



JOANN DURGIN

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in Her Eyes

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Dedication

After the introduction of Colin Young in *Sleigh Ride Together with You*, I knew this series wouldn't be complete without his story! I hope you'll enjoy Colin's adventures in *Starlight in Her Eyes* as much as I loved writing them.

With deepest gratitude to Pelican Book Group and Senior Editor Nicola Martinez, I dedicate this final installment in the *Starlight Christmas Series* to my faithful readers. I love nothing more than bringing you stories that shine with the love, grace, and mercy of our Heavenly Father.

Blessings,

JoAnn Durgin
Matthew 5:16

1

Monday Morning, Early December

Colin Young tugged off his glove and punched a quick succession of numbers on the keypad. “Please let that be right.” He hoped his memory hadn’t gone numb along with his fingers in the near-freezing temperatures. When he heard the telltale click on the door and spied the flashing green light, he cracked a grin. “We have liftoff. Good morning, Philadelphia!”

After pulling open the heavy steel door, he stepped inside the building, bringing with him the sound of jingle bells as well as a mini-squall of wet snow. Shivering in his wool overcoat, he brushed flurries from the sleeves and stamped his feet on the floor mat. “Brrr! Why does it have to be so cold...?” He stopped as he spied a pair of shapely ankles showcased in deep red, high-heeled shoes.

“You’re late.” Serena Monroe approached him with a pointed glance at her watch. Ah, yes, the senior producer’s ever-dutiful assistant, AKA, his personal watchdog. As usual, the frown line between her brows surfaced. She’d perfected the look, but in her early thirties or thereabouts—near to his age—she should be careful, or that line might become permanently embedded. Her chestnut-colored hair was twisted in a bun at the back of her head, making it difficult to tell how far down those tresses reached, although he

suspected halfway to her trim waist. As always, Serena wore her trendy but somewhat masculine eyeglasses, and her lips were set in a firm line. Rosy red lips, but that was neither here nor there.

"I beg to differ, love. I wasn't on time, and there's a difference." Colin graced her with his most charming smile as he shrugged out of his overcoat. "Not to mention I have a legitimate reason which even you might find sentimental."

"I doubt it." No-Nonsense Serena took his coat and handed it off to one of the interns who always seemed to be lurking about the premises. Her gaze skimmed over his designer shirt and jeans before she cast a wary glance at his feet. "Please don't tell me you're wearing jingle bells on your shoes."

"Fine, then. I'll show you." He hiked the bottom of his jeans and lifted a red high-top sneaker. "Notice the reindeer nose on the laces. Pitiful or not, it's my attempt to infuse a bit of festiveness into my new place of employment. I'll have you know my choice of footwear generated smiles and holiday greetings during my morning walk from the apartment to the station." *Jingle jingle.* "'Tis the season and all that."

"You're a novelty," Serena said. "I'm sure they don't know what to make of you."

"Yes, well, I'm more of the 'God bless us, everyone!' mentality than 'Bah! Humbug!' If any unseemly types are roaming the streets, I'd rather they love me before they shove me, and hug me before they mug me."

Serena shook her head and resumed walking down the hallway.

Colin chuckled.

The network transfer from Des Moines to *Wake Up,*

Philadelphia! had been a huge coup for his television broadcasting career. After months of contract wrangling, he'd finally arrived two weeks before Thanksgiving to find the television station desperately in need of a revival. Seemed the higher-ups held expectations that he might boost the ratings for their aging program as well as bolster employee morale. No pressure there, but he felt up to the challenge or he'd go down trying.

Serena checked her clipboard. "Have you had anything to eat this morning? We can't have your stomach rumbling. The mic will pick it up."

When he didn't answer immediately, Serena darted into the lunchroom three doors down. In less than a half-minute, she returned and handed him a holiday-themed napkin along with an English muffin smothered in a layer of chunky peanut butter. His breakfast of choice. The woman paid attention and must have been lying in wait for his morning arrival. Scary thought, even though it's what the station paid her to do.

