

Marry Me at
Christmas



Debbie Mason

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Chapter One



Trouble was coming to Christmas. At least that's what deputy Jill Flaherty's gut told her. And over the past two months, she'd learned to trust that warning weight in her stomach. She looked up from her computer screen when the door to the station opened and immediately revised the thought. Trouble was already here.

Two older men, who bore a striking resemblance to Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in *Grumpy Old Men*, held open the door, letting in a blast of cold, late-November air. Ted and Fred were Nell McBride's best friends. Well, they had been up until Nell announced her engagement to Calder Dane three weeks earlier. Ted and Fred had been visiting the station almost daily to file complaints in hopes of breaking up the elderly couple. Today they'd brought reinforcements: Stella Wright and Evelyn Tate. The wind swirled Stella's long, bottle-black hair around her face and practically pushed the diminutive Evelyn through the door.

While the foursome stomped snow from their winter boots on the mat, Sheriff Gage McBride exited his office. Spying his great-aunt's best friends, Jill's boss released a muffled groan and backtracked, shutting his office door. It sounded like he locked it. *Smart man*. Jill wished she could do the same. Instead she glanced at the dispatcher's desk and caught Suze's eye. Jill nodded at the foursome and mouthed, *I'm busy*.

Suze mouthed, *Me too*, and motioned Fred, Ted, Stella, and Evelyn to Jill's desk before going back to her computer. Jill should have known better than to expect help from Suze today. It was Man Candy Monday on Facebook. Jill forced a smile for Nell's best friends. It was either that or get sent back to sensitivity training at the nursing home. In May Jill's dealings with the over-seventy crowd had gotten her into hot water with her boss. She also needed the seniors' votes in her bid for sheriff next spring.

"What can I do for you folks today?" She directed her question at Fred, who was undoubtedly the ringleader.

"Commit Nell. She's lost her marbles," Fred informed her. Ted, Stella, and Evelyn nodded at his assessment.

Jill held back a sigh and gestured to the two chairs in front of her desk. "Sit down, Stella and Evelyn. Fred and Ted, grab two chairs and join us."

It was time they settled this once and for all. Not only were they driving Jill crazy, they were hurting Nell's feelings. Jill had seen the disappointment on Nell's face when her best friends refused to attend her engagement party last week.

Once they were seated, Jill said, "First off, I can't

commit Nell. Even if she needed to be, that would be up to her family. Namely her nephew, who happens to be a doctor. So why don't you tell me what the real problem is?"

"I told you, she's lost her marbles," Fred grumbled, crossing his arms.

This time Jill didn't bother holding back a sigh. "No, she hasn't. Nell's—"

Fred interrupted her. "She's acting like a teenager. She was all over Calder, making out with him right there for everyone to—"

Okay, so if that was true and the couple were in public, there might be a case for a lewd conduct charge, or at least a warning. Since Nell had been a big fan of the *Fifty Shades* books, Jill was a little nervous to discover what the couple had been up to and where. "On Main Street?"

"No, not on Main Street. At Nell's house. They were decorating a Christmas tree and making out under the mistletoe."

Jill gave the older man a pointed look. "And you saw this how? Before you answer, remember there are laws against peeping Toms."

"I'm not a peeping Tom. They were doing it right in the front window."

Evelyn gasped and covered her mouth, while Stella said, "Shameful. It's worse than I thought. You said they were just kissing."

Fred frowned. "They were. What did you think they were doing?"

"Having S. E. X." Ted spelled out the word for his best friend, causing Evelyn to gasp again and Jill's colleague

Ray to saunter over. The tall, lanky deputy parked his butt on the desk in front of her and grinned around his candy cane.

Jill held up a hand to stop any further discussion of seniors and sex. “If that’s the only reason you think that Nell’s—”

“Oh no, dear, that’s not the worst of it,” Evelyn said. “Nell isn’t entering the holiday contest for best decorated house.” The older woman looked more shocked by that than the news her best friend might be having sex.

Given how competitive Nell was about the annual contest, Jill had to admit it was somewhat surprising that she didn’t plan to take part this year.

“No, Evelyn, the worst of it is that Nell’s handed over the reins of the Parade of Lights. She’s organized the parade for forty years. Forty, Jill. Forty years,” Stella’s voice rose on each word until she was practically yelling.

Ted winced and lifted his hand to his hearing aid.

Nell had handed over the organization of the Christmas parade to Chloe and Ty. Since the former soap star and Hollywood hairstylist were affectionately known around town as Diva One and Diva Two, that was worrisome on a whole other level. Which reminded Jill she had a meeting at the town hall in fifteen minutes to discuss the parade. She was the sheriff’s office representative. “All right, I understand why you’re worried about Nell. But she’s been in love with Calder since she was in high school, and now they have a second chance. Surely you can—”

Fred cut her off with a derisive snort. “He broke her heart.”

“Ripped it out of her chest and stomped on it,” Stella said with feeling.

Evelyn nodded, at the same time turning earnest eyes on Jill. “I know how it must seem to you, dear. But we’re not trying to cause trouble. We’re trying to protect Nell. She’s been our best friend for sixty years, and she won’t listen to us. We need your help to stop her from making a terrible mistake.”

“A horrible, dreadful mistake. She’s going to end up a nurse with a purse.” Stella added her two cents.

“Calder’s in great shape for seventy-eight, Stella. I hardly think Nell—” Jill began.

“Bad, real bad,” Ted said. Obviously he’d missed some of the conversation.

Ray removed the candy cane from his mouth. “They’ve got a point. You should—”

Afraid her colleague would make matters worse, Jill quickly intervened. “Head to the town hall for the meeting. You’re absolutely right, Ray. I can’t be late.” Ray frowned at her as she pushed back from her desk. “Look, if I thought there was something to worry about, I’d check into it for you, but there isn’t. Nell and Calder are in love. It’s a good thing. A great thing, really. And what the four of you should be doing, instead of trying to break them up, is support them. Nell’s always been there for all of you. She needs you to be there for her.” Just like the older woman had been there for Jill. She wished she could share with Nell’s best friends what had happened all those years ago, but that was Nell’s story to tell, not hers.

Evelyn wrung her hands. “Maybe you’re right—”

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before any of us give Nellie

our blessing. If you won't help us, we'll find someone who will," Fred said with a stubborn jut of his white-whiskered chin.

Evelyn sent Jill an apologetic glance, then threw in with her friends and nodded.

Proof that trouble had most definitely come to Christmas.

Chapter Two



By the time Jill made it to the town hall, the meeting had started. The wood-paneled room was more packed than usual. From where they stood beside a large projection screen, Chloe and Ty sent her exasperated looks.

