



A CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

JoAnn Durgin

*Starlight,
Star Bright*

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Bright

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Dedication

For my family, as always, thank you for your many sacrifices, patience, understanding and love. What a blessing you are.

To Maria Battista Hancock, my lovely friend, thank you for your willingness to assist with my translation relative to your native Italian, a language both beautiful and romantic.

A heartfelt thank you to my faithful readers for your encouragement, loyalty and prayers as I move forward in this exciting journey as a Christian author.

Thank you to Nicola Martinez and Fay Lamb of Pelican Book Group for your faith in these characters and bringing their story of hope and love to readers.

Above all, I praise and thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for His infinite grace and mercy. What an honor and privilege it is to share His love with you.

Blessings,
JoAnn Durgin
Matthew 5:16

1

The *look*. Dante had seen it enough to recognize the telltale signs.

The woman's blue eyes widened, and her jaw slacked before the bell on the door stopped jingling. Wearing an apron embroidered with *Barney's Diner* across the front, she paused in the middle of cleaning the counter. The gleam in the eye he'd nicknamed "the dawn of understanding" should surface next. Followed by the inevitable question, "Excuse me, but aren't you...?"

If he could put off her questions long enough, he'd have time to gulp down a cup of something hot and caffeinated and eat a decent meal before blowing back out of town on a breeze as blustery as the one that carried him into tiny Starlight, Iowa. Dante shivered. Would he ever be warm again?

"Welcome to Barney's." A grin creased the woman's lips.

He removed his Stetson, clasping it with near-frozen fingers. "*Buona sera.*"

"Menu's on the counter. I'll be over in a couple of minutes to take your order."

"*Grazie, signora.*" He dropped onto a counter stool, parked the dark brown hat on the adjacent seat, and rubbed his hands together to coax them back to life. If he'd possessed the gift of foresight, he'd have stopped somewhere and bought a pair of thermal gloves.

Living in Italy must have numbed his brain.

After opening the menu, he perused the offerings. The names of the specialties were plenty interesting: Jake's Jumpin' (or Julia's Tame) Chili, Ben's Boatload of Beef Burger (Antacids on the Side), Hannah's Broccoli's-Really-Good-For-You Soup, Pastor Ted's Heavenly Ham & Swiss Sandwich, Angie and Harry's (No Bones) Chicken Soup and Dylan's Where's-The-Fire? Burrito. With names like that, there had to be some fun stories and people behind them. That kind of thing made small-town living special.

Dante closed the menu and stacked it with the others on the counter, resolved to order whatever was available and quick. He surveyed the place. Nice little diner, well-maintained and quiet. The black and white checkerboard floor was accented by red vinyl seats on the chairs, booths, and counter stools. A handful of customers spoke in low tones and darted curious glances his way. Although he turned aside, he sensed the eyes on his back, the speculative whispers.

The better option might have been a fast food drive-thru, but the billboard advertising Barney's Diner a few miles back on the highway had captured his attention. Good thing, since he'd been distracted by aching muscles. Hunching over the steering wheel for hours could do that to a guy. Otherwise, he might have missed Starlight altogether. He did have a reason to stop at Barney's, after all. *The letter*. Dante patted the inner pocket of his jacket and breathed a sigh of relief. Still there.

"No one's a stranger in Starlight," the woman said, coming back around the counter. "I'm Caroline Picasso."

"Nice to meet you. Picasso?" He hoped the

question might distract her.

"Yes, sir. You can't make this stuff up. No relation that I know of, if that's what you're thinking. Ben—that's my husband—*does* like to paint. They're not masterpieces, mind you, but I happen to think they're pretty good. At least you can tell a nose from a chin or a hand from an elbow." The way she gestured with her hands and twisted her face to illustrate her point made him laugh. "So, tell me, what might your name be, and what brings you to our little town?"

"Just passing through, signora." His mistake was drumming the fingers of his right hand on the counter.

Those blue eyes lit, and she surprised him by grabbing hold of his hand, rotating it, studying his World Cup ring. "Real nice ring. Impressive."

