

Cookie Encounter
By Michelle Connell

Chapter 1

“Finally, something besides a casserole,” a tall, clean shaven man with dark hair said in a husky voice.

Startled by his appearance at the door caused a spike in my heart rate. I, Natalie Alexander, nearly gasped for breath as I stared at a familiar face, yet one I’d never seen before.

After ringing the doorbell of what I thought was Mr. Norton’s house, I wondered if I was at the right address. This man with warm chocolate eyes, strong jaw line, and darker hair than the elderly Mr. Norton I expected, could be a younger version of him.

A much taller version.

A more leaner and muscular version.

And definitely a more handsome version.

There must be a God after all.

If only. But I refused to let my mind go there. This was not the time. All of these thoughts swirled through my brain while waiting for this guy to say something a little more normal. Like “hello”.

This Mr. Norton look-alike stared at me through the glass door looking confident in his crisp oxford and navy slacks. What a strange greeting. I stared back, wondering if he was serious. Perhaps a round foil wrapped plate gave it away. Intelligent, too. A little slow on the manners, perhaps, but otherwise the Richard Castle look-alike seemed intelligent and looked yummy without being overly aware of the fact. My feet shifted awkwardly, my mouth not working. I shivered, waiting.

He finally noticed my plight. “Oh, forgive me. Come in from the cold. My manners completely left me. And I was joking about the casserole. Though anything sure beats another one of those!” He smiled at me.

Maybe he’s normal after all. I stepped into the foyer, gingerly knocking the snow off my boots onto the rug. I looked at my plate of cookies, wondering if he would ever take it.

My surprise host leaned down and whispered, “But seriously, how many casseroles can four people eat in a day?”

I couldn’t help smiling. I’ve seen the amount of food that can accumulate for grieving families and knew what he meant.

“I’m Jim’s nephew by the way. Nick, last name also Norton. And you are?”

I’m glad I had a moment to digest his comments as it gave me a chance to find my voice. “Natalie. Natalie Alexander from down the street.”

We were still standing in the foyer as if Nick kept me there on purpose. We were like new comrades, if that made sense. I shook Nick's offered hand with my mittened one, the other still holding the cookies.

"Come on in, Natalie." Nick backed up and shut the door. "Nice to meet you. Everyone is in the living room." He finally took the plate almost as an afterthought and motioned for me to follow. Slipping off my mittens, I snuck a peek at his left ring finger. Bare. Hmmmm.

We walked down a short hall, the walls displaying family photos in varying sizes. In the living room several people sat on plush chairs and overstuffed sofas. This room was considerably warmer than the hallway since a blazing fire radiated welcome heat. The elder Mr. Norton sat in a crimson chair near the fireplace. His crumpled navy cardigan and striped shirt hung limply on his frame as he leaned forward with his head in his hands, his hair flopped over them.

"Uncle," Nick whispered, "this is Natalie from down the street. You've never mentioned your pretty neighbor." Nick softly rested his hand on his uncle's shoulder.

Upon hearing his comments—though Nick whispered them—my internal thermostat rose ten degrees at least. I fingered the mittens in my coat pockets, wondering why Nick wasn't attached. Not that I was interested. Nope.

Then he added, "And she brought cookies. Homemade oatmeal chocolate chip, looks like," he said, in a normal tone after peeking under the foil.

Mr. Norton looked up and smiled briefly. "Thank you," he said in a hoarse voice. The poor man looked lost as he flipped his hair back in place. I could see why Nick answered the door.

"I'm so sorry about your wife. If there's anything I can do, let me know."

Mr. Norton nodded and stared at the fireplace. I glanced around the room and saw only white or gray heads except for Nick's. No wonder he had kept me at the door!

I looked back at Nick and he motioned his head toward the kitchen. "He's not doing too well, he's still in shock. She was in fairly good health for 83. I'll miss her though." Bits of conversation trailed behind us as we headed to the kitchen near the front door. Nick gestured toward an empty chair.