Jill grimaced. “Sorry,” she said as she scanned the room for her fiancé, Sawyer Anderson. She spotted him at the end of the conference table. He pulled out a chair and waggled his eyebrows while giving her a slow, sexy smile. One that promised trouble in a way that she was totally onboard with, just not in the middle of a town hall meeting.

“Behave,” she warned out of the side of her mouth as she sat down and said a quick hello to her sister-in-law on her right, and to Nell and Calder, who were on Sawyer’s left.

Sawyer ignored the warning and curved his hand around her neck beneath her brown leather jacket. He

tugged her closer, kissing her temple before murmuring, “Missed waking up with you beside me, babe.”

Jill missed their early morning routine of leisurely kisses and cuddles, too. She loved their house on the lake, but navigating the snow-covered back roads meant that she had to leave before the sun was up to get to work on time. She allowed herself a brief moment to absorb the feel of his warm lips against her skin and inhale his clean, outdoorsy scent, straightening abruptly when a couple of people cleared their throats.

Heat rose to her cheeks as she glanced around the room. Grace met her gaze and grinned, nudging her head at Ty and Chloe.

The throat clearers looked at Jill. “Do you mind if—” Chloe began, then narrowed her eyes at Nell and Calder. The couple had their heads together and were quietly laughing. Jill hoped Chloe didn’t ask them what they were giggling about, because Nell’s cheeks were a telling pink and Calder’s hand was under the table.

Ty tapped a pointer against the screen. “Focus, people. We have a lot to cover.”

Sawyer leaned into Jill, sliding a heavy hand up her thigh. “Nell and Calder are having fun, why can’t we?”

She covered his hand with hers. “Because I’m here in an official capacity and have an image to uphold. They’re allowed to be giddy. They’re getting married soon.”

He raised a dark blond eyebrow and thumbed her engagement ring. “So are we.”

“One wedding at a time, okay?” Sawyer had been trying to nail her down to a date. Mr. Romance’s preference was Valentine’s Day. But with Jill’s campaign for sheriff gearing up in the new year and then the election, she

wanted to wait until next fall. Catching the look of disappointment on his handsome face, she filled him in on Fred, Ted, Evelyn, and Stella's visit as Chloe and Ty passed around today's agenda.

Sawyer grimaced and rubbed his stubbled jaw. "I probably should have told you they paid Calder a visit the other day at the plant."

Sawyer had teamed up with Calder to bring his sport drink, Gold Rush, to market. They were refurbishing Calder's plant to bottle the drink. Jill picked up the agenda and held it in front of her face, indicating that Sawyer do the same. "Did they threaten him?"

The corner of his mouth quirked. "Does challenging him to a duel count?"

Before she could answer, the papers were whipped from their hands. "Would you two like to share what you're whispering about over here? You're delaying the meeting," Ty snapped.

Chloe walked to the far end of the table and took Madison's gavel from her, banging it on the table. "Meeting is called to order."

"Ah, Chloe, that's my job. I'm the mayor," Madison said.

"Didn't Easton tell Gage? You're not seeking another term so I've decided to run."

"I'm going to be her right-hand man," Ty announced.

Jill groaned. She loved Ty and Chloe, but if she won her bid for sheriff and Chloe won hers for mayor, Jill would have to deal with them in an official capacity on a weekly basis. Knowing the two of them as well as she did, it would probably be hourly.

As though Sawyer read her mind, he chuckled. "You can handle them. Besides, I have your back."

“Thanks.” She glanced at her sister-in-law, who was twisting her wedding ring. “What’s wrong?”

Grace leaned in and whispered, “Skye’s thinking of running, too.”

Sawyer must have heard because he laughed out loud. “Sounds like you’re going to be busy keeping the peace, Deputy Flaherty, soon-to-be Anderson.”

“I won’t be Anderson anytime soon if—”

The lights went out, and the words “out with the old and in with the new” appeared on the screen.

“Are they talking about me?” Nell asked.

“We know change is hard, Nell. But the parade needed a facelift,” Chloe said from where she now stood beside the screen. “It’s going to be totes fab; just you wait and see. Ty.” She nodded at her partner, who was working the projector.

Jill stared at the images that filled the screen. It looked like a Disney parade. But if she wasn’t mistaken, the people in costume were . . .

“That’s right, each and every one of you is in the parade. We’re incorporating Nell’s romance series into this year’s theme—Happy Ever After. Each book will have its own float. And before you ask, yes, local businesses, the nursing home, and sports teams will be involved as well.”

“Chloe, the parade is only two weeks away. There’s no way—” Madison began.

“Don’t worry, Beau and his crew are building the floats as we speak. All you have to do is show up for the dress rehearsals.”

When everyone began talking at once, Ty ran over and grabbed Madison’s gavel and hammered the table. “Save your questions until after the meeting. You haven’t

heard the most exciting part.” He laid down the gavel and placed his hands over his heart. “Nell and Calder—”

Chloe cut him off. “Ty, it was my idea. I should be the one to tell them.”

He frowned, moving his hands to his hips. “No, I was the one who suggested the perfect way to end the parade was with their wedding.”

“What?” Calder and Nell said at almost the same time. They were having a quiet wedding on New Year’s Eve with family and close friends.

Chloe glared at Ty, then turned to Calder and Nell. “I know you were thinking of something small, but it just won’t do. We’re going to give you the fabulous wedding you deserve, and the whole town will be on hand to help you celebrate. You’re the ultimate happy ending. It fits perfectly with this year’s theme.”

All Jill could think was *Nightmare at Christmas*.

“But I’m Santa. I’ll be on the float,” Calder reminded Chloe, his cheeks flushed a rosy red.

“Yes, and so will Nell. She’s Mrs. Claus.” Chloe made a ta-da gesture with her hands.

Jill wished Easton was here to rein in his bride-to-be. He was the only one who could make her see reason.

“We found you the most fabulous vintage Mrs. Claus costume, Nell. Look.” Ty pointed to the screen. “Once the parade reaches the town square, you’ll get off and be married beside the Christmas tree. Main Street will be dark except for the lights from the lanterns we’ll be providing everyone. And once you’re pronounced man and wife, you’ll light the tree.” He clapped. “It’s going to be magical.”

At the sound of an incoming text coming from Jill’s

jacket, Chloe gave her the stink eye. “I can’t help it, I’m on duty,” Jill grumbled as she retrieved her phone.

