



JOANN DURGIN

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Together
with
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Dedication

This third novella in the Starlight Christmas Series is dedicated to those faithful readers who insisted that Nicole (ex-girlfriend of Jake in *Meet Me Under the Mistletoe*) needed her own happily ever after. This one's for you!

A special thank you to author Melissa Tagg for answering my questions about the fun landmark in Des Moines, Iowa, featured in this book.

May the grace of the Savior's love fill your hearts at Christmas and always.

Blessings,

JoAnn Durgin
Matthew 5:16

Other Starlight Books

Meet Me Under the Mistletoe
Starlight, Star Bright

1

Tuesday Evening, Early December

If she didn't rescue this interview, Nicole Reardon figured she'd be guzzling eggnog within the hour. Spiked. Not that she made a habit of blowing interviews. Or drinking to drown her inadequacies or for any other reason. Well, not since an unfortunate sorority incident in college. Maybe she should go back to reading news on the weekends. The freedom and variety of co-hosting *Wake Up, Des Moines!* thrilled her, but at other times—like now—she'd prefer a script to winging it solo.

Never mind this interview was for tomorrow's broadcast, a fill-in feature for a last-minute cancellation, and the only time the replacement guest was supposedly available. Taped or not, this interview was still live. A one-shot deal with no do-overs allowed.

You can do this. Swallowing her apprehension, Nicole lifted her chin. Her training and experience prepared her for situations like this. She needed to rise above and conquer.

The shy, middle-aged spinster who fidgeted opposite her wore a pained I'd-rather-be-anywhere-but-here expression. How could she coax romance author Rose Valentine—like anyone would believe that name—into giving her more than monosyllabic

responses? Surely, there must be a writer's passion imbedded deep within this woman. Forget exciting. She'd take anything she could get at this point.

The Taping in Progress light blinked, jumpstarting Nicole's pulse and making her palms sweat as Rose mumbled an answer to the latest question. *Think, Nicole.* She needed inspiration...quick. Grandma Camille's image inexplicably popped into her mind. Wait a minute. Grandma devoured what she termed "dime store romances" for years. "The guys in those books are keepers, Nicole. Just like your Grandpa Joe," she'd say, blushing like a schoolgirl. "Strong and manly. Confident and more than a little stubborn. A man like that knows how to make his woman feel as if she's the most precious jewel in the world."

The hero. Yes, he was the key that could trigger Rose Valentine to spill her guts.

With renewed purpose, Nicole crossed one leg over the other and leaned close to her guest with a conspiratorial glance. "Rose, can you tell us about Slade Stonehenge, the hero of your latest novel?"

Keeping a straight face while saying such an absurd name employed every ounce of Nicole's limited acting talent.

The way Rose's blue eyes lit like sunshine breaking through dark rain clouds was a sweet reward all its own.

Let the gushing begin.

Thank you, Grandma Camille. Sure, she'd found her hero, but men like Grandpa Joe were rare. A fictional hero like Slade was nothing more than a misguided female fantasy to give women false hope that such a man could exist.

Nicole swallowed her satisfaction with a practiced

smile as Rose happily prattled on about the so-called “perfect” man. A few minutes later, when the red warning light flashed to signal the end of the interview, she exhaled a slow sigh of relief, hopefully undetectable to anyone else. Thanking Rose—actually interrupting the woman to do so—Nicole unhooked her microphone as a dutiful assistant arrived to usher her guest from the set.

“That’s a wrap, everyone!” Mike Sturgess, senior producer of *Wake Up, Des Moines!*, removed his headset and unfolded his lanky frame from the chair. “Save me some eggnog at the party.” Passing by where she sat in the middle of the set, Mike gave her an enthusiastic thumbs-up. “Great save, Nikki.”

“Thanks, Mike. Appreciate it.” Not much more she could say. Warranted or not, Mike had always been generous with his praise. Learn from it and move forward.

Kicking off one black shoe and then its mate, Nicole stretched her legs and wiggled her toes. Ah, much better. She rotated her right foot although it did nothing to ease the dull ache. Frowning at the discarded four-inch heels, she lightly massaged her ankle, thankful it wasn’t swollen. After twisting her foot on the ice earlier in the day, she’d need to soak it when she finally made it home tonight. For the segment just taped, the wise decision would have been to forsake vanity in favor of common sense, but the wardrobe supervisor had insisted she wear the death-trap shoes.

