



The
CHRISTMAS
MISSION



KAREN MALLEY



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Dedication

To Matthew and Kevin. You've made every Christmas special since you entered my life. You'll always be my boys, no matter how old you get. Thank you for giving me the joy of being a mother.

1

As the carols streamed from the overhead speakers, Nicole finished ringing up her customer and turned to find Jasmine grinning at her. "What?"

Jasmine's grin grew wider. "It's almost 3:00."

Nicole shrugged. "So?"

"So, it's almost time for your admirer to make an appearance."

Nicole waved away the comment. "He doesn't come every day."

"So you admit you've noticed."

"What? No! And he's not my admirer. He comes occasionally for a smoothie on his break."

Jasmine narrowed her eyes at Nicole. "Girl, that man is sweet on you. It's so obvious."

Nicole tried to suppress a smile. It was nice to daydream about the impeccably dressed man being interested in her. "We've only ever exchanged a few sentences. He's never hinted at anything more."

"Maybe he's shy," Jasmine suggested.

"He sells suits in the mall. You can't make a living in sales if you're shy."

Jasmine pointed at Nicole. "Ahh, right. He's used to dealing with men in that fancy-schmancy store, but he can't talk to women."

"Jasmine, stop. I don't know anything about him."

"He's handsome and has a steady job."

"Yes, he works at Cavanaugh's. But what if he's an atheist or something?" Nicole asked.

A young mother pushed a stroller up to the counter, effectively ending the conversation. Nicole took the woman's order and went to fill it. As she returned with the fruit bowl and smoothie, the object of her discussion with Jasmine approached the counter. Nicole pretended not to notice, turning away to let Jasmine take his order, but Jasmine conveniently disappeared into the back.

"The usual?" Nicole asked, trying to be nonchalant.

She was rewarded with a million-watt grin. "Am I that predictable?" he asked.

"You've been coming here for a few weeks, and you order the same thing at the same time nearly every day."

"I guess I'm a creature of habit. What's wrong with knowing what you like?" His sparkling eyes bored into Nicole's.

OK, so he wasn't exactly shy.

Nicole turned to make his smoothie before he noticed the heat rising in her cheeks. Jasmine picked that moment to return.

"I see Nicole is making your smoothie. Is there anything else I can get you?"

He shook his head. "No, just the smoothie."

Jasmine was undeterred. "So, you work in the suit store in the lower wing, I assume."

"Right."

“Do you work every day?”

“Most days, but we’re closed on Sundays. Need a day of rest to serve the Lord.”

Nicole returned with the smoothie and deliberately ignored Jasmine’s pointed look.

“How refreshing it is to hear a young man taking a day for the Lord. You run into so many atheists these days.”

Nicole narrowed her eyes at Jasmine. She turned back to the man. “Here’s your smoothie. I hope my coworker here wasn’t too much of a bother.”

He took the cup and handed her some cash. “No bother at all. Do you really run into a lot of atheists when you’re filling orders? I can’t understand why that would come up.”

Nicole shook her head. “Don’t listen to her,” she stage-whispered. “She’s a little crazy.”

Jasmine laughed and started organizing the snacks.

“Well, I guess I’ll get back to my store. Pleasure talking with you ladies.” He took his leave and walked back in the direction he had come, but not without a glance back over his shoulder at Nicole.

Embarrassed at having been caught watching him, Nicole swatted Jasmine’s arm. “You are impossible!”

“What? I found out some important information. Admit it. You’re intrigued by him, especially since we learned he cares about God.”

Nicole shrugged. “Maybe. But now I need to go refill the fruit.”

~*~

Nicole logged out of the cash register and hung up her apron. What a busy day. The closer it got to Christmas, the more shoppers entered the mall, and it seemed they all wanted smoothies. She couldn't imagine why, not with the temperature dropping almost every day. She'd rather be drinking hot drinks this time of year. Still, she wouldn't complain. More customers made the day go faster, and ensured she kept her job. It wasn't much, but it paid the bills.

Normally she'd walk straight out to her car, but she was in the mood to check out the Christmas displays. Santa had been there since Thanksgiving, but Nicole hadn't made the detour. Christmas wasn't about Santa, but the traditions were still fun.

