

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# SUSAN MALLERY

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is wearing a grey sweater with a colorful pattern, and the woman is wearing a green sweater and a red knit hat with pom-poms. They are standing in front of a rustic blue door decorated with a green Christmas wreath featuring a large red bow and pinecones. The background shows a wooden building with a window.

*Marry  
Me at  
Christmas*

❧ A FOOL'S GOLD ROMANCE ❧

Susan Mallery

**Marry Me At Christmas**

«HarperCollins»

## **Mallery S.**

Marry Me At Christmas / S. Mallery — «HarperCollins»,

Wish upon a Christmas star with New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery's sparkling Fool's Gold romance! To bridal boutique owner Madeline Krug, organizing a Christmas wedding sounds like a joy—until she finds out she'll be working closely with the gorgeous brother of the bride, movie star Jonny Blaze. How will a small-town girl like her keep from falling for the world's sexiest guy? Especially with mistletoe lurking around every corner! Jonny came to Fool's Gold looking for normal, not for love. Happily-ever-after only happens in the movies. Still, nothing about this quirky town is quite what he expected, and "ordinary" Madeline is the most extraordinary woman he's ever met. Refreshingly honest, disarmingly sweet. Achingly beautiful. Planning the perfect wedding leads to candlelit dinners and strolls through snow-covered streets. And Madeline finds Jonny in real life even more captivating than her celebrity crush. But will the action star be brave enough to risk his heart and step into the role of a lifetime?

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"The Christmas Wedding Ring has Susan Mallery's trademark emotional punch... Another example of how deft Susan Mallery is at creating classic love stories."

—Fresh Fiction

"It really is the most wonderful time of the year in Fool's Gold, where readers will witness heartwarming family drama and tender romance. Another of Mallery's patented mood elevators!"

—RT Book Reviews, Top Pick, on Christmas on 4th Street

"Susan Mallery is one of my favorites."

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

"The wildly popular and prolific Mallery can always be counted on to tell an engaging story of modern romance."

—Booklist

"[Christmas on 4th Street is] brimming with lively humor, spot-on dialog, small-town charm, and holiday cheer... A joy-filled, Christmas treat."

—Library Journal

"A sweet, heartwarming Christmas romance and a winning seasonal charm in the enchanting, magical community of Fool's Gold."

—Kirkus Reviews

Marry Me at Christmas

Susan Mallery



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

New York Times bestselling author SUSAN MALLERY has won the hearts of millions of readers around the world with books described as "immensely entertaining, intensely emotional" (RT Book Reviews), "hilarious" (Fort Worth Star-Telegram) and "heartwarming" (Publishers Weekly). One major retailer recently described her as "the queen of romantic fiction." While she deeply appreciates the accolades of critics and booksellers, Mallery is even more honored by the enthusiasm of her readers and the word of mouth that catapults her toward the top of the bestseller lists time and again.

Mallery lives in not-so-sunny Seattle with her husband and a toy poodle who makes her laugh every day and who's not even a little bit impressed by her growing fame. Visit Susan online at [SusanMallery.com](http://SusanMallery.com).

I'm one of the luckiest authors in the world. Seriously, I have the best readers anywhere. This book is dedicated to the delightful, creative and fun Kim V.R. I'm thrilled that your girls week friends, radiation friends and Inez got you addicted to romance, and I adored meeting you.

And...

To reader Paula B, who asked that this book be “dedicated to my son Tom B for making my dream come true.”

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“DO THEY KNOW they look like pumpkins?”

Madeline Krug appreciated that Rosalind asked the question very softly. One of the first rules of running a successful wedding gown store was to not insult the bride or her wedding party. And while she normally would have mentioned that to her assistant, in this case the question was kind of legitimate.

It wasn't just the very full skirt on the bridesmaids' dresses. A billowing that was oddly, well, pumpkin shaped. It wasn't the colors, which ranged from tangerine to coral to, um, pumpkin. But when those two elements were put together with a pale green crown of leaves and tiny flowers on each of their six heads, the overall effect was just a little...pumpkin.

“The bride told me this is exactly what she wanted,” Madeline murmured. “That she's been dreaming about her wedding since she was a little girl and these are the dresses she pictured. She was thrilled we could find them.”

Madeline smiled at her assistant. “Every bride has a perfect dress and a vision for what she wants her wedding party to look like. Our job is to find out what that dream is and make it come true.”

Rosalind looked doubtful, but nodded, as if taking mental notes.

The fortysomething brunette had been working at Paper Moon for about a month now. With her kids all in middle and high school, she’d wanted to return to the workforce. Madeline needed someone she could depend on and Rosalind came with good references. So far, they were doing well as a team, although Rosalind still found the various bridal idiosyncrasies surprising.

Madeline returned her attention to the wedding party. She double-checked the fit of each dress, confirmed the bride was giddy with happiness, then promised a final pressing before the dresses were picked up the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Because the, um, pumpkin wedding was the Saturday after the holiday.

By three o’clock the bridal party had left. Madeline retreated to her office to finish up some paperwork. After processing invoices, confirming a couple of deliveries and noting when her favorite bridal designer’s new summer collection would be available, she leaned back in her chair and allowed herself a rare moment of contentment.

She loved her job. She wasn’t saving the world or finding a new source of renewable energy—but in her own small way, she helped people be happy. Brides came in all shapes, sizes and temperaments, but for the most part, she loved each one of them. She loved the look on their faces when they found the right dress. The happy tears were so satisfying.

Sure there was drama, but she could handle a little drama. It kept things interesting. And when the drama was over and the bride emailed her a picture of herself on the big day, well, nothing was sweeter.

She was just plain lucky, she thought. If not in love, then certainly in every other part of her life. Because—

“Hello, Madeline.”

Two simple words spoken in a kind voice. That should have been fine. Or even nice. Instead, Madeline stared at the well-dressed woman standing in the doorway of her office and knew that her life was about to change. She couldn’t say how or why, but as surely as the sun would rise in the east, when Mayor Marsha Tilson showed up looking slightly expectant, things happened.

“Ma’am,” Madeline said, instantly coming to her feet. Because that was how she’d been raised. You stood when an older person came in the room.

Mayor Marsha had been the mayor of Fool’s Gold for longer than Madeline had been alive. She was, in fact, California’s longest serving mayor. She was much loved, warm, caring and had a way of knowing things that no one had ever been able to explain. Madeline had always liked her. She found her a little scary, but she liked her.

“Do you have a minute?” the mayor asked, already walking into the small office and taking a seat.

“Of course.”

Madeline was a little relieved when Dellina Ridge, Fool’s Gold’s event planner, followed the mayor into her office and offered a reassuring smile. Dellina was a good friend. If something bad was about to happen, not only would Dellina have warned her but she would have offered moral support and brownies.

“As you know,” Mayor Marsha began when they were all seated, “the holidays are a busy time here in town.”

Madeline nodded. Fool’s Gold loved to celebrate in every way possible. From mid-November until after the first of the year, there was always something going on. Lucky for her, it was an especially slow time at Paper Moon, which meant she got to enjoy everything going on around her.

The rhythm of a bridal shop was different from regular retail. Come January second, when a lot of stores slowed down, she would be juggling newly engaged brides-to-be. Many a proposal would be made on either Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve. But that wasn't why the mayor was here.

Mayor Marsha glanced at Dellina, who scooted to the front of her chair and gave another smile.

"It's me," Dellina admitted, sounding a little rueful. "I'm totally scrambling. The Hendrix family is planning a huge party on New Year's Eve, there are a dozen holiday events and three weddings, and I'm up to my eyebrows in invitations and details. I can't take on one more thing."

Madeline still wasn't sure where this was all going. "If you need me to help with something, I'm happy to," she said slowly. Of course she would be there for her friend. But why wouldn't Dellina have come to her directly? They'd known each other all their lives. Why involve the mayor?

Dellina shifted slightly. "Yes, well, it's more than my usual panicked call to come stuff goodie bags. It's a wedding."

Madeline looked between the two of them. "I don't understand," she admitted.

"There's going to be a wedding the Saturday after Christmas," the mayor said happily. "You know how I love a wedding. This will be a small affair. Right now the guest list is at forty. I suspect it will grow a little, but shouldn't be more than fifty or fifty-five people. There's no location issue—everything will be at the bride's brother's house. The catering is taken care of."

"Ana Raquel is handling that," Dellina added. "She had a cancellation and can fit in the wedding. So it's just the basic details. Dress, invitations, decorations. I know it's a lot to ask..." Her friend shook her head. "I'm sorry. We haven't asked yet, have we?"

Mayor Marsha patted Dellina's hand. "I'll do the asking, dear. Madeline, your town needs you to plan a wedding. Are you up for it?"

"I don't know," Madeline admitted. "I've never done anything like that before. I work with brides and we talk details, but to take a wedding from start to finish, even a small one, would be challenging."

Which was as close to saying no as she was going to get, she thought as the mayor continued to look at her with that steady, supportive You'll do what I say because I have powers and you've never once refused me anything look that was both famous and inescapable.

"I have a master list and I'd be happy to help," Dellina added. "I'm sorry to put you in this position."

"Don't apologize," Mayor Marsha said firmly. "I'm to blame. When I spoke with Dellina earlier today and she said she wasn't available, we brainstormed who we could ask. You're the one we both thought of."

Madeline got the subtext of the message. Dellina had been as trapped as she was now. When Mayor Marsha wanted something done, she was unstoppable. Which meant saying no wasn't an option.

Planning a wedding in seven weeks, over the holidays, when she'd never done much more than be a bridesmaid and sell wedding dresses? Were they crazy?