Suze had sent her a screenshot of Calder and Nell’s wedding announcement in the online version of the town’s local newspaper, the *Christmas Chronicle*. Two minutes ago an anonymous commenter had posted: *Nell McBride and Calder Dane will not be married. The wedding is canceled.*

Chapter Three



Since the day of the town hall meeting, Jill had been waiting for Fred and Ted to make their move. If not them, Stella and Evelyn. But so far it had been quiet on the break-up-Nell-and-Calder front. She didn't expect it to last much longer. The parade and wedding were a week away.

But the four seniors had denied posting the comment in the online version of the paper. And despite Calder's and Nell's obvious discomfort with their quiet wedding turning into a community event, Jill hadn't seen any evidence at the meeting that either one of them had been behind the post. So Vivi McBride, owner and publisher of the *Christmas Chronicle*, deleted it. No one wanted the couple upset before their big day. Though Chloe and Ty were upsetting pretty much everyone else today.

Chloe, looking like she'd stepped off the big screen in a floor-length white fur coat over a silver lamé gown, interrupted the high school band's off-key rendition of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," instructing them on

how the carol should be played. While Ty, in a cupid costume, a skin-toned bodysuit with sparkly red hearts attached to his back and front, made his way toward Jill with a ticked-off expression on his face. Chloe and Ty were overseeing the parade as though an Emmy hung in the balance.

Ty's red-slipped feet lit up as he stomped in Jill's direction. He stopped in front of her and put his hands on his hips, his eyes narrowed behind his red square-framed glasses. "Where are my heroes?"

Jill pretended to be looking around the warehouse. "Umm, I just saw them a few minutes ago. Maybe they went out for a bite to eat," she lied.

The men, including her fiancé, had snuck out fifteen minutes ago. And she had a pretty good idea where they'd snuck off to—her and Sawyer's house on the lake. About a foot of snow had fallen in the past several days, and the guys planned to make an outdoor skating rink to host a hockey game between the men and women on Christmas Eve. Unbeknownst to Sawyer, Jill had been brushing up on her skating skills.

Ty threw up his arms in exasperation. "It's the dress rehearsal. They have to get in costume."

"Yeah, about that, I don't think Sawyer's comfortable wearing a Viking costume. It's a little cold to be sitting in a canoe half-naked." Jill should have known better than to share with Ty that Sawyer, with his shoulder-length dark blond hair and chiseled good looks, reminded her of a Viking warrior. Lucky for Jill, her costume consisted of the red dress she'd worn to propose to Sawyer.

Ty waved his cupid wand. "Pfft. Gage is a half-naked Santa, and I haven't heard him complaining."

“I have,” Jill murmured. All the men had been, just not to Ty.

““Get them back here pronto while I check on Nell,” he said and headed off with his red shoes flashing.

Chloe clapped. “Places, everyone.” Then she frowned. “Madison, where is Gage?” Madison, who was dressed as an elf, pretended to look behind the oversize red Santa chair on *The Trouble with Christmas* float, then shrugged. “He was here a few minutes ago.”

Her stepdaughter Lily looked up from where she sat by a white Christmas tree on the float with her little brother Connor and big sister Annie. “Daddy left with Uncle Chance and Uncle Easton to—”

“Get us some . . . pizza,” Annie cut off her sister, then rubbed her stomach. “We’re real hungry.”

“Hungry,” two-year-old Connor echoed.

Chloe didn’t look happy with the turn of events, but it wasn’t like she could take the kids to task for being hungry. “Grace, where is Jack?”

Jill’s sister-in-law sat in the middle of the *Christmas in July* float surrounded by brightly painted wooden flowers with Jack Junior on her lap. Looking beautiful in a yellow dress, Grace pretended to scan the replica of their purple Victorian home with a big yellow ribbon tied around it. Jill’s brother was supposed to be standing on the porch in uniform.

“He’s with Uncle Sawyer. They’re making—” Jill’s nephew piped up before Grace managed to distract him with a flower. She smiled at Chloe. “Making sandwiches, I think.”

Chloe pursed her lips, her gaze moving to the *It Happened at Christmas* float. Skye, dressed as the Sugar Plum

Cake Fairy, sat reading to her daughter Evie, who wore a matching costume. Their float was purple and sparkly. Skye's husband, district attorney Ethan O'Connor, was nowhere in sight, of course. If he had been, he'd be standing behind his wife and daughter wearing a Prince Charming costume like the one he'd worn the day he'd proposed to Skye. Before Chloe could ask about her husband, Skye volunteered, "Ethan's in court, but he'll try to be here by six."

It was two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon.

Chloe eyes skipped past the *Wedding Bells in Christmas* float. Probably because Vivi looked about as happy as Chloe. Her son Sam was crying, and their dog Princess, dressed in a pink tutu, was barking while attacking the fake flowers decorated with white lights. Liz O'Connor-McBride stood under a trellis covered in autumn leaves wearing her wedding dress. Her husband, Dr. Paul McBride, and Vivi's husband Chance were MIA, too.

Chloe frowned when her gaze landed on the *Snowbound at Christmas* float. Chloe's sister Cat and her husband Grayson were supposed to be standing back-to-back dressed in black leather with their guns raised in front of a red barn half-buried in snow. Jill thought they had the best costumes. "Ty, weren't Cat and Grayson supposed to be back today?" Chloe said, then looked around when she didn't get a response. "Where did Ty go?"

"To help Nell. And I might be wrong, but someone said Cat and Grayson wouldn't be back until Friday," Jill said carefully. When the couple heard about the parade, they'd extended their honeymoon in California. They were staying at Chloe's beach house.

The actress walked dejectedly to the *Kiss Me in Christmas* float. Easton, if he were here, would be standing in front of the pink cabin dressed as a farmer—a hot farmer without a shirt—holding a pitchfork. Chloe would be up there beside him in her fur coat and gown holding a leash attached to a fiberglass cow. It had taken some doing, but Easton had managed to convince his fiancée that having their cow Bessie accompanying them on the float was a bad idea.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jill asked as she joined Chloe.

Chloe lifted a shoulder. “I wanted the parade to be special. Not just for Nell and Calder, but for the whole town.”

“It will be. The floats are amazing.”

“If no one knows what they’re supposed to be doing, it won’t. I don’t understand why they couldn’t wait a few minutes before getting something to eat.”

Jill felt guilty for her not-so-nice earlier thoughts. Chloe had thrown her whole heart into the parade. She’d been working around the clock to make sure everything was perfect. “It’ll be fine, Chloe. Just tell them what to do and they’ll do it. Look, here comes Nell.”

Chloe turned, and her face lit up. “Nell, you look amazing.”