"I can't stay, sorry. Mrs. John is waiting for me." I noticed a two-inch stack of envelopes and three plants on the round dining table. I glimpsed a counter lined with square and rectangular dishes covered in foil before we moved closer to the front door. Scents of pastas mingled with brownies and cakes made my mouth water.

"What happened? Was your aunt sick?" I started for the front door, Nick following my lead.

There was a silent pause as he tasted one of my cookies. "Very good, these won't sit around long." He brushed crumbs off his shirt and answered my question. "No, not really. She seemed to have some sort of mild episode with her heart or something and Uncle Nick called for an ambulance. Uncle Nick thinks something happened to her on the way to the hospital, we aren't sure."

"That's too bad. I'd only met your aunt and uncle once at Mr. John's birthday party back in November. It's hard to believe something happened to her."

"Everybody's surprised by it." Nick slid his hands into his pockets, not moving to open the door. He looked directly into my eyes. "I don't recall seeing you before. I think—no, I *know* I would have remembered."

My heart beat faster. "I've only lived here since August."

“Ah. The metro-east is a great place to live,” and she thought he heard him say, “and it just got better.”

His startling statement nearly caught me off guard. “I didn’t know you lived here. Were you at Mr. John’s birthday party?” I think— no, I *know* I would have remembered.

“I was invited, but it was teacher conference night.”

“What do you do? Er, I mean, what do you teach?” Work, brain. Now I’m butchering the English language with a teacher of all things.

Nick tried not to smile, but went on, “Freshmen and Junior English.”

“Wow, that’s great. I’m a writer. Do you happen to know anyone interested in starting a writer’s club? Students or coworkers perhaps?” If I believed in fate, this would be a great example. I hadn’t had any great ideas of starting a new group after moving to the area.

“I do.”

I glanced back at his face taking in his grin and tilted my head waiting for him to share whom he was talking about.

After a few seconds of silence, he announced, “Me.”

“Oh!” Suddenly the lint in my mittens seemed important. This was too much. I’d been surprised too often in such a short time; I didn’t think I could take any more. I tried not to let his good looks distract me and tuned into the words coming from his mouth.

“...I’ve always wanted to get around to writing more.”

From the kitchen, I could hear a clock ding the quarter hour. I sucked in my breath. “I forgot about Mrs. John. She’s got water boiling for hot cocoa. Sorry, but I better go.” I pulled out my mittens and slid them onto my hands, not that my hands needed any additional warmth.

“Would you like to get together sometime and continue this conversation?” Nick asked, opening the door. “I’d like to talk more about writing.”

“Uh,...I work at home most of the time, but occasionally go to the coffee shop on Main Street. I’ll be there in the morning.” I didn’t expect him to come, under the circumstances.

“Some cousins and other relatives are coming in later today, making it easier for me to escape. What time?”

“Not before nine. I try to exercise and clear my head before writing.” Did I just say that out loud?

“I’ll stop by then. I enjoyed talking shop with you.” He grinned at me before opening the glass door.

“Same here. Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, and tell your uncle he’s in my thoughts. I don’t want to bother him again.” The reason for coming almost escaped me, with Nick’s presence throwing me for a loop.

“I’ll let him know. Thanks for stopping by with your delicious cookies. See you tomorrow.”

He seemed positive about tomorrow, but I wasn’t so sure with his family grieving. I walked through the January cold and retraced my steps to Mrs. John’s. Oh, dear. What was I getting myself into now? I didn’t have the time or desire to start dating. Not Nick or anyone. I couldn’t. Who was I kidding?

Snow started to fall again as I walked. Our neighborhood was an eclectic mix of older, stately homes with smaller bungalows here and there. Mascoutah (pronounced mu-scoot-uh) is not quite two-hundred years old, with some original buildings still standing on Main Street. The town is quite charming, which is partly what drew me here in the first place. The people are super friendly and willing to help in any way

The air was silent as I trudged through the snow, bending with the increasing wind. I thought back to the party in November where I met Nick's aunt and uncle. There had been a crowd gathered at the John's house, to celebrate Mr. John's 65th birthday.