"Sure," she said easily. "I'm in." She frowned as she realized she didn't know anyone who had recently gotten engaged, or even who was planning a holiday wedding. "Oh, who's getting married?"

"Ginger Blaze."

The name meant nothing. "She's not local. Is her fiancé..."

Madeline felt her heart stop. Physically stop. There had been steady beating, then nothing. That was followed by a distinct popping sound in her ears along with panic. Cold, slimy, I-can't-breathe panic.

"Blaze," she whispered. Quite the trick what with her heart stopped and her lungs not working. "Blaze as in Jonny Blaze?"

Mayor Marsha nodded. "Ginger is his younger sister. I believe she lives in San Francisco. She's in a PhD program. Something with biology or genetics. Mr. Blaze wasn't clear. However, he asked

me to help him find someone to plan the wedding with him. That's when I approached Dellina. You know the rest, my dear."

Jonny Blaze? The tall, handsome action-movie star who had recently moved to a ranch outside of town? The man who had a body like a god and a smile that reduced perfectly intelligent, articulate women to puddles? Jonny Blaze, who was, unbeknownst to him, of course, her movie-star boyfriend?

No. She couldn't. She had a mad crush on him. Every time she'd seen him in town, she'd stared like an idiot. She'd babbled and he hadn't been closer than twenty-five feet. She couldn't imagine being next to him, let alone working with him.

I can't. There. She'd said it. Or at least thought it. Which was practically the same thing. She couldn't.

"From what I can tell, Mr. Blaze is a very nice man," the mayor was saying. "He wants to fit in. Be a part of the community. As you know, we take the well-being of our citizens very seriously. Mr. Blaze needs a refuge from the trappings of his career and we can provide that. The quiet, everyday kind of life he craves."

"The wedding is going to be close friends and family," Dellina added. "It's small and intimate. I swear, if I had an extra second, I'd take it on."

"You're already doing too much," Madeline said, pleased she could speak. "I know you. You're running in forty-five directions."

If it were anyone else, she thought frantically. But it wasn't and saying no had never been an option.

She drew in a breath and told herself she was strong. She was mature. At the very least, she could keep from squealing in his presence.

"I'm happy to help," she said.

"Excellent." Mayor Marsha nodded. "You're meeting with him in an hour."

Of course she was, Madeline thought, not even surprised. Because that was how the mayor got things done. A well-planned ambush followed by a lack of time to come to one's senses.

An hour. Not nearly enough time to lose five pounds, have a makeover and become glamorous and sophisticated. Why, oh, why hadn't she learned French? Or aikido? Anything that would make her interesting for Jonny Blaze? She briefly wondered if aikido was the martial arts training or the dog breed, then sighed. Too late to worry about that now. As it was, she was going to be stuck being herself.

"I'm going to tell him I don't have any experience with planning a wedding," she said. "I need to be honest about that."

The mayor smiled. "I would expect no less, my dear."

\* \* \*

Jonny Blaze had traveled all over the world. He was used to the insular world of a movie set and the contrast of whatever town they were in during filming. He'd lived in tents, high-rises and, for six gut-churning weeks, on a fishing boat. But none of that had prepared him for the quirky, busy, oddly happy place that was Fool's Gold.

Everyone here was...nice. They said hello to each other, knew each other's kids' names and, as far as he could tell, celebrated every known holiday and a few he'd never heard of. He'd been looking for a place to hide and instead he'd found himself in an unusual town that he couldn't seem to ignore, but also couldn't bring himself to embrace. It was an unexpected conundrum.

He stepped into Brew-haha for his two o'clock meeting. The barista greeted him by name and asked if he wanted his usual. Had he been anywhere else, he would have known she'd remembered his usual because of his movie-star status. Except in Fool's Gold, the barista treated everyone exactly the same. An experience so refreshing that coming to the local coffee shop became one of his favorite things to do when he was in town.

He paid for his order, then went to wait. Because this wasn't LA where a starstruck employee raced to get him his coffee. He had a turn, just like everyone else.

Jonny had grown up normal, so he'd been unprepared for how starring in action movies would change everything about his life. Now, over a decade later, he was used to slipping into restaurants through a back door and knowing paparazzi were going to be lurking around every corner. He'd tried living in a secure condo, then had bought the obligatory walled estate, high in the Hollywood Hills. When that didn't keep out the unwelcome, he'd gone looking for something better.

He'd found it about twenty-five miles outside of Fool's Gold, California, on a cattle ranch with a rambling old house and a barn that he'd converted to a shop and workout room. He was close enough to town that he could get his normal fix at Brew-haha, but far enough away that he could revel in the quiet.

He'd sold the cattle to another rancher and had leased the grazing rights to the same guy. Now, as Jonny took his coffee, he grinned. Yup, he had grazing rights. What could be more middle America than that?

He turned his attention to the half-dozen tables at the small coffee shop. He was supposed to be meeting a Madeline Krug. The mayor had recommended her to help him plan his sister's wedding.

He didn't see anyone fitting her description, so he claimed one of the two empty tables. He figured she would find him when she arrived.

The store had big windows and shelves on the walls. There were a few items for sale, along with some harvest decorations. He saw pumpkins and a couple of ceramic turkeys. On one of the windowsills was a small replica of the Bluenose, a famous racing and fishing schooner from Nova Scotia.

As he sipped his latte, he tried to recall how, exactly, the mayor had found out about his sister. He didn't remember mentioning Ginger or her engagement, but he must have because it wasn't public knowledge. Maybe his friend Shep had said something. All he knew for sure was one minute he and the mayor had been talking about the upcoming Thanksgiving parade and the next she'd been asking about Ginger's wedding. He'd admitted he was lost when it came to planning, and before he'd known it, the mayor had offered to find someone who could help. Not two hours later, she'd set up this meeting.

The door to Brew-haha opened and a woman entered. She was in her late twenties, with shoulder-length blond hair and blue eyes. She looked slightly rushed and a little frazzled. Not nervous, he thought as he studied her. More determined, with a little unsure thrown in.

Her gaze landed on him. Instantly her shoulders squared and her chin went up. Madeline, he thought, recognizing her from the mayor's description and appreciating how she looked more resigned than thrilled. He supposed most people wanted to be liked. He did, too, but for the right reasons. Anyone who was impressed the second they met him left him looking for the closest exit. Because they weren't there for him. They were there for Jonny Blaze, Action Star. Wariness was a lot more honest than gushing, and in his world, honesty was a sought-after commodity.

Madeline crossed the small café and stopped by his table. Her gaze was direct as she offered him a slight smile. "Mr. Blaze, I'm Madeline Krug. Mayor Marsha said you'd be expecting me."

"Jonny," he said easily, rising and pulling out a chair for her. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

She sat down and opened a large black tote. From inside, she pulled out a pad of notepaper and a pen. After placing both on the table, she drew in a breath and turned her attention to him.

"I understand your sister is getting married."

"So she tells me." He smiled.

Madeline stiffened, then drew in a breath. "December 26? The Saturday after Christmas?"

He nodded.

“All right. So here’s the thing. I work at Paper Moon. It’s a bridal gown store. I’m the manager there. I work with brides every day. I handle the details of their gowns, veils and often shoes. I outfit the wedding party. Sometimes I have to act as referee between various family members. Grandma doesn’t always approve of the bride’s choice.”

He’d seen enough reality TV to know that was true. But he had a feeling Madeline hadn’t yet gotten to the point of their conversation. She had something to say and he was going to be patient until she got it out.

She looked at her blank pad of paper, then back at him. “I’m not a professional wedding coordinator. I’m not even an amateur one. I’ve seen a lot of weddings and my friend Dellina, who’s an actual event planner, has offered to give me direction, but this isn’t what I do for a living. Having said that, I’m happy to help you with this, if you’d like. Or you can bring in someone from Los Angeles or wherever. It’s totally up to you.”

Jonny couldn’t remember the last time someone told him she couldn’t do the job. Everyone generally overpromised and underdelivered. It was a fact of life. They wanted his money or the prestige of saying they worked for him. The former made sense. People had to make a living. But the latter genuinely flummoxed him. The fame might screw up his life, but it wasn’t real. It was imposed on him. Underneath the big name on the billboard, he was just a guy doing a job. A really weird job, but still. There was nothing magical about his abilities. He wasn’t saving the world. He was jumping out of planes and punching fake bad guys. Not the stuff of legends.

None of which was Madeline’s problem, he thought, looking at her.

She was pretty enough. Her makeup was light and he would guess none of her features had been altered by the careful skill of a plastic surgeon. She was dressed in a simple black dress. The style was plain and didn’t really suit her. No doubt she picked her clothes to blend in, rather than stand out. In her line of work, the bride would be the star.

“Just to confirm,” he said, picking up his latte, “you’ve never planned a wedding. You’re open to having me hire someone else, but if I need your help, you’ll be there.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. Ginger and I don’t have any family, but her fiancé does. He’ll have ten or twelve relatives attending. The rest of the guests will be Ginger’s and Oliver’s friends. As of my last conversation with my sister, we’re at forty-four guests.”

Madeline picked up her pen, then put it down. “Is this conversation or information?”

He thought about his sister. She was sweet and funny and, by far, the smartest person he knew. She wanted a small, quiet celebration. Simple. Ordinary. She would hate anything big or flashy. A wedding planner from LA would want to design an extravaganza. Something that could make her career. Jonny wanted Ginger to be happy. Nothing else.

Madeline Krug, wedding-gown store manager of Fool’s Gold, California, would understand what Ginger wanted. And she had no portfolio to build at Ginger’s expense.

“Information,” he said firmly. “I want you to help me with my sister’s wedding.”

