

Starry Nights
A Contemporary Romance Novella
By JB Duvane

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About Starry Nights

Sometimes even being a movie star can't buy you a second chance with the girl you still hunger for.

But true love can...

Shane:

My life as a movie star has been great, don't get me wrong. But after a while it started to feel so empty.

I don't know who I can trust. I don't know if people want the movie star persona or if they're interested in the real me.

I'm tired of the meaningless sex and the fake women. I'm ready for someone who's real.

Someone like Maggie... *my* Maggie.

It's been ten years, but when I looked into her eyes, I swear could still feel her in my arms like it was yesterday.

When I saw her, I panicked. I retreated into 'movie star Shane.'

It's become this habit I can't shake after so many years.

Now we're on opposite sides of this land deal, and it's like she actually thinks I don't love the island as much as she does.

And she thinks I don't care about her.

But she's wrong.

Maggie:

So, the big movie star's come back to his home town. No doubt to impress everyone with his good looks and money.

He actually has the nerve to try and buy up protected land on our island for his own use...and for profit.

Typical, selfish movie star behavior. Somehow I expected more though.

And then, he acted like he didn't even remember what happened between us.

I guess I really was just one in a long line of faceless girls to him.

But I'll never forget the way his lips tasted or the way his body felt when it was pressed against mine.

And now I have to pretend that I don't remember either, otherwise it's hurts too much. Shouldn't be too hard, because on all accounts, he's turned into just another cocky bastard.

And if he thinks he's going to buy up our island, he's going to see how little all of his movie star charm gets him.

At least that's what my head is saying...

I'm trying really hard to listen to my head right now, because that million-watt smile of his is tearing me up inside.

Chapter 1

Maggie

"I don't know what I'm gonna do. I don't feel like I'm going anywhere in this job and the bottom line is it's not any fun. At all. I mean, how much fun can HR be."

"Well, at least you have your own office," Janine said as she stabbed a chunk of chicken out of her Cobb salad. I'd known Janine for about five years. She was my best friend, one of my only friends on the island, really. So many people that came here only stayed for a month at the longest, then were gone before I could really get to know them. I loved living on Kauai, but it could get kinda lonely at times.

"Yeah, but I want my life to be fun, Janine. Do you have fun at your job?"

"I wouldn't exactly call real estate and trust law fun, but I do enjoy it. But what does it matter if your job isn't the height of excitement? You have the rest of your days to make up for any lack of fun, don't you?"

"That's what I've always thought, but I want more. Living on this island is amazing, I'd never give it up for a more exciting job, but I'm really feeling like I need some kind of change."

"What you need is to find a man."

"Yeah, that's another thing there's a shortage of here on Kauai."

"When was the last time you went out on a date, Maggie? It seems like it's been years." I sat there for a second and stared down at my plate.

"Sorry," Janine said. "I didn't mean to make it sound so bad, I just meant—"

"Shhh." I held my hand up so Janine would stop talking, then after a few moments looked up at her. "The people at the next table were just talking about that whole thing where the government is allowing some of the public land to be sold off. They were talking about something right around here and I was trying to hear them." I listened for a minute longer. "Sounds like they're talking about Game of Thrones now."

"Well, I can tell you about some public land that's in the process of being sold right around here, and I can tell you exactly who's buying it."

Janine paused for a moment, acting like it was some big secret.

"Well? Are you going to tell me?" I said with my head lowered. "I feel like we're swapping government secrets!"

"We kind of are, Maggie. I'm really not supposed to be talking about this. For a variety of reasons. Okay, I'll tell you, but you have to promise not to say anything to anyone. I could lose my job."

"Well, who would I tell?"

"Okay, so you know that big forested area up north on the west side of the island—the part with all the sandy beaches and inlets and hiking trails that go through the forest? You know, with that cove you took me to."

"Yeah, I grew up on this island, remember? I know pretty much every mile of that area. Don't tell me part of that forest is being sold off for development."

"Yeah, including the part with that cove. They're planning on building right on that beach, I guess because it's got a lot of level beachfront access. It's some pretty prime real estate."

I was in shock. That was one of the most beautiful places on Kauai. It was a place my family would go to for almost every weekend and holiday. For us, spending Sundays there was like going to church.

"But that's protected land. They can't do that!"