“All for the image,” she said under her breath. “Why must designers torture us with shoes that look incredible but hurt like anything?” Easing back in the chair, Nicole closed her eyes, hoping no one overheard

her whine.

“Wouldn’t know, love. In the case of your shoes, I’d say they were designed to attract the male primal instinct. In that regard, their effect is well-taken.”

Colin.

Nicole’s lids fluttered open and she smirked at her co-host. “I didn’t realize you were lurking nearby.”

Colin stood beside the anchor desk with a cord of holiday Christmas tree bulbs dangling from one hand. The same kind of oversized, colorful bulbs Grandpa Joe used to string along the roof of their small house every holiday season. The very same type Ben Picasso in Starlight favored, too. Overdone and tacky, yet charming all the same.

An unexpected pang of sentimentality overwhelmed her, and tears stung her eyes. As much as she loved her career, she often missed the sweet simplicity of small-town living. When she’d lived in Starlight, the town’s somewhat eccentric but loving and completely wonderful citizens had accepted and loved her without question and with open arms. In many ways, Starlight was more “home” in a way that Des Moines—or any other larger city—never could be.

She snapped out of her reverie. “My shoes are very respectable, thank you very much. Really, Colin. Must you make everything about—”

“Why I find women so absolutely fascinating? Always.”

After working with her wildly popular British co-host for a year, she’d learned changing the subject worked best. Recounting the ways she could see God working in his life seemed to work well and usually shut him up for a few minutes. He’d bowed his head during a recent dinner, giving her encouragement he

might be softening in his resistance to all things “spiritual.”

They spent a lot of time together, both on camera and off. Sadly enough, Colin knew everything about her personal life, what little there was to tell. Which also meant she knew more than she wanted about his personal escapades.

Nicole gestured to the chair beside her. “Come sit with me for a minute.”

“Delighted.” Leaving the bulbs on the anchor desk, Colin strolled across the set and dropped into the armchair beside her. “Speak to me. What’s on that lovely mind of yours?”

The familiar scent of his favorite rich spice and sandalwood cologne enveloped her. Dressed in an Italian-made gray suit with a starched white dress shirt, Colin was the epitome of upscale sophistication. A whimsical, red silk tie, which featured smiling, dancing snowmen, was today’s concession to the season and completely Colin.

Nicole rotated her foot and blew out a breath. “Did you catch the interview? That fiasco skidded downhill faster than I did on that pesky ice patch this morning.” The thought of it made her ankle ache all over again.

“Yes, but unlike that unfortunate wipeout, you managed a spectacular save just now. Asking Miss Valentine to discuss her latest hero sparked the woman like a firecracker.” Colin snapped his fingers. “Pop! Pop! Another stellar example of Nikki Reardon genius.”

“You can thank my Grandma Camille. She talked about the characters in her romance novels like they were personal friends. Not that I’m mocking Rose or

her book, but Slade Stonehenge? Seriously? Don't you find that name the least bit offensive? You're from England, after all. And, well, you are a man."

Colin chuckled. "Glad you noticed. What gave me away?" Crossing his arms over his chest, he appeared to ponder her question. "I imagine Rose wanted an iconic, strong name. With that admittedly peculiar moniker, she certainly accomplished her goal. Based on the sales numbers for her books, readers aren't complaining."

Male laughter erupted from the far side of the studio where a dark-haired man talked with Mike and a couple of the show's sound techs. The visitor's laugh sounded natural and relaxed, his movements were fluid, his voice resonant without being obnoxious or overbearing. Handsome enough to be a network anchor, he stood at least six feet tall, lean with an athletic build. A tailored navy sport coat stretched across his broad shoulders and a blue-and-white striped dress shirt was opened at the collar and tucked into dark dress jeans.

As she surveyed him beneath veiled lids, Nicole's pulse strummed an erratic rhythm. "Who's the guy?"

"Haven't a clue." Colin angled his position to gain a better view. "That jacket's got Armani written all over it. My money says he's either an advertiser or a wealthy patron. Perhaps both."

Tearing her gaze from the visitor, Nicole refocused on Colin. "I have a question and would like your input." Without giving him the chance to respond, she plunged right to the crux of the matter. "Can you please explain how discussing a fictional demigod can possibly help our viewers? It's my goal to give them something meaningful and solid to carry them

throughout their day—other than some muscular fantasy man.” She ignored Colin’s widening grin. “Not that I necessarily expect to impact their lives in some dramatic, life-changing way with every show we do, but something thought-provoking and relevant might be nice.”