\* \* \*

Madeline resisted the need to ask the obvious question. Why would anyone want her to plan a wedding? Although it was possible the answer would be clear to someone who wasn’t suffering from being so incredibly close to Jonny Blaze.

She was pleased that she was able to breathe. And her heart seemed to be working fine. Maybe it was because the moment was so surreal. Here she was in the town where she’d grown up, sitting across from Jonny Blaze.

Up close he was just as handsome as he was on-screen. His eyes were a beautiful shade of deep green and his hair was glossy and dark. She wondered if that was his natural color, because it had been light brown, blond and red for various roles.

He was broad-shouldered, with muscles. Thin, but not skinny. When he spoke, he sounded incredibly normal. She simply couldn't reconcile what was happening, although she was going to try to go with it. The alternative was to run screaming into the street and that didn't look attractive on anyone.

"What are you thinking?" he asked unexpectedly.

Madeline blinked. No way she could answer that question. Not directly at least.

"That you're a regular person."

He flashed her another smile. "Thanks for noticing. Some people don't."

"How strange. To go through life with people thinking they know you when they don't," she said without thinking. "It must be both good and bad."

"It is." He sipped his latte. "We should talk about your fee."

Madeline felt her eyes widen. "What? Fee? No. You're not paying me. This isn't a job. Mayor Marsha asked me to help out and I'm happy to."

He put down the drink and leaned toward her. He was so close she could see all the colors of green and gold in his irises. It was mesmerizing. As was he.

"You can't do this for nothing," he told her.

"Why not?"

She tried to control her breathing so she wouldn't start hyperventilating. The man was impossibly handsome. The line of his jaw, the shape of his mouth. She could sit here and shiver and stare all day long.

"You're doing a job."

"I'm helping out a fellow citizen. There's a difference." She drew in a slow breath. "I'm not doing this because you're Jonny Blaze. I'm doing this because you live here." She shrugged. "The store is quiet this time of year and I'm looking forward to seeing a wedding through from start to finish. Normally all I get to deal with is the wedding gown."

He didn't look convinced, but that didn't matter. There was no way he was going to pay her. That was just icky.

"Tell you what," she said with a grin. "You figure out what you think is a fair amount to pay me and then you can donate that amount to HERO—our local search and rescue program."

He studied her as if she weren't anything he'd encountered before. "You're a little strange."

"Just like the town?"

"Yes, and equally unexpected." He nodded slowly. "All right, Madeline. I accept your offer to help and I will make a generous contribution to your favorite charity."

"Deal. Now I should probably talk to your sister to get her thoughts about what we're doing."

"Good idea."

He gave her Ginger's email address and cell number.

"Set up a time to talk. If she's not in the lab, she's studying or working on her dissertation."

"Okay. I'll email her as soon as I get back to the office. Once she and I have spoken, I'll have a more clear idea of what she wants. Then I'll put some ideas together and you and I can talk about them."

"Great. I appreciate you helping me. I want Ginger to have the wedding of her dreams."

"Then we'll make that happen."

They both rose. She held out her hand to shake, realizing a half second too late that it might be a mistake. He took her hand in his and they shook. People did it thousands of times a day. Maybe millions.

But she'd never done it with Jonny Blaze, so was unprepared for the hot, melty sparks that erupted all over her body. Or the way her chest got tight and her thighs tingled.

Lightning, she thought with amazement. The lightning her mother had always told her about. The lightning that meant the women in her family had found the one.

No, she told herself firmly as she pulled back her hand. Not lightning. Star power. There was a very big difference and she would do well to remember that.

## TWO

JONNY PARKED HIS SUV near the lake and walked the rest of the way into town for his meeting with Madeline. He found that when he was in Fool's Gold, he liked being out and walking around with everyone. The air was cool—they'd already had the first snowfall of the season. People were bundled up with scarves and jackets, but the extra layers and chill didn't keep them from greeting each other.

He'd been smiled at and wished a good day more times than he could count. It was nice. Regular. At least out here. In LA everyone would be driving, even if they only had to go three blocks, and in New York, each person was in his or her own personal bubble. He didn't have to worry about paparazzi. They'd shown up for about two days after he'd moved here. But once they'd realized there was nothing to report, they'd left him alone. Which was exactly how he liked it.

He'd spoken to his sister that morning. She'd had a good conversation with Madeline and was excited about her upcoming wedding.

He'd wondered if Ginger would ask Madeline about her credentials, but his sister had only raved about how Madeline understood exactly what she wanted. For his part, he needed a local connection because he wanted to use vendors from the area. While flying in someone from LA might be easier, working with Madeline gave him more control.

Ginger's wedding was important to him. Since their dad had died nearly a decade before, it had been Jonny and his sister. They looked out for each other. Seeing her get married would be great. He liked her fiancé. Oliver was a good guy. Just as smart and focused as Ginger. They did well together.

He crossed the street, heading for Paper Moon. He was meeting Madeline in her store. As he turned a corner, a woman walked up to him. She was a tall, attractive redhead.

"You're Jonny Blaze," she said as she stopped next to him. "I've been looking for you."

Talk about the inevitable, he thought, wondering if he had a pen with him. While it had taken longer here than most places, him being recognized and stopped was a part of celebrity life. Mostly he was fine with being asked for an autograph or picture even when he was between movies or publicity tours, like now. Because his fans didn't care if he was working or simply enjoying a few weeks off.

He glanced at the woman's left hand and saw a wedding band. Hopefully that meant she wasn't going to come on to him. Although it didn't always.

The fame thing was complicated. He had to admit, there were times when he liked not having to wait in line or always being able to get a table at a popular restaurant. But the downside could be dark, and for the most part he preferred to live privately.

"I'm Felicia Boylan," the woman continued. "I run the festivals here in town."

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, as well." She offered him a quick smile. "We have a parade in town on Thanksgiving morning. Will you be here for the holiday?"

"I will." Ginger was going to be spending it with Oliver's family, so he was on his own.

For a second he worried this Felicia woman was inviting him to dinner. Not that he wouldn't enjoy some company, but he wasn't interested in hanging out with people he didn't know. Then the comment about her job, along with the parade, clicked into place and he got it.

She wanted him to be the grand marshal. He wondered who had gotten bumped when Felicia had found out he'd moved to the area. And while he appreciated the offer, he wasn't exactly a parade kind of guy. He would let her down gently, he told himself. No hard feelings and all that.

"Excellent. I heard you had a classic car. A 1956 Cadillac convertible. An El Dorado, I believe." Her stare was intense, as if she wanted to be sure she got all her facts right.

"That's right," he said slowly.

"And it's red?"

He nodded.

The smile returned. “Perfect. I was hoping we could borrow it for the parade. The vehicle Mayor Marsha normally uses isn’t working and it appears the parts won’t arrive in time. I was hoping your car could be the backup. We have insurance. I would personally watch over your car. So can we borrow it for the parade?”

The car was in mint condition with white leather interior. He loved that car. But what he couldn’t wrap his mind around was the fact that Felicia wanted *it*, rather than *him*, in the parade.

“You want to borrow my car,” he confirmed.

“Yes. For the parade.” She drew her eyebrows together. “You do know what a parade is, don’t you? If not, I’m happy to explain.”

“I have a basic idea of what’s involved.” The car. Huh. He never would have guessed that. “Okay. You’re welcome to my car.”

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch to make arrangements.”

With that, she hurried away. Jonny stared after her, then shook his head. He was the one who’d wanted to be treated like everyone else. He should be grateful only his car was going to be in the parade.

He continued walking and saw Paper Moon up ahead. The big front windows displayed wedding gowns along with shoes and veils. When he stepped into the store, he paused to glance around.

A few years ago he’d dated a set designer. From her he’d learned how seemingly insignificant details could set the mood or ruin the moment. That a misplaced lamp could produce awkward shadows and that furniture created movement.

Now he took in the high ceilings, the plush furniture, the elegant armoires and shelves. Everything directed the eye toward a kind of dais placed in front of a half circle of ten-foot-high mirrors. He would guess that customers stepped up in front of those mirrors and immediately became the center of attention. Practice for the spotlight of the big day, he thought.

To his left were racks of wedding gowns. An open doorway led to another room, also filled with dresses, but they were for the bridesmaids, he would guess.

“Jonny.”

He turned and saw Madeline approaching. She was still dressed in black—this time a sweater and slim pants. Her hair was wavy, her makeup simple. She looked polished and capable. Reassuring, he thought. Brides would like that.

“Thanks for coming here,” she said as she stopped in front of him. Humor brightened her blue eyes. “All this girlie stuff making you sweat?”

He chuckled. “Not even close. You forget, in my job I have to wear makeup.”

“That’s right. Then I won’t feel guilty for asking you to visit my office.”

“Don’t. I like coming into town and this gave me an excuse.” He looked at the dresses. “They’re like costumes. A woman puts them on and becomes someone else for the day.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’re right. It is a costume for a rite of passage.” She tilted her head as she smiled at him. “Although if I’m doing my job right, instead of becoming someone else, she becomes a better version of herself.”

“Good for you.”

She was smart, he thought. Easy to talk to. Both of which would be an asset in her career. She would have to get along with a lot of different types of people. Bend to them, find out what they wanted and make it happen.

It had been a long time since that had been his problem. Mostly people did what he wanted. More often than not, they anticipated his needs. After a while, it was easy to forget how to be normal, which was the reason he didn’t have a personal assistant. One was always hired for him when he was filming, but the rest of the time, he made himself deal with stuff like grocery shopping and laundry.

“My office is this way.” She pointed to a narrow hallway, then turned to lead the way.

He followed, his gaze dropping to the sway of her hips. As she moved, he found himself intrigued by the curve of her ass and the length of her legs. As he couldn't remember the last time he'd been even slightly tempted, he enjoyed the sensation of waking arousal.

