

The background of the cover is a desert landscape at dusk. A large saguaro cactus stands in the center-right. The sky is a mix of blue and orange. Colorful Christmas lights (blue, purple, yellow) are strung across the scene, with some appearing as glowing trails. In the upper right, there are four Christmas ornaments: a blue one, a white one, a purple one, and a gold and white striped one.

LAREN MALLEY

SOMETIMES GOD
THROWS US OUT OF
OUR COMFORT ZONE

CACTUS
for
CHRISTMAS

Cactus for Christmas

Karen Malley

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.

Cactus for Christmas
COPYRIGHT 2023 by Karen Malley

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, 2023
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0434-0
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my newsletter readers who helped with the names and some of the ideas for this book: Rosemary M, Amanda Z, Kathy M, Elaine K, Ami J, Karen S, Donna G, Heidi M, and Nancy S. Thanks for being a part of my story!

Other Titles by Karen Malley

The Pine Springs Series

Finding Sunshine (Free Prequel)

Following the Sparrows

A Second Chance for Grace

Sunflowers and Suspicions

The Chester County Couples Series

Lilacs and Love Letters (Free Prequel)

Moonlight and Mystery

Recipes and Redemption

Christmas Novellas

Saved by a Christmas Angel

The Christmas Mission

Cactus for Christmas

1

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” Isaiah 43: 18-19

Lucy dropped the phone and buried her face in her hands, the tears falling freely. Her stomach tightened into a knot. How could God let this happen? Her shoulders shook as sobs wracked her body. After several moments her breathing slowed and she gained control. Roscoe, her faithful canine companion, stared at her with mournful eyes. Lucy wiped her tears and pulled out the old family photo albums. She flipped through page after page of Ethan and the girls happily opening gifts, building snowmen, lighting Advent candles, decorating the tree, the house... Each photo captured a special memory in her heart. She should be grateful for the memories God had given her, but she still wanted more. She put away the albums and threw the wadded-up tissues in the trash.

Movement outside the window caught her eye. Lucy’s next-door neighbor, Hadessa, was approaching with her little Scottish terrier. Lucy waved, and Hadessa turned and came up the front walk. Lucy

hurried to the front door, throwing it open to greet her friend. A rush of frigid air followed Hadessa into the living room before Lucy shut the door. The pine-scented candle on the coffee table flickered, but managed to stay alight.

Roscoe sniffed at Gidget, and the two dogs wagged their tails and pranced around one another, but Roscoe didn't stray far from Lucy's side.

"My goodness, your tree is lovely," Hadessa said. "I can't believe you set everything up already."

"It's December first. Ethan always put the tree and the decorations up on December first."

Hadessa pursed her lips together. "Have you changed anything in the house since Ethan died?"

"I got a new water heater last winter," Lucy said.

Hadessa put a hand on her hip. "You know what I mean."

"Why should I change anything? I like things the way they are. I don't have to make changes just because Ethan isn't here. That's change enough." Lucy frowned. "I can't believe this is my third Christmas without him."

Hadessa opened her mouth to say something else, but seemed to think better of it. "The house looks wonderful."

Lucy attempted a smile. "Thanks. Ethan would've been proud. I can't string lights on the roof like he did, but I set up the rest of the house like a Christmas wonderland, just the way he always did it."

"How did you manage setting the tree up by yourself?"

"I paid the Johnson boys a few dollars and a few cookies to drag it up from the basement for me."

"It is nice having young people in the neighborhood. They've been mowing my lawn for the past few years. I'll be sad when they leave for college." Hadessa's sharp eyes focused on Lucy's face. "Speaking of sad, what's wrong? You don't seem like a woman full of the Christmas spirit."

"Let's have some tea." Lucy ushered Hadessa into the kitchen and poured a cup for her. She didn't want to think about it, but talking with Hadessa always lifted her spirits. She handed the cup to her dear friend, refreshed her own cup, and they settled at the kitchen table. "It's been a rough afternoon. First Ava Kathryn called. The doctors don't want her to fly this close to the baby's birth date. They're not coming for Christmas."

Hadessa patted her hand. "I'm sorry, dear. That happens when they grow up, I'm afraid. They stop coming home. I'll be spending the day in New Jersey with my daughter and her family."

"At least your daughter only moved two hours away. I don't understand it. I raised my daughters here in Pennsylvania their whole lives. Now Ava's in Tucson and Audrey's in upstate New York. Christmas was the one time I had everyone together. Ethan's gone, and now my baby daughter won't be here either."