“Thinking is good.”

“Nikki and Colin.” They both turned as Mike walked toward them with the subject of their speculation. “Meet Alexander Kingsfield. He’s just flown in from New York and will be here with us for the next week. Make him feel at home, will you?” With a quick slap on the visitor’s back, Mike excused himself, telling them he needed to speak with Artie, the station’s general manager, before the holiday festivities commenced.

Mike had a disconcerting habit of leaving things open-ended on occasion, but their senior producer wouldn’t have introduced Mr. Kingsfield if he wasn’t somehow important to the station or *Wake Up, Des Moines!*

As Nicole started to rise to her feet, a sharp pain shot through her ankle. Trying to disguise her wince, she bit her lower lip.

“Steady, love.” Colin placed one hand beneath her arm.

“Don’t get up on my account.” Mr. Kingsfield pulled over a chair, positioning it to face her. “I hope you don’t mind if I join you.”

“Not at all.” She eased back into her chair. “Please do.”

Colin offered his hand to the other man. “Colin Young, Nikki’s co-host and devoted protector.”

The corners of Kingsfield’s mouth lifted as he

shook Colin's hand. "I can see that. Not that I believe Nicole needs a protector. Call me Alex. It's an honor to meet you both." His eyes were an incredibly rich, velvety moss green as they focused on her. "May I call you Nicole?"

"Yes, of course." How considerate of him to ask. Although she preferred Nicole, most people called her Nikki without a second thought. His use of the word "honor"—a throwback to her grandfather's era—and his assessment that she didn't need a protector caught her attention. Likewise the fact he wore no wedding band. When Alex offered his hand, firm and warm, Nicole left hers in his long enough to regret it. In the best of ways.

Withdrawing his hand, Alex glanced at her bare feet. "You seem to be in pain. I'm sorry. May I ask what happened?"

A wave of self-consciousness swept over Nicole and warmth flooded her cheeks as she tucked her feet beneath her chair. "Unfortunately, I skidded on a patch of ice in the station's parking lot this morning and wrenched my right ankle. I feel safe in saying the Ice Capades won't be beating down my door anytime soon."

Although Alex's lips twisted, compassion radiated in his expression. "I'm thankful you weren't hurt worse." Those eyes—intense and intelligent—would be difficult to forget even if she never saw him again. Likewise, the well-sculpted cheekbones and strong jawline.

He had great hair—dark, wavy and thick. The left side of his mouth tipped slightly higher than the right, framing a very inviting smile. She suspected his nose might have been broken at some point, and a faint

horizontal scar sat above his right eyebrow, about an inch in length. Instead of detracting from his appearance, those minor imperfections only enhanced this man's rugged, masculine appeal and gave him character. In spite of his composed demeanor now, Alex struck her as the kind of man who might have been a rough-and-tumble kid.

Colin was right. She really needed to get out more and socialize with the opposite sex. Like it or not, Alex Kingsfield intrigued her. Give her one handsome man and she was quickly turning into a puddle of romantic goo. Blame it on the holidays. They always made her sentimental and mushy, reinforcing her aloneness—not loneliness—in the world. Big distinction.

"Tell me. Are you one of our viewers, Mr. Kingsfield?" Given her co-host's penchant for directness, Nicole was surprised Colin hadn't asked the man pointblank who he was and the specific reason for gracing them with his presence.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Score one for ambiguity.

Who was this man? Only the good manners she'd been taught as a child prevented Nicole from blurting out the question. Curiosity had forever been her constant sidekick, patience her biggest challenge. In some ways, those qualities worked to her great advantage in the world of broadcast journalism.

"Make yourself at home then, mate." Hiking his sleeve, Colin checked his watch. "We have a few minutes before we're expected to make our joint appearance at the station's holiday fête. Nikki was just questioning how discussing a fictional romance hero holds any relevance for our viewers."

"I caught the end of your interview, Nicole." The

smile Alex gave her was warm. "You handled it well. Considering I've seen more talkative mimes, your question seemed the perfect antidote." He nodded to Colin. "I'd also like to hear your response to her question."

Nicole hid her smile. Alex must indeed be familiar with their show since her co-host held an opinion on every topic known to mankind.