On the bright side, that part of him wasn't dead. Something to remember when the nights got long.

Her office was small and utilitarian. No window—just a few file cabinets, a battered desk, her chair and two others for visitors. A plastic palm tree nestled close to pictures of an older couple, along with a man in his midforties. There was also a younger woman close to twenty. A younger sister, he would guess. And the man?

So much for his brief moment of fantasy, he thought as he pointed to the photos.

“Your husband?”

She turned, then shook her head. “I'm not married. That's my brother and his daughter, Jasmine. Those are my parents.”

All good news, he thought. “Nice family.”

“Thanks.”

He settled in one of the visitor chairs. “How long have you owned the store?”

“What? I don't. I'm a partner. Isabel Hendrix owns most of it. She bought it from her parents a couple of years ago. It's been in her family over fifty years. Paper Moon is kind of a Fool's Gold tradition.” Her voice turned wistful. “Nearly every little girl grows up imagining buying her dress here.”

She smiled. “Luckily most of them end up doing just that. The other half of the business is women's clothing. A lot of regional designers who haven't been discovered yet. Isabel offered me a small percentage of the business to be paid out over several years. While I appreciate that, I'm putting in part of my salary to increase my ownership.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Which is way more than you wanted to know. Sorry.”

“Don't apologize. It's interesting. You're ambitious.”

“In my tiny way, yes. I also want to earn my way in.”

He liked that. Too many people wanted things given to them. He could appreciate that quirks of fate and just plain dumb luck could change everything. He was proof of that.

“That's why I'm excited about helping you with Ginger's wedding,” she added. “It's a chance to learn something new.”

\* \* \*

Madeline couldn't tell if she sounded reasonably intelligent or had been reduced to babbling. Being this close to Jonny Blaze was still difficult. From a distance, she was able to maintain a clear line of thought. But when he was just on the other side of her small desk, well, her brain had other things on its mind.

It wasn't just that he was good-looking. In reality Fool's Gold had more than its share of handsome men wandering around. But he was different. She didn't know if it was the movie-star thing or a personality flaw or what. Her friend Felicia had once talked about the sociological aspects of hierarchy in the village. Something about having the biggest head.

No, that wasn't right. The most important person. But there was also something about a big head. Anyway, she would need to go talk to Felicia and get it figured out. She was pretty sure the theory would help her act more normal around Jonny Blaze.

Now she forced herself to remember why he was here—which wasn't to fill her afternoon with eye-candy moments. There was a wedding to organize and she was responsible for that.

“I spoke to Ginger,” she said.

“She mentioned that. She liked you.”

The unexpected comment momentarily flustered her. “I liked her, too. She's really nice. And excited about the wedding.” Also dealing with school and the holidays and everything else. Just

listening to all Ginger had going on had exhausted Madeline. “I made notes during our call. She confirmed what you said at our previous meeting. She wants a small, intimate, low-key wedding. The guest list is forty-four people and she swears it’s not going to get any bigger.”

“However big she wants it is fine with me,” Jonny said. “This is about Ginger and Oliver. She’s my sister and what makes her happy, makes me happy.”

A not uncommon sentiment from a big brother, yet nice to hear.

“The wedding is going to be at your ranch?” Madeline asked, checking her notes. “There’s a barn?”

The lazy smile returned. “It’s nicer than it sounds. The barn has been converted into a big, open space. We’ll be able to fit in tables and decorations.”

“What do you use it for?”

“I haven’t decided. I knew I didn’t need a place to house livestock.”

“No desire to raise horses and cows?”

“Not this week. You’ll probably want to come take a look at it.”

Go to his house? Or his barn, but still. They were on the same property. She hoped she looked normal as she nodded and made a note. “That’s a good idea. We can discuss decorations and table linens. I’ve already reserved the tables and chairs. I was worried they would all be set aside for other events. I wasn’t sure if you had enough dishes and glasses, so I reserved those, as well.”

“Good thinking.” Concern drew his brows together. “I hadn’t realized there was so much to organize. I’m glad we’re working on this together.”

His words made her tingle all over. Star power, she told herself. Nothing more than star power.

\* \* \*

Madeline wrapped up her meeting with Jonny, then collected her handbag and walked toward the other side of the store. While wedding gowns would always be a part of Paper Moon, the retail clothing addition was doing well. Madeline found Isabel sorting through a shipment of handbags.

Her business partner, a tall, curvy blonde, smiled. “Is it time for lunch? Thank goodness. This has been one of those mornings. Only half of what I ordered got delivered and there was nearly a fistfight between two tourists who wanted the same jacket in the same size. I was afraid I was going to have to call for backup.”

“You know where to find me,” Madeline told her. “Rosalind is here most days, too. Between the three of us, we should be able to wrestle any unruly shopper into submission.”

Isabel laughed. “Thank you for that. I feel better.”

The words were appropriate, but there was something about the way Isabel said them. “Are you okay?”

“What? Of course. I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure.” There was something, Madeline thought, studying her friend. She just couldn’t figure out what.

“You’re feeling okay?” she asked.

Isabel had recently announced she was pregnant. As far as Madeline knew, everything was progressing normally.

Isabel put a hand on her belly. “Everything is going along as it should,” she said firmly. “I’m healthy. Not to worry.” She started for the back. “Give me one second and we’ll head to Jo’s.”

Two minutes later they were walking to Jo’s Bar, where they would meet their friends for lunch. The air was crisp. The first snow had already fallen and pretty much gone away. There were still a few piles left from clearing the sidewalks, but little else. Still, plenty more was on the way. While the first few snowfalls were always exciting, by month two of shoveling, Madeline knew she would be ready for spring. Still, it would be wonderful to have a white Christmas.

They ducked into Jo's Bar. The place catered to women and was decorated with flattering paint colors, good lighting. There were plenty of healthy choices on the menu. Today the TVs were tuned to either a shopping channel or a show on HGTV.

Madeline saw that Shelby and Destiny had already claimed a table. She waved at her friends, then led the way over.

"Hey, you," Shelby said, coming to her feet and hugging Madeline. She greeted Isabel, then moved so Madeline could say hi to a more-pregnant-by-the-day Destiny.

"You're glowing," Madeline said with a laugh. "And glowing. Isabel, this is in your future."

"If only," Isabel said with a sigh. "I'll never look that good when I'm six months along."

"Don't be too nice to me," Destiny told them. "I'm very hormonal these days. I'll start crying."

"We don't want that," Shelby, a petite blonde, told her teasingly.

The two women smiled at each other. While Shelby and Madeline were close, Shelby and Destiny were sisters-in-law. Destiny had married Shelby's brother—former Olympic skier Kipling Gilmore—the previous summer. No one had known they were even seeing each other until the surprise wedding. Talk about keeping a secret.

Something Madeline was finally experiencing herself, she thought happily. Not that working for Jonny Blaze was as exciting as an illicit romance, but still. She knew that she was going to have to tell Isabel—what with her having to be gone from the shop from time to time. But that was for later. Right now she was keeping the information to herself. Mostly because she and Jonny hadn't discussed if it was public or not. Until she confirmed that he was okay with her mentioning it to her business partner, she wasn't saying a word.

The door opened and Patience, Taryn and Consuelo walked in. Or rather Taryn and Consuelo walked. Patience waddled, with her second child due the first week of January. The three women headed to their table.

Madeline loved her lunches out with her friends. The number and faces were always changing, but they had friendship in common. Today's group was eclectic, as always. Patience owned Brew-haha, the local coffee shop in town, Phoebe was a recent transplant from LA who was now a rancher's wife, Taryn ran a PR firm and Consuelo was an instructor at the bodyguard school.

Isabel looked at Taryn and shook her head. "I see you're back to your skinny self. Didn't you just have a baby last Tuesday?"

"I had Bryce in July," the violet-eyed brunette said with a grimace. "And I've been sweating in the gym every day for the past four months. I've had to lift weights. It's awful. So you don't get to be mad at me. I've earned my way back into my clothes."

Isabel stuck out her tongue and the rest of the women laughed.

"It feels good to be back to where I was," Taryn said.

Destiny rested her hand on her growing belly. "I look forward to it."

"Sing it, sister," Patience said.

Madeline was sure most women would agree with them, but she had to admit to a little disappointment. It seemed to her that having a baby should be transformative. That you shouldn't just slip back into your old life. Although she doubted carrying around an extra five or ten pounds was the right way to mark the occasion. She just knew that if she was lucky enough to fall in love and get married and have kids, she wanted the experience to change her.

Jo came by and took their orders. Conversation flowed easily. Phoebe mentioned hearing from Maya and Del, who were in China. That was followed by everyone admitting they had no idea how the Chinese celebrated the holidays, or if they did at all.

As people talked, Madeline became aware of Isabel fidgeting in her seat. She leaned close to her business partner.

"I know I keep asking this, but are you okay?"

Isabel surprised her by hugging her. "You're a good person, you know that, right?"

Madeline studied her. “Are you crying?”

“What Destiny has is contagious.” Isabel cleared her throat, then sighed. “I have an announcement.”

The table quieted. Isabel looked at them all. “I’m pregnant.”

Consuelo frowned. “Did you hit your head? Do you have a concussion? We all know you’re pregnant. If you hadn’t told me, I’d still know. Ford tells me every single day. If I didn’t like you so much, I would kill him because he’s annoying.”

A statement that from anyone else might be cause for alarm, but was exactly how Consuelo thought and talked.

Isabel seemed to brace herself. “I didn’t hit my head. It’s just... I had my ultrasound and...” She held up her hand. “I’m fine. I’m doing well. Too well. Because... I’m having triplets.”