"Yes, they can. A lot of national forest and monument land is up for grabs to the highest bidder now. My law firm is handling the whole thing. I'm not supposed to talk about the deal at all. It's completely closed. No one is even supposed to know about it. I imagine partly because of all the public outrage revolving around the land being sold, but also because this buyer swooped in even before it officially went up for sale—"

"Damn right the public would be outraged! They should be. I don't understand how they can do that! How they can sell land that has belonged to everyone for ... well ... forever. It shouldn't be up to one president to ruin all that for millions of people."

"It's the current administration, Maggie. They don't care about the land or the people. They just care about getting more money to big business—the ones who actually need it least. It's nauseating."

I sat there in stunned silence. I couldn't believe they were going to take my family's special place away. The place where we scattered my grandmother's ashes and buried my cat.

"But that land doesn't belong to anyone, Janine. It's not fair. I have so many memories there, my grandma and Scruffs are there ..."

"I know, sweetie. I remember going with you to bury Scruffs after she died."

My eyes filled with tears as Janine reached across the table and put her hand over mine. I glanced sheepishly around the room and was suddenly incredibly self-conscious about having this conversation in a room full of strangers. "I just can't believe they're going to sell that land," I said to my empty plate.

"Just wait until you hear who is buying it, Mags. You won't believe it."

"Who?" I asked, finally stopping the tears from falling down my cheeks so I could make an attempt at holding myself together, at least until I got to my car.

"Shane Holloway. You know, the actor. He was in all those action movies—"

"I know who he is, Janine," I said, cutting her off. "He grew up on this island too. We went to school together, for like, our whole lives. Or until we were eighteen, anyway."

"Oh my God, I had no idea, Maggie! You're so lucky. He is just about the most gorgeous man on the planet. So you were friends with him or something?"

I paused for a moment, not really wanting to talk about him, especially if he was the one who was buying the land. "Sort of. Everyone knew everyone at school. Our class was really

small. He was in the same group of friends as I was, and we spent some time together right before he left."

"Left where?"

"He moved to LA after high school graduation. He had been offered a role in a movie. Not a starring role, but one that would get him noticed. It was an incredible opportunity for him, so he took it."

"Was he scouted here on the island or something?"

"No, he was visiting an uncle in LA the summer between junior and senior year and some talent agent spotted him at an outdoor restaurant and gave him his card. Things just snowballed from there."

"That's not surprising at all. He is one fine man. Those eyes, and that smile. He practically lights up the screen no matter what movie he's in."

I was kind of surprised to hear Janine talk like that. I'd never heard her fawn over anyone before. "Yeah, a lot of agencies were interested in him the minute he was discovered. He wound up flying back and forth to LA a lot his senior year — missed a lot of school. They almost didn't let him graduate."

"Wow, so you seem to know a lot about him."

"Like I said, Janine, everyone knew everyone back then — and everyone's business. This is a small island."

"Well, I guess he sure knows someone who knows someone now, because he's in on a deal that was absolutely not offered to the public. Not when he got in on it, anyway. He must have gotten in through a back door somehow."

"What do you mean? Is it an illegal deal or something?"

"No, nothing like that. But whoever set the deal up had to have known people in the right places, that's for sure. Plus has the money to back the whole thing. That land is worth millions and a lot of people are very interested in it. I bet there are a lot of vultures waiting around on the sidelines, hoping that this deal falls through. If it does they'll have a bidding war over it, that's for sure. He might even be buying it so he can start the bidding on it himself."

"I can't believe it's Shane Holloway you're talking about. He used to be a really sweet, shy guy. I can't believe he would be trying to turn a profit like that, and on *that* particular piece of land."

"He must have an awful lot of money socked away in order to buy it. I guess people pay a lot to watch a handsome man blow a bunch of bad guys away. And you know what they say about fame going to people's heads."

"Yeah, but it can't be like that for every person who becomes famous. Isn't it possible that some don't change? Especially to the point where they become practically unrecognizable."

"Are you sure there's something you're not telling me, Maggie?"

"What? No." I shook my head like I was trying to shake off a bad dream. I was having a hard time picturing the Shane Holloway I knew as a big wheeler dealer. It made my skin crawl to think of him that way. Plus, it made me sad to think that he didn't remember how important that land was. To me and everyone who was native to this island. "Seriously, Janine, I'm just surprised, is all. I haven't paid much attention to the entertainment world in a long time and hearing about him being involved in all of this just caught me off guard."