Chloe was right. Nell had never looked more beautiful. She wore a red velvet floor-length gown and matching cape trimmed in white fur; the hood draped over her red hair, her hands tucked in a fur muff, a pair of high-heeled black leather boots on her feet. Ty had done a great job on Nell’s makeup and hair, but it was the happiness radiating from the older woman’s face that made her truly beautiful.

“Where’s Calder?” Chloe asked Ty.

“I thought he was out here with you.” He glanced at the

elaborate Santa's float with its old-fashioned sleigh and eight life-size reindeer at the end of the line and frowned. "He's not on the float?"

Chloe shook her head. "Nell, have you seen him?"

"No, I haven't heard from him since this morning. But he said he'd be here."

Ty and Chloe started calling out to the various parade participants to see if they'd seen Calder. No one had.

Her brow furrowed, Nell removed a hand from her muff and dug around in the cape's pocket. She pulled out her phone.

Jill's trusty gut told her something was wrong. She scanned the warehouse, looking for Fred and Ted. She'd seen them twenty minutes ago. They were dressed as elves. One wore green, the other wore red. Just as she was about to hunt them down, the two men zoomed in on their four-wheelers. They each held a takeaway bag. Jill waved them over.

Ted and Fred shut off the four-wheelers, and then walked over. She didn't miss the way they avoided looking at Nell. Jill crossed her arms. "What did you do with Calder?"

"Nothing, why?" Fred asked.

"He's not here."

Ted released a resigned sigh. "Stood you up, did he? We tried to warn you, Nellie, but you wouldn't listen to—"

"He didn't stand her up. You two—" Jill broke off when Nell looked up from her phone.

The older woman blinked away the moisture from her eyes before saying, "Yes, he did. He just texted that he can't marry me. The wedding's off."

Chapter Four



Chloe and Ty looked like they were about to faint, but Jill was more worried about Nell. She'd gone as white as the fur trimming her cape. Jill put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Nell. You know as well as I do that Calder wouldn't cancel the wedding. He loves you." Jill gestured to the two older men. "Fred, Ted, let me see your phones."

"Why? We didn't text her, Calder did. We wouldn't do something like that," Fred said.

It probably wasn't worth the aggravation of confiscating their phones. The timing of the text and their arrival didn't add up. But it didn't mean they weren't indirectly involved. "No, you've just been trying to break them up since they announced they were getting married."

"Because we knew he was going to break her heart, and we were right!"

Fred's outburst seemed to pull Chloe and Ty from their near faints. They gathered around Nell, making sympathetic noises. She shrugged them off. "It doesn't matter.

I don't know what the Sam Hill I was thinking. Seventy-seven is too damn old to get married."

Chloe whispered something to Ty, and they patted Nell's shoulder before walking toward the floats. No doubt to let everyone know what had happened.

Jill wasn't the only one who could tell Nell was trying to act tough and not cry. Ted looked from Nell to Fred and nudged his head at the four-wheelers. Fred nodded. "He's not getting away with it this time, Nellie," he said and walked off with Ted.

"Ted and Fred, you're not going anywhere," Jill called after them.

Stella and Evelyn, carrying red lanterns and dressed in old-fashioned caroling outfits, walked their way. "Nell, what's wrong? Did Ted and Fred hurt your feelings?" Evelyn nibbled her bottom lip and glanced at Stella, then rubbed Nell's arm. "They're just jealous, you know. They've had all your time and attention for so long, they don't want to share you with Calder."

"They won't have to worry about that now." Her eyes glassy, Nell turned to walk away.

Jill reached for her. "Wait. Stella, did you text Nell a message from Calder canceling the wedding?"

The older woman bowed her head, giving it a slight shake before raising sympathetic eyes to her best friend. "I'm sorry, Nell. But it's probably for the best. He's—"

"This isn't helping, Stella. Did you or didn't you have something to do with this?" Jill asked.

"No, of course not," Stella said, looking offended.

Jill arched an eyebrow. "You expect me to believe after all these weeks of trying to break them up, you've just stopped?"

“No dear, we were going to object when the preacher asked at the wedding,” Evelyn confided with an apologetic glance at Nell.

Madison hurried over with the other women following close behind. Jill backed away to give her room. Nell needed Madison. She was like a daughter to the older woman. “Chloe and Ty told us what happened. I don’t believe it for a minute, Nell. And neither should you. We’re getting to the bottom of this.” She took Nell by the hand. “Come on, we’re going to see Calder.”

“That’s a good—” Jill broke off at the sound of revving engines, turning to see Fred and Ted taking off on the four-wheelers. *Dammit*. She’d forgotten all about them. But the doors to the warehouse were shut so she had a chance to stop them. She was just about to go after them when the doors opened. Gage, Sawyer, and the other men stepped back to let Ted and Fred escape. “We’re going to kill Calder,” Fred yelled over his shoulder, presumably in response to one of the men.

When the men approached to ask what was going on, everyone started talking at once. Gage put his fingers between his lips and whistled. “All right, let’s try this again. Why are Ted and Fred going to kill Calder?”

Nell stood quietly in the center of the crowd as, once again, everyone responded to Gage’s question.

Jill moved away to call the station and get the deputy on duty to head off Ted and Fred. Sawyer followed her. “I can’t believe Calder called off the wedding,” he said once Jill had disconnected.

“No one can. Well, no one except Ted, Fred, Evelyn, and Stella. Nell seems to believe it, too. I’m worried about her, Sawyer. You and Calder are pretty close; why

don't you call him? Maybe he'll tell you what's going on."

He scrubbed his jaw. "I don't know, babe. He probably just needs some time. Maybe he got cold feet. You have to admit the whole parade-wedding thing is kind of overwhelming."

"Really? So you're telling me if you were in his shoes you'd cancel our wedding?"

Sawyer placed his hands on her shoulders and ducked down to look into her eyes. "How did this become about us? It's not the same thing at all. They're in their seventies."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Because for Jill, Calder and Nell's happy ever after was tied to hers and Sawyer's. She felt a connection to the older couple. If Jill hadn't had Nell in her corner, she might have lost Sawyer.

From the conversation going on between Gage and Madison, it sounded like Jill wasn't the only one having a problem convincing her significant other to intervene.

"You guys suck," Jill said. "First, you all run out on poor Chloe. You have no idea how hard she and Ty have been working on the parade. And now you've all got this weird manly thing going on and don't want to interfere."

"Ah, I'm not really sure what's going on here, but I think I'll go and help with the floats."

"You do that," she said, noticing the other men were heading off in that direction, too.