She made her way through the crowd and stopped, admiring the gigantic tree covered with lights and ornaments. Next to the tree sat Santa in his red chair, a pig-tailed toddler in his lap. The girl turned towards Santa and rubbed his beard with both hands. Santa let out a chuckle, and the photographer clicked away.

The line snaked around the concourse. Impatient children dressed in their Sunday best waited their turn. For the children, it was about telling Santa their desires, but for the parents, it was all about getting the perfect photo. What would it have been like to sit on Santa's lap as a child? They'd never done normal things like that when she was a kid.

"All done for the day?"

Nicole's reverie was interrupted by a now-familiar voice. She turned to find suit-guy. Her heart kicked up a notch. "Yes, thank goodness. It was a busy day," she said. "How about you?"

"Not too bad," he said. "I'm Michael, by the way."

Finally, a name for the face. "I'm Nicole, but you probably already know, thanks to my very nosy co-worker, Jasmine."

Michael's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Yes, but it's nice to officially meet you." He extended his hand, and Nicole shook it, a warmth travelling up her arm. "Are you planning to take a picture with Santa?"

Nicole laughed. "No, I wanted to check out the displays. There hasn't been much time to get in the Christmas spirit. I usually head straight to the parking lot after my shift."

"Which explains why I don't usually see you outside of the shop," Michael said. "I like to make a loop of the mall before heading home, especially this time of year." He pointed towards the Christmas village. "I love watching the kids with the delight in their eyes."

"I was thinking the same thing. But now I need to head home. It was nice to meet you, Michael."

"I'll walk with you," he said.

As they headed away from the Christmas display, Michael scowled. "Seriously? The trashcan is right there. How hard is it?"

Nicole followed his gaze to a collection of discarded cups. Michael picked them up one-by-one and tossed them into the trashcan with ease. The last

cup, however, bounced off the can and sticky liquid splattered all over the floor. Michael moaned.

"No one saw you," Nicole said.

Michael shook his head. "No, I made things worse. I'll take care of this." He veered off to the right, opposite the direction of the main exit. Nicole waited, curious what he would do. He returned a few moments later with a janitor bucket. He removed his coat, draped it over a nearby chair, and loosened his tie. She admired his relaxed appearance, having never seen him without a full suit.

He mopped the mess and returned the bucket. As he walked back towards the chair to retrieve his jacket, he noticed her watching. "I thought you'd be long gone by now."

"It was nice of you to clean up the cups."

"It would've been simple if I wasn't trying to show off."

Nicole's stomach fluttered as he directed his smile towards her. She wanted to learn more about this man. They continued walking towards the parking lot, and a faint tapping sound grew louder. Dread built in Nicole's gut. Sure enough, as they approached the glass atrium near the food court, the rain started pouring down in sheets.

"I'll wait here for a while," Nicole said.

"Not interested in getting soaked?"

"No..." Nicole broke off. How much should she share?

Michael cocked his head, the question in his gaze.

Nicole sighed. "I hate driving in the rain. A few

years ago, the rain was coming down like this, and I skidded off the road into a ditch." She shuddered. "I was stuck for two hours until the tow truck pulled me out."

Michael's eyes widened. "Were you hurt?"

"I broke my collarbone in three places. It hurt so much. I still get nervous driving when it's raining hard. And now, it's close to freezing—the roads are bound to get icy."

"I'm sorry, Nicole. Would you like a ride?"

The offer was tempting, but even knowing that Michael didn't work on Sundays, Nicole wasn't about to get in a car with an almost-stranger. "No, I'll be fine. I'll wait until it passes."

"Would you like some company?" Michael's expression was hopeful.

Nicole hesitated. Did she? Making small talk while serving him a smoothie was safe. Daydreaming about him was safe, although she'd never admit to Jasmine she did so. Spending time waiting out the rainstorm was a different matter entirely. The mall wouldn't close for several hours. What if they stayed and talked and he didn't like her?

"It's fine. I didn't mean to be so forward. I'll give you some space." Michael started moving towards the door.

"Actually, some company would be nice, if you don't mind."

Michael gestured towards a table in the food court. "Shall we sit?"

Nicole nodded, and moved towards the table. A

flash shot across the sky, and almost immediately, thunder rumbled overhead. Nicole trembled.

Michael moved closer. "Are you nervous?"

Nicole bit her bottom lip. "A little. I guess it's silly."

