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JoAnn Carter

# Smuggler of the Heart

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by

JoAnn Carter

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Smuggler of the Heart

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## Dedication

To the man who smuggled my heart away seventeen  
years ago, Glenn. I love you more with each passing  
day. Thanks for believing in me!  
And to God, my Savior, Creator of all things.

## Praise for *By the Book*

"I think what I liked most about *Smuggler of the Heart* is how it delves deep inside, almost to the soul of the characters. Memories made are most special and the ones with Tim and Samantha leave a great impression. JoAnn Carter pens a heartwarming tale, even sketching a grandmother making the reader feel as if Betti is a grandmother for all ages. This story reminded me of the parable about finding the one piece of silver that was lost."

~Cherokee, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

"...A cozy story that makes you feel good when you read it. Tim and Samantha have to overcome some issues from the past, but you root for them the entire time. 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

"...Ms. Carter does a credible job of reconnecting the heroine to her roots via a historical old box that had been used for smuggling in the Vermont Mountains - a box with a very romantic story attached to it... It's definitely a curl-up-with-hot-chocolate-and-relax-by-the-fire sort of book that leaves one with a warm and agreeable aftertaste - you know, the type where you close the cover with a dreamy smile and a satisfied sigh."

~Review by Black-eyed Susan at the Long and Short Reviews



## Chapter One

Saturday

*“Hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught...” Psalm 55:2 (NIV)*

Samantha gingerly reached for the newfound treasure. A rush of adrenaline coursed through her body, and her nerves jingled the instant her fingers caressed the soft, worn wood. Just as she knew her own name, she knew there was something special about the small chest.

“That you making a racket up there, Sammie?”

Samantha blew a puff of dust off the curved lid and sat down Indian-style on the painted but worn wide plank attic floor. “I’ll be down in a few minutes, Gram.”

Gram chuckled. “Sure, and pigs can fly too.”

Gram might be eighty-something, but she didn’t miss much. She knew Samantha’s passion for history and antiques and how long it had been since she had visited the attic of her grandparents’ beloved 1820s Victorian home. For that matter, how long since she’d been in Vermont, period.

Samantha fiddled with the latch on the chest. Her finger brushed against a small metal protrusion on the side of the lock. In a sudden, swift motion, the latch sprung open and the lid lifted a quarter of an inch, almost as if the chest wanted to share its

secrets and stories with her. She lifted it further and peered inside. The musty smell of aged wood and paper greeted her like a familiar friend she hadn't seen for a long, long time.

She clutched the box to her chest and rushed downstairs. Breathless, she held out her find for her gram to see. "Do you know what this is?"

"I do." Gram's eyes sparkled. "And, I must say, it's good to see there's some life in you. I've been worried about you since you've come home."

Gram didn't need to be concerned about her. She was a strong independent woman—at least she liked to think she was. Granted, she had felt a little bit blue as of late, but didn't everyone experience those feelings every now and then in life?

Time to focus on something else. She held the box a bit higher. "The chest?"

Gram motioned for Samantha to join her on the couch. "That chest's said to have held letters from one of the caves in the Notch."

"Smuggler's?"

"You remember the history?" Gram asked with obvious delight.

"Sure." Samantha nodded. "When I drive through Smuggler's Notch, I try to picture it as during the War of 1812."

"Yup," her gram said. "That was when the good old U.S. Congress placed an embargo on the imports from England."

Samantha looked out windows to the mountains. "I can imagine smugglers hiding in the thick forest and storing their supplies of food, clothing, cattle, and such from Canada in the caves and caverns along the Long Trail." She turned back to her gram and matter-of-factly said, "And then of course, a hundred years later, when the U.S. Congress passed a law prohibiting the sale of alcohol, it happened again."



Gram nodded. "Smugglers avoided the revenue agents by storing the alcohol in the caves where they freely smuggled it through the Notch Pass, down to central and southern New England. Thus it's aptly named..."

Together, they chorused, "Smuggler's Notch."

Samantha smiled at her gram's joy, which must have been mirrored in her own eyes.

History...her passion. But recently, without her even realizing it until this moment, the joy and excitement she usually felt had fallen flat. She still enjoyed her teaching position at a high school in New Jersey, but her enthusiasm over the last several years had waned. How had that impacted her students? She shook her head, trying to dispel that train of thought.

Perhaps coming back to Vermont for winter break was what she needed—at least she hoped so.

"Samantha, I know I don't tell you this often enough, but I think you're a gifted history teacher. I only wish you'd come back home where you belong."

There were many subjects Samantha would be delighted to discuss, but her personal life, particularly where she did or didn't belong, wasn't one of them. Especially since she had been struggling with those very same thoughts moments ago. "Gram, let's not go there. How about you tell me about this chest instead?"