The ring *was* a bit ostentatious, but it was a personal badge of honor. Among his most prized possessions, it reminded him how far he'd come and symbolized a hard-fought battle in his third year with the Italian Soccer League.

Releasing his hand, Caroline brought his thoughts back to the present. "I'll call you Italian Cowboy for now." Her grin resurfaced. "Sounds better than Mr. Passing-through-Town. Where were you a second ago?"

"Mentally thanking you for not asking any questions."

"Everybody's got a story to tell," she said. "I'm sure you've got a real good one, but it's yours to tell. Before you head out in the cold again, you've gotta have a cup of my hot coffee. It'll keep you alert for wherever you're going tonight."

"Sounds great. *Grazie mille.*" His stomach growled, reminding him it'd been seven hours since he'd

ingested weak minestrone soup and a half-wilted salad in a no-name roadside diner a couple of states back.

A gust of cold December air blasted him as the front door flew open, the bell jingling away. Dressed in a light blue knit hat, jeans, a white parka, and snow boots, a young woman stepped over the threshold of the diner. With effort, she leaned against the door while the wind howled outside.

Dante jumped from his seat, moved around her, and gave the door a firm push.

She graced him with a bright smile. "Thanks." Eyes the color of dark chocolate—with a hint of warm, melting caramel—met his. With her cheeks flushed pink and snowflakes dancing on dark lashes, she was lovely.

"Prego."

"Amanda!"

They both turned as Caroline rushed forward, moving faster than he'd have thought possible as she enfolded Amanda in a warm embrace. "Oh, honey, what a wonderful surprise. I knew you were coming for Jake and Julia's wedding, of course, but I didn't expect you so soon. Sure is great to see you. We've all missed you around here."

When Amanda pulled off her hat, a mass of loose, honey-blonde curls tumbled past her shoulders. "*Molto bella,*" Dante said under his breath. The last rays of sunshine shone through the picture window behind her, forming a sort of golden halo around her glowing face. *Wow.* Christmas season or not, all the driving must be getting to him. Next he'd be seeing Santa, flying reindeer, and elves.

"I decided to combine vacation time with the Christmas break and come home early. If Julia needs

any help with last-minute details, I wanted to be here. Besides," Amanda said with a grin, "palm trees and flip flops at Christmas somehow seem...wrong. You can't beat Starlight during the holidays."

"You got that right," Caroline said. "Sit yourself down and I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"Actually, I called ahead, and Martha's holding a box of frosted sugar cookies for Jake. I parked out front, and when I saw you through the window, I couldn't resist stopping in to say hi. I'm going to run over to the bakery before Martha closes for the night, and then I'll be back."

Amanda slanted a curious gaze to where he stood beside her as if rooted to the floor like a teenager with a silly crush. She tugged off one glove and held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Amanda Marston. Thanks again for your help."

"Buona sera, *signorina*." Slipping into Italian came naturally but he hoped this gorgeous woman wouldn't misconstrue his words and think he was some kind of Romeo trying to impress her. Based on her expression, she'd formed no early judgments. He reached for her hand, pale in contrast to his own, which was bronzed from the unrelenting Italian sun. The fact she wore no engagement ring or wedding band filled him with an unexpected sense of satisfaction. "I'm Dante. Very nice to meet you."

"You, too." Amanda tilted her head.

Her movement drew his attention to her hair. Those blonde curls fascinated him. "Italian or American?"

He released her hand, ignoring Caroline's smug grin. "Both. It's sort of a long story."

"Aren't they all?" Her lips creased into an inviting

smile. "I'd like to hear it sometime." This woman was no shy wallflower, but her comment came across as simple curiosity rather than overt flirtation. Although he liked assertive women, he'd encountered far too many fawning, aggressive fans in the past few years. But Amanda seemed genuine, unassuming, and friendly.