Sawyer started to walk away, then turned and came back to cup her face with his hands. "I love you, and you don't have to worry about me getting cold feet. If Calder hasn't come to his senses in a few days, I'll call him."

"Thanks. I love you, too," she said grudgingly.

“You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

“We haven’t even set a date yet. How can I get cold feet?”

“I don’t think you’re in the mood to talk about this.”

“Are you saying I’m moody?”

He sighed, then kissed her. “Looks like I can’t win with you today. We’ll talk when we get home.”

As Jill watched him walk away, she spotted Nell standing off by herself staring up at the Santa float. Nell had always seemed so strong and vibrant that it bothered Jill to see her looking beaten down and...old. She’d never really thought of Nell as old until today. And that decided it for Jill. No matter what Sawyer said, she was going to find out what was up with Calder. She waited until everyone was busy with the floats and ducked out of the warehouse, heading for her Jeep. She turned at the sound of someone coming up behind her.

“I’m coming with you,” Madison said. “You are going to Calder’s, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I... You realize you’re dressed as an elf, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “I couldn’t change or Gage would know I’m up to something. He told me not to interfere. Skye, Grace, and Vivi are covering for me. Besides, Calder’s Santa. He won’t care.”

Jill shook her head in frustration as she opened the driver’s side door. “I don’t know what their problem is. It’s like they took a vow never to call another man out when he breaks up with someone.”

“Probably because they’ve all done the same thing at one time or another.”

“Those guys? A time or ten.”

“We don’t need their help anyway. We’ll take care of it ourselves,” Madison said, buckling her seat belt. “I’m just as worried about Calder as I am Nell. This seems totally out of character for him.”

“I know. Something feels off. I just can’t put my finger on it,” Jill said as she drove out of the warehouse parking lot.

When she pulled up to Calder’s log home at the base of the mountain fifteen minutes later, Jill decided her trusty gut hadn’t steered her wrong. She parked between a top-of-the-line black Lexus and a silver Mercedes.

“Hang on,” she said when Madison went to open the passenger’s side door. Jill called in the license plates. A few minutes later she had the owners’ identities—Marcus Dane and Hilary Dane-Seares. Calder’s son and daughter.

Jill glanced at Madison. “I think we know what the problem is now.”

The bell on Madison’s hat tinkled when she nodded, her lips pressed in a grim line. “They probably have visions of their inheritance disappearing if Calder marries Nell. And then there’s that whole McBride-Dane feud from back in the day. Not to mention their nephew getting thrown in the psych ward because of me and Gage.”

“Forgot about that,” Jill said as she opened the driver’s side door. “Maybe best if you pretend you’re Santa’s little helper and let me do the talking. You might want to leave your hat behind. You jingle.”

Madison sighed and took off her hat, patting her blond hair into place. Jill laughed when the other woman got out of the Jeep. She’d forgotten about the bells on the curled-up toes of Madison’s slippers. Then she frowned because she’d also forgotten Madison was pregnant. Her

husband was overprotective . . . and Jill's boss. "You know what, maybe you should wait for me in the Jeep."

"No way. You might need a witness. Or backup."

"I have backup," Jill said, pulling her gun and badge from her purse. She opened the door and grabbed her shoulder holster off the backseat. Putting her black pea-coat back on once she'd strapped the holster over her red dress, Jill affixed the badge at her waist.

Madison grinned when she met her at the front of the Jeep. "I see why Sawyer named your signature drink Hot Cop."

"Ha. Come on, we have an audience." Jill nodded at the lace curtains moving in the front window. They walked up the three steps to the front porch and knocked on the door.

A woman with perfectly coiffed silver hair answered. She glanced at Madison, raising an equally perfect eyebrow, then directed her question at Jill, "Is there a problem, officer?"

"Deputy Flaherty, and you would be?"

"Clara Dane. Calder's daughter-in-law. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Calder."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Jill crossed her arms. "And why is that?"

Another woman, her pale blond hair pulled back from a classically beautiful face, approached the door. "Clara, what's the problem?"

"The deputy would like to speak to your father. I was just about to explain that he's under the weather."

The woman who Jill decided must be Calder's daughter Hilary looked down her nose at Madison, then said to

Jill, “My sister-in-law’s correct. My father isn’t up to visitors. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I don’t want to disturb Calder, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to let me see him. I’ve received several calls from citizens expressing concern for his well-being, and I have to follow up. So if you don’t mind stepping aside, this won’t take long.”

“Actually, I do mind. Very much so. You can tell Nell McBride she doesn’t intimidate me. Nor do you, deputy. I know my rights.”

“Nell is concerned about her fiancé, ma’am. We all are,” Madison said. She’d kept quiet longer than Jill expected.

Hilary lifted her chin and sniffed as though she smelled something rotten in Christmas. “Ex-fiancé, my father canceled the wedding. Obviously that’s why you’re here.”

A tall man appeared behind the women. “Let the officer in, Hilary.” Marcus Dane looked like an older version of his father.

“I’m the one being appointed Daddy’s conservator, Marcus. Not you. It’s my job to protect him from being taken advantage of. The only reason they’re here is because of that woman. Come back with a warrant, deputy, and we’ll talk then,” Hilary said, then went to close the door.

Jill stopped its forward motion with her foot and pushed back her coat to make sure her gun and badge were visible. “Step aside. Your brother invited me in.”

The woman gave a negligent shrug of her shoulders. “Fine. It won’t do you any good. I’ll be named my father’s guardian in a few days’ time. We have an appointment with the judge on Friday.”

“Your father doesn’t need a guardian. He’s one of the sanest people I know,” Madison said.

Hilary gave Madison an up-and-down look. “I’m not surprised you’d think so, but you’re wrong. My father believes he’s Santa Claus.”

Chapter Five



Jill knocked on Calder's bedroom door. Madison was with the Danes in the living room. Jill wasn't worried about leaving her on her own. Not after she'd introduced her to the Danes as the sheriff's wife and Dr. McBride's daughter-in-law. Marcus had gone to school with Paul. The man seemed nice enough, but he was whipped. His sister and wife had him on a tight leash. They wouldn't get any help from him.

"Calder, it's Jill Flaherty. Can I come in?"

"Come on in, Jill." Calder's voice came through the closed door. Like Nell, he sounded old and beaten.

A lamp cast a small pool of light in the room. Calder, wearing his Santa suit, sat slumped in a chair beside the bed. He looked up when Jill entered. "How's Nell?"

She closed the door, then walked around to sit on the edge of the bed beside him. "Hurt, confused. It might have been better if you'd come to the rehearsal instead of

texting her. At least then you could have told her in person why you're canceling the wedding."

