

Jingle Bell
MATCHMAKERS

Lori DeJong

For Michaela, my daughter, best friend, and Christmas buddy. I'll always treasure our Black Friday shopping excursions, decorating the tree, our ugly but yummy Christmas sugar cookies (we really should take a class), harmonizing to our favorite Christmas songs in the car or while playing games as a family, and just simply experiencing all the holiday things with you. You are my heart, my love, my reason. Love you big!

One



Cecelia: It worked! Her flight just landed at DFW.

Marlene: Wonderful! Let's get this done 😊

Hoodwinked. And by her own mother, no less. Aubrey dragged her hastily packed suitcase behind her while lugging the matching carry-on up the front steps of her childhood home. Even after eleven years, the porch remained the same.

“Aubrey. You’re here!”

Coming to an abrupt halt, Aubrey tried to glare at said con artist mother as the woman barreled out the door toward her, smile wide and arms outstretched.

Her breath left in a *whoosh* when those arms grasped her in a tight embrace. She could do nothing but hold on to keep her balance on her high-heeled platform shoes.

Mom pulled back and took Aubrey’s face in her hands. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m so happy you came home.”

“You mean, before my poor, sweet, sick nana succumbed to the slight head cold she’s nursing while baking cookies on this fine December Friday I’d planned to sleep through?”

At least Mom had the decency to blush, being caught in her own chicanery. She dropped her hands and crossed her arms over the reindeer head on the front of her sweater, complete with red, fuzz-ball nose. “You saw Mama already?”

“Went straight there. After catching the seven-fifty flight out of Nashville, which means I was at the airport at six a.m. All because—how did you put it? Oh, that’s right. *Aubrey, honey, you need to come home. Your nana’s not well and wants so badly to see you before it’s too late.* Yes. I do believe those were your exact words.”

Her mother’s sigh produced a little cloud puff in the cold air. “Well, I didn’t *lie*. She’s had this awful cold all week.” She turned and walked back through the still-open door. “And she’s said numerous times how much she’d like to see you come home while she still has her faculties.”

With a shake of her head, Aubrey adjusted the tote’s strap over her shoulder and took the handle of her suitcase, following her mother inside the warm, farmhouse-style home she’d been raised in. A complete departure from the modern high-rise condo she left before sunrise.

“Nana will still have her faculties when she’s a hundred years old.”

“While that’s probably true, I don’t think she wanted to wait that long to see you. Now, I have your room all ready for you. I’m putting together some things for the church Christmas auction tonight, so go on up and get settled.” She turned at the foot of the stairs, her eyes imploring. “Honey, I’m sorry if I was less than forthright. But it’s been forever since you’ve had a proper Christmas with us here in Cantwell.”

Guilt loosened the irritation in Aubrey’s chest at her mother’s duplicity. It was true she hadn’t been home for Christmas in a while. Not since that last one during her senior year at Belmont University. When she and Cody had come home for winter break and returned to school engaged to be married. And hopefully on their way to a big career in Christian music.

Cody Lansdale.

Aside from not leaving this house for the next two-and-a-half weeks, there was considerable doubt she could get through this visit without seeing him. Cantwell's population sat a smidge south of twenty thousand, and he was now the worship pastor at the church she'd grown up in. Things hadn't exactly ended ugly, but words were said that left them both wounded. Before she handed him back his ring and watched him walk away.

But they'd each moved on since their breakup when Cody chose to leave rather than see how far their stars could rise.

Except, lately, it seemed her star was stuck in an orbit going nowhere.

She released a weary sigh. The two-hour flight, followed by a drive about as long on four hours' sleep, was catching up to her. "I know, Mom. But I just saw you all at the Fort Worth show last month."

"A few minutes before a concert and breakfast the next morning is not nearly the same. And, sweetie, I have to say, you didn't seem ... happy. Content. So, since you didn't have any immediate plans after the tour, I figured this was the perfect time to have you home."

Her mother's blue eyes scanned her up and down from under a curtain of bottle-blond bangs. "And we need to get some meat on those bones, honey girl. You're much too skinny."

Aubrey glanced down and then back at her mom. "I'm not skinny. I'm fit."

"You're thin as a reed. Please tell me you had lunch, seeing how it's already two-thirty."

"Nana fed me." And if she kept eating like she had so far today, her agent would have her on a thousand-calorie-a-day diet the second she set foot back in Nashville.

"Good enough. Now, go on. Get unpacked but come back down after you get settled. I'm heading up the Jingle Bell Christmas Committee this year and have a to-do list a mile long

before the Jingle Bell Auction tonight. Your sister's in charge of that, by the way."

Stifling a yawn, Aubrey lugged her suitcase up the stairs to her bedroom, a.k.a. the guest room. None of her old posters or pictures remained on the walls. Her bulletin board covered with photos and mementos, gone. A calming, navy blue comforter covered her old bed with a pristine white bed skirt and floral shams, not the sunshiny yellow she'd left behind when she left for college.

After unpacking and hanging up the clothes she didn't want to get any more wrinkled than they were, she walked back downstairs.

"What time?" came her mother's voice from the kitchen. "Okay, yes. After school lets out. That's a good plan. I'll have—" She stopped abruptly when she noticed Aubrey. "Um, I'll have him give you a call back. I surely will ... uh huh ... okay, bye now."

Aubrey scanned the crowded space, where several boxes sat stacked against the counter covered with baked items wrapped in plastic. "What is all this?"

"Oh, some baked goods and craft items that were donated for the auction. But listen, if you could help me pack up the rest of these boxes, that would be great. Then run them to the church activity center. There's no way all of this will fit in that little car you rented, so you can take my SUV. You'd be doing me a huge favor. And you can also say hello to your sister."

Aubrey's joints all but groaned with fatigue, although from the disarray in the kitchen that was usually tidy and in perfect order, Mom had a lot on her plate. But then, Cecelia Mayfield had never met a cause, event, project, or shindig she wouldn't jump headlong into.

And Aubrey would love to hug on her little sister Sandy for a minute. Or five. Even if she was twenty-nine and about to be married to the mayor's son. Dane graduated in Aubrey's class three years ahead of Sandy and had been Cody's best friend since

grade school. This meant, as Sandy's Maid of Honor, she would be paired with her former fiancé at the wedding. Super.

"Sure, Mom. Glad to help."

But once this errand was done, she was curling up under that navy blue comforter and sleeping until tomorrow.