Caroline elbowed him as she rounded the counter. "I would have introduced you, Amanda, but I hadn't been able to get a name out of him. Until you came along, I'd decided to call him Italian Cowboy. After all, how many Italian-spouting cowboys do we get traveling through Starlight on the second Tuesday in December?"

Amanda laughed. "Not many, I'm sure. I'm going to run over to Martha's, and I'll be back in a few minutes for that promised cup of coffee." With a quick wave, she tugged on her hat and opened the door, setting that bell to its infernal jingling.

"Was she a figment of my overactive imagination?" The question slipped out as Dante sank back onto his seat. He hadn't intended to say it out loud, and he needed to leave before Amanda returned. His brain told him one thing, but why did everything else in him urge him to stay? Something about Amanda was different. Very special different. Need-her-in-your-life different.

2

Dante frowned. He'd never been one to idealize a woman and harbor romantic fantasies before, so why now? Just because it was the off-season and he wasn't actively training didn't mean he could allow himself to be distracted by the first intelligent, sweet, and unassuming woman he met back in the States. A woman he found incredibly attractive. Make that *unbelievably* attractive.

"Amanda's as real as you and me, Italian Cowboy," Caroline said, bringing him back to the present. "She moved to Florida with her parents a couple of years ago. Teaches high school history and coaches the swim team. Her brother Jake's the fire captain in town, and he's getting married soon. That's the quick rundown." She leaned closer. "Amanda's also one of the prettiest girls ever born and raised in Starlight. With a sparkling personality to match." Caroline rapped her knuckles on the counter. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Si," he said. "So it would seem."

Caroline pulled a red ceramic mug from a rack hanging above the counter and filled it with the steaming black brew. "Take anything in it?"

"Just black, *per favore*." He needed the caffeine straight-up tonight. The strong aroma filled his senses. Coffee was a guilty pleasure forbidden during the grueling months of training and the playing season.

He'd savor every single drop.

Caroline placed the steaming brew in front of him and leaned close. "It's not every day I get the honor and privilege of serving a world class soccer player at Barney's Diner, Mr. Moretti."

He jerked up his head.

"I knew it!" She tossed down her towel and stepped around the counter. He twisted on the stool as she moved beside him and lowered her voice. "It is you, isn't it? Dante Moretti, as I live and breathe."

"Si." He blew out a sigh. "What gave me away?"

Her eyes twinkled. "For one thing, you've got a Texas drawl mixed with the Italian. The jeans, boots, and Stetson are pretty much a dead giveaway. I've seen your photo and watched you play enough times to recognize those blue peepers, all that dark wavy hair and"—she peered close—"yep, there it is, that little heart-shaped mole above your left eyebrow. But the biggest tip-off? Not many men walk around wearing a World Cup ring, and certainly never in Starlight. Believe it or not, I'm like the biggest pro soccer fan in this town. When you took the 'dive seen round the world' and caught that ball in the World Cup, I screamed so loud I reckon the neighbors thought I was being murdered. Nearly threw out my back with all the jumping up and down."

"Really?" Who'd have thought an older woman in a no-name town in central Iowa would be a professional soccer fan? Gave him a rush all the same. Lifting his shoulders, Dante gave her a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Not to sound insensitive. Molto grazie."

"Let me see," she said, tapping a finger on her chin. "What is it they call you in Europe?"

He held up one hand. "Signora, stop right there—"

“Delizioso Dante?”

He shifted, uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny. No matter where he went, he couldn't escape that inane nickname the Italian press saddled him with from the beginning of his career. “If you knew me better, you wouldn't be saying that to my face, Miss Caroline.” He rubbed a hand over his beard. Although it hid his most celebrated features, the facial hair itched and annoyed the spit out of him.

“Speaking of faces, why are you hiding those famous dimples?” She surprised him with playful taps on both cheeks. “If Len's Barber Shop was open, I'd haul you over there right now, sit you down, and not let you out of the chair until this handsome face is as smooth as a baby's behind.” She settled her hands on her hips, reminding him of his Gran. “Answer me one thing. You're not married, are you?”

