

A festive holiday card with a green background. At the top left, a large red bow is tied around a branch of mistletoe with white flowers and green leaves. Golden streamers and swirls are scattered across the scene. In the bottom right corner, a firefighter's helmet is visible, with the word 'FIREFIGHTER' and the number '14' on it. The text 'JOANN DURGİN' is at the top right, and 'MEET ME UNDER THE MISTLETOE' is in the center right.

JOANN DURGİN

MEET
ME
UNDER
THE
MISTLETOE

Meet Me under the Mistletoe

JoAnn Durgin

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.

Meet Me under the Mistletoe

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Dedication

For my forever Mistletoe Man, my husband, Jim, who made the same special promise to the Lord like my hero in this story, Jake Marston—and kept it. I’m so thankful he did.

My thanks and gratitude go to Sergeant Ben Wright and Captain Brad Collier of Station 4 in New Albany, Indiana, for explaining all things “firefighter” and allowing this writer a peek into the mindset and true heart of the men and women called to this most noble profession. To all the firefighters who serve their local communities across our great nation with courage, humility, and selflessness, I thank you.

Special thanks to Nicola Martinez, Fay Lamb, and Annette Irby for their encouragement and support and to our gracious Lord for blessing me with these characters and their story.

Psalm 62:1-2

Praise for JoAnn Durgin

I love JoAnn Durgin! Her stories and characters are fresh and engaging, and her writing is among the strongest I've seen. I love her unique style and tone. Her stories are right up my alley, offering a fun, romantic getaway. ~Janice Hanna Thompson, author of the *Weddings by Bella* series

Keep your eye on JoAnn Durgin—a fresh voice in Christian fiction who writes from the heart, straight to the soul. ~Julie Lessman, award-winning author of *The Daughters of Boston* and *Winds of Change* series

With characters that dance off the pages and into your hearts, JoAnn Durgin's books overflow with humor, faith, and oh-so-sweet romance! ~Dora Hiers, author of *Heart Racing, God-Gracing Romance* (White Rose Publishing)

It's evident author JoAnn Durgin loves her characters—and readers can't help but fall in love with them, too, as they tackle real life problems with faith and Durgin's trademark sense of humor. ~Beth K. Vogt, author of *Wish You Were Here* (Howard Books, May 2012) and *Catch a Falling Star* (Howard Books, May 2013)

1

Where will you end up?

Applying pressure to the stuffed bear's eye, Jake counted under his breath and waited for the glue to set. The guys in the firehouse would tease him if they knew, but he always said a prayer for the kid who'd get one of these fix-it projects. This teddy bear, like most of the dolls, animals, or toys from Starlight's Christmas drive, had been "gently" loved—another way of saying the previous owner held no special affinity for it. Satisfied the plastic eye was secure, Jake relaxed his grip and placed the bear on the shelf next to the train set, model car, and sock monkey he'd repaired, painted, or patched. His shoulders ached from hunching over the desk the past couple of hours, but it was worth it.

The doorbell rang, loud in the quiet of the century-old family home. Darting a quick glance at his watch, Jake grimaced at the pain radiating through his lower back as he rose to his feet—a none-too-subtle reminder of his on-the-job fall a couple of weeks ago. Not enough to warrant short-term disability but sufficient to give him plenty of grief. His heating pad was his constant companion when he climbed into bed every night. Maybe he should get a dog. The affection, plus the added warmth, sure would be nice. A big, furry canine would be the perfect, loyal companion. *Merry Christmas to me.*

After hobbling through the foyer, Jake switched on the outside light and took a quick peek through the beveled glass oval on the front door. The oversized Christmas bulbs strung along the bottom of the porch roof formed a cornucopia of vibrant color, an iridescent halo, behind Dylan's head. Jake couldn't resist his grin as he opened the door. "To what do I owe this honor, Sergeant Sinclair?"

