

MISTY WILLOW · BOOK TWO

WHEN LOVE
Arrives

A NOVEL

JOHNNIE ALEXANDER



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Johnnie Alexander, *When Love Arrives*
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To Mandy

I'd claim you as my own except your mom won't let me.

— 1 —

Praise be to the Lord, for he showed me the wonders
of his love when I was in a city under siege.

Psalm 31:21

LATE AUGUST

*B*rett Somers usually waited till after dark to take up his vigil outside the brick building. But not today.

Despite the warmth of the early evening sun, he shivered when a light, bluer than a clear summer sky, appeared through the rectangular panes of the ninth story window. Over the next few hours, random colors would appear in more windows and become more vivid, more numerous. In the darkness of night, the vibrant panes created a brilliant kaleidoscope of hope.

The hospitalized children controlled the color of their ambient night-lights unless, like the boy in room 927, they were in a coma.

Brett pressed his hand against his heart, but he couldn't ease the unbearable pain that threatened to break him in two.

If only the boy behind that lighted window would open his eyes.
I'd give everything I own if he would only open his eyes.

Brett shifted his weight and leaned against his Lexus as footsteps ambled toward him. Finally.

He forced a smile. "How is he?"

"Still the same, man." A mass of curly red hair framed Aaron Wiley's round cheeks, and his blue eyes twinkled. No surprise that each Christmas he donned a white wig and beard for the young patients whose vital signs he monitored. "He just lies there, sound asleep."

Brett swallowed the sigh building up in his throat. "The accident was two months ago."

"Head traumas take time to heal."

"What about Meghan?"

"She seems to be doing better now that she's not spending twenty-four hours in this place. I overheard her talking about a church giving her an apartment, no charge." Humor twinkled in Aaron's gentle eyes. "Don't suppose you had anything to do with that?"

"She was going to end up in a bed next to him if she didn't . . ." Brett pressed his lips together.

"Take care of herself?" Aaron finished the sentence.

Brett grimaced. He wouldn't have to resort to these cloak-and-dagger tactics if Meghan weren't so stubborn. So unforgiving.

Not that he hadn't given her a good reason to despise him.

He pushed away from the car and retrieved a gift bag illustrated with zoo animals and balloons from the backseat. "Tomorrow's his eighth birthday. I want you to give him this."

Despite the blue and yellow tissue paper sprouting from the top, Aaron peered inside. "What did you get him?"

"It's not from me."

"Course it isn't."

"Come up with something, okay? There has to be a group or some kind of foundation that donates toys to these children."

"A few." Like the big kid he was, Aaron slightly shook the bag as if trying to get a hint of what was inside. "They donate books. Hand-carved wooden toys. Stuffed animals."

“That works. It’s a stuffed monkey. With an MP3 player inside.”

“Good choice.”

“Wearing an Ohio State football jersey.”

Aaron grinned. “Even better.” He held out his closed fist, and Brett obliged him with a friendly bump.

But the lightened mood quickly faded as a rain-tinged breeze swept along the quiet street. “She can’t know it came from me. I’m depending on you.”

“I’m always here for you, man. You know that.” A rare frown pulled at Aaron’s mouth. “But I can’t do this anymore.”

Brett closed his eyes as the words he’d been dreading settled like a boulder in his gut.

With anyone else, he’d pile on the charm. Or the pressure.

But Aaron wouldn’t succumb to either. Besides, the certified nursing assistant risked his job every time he gave Brett an update. Even if the update never changed.

“I understand.”

“You should just talk to her, man.”

“I’ve tried.” He slightly shook his head. “She hates me.”

“Not used to that, are you?”

“No, Aaron. I’m not.”

“Tell you what.” The twinkle returned to Aaron’s eyes, and his voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. “When he wakes up, I’ll make sure you know.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“I better go, man. My shift’s about to start.” Aaron’s characteristic smile beamed as he cradled the gift bag. “Don’t worry, she’ll never know where this came from.”

Brett nodded his thanks, and Aaron sauntered toward the hospital.

Suddenly light-headed, Brett bent over the trunk of the Lexus, his hands pushing against the black frame as the sigh finally escaped in an exhale of air.

If only he’d known she’d kept the baby . . .

He exhaled deeply again and shook his head.
If he'd known, he wouldn't have cared.
Not back then. Not when it mattered.