Colin rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepled his fingers. "First, let's consider the show's demographics. Our average viewer, if you will, is a lovely, middle-aged woman in the suburbs. Call her...Sally. There's Sally, sitting in her kitchen, sipping her morning coffee and preparing to face her day. She clicks on the telly and punches in the channel for *Wake Up, Des Moines!* You see, the thing is, Sally doesn't want hard news from us. In fact, she wants us to give her a reason to face the day."

Nicole pondered his words and avoided looking at Alex. The man was much too distracting. "So," she said, "talking about a man with the face of Adonis and the physique of Hercules, who falls madly in love with the virginal, mild-mannered heroine at first sight, drives or pilots any vehicle ever invented, rides a horse, brandishes a weapon like a warrior, scuba dives with sharks, befriends all mankind, and empowers our heroine so she blossoms into a shining beacon of womanhood"—she drew in a quick breath—"is going to somehow enrich Sally's life. And give her a reason to face the day?"

Alex laughed while Colin graced her with the megawatt smile that seduced women on a daily basis. "Score one for that lively imagination of yours. It's all about romance, my dear skeptic. It's the reason we live,

the reason we breathe. At its basic core, love is the reason we exist.”

A familiar gleam surfaced in Colin’s brown eyes before he moved his gaze to Alex. “Wouldn’t you agree?” Colin was throwing down the metaphorical gauntlet at their guest’s leather-clad feet. Why he felt the need to do such a thing, Nicole couldn’t imagine. She’d all but given up trying to figure out the male psyche a long time ago. This wasn’t a silly competition or duel of sorts. Besides, they knew next to nothing about Alex. Only that he was from New York and somehow important to the station or their show. Intelligent. Articulate. Attractive. Make that extremely attractive. Charismatic. She’d best stop the mental checklist. What she found unbelievable was that she sat between two handsome, manly men engaged in a discussion of...love and romance?

Calm and cool, Alex didn’t bat an eyelash. “Love is the reason we exist, yes. In fact, without the redeeming love God first demonstrated for us, our very existence would be a moot point.” His gaze settled on Colin. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Wow. That was the last thing she’d expected to hear. Meeting Colin’s challenge head-on was one thing, but Nicole doubted Alex would make such a statement without a personal understanding of the Christian faith. Not since her ex-boyfriend, Jake Marston, had she met a man who’d demonstrated a depth of faith beyond spouting a thanks for the grub prayer or calling upon the Almighty whenever he needed a financial windfall.

If Colin was surprised by Alex’s words, he covered with his usual aplomb. “Touché. Tell me. Are you some sort of chaplain come to prompt us to

confess our mortal sins? In that case, you might need a longer visit here in Des Moines.”

“Hardly.” Alex shook his head with a soft chuckle.

Colin slanted her a grin. “Only speaking for myself, of course. I don’t think I caught why you’re here or who sent you, mate.”

Trying not to appear overly eager for his answer, Nicole trained her features into an expression of neutrality, an on-air technique she’d learned in Basic Interviewing Skills 101.

“I’m actually here on behalf of, and at the request of, the corporate office.”

Shocked by Alex’s statement, Nicole’s pulse sputtered. “You’re from the network?”

2

Nicole hadn't meant to blurt out the question, but her surprise trumped any sense of professionalism. Colin appeared equally stunned. They'd gone from discussing *Wake Up, Des Moines!* and love to religion, of all things, with a network executive?

"Yes. I assure you, I don't bite." Alex's smile, and his words, alleviated her momentary apprehensions. "I'm sure you need to get ready for the party now, so I won't take up any more of your time." Slapping his hands on his thighs, Alex rose from the chair. "As Mike said, I'll be here for a week. We'll have plenty of time to talk later." His gaze encompassed them both. "I'll look forward to it."

"So, what do you make of him?" Colin said as Alex strolled off the set. "He certainly seems rather sure of himself." Colin walked to the anchor desk and retrieved the bulky cord of Christmas bulbs and draped them around his neck. "Is it me?"

"Confidence is a good thing. You should know a thing or two about that." After lifting from the chair, Nicole tested putting her full weight on the sore ankle. "Colin, I can't help but wonder why the network would send someone here in the first place, especially during the holidays." She took a few tentative steps forward. "I'm not sure whether to be intimidated or encouraged. You've been here at the station longer than I have. Ever been graced by a visit from a network