Hadessa's lip curved upwards. "Your baby daughter is what? Twenty-eight now?"

Lucy gave Hadessa a half-smile. "She'll always be

my baby. Even though she'll soon have a baby of her own. That's why it's so hard she won't be here."

"I'm sure you and Audrey's family will enjoy yourselves. Her kids are bound to keep you on your toes."

Lucy's lower lip quivered. "But that's just it. Right after Ava Kathryn called, I got a call from Audrey Christine. Her father-in-law passed away. He had a major stroke. It was all so sudden."

Hadessa's brow wrinkled. "How sad to lose him this close to Christmas."

Lucy wiped a tear from her cheek. "I know, but it doesn't really matter what time of year it is. When Ethan died, I felt as if the rug got pulled out from underneath me. The plans of a long, leisurely retirement and growing old together were ripped away. The loss was almost a physical ache. It's not quite as raw now, but I still miss Ethan."

Hadessa set down her mug. "Of course, you do."

Lucy inhaled a deep breath. "Anyway, Audrey Christine has to spend Christmas with her mother-in-law, so she won't be coming either. I'll be all alone for Christmas."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. No wonder you look such a fright."

"That's not helping."

"You're right. Why don't you pour yourself a glass of wine and draw a nice hot bath? Relax and wallow in self-pity. Then get over it and find something else to do for Christmas."

"What else is there to do other than spend time

with family?"

Hadessa's lips curved into a smile. "I'm sure you'll find something." She eased herself to her feet. "I want to get Gidget out for her walk before it gets dark. It happens so early these days." Hadessa slipped on her coat, clipped Gidget's leash back on her collar, and headed out.

Lucy reheated her mug of tea and settled on the sofa opposite the Christmas tree and the big picture window. Flurries drifted down from the sky, completing the view. Even without Ethan, this was safe and comfortable, the way the Christmas season should be.

Her mind traveled back to her conversation with Ava Kathryn.

"How's my newest grandbaby doing? Put on the video so I can see your belly."

Ava laughed and switched to video. Holding the phone away from her, she showed off her swollen middle. "I'm fine, Mom. But..."

Lucy straightened. "What? What's wrong? Is the baby OK?"

"The baby is fine, but I've been having Braxton-Hicks contractions. The doctor doesn't think I'll make it to full-term."

"But you're only seven months pregnant," Lucy said, rising to her feet, worry mounting.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, but the baby is measuring big. I guess I miscalculated by a few weeks. My cycle was never particularly consistent. He thinks I'm more like 8 months along."

"But you and the baby are OK?"

"We're fine. Babies are born early all the time. But it means we're not flying out for Christmas."

Lucy sank back onto the sofa. All she could manage was a quiet "Oh."

"I know you're disappointed, but the doctor doesn't want me to fly. The baby could come any time."

Lucy swallowed hard. "It's OK, dear. I understand."

"You could come out here."

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I just finished decorating the house, and I've never missed the Christmas Eve program here. I know you love Tucson, but I can't imagine a warm Christmas. It isn't right. Besides, Audrey Christine and her family are coming. It's all planned. We'll go caroling with the neighbors, bake cookies, go to church, and I'll make a big ham dinner, like always." Except now without her husband or her youngest daughter. Lucy squeezed her eyes shut. She would not cry.

"Are you sure, Mom? Audrey's family could come too."

"You can't fit all of us in your little house. And Roscoe couldn't handle flying. I can't leave him. He'd be a nervous wreck." Lucy gazed at her precious beagle, never far from her side.

Ava's sigh came through loud and clear. "Yeah, he's a creature of habit, like you. I'll call you later in the week. Love you."

"You too, honey." Lucy laid down the phone as Ava disconnected.

What was wrong with being a creature of habit? All their Christmas traditions were special. It was bad

enough not having Ethan around any longer. Now neither of her girls would be here either. In spite of her mood, her stomach growled. Lucy filled Roscoe's bowl with kibble and heated a bowl of her homemade chicken soup in the microwave. Carrying it to the table, she picked up a paperback from the kitchen counter. Since Ethan's passing, she'd taken to reading while eating. It took away the sting from eating alone.

When she finished her meal, her phone rang yet again. Now what? There wasn't anyone left to tell her they weren't coming home for Christmas. The phone number was one she didn't recognize, but something prodded her to answer.

"Hello, is this Lucinda Esther?"

The deep, masculine voice sent shivers down her spine. But who could it be? No one called her Lucinda Esther but her sister.

"It is..."