The camera shutter clicked multiple times in quick succession, then Dani slouched against the medical building across the street from the hospital. By the light of the sun's slanting rays, she checked the camera's digital display. The images of two men, a good-looking blond and an unruly carrot-top, appeared in the square screen. In the final image, the Adonis stood alone, his chin lowered.

Not an online photo scavenged from internet images, but the living, breathlessly handsome man himself.

When Dani looked up from the display, Brett's hands were interlaced behind his head. She caught a momentary glimpse of his pained expression as he lifted his eyes to the heavens.

Compassion stirred her heart, but it only lasted a single beat. Taking a few steps forward, she lifted the camera and took another quick succession of shots, though she wasn't sure why. She didn't need more photos of the guy.

Unless . . . She swatted away the thought, but it fought back. *Unless I could sell them.*

Given his recent celebrity, they might be worth something. And she desperately needed money.

Getting vengeance by humiliating him was one thing. But exposing his obvious pain to the world—she couldn't do anything that sleazy.

Could she?

It was bad enough she'd spent the past few hours waiting for him to emerge from his office building's parking garage so she could tail him. The thrill of playing detective had quickly evaporated into boredom.

When he finally appeared, she'd expected him to pick up a Barbie bimbo for a Friday night on the town. Her adrenaline raced

as she prepared to follow him. But instead of going to a nightclub or restaurant, he'd driven to this children's hospital.

Why?

A blaring siren broke the brooding peace of the lonely street. Dani pivoted as an ambulance sped her way. The revolving red light throbbed as if toying with her. *Pain. Death. Pain. Death.*

The malevolent words kept time with each revolution, and her breathing accelerated as if racing the siren's crescendo.

Pressing her palm against her abdomen, she concentrated on deep inhaled and exhaled. This emergency had nothing to do with her. Nothing.

The ambulance slowed as it made a sharp turn and followed the curving drive around to the ER.

"Are you okay?"

Dani spun toward the voice and gazed into the most attractive blue eyes she'd ever seen. A faint smile creased the man's gorgeous face, revealing deep dimples.

Busted.

Her surveillance plan for learning more about Brett Somers's personal life hadn't included speaking to the guy. Heat crept up her neck and warmed her cheeks.

"I didn't mean to scare you." The smile disappeared. "You look a little pale."

Her voice stuck in her throat. Good-looking and self-assured, he was just the kind of man who made her stammer and trip over her own feet. The kind of man who either looked right through her or only noticed her because she'd done something clumsy or stupid.

Like secretly taking pictures of him.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you going to be sick?"

"Fine," she blurted, flushing again at the squeak in her voice. She cleared her throat. "I'm fine. I just don't like ambulances."

"Who does?"

She followed his glance toward the hospital. An assortment of colors shone through several of the windows.

“Taking photos of the lights?”

“Um, yes.” She nodded to support the lie and forced a smile.

“Can I see?”

“No!”

He appeared taken aback by the force of her objection, but only for an instant. Holding out his hand, he smiled. “Please.”

Her knees turned to jelly when his dimples reappeared. He obviously expected her to succumb to his charms. Most women probably did.

But no way could she show him the images she’d taken. He’d think she was a stalker.

Who was she kidding? She *was* a stalker.

Though for a very good reason.

“I’d really like to see them.”

She couldn’t let him know how much he intimidated her. Why couldn’t she be poised and self-confident? Like Audrey Hepburn. No matter the circumstances, Audrey always said and did the right thing.

Of course she did. She had a scriptwriter.

Dani wished she had one too. With a quiet sigh, she straightened her shoulders and carefully placed the camera in its bag. “The pictures are personal.”

He dropped his hand. “Which window?”

“Excuse me?”

“Which window is yours?”

She crinkled her eyes in confusion. “None of them.”

“You don’t have someone inside there? A sick child you’re worried about?”

“No.”

“So you take hospital photos for the fun of it?” His gaze bored into hers, and a hint of suspicion weighted his words. “Strange hobby.”

Dani silently agreed. If that were the truth, it would be strange. She needed to distract him. Maybe engaging in conversation wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

“Which window is yours?” She tried to sound nonchalant but doubted she had succeeded. Small talk with handsome men had never been her forte.

The brilliancy of his eyes faded, and he carelessly shrugged. “Just looking at the lights.”

So he could lie too.

From her research, she knew he’d never been married. Since the death of his grandmother a few months ago, his only family members were a sister and a cousin, both single as far as Dani knew.

So there should be no children in Brett’s life.

Or maybe he was telling the truth, and the present he had given the other man wasn’t for a patient but for someone on the hospital staff. Perhaps he was playing secret admirer.