He nodded, twisting the Santa's hat in his hands. "I wanted to. Wanted to go to her and explain, but my daughter said it was better this way. Better for Nell."

"So you really don't want to marry Nell?" He cast a nervous glance at the door. "Calder, you can tell me the truth. This is between you and me. I won't even tell Nell if you don't want me to."

He relaxed a bit. "It's my fault. I put off telling the kids about the wedding. I knew they'd be upset. But somehow they found out. Hilary says I'm dishonoring her mother's memory by marrying Nell." He looked at Jill. "My wife was a good woman. I loved Meredith in my own way. But Nellie, she was the love of my life. I never got over her. I think Meredith knew that. Maybe she told the kids, I don't know. But Hilary and my daughter-in-law are dead set against me marrying Nell."

It was beginning to make sense. Calder felt guilty for loving Nell, and his daughter was playing on that. Though maybe it wasn't just about their inheritance. Maybe for Hilary it really was about her mother. "You're a good father, Calder. But what about you—what do you want?"

"Doesn't really matter. I'm old. Probably don't have much time left anyway."

"None of us know how much time we have. But wouldn't you rather spend what time you do have with Nell? You deserve to be happy, Calder. And so does Nell."

"She does." His hands tightened on his hat, and he cleared his throat. "My daughter, she thinks I have Alzheimer's. I don't want Nell to spend the rest of her days nursing me. I don't want her to remember me like

that. It's better this way. At least now she'll have her friends back in her life."

The infamous Flaherty temper flared to life inside Jill. She wanted to strangle Hilary. Calder Dane did not have Alzheimer's. She'd stake her career on it. But how was she supposed to tell a loving father what she suspected his daughter was up to without hurting him? Carefully. Very carefully. "Why does she believe you have Alzheimer's?"

"She says I'm repeating myself. Forgetting things."

"We all do that. It doesn't mean you have Alzheimer's." Jill took her phone from her coat pocket and googled Alzheimer symptoms. She read them off to Calder. Not surprised when he answered no to all of them. "You've been seeing Dr. McBride for years. He's a good doctor. He would have noticed if you were having problems. He would have had you tested. And you don't have to worry about Nell losing her friends. They've rallied around her now."

"Ah, so I guess I can expect a visit from Ted and Fred." For a second, she thought she saw a familiar twinkle in his blue eyes, then he sighed. "I don't know what to do. Either way, I hurt someone I love."

"You're seventy-eight. You damn well do what you want to do." She grimaced. "Sorry, it just doesn't seem fair that you and Nell got your second chance only to have... other people stand in your way. And I've got to say, it's not about you, it's about them. Your daughter—"

The door opened. "My father needs his rest, deputy," Hilary said, while Clara hovered in the background.

Jill stood up and gave Calder's shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "I'll be back to check up on you. Call if you need me."

“Thanks, Jill.”

She walked to the door and stared the two women down, saying for their ears alone, “I know exactly what you’re up to. You won’t get away with it. So I’d advise you to quit while you’re ahead. Your father is a wonderful man. He doesn’t deserve to be treated this way.”

Hilary brushed past her without responding. Clara did the same, but without her sister-in-law’s attitude.

Jill strode down the hall. Marcus stood by the front door with Madison. “Your father needs someone in this family to stand up for him. Grow . . . Man up,” she said before storming out of the house. If she didn’t get out of there, she might do or say something she’d regret. She had to get her temper under control.

She heard Madison coming down the steps behind her. Jill leaned against the Jeep, breathing deeply of the cold, pine-scented air. She remembered Madison wore only a thin costume and beeped the lock.

Madison looked at Jill when she finally joined her in the Jeep. “You okay?” she asked.

“Getting there. I no longer want to shoot someone,” Jill said as she put on her seat belt.

“You might when I tell you what I found out.”

“Maybe you’d better wait until we’re far enough away then.”

“Good idea. So . . . were you going to tell Marcus to grow a pair?” Madison asked, looking like she was trying not to laugh.

Jill snorted. “Yeah, not sure he appreciated man-up any better than he would that.”

“So what? It’s true. You should hear the way those two speak to him. Now tell me how Calder is.”

Jill filled Madison in.

“I want to go back there and shoot them myself. And I don’t believe for one second this has anything to do with dishonoring the memory of Calder’s first wife. It’s about the money. Calder Dane is filthy rich. I texted Vivi while they were getting me a cup of tea, and she looked into them with a little help from Easton.” She held up her hand. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t know we’re here. She told him it was for a story. Anyhow, Hilary’s in the middle of a nasty divorce, and Clara has a very expensive addiction to Harry Winston jewelry. One that Marcus is having a difficult time supporting since his investments went ka-bluey last year. So what are we going to do?”

“First, Nell needs to know exactly what’s going on. Then Fred, Ted, Evelyn, and Stella have to reach out to Calder. Let him know that Nell won’t lose their friendship if they get married. And then . . .” She cast Madison a sidelong glance. “It’s probably better if you don’t know.”

“Hey, just because I’m married to your boss doesn’t mean I can’t be trusted.”

“Okay, we’re going to kidnap Calder.”

Madison groaned. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

Chapter Six



The Flaherty temper had gotten Jill into trouble in the past. And it had definitely gotten her into trouble now. Or more correctly, if the women gathered in Nell's living room actually followed through and kidnapped Calder, they'd be in trouble. Big trouble. But only if they were caught. Which wasn't exactly as comforting a thought as it should be. Because Jill didn't think they could pull it off without her. She should have kept her mouth closed until she calmed down.

Madison served tea and Christmas cookies to Nell, Chloe, Skye, Vivi, Grace, and Ty. They were still in costume. After her initial panic over Jill's plan, Madison got on board with gusto, arranging for the women and Ty to meet them back at Nell's. The men were tasked with taking care of the children and finishing up at the warehouse. They didn't have a clue about the rescue-Calder plan currently underway. As far as they knew, they were here to comfort Nell.

It kind of surprised Jill that, after her unfiltered diatribe, Nell still needed comforting. Instead of jumping in to organize the rescue plan as they'd expected her to, Nell had sat quietly on the couch. Her reaction reminded Jill a little of Calder's. They felt guilty. As though Calder's love for Nell had taken something away from his late wife. Nell felt bad for Meredith. And she didn't want to cause a rift between Calder and his children.

"Just tell them you don't need or want their money. Sign a pre-nup if they want you to. I guarantee they won't have a problem with the wedding then," Vivi said.

Nell lifted a shoulder. "Doesn't matter. We're too old anyway."