"Sorry I didn't call, buddy, but I didn't want to give you the opportunity to turn me down." Dylan waved a hand to a far corner of the covered porch. "I brought my sister for reinforcement. Julia, come meet Captain Jake Marston, Starlight's resident wounded hero."

He squinted in the dim light, wondering why Dylan felt the need to introduce him that way. Dressed in a red flannel shirt, jeans and heavy socks, Jake shivered when a gust of bitter wind blew the door open wider. "Come on inside and get warm," he said loud enough for Julia to hear.

After reattaching a drooping section of bulbs, she turned. "All better now."

"She's used to saying that," Dylan said. "Julia's a pediatric nurse over in Cedar Rapids."

"I also know how to keep impertinent patients in line, and you remind me of some of them. Be good, brother." Shoving her mitten-covered hands in the pockets of her down jacket, she walked across the porch in their direction.

This is Julia? For whatever reason, Jake's mental picture of Dylan's kid sister was stuck way in the past—a gawky teenager with a mouth full of metal. That preconceived image paid her no justice whatsoever. Taller than most women, she was slender

without being skinny. A white cap covered her head but dark, wispy bangs escaped, tousled by the wind. Even in the dim light, her eyes were bright. Could be a reflection of the porch light, but no...there was definite sparkle.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Julia. Thanks for...taking care of my bulbs." Jake ignored Dylan's smirk of amusement at that inane comment. He could handle talking to kids, but women proved a daunting challenge. *Great*. He'd already wedged his size twelve foot in his mouth. If they taught a class at the church—or sponsored a support group—for clueless single men on how to hold a conversation with a woman, he'd be the first to sign up. His bumbling and often idiotic statements would make him the star pupil, or at least a living, breathing example of what *not* to say when it came to social graces.

"Happy to help," Julia said with a shy smile, stepping into the front foyer.

Dylan brushed past him, giving him a light pat on his not-so-banged-up left shoulder. "How ya holdin' up? A word of advice," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, "don't say anything about Julia's fiancé. Touchy subject with her."

Jake closed the door. "Wouldn't think of it."

Headed straight for the staircase—with its handrails and balusters hand carved by Jake's great-grandfather, the *original* Jacob Marston—Dylan grabbed the jacket hanging on the knob. "Come on. It's time to get you out of the mausoleum. We've got some holiday do-gooding to do."

Jake quirked a brow. "If that's your misguided way of convincing me to go out in below-freezing temperatures, you should know better." Getting to

know Julia was an appealing option, but he was tired. What he needed was a good, long soak in the tub, but no way would he ever admit that to another man, especially Dylan. He gestured to the shelf displaying his recent handiwork. "I've already put in my time tonight."

"You need to recirculate among the land of the living and end this self-imposed exile." Dylan mock-shivered and darted a wary glance at the toys lined up on the shelf. "Those dolls give me the creeps. It's like they're following me with their eyes."

"Reason number one to stop watching silly movies." Silky dark hair tumbled halfway down her back as Julia removed her cap. Peeling off her mittens, she smoothed flyaway strands away from her cheeks.

Jake found it difficult not to stare. Dylan's sister was stunning and hands-down the most beautiful woman ever to grace his front foyer. No wonder he couldn't talk to women. Even his thoughts were harebrained. Rubbing his hand over his jaw, he regretted not shaving since yesterday morning.

"First thing you should know about me is that I don't always share my wayward brother's opinion," Julia said. "I'm sorry you were hurt, Jake, but from what I hear, you saved a beloved family dog and risked a lot."

Jake's pulse raced at the compliment. "Thanks. Just doing my job. I'll live."

Her perusal encompassed the living room before moving back to the front foyer and staircase. "This house has so much character. I imagine it holds fascinating stories. How old is it?"

Eyes the color of warm sapphires met Jake's, momentarily stealing his breath. Digging deep, he

found his voice. "It's over a hundred years old. My great-grandfather, Jacob, built it as a wedding gift for his bride."

"How romantic." Julia ran her hand over the smooth, rich oak of the handrail. "That makes it even more special. Did you grow up here?"