"Much obliged. You may now cross 'Colin's breakfast' off your handy-dandy list." Colin took a bite and then licked his lips. "Hmm. Yummy."

"The show goes live in forty minutes. Not a good day to be late." Serena's heels clicked on the hard floor as she marched with her trusty clipboard under one arm and an enormous black handbag looped over the opposite shoulder. The vintage—circa Age of Aquarius—red and white patterned dress she wore revealed her sense of personal style and femininity to great advantage. Somewhere beneath Serena's prim-and-proper exterior was an intriguing woman begging to come out and play.

"If there's ever a good day to be late, please be so kind as to let me know. Never fear, love. I'll have plenty of time to meet and greet the audience before we go live." With a few quick bites, Colin devoured the English muffin. Crumpling the napkin, he dropped it in the nearest trash receptacle. "Come now, Serena." He followed her into the elevator and the doors closed. "Please try to show the new guy a measure of goodwill."

After exiting the elevator on the fifth floor, Colin kept pace beside her as they walked. Click clack. *Jingle jingle*. "I was detained in traffic behind yellow buses carrying schoolchildren eager to kiss the famous Liberty Bell." He ran one hand through his hair, still damp from the fresh snowfall. "The symbolism of a cracked bell will never cease to amaze me."

Serena's features momentarily softened. Much better. "Visitors come to hear the history of the Liberty Bell and to remember its significance to American citizens. Not to kiss it. Or to see its famous crack."

He grinned and cleared his throat at her last statement, determined not to chuckle.

The corners of Serena's mouth quirked. "I'm sure you're aware it was cast in London and the clapper cracked the bell during its very first use."

"Your point?" Feigning shock, Colin moved one hand over his heart. "Please don't tell me you're making a generalized statement of the defectiveness of all things made in London."

"Depends. Where were you born?"

Colin grunted. "Surrey." Maybe there was humor and spontaneity hidden beneath this woman's stoicism. Without a doubt, she understood the fundamentals of irony.

“Close enough,” she said. “Once you’ve settled in Philadelphia a bit more, you should take some field trips. Familiarize yourself with the city. The Christmas season is especially fun.”

“Now there’s a thought. Are you offering to personally escort me about the City of Brotherly Love?” Since he’d started at the station, Serena had been all-business while he preferred a much less confined way of living. Well, at least the old Colin Young did. The new and improved version was still finding his way as a Bible-believing, Christian man. Far from perfect, but he was trying.

“I’m offering to escort you from the back door to your various stations each morning and ensure you’re on the set for the sound check fifteen minutes ahead of the broadcast. The rest is up to you.” Holding the door, Serena ushered him into yet another hallway—this building had endless floors and hallways, and certainly more than the Des Moines television station. Besides that, whatever happened to the old-fashioned custom of a man holding the door for a woman? Perhaps Serena hadn’t been around enough gentlemen.

“Tell me something, Serena. What do you do for fun during the holidays? Rescue lonely Christmas trees? Find orphaned animals a good home?” He needed to trim his sarcasm. For all he knew, the woman worked tirelessly for the underprivileged.

“Something like that.” And again with the clicking of her heels as she moved farther down the hallway.

Moving ahead of her, Colin made sure to open the remaining doors.

“Thank you,” Serena said with a nod of appreciation.

A small victory, but he’d take it.

Ten minutes later, the hair stylist—Marla, a surprisingly jovial woman considering she had five children under the age of twelve—hovered about him. Her every movement evoked the strong scent of peppermint. As Colin watched in the mirror, she artfully arranged his blond hair so that it fell in natural waves, mussed in a somewhat rakish-looking way that also suggested urban hipness. Or so Marla claimed.

His gaze moved to where Serena was reading a book in a corner chair. She'd kicked off her shoes and curled her long legs beneath her. For once, she wasn't studying notes on her clipboard, but presented the image of a woman in repose. The festive cover of her book featured a man and woman in one another's arms under mistletoe. Fascinating. She struck him as more the highbrow type who'd prefer classic literature to a holiday romance.