The party was a few weeks before the Giving Thanks holiday. I'd mingled among the guests, some older, some young. Mrs. John invited me saying it would be a good opportunity to get to know some of the neighbors. I thought, why not? I'm usually holed up in my home office, so this was an excuse to get out and meet people.

That day Mrs. John's kitchen table had displayed three delectable desserts. These were not your run-of-the-mill birthday cakes. One was a creampuff concoction with layers of pudding, whipped topping and drizzled chocolate syrup. The second was a pumpkin and nut cake. And the third was a chocolate and cherry creation, also with whipped topping. How could I possibly choose only one from such an array? I didn't! I followed suit of a couple of other guests and asked for a small sliver of each. The chocolate and cherry dessert turned out to be my favorite.

Mr. and Mrs. John were great hosts, making sure I felt welcome and introducing me to everyone there. I vaguely remember Nick's aunt and uncle among the crowd.

I shook the memory from my mind before knocking on Mrs. John's door and letting myself in since she was expecting me. I'd stopped by earlier to get Mr. Norton's house number so I could deliver the cookies.

"Hello again, dear. Did you meet Mr. Norton, Nick Norton, that is?" Her knowing smile was wide and expectant. Perhaps that's why she declined to go with me.

How did she know? "I did. He seems very sure of himself." I sat down at her kitchen table and slipped out of my coat, hanging it on the back of the chair. Her table though, was uncluttered with only a doily in the center displaying a purple-flowered African violet.

"Ah, I suspected so. He's handsome isn't he?" Her wrinkled hands poured water into two mugs and stirred the cocoa with a spoon. She pushed a steaming mug toward me. The cup said, 'Greatest Grandma'. I smiled. "He's also very available," she said, raising her eyebrows slightly before returning the kettle to the stove.

I carefully sipped the steaming cocoa. I had to tread carefully here. "Well, who knows? He certainly seems nice, but a little confident." I didn't know what else to say. I hadn't fully digested the encounter with Nick yet. And I certainly wasn't expecting to meet him or anyone else that made my heart gallop like a winning race horse. But this was ridiculous; we just met. And I wasn't sure if I could handle a romantic relationship.

"How is your book coming along, dear? Are you still working on the one you told us about at the party? The one about the crazy writers?" She pushed a loose gray curl behind her ear and sat at the table across from me.

"Yes. It's coming along slowly. All of the characters write different kinds of stories from westerns to science fiction. And those genres are so different from what I usually write. I don't know much about either one, but all my characters belong in a writing group and someone challenged them to write a book in their genre in one month, so they took it."

"I don't write much of anything except letters and email. When the computer doesn't have a virus or something else wrong with it." She blew on her cocoa. "My kids have talked to me about texting, but I don't see the need."

I took another sip of my beverage. It was finally cool enough to drink without burning my tongue. I helped myself to a slice of pumpkin bread she had on a platter. "Good bread."

"Thank you, it's left from Christmas. Every year I bake too much, but I can't help it. I love to bake."

“Me, too. I just made cookies this morning, so that’s what I took to Mr. Norton’s.” I giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

I told her what Nick had said about the cookies when I got there.

Mrs. John chuckled too. “Yes, I suppose if you just met and that’s the first thing he said, it would rattle you. But he really is a nice young man.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like casseroles,” I said.

“Oh, he eats anything other people make. I understand he’s a horrible cook according to his mother. But she tried.”

“Most men aren’t good in the kitchen. My dad’s cooking was terrible. Whenever mom went out of town, my brother and I always tried to eat at a friend’s house or pick up fast food when we could drive.”

“I suppose that’s true. But there are a few good men who know their way around in the kitchen—like that Bobby guy on television. You’re right though, I don’t know too many myself.”

“I don’t either. My brother is as bad as my dad, if not worse. One time, he tried to make some sort of pasta dish for dinner when he had a girl over and made the biggest mess I’ve ever seen. When mom came home and saw it, she banned him from the kitchen for life.”

Mrs. John laughed. “What would men do without us?” She reached over and patted my hand. Hers was wrinkled and soft from lotion, mine smooth and slender.