"Pretty much. I spent a lot of weekends and holidays in this house. My grandparents lived here until they moved to a smaller place when I was ten. That's when we moved in."

"So many people have gotten away from tradition and family, but it means everything." Her tone sounded wistful. "I'm sure a house this old requires a lot of upkeep, but it's also a labor of love, isn't it?"

He couldn't have said it better himself. "Exactly."

"Ask Jake the name of his ancestor's bride," Dylan said from the living room. "For the record, did you note my buddy here is also named for his ancestor?"

Julia lifted her eyes to Jake's. "I'll humor him. What was your great-grandmother's name?"

"Julia." For once, Jake's voice didn't waver. Considering he didn't believe in coincidence or luck, that ancestral fact was mighty interesting. He hadn't even thought of it, and he was more than surprised his often clueless friend had. Julia's eyes widened before she turned aside, a pink flush in her cheeks. If possible, it made her even prettier.

"How romantic." Dylan gave an exaggerated sigh then closed his mouth when both Jake and Julia stared at him. "Sorry. Don't mind me."

Julia stepped closer to the shelf of toys, childlike fascination written in her expression. She touched the sock monkey before trailing a finger to the model car. A gentle smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Do you

ever wonder about the stories behind these abandoned toys?" She picked up the car and opened and closed one of the doors before returning it to the shelf. "Did another favorite replace it? Did the child move away, get tired of it, give it to a friend?"

Jake shrugged. "I think more about where it'll end up and hope it makes a kid happy. I try to be productive during my down time, and I like refurbishing them. My dad was a firefighter, and I used to help him fix the toys, especially at Christmas. Most people donate new ones these days, and it's getting harder to pass the safety restrictions, but I find a lot of forgotten treasures." His eyes fell on the model car. "Dad taught me more than he'll ever know. About a lot of things." Why he added that last part, he wasn't sure, but it was true.

"That's very admirable, and it looks like you've done your dad proud." Julia lifted a doll from the box on the floor. "Molly Dolly." She blinked hard a few times and bit her lower lip. "I had one like this, but I lost her when I was five. My brother claims to know nothing about it, but I have my suspicions."

"You *still* haven't let go of that?" Dylan raised both hands. "Honestly, I know nothing. If you remember, I led the search and rescue operation. I'm sticking to my original story: Mugs had everything to do with it."

"Mugs was our dog," Julia said. "He *was* sort of a canine kleptomaniac." She wiped moisture from the corner of one eye. "Sorry to get all silly and sentimental about a doll."

"Until she was almost seven, my sister, Amanda, used to haul Sally Sings-a-Lot around everywhere, so I know how attached girls can get." Know yes, but

understand, no. When Julia's magnetic eyes smiled into his, he had the irrational urge to buy her a hundred dolls. He also knew enough about women to realize a replacement couldn't fill the void in Julia's heart for the one she'd lost. "You don't think this could be—"

"Oh, no," Julia said, shaking her head. "That would be a real Christmas miracle. This one is a newer version. Mine had darker hair, and the smile is different." She smoothed a wrinkle in the slightly torn red dress and replaced the doll in the box.

Jake glanced at her left hand, surprised she wore no engagement ring. Given Dylan's earlier comment, perhaps there was trouble in paradise, and she'd returned the ring. Or temporarily removed it and come to Starlight so she could think things over. *Man, get a grip. She's engaged. End of story.* Jake averted his eyes and shifted his position.

"You do terrific work, Jake, and I'm sure these toys will make the kids very happy." Julia's smile charmed him senseless.

Dylan cleared his throat, bringing Jake back to reality. "Sorry to break up this tender moment. It warms this old heart of mine. And yes, it's wonderful for the kids and all, but you wanna know something?"

Not sure he wanted to hear what was coming, and not appreciating the sarcasm in Dylan's tone, Jake waited. His friend's proclivity for blunt honesty was a mixed blessing depending on the topic. Jake moved into the living room, taking slow, careful steps. Slumping onto the padded arm of the sofa, he planted both feet on the floor to balance his weight.