"You can't always control your fears," Michael said. "You went through a difficult experience. It's understandable it affected you." He turned to face her. "Can I pray for you?"

Nicole blinked. Was he serious? "Yes, please."

"God, please be with Nicole right now. Please comfort her and give her peace in the storm. Help her to remember that You are always with her and always in control. In Jesus' name, Amen."

A sense of peace washed over Nicole. "Thank you. That was incredibly sweet." Suddenly the suit salesman took on an entirely new dimension. "I may be OK driving in the rain after all."

"Glad to hear it. How about if I follow behind you? I can make sure you get home safely, and you won't worry about getting in the car of some guy you hardly know."

Nicole's cheeks grew warm. "I didn't mean..."

Michael waved a hand. "No, I get it. It's smart to be careful." He peered through the skylights. "It might be letting up a bit. We can make a run for it. Where are you parked?"

Nicole followed Michael out of the mall and pointed out her car. "It's the green sedan over there."

Michael spelled out her license plate. "OK, got it. I parked on the other side of the lot. Give me a couple of

minutes, and I'll be right behind you."

As they moved out from the protection of the overhang, the skies opened up again. Nicole sprinted to her car, fumbled with the door handle, and sank into the driver's seat. What a night. Despite being soaked, she smiled. She couldn't wait to tell Jasmine. She turned on the car and waited for the heat to kick in. Shivering, she turned on the radio to the all-Christmas station. The music filled the car, and while she was still cold, the atmosphere was brighter.

Rain poured down, but Nicole was more at ease in the rain than she'd been since the accident. Was it Michael's prayer or was it knowing he'd be following her home? A few minutes later, headlights flashed to her right. Assuming it was Michael, she pulled out of the parking space and headed towards home. Sure enough, the car followed her out of the lot. She eased her grip on the steering wheel and took the familiar streets back to her place.

As she pulled up to her apartment building, a buzzing sound blared. Oh, no. The fire alarm was going off again. She slumped back against her seat. All she wanted was to dry off, put on warm clothes, and eat dinner. A knock sounded at her window, and she jumped. There was Michael, standing outside her car with an umbrella in hand. Sirens approached from a distance.

"I'd planned to wait until you were safely inside, but it doesn't appear you'll be able to go in," Michael said.

"No, I'll sit here and wait it out." Nicole's stomach

made an embarrassing groan.

"And starve to death? Not on my watch," Michael said. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

"I can't go anywhere like this," Nicole said. "I'm soaked."

"I know just the place. How about you follow me this time?" Michael asked.

Should she trust him? Why not? Any guy who would pray for her had to be OK, right? Besides, it wasn't as if he was a complete stranger. She knew where he worked. She shrugged. "OK, lead the way." She watched him walk back to his car and then pulled out behind him.

A short while later, he parked in front of a cozy split-level in a charming neighborhood on the south side of town. Nicole eased in behind him, realizing as she parked that she hadn't thought about the rain. This time, the knock on her window didn't startle her.

Michael opened her car door and held the umbrella over her head. Nicole smiled. "Thanks, but it's too late for the umbrella. I'm already soaked to the bone. Is this your house?"

"It used to be. I grew up here."

"You brought me to your parent's house?" Nicole's heart pounded. "Why are we here?"

Michael's gaze was kind. "Because you're in need of dinner and dry clothes. You can find both here. My mom is an amazing cook, and I'm sure one of my sisters has something you can borrow. I didn't think it would be appropriate to take you to my place."

A flood of emotions streamed through Nicole.

Touched by his thoughtfulness, nervous about meeting his family, grateful he brought her somewhere with dry clothes and a hot meal... "Thank you. This is very kind. Are you sure they won't mind?"

Michael grinned. "I called on the way over. There's already an extra place set at the table."

Nicole considered protesting, but the rumbling in her stomach reminded her why she wasn't sitting in her apartment parking lot waiting for the firemen to allow her back in the building. "It sounds perfect. Lead the way."

2

Nicole followed Michael into a living room filled with worn, comfortable furniture. Smells from the kitchen wafted through the room, causing the rumbling in her stomach to increase. Michael led her into the kitchen where a plump fiftyish woman with auburn hair was pulling a casserole out of the oven.

“Mom, this is Nicole,” Michael said.

The woman wiped her hands on her frayed apron and extended one. “Shannon,” she said. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Nicole took Shannon’s hand. “You as well. Thank you for taking me in this evening.”