There was a moment of silence followed by loud cheers and calls of congratulations.

Madeline took in the news. She knew Isabel’s husband, Ford, had triplet sisters, so it wasn’t a complete surprise that she would be having multiples. It was just, well, Madeline had thought they were friends. That working together had brought them closer. Even though she’d asked, Isabel hadn’t told her the news privately.

Madeline reminded herself that the information was Isabel’s to share and she shouldn’t take the slight personally. It was just—

“Don’t be mad,” Isabel whispered. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Okay,” Madeline said slowly, still not sure why.

“It’s just... I was scared. I’m going to need you so much and it’s not fair, but without you, I can’t keep the business going.”

Madeline hugged her. “You’re an idiot.”

“I know.”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“You swear?”

“Try to get me to stop. I love you.”

“I love you, too. You’re the best business partner ever.”

Madeline laughed. “You say that like it’s news.”

\* \* \*

While the rest of the country seemed to jump from Halloween to Christmas, in Fool’s Gold the tradition of giving thanks was embraced. Jonny saw gourds and straw baskets, every form of turkey from paper to ceramic. There were harvest garlands and fall-colored bunting and plenty of pilgrims. Hokey but nice.

He wasn’t sure how the transition to Christmas was going to happen, but it would have to be nearly an overnight thing. There was a town Christmas tree lighting scheduled this coming Saturday, only two days after Thanksgiving.

He crossed the street and headed into Paper Moon. He could see Madeline up on the dais, with a bride. The young woman was maybe twenty, with brown hair and glasses. She reminded him a little of Ginger, with her earnest expression.

The dress had a big skirt, like something a Disney princess would wear. It suited her youth, he thought, then held in a grin. Next thing he knew he would be discussing makeup and shoes. Talk about a way to frighten off guy friends. His buddy Shep would sure have something to say about any discussion that girlie. For now, Jonny was safe. Shep was on loan to the search and rescue program in Yosemite and wouldn’t be back until after the holidays.

A tall, blonde woman walked up to him. She studied him for a second, as if trying to place him. He saw the exact moment she realized who he was. To her credit, she barely blinked.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “I’m Isabel Hendrix. May I help you?”

Now it was his turn to be startled. If the woman knew who he was, why didn't she know why he was here? He glanced from her to Madeline, who was hugging the young bride. The girl stepped off the dais and headed for the dressing room. Madeline followed her down the stairs, then walked over to join them.

"Hi," she said. "Did we have an appointment?"

A polite way of pointing out he was interrupting her workday. She stood up for herself. He liked that.

"I had a couple of ideas I wanted to talk to you about. When you have a free moment."

"Sure. I'll be about ten minutes, if you want to wait."

"Your office?"

Isabel glanced between them. "You two obviously know what you're doing. I'll head back to my side of the store."

She gave Madeline a look that clearly stated they would be talking later.

The promised ten minutes later, Madeline joined him. "How can I help you?" she asked as she settled behind her desk.

"You didn't tell her."

"What?"

"Your business partner. You didn't say you were working with me."

She shifted in her seat, then waved a hand. "I didn't know if I should, so I erred on the side of discretion. This is your private business. I don't talk about my brides with anyone. Not in any detail. I might ask for opinions on a dress or get suggestions, but what happens here is personal. Planning a wedding falls under the same category."

He could appreciate someone who respected privacy. "You can tell your business partner and anyone you'd like that you're helping me."

"Good, because I'll have to say something what with you showing up here and all."

"Should I have worn a disguise?"

"Maybe a fedora."

He chuckled. "Not sure I own one of those."

Madeline was dressed in her usual black, with her hair pulled back. She had on red lipstick. It was kind of sexy and, when combined with the prim cut of her blouse, gave her that naughty librarian look. He'd always been a sucker for librarians.

"You wanted to talk about the wedding?" she asked.

"Ice sculptures."

"Excuse me?"

"I was thinking ice sculptures to line the main driveway to the house and the walkway to the barn. Flowers in vases, maybe a few snowflakes for the holiday season. Just to make it more festive."

Madeline considered his words. "I never would have thought of them, but sure. I can run the idea past Ginger. They'd add a nice touch. Also give some visual interest when people looked outside. Would you light them?"

"Of course."

"That could be really pretty." She pulled out a folder and made some notes. "I'm putting together information to email her tonight. I'll include this. And while I have you here, if you have the time, I have a couple of things I'd like you to look at."

"Sure thing."

It was nearly noon. He thought about asking if she wanted to have lunch with him. Because he enjoyed Madeline's company. Plus, the whole red-lip, buttoned-collar thing was working for him.

But then what? Getting involved with him was a nightmare. Someone always leaked the information to a tabloid and then it went to hell. In a town like Fool's Gold, there weren't going to

be any secrets. Someone was bound to know someone who knew a guy who made his living taking pictures.

Jonny had been down that road before and it never ended well. He knew he was lucky. He made a lot of money at a job he really liked. It had allowed him to take care of his sister. But there was a price for fame, and sometimes it was one he didn't want to have to pay.

She handed over several sheets of paper. "Catering ideas. I've been talking to Ana Raquel and I've marked her suggestions for what is the most popular. One of the challenges is the time of year—we can't always get all the seasonal options."

"We can fly in any fresh produce."

Madeline's blue eyes danced with amusement. "I'm sure we can," she said gently. "Ana Raquel is more concerned about not having a holiday-based meal. People will have been eating turkey and prime rib already. It's all heavy food. Her idea was to go for something lighter. Maybe even tropical. In contrast with the weather. Grilled fish and lots of finger foods."

Something he'd never considered. He knew that Oliver's family did a traditional turkey dinner on Christmas Eve and then had prime rib on Christmas Day. Exactly what the chef had said.

"They both like Mexican food," he said slowly as he scanned the suggestions. "What about combining that with tropical?" He pointed to the Coconut Popcorn Shrimp with Mango Lime Salsa. "Like this. They'd enjoy that a lot. Ginger wants casual and easy. Food like that would mean giving her what she's looking for."

"You're a good brother," Madeline said unexpectedly.

"I want Ginger to be happy."

"But you know stuff about her. That's nice. I have an older brother. While I adore him and I know he'd be here in a heartbeat if I needed him, he has no idea if I like Mexican food or not."

"You're forgetting I took care of Ginger for a few years. I cooked and everything. I know exactly what she'll eat."

She studied him. "I'm trying to picture you in an apron."

He chuckled. "Never wore one of those."

"I'll talk to Ana Raquel and have her put together a menu combining tropical and Mexican foods. She makes a Black Bean Soup with Lime Cream that is to die for."

"Then we need that for sure."

Madeline made some notes. "It's Thanksgiving tomorrow, so let's say by Tuesday of next week? Are you going to be around?"

He nodded. "I'm driving to San Francisco this afternoon to have dinner with Ginger, then I'm heading back."

"Which means the timing is perfect." She pulled out another folder, then handed him several wedding invitations. "These are all the samples I could pull together on such short notice. If you don't like any of them, I'll get some more."

He laid out the invitations. They were all on thick card stock. Several had a picture of the couple and he immediately dismissed those. While they were nice enough, there wasn't time to get a photo taken.

"Which do you like?" he asked.

\* \* \*

Madeline knew that she was helping with his sister's wedding, but it was still strange to be asked her opinion on something like wedding invitations. Now if it had been a veil, she would have been more comfortable with her choice. Still, she stood and leaned over the desk. She'd looked at the samples as they'd come in and already had a few favorites.

"These are nice," she said, pointing. "This one is a layered package, with different cards tucked into one envelope. You can do the invitation on one card, provide information on where to stay on another, have a map to your place."

She tapped another one. “I’ll admit it. I’m a sucker for laser cutting. I think the lace effect on the paper is spectacular, but hey, I sell wedding gowns for a living. If I didn’t revel in lace, I’d be in the wrong profession.”

He laughed. “Good point.”

He considered her choices, then pulled out one that had a vintage feel and was cut to look like an unrolled scroll. “I like this one. I’ll take her all three and she can pick one tonight. I’ll get them ordered first thing.”

“Would you send me the confirmation when you do?” she asked, sitting back down and making a note on a pad of paper. “That way I can move it from the to-do list to the pending list.”

“There’s a pending list?”

“Yes, and a completed list, although, so far, that’s blank.”

“Once the menus are finalized, you can move that over.”

She sighed. “You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to that happening.” She wrote a couple more notes, then closed her folder. “That’s all I have. If you’re going to be busy with Ginger, I can order the invitations, once she chooses the one she wants.”

He was a famous guy. He had to have places to go and people to see.

“I’ll do it.” He leaned back in his chair. “Won’t you have family over the holidays?”

Madeline smiled. “I will. My parents have already flown in. As we speak, my mother is baking in my kitchen.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s wonderful. She’ll make cookies and brownies and cakes. I’ll gain five pounds and every one is worth it.”

“Nice,” he said. “How many in the family?”

“I have one brother and a niece. Robbie lost his wife to cancer several years ago.” The whole family had been devastated, Madeline thought, remembering the sadness of it all. “We’ve always been close, which I’m hoping helped them.” She shook off the memories.

“My parents are older. My mom had Robbie ten months after she got married, but she couldn’t get pregnant a second time. They’d pretty much given up when I came along.” She thought about all the stories she’d been told. “Robbie was seventeen when Mom announced she was pregnant and eighteen when I was born. He admits he was pretty horrified to realize his parents were still having sex.”

“So you were a surprise.”

“Yes, but they swear I was a good one.”

“You had to be.”