After twisting off the cap of his water bottle, Colin took a long drink as he surveyed Serena. Quite a fetching picture she presented. "What has you so engrossed over there?"

Serena's cheeks colored a becoming shade of pink. "Nothing, really. Just a silly book."

"If it prompts such a wistful expression from you, it's decidedly not silly."

"It's mindless fun and heartwarming." She closed the book and tucked it inside her handbag. "I only read this type of book during the holidays." A touch of defensiveness edged Serena's slightly southern accent.

He hadn't a clue where she'd been born except to assume it was somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

After grabbing her rather spectacular red shoes, she pushed her feet into them.

Colin couldn't resist. "If reading a holiday romance novel puts you in a charitable frame of mind toward God, country, and your fellow man, then I'm all for it."

Based on her quick frown, perhaps his comment was a tad cheeky.

"Couldn't you just listen to Colin's yummy accent all day?" Marla winked at Serena. "No matter what he says in that deep, sexy voice of his, he sounds so cultured and sophisticated. I don't know any American man who could get away with saying *decidedly*."

Serena avoided his gaze and rose to her feet. "I'm sure Colin's accent covers a multitude of sins."

Colin stared at her, momentarily stunned. He'd built his career on the ability to come back with a quick retort, but this woman had caught him unaware. Did she honestly hold such a low opinion of him? He'd apparently need to do more than open doors for Serena to prove he was a decent sort.

"Now, now, children. Play nice." Marla sprayed his hair with something from an oversized aerosol can.

Wrinkling his nose, Colin couldn't stop his sneeze. "Bless me all the way to Canterbury," he mumbled under his breath. He waved one arm to stop Marla's continued assault. "I think that's quite enough, love. How many showers will I need to rinse this shellac from my hair?"

"It's a new formula. Trust me, honey. Your lady friend won't have any problems running her fingers through your hair." After giving him one final spritz, Marla whipped the plastic cape from his shoulders. Twisting the chair around so he could see his reflection in the mirror, she raked her fingers through his hair. "What'd I tell you? *Voilà*. Touchable softness and it

falls right back in place.”

“Right. A bona fide miracle in a can.” Colin slid out of the chair. “Thank you, Marla. Always a pleasure.”

She might be surprised to know he hadn’t enjoyed the company of a “lady friend” in well over a year. Since coming to faith through Jesus, he’d adopted an entirely new set of rules for personal conduct. Not that it’d been easy, and it was a day-by-day process, but moving from Iowa to Pennsylvania and his new co-host position had helped to keep his mind focused and otherwise occupied.

Serena hadn’t bothered to wait for him—no surprise there—and she was already halfway down the hall as he darted around the corner. He didn’t relish being made to feel like a puppy nipping at her heels. After the makeup artist had dutifully powdered his nose, as per their morning routine the past two weeks, Colin and Serena entered the large wardrobe room with its endless racks of dresses, blouses, jackets, and skirts for his female co-host, Gabrielle Shanahan.

Across the room sat rows of suits, shirts, slacks, and sweaters worn by his unfortunate predecessor, Graham Preston. He was surprised they hadn’t donated the lot to charity after Graham’s untimely death from a car accident eighteen months ago. Keeping the clothing struck Colin as somewhat morbid, but they’d had a succession of interim hosts before he’d been hired. If they’d hoped he might fit into the man’s clothes, they’d have been wrong, not to mention a couple of inches short in the length of the trousers.

At slightly over six feet tall, Colin’s shoulders were broader and he stood taller than Graham, at least in

terms of physical size. The son of a New York network anchor, Graham had become a legend in his own right in the Philadelphia broadcast community.

Colin's gaze drifted to the shelves containing Graham's shoes. Big shoes to fill, metaphorically speaking. He doubted Graham had ever bounced around the television station with jingle bells on his impeccable leather shoes.

After setting down her clipboard and purse, Serena sifted through a nearby rack before pulling out a garment bag. Colin caught his name emblazoned on the front of the bag before she unzipped it and drew out a well-tailored, dark double-breasted suit. Walking to the one shoe rack with his name on it, Serena selected burgundy leather shoes and handed them to him.