When she raised a brow, waiting, he shook his head. “Not even close. My line of work doesn't exactly attract the marrying kind of girl.” Sure, he'd engaged in his fair share of innocent flirting, but that's as far as he'd allowed it to go. By focusing on his game, he'd avoided unwanted complications or “entanglements,” as his teammates were fond of saying. That kind of behavior only brought trouble he didn't need.

“Well, if there's not some mighty strong undercurrents in *that* statement.” Caroline moved back behind the counter again. “Don't go running off. Stick around and get to know Amanda better. Besides, you need to eat, and you haven't even tasted your coffee.”

“I'm not staying, Miss Caroline, so getting to know Amanda would serve no purpose, regrettable though it might be.” That last part was mumbled under his breath, but Dante knew she'd heard him. Maybe all the

Christmas songs he'd heard the last week while driving around the country had made him go soft and sentimental.

The intensity of Caroline's gaze, so much like Gran's, leveled him. "You got somewhere else you need to be right now?"

"No, ma'am, but—"

"Tell you what. You don't call me ma'am and I won't let on we've got a world class champion athlete in our midst. Deal?"

He chuckled. "Si."

"Now, sit up straight, mister. A very pretty 'marrying kind of girl' is coming back in here again in a few minutes, and you'd better be ready to pour on all that famous Moretti charm."

3

Dante wrapped both hands around his mug and surveyed the scene outside the big picture window. A light, steady snow fell, coating the ground with another fresh layer, reflecting the last rays as the sun lowered on the horizon. Picturesque was the word for it, like a scene on a Christmas card.

As he'd driven through the quiet streets shortly before dusk, the quaintness of the town—with bright, multicolored lights strung across their facades and twinkling in the trees—appealed to a sense of hometown charm he hadn't experienced in years.

Even through the closed windows of his rental car, he'd heard Christmas music playing as bundled-up townspeople, smiling and with arms full of packages, poked in and out of cute little shops. Life's unexpected detours were made for a place like Starlight. Kind of like one of those Norman Rockwell towns where people went caroling and shared cups of hot chocolate afterward. The old stone church he'd seen in the town square probably featured a live nativity. How nice it would be to visit family here for the holidays. Nice to *have* a family.

When the bell jingled again, Dante's senses heightened to full alert as Amanda reentered Barney's. At least the wind had died down, and she closed the door with ease.

"Want the usual, honey?" Caroline called from a

table across the diner.

"Sounds good. Thanks." Rubbing her hands together, Amanda seated herself on the counter stool next to him, still shivering. She removed her hat and placed it with her gloves and the box of cookies on the counter. "I've been looking forward to this all day."

He sipped from his mug for the first time and then winced. Stronger than espresso. He cupped a fist over his mouth and coughed. Caroline Picasso made one mean cup of coffee. From the corner of his eye, he caught Amanda's amusement. If he ever played a soccer match with this brew in him, he'd be all over the place, his on-the-field performance either brilliant or so hyper he'd make careless mistakes. "Tell the truth, Amanda." Coughing again, he thumped a curled fist against his chest. "You've looked forward to *this* all day?"

When she leaned close, he caught a whiff of vanilla and cinnamon. He never realized scents he'd associated with cooking could be so...tantalizing. "Notice I didn't say the coffee was *good*." Amanda angled her head to the corner where Caroline talked with her customers. "She has a heart of gold and can work a room like no one else. Guaranteed by the time you leave Barney's tonight, you'll have a lifelong friend."

Two lifelong friends would be even better, but she was right. "Si. Caroline's *simpatico*." So was the woman seated next to him. Amanda radiated a spontaneous, overflowing joy. A natural effervescence. She had a spark—faith, healthy living, a certain energy perhaps—that appealed to him on much more than a physical level. Yeah, maybe he was losing it. He probably just needed some decent sleep.

"I take it you haven't stopped off at the house yet, Amanda?" With the coffeepot in one hand, Caroline pulled another red mug from a shelf. She filled the cup with the steaming liquid and put it on the counter.

