but it was already four-thirty."

"What did Mrs. Barton say to that?"

"She informed me she didn't care to hear anymore and then asked me if I wanted my job or not."

"Want your job?" Sarah repeated, flabbergasted.

Ellen moaned. "Oh, Sarah, I've just checked, and two of the five rooms look like they've been ransacked."

Sarah gritted her teeth. She wanted nothing more than to advise Ellen to throw in the towel as

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the horrible help had, but she couldn't. She knew all too well that Ellen's very livelihood, and the elderly aunt she cared for, depended on this job. It wasn't the most glamorous work, but for nine years, it had paid the bills.

Sarah put her car in reverse and said, "I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Chapter Two

Sarah and Ellen worked like whirlwinds until finally, at ten to seven, Sarah put the finishing touches on the last room. She didn't hear the door open behind her, only felt a tap on her shoulder. After switching the vacuum off, she turned around to see what Ellen needed. Dynamite couldn't have rocked her harder when she stared into the second lieutenant's light brown eyes. Stunned, her limbs seemed to turn to stone. She couldn't move.

"I hoped to meet you again." He switched his hat from hand to hand, unaware that Ellen had walked into the room. "But what are you doing here?"

Thankfully, Sarah didn't miss her friend's entrance. She sent Ellen a silent SOS signal, praying her friend would understand.

Apparently, Ellen did, because she smiled and said, "Sarah saved my job. She came over to help me finish your rooms." Sarah's whole body sighed with relief as the officer turned toward Ellen. Ellen extended her hand to him. "Hello. I'm Ellen Howe."

Sarah wasted no time. It was now or never. As Ellen walked further into the room, Sarah snuck behind the officer and slipped out the open door.

"I hope your stay will be comfortable here," Ellen said. "If you need anything, just give a yell."

"I'm sure our stay will be pleasant, thanks."

When Dylan turned around to introduce himself to both women, he realized the pretty girl had managed to disappear once again. “Where did she go? She was just here.”

Ellen changed the subject. “We’re glad you’ve chosen to stay with us. Your name is...?”

The mystery woman’s tendency to slip away left him miffed. Why was she so elusive? It made him even more curious about her and fed his reason to want to find out as much about her as possible. Ellen’s steady gaze never wandered, and finally, her question registered. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He answered almost as if on autopilot. “The name is Eldredge. Lieutenant Dylan Eldredge.”

He heard a knock on the open door as Ellen whistled under her breath. Dylan’s comrade walked into the room. “Dylan, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Hey, Matt, what’s up?”

Matt Briggs, Dylan’s partner, acknowledged Ellen with a warm, genuine smile. “Excuse me.”

“Sure.” Ellen’s face turned pink.

“Time to hustle.” Matt tapped his watch. “Chief’s expecting us.”

“Be right there.” Dylan followed Matt to the door. “It was nice to meet you, Ellen. I look forward to seeing you again and your friend—Sarah, was it?”

“Yup.” Ellen nodded. “Nice meeting you too.”

Dylan took another glance around the room. “The chief happened to mentioned to me the condition the rooms were in when he stopped in earlier.”

“He did?” Ellen’s voice cracked.

Dylan chuckled and held up his hand. He hadn’t meant to alarm her. “It’s okay. I just wanted you to know, whatever this place may have looked like before, it looks great now. I’ll be sure to pass that along to him.”

Ellen’s wrinkled brow softened. “Thanks!”

Dylan smiled. "Catch you around." He gave her a small salute and left the room.

Ellen closed the supply room door and sat down with a huff on the nearby stool. "Wow! I've just met two of the most handsome men I've ever seen, and they were nice. Who are they? Where are they from?"

Sarah groaned. She wasn't up for the drill. All she wanted was to go home and forget all about the officers, one in particular: the one who made her lose her sense of normalcy. But, knowing Ellen that would be all but impossible. She'd be like a mule, unwilling to move, until she had some answers. Sarah threw up her hands and said, "All I know is they're officers from Hampton."

Ellen folded her arms across her chest. "Okay, give. What's up?"

Sarah knew what she meant. It wasn't like her at all to run away from anyone. She had some explaining to do. The only problem was, she didn't know what was going on herself. Finally, she shrugged. "I don't know. I can't elucidate it." She stood up and paced the floor. "I just have a weird feeling."

They both stood there facing each other. Sarah crossed her fingers behind her back in hopes of changing the subject. Tentatively, she said, "We made it. The rooms are all finished. Who said it couldn't be done?"

"Yeah, I know, but I couldn't have done it without you. You're a great friend. Thanks."

Sarah grinned. "No problem. Did Mrs. Barton have anything to say?"

"Not one word." Ellen shook her head.

"Hmm, figures."

"So?"

There goes that idea of changing the subject.

Sarah knew it was useless to put off the inevitable. She covered her face and sighed. "You want to talk about those guys, right?"

Ellen rubbed her hands together as she sat on the edge of the stool.

"Okay, okay. Here's the deal. Other than God, you know me better than anyone else. I always keep men at arm's length, but the officer who was in the room when you came in, well, he looks at me, and I don't know." Her words fell like glass shattering. "It just feels too close."

Ellen gulped. "Never in a million years would I have thought it possible for any man to penetrate the shield you hold around your heart."

"Whoa. I never said anything about my heart," Sarah murmured as her stomach tightened. She had to put a stop to where Ellen was taking it—and fast. But how? "I just need a little time to sort out what's going on."

Sarah saw a ray of hope spring into Ellen's eyes. Immediately, Sarah twisted the door handle and flung open the door. "Don't you dare get any ideas, Miss Howe!"

Sarah watched Ellen choke back her words more than once through the course of the evening. She almost told Ellen just to go ahead and get it off of her chest since it was obvious she wanted to talk about the officers. But Sarah waited, and somehow Ellen managed to hold her tongue. Finally, after the women settled Aunt Mimi in bed, they went out to the front porch to sit in the old swing and gaze at the stars.

"Sarah?"

She answered with a contented, "Hmm?"

"I know growing up in your house with your dad's drinking problem was..." Ellen paused, obviously searching for the right word. "Difficult."