"I'm guessing the high-tops are out for the show?"

"That would be correct." Serena moved to a short rack of dress shirts and selected a white one with thin blue pinstripes. From a small jewelry box, she chose a pair of gold cuff links and a tie clip and deposited them in his open palm. Somehow he'd always thought a woman choosing his wardrobe would be fun. With Serena, it seemed clinical.

Next, she chose a bright red silk tie.

"Appropriately patriotic and all-American," he said. "Please don't feel the need to babysit me, Miss Monroe. At *Wake Up, Des Moines!* I was more than capable of getting to the studio of my own free will each morning. On time, no less."

Offering the shirt and tie to him, Serena blew out a sigh. "Capability's not the issue, Colin. Believe it or not, I'm here to make your life less complicated."

"While I can appreciate that—and in spite of my

sometimes childlike tendencies—I've been dressing myself since I was four." Taking the garment bag from her, Colin motioned for her to either turn around or leave. They went through this same routine every day. She'd choose his wardrobe and then he'd dismiss her for a time. Modesty wasn't the issue, but he had standards. Limitations. "Surely the esteemed Mr. Preston didn't allow you to help him dress."

The pink drained from Serena's face. "As a matter of fact, he did. Be sure to brush your teeth. And you have peanut butter on your mouth." Using her thumb, she swiped it over his bottom lip.

"Yes, Mum," he said, irritated that she felt the need to remind him of the simple necessities. Still, he couldn't shake the unexpected warmth Serena's touch shot through him. He found himself off-guard, but not in an unpleasant way.

"I'll be back in ten minutes to help with your tie." She was right. If left to his own devices, his tie would forever hang askew. Nicole "Nikki" Reardon, now Nikki Kingsfield—his former co-host in Des Moines, and his best friend, then and now—had helped him with his tie before every show. Now Serena was paid to push him from Point A to Point B. How odd, but he'd try to view it as a perk of his more high-profile position.

When she returned, Serena gave him an approving once-over which pleased him more than it should have.

"Very nice." She stepped forward without hesitation and turned up the collar of his starched shirt, something she'd never done before. Although he knew it was innocent on her part, the brush of her long, slender fingers on his neck filled Colin with an

unexpected sense of intimacy. His pulse ticked faster, and his collar suddenly felt a little snug. Serena would be appalled if she could read his thoughts.

"You've also done this before," he said.

"Of course. It's my job." Beneath the glasses, Serena's blue-eyed gaze briefly met his before dropping to his tie. But not before he caught the flicker of something indefinable. Hurt, perhaps? After focusing on her right ear with its delicate pearl earring, Colin moved his gaze to her neck. With her hair pulled back, it showcased how long and lovely it was.

"You do it considerably well," he said. Too well at the moment, if it were possible. He was beginning to strongly dislike the words "of course" from this woman. Likewise when she told him it was her job to do something or other. Her nails were buffed to a high shine and devoid of color. Being this close to Serena, Colin noted a small stain on the collar of her dress. He caught a whiff. Grape jam? Best not to tease or mention it lest he incur her ire. Could it be he'd discovered a small chink in this woman's armor? Needing a new focal point, he stared at an ugly abstract painting on the far wall.

Concentrated on finishing her task, Serena smoothed his tie and then stepped back. "Please don't fiddle with the tie. This one doesn't play musical tunes. We learned that lesson with the one you wore the other day. Your interview questions are on a card on the table if you need to refer to them. Look for the yellow highlights."

"I'm ready, Serena," Colin assured her. "No need for cues or prompts. You'll learn I'm very good at ad-libbing if the situation warrants."

"I know. You're a master at it." Serena turned and

headed toward the studio. "I'll be waiting for you after the show to brief you about tomorrow's guests," she said over one slender shoulder.