"Okay, well, don't let it get you too down. You never know what's going to happen. I have to get back to the office. I have back to back meetings all afternoon." I tried to grab the metal tray with the receipt from the center of the table, but Janine beat me to it. "I'm getting lunch today, sweetie."

"Okay, but I've got the next one."

"Sounds good," she said as the waitress came and took the card up to the register.

After the bill was taken care of, I got up and took a few steps toward the entrance, then stopped dead in my tracks. There he was. Shane Holloway, standing there with some tall, blonde woman who looked like she'd just stepped out of a vogue shoot. I felt someone jerk my arm to the side and when I turned Janine's voice filled my ear. "Oh my God, Maggie. That's him! Shane Holloway is up at the hostess station!"

"I can see him, Janine! Will you please calm down!" I whispered with as much emphasis as I could. "And let go of my arm!" I tugged my arm away from her grasp so that we didn't look like a couple of giddy schoolgirls huddled together, all starry-eyed in front of the big celebrity. But I pulled away harder than I realized and somehow lost my balance. In order to catch myself from falling flat on my face, I reached out to the counter where one of the waitresses was entering in a ticket. My hand came down hard on the front counter and hit a stack of metal credit card trays, and of course they all came crashing down onto the tile floor in front of me. The sound was almost deafening. I just stood there and stared at about twenty metal trays as they bounced and scattered across the floor for what felt like forever.

When I finally looked up the entire restaurant, including Shane and his blonde friend, were staring right at me.

"I'm so sorry," I said to the waitress behind the register. I put my hands on my face, but I was pretty sure that did absolutely nothing to disguise how red it was. "I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, ma'am. Not a problem at all," the waitress said as she came around the counter, bending down to scoop up the trays as quickly as possible.

"Please, let me help you," I crouched down to help her, but also so that I didn't have to look Shane Holloway in the eyes again. I hoped by the time I stood back up he and his blonde girlfriend would be gone.

"That's not necessary. You can go ahead and leave. I'll clean the trays up."

"But, I'm so embarrassed."

"Really, it's okay," she said with a smile. It was a kind and genuine smile and I really

wanted it to make me feel better, but I knew—I could literally *feel*—that Shane Holloway was still staring at me. I wished the girl would let me help her pick up the rest of those damned trays because otherwise I had absolutely no reason to continue staring at the floor the way I was. And I wanted—more than anything in the world—to continue staring at the floor for as long as humanly possible. But I knew if I didn't stand up within a few seconds I would look like an even bigger idiot.

I stood slowly, my eyes inching their way up to knee level. I could see the shapely legs of the blonde woman and the expensive trousers that Shane had on. Once I was standing up straight next to Janine again, I tried to keep moving my eyes up, but I couldn't get them to go any higher than Shane's chest.

I focused on the pearly buttons that trailed up the white fabric, took a deep breath and let it out, then forced myself to look him in the eyes.

There they were, those incredibly dark eyes that I remembered so well. I couldn't breathe for a moment. I felt like I had been transported back in time to the day those eyes melted my insides and were burned into my brain forever. In my dreams and fantasies that I'd had pretty much every day since he moved away ten years ago, his eyes seemed to go on forever, making me feel like I could disappear into them. Disappear into *him*. In all these years I hadn't forgotten how incredible they were, and while I stood there and looked at him, I felt like I was falling again. Falling into those incredible eyes.

Looking at them now, though, there was something different in them. They weren't as open and filled with light like they had been when we were both eighteen. The excitement about his acting career lit his whole face up back then, but now that light seemed to be a bit faded. Shane was smiling at me, but the smile on his lips didn't quite seem to reach his eyes.

"Maggie," he said with a pleasant but not particularly warm tone. Shane's deep voice resonated inside me, though, pulling me even closer to him. I moved forward, not sure if it would be appropriate to give him a hug, but my question was answered when his hand moved in between us. When I extended mine he at least grabbed it with both of his, which felt infinitely more intimate than if he had given me a business handshake. But still, it made my heart ache that Shane shook my hand after all this time.

"It's nice to see you."