She laughed. “I’m sure I was a challenge, but my parents were always there for me. We have great traditions and I’m really close with my niece. Jasmine is only eight years younger than me. We text all the time. She’s going to die when she finds out you’re in town.”

“You haven’t told her?” He held up a hand. “Don’t answer that. Madeline, I appreciate you’re respecting my privacy, but you can tell your family. Only if you want. I don’t expect to be a topic of conversation.”

She laughed. “That would be kind of weird. Although we’re always looking for new traditions. You could be one.”

“Thanks, but no.”

She wondered what he did for his traditions. She would guess there had been years when he’d been away on movie shoots, or whatever they called it, over the holidays. Times when he couldn’t get home.

He’d mentioned that he was seeing Ginger that night, but what about tomorrow? Would he be alone for Thanksgiving? And if he was...

She dismissed the thought before it could fully form. On what planet would she be inviting Jonny Blaze to her house for anything? She couldn't begin to imagine him sitting next to her mother or father. They would have nothing to talk about. It was too strange and he might think she was interested in him. So no. He was a rich, famous guy. He had a thousand places he could go. She was crazy to think about him being lonely on Thanksgiving.

He glanced at his watch. "If there's nothing else, I'm going to get on the road."

"Drive safely," she told him.

"I will." He collected the three sample invitations, then stood. "We'll talk after the holiday?"

"Absolutely. Happy Thanksgiving."

"Same to you."

### THREE

MADLINE WAITED UNTIL Jonny left to go find Isabel. Her business partner was sorting through inventory. They'd been discussing putting a few items online to see if they could start selling across the country. Several tourists had expressed interest in having access to the clothes without having to fly back to town.

"So, that was interesting," she said as she walked into the storeroom.

Isabel looked up and smiled. "If you're trying to illustrate that keeping the information about the triplets to myself wasn't my best idea, point taken."

Madeline walked to her and touched her arm. "That wasn't it at all. Mayor Marsha came to see me and asked me to help Jonny plan his sister's wedding. Dellina's busy, and as it's only going to be a small event at his house, it seemed as if I couldn't mess it up."

Isabel winced. "Mayor Marsha asked you personally?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then you didn't have a choice." Her friend's smile turned impish. "So, you're working in close proximity to the gorgeous, muscled Jonny Blaze. Does he know about your mad crush on him?"

"No, and he doesn't need to."

"I'm not so sure about that. Is it fun? Are you having trouble breathing?"

"A little," Madeline admitted. "It's getting easier. I can go a whole three minutes without hyperventilating. Give me another two weeks and I'll last for an hour without remembering who he is."

"Is he nice?"

Madeline thought about their brief meetings and how he obviously loved his sister. "He is, and way more normal than I would have thought. He's just a regular guy."

"Seriously?"

Madeline grinned. "Okay, maybe that's too strong, but he's not that different. He doesn't act like a movie star."

"Any tingles?"

"Plenty and I'm not the least bit concerned. Look at who he is. Tingles come with the territory. They're about star power, not the man."

"You're sure? Because you're great and he'd be lucky to have you, but I'm not sure he'd be happy with a small-town girl."

"Me, either." As if, Madeline thought humorously. "Although if he wanted to tie himself in red ribbon and be waiting under my Christmas tree, I wouldn't say no."

"I doubt there are many women who would. 'Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas is Jonny Blaze.'"

Madeline laughed. "You've been reading my email." She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly noon, which meant she needed to be going.

"Are they here?" Isabel asked, following her gaze.

"I'm guessing my mom already has the oven going," Madeline said happily.

"Tell everyone hi from me and we'll see you tomorrow. About seven?"

“Whatever works for you.”

Madeline gave her business partner a hug, then returned to the wedding gown side of the store. Rosalind would work until three, then close things down for the holiday. Madeline was leaving early to go meet her family.

As they did each Thanksgiving, her mother and father, brother and niece returned to Fool’s Gold. Like migrating birds, she thought with a grin as she grabbed her handbag and called out that she was leaving.

Once she was outside, she breathed in the chilly air. It even smelled like a holiday. The streets were more crowded than usual, with people running last-minute errands. There were plenty of tourists, as well, in town for the festivities.

The holiday season bonanza of activities started with the Thanksgiving parade tomorrow afternoon. That was followed by the official tree lighting on Saturday and so on, right up through New Year’s. Madeline enjoyed all of it. She was on the committee for the Live Nativity, which was exactly how it sounded, live animals and all.

For the most part the committee work was easy enough. There were some unusual choices such as Priscilla the elephant and her pony, Reno. The only disagreement had been when someone had suggested a toy poodle stand in for the Baby Jesus. But what was life without controversy?

Not that she had to worry about her committee today. Instead, she would be spending time with her family.

She walked the ten blocks to her small house, then smiled when she saw the rental car in her driveway. Her parents had flown in from their place in Florida while her brother and niece would be arriving from O’Hare. Jasmine was a sophomore at Northwestern, while Robbie, Madeline’s brother, was a pediatrician in Saint Paul.

She ran up the three steps to her porch, then opened the front door and stepped inside.

“I’m home,” she called.

Her parents stepped out of the kitchen and hurried toward her. “My darling Maddie,” her mother said, her arms open, her smile welcoming. “How are you?”

Her dad grinned. “She looks good, Loretta. She looks good.”

Madeline was captured in their embrace. She hugged them back, letting the love wash over her.

She’d been lucky, she thought to herself. Lucky to be born into such a loving family. While she’d always known that her parents were older than her friends’, she’d been okay with that. Loretta and Joseph had nurtured her, encouraging her to believe in herself and follow her dreams. The only flaw in their plan had been how long it had taken Madeline to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

It hadn’t helped to have such a successful older brother. By the time she entered first grade, Robbie was already in medical school. But he’d always taken time to pay attention to her, and while they hadn’t grown up together, they’d been close.

Now she smiled at her parents. “How was your flight?”

“Excellent,” her father said. “Your mother fretted the whole way.”

“I didn’t fret,” Loretta said with a laugh. “I thought they were flying too slow. I couldn’t wait to get here.”

Her parents had arrived in Sacramento late the previous evening. With her dad pushing seventy-five, they preferred to wait until morning to make the drive to Fool’s Gold.

“Did you check into the hotel?” Madeline asked. “If you didn’t, you can still change your minds and stay here.”

Her mother touched her cheek. “You’re sweet to offer, but you need your space and so do we.”

Because Madeline’s house was charming, but only had two bedrooms and a single bathroom. She’d chosen it because the living area was large, as was the kitchen. But the spare room was practically closet-size.

“I’d sleep on the futon,” she pointed out.

“We’re fine at the lodge,” her father said, hugging her again. “We always run into old friends there.”

They went into the kitchen. Her mother already had peanut butter cookies in the oven and fresh coffee in the pot.

“Did you check everything?” Madeline asked. “I went over the list a couple of times and I’m pretty sure it’s all here.”

Her mother laughed. “You did an excellent job. I did check and you remembered everything.”

The Krug family had a Thanksgiving tradition. The parade, followed by dinner, followed by an open house that lasted well into the night. Friends and neighbors dropped in to visit. There were cakes and cookies and pies, along with good conversation and plenty of laughter. It was one of her favorite memories from childhood.

When her parents had moved to Florida, the tradition had been dropped. Madeline had gone to visit them for the holiday. But when she’d bought her place a couple of years ago, her parents had wanted to spend Thanksgiving in Fool’s Gold and she’d found herself hosting the annual open house.

“I brought you something,” her mother said, going to her handbag and pulling out a red box. “For Christmas.”

Madeline stared at the box and knew exactly what was inside. They were a family tradition and had been on the Christmas dinner table her entire life.

Her mother’s smile faded. “Was I wrong to bring them? Are you sad? Oh, Joseph, did we make a mistake, booking the cruise over Christmas?”

Madeline took the small box and opened it. She pulled out the cardinal salt and pepper shakers and placed them on the counter. “They’re beautiful. Thank you for bringing them to me. I’ll use them, I promise. As for you making a mistake, you didn’t. You’re going to have a good time.”

“But you’ll be by yourself.” Her mother’s brows drew together. “We worry about you.”

Because for the first time they wouldn’t be spending Christmas together. Robbie and Jasmine would be with Robbie’s in-laws and her parents had booked a holiday cruise with two other couples.

When they’d first told Madeline, she’d felt a little twinge. But then she’d reminded herself that they’d worked hard all their lives and they deserved to enjoy their retirement.

“I’ll be fine,” she told them. “I have lots of friends. You know that. The big question is which invitation to accept for dinner.” Her parents didn’t look that reassured.

She searched for something else to say—something that would reassure them. She brightened. “Besides, I’m going to be so swamped. I’m planning a wedding.”

“Who’s getting married? Why didn’t I know one of your friends had gotten engaged?”

Madeline chuckled. “Mom, you have to brace yourself. I’m not helping a friend. Do you know who Jonny Blaze is?”

“The actor?” her mother asked.

“I enjoy his movies,” her father added. “*Amish Revenge* is one of my favorites. We have the DVD.”

“He’s getting married?” Her mother shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s not him, it’s his sister.”

Madeline explained about Mayor Marsha and the request, along with the subsequent conversations. “You can’t tell anyone,” she added. “It’s a private thing.”

“Of course,” her mother said. “You’re very sweet to help him out.” Her mouth curved into a teasing smile. “Is he just as handsome in person?”

“You know it.”

Her father cleared his throat. “Loretta, do I have to worry about you?”

His wife laughed. “Hardly. Jonny Blaze is young enough to be my son.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re a beautiful woman and he’d be lucky to have you. What I want to know is how hard I have to fight to keep you.”

Their teasing warmed Madeline from the inside out. Her parents were loving, in love and just plain good people.