Gram rolled her eyes. "You're more stubborn than that old manual lawn mower. I guess I should expect as much with all that red hair."

Samantha lifted her chin. "It's not red. It's auburn."

Was it her imagination, or was Gram fighting a smile?

Gram coughed in her hand. "Where were we...oh, yes. This chest stayed in a cave where it held correspondence or information from one party

to the next.”

“How’d you get it?”

“I’m saving that part of the story.”

Samantha’s heart sank with disappointment.

“Why?”

“So I can be sure you’ll come back home, where you belong, from time to time.”

Samantha rolled her eyes and bit back the retort, *Now who’s being stubborn?*

## Chapter Two

### Sunday

*“But good memories become a treasure chest of priceless reminders of relationships shared and joys experienced.” ~ Bill Crowder from “Our Daily Bread”*

Pure white snow matched the church’s clapboard exterior. Tall windows, each holding a single candle, twinkled their greeting. Samantha took a deep breath. The fresh mountain air did wonders to chase away the cobwebs that had clouded her mind.

She didn’t dare compare Stowe to the car-polluted Trenton, New Jersey where snow turned black almost as soon as it fell. If she did, she might not want to return to work. Why hadn’t she noticed before how bright and clean her old hometown was? Then again, perhaps it was just her mindset today. After all, hadn’t Trenton looked appealing with all its rich history when she arrived seven years ago to go to The College of New Jersey for her teaching degree? She shrugged as she made her way through the wide double doors and into the narthex. *Must be the seven-year, move along itch.*

“Samantha Warren?”

That deep baritone voice that called her name was one she’d know anywhere. Tim. *Yet another*

*craze down the drain.* Perhaps coming back to the church where she had grown up wasn't the best idea in the world.

Suddenly, she felt empty inside. What was it about his voice? It made her realize not only had she been missing her passion for history, but also even after seven years, she'd been missing him: the man she had once thought of as the love of her life. She swallowed what felt like a golf ball and turned to face the inevitable.

"Yup, it's me." Part of her past stood twelve inches away. Lightning couldn't have struck her harder. She tried hard not to let her chin drop. If possible, Tim Davis, all six foot two of him, looked even better now than when she left. His light brown hair was tousled, as if he had quickly brushed his hands through it. It gave him a rather roguish appearance. His broad shoulders filled every inch of his maroon dress shirt. But it was his intense hazel eyes flecked with bits of green that held her captive.

"Well, I'll be..." After a pause—or was it a lifetime—Tim said with a grin, "*It is you.*"

Samantha played with the button on her sweater. She'd left Vermont to pursue her dream of teaching history, but with Tim standing so close, all the reasons why she'd stayed away melted like a murky puddle at her feet. As tempted as she was to look at his left hand to see if there was a ring, something held her back. What would she do if there were? Her sore heart could only take so much. "Tim, you look..." She held her hand out and then blurted, "Great!" Did she actually say that out loud? In an instant, the room went from chilly to hotter than a furnace. Thankfully, the prelude started, saving her from making an even bigger fool of herself.

"Mind if I sit with you?"

His deep voice wreaked havoc on her insides. Feelings she thought were long buried and gone now

flooded over her like a tidal wave. She didn't dare trust herself to speak, so instead she nodded and clutched her Bible like a weapon.

Tim took her elbow and steered her toward a pew. "This okay?"

*Okay? You kidding? I feel like I've been hit with a Mac truck.* She glanced around at the sea of faces, some familiar, some new. Looking for a way of escape, she asked, "Wouldn't you like to sit with your family or your wife?"

With a lopsided grin, he said, "Mom and Dad are visiting my brother and his family this weekend. As for a wife..." His eyes twinkled. "Somehow, I never did get around to marrying. How about you?"

*Never got around to it?* If someone offered her the choice between running shoes or mistletoe at this moment, she wasn't sure which one she would take. Her heart hammered. *What's wrong with me?*

"Samantha?"

Tim's question snapped Samantha back to the present. "Hum, uh, yeah. I mean no...no, I'm not married, and this seat will be fine." She felt like a teenager once again. *God, I could use some help here!*

The minister took his place behind the ornately carved pulpit. "Good morning, everyone. Our call to worship today is found in Philippians 1:3." He glanced down and read, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you."

Samantha squirmed as her mind quickly replayed bygone days in Tim's company. *Not funny, God. That wasn't quite the help I was looking for.*

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"Sammie, that you?"

"Yes, Gram. I'm home." Samantha closed the door and tossed her purse on the bottom step as she shrugged out of her deep green winter coat.

Gram peeked around the corner and waved her inside. "I was sorry to miss church today, but

Gramps needed me.”