Nice to see me? I thought, trying not to show my disappointment. He seemed so formal, so controlled. Not like the Shane I remembered at all.

"It's ... nice to see you back here too, Shane. Are you shooting a movie on the island?" Ugh. I hated the way that came out of my mouth. This whole conversation felt so uncomfortable and ... fake. I just wanted to get the hell out of that restaurant.

"No, I've moved back to the island. I'm in the middle of a real estate deal on some property here. It should be closing soon."

"Hi," Janine said, extending her hand to Shane. "I'm Janine Granger. I'm a friend of

Maggie's."

"Oh God, I don't know where my head is today. Shane, this is Janine. Janine ... Shane. I think I told you, Janine, that Shane and I went to school together?" I flashed my eyes at Janine hoping she'd just play along with my lame attempt at acting cool.

"Yes, I think you mentioned it." Janine had somehow managed to get her thirteen-year-old girl under control during this short but torturous meeting.

"Nice to meet you, Janine." Shane turned to the blonde and introduced her to both of us. "This is Brittany, my girlfriend."

The blonde model with the pop star name slipped her slender, limp hand into mine for a split second, then into Janine's. "Nice to meet you," She said without any sincerity whatsoever. I disliked her immediately.

"It's nice to meet you, Brittany. Welcome to Kauai," I said with all the gumption I could muster.

"I think they're ready to seat us," the model said as she put her hand on Shane's lower back, then gave me an impatient glance.

"Oh, yeah, go ahead and sit down, have your lunch. Janine and I need to get back to work. We should catch up sometime, Shane." I just about cringed visibly when those words tumbled out of my mouth. I didn't want to sound like some groupie so I made the moment even more painful by sounding like an insecure teenager. "But I'm sure you're really busy with your land deal and everything."

"No, I mean, yes. That would be great. I'd like that, Maggie." There was that controlled tone again, the one that said *That's probably not going to happen so don't get your hopes up*. I didn't even bother with the charade of giving him my number. I just turned and went out the door.

Chapter 2

Shane

"Sir?"

I looked across the table at Brittany and then up at the waiter who was standing next to my chair, both of whom were staring right at me. "Oh, sorry. I'll have the eight ounce tenderloin."

"How would you like that done, sir?"

"Rare, please."

"Very good, I'll be back with your drinks."

"Thanks ... thank you very much," I stammered as I handed the waiter my menu. I felt like a rug had been pulled out from underneath me. Seeing Maggie after all this time had left me completely flustered. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't wondered if she was still living on the island. This was her home and had been her family's home for generations. I knew exactly how important this island was to her. I just hadn't planned on seeing her so soon.

I'd thought I'd look her up after the deal went through and I got settled in. I'd pictured it more than once, actually. Taking her out to lunch, then maybe down to the cove where we could watch the sunset and see the night sky fill with stars. But all of that was ridiculous. Especially since Brittany was here with me now.

"Are you okay?" Brittany asked after taking a sip of her lemon water. "You seem strange."

"I'm fine. I think I'm just really hungry. It's getting kind of late."

"Yeah, I wasn't expecting all those people to keep stopping you. I guess they don't just gawk here, like in LA. They actually want you to stop and talk to them," she said as she glanced around the restaurant.

"Well, I know some of these people. They haven't seen me for years and they're curious."

"Just be careful, Shane. You're too trusting. I know people, and they all want something. Especially from the movie star who's come back home. From what I've seen so far, you're the most exciting thing that has happened on this island in a decade."

"They're nice people, Brittany."

"They can't all be nice."

"Well, maybe not, but ..." I was going to say something else, but I let myself drift off. I couldn't get my mind off Maggie, and how amazing it was to see her. She looked spectacular. Her dazzling blue eyes set off by beautiful olive skin just about shut my brain down completely. I was surprised I got a single intelligible word out from the moment I saw her. And I didn't know if I was imagining it, but when she looked up at me I could have sworn that she was blushing.

I wanted to say so much more to her, but my stupid Shane Holloway public persona took over and I practically became a used car salesman. At least that's what I always sound like to myself. My manager says it's fine, that it helps with the public's perception of me. It keeps

me at a distance and doesn't reveal anything too personal. But it isn't me at all, that act I put on. It's just something that I've learned to do ever since I got to Hollywood—a trick that helps me get through it all.