The image of his earlier pained expression appeared before her as clearly as if she were staring at a printed photograph. His secret didn’t have anything to do with romance. She gazed at the colored lights. Behind one of those windows was a child he cared about.

A mystery.

Feeling his eyes upon her, she met his gaze and awkwardly smiled.

“I’m Brett Somers.”

I know.

“And you are?”

Dani’s eyes shifted, and she stared at the tan toes of her canvas shoes. Her mind flashed to the classic movie she’d watched last night.

“I’m, um, Regina Lampert.” The lie surprised and emboldened her. Suddenly tickled by her audacity, she grinned.

His eyebrows lifted. “Regina Lampert?”

She nodded.

“As in *Charade*? Audrey Hepburn’s character?”

Busted again.

“You know that movie?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She mimicked his earlier casual shrug. “You just don’t seem the type.”

“What type?”

“The type to know about classic movies.”

His eyes crinkled in amusement. “What type am I, Regina Lampert?”

“I don’t know.” *Careful, Dani. He can’t suspect you already know anything about him.* “The never-alone-on-a-Friday-night type. The let’s-jet-off-to-Paris-in-five-minutes type.”

“Paris doesn’t interest me.” The amusement eased into a broad grin as he spread his hands. “And I’m all alone here. Besides, I never fly.”

She nervously twisted the camera bag’s strap, determined to ignore that last comment. “So how do you know so much about Audrey Hepburn?”

“I don’t really. But my grandmother was a huge Cary Grant fan. I watched *Charade* with her several times. You?”

“Too many Friday nights alone, I guess.”

“Pretty girl like you?”

Immediate heat burned her face.

“How many stars would you give *Notorious*?” he asked.

“Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman’s *Notorious*? I love it.”

“It’s playing at the Ohio Theater. Part of their summer classic movie series.” He pulled out his phone and tapped at the screen. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes?”

“Before the movie starts.” He flashed that knee-weakening smile again. “I know we’ve just met, but I’m a respectable businessman. Successful too, I don’t mind saying. I own a thriving property development company. And my cousin is engaged to the daughter of missionaries. We used to not-date, so she can tell you what a gentleman I am.”

Dani’s head spun at his quick patter.

His finger poised over his cell. “Shall I call her for you?”

As if it had a mind of its own, her hand shot out and covered the phone's screen to stop him. "You don't need to do that." Her fingers lingered against the warmth of his skin.

This could not be happening.

"Then you'll come? My treat."

"To the movie? It's probably sold out."

"I know the manager."

Of course he did.

"Come on, 'Reggie.'" He shoved his cell into his pocket and bumped her elbow with his. "Historical theater. *Notorious* on the big screen."

Twisting the camera bag's strap, she tried to think of another objection.

Just say no. N.O. One easy syllable.

But her voice didn't cooperate.

"A giant bucket of buttered popcorn."

He sounded so pitiful she couldn't help grinning.

"If it makes you more comfortable, we can drive separately. Where's your car?"

"Around the corner." She tilted her head to the side street next to the medical building. "Where's the theater?"

"Only a few blocks from here. So how about it?"

Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea. A movie meant little time for small talk, which meant she might find out something useful without giving anything away. Seeing one of her favorite movies on the big screen was a bonus.

"Okay," she said.

His dimples deepened. "Okay."

As they walked to her car, he gave her directions in case they got separated. She tried to pay attention, but her stomach tightened at what he must be thinking about her eleven-year-old Honda Civic. The rusted spots seemed to take on a noticeable and vibrant hue beneath the streetlamps.

Shoving her not-good-enough feelings aside, she unlocked the

driver's door. So what if she didn't drive something new and shiny. At least she worked for what she had.

Until she'd gotten fired.

More accurately, forced to resign. But it amounted to the same thing.

Brett grabbed the door as she opened it and slid into the seat. "Follow me to the light and take a left."

"Got it."

"Good." He shut the door and waited.

The engine coughed, then smoothed into a solid hum. She lowered her window. "Something wrong?"

"Just wanted to be sure you got it started."

"I usually do." Her voice held that defensive snap she hated.

"Usually?"

She swallowed a sigh and gazed up at him. "We're going to be late."

"You're right." He tapped the window frame, then jogged to his car.

A few moments later, she pulled onto the street behind his Lexus and gripped her steering wheel.

She was on this lonely street to spy on Brett Somers. How in the world had she ended up on a date with him?