"Thanks," Amanda said. "I wanted to surprise Jake, but the closer I came to Starlight, I figured I'd better give him a two-minute warning. Besides, I needed to work out the kinks in my system and revive a little."

"He'll sure be glad to see you, honey, and I know you and Julia will have fun getting ready for the wedding. When are your folks planning on making the drive?"

"They've decided their driving days are over. To which the rest of the world says a big amen," Amanda said with a small grin. "Mom and Dad are flying in three days before the big day."

"Want something to eat? Some of your brother's special recipe chili before you head over to the old homestead? Marv made up a fresh pot this afternoon."

"I'm not that hungry," Amanda said. "How about a blueberry muffin?"

Caroline nodded. "Coming right up, sweetie." She turned her attention to him. "How about you, Dante? See anything that looks good?"

He chewed the inside of his cheek, amused by Caroline's insinuation. "I'll take whatever you've got that's healthy, per favore."

As she refreshed his coffee, Caroline frowned.

"Signora, do you have something against healthy eating?"

"Not at all, but I sure hope you're not one of those vegans." She waved a hand. "Veggies, vegans...whatever you kids are calling it these days.

Just be quiet and eat your beef, people. I'll never understand all the fuss. Mankind existed for centuries as carnivores."

Amanda nudged his arm. "Helpful hint. The bread's baked fresh at Martha's every morning, and the sandwiches are great here."

"Grazie," he said. "I'll take a pastrami on rye with mustard. Do you have that?"

Caroline wagged a finger, but her smile reached her eyes. "I think I might. Give me a couple of minutes, and it'll be right up. I'll throw a few sea salt chips on your plate, too, if you don't object to those. Supposed to be healthier."

"Fine. Take your time."

Amanda waved to one of the old-timers. Interesting how a pretty girl paying attention to an old man could bring a sparkle to the senior's eyes and a flush to his cheeks. Then again, Dante probably still had that ridiculous, I'm-infatuated-by-a-girl expression on his own face. Who wouldn't around a woman like Amanda?

"What brings you to Starlight, Dante?" Amanda's gaze met his over the rim of her mug.

How to answer? "I saw the billboard on the highway and thought I'd enjoy some small-town charm and a good meal." Truthful, yes, but something held him back from telling her about the letter. This was a great change of pace, sitting beside a gorgeous woman with no obligations, no commitments, and talking about something other than professional soccer.

"When's your brother's wedding?" He turned on the counter stool, and their knees bumped. He smiled. She smiled back, and neither one moved.

A wistful expression crossed her features. "New

Year's Eve. Romantic, don't you think?"

"I suppose." Feeling brave, he chanced another sip of the strong coffee.

Someone from a nearby table called to Amanda. "Excuse me a minute." She scooted off the counter stool and traversed the room, nodding at customers and exchanging a quick hug here and there. Everyone adored this woman, and it was easy to see why. He was half in love with her after knowing her only a few minutes. What he'd seen in those warm eyes was a reflection of what she must see in *his* eyes. Interest. Curiosity. Attraction. Tempered with regret of what was destined to be a short-lived encounter. Pity. A sense of loss threatened to overwhelm him. Yeah, he must be more tired than he thought.

Caroline emerged from the kitchen and set a plate in front of him with the best-looking sandwich he'd seen in months. At least it'd help distract him and absorb some of the caffeine since he'd have plenty to spare. "Thank you, Miss Caroline."

"Welcome." She placed Amanda's plate with the muffin on the counter. "Eat up, now. Plenty more where that came from."

Might as well show her the letter before Amanda returned. "Caroline, I had a specific reason in coming to Starlight." Dante unzipped his down jacket and pulled out the note, smoothing it on the counter. "I'm here to see a kid named"—his eyes scanned the big, printed letters on the white, lined paper—"Andrew."

"Andrew Sinclair? That's the only Andrew I know of in Starlight."

"Could be. It says Andrew from Starlight, Iowa, and it's signed by..."—he skimmed to the bottom—"Tyler."