Shannon wrapped Nicole’s hand in both of hers. “Your hand is freezing, dear. You poor thing—caught out in the rain.”

“I got rained on too, Mom,” Michael said.

Shannon waved a hand at him. “Go get your sisters.”

Michael disappeared and soon, two teenaged girls entered the kitchen. Shannon pointed at them in turn. “Kayleigh and Fiona, meet Nicole. Can one of you please give her something dry to wear?”

The older girl, Kayleigh, smiled. “Sure, come with me.” Nicole followed Kayleigh up the short staircase to

a bedroom, where Kayleigh pulled out a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt. "How's this?"

"Perfect, thank you. The fire alarm was blaring at my apartment building, so I couldn't go home to change."

"No problem," Kayleigh said. "Dinner's ready, though, so come back down when you're dressed." She closed the door behind her, and Nicole peeled off her wet clothes, replacing them with the dry ones. She glanced at herself in the mirror. Her damp hair was flat against her forehead, and the oversized sweatshirt dwarfed her frame. Nicole found a dry part of her shirt and dried her hair the best she could. It would have to do.

She hurried down the stairs and found Michael's family gathered around a large dining table. Shannon placed a tray of steaming biscuits in the center, and Michael poured glasses of water. "Dad, this is Nicole, a friend from the mall."

A large, gray-bearded man grasped Nicole's hand in his. "Name's Mike. Pleasure to meet you. Glad you could join us. Shannon's shepherd's pie is to die for."

"Oh, it's not so special," Shannon said.

"Trust me, Mom, it is," Michael said. He turned to Nicole, pulled out a chair for her, and then took the seat beside her. "I find an excuse to come here at least once a week. Tonight, you were my excuse." He threw her a wink.

As everyone took their seats at the table, they all joined hands. Surprised, Nicole allowed Shannon and Michael to take her hands in theirs. Mike's deep voice

rang out.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for my beautiful wife and this amazing food she’s prepared for us. Thank You for a warm, dry, and safe place to eat it, and thank You for the pleasure of a dinner guest this evening. Please bless our time together. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Warmth flooded through Nicole. Is this what it would be like to grow up in a Christian family?

As the girls chattered about school, Nicole watched and listened. This was a safe place, a place of acceptance. Was this what she was searching for all those years? She turned to find Michael studying her. “What?”

He held up the casserole dish. “Thought you might like some dinner.”

Nicole’s face warmed. “Of course. Thank you.” Michael ladled a giant spoonful of the meats and vegetables topped with fluffy mashed potatoes onto her plate. He followed it with a buttery, flaky biscuit. Nicole tried to eat slowly, but the delicious meal was too hard to resist. She ate every last bite, wiping the gravy from her plate with the lighter-than-air biscuit. She sat back against her chair and grinned at Shannon. “That was fantastic. Thank you so much for dinner.”

Shannon beamed. “I’m so glad you liked it.”

“Do you have much homework tonight?” Michael asked his sisters. He was met with groans.

“Big chemistry test tomorrow,” Fiona said.

“And an English paper to finish,” Kayleigh added.

“Why don’t you let me take care of the dishes?”

Michael said.

"Thanks!" the girls said, and scrambled up the stairs.

Nicole laughed. "I take it the dishes are usually the girls' job?"

Shannon stood, clearing plates as she did. "Michael had a turn in there as well, but since he moved out, it falls to the girls. Once the children were old enough, Mike drilled it into their heads if they wanted to enjoy having me cook for them, the least they could do would be to clean the dishes as a way to say thank you."

"Wonderful," Nicole said. "And they don't complain?"

Shannon laughed. "Oh, they complain, all right, but they get it done. Deep down, they don't really mind. They figure it wouldn't be normal not to complain about chores."

Nicole laughed. "I suppose that's true."

Michael started stacking plates and carrying them to the kitchen. Nicole followed with a stack of her own.

"You're our guest," Michael said. "You shouldn't be doing the dishes."

"I heard how it works around here," Nicole said. "I want to help to say thank you for the meal."

A grin spread across Michael's face. "I'm not sure it applies to guests, but if you want to, I won't stop you. Wash or dry?"

"I'll wash. You dry and put the dishes away."

"Good call."

Nicole filled the sink with soapy water while