Dylan moved in front of him, his brow creased and arms crossed. A familiar stance. The man wasn't

backing down. "Ever since you got hurt, you've been holed up here every night. Just another reason to hide from the world and lick your wounds."

"Excuse me?" Jake ran a hand through hair grown too long in the last couple of weeks. Why did his friend have to bring up a sore subject with Julia in the same room? He inhaled a deep breath, trying to disguise his irritation. "Falling through a burning flight of stairs had a little something to do with it, Dylan. It's called *nursing* my wounds, and it's a legitimate reason for staying home. My top priority right now is making it through a full shift at the firehouse. Besides, ever heard about your home being a refuge? There's a lot of merit in that sentiment."

"Maybe I should wait in the car..." Julia started toward the front door.

"No," Dylan said. "Give us a few minutes, Jules."

Jake nodded in the direction of the kitchen. "Feel free to help yourself to a glass of water or anything you want while your brother lectures me. I'm used to it, so it shouldn't take too long."

"I know the feeling," Julia said.

"My sympathies."

Julia's lips twitched as she turned to go.

Am I flirting? Jake thought he'd forgotten how, not that he was ever any good at it. At least he didn't utter anything misguided in that last exchange, but he needed to watch himself. Julia might not wear an engagement ring, but the woman was off-limits. Still, no way was he going to get into this now and air his dirty laundry in front of *any* woman. Then he remembered he'd been folding his freshly washed clothes on the kitchen table and stifled a groan. The red and green plaid boxers he'd bought on sale dirt

cheap—the *only* reason he'd purchased them—were sitting on top of that pile of clothes. The ones with silly embroidered reindeer prancing all over them.

Aw, man. He wouldn't want his *mom* to see those stupid boxers. If only he could move faster than a snail in snow, he'd dash straight to the kitchen table and hide them, but no. It was too late, and his embarrassment reached a whole new level. He'd always known God had a sense of humor, not to mention a highly-developed sense of irony.

Jake braced himself for the coming lecture. The only saving grace? Dylan's chastisement might actually be preferable to a burst of laughter from the gorgeous but unavailable woman in his kitchen.

2

Dylan's penetrating gaze bore through Jake. "I'm not discounting your pain, but it's been almost a year since Nicole left. You can't wallow forever, Jake."

Ah, right. Here we go. Dylan's "concern" was borderline nagging, and it was beginning to annoy him. Jake crossed his arms over his chest and cringed, not bothering to hide the fact that tonight his twenty-eight years felt more like seventy. The relentless, freezing Iowa winter must be settling in his back.

"Did my mother or Amanda pay you to make that speech? And for the record, this frown's the back pain talking, not the reminder of abandonment. Nicole made her choice, and I'm not wallowing. Trust me on that one. I'm thankful she realized she didn't want to marry me *before* I put a diamond on her finger and we pledged everlasting love." Funny how the mention of Nicole didn't bother him anymore.

"Yeah, whatever," Dylan said. "Listen, there's a Christmas party down at Regency Hall. One of the local churches is handing out gifts and stuff for the kids. The chief called earlier and asked if we'd make an appearance. We're taking the engine and doing the usual gig. In this case, since you're the walking wounded, you get to play up the hero card. Not to sound insensitive."

"I don't need a reminder, but clarification, please," Jake said. "The chief asked or he commanded?" Big

distinction.

“Asked. Where you’ve got kids, ladies will be hovering nearby, if you catch my drift.” Dylan wiggled his brows and started to slap him on the arm before he caught Jake’s warning glance. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

The corners of Jake’s mouth lifted as he nodded toward the box of toys still needing repairs. “One-eyed, one-armed Suzie over there can catch your drift, Dylan. Glad to know your priorities are in order.”

“OK, then, since you’re forcing me to bring in the big dogs...”