"I'm sorry to bother you, Lucinda. My name is Noah Charles. I live next door to your sister, Isabel. I'm afraid she's in a bit of a pickle. She had a fall and broke her hip."

"Oh, my." Lucy's hand flew to her mouth.. "When did this happen? How is she?"

"It happened about an hour ago. She's in the hospital now. I saw the ambulance and came over to find out what happened. Before they carted her off, she pointed me toward her address book and told me to call you."

"Thank you for doing so. I'll keep her in my prayers. Did she take her phone to the hospital? Will I

be able to speak with her once she's out of surgery?"

"She did, but..."

Not another but. This day couldn't get any worse.

"But what?"

"She was hoping you could come and help her out."

"I live in Pennsylvania."

"Yes, she mentioned that."

"I can't just hop on a plane to Arizona."

"Izzy said you were her only relative. I'll do what I can, but I'm not sure either of us would be comfortable with me helping her with her more, ah, delicate needs. If it helps, she'll be in the hospital a week or two. But then she'll need care at home for at least a few weeks. She mentioned you're a nurse..."

Lucy stifled a groan. "I'm retired."

"I'm sure you remember your training. Izzy is blessed to have you."

The timeline clicked in Lucy's head. "But I'd be there over Christmas."

"I suppose you would. Well, wouldn't it be nice to spend Christmas with your sister? What a perfect excuse to get away from the cold."

This man was infuriating. "Christmas is supposed to be cold. Haven't you heard of a white Christmas or chestnuts roasting by an open fire?"

"You wouldn't use roasting chestnuts as an excuse not to help your sister, would you?"

And there it was. How could Lucy say no? Isabel was alone. She'd lost her husband about a decade ago, and they had no children. She and Isabel had never

been close, but family was family. And now she had no one else to spend Christmas with, either. Hoping her voice didn't sound as resigned as she felt, she conceded. "I'll be there. You're sure she'll be in the hospital for a while? I'll be driving out."

"Driving?" Surprise colored Noah's voice. "You're over 2,000 miles away. It will take days."

"Yes, but I need to bring Roscoe with me, and he's far too anxious to fly."

"Well, that makes me feel better. I'm glad you won't be traveling alone. I look forward to meeting you and your husband when you arrive. Izzy will call you as soon as she's able. Drive safely." He disconnected the call.

Lucy blinked. Her husband? Oh, Noah must think Roscoe was her husband's name. Still, what did it matter? Just because his smooth-as-silk voice gave her chills didn't mean she was attracted to him. He was probably young enough to be her son. Still, there was something calming about his voice, even with the awful day she was having.

She laid her phone on the table and cradled her head in her hands. In the past few hours she found out she wouldn't see either of her daughters for Christmas, and now she wouldn't even be home to enjoy it. There would be no big family dinner around the huge dining room table, no Christmas cantata or Christmas Eve service at her church, no participating in the cookie exchange. She'd be stuck nursing her stubborn older sister back to health. She blinked back tears, placed her dishes in the dishwasher, and moved into the living

room, lifting Ethan's picture off the mantel.

"Oh, Ethan, how did I get here? I thought spending Christmas without you was bad enough, but now this? I'm losing everything I love about Christmas."

2

Noah checked the time and slipped his phone back into his pocket. He'd lost a lot of time this afternoon with Izzy's fall. It was nearly 4:00. He'd missed most of the school bus stops, but he could still hit the local park before sunset and make it to Betsy's house before dinner. He grinned, imagining Davy's face when he showed up in their driveway with the ice cream truck. What four-year-old wouldn't be thrilled?

He drove to the commissary, checked his inventory, and topped off the freezers in the truck. He unplugged the truck from the generator and headed to the nearest park. As he approached, he flipped on the music, and the jingle started playing. Funny how it never got old. Even after doing this job for two years, he still got a little thrill from the song. It brought him back to his youth. He pulled into the parking lot. Perfect. T-ball practice on one field and soccer on the other. The kids were bound to be hot and sweaty and begging their parents for ice cream. Noah parked the truck and readied for business.

For the next forty-five minutes, Noah handed out popsicles and ice cream treats to the children as they finished up practice, but with the early sunset this time of year, he had to wrap it up quickly. Still, he'd done

good business. And he certainly couldn't complain about only working an hour. Setting his own hours was amazing. Sure, he could've retired for good, but this job satisfied something in his soul that had been lacking. When the last child in line was served, he hopped in the driver's seat and drove to Betsy's house, resisting the urge to turn on the music when he reached their neighborhood. He wasn't supposed to play it after dark. He pulled the truck into the driveway, knocked on the front door, and opened it, calling as he entered. "Hey Betsy, did you make enough dinner to feed your old man?"