Madison put down the tea tray and sat on the arm of the couch beside Nell. "Dad says the two of you are in better shape than the majority of his patients. You'll probably outlive us all."

Everyone looked up when the front door slammed. Fred and Ted ran into the living room. "They're packing up Calder's place and putting him in a home. Hurry up, we don't have much time," Fred panted, bending over to place his hands on his thighs.

"Wait, what? How do you know that?" Madison said.

"We tried to call him just like Jill asked us to, but his daughter kept picking up his phone. So we went out there to see him. They wouldn't let us in. We..." He glanced at Jill. "You can't arrest us. We were just doing what you said."

She had asked them to call Calder. She hadn't expected them to go out there. She should have known better. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. We didn't get a chance. We were sneaking

around to Calder's bedroom window to have a word with him, and we heard his daughter out on the porch talking on her phone. The stuck-up one. Anyway, she was making arrangements for Calder at a home. Ungrateful kids, uprooting their father from the place he loves. He doesn't deserve that. No father does."

"Where"—Nell cleared her throat—"where's the home?"

Fred scratched his head, looking like he didn't want to tell her.

"Arizona," Ted said. "A desert, Nellie. They're taking him out to the desert to die."

"Over my dead body," Nell said, slamming her teacup on the coffee table. "We're—"

"Help, I need some help," a woman called out. It sounded like Stella.

Fred and Ted ran from the room. They came back carrying Evelyn between them, placing her on the couch. With a loopy smile on her face, she waved at them with both hands and giggled. Then she slowly listed to the left and did a face plant in Skye's lap.

Skye's eyes widened, and she leaned back against the couch.

"Is she dead?" Chloe and Ty asked at almost the same time.

"No, I think she's stoned," Skye said.

Stella nodded as she entered the living room. "It was the brownies."

"You let her make them again?" Nell said. "You know she doesn't stop eating them once she starts."

"Don't be mad at me. It's Jill's fault. She told us Calder wouldn't marry you if he thought you were going

to lose us. So we were going to tell him we're on board with the wedding now."

"I didn't tell you to make brownies with weed," Jill protested. "I told you to call."

"We were worried about Calder and wanted to check on him. From what you said, it didn't sound like his kids would be accommodating. We figured the brownies would loosen them up. They wouldn't let us past the front door. Evelyn was so worried about Calder, she started eating the brownies on the drive home."

Ty angled his head. "She looks happy and relaxed now. Any left?"

Nell got up and stormed from the living room.

"Nell, where are you going?" Madison said, hurrying after her.

"To rescue my man. No one is taking him away from Christmas or me."

"You go, girl," Ty said and gave Chloe a hand up. "Come on, Diva. It's time to rescue Santa."

Vivi and Grace did a fist bump, then jumped up from their chairs to head after Nell. Skye lowered Evelyn carefully onto the couch.

"Hold it," Jill said. "We need a plan if you don't want to get caught." She pointed at her sister-in-law. "Pregnant women are not allowed on the mission. That goes for you two, Madison and Skye."

The women started to protest, but Nell intervened. "Jill's right."

"You can't be involved either, Jill. You'll ruin your chance of getting elected sheriff if we're caught," Vivi said.

It was true. And one of the reasons Jill had been mad

at herself for making the suggestion in the first place. But she wasn't about to let them go alone. "We won't get caught," she said.

* * *

Famous last words, Jill thought two hours later as she stood in the holding cell with her partners in crime. They probably wouldn't have been caught if Vivi hadn't thought she'd seen a bear. Which resulted in panicked shrieks from Ty. She couldn't really blame Vivi...or Ty.

They were all dressed head-to-toe in black with camouflage streaks on their faces. And when Fred wandered off to relieve himself, tromping around in the woods, he did look a little bearlike. In response to the yelling and shrieking, Marcus Dane rounded the log home with a rifle. If not for his sister and wife, Jill doubted he would have called it in. They, of course, did.

"Get the keys," Nell whispered to Madison, who'd arrived at the station with Grace and Skye as soon as they got the news.

Jill sighed. "We're not breaking out, Nell."

"We're not, but you are. You're not losing your job over this." Everyone agreed, and despite Jill's protests, they removed the black knit hat from her head and the streaks from her face, pushing her out of the cell when Madison opened the door.

"Skye, call Ethan. We're going to need a good lawyer," Nell said.

The Sugar Plum Cake Fairy held up her phone. "Already done."

They turned at the sound of the door opening. Chloe's

sister Cat walked in and grinned. “Looks like I missed all the fun.”

“I thought you weren’t coming home till Friday,” Chloe said.

“Mom called this afternoon and told us what was going on with Calder. Grayson had a friend fly us home. So what—” Cat broke off when the door opened to reveal Gage. Sawyer, Easton, Chance, Dr. McBride, and Jack followed him into the room.

Gage glanced at his wife, then eyed everyone in the holding cell. “What the hell were you thinking?”

As they all started to talk at once, Sawyer came up beside Jill and put his arm around her. “You missed a spot,” he whispered, rubbing her cheek with his thumb.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

“I’ve got your back, babe.” He winked.

When Nell, Fred, Ted, and Stella had finally run out of steam, Vivi added her version of the events. Then Chloe and Ty did. By the time they were finished, Gage was rubbing his temples. “Okay, I understand why you were worried about Calder, and I’ll look into your allegations. But I want to know whose idea it was to kidnap him?”

Everyone in the cell raised their hands. Jill couldn’t do it. She couldn’t let them take the blame. “Mine,” she said.

Vivi and Nell stared at her. Chloe and Ty yelled at her, and Sawyer, he just sighed and gave her shoulder a supportive squeeze.

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She ate Evelyn’s brownies. They had wacky tobacky in them,” Fred said. Stella and Ted nodded.

Ethan, who’d walked in a few moments earlier, came to Jill’s side. “From what I’ve heard, Gage, Jill deputized

concerned citizens in an effort to rescue a much-loved member of our community who she felt was at risk. No sense clogging up the courts with this. The judge would just throw it out. Especially when folks get wind the Danes planned on abducting Santa from Christmas.”

Gage’s shoulders rose on a deep, inward breath. “If I let them out and don’t charge them, you have to deal with the Danes.”

“No problem. It’ll be my pleasure,” Ethan said, grinning when his wife whispered in his ear.

“Someone’s getting lucky tonight,” Sawyer murmured.

“Wait, what about Calder? We can’t let them take him to Arizona,” Nell said with a distressed look on her face.

“Nell, you leave Calder to me. If his kids are more interested in the money than him, I think I know how I can get past them,” Sawyer said.