I played that moment over in my head, when Maggie's eyes slowly moved up my chest. Those thick lashes slowly rising up until her eyes finally met mine. Then that sweet look that flashed across them when she smiled.

"Is it? Shane? *Hello?*"

I was jolted out of my daydream with Brittany snapping her red nailed fingers in front of my face. "Sorry, babe. What did you say?"

"I asked how your steak is. I think I'm going to send mine back. It tastes like they ran down the street and bought it at the supermarket."

"Sure, do whatever you want."

"Jeeze, Shane, where are you? You've been on another planet ever since we landed."

"I don't know. Maybe it was the flight. I'm pretty beat."

"So, are you saying that this is it for tonight?"

"What do you mean? Did you want to do something else?"

"Well, I thought you were going to show me around. Take me out on the town. There *is* more to the town than this, isn't there?"

"Yeah ... yeah, I mean, I'm sure there's a lot more since the last time I lived here. But maybe we can do that tomorrow. Explore a little ... find a nice quiet coffee shop."

"Coffee shop? I was thinking something a little more ... adult. Like a club?"

I looked at Brittany like she was speaking another language. Standing around in a club and trying to have a conversation over blaring music was just about the last thing I wanted in my life. I'd left LA to get away from all of that. I thought she understood. I thought she wanted the same thing.

"Why don't we talk about this later. After we get back to the house. I'm really beat."

"Okay." Brittany smiled, but it didn't seem very genuine. She had actually been pretty unhappy with just about everything since we landed. I was starting to get the feeling I shouldn't have agreed to have her move here with me. I didn't want to think that way so soon after arriving, especially since I was really wiped out from all the excitement, but she really seemed like a different person ever since we landed.

Back in LA, the very first time I mentioned the possibility of buying some property and moving back here, she was convinced that it would be the best thing for our relationship. We would both be able to settle down and relax, as she put it. I explained that it would all take a while—the real estate deal and building a house—but none of that seemed to concern her a bit.

Just before we left LA I was lucky enough to rent a gorgeous house that sat on the edge of a cliff and overlooked the land I was in the process of purchasing. From the images I saw

online, it had full glass walls with a gorgeous view of the ocean as well as the thick forest and beaches on all three sides.

I told Brittany that we would probably be living there for a while. I still wasn't one-hundred-percent sure what I was going to do with the land. My dream was to build a house for myself and my family. I wanted to bring them back to the island where I grew up. I knew they loved it here and I wanted to provide my parents with a paradise where they could both retire and live out the rest of their lives.

I planned on hiring the right people for the job, though. I didn't want to disturb the land too much. I wanted every part of the process and everything that was done to the land to blend in with the surrounding area. I wanted it to stay as perfect as I remembered it—back in high school when I went there with Maggie.

It was such a strange coincidence, seeing her almost first thing when I got back to the island.

"I can't believe they haven't come back here to check if we need anything. I'm not even going to bother sending the steak back now. It's been almost fifteen minutes. Don't they know who you are?"

"What? What's that supposed to mean? I don't expect special treatment because of who I am. That's silly, Brittany."

"I don't think the waiter checking to see if we need anything, like another drink, is considered special treatment, but maybe it is on this *special* island."

"Come on, Brittany, just let it go. It's busy here, and I want to get back to the house and relax."

I motioned to the waiter for the check and he brought it right away.

"I hope everything was to your liking."

"Well, the steak wasn't exactly what I was expecting and we could have used more drinks, but—"

"Everything was fine, thank you."

I dropped my credit card on the tray and the waiter glanced at Brittany. "Is there anything else I can get for you, ma'am?"

"Not now. Thanks." I watched that smug, glued-on smile on Brittany's face fade as the waiter walked off. Her eyes met mine and she gave me a "what the fuck" look. "It's his *job*, Shane. He's supposed to take care of us. That's what he gets paid to do. Besides, I can't believe he called me ma'am."

"You don't have to be so nasty about it."

"You think that was nasty?"

"Never mind. Let's just go."

I signed the slip and put my card in my wallet, then stood and waited for Brittany to walk in front of me before leaving. I suddenly didn't want to look at her face anymore. If this was

what she was like when she was tired or stressed out, all I could do was hope that being on this island would relax her like she said it would.