Jake snapped to attention and raised his hand. “Oh no, buddy. Don’t tell me you and Hannah are fixing me up. I thought you learned your lesson after the last time.”

“Hey, Jasmine is a fine woman, has a solid relationship with the Lord, a good career—”

“Who thinks the Eiffel Tower is in the Midwest. Kings Island or something. Not that she isn’t pretty and sweet as molasses, but she’s not for me.” Thank goodness Jasmine didn’t live in Starlight, or the situation could get awkward.

Dylan shook his head. “So she might not be the best at geography, but who cares? Ever think maybe you’re too picky?”

Jake stared him down. “No, as a matter of fact. Maybe I’m waiting on God’s timing and not yours, mine, or anyone else’s. Ever consider that? You will not—I repeat—*not* fix me up again. That’s final.” He stood without too much discomfort, and gained the advantage of a few more inches. “If I humor you and go tonight, it’s for the kids, and no other reason. Just so we’re clear on that point.” Dylan always knew how to play on his weakness.

“Of course, there’s no other reason,” Dylan said. “Don’t worry. We didn’t arrange anything, but Hannah’s matchmaking efforts have shifted into overdrive these days. This nesting instinct of hers makes her want to pair up everyone.”

Seemed Hannah wasn’t the only one playing matchmaker. “All right. Tell me I don’t have to put on the gear and all’s forgiven.” The full uniform with bunkers—boots, pants and suspenders, combined with the turnout coat and helmet—would add more than fifty pounds. Guaranteed to give him grief and slow the healing process. He headed to the front hall closet, each step a little easier. Moving around was good and helped alleviate the stiffness.

“I think the chief will excuse you from wearing it,” Dylan said. “You’re one of our finest, but it’s a real shame you don’t have the same effect on women as you do with kids.”

Jake pushed aside Dylan’s comment, no matter how true. He bent over to retrieve his boots from the hall closet and blew out a breath he hoped Dylan would interpret as physical pain. Not many women could understand the sacrifice of being on call, especially if it meant missing out on planned events. Through the years, his dad had missed a few football games, one of Amanda’s dance recitals, and a school program here and there. Sure, Jake had been disappointed, but he also admired his father’s commitment to the firefighter brotherhood.

He carefully lowered himself to the steps, wincing with the effort. When Dylan reached out a hand to help, Jake waved him away. “I got it.”

“Hannah was afraid you were turning into Scrooge. Or a hermit.”

"Never," Jake said. At least smiling didn't hurt. "How's she feeling?"

"Better. This third kid's taking more out of her. She's convinced it's a girl since she says this pregnancy 'feels' different. Can't discount a woman's intuition on these things. She was right about the other two."

Jake knew Dylan wanted a little girl to spoil this time around. Might soften him up, so it could only be a good thing. "Hannah's coming tonight?"

"Yeah. She's meeting us there and bringing the boys." Dylan returned his smile and angled his head toward the kitchen. "It's safe to come out now, sis. Time to get Captain Jake all bundled up."

Within seconds, Julia rounded the corner of the staircase. Dropping to her knees, she tied the laces on his boots. *Wow*. If this angel of mercy wasn't already spoken for, he might be interested. As pretty and nice as she was, she'd have guys lined up into the next *town* waiting to date her, given the opportunity. Plus, she'd seen those ridiculous Christmas boxer shorts. Even if Julia *was* available, she'd have that silly image forever burned in her brain.

Once she finished her task, Jake thanked her. Clutching onto the stair railing, he rose to his feet, feeling like less of a man since he needed the support. He wasn't used to helplessness, and he hated it.

Retrieving Jake's jacket from where he'd left it in the living room, Dylan tossed it to him. "Need help putting that on? No offense, but you seem a little feeble there, buddy."

"I'll manage. You two go on, and I'll be there in a second." His right shoulder felt like it had a knife lodged in there. Jake ground his teeth in a concerted effort not to reveal his pain as he shrugged into the