Jill smiled up at him and whispered, “You’re getting lucky tonight, too.”

“But what about the wedding? Even if you can stop them from taking Calder, they’re going to do everything they can to make sure we don’t get married,” Nell said.

“Don’t you worry about anything, Aunt Nell,” Dr. McBride said. “You made sure we all got our happy ever afters. We’re going to make sure you get yours. Come on boys, we’ve got work to do.”

“My heroes.” Ty sighed.

Chapter Seven



Christmas's heroes had worked their magic. Sawyer had charmed Hilary and Clara into letting Calder join him at the plant to do one last inspection of the property. They'd been impressed to learn how much money Calder stood to make and happily let Sawyer take their father away.

Sawyer took him to Nell's instead. After the couple's tearful reunion, Dr. McBride reassured Calder that he didn't have Alzheimer's. Then Dr. McBride and Ethan, with Chance and Easton as backup, met with the Danes and set them straight.

Over the last few days, Calder, with Nell as his backup, had several meetings with his family. Last night they'd finally agreed to attend the wedding.

Which is why Jill was now sitting on a chair to the left of a twenty-foot unlit Douglas fir in the town square with her guitar on her lap. Ty stood behind her with Annie by his side. He'd changed from his cupid costume into a black tux with a red bow tie, the same as the men in the

wedding party. Annie, like Nell's attendants, wore a red dress.

The citizens of Christmas filled Main Street with lanterns in hand. Close family and friends formed an aisle to the tree, holding their lanterns high to light the couple's way. Calder's daughter and daughter-in-law stood at the front of the line to Jill's left. They didn't look happy. Even though Sawyer had promised Jill, while he was fake paddling along the parade route, that everything would be fine, she couldn't help but worry. The parade had been perfect; she wanted Nell's and Calder's wedding to be, too.

Jill glanced back at Ty. "Clara and Hilary are making me nervous."

"Don't you worry, Jilly Bean. We have one more hero who is still on the job."

"Who?"

"Your brother."

"But I thought he couldn't make the parade because he had a rescue mission." Retired from the military, her brother was now a pilot for Search and Rescue.

"He does, and it sounds like he's right on time," Ty said, looking up at the night sky. At the familiar *woop-woop* of a helicopter above them, the crowd did the same. The lights from the chopper swirled over the pastel-painted shops as it began its descent into the park. But everyone's attention was drawn to Calder in his Santa suit when he walked up the aisle with his groomsmen following behind. His son Marcus was his best man. Sawyer and Dr. McBride were standing up for him, too.

Jill glanced at Hilary and Clara as the men took their places. Her stomach clenched at the women's mutinous

expressions. Sawyer and Ty were wrong. This was not going to have a happy ending. But just as the thought popped into her head, three men, three extremely handsome men, jogged down the aisle. Much to the delight of the women in the crowd. Well, most of the women. For some reason, Sophia and Autumn Dane looked like they might faint. That's when Jill realized who the men were—Calder's grandsons.

Sawyer caught Jill's eye as the men stopped to speak to their mothers. *Told you*, he mouthed. And from the expressions on Hilary and Clara's faces now, there wasn't going to be any trouble in Christmas tonight.

Ty poked her in the back. "It's time."

The crowd went quiet. Jill picked up her guitar and began to play Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This" as Nell and the bridal party made their way up the aisle. Ethan and Skye's daughter Evie was the flower girl; Gage and Madison's son Connor the ring bearer. Their daughter Lily was the junior bridesmaid, while Madison was the matron of honor. Fred, Ted, Stella, and Evelyn made up the rest of the bridal party.

When Nell reached Calder and they joined hands, Jill got a little choked up and couldn't sing the rest of the chorus. Ty and Annie covered for her, singing the last lines of the song while Jill strummed her guitar.

As the preacher began the ceremony, Sawyer held her gaze. *I love you*, he mouthed. He didn't need to tell her; she could see it in his eyes. She mouthed the words back to him. And as Nell and Calder exchanged vows, a light snow began to fall.

"It's a Christmas miracle," Ty murmured behind her.

Jill pressed her lips together to keep from laughing,

then held her breath when the preacher asked if anyone objected. Calder's grandsons turned to look at their mothers. The tense moment passed, and it wasn't long before the preacher said, "I present Mr. and Mrs. Calder Dane, or as they're known in Christmas, Mr. and Mrs. Claus."

Everyone clapped and cheered. Well, everyone expect Clara and Hilary. Ty hurried over to hug the beaming couple, then guided them to the tree. Unlike last year, there were no exploding bulbs when the tree was lit. Sawyer came up behind Jill and wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on the top of her head. As they sang "Oh, Christmas Tree" along with their friends and family, Jill was filled with love for the town and the man holding her in his arms. She glanced at Nell to find the older woman looking at her. They shared a smile. They'd both gotten their happy ending.

Someone called out, "Ride's here, Santa."

The crowd parted to reveal Calder's sled and dog team. As the couple walked hand in hand to the sleigh, Jill and Sawyer, along with the other guests, threw oats mixed with edible glitter at the happy couple.

The crowd backed away once Calder had tucked his bride under a blanket of furs. He gave Nell a kiss, then took his place on the runners behind her. Cracking his whip in the air, he shouted, "On Donner, on Blitzen—"

Ty, Lily, Annie, and the rest of the children joined in, calling out the other reindeer's names.

"Don't worry, kids, me and the Mrs. will back on Christmas Eve," Calder yelled over his shoulder as the sleigh shot off down Main Street. Just as his *ho-ho-hos* faded, a shooting star lit up the night sky.

Sawyer's arms tightened around her. "Make a wish."

She smiled up at him. “I’ve already got mine.” And she thought it only fair that she give Sawyer his. “Let’s do it.”

He angled his head. “Do what?”

“Get married on Valentine’s Day.”

A slow smile curved his lips. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. Unless you want to wait. Because I’m—”

“Oh no, you’re not changing your mind.” He stepped back and took her by the hand. “Come on, we’ll book the church and preacher right now. I overheard Chloe talking to Ty earlier. Sounded like she was thinking about a Valentine’s Day wedding, too.”

“Okay then, we better...” Jill trailed off, spotting Chloe leading Easton toward the preacher.

“Looks like we better pick another day, babe,” Sawyer said, sounding disappointed. “No way we’ll beat them. They’ve got a couple yards on us.”

“Wanna bet?” Jill waved her arms, calling out, “Chloe, look, paparazzi.”

While the actress stopped and turned, fluffing her hair with a wide smile on her face, Jill tugged on her laughing fiancé’s hand and ran for the preacher.