A blur came toward him, and little Davy wrapped his arms around Noah's legs. "Grandpa!"

Noah grinned and lifted his grandson in his arms. His heart was full to bursting. "Hey, buddy. How was preschool today?"

"We played in the sandbox and I got my colors right and Tommy got a new truck and he brought it to school and tomorrow we're going on a field trip to the fire station!"

"Wow, sounds like a lot for one day." Noah ruffled his hair and set him down.

"Come build blocks with me." Davy sped off to the family room.

Noah called after him. "In a few minutes, buddy. I want to talk to your mommy first." Coming here was the right choice. This little house was filled with so much love. He inhaled the scent of dinner cooking in the next room, and his stomach growled in anticipation.

Betsy appeared in the foyer a moment later, twisting her long black hair into a ponytail. "Hey, Dad."

Noah leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek. "Hey, sweetie. Is it OK if I join you for dinner? I brought dessert."

Betsy's forehead crinkled. "Where?"

Noah chuckled. "It's in the driveway."

Betsy moved over and peered out the window. "You brought the truck? Oh, Davy will be beside himself with excitement. And sure, you can join us. It's nothing special. I made baked chicken." She threw him a grin. "You can join us if you give me one of those cones with the chocolate and nuts on top."

"It's a deal. You may think it's nothing special, but I appreciate home cooking. Sure, I did KP duty in the army, but I never got the hang of cooking for myself. Too many meals on the road."

"I guess all your travelling these days is local. Still, if you ever get hungry, there's plenty of ice cream in the back."

"True. Where'd you learn to cook, anyway?"

"Not from Mom, that's for sure. Mostly from Adele when we got the apartment together after sophomore year. Now I try recipes I find on the internet. It's not hard. I'm sure you could manage."

"It's no fun cooking for one person. Not when I can come here and spend time with your family. Of course, if you tire of cooking for me, I can always ask Adele. She's a nice girl."

Betsy planted her hands on her hips. "You will not

call my college roommate and invite yourself over for dinner."

Noah couldn't help laughing at the indignation in her tone. "Relax. I'm kidding. When will David get home?"

"Any minute. Why don't you get Davy ready? I'll pull the chicken out of the oven and we'll eat when David walks in the door."

"Yes, ma'am." Noah saluted and joined Davy in the family room. "Hey, champ, that's quite a tower you're building. Are you hungry? Mommy has dinner ready."

"Yay!" Davy jumped up and started for the kitchen.

"Let's wash your hands first," Noah told him.

Five minutes later, Noah sat around the cozy kitchen table with Betsy, her husband David, and Davy. "May I say grace?"

Betsy nodded. "Sure, Dad. Go ahead."

Noah bowed his head. "Thank You, Lord, for this precious family, and for this food. Please bless our time together. Amen."

"Amen," Davy echoed.

"This smells amazing, Betsy. You're a blessed man, David."

"I am." David smiled at his wife and son. "What's with that monstrosity in my driveway? Thanks for giving me space to pull into the garage, at least."

"I had a late start today. Some excitement at the neighbor's house. I came straight from work."

"What happened?" Betsy asked.

“My next-door-neighbor fell and broke her hip. I checked on her since she lives alone.”

Betsy frowned. “Oh, how sad.”

David placed a piece of chicken on his plate. “She’ll spend Christmas at a rehab center if there’s no one to stay with her.”

Noah shook his head. “Her sister is coming. I called her.”

“I’m glad she won’t be alone,” Betsy said. “It must be hard to be old and alone.” Her eyes darted to Noah. “Oh, I’m sorry, Dad.”

“I’m not old and alone. Well, I’m not old, anyway.”

“Yes, you are, Grandpa,” Davy said.

Everyone around the table laughed. Noah patted Davy’s hand. “I suppose to someone who’s four, sixty-two sounds ancient. I think Izzy must be in her mid-seventies. You wouldn’t know it, though. She’s always power-walking or biking through the neighborhood. She ran in a 5K last month. She’s a lively one.”

“Maybe she could keep you company.” Betsy’s eyes gleamed.

Noah held up a hand. “I don’t think so. She’s a little too wild for my tastes. I learned my lesson the first time. If I ever remarry, it will be to a sweet, traditional Christian woman who’s content to spend evenings stargazing or watching a movie. I don’t need adventure. I’ve had enough of it in my lifetime.”

“You’ve changed so much the last few years, Dad.”

Hopefully that was a good thing. “When your