An idea popped into his mind, irrational or not. Catching up to her, Colin put his hand on her arm. "Here's a thought. Let's shake it up a bit. Live dangerously. You can brief me over lunch instead." Where had that suggestion come from? Obviously from some subliminal part of him. Or perhaps it was the Holy Spirit at work?

Serena looked down at his hand on her arm; he released his hold on her. From what he'd observed, she closeted herself in her office while the others often indulged in three-hour lunches, which sometimes extended into happy hour as they slurped margaritas and flirted with one another and assorted business types from Center City. He'd once lived in the middle of that world, but no more. Funny how he didn't miss it. Not at all.

Serena eyed him, and Colin could tell she was weighing her options. He needed to sweeten the deal. "I'll have my assistant order some of those humongous hoagie sandwiches and, for our dessert, I can offer you delicious strawberries dipped in Belgian chocolate, courtesy of a generous station sponsor. Please say you'll join me."

Removing her glasses, Serena met his gaze squarely. "Colin, your reputation as a consummate professional on-camera is without question, but your history with women precedes you. If I agree to lunch, it's solely for the purpose of discussing business. Just so we're clear, I have no interest in being anything to you other than a work colleague."

"Understood." To Colin's regret, he'd come by the

womanizing reputation honestly. Since moving to Philadelphia, he'd kept a low profile, spending most of his evenings alone in his new downtown loft. He must be getting soft, or old—or both—since he could now fully appreciate the merits of staying in and reading or tinkering about in the kitchen.

Finally, Serena spoke again. "I'll meet you here in the studio at noon. Once the show tapes, everyone clears out and it's very quiet."

"I'll see you then. Thank you, Serena."

While he'd been making a concerted effort to listen to Christian music, singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" in the halls of the station early on had done nothing to quell the rumors about him. His behavior had probably been misinterpreted as flippant or irreverent when nothing could be further from the truth. Based on his former lifestyle and public persona, he couldn't blame them. The idea of getting a dog, as Nikki had suggested, was growing on him.

A little more than an hour later, once the ON AIR light ceased blinking and the show wrapped, Colin stood to his feet beside Gabrielle. In her heels, she was nearly his same height, whereas the top of Serena's head only reached his shoulders. A warning signal sounded in the back of Colin's mind, which he promptly ignored.

Gabrielle eyed him with a quirked brow. "I noticed the way you looked at Serena this morning, my friend. A word of advice? You'd be better off to steer clear of her in terms of anything other than station business."

Colin stiffened. "No worries, love. She's already told me as much."

Even if Serena should decide to encourage his

attentions—a highly unlikely prospect—pursuing the comely assistant would not be advisable.

Gabrielle's dark eyes widened. "You don't know, do you?" Tucking a few strands of her medium-length blonde hair behind one ear, her expression was difficult to read. The woman was affable, and their professional chemistry was undeniable, but Gabrielle was no Nikki Reardon. Off the air, his new co-host was more detached and impersonal.

Colin resisted the urge to cross his arms. "I know Serena's very good at what she does, almost to a fault."

"Forget I said anything. It's not my place." Gabrielle turned to leave.

"Not quite so fast." Colin kept his voice low so the crew wouldn't overhear their conversation. "While I don't wish to engage in idle office gossip, can you give me a bit of a heads-up?"

Gabrielle stepped closer. "Steer away from personal issues with Serena and you'll be fine. She has some...baggage."

"Is that all? In my estimation, we've all accumulated some sort of baggage if we've lived a life that's actually worth living. As long as she's not a suspected murderer or a candidate for the loony bin, I'm not worried."

Gabrielle gave him a small smile. "Enjoy the rest of your day, Colin."

"I'll do that. You, too." Watching her go, Colin puzzled over Gabrielle's warning.

All the while, he couldn't shake the image of a pair of blue eyes. Challenging him. Drawing him in.

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another," he quoted under his breath. He liked that particular verse of scripture. He enjoyed his sparring

sessions with Serena as a way to begin each morning. In some ways, it invigorated and energized him.

As much as anything, Colin could use a friend. He suspected Serena could, too.