“Starve, I guess.”

“Well, if you and Nick get together, I’m sure it will be a done deal if you ever make dinner for him.” She winked.

I blushed. And not for the first time today. I finished my piece of pumpkin bread and the last sip of my cocoa. “Thank you for the delicious snack. I better get back to my office and get some work done before supper.” I got up from the table and slipped into my coat.

Mrs. John walked me to the door. “Thank you for keeping an old lady company and for the laughs.”

I gave her a hug and thanked her again for the cocoa. I didn’t notice the frigid air as I walked home thinking about the conversations with Nick and Mrs. John. Would Nick show up tomorrow? Could we get a writer’s group going? That would be great.

Though I had lived here several months now, I still didn’t know many people and didn’t know where to plug into a writer’s group. There were many online, but I would like to find one that met in person somewhere around here.

I checked my mailbox beside the front door before going in. Though Mr. Norton’s and Mrs. John’s houses were similar bungalows, my house was a huge Victorian with a wrap-around porch. I loved houses with character and this one definitely qualified. The white paint peeled in some places and the gingerbread trim could use some touching up, otherwise the house was certainly in great shape for its age.

I’d always loved older homes, especially the house my grandparents had. When I was a child, I enjoyed exploring in the attic and playing on the upstairs landing with my brother and cousins. The landing alone was big enough for three billiard tables.

The landing in mine wasn’t as big as grandma’s, but it was large enough for me and Felix, my mischievous cat. I even had a dumbwaiter that worked, which I didn’t use of course. Although there was a back staircase off the kitchen, I preferred the wide wooden staircase off the hall. I loved the sound of the tap-tap-tap echo as I went up or down the stairs.

My upstairs office looked out over the flower garden and served a perfect retreat to observe and think when I couldn't write. It was now snow-covered, but I knew from my first viewing of the house that in the spring and summer the garden would again display a splendor of color from the dianthus, snapdragons, petunias, and impatiens planted there.

When I decided to move south to Illinois from Wisconsin, my brother Ashton thought I was crazy. "You don't know what you're doing," he argued. "You've never owned a house before and now you're going to buy one over four hundred miles from home?"

Well, so far things had worked out. The house was sound as far as I could tell. Except for the occasional weird buzzing I heard from the top floor somewhere. But since it passed inspection, it has been a good first house. When I moved in, the overgrown lawn needed mowing right away. I quickly found a service that promised they wouldn't use those obnoxious leaf blowers. There's nothing worse than being in the middle of a good writing spell and having that awful cacophony jar me out of my concentration. Those machines should be outlawed as disturbing the peace violators.

I tossed my coat on the coat tree after going inside, leaving the mail on the small hall table to deal with later. I worked for a couple hours on a new pamphlet for an electric company before realizing Felix was rubbing against my leg. I rescued him from the local animal shelter shortly after moving in so I'd have some company. "OK, OK, I'll get your chow, settle down." I rubbed his back for a minute, before heading downstairs. Felix continued to meow until I had enough food in his dish to satisfy him. He wasn't a finicky eater, but when he was ready to eat, he was hungry *now*.

At bedtime, Felix raced me up the stairs. It was his nightly ritual. He knows when I'm going to bed, no matter what time it is. He always races to the top of the stairs and turns around to wait for me. Then he tries to trip me when I'm going into the bathroom. "Oh, Felix! If I didn't know any better, I'd think you did this on purpose every night."

"Meow," he replied innocently.

"I don't buy it," I told him.

Felix normally slept at the foot of the bed on a folded towel to keep the fur he sheds to one spot, but occasionally he managed his way up to my pillow. More than once I've woken with a feeling that I was being watched only to find him staring at me. The first time he did that it spooked me, but I'm used to it now.

As I readied for bed, I wondered again if Nick would show up at the coffee shop in the morning. I didn't want to come across like a love-sick teenager, but I secretly hoped he would. Then I thought, could I even cope with a guy right now? Perhaps the better question was would he even want me?