She worried about them because of their ages. She wasn’t ready to lose either of them. But they were both healthy and Robbie assured her they should live well into their nineties. While she would like them around forever, she would take what she could get.

A car pulled into the driveway. Her mother clapped and her father headed to the front door.

“Right on time,” Madeline said, just as excited to see the rest of her family.

The next few minutes passed in a blur of greetings and hugs as Robbie and Jasmine were welcomed into the house. Flights were discussed and the cardinal salt and pepper shakers were cooed over.

By the time all that was done, Madeline found herself in the kitchen with her niece. Jasmine pulled up a bar stool and scooped batter onto waiting cookie sheets.

“I don’t know, Maddie,” the twenty-one-year-old admitted. “Dad doesn’t say anything, but I can feel the pressure.”

“Your dad wants you to be happy.”

“He wants me to be a pediatrician.”

“Probably, but he’ll settle for you being happy.”

Because while Jasmine had said she was interested in medicine, her decision to focus on radiology was different than her initial plan to follow in her father’s footsteps. Jasmine’s mother had died of breast cancer.

Her death had changed them all. Jasmine especially. She’d decided to focus her sadness in a productive way. Something Robbie would have already guessed.

“He loves you,” Madeline pointed out. “He’ll be fine.”

Jasmine, a blue-eyed blonde like the rest of the Krug women, wrinkled her nose. “Maybe you could talk to him.”

“Maybe you could talk to him yourself.”

“Why do I have to act like an adult?”

“It builds character and you might want to have the skill later, so it’s good to practice.”

Jasmine laughed. “If you insist.”

“I do.”

Robbie walked into the kitchen. He was nearly six feet, with light brown hair that was going gray at the temples. He smiled when he spotted them talking.

“How are my two favorite girls?”

“Good,” Madeline said. “I think it’s going to snow.”

“I hope so. It’s so fun here when it snows.”

Madeline grinned at her brother. “I would think you’d get enough snow at home.”

Robbie snagged one of the cooling cookies and took a bite. “It’s different here.”

“Magical,” his daughter said.

“I don’t think I’d go that far, but close.” He turned to Madeline. “You okay with the holiday plans? You can come with Jasmine and me if you want.”

Madeline appreciated the concern for what would be her first Christmas without her family. “I’ll be fine. I’ve already talked to Mom. I have friends and plenty to keep me busy. Don’t worry.”

“Grandma Pat said it was okay,” Jasmine added. “Just so you know.”

Grandma Pat was Robbie’s mother-in-law and Jasmine’s maternal grandmother. “Tell her thank you, but I’m staying in Fool’s Gold.” She had work and a wedding to plan. There was also the slight chance she might be caught under some mistletoe with a very handsome Jonny Blaze.

\* \* \*

Around noon on Thanksgiving, Jonny drove into town for the parade. He was curious to see the festivities, not to mention cheer on his car. He wasn't sure Mayor Marsha was a 1956 El Dorado kind of gal, but who was he to judge?

He was surprised by the number of people already lining the streets. It took him a while to find parking and then he had to walk nearly a mile back to the parade route. He passed lots of families. Parents with kids in strollers and even parents with teenagers. He would have expected the older kids to head off to be with their friends, but from what he could see, they were pretty willing to stay with the old folks. A few people smiled and called out a greeting. He had a feeling that was about the day and not him, which he liked.

The temperature was brisk—probably the midthirties. Cold but not unbearable. The sky was clear, but he would swear he could smell the promise of snow. On the corner, Brew-haha had set up a kiosk with mugs of cocoa and coffee. Next to that was a food cart that sold all kinds of Thanksgiving-shaped cookies. Turkeys and pumpkins and Pilgrim hats. He got a coffee and a couple of cookies, then strolled around in the crowd.

There was plenty of conversation. He heard snippets of different discussions on everything from the favorite part of the parade to what side dishes a certain mother-in-law expected her new daughter-in-law to make. When the faint notes of music drifted toward them, the crowd went quiet, then began to cheer.

He turned with everyone else, eager to catch his first glimpse of this small-town parade.

“Oh. My. God. You're Jonny Blaze. I can't believe it. What are you doing here? Do you live here? Is it really you? Can I have an autograph and take a picture?”

It took a second for the frantic words to register. Jonny turned and saw a woman in her thirties staring at him. She was holding a toddler and there was a slightly older girl hanging on to her free hand. He knew he'd never seen her before and guessed she was a tourist in town for the long weekend.

The woman stared at him, then nodded. “It's you. I can't believe it. Mike, hurry. It's Jonny Blaze. You need to take our picture. This is amazing. Can we kiss, because wow, would I like to kiss you.”

This happened all the time. He knew exactly what to do, how to establish boundaries. He'd been doing it for years. Only in the past few weeks, he'd forgotten what it was like to have the public intruding into his life. So he wasn't prepared and in the seconds it took him to figure out what he was supposed to say—beyond “Hell, no, we can't kiss”—the woman was moving in for her picture.

“You're going to feel really foolish in a minute.”

The voice came from behind him, then a woman who had to be in her seventies pushed in front of him.

“I know what you're thinking,” she continued cheerfully. “That he's that movie star Jonny something, right? Happens all the time.” The old lady slapped him on his upper arm. “This is my no-good grandson. He can't hold a job to save his soul. My daughter is pulling her hair out, let me tell you. Now he's not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but he's learned how to clean out gutters. You have some work he could do? He's honest and he's cheap.”

The woman holding the baby took a giant step back. “You're not Jonny Blaze? And you were going to kiss me? I don't think so. Yuck.” She rolled her eyes. “Why would I want to kiss a stranger?”

*My point exactly*, Jonny thought as the woman and her family hurried away.

He turned to the old lady. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. I saw them moving in for the kill and figured you could use some help.”

“I'm usually better than that.”

She shrugged. “It's okay. Everyone gets to have an off day. I'm Gladys, by the way.”

“Jonny Blaze.”

She grinned. “Like I don't know that. Nice to meet you officially. You're very handsome.”

He laughed. “Okay, don't get scary.”

She winked. “I know things. You'd be amazed.”

“I probably would be. And then you’d dump me and break my heart.”

“Very possibly.” She eyed him speculatively. “I do have a great-niece who’s single. Actually, Nancee’s in a relationship with a no-good jerk, but does she listen?”

“They never do.”

She motioned to someone he couldn’t see. “I’m leaving you with protection, seeing as you’re woefully unprepared to take care of yourself.”

He turned and saw Madeline walking toward them. Gladys quickly explained what had happened.

Madeline turned to him. “Are you okay?”

She was genuinely concerned. He could read it in her blue eyes. Talk about strange—people didn’t look out for him, they took from him. He was expected to be the one to provide. If he needed help, he hired security.

She was dressed in a bright red coat that matched her lip gloss. A matching scarf was wrapped around her neck and she had on mittens. Nothing overtly sexy, yet he found the outfit appealing. And very Fool’s Gold.

“I’m fine,” he told her. “Just an overly zealous tourist. Gladys shut her down.”

“Gladys is good at doing that. But brace yourself. She’s going to want payback.”

“She already mentioned us sleeping together,” he said, telling himself she really had been joking.

“If only it would stop there.” Madeline glanced around. “You’re a sitting duck out like this. Come on.” She pointed down the street. “You can hang out with my family. We’re small in number, but mighty in spirit.”

He wanted to say he could take care of himself—that he wasn’t some dweeb who needed protecting. Only he liked her looking out for him. It was strange, but kind of nice. Like the town, he thought as he walked with her.

Madeline stopped in front of an older couple. Jonny remembered what she’d said about being a late-in-life surprise for her parents.

“Mom, Dad, this is Jonny Blaze. Jonny, my parents, Joseph and Loretta Krug.”

If the older Krugs were surprised, they didn’t let on. They both greeted him, then shook his hand.

“No relationship to the French Krugs,” her father said with a wink.

It took Jonny a second to make the connection. “The champagne guy,” he said.

“That’s the one.”

“I wouldn’t mind being related to a champagne baron,” a tall, younger man said.

Jonny took in the similarities between Joseph and the man standing next to him, then held out his hand. “You must be Madeline’s brother.”

“Robbie. Nice to meet you. And this is my daughter, Jasmine.”

“Hi,” the young woman said with a smile. “Wow, you really are Jonny Blaze.”

“It’s just a rumor,” he told her.

The music got louder and everyone turned toward the street. He could see a banner carried by members of the high school drill team. Behind them was his car with Mayor Marsha sitting on the open back, her feet firmly planted on the rear seat.

“She’s beautiful,” Madeline teased. “Does it hurt to see her in public like that?”

“No. Better for her to be admired by all.”

Robbie moved next to them. “We’re talking about the car, right? Not that I don’t love Mayor Marsha, but words like that would make me really uncomfortable.”

Madeline linked arms with her brother. “Don’t worry. Jonny is already spoken for. Gladys has made her play for him.”

Robbie slapped him on the back. “You’re a braver man than me.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Behind the car with the mayor was the marching band. Jonny wondered if the good mayor had thought to invest in earplugs, because the music was loud. Then he remembered this wasn't her first rodeo. She was California's longest-serving mayor and he would guess there was very little she wasn't prepared for.

After the marching band came the floats. Some were expected—like the decorated fire truck. Others surprised him. There was a giant plastic polar bear, all decked out for the holidays. Of course, that was nothing when compared with an actual live elephant, dressed like Santa.

Loretta, Madeline's mother, moved next to him. “Before you ask,” she murmured, “they keep it on with Velcro. Several women in town banded together to make the costume. The tricky part is getting it on her. Not that she doesn't cooperate. She does. But she's a big girl.”