Samantha hung her coat on the tree and then followed her grandmother. “How’s he feeling?”

“Better, but when you break a hip at our age, it takes a toll.” She walked toward the kitchen. “Come have a cup of tea and tell me about church.”

Samantha slowly blew the air out of her cheeks. Just what was there to say? She could hardly concentrate on the sermon. Not that it was the pastor’s fault, mind you. No, it was all because she sat next to Tim, and for an electrifying moment, he was so close, his arm brushed hers as they shared a hymnal. It went downhill from there. She was way too aware of him.

Caught up in reliving the morning, she almost tripped over the threshold.

“Watch that step, Sammie,” Gram warned. “One invalid is more than enough in this house.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” But was she really? She had been questioning that herself lately. And meeting Tim again this morning hadn’t helped one bit! She lived in a tiny apartment with gray walls and lived an equally gray social life. These days, life seemed almost meaningless. Where was the future she’d thought was in store for her when she left? What happened to think big, see the world, face an exciting new tomorrow? Instead, the reality of hard work and TV dinners had taken over.

Something was missing—and it was way bigger than even Tim.

Thinking about missing things, Samantha’s mind went back to the attic. She sat down at the table. “Gram, you never finished telling me about the chest.”

Gram reached for the sugar and, with a mysterious twinkle in her eye, she said, “All in good time, dear. All in good time.”

The phone rang, preventing any chance of

pursuing the topic. Samantha stood up and headed toward the phone. "I'll get it."

She picked up the handset, pushed the talk button, and held it up to her ear. "Hello?"

"Sam?"

Samantha's knees suddenly felt like Jell-O as she recognized Tim's deep voice. "Speaking."

Tim cleared his throat. "It was so good to see you at church today."

"It was good to see you too," she said in all honesty.

"It's been a long time."

Did that mean he missed her? Why did he wait this long to tell her? Mentally shaking herself to stay on topic, she said, "Yes, it has."

"I have tomorrow off of work, and I was wondering, while you're home, if you'd like to go to Smugg's with me?"

Her breath caught. A whole day in Tim's presence enjoying not only his friendship, but also the ski slopes, which had once been a home away from home, held a deadly attraction. She didn't know whether to be more intimidated or excited. She shook her head. What was she thinking? She knew exactly where spending time with Tim would lead her heart. And a long distance romance held no allure. "Tim, I don't think that would be a good idea. I'm only here for a few more days."

"All the more reason to go," he quickly replied.

"Gram might have some things for me to do..."

"Ask her."

Samantha put her hand on her hip. Would that pigeonhole her into doing something she didn't want to do? But to not ask her gram would seem rude. Nothing like being in between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

"Hang on a sec." She held her hand over the mouthpiece. "Gram, it's Tim. He wants to know if I'd

like to go skiing tomorrow.”

Gram took a tentative sip of her tea then said, “What a great idea.”

Half desperate, Samantha asked, “Wouldn’t you like to do something together?”

For all the innocence Gram was trying her best to portray, Samantha knew differently from the twinkle in her eye. “I don’t see why enjoying a few hours with Tim would hurt. You can spend time with us later in the day.”

Samantha turned away and took a steadying breath. *Gram’s no help at all.* She really should say no, but... “How about a half a day?”

She wasn’t sure who was more surprised she had agreed to go. The line stayed quiet for a few seconds.

“Great!” Tim’s voice finally boomed. “I’ll pick you up at eight-thirty.”

Her heart betrayed her as it galloped in expectancy over seeing Tim again. “See you then.”



## Chapter Three

### Monday

*“He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth—the Lord God Almighty is his name.” Amos 4:13 (NIV)*

Samantha gazed at the three white-capped mountains that encompassed Smuggler’s Notch: Morse Mountain to her left, Madonna straight ahead, and Sterling Mountain to her right. Tiny snowflakes swirled and tickled her nose. She had yet to figure out how Tim had convinced her to come when he called her yesterday, but here she was once again like old times, on the ski lift making her way up to the Upper Drifter on Madonna.

Tim closed in the few inches that separated them. “Perfect day for skiing.”

She nodded in agreement, and as they neared the top, the view almost took her breath away. She drank in the vista of God’s creation, from the bright sun resting in its perfect spot, to the mountain’s peak that seemed to be lifted up in praise to its Creator.

Creation seemed to be shouting and testifying God is, was, and always will be.

God.

Tears pricked her eyes. Like a light bulb illuminates a dark cellar, she realized it wasn't Tim or even her lost passion for history that was making her miserable. She missed God. *I don't know when or how it happened, but I forgot I'm not here for anything but to love You and to be loved by You. Simple, or in my case, as difficult as that.*

"Samantha! Hop off." Tim nudged her. "This is our run."

She made a quick exit. "Thanks, I was caught in my thoughts."

"You okay?" The concern in his eyes made her realize once again what a gem he was.

She swiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her glove and smiled. "Have you ever had one of those 'ah-ha' moments?"

He nodded in understanding. "Yup."

Samantha sniffed, gathered her ski poles, and took a deep breath. The world suddenly seemed right and good, a feeling she hadn't experienced for a very long time.

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Samantha's bright smile made Tim's heart thump a speedy tempo. He could stay here all day, content just to be with her. The Samantha he remembered was finally back. Not the fidgety woman he had sat with on Sunday, but his Sammie. He'd dated other women off and on since she left, but the relationships never went deeper than a social level. Now he knew why—talk about "ah-ha" moments. Even after all these years, Samantha still held his heart. The million-dollar question was, did she feel the same?

What had he missed in the seven years she was gone? Was her favorite ice cream still Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia? Did she still have the stuffed bear he won at the fair their senior year of high

school? Was she dating anyone? Had she fallen in love? *God, please tell me You didn't bring her back just for me to lose her again.*

Tim softly asked, "Why'd you come back, Samantha?"

"I was homesick," she called over her shoulder as she pushed off. She'd caught his eye just for a second before she was gone with a whoosh of skis on snow, and just that tiny glance warmed him from the center out.

He shook his head. *Ice and snow.* He had to keep his cool. *Ice and snow.* What had she said, anyway?

*Homesick?*

Now he had the whole run to be held in suspense over what exactly that meant. In his fantasy, she'd say she was homesick because she missed him, but that was wishful thinking. If she'd missed him, wouldn't she have kept in touch?

Fresh powder blew up and flew behind her as she leaned into the curves of the trail. He followed close behind her, enjoying the chase. Enjoying the view. *Argh. Ice and snow.*

As soon as they got to the bottom, he grinned. "Not half bad for a flatlander."

She plopped her goggles on top of her hat. Slightly out of breath, she rested her hands on her thighs. Her cheeks were almost as red as her lips. "Thanks for letting me win."

*She knew.* Tim placed his hand over his chest and raised his eyebrows. She looked adorable gazing at him with those big blue eyes.

"Yes, you." Samantha laughed. "You'd have me beat in a heartbeat if you wanted to." Her eyes crinkled up at the sides and tugged at his heart.

Tim shrugged, doing his best to keep his mind from how pretty Samantha was, how much he'd missed her. "Now, what's this about being homesick?"

Samantha straightened up and started to make her way toward the lift. "I said, I *was* homesick. As in past tense."

Tim took hold of her arm and waited until she faced him. He wondered what she would do if he pulled her closer, wrapped his arms around her, but he didn't dare. What if she didn't think of him that way? Her long red hair, held in a ponytail under her hat, blew in the wind. Just like her, the locks wouldn't hold still. "So, you're not homesick anymore?"

She looked up to the mountain and then back at Tim. "I lost God."

That was not what he expected her to say. Samantha had always been so steady in her walk with God. Her faith had challenged *him* to be closer to God.

Tim's frown must have said more than his words could articulate, because she continued. "I know He'd never leave me, but in chasing my dreams, I kinda forgot about Him." She hung her head low and spoke so softly that he had to take a step closer. "It was all about me and my desires, which left me with nothing but emptiness. Coming back to Vermont helped me recognize what's happened in my life."

He didn't realize his hand had dropped until she started moving forward. Samantha glanced up at him. "How about you? Are you still working for the town of Stowe on the maintenance crew?"

Tim nodded as he tried to grasp all she had shared. "But not for much longer."

It was Samantha's turn to stop. "Why?"

He leaned in closer to her. The smell of her shampoo distracted him, or was it her nearness? "How does *Pastor* Tim Davis sound to you?"

Samantha's eyes grew wide, like two snowballs. "What?"

Tim shoved his hands into his pockets, wishing

he could shove the temptation to touch her smooth, rosy cheeks just as easily. "If you keep looking at me like that, I may get a complex."

She swatted his arm. "You're not kidding me, are you?"

He grinned. "I don't think my seminary professors would like to hear that one of their soon-to-be youth pastor graduates is spreading lies."

"A youth pastor?"

Tim shrugged. "I've been helping out with the youth group since I came back from college. The church asked me if I'd consider working with them full time. At first, I wasn't sure, but the more I thought and prayed about it...well, here I am."

She put her hand on her hip and harrumphed, then grabbed his arm and pulled him in the opposite direction. "Let's go get a cup of cocoa and sit by the fire. We have some catching up to do."

"But we've only done one run."

Samantha laughed. "You'll make a good youth pastor. You haven't changed much. Come on," she urged, giving his arm another tug. "Business first, fun later."