He nodded, wondering how on earth an elephant came to be dressed as Santa in a parade. Of course, she was trailed by a pony and a goat, both in elf costumes, so hey.

Loretta leaned close. “What are your plans for dinner? Would you like to join us? Before you answer, I'll tell you that it's just family for the meal. Maddie and I have been cooking since yesterday and everything is delicious, if I do say so myself. After dinner, there's an open house. Our friends and neighbors stop by to welcome in the holiday season.”

He thought about the big, empty house waiting for him back at his ranch. He'd come to Fool's Gold looking for privacy and solitude. After having found both, he had to admit that the nights could get a little long and lonely.

“I'd like that,” he told her. “Thank you.”

She patted his arm. “Good. Friends are always welcome at our table.”

She moved back to stand next to her husband. Jonny glanced from her to the man at her side and wondered how his life would have been different if he hadn't lost his mother when Ginger was born and his father over a decade ago. Family was important. He knew that Ginger kept him grounded. When he wasn't sure what decision to make about a project, he picked the one he knew would make her proud. Without someone to love, a person didn't have an anchor.

Madeline smiled at him. “Everything okay?”

“Your mom invited me to dinner. Hope it's okay I said yes.”

Her smile was immediate and welcoming. “Brace yourself. It's loud.”

“Small in number but mighty in spirit?”

She laughed. “Exactly.”

#### **FOUR**

”MADELINE KNEW THAT in a few weeks her life would return to normal and she would look back and wonder if any of this had actually happened. But until then, she would simply go with it and tell herself that washing dishes with movie star Jonny Blaze was just one in a series of memories she would bore people with when she was eighty.

As she'd already told him twice he wasn't expected to help, she didn't bother saying it again. Instead, she passed him a clean casserole dish to dry. The dishwasher was chugging away, the leftovers were already put in the refrigerator and a final batch of sugar cookies was in the oven. The warm, sweet scent filled the kitchen, overriding the last delicious whiff of turkey and gravy.

“I'm so full,” she admitted as she reached for the china gravy boat. “I hope I still fit in my clothes tomorrow.”

“Do you get a lot of customers on Black Friday?” he asked.

“Not really. It's not a big shopping day for brides-to-be. Thanksgiving doesn't bring out the proposals. Christmas and New Year's are different, so in January I'm busy.”

“Are you their first stop?” he asked, putting the dry dish on the counter next to the others.

They'd already finished the wineglasses and serving dishes. She emptied the dishpan and rinsed it, then peeled off her gloves. She leaned against the sink.

“While it’s not all about the dress, it’s an easy thing to start looking for,” she told him. “Going to look at flowers or studying menus isn’t exactly the same. Trying on a dress gives the bride immediate feedback. She can see how she’s going to look on her wedding day. Tasting a small piece of cake isn’t the same as seeing the whole thing, life size.”

She smiled. “It’s fun to see them, all excited, flashing the ring. I guess it’s one of the last rites of passage and I enjoy being a part of that.”

Something he couldn’t possibly be interested in, she thought. But even as she thought about changing the subject, he moved a little closer, as if listening intently.

“What’s the best part?” he asked.

“I’m not sure what it is for them, but for me it’s when the bride knows she’s found the right dress. I can tell by the look on her face. Everything just feels right.”

Like this moment, she thought hazily. If only the tall, handsome man in her kitchen would step a little closer still and maybe lean in for a—

The doorbell rang. She filed her fantasy away for another time and pointed to the back door. “This is your last chance to escape,” she teased. “Otherwise, prepare to meet some of the founding families of our town. Or at least the ones I know.”

“I don’t scare easy. Lead on.”

She walked into the living room and saw that several couples had arrived at once. The next few minutes passed in a blur of introductions. Madeline was pleased that no one was overly shocked to find Jonny Blaze in her living room. Or maybe they were like her—secretly stunned, but keeping their reaction to themselves.

She went back to the kitchen to start piling goodies onto platters. There were cookies and brownies and bars of all kinds. Shelby came in and walked to the sink where she washed her hands.

“So, how’s it going?” her friend asked.

Madeline smiled. “Fine. Did you have a nice dinner?”

“Sure. Kipling and Destiny are always fun to hang out with. And I adore Starr.”

Starr was Destiny’s half sister. The teen lived with them.

Shelby dried her hands, then started adding more cookies onto platters.

“Want to talk about it?”

Madeline widened her eyes, as if confused. “Talk about what?”

Shelby put down the brownies and settled her hands on her hips. “Jonny Blaze is standing in your living room. Last I heard, you had a serious crush on him. Serious to the point that you couldn’t even look in his direction, and now he’s here?”

Madeline grinned. “I know. It’s so strange.”

“And?”

Madeline finished filling the plate, then faced her friend. “It’s all Mayor Marsha’s fault.”

“Most things are.”

She quickly explained about the wedding and how she was now spending time with the action star.

“Are you freaked?” Shelby asked.

Madeline realized Isabel had voiced the same concern. She must have really been acting strange when Jonny was nearby. “At first, but it’s getting better. He had dinner here. That was surreal. But my parents took it in stride and I pretended that I was just as calm.”

“Has he kissed you?”

The unexpected question caused Madeline to flush. “What? No. We’re working together. Besides, I’m, you know, regular. He’s Jonny Blaze.”

“I’m sure he’s just as interested in sex as the next guy.”

“Shelby, no.” Madeline glanced around to make sure no one was nearby. “It’s not like that. He would never want that from me.”

“Then he’s an idiot. You’re great.”

Because Shelby was a loyal friend. Madeline knew that she was pretty enough for regular people, but in the sphere that was Jonny’s world? Not so much.

“It’s okay. I’m getting over my crush and enjoying what I know is very one-sided sparkage. It’s nice. My own little fantasy holiday entertainment. I’m also having fun planning the wedding. It’s different. I haven’t met Ginger yet, but we talked on the phone and she’s really nice.”

“When he comes to his senses and ravishes you, I want details,” Shelby told her. “I’m in a very arid dry spell. I will live vicariously through you.”

Madeline pretended to fan herself. “I hope I have something to share.”

They both picked up plates of treats and carried them back to the living room.

In the few minutes Madeline had been in the kitchen, more people had arrived. She saw Jonny talking to a couple of the guys from CDS—or as the locals knew it, the bodyguard school. It was interesting, watching them together. Ford and Angel were both physically powerful and good-looking, but there was something compelling about Jonny. She supposed that was a lot of the reason he was successful in movies. You wanted to watch him.

“Hey.”

Madeline turned and saw Consuelo Hendrix standing next to her. “Hi.”

“Nice party.”

Madeline nodded because she was unable to speak. She knew it was shock at how her friend was dressed, and when Consuelo noticed, there was going to be ugly punishment, but still. She couldn’t help staring.

She and Consuelo had been friends for a couple of years. Nearly since the other woman had moved to Fool’s Gold. Consuelo had worked for the government, doing things that she never talked about. Despite her petite build, she was tough and dangerous. She didn’t do emotion, she moved like a prowling leopard and her idea of relaxation was to go climb a mountain.

She taught all kinds of fighting techniques at the bodyguard school, along with mixed martial arts to people in town. Her everyday wardrobe consisted of cargo pants and boots. In the summer they were worn with a tank top or T-shirt. In the winter, a light sweatshirt.

But tonight she had on a fitted black dress. Simple, really, with a scoop neck, a straight skirt and long sleeves. With it she wore thigh-high leather boots with a serious heel. The church-appropriate dress paired with very naughty boots was pure Consuelo. When placed on her perfect, athletic body, the results were incredible. And intimidating.

“What?” Consuelo demanded, her voice challenging. “You want to say it, so say it.”

“You look beautiful.”

Consuelo’s eyebrows drew together. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Madeline held out the plate. “Sugar cookie? My mom made them.”

Consuelo took one. “Don’t think you can distract me from the compliment.”

“You do look lovely.”

Consuelo groaned. “I knew it was a mistake. I told Kent, but he said that just once he wanted to see me in a dress. So what the hell, right? It’s the holidays.”

Madeline laughed. “You are incredibly strange.”

“I know.” Consuelo stepped back and then looked down at herself. “It’s not too much?”

“Like I said—you’re beautiful. Sexy, too. I’m amazed you made it to the party on time,” Madeline murmured. “I’m assuming Kent knows he’s a lucky man.”

“He does.” She glanced around at the people laughing and talking. “Who’s that guy? He looks familiar.”

Madeline didn’t have to turn around. “Jonny Blaze.” She waited for the shriek, or at least the semishriek. Consuelo was always controlled.

“Oh, right. I should have recognized him. I like his movies. He gets it right. The fighting.” Consuelo rolled her eyes. “You have no idea how many actions scenes are completely screwed up. It makes the movie or TV show impossible to enjoy. Kent says I should be more forgiving.”

“Not gonna happen?” Madeline asked with a grin.

“You know it.”

“Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

Madeline walked over to where Jonny was now talking to a couple of guys from Score, a local PR firm owned by former NFL stars. As soon as she approached, Jonny turned to her.

“This is my friend Consuelo,” she told him. “She works at CDS.”

“The bodyguard school,” he said, looking at the other woman. “Jonny Blaze. Nice to meet you.” They shook hands. “I met Angel and Ford a few minutes ago. They were talking about you.”

Consuelo groaned. “Don’t believe them. It’s all lies. I like what you did in *Amish Revenge*. That last scene—on the train. It was authentic.”

“Thanks. It was all me and I have the bruises to prove it.”

Everyone else chuckled, but Consuelo just kept talking. “The fight scene before sucked, though. You didn’t have the moves down. You have a trainer, right? He blew it. It’s not your fault.”

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