

“*I*s that all of them?” Madeleine scanned the envelopes and people spread all over her aunt’s living room. Her dad and A.J. would’ve stayed to help today, but they were busy with their own projects. Dad with his work as a portrait photographer and A.J. with finalizing details on the wedding venue. As it turned out, Madeleine was grateful for the time spent with some of her favorite ladies.

“Let’s gather everything up and double-check.” Her mom Catherine spoke with an authoritative air, although Madeleine knew she was anxious about the wedding happening in only two months. She’d mentioned as much only a few dozen times.

Planning a Christmas wedding on such short notice was a daunting task, but if anyone could pull it off, these women could. Her Aunt Clara had held the family together through triumphs and tragedies—the loss of her husband, the separation and reunification of Madeleine’s parents, and Madeleine’s own journey back to Christ. Every time Clara had been there to soften the blows and lift everyone up. She never shied away from the truth but spoke it with grace and love.

Nancy Jones had been a friend of the family for a long time. Well, except for several years when Madeleine basically hated her and blamed her for her mother's leaving Shady Springs. But now all was forgiven and the past was water under the bridge. Nancy had been like a mother to Madeleine's dad and was making up for lost time.

"Thank you all so much for helping me. I was dreading addressing all of the wedding invitations by myself." Madeleine threw an arm around Aunt Clara who hugged her back.

"Of course, sweetheart. We're happy to help out." Clara squeezed Madeleine around the waist with one arm, practically lifting her off the floor in her exuberance.

"That's all of them." Mom started to hand Madeleine the envelopes but pulled back. "Actually, let me mail these for you. I have to run by the grocery store and the post office is right around the corner."

"If you're sure, I would love that." One less item on her list was a win. She sighed contentedly as she smoothed the fabric of her jeans. "I think we may actually pull this off." Madeleine beamed, looking at the other women.

"We'll see." Mom raised her eyebrows but smiled as she took the invitations and walked out the front door

*Ding.*

Madeleine saw a text alert on her phone from A.J.

Where are you right now?

She typed a quick reply before sliding her phone in her back pocket.

"What's next on your list?" Clara walked around the living room with a wastebasket, picking up little peel-off sticker backings from the envelopes.

"We have to order dresses for bridesmaids and suits for the groomsmen." Madeleine massaged her temples and plopped

back down on the sofa. “Honestly, I almost want to have everyone just wear an outfit they already own.”

“Why not do that?” Clara popped her head up, eyes wide.

“Sounds like a great idea to me.” Nancy spoke up from the armchair in the corner.

Waving her hands dismissively, Madeleine frowned. “No, no. How would that look with everyone up front in completely different outfits? Even if I told everyone to wear maroon or something, there’s bound to be all different shades of red.” She shivered at the thought.

“Weddings used to be very different.” Nancy tilted her head, her gaze wandering to the wall across from her. “There’s too much pressure on young people now to have a picture-perfect ceremony.”

Madeleine followed Nancy’s line of vision. The wall was filled with family photos, many of which featured her Uncle George. And right in the middle was a wedding picture. Clara wore a simple gown with capped sleeves and nary a train to speak of. Instead of an elaborate veil, her head was adorned with a flowered headband. Madeleine didn’t remember the ceremony—she was too young—but she grinned from her mother’s arms. The seven of them, Madeleine, her parents, Clara, George, and Madeleine’s grandparents, all looked radiant.

“My wedding was very small,” Clara said. Only family and a few close friends. But it was the happiest day of my life.”

“Would you change anything about it?” Madeleine scooted forward, watching her aunt’s face. The hint of a wistful smile tugged at Clara’s lips.

“Oh, sure. Lots of things went wrong.” She gave a short laugh. “The cake was dry and the musicians were off-key. But ...” Clara trailed off and tore her gaze from the wedding photo to look at Madeleine. “No, actually. I don’t think I’d change a thing.”

Clara carried the wastebasket to the next room. Madeleine turned to Nancy.

“What about you, Nancy? Would you change anything from your wedding?”

“Not much.” Nancy twisted her wedding ring. “I wish we’d taken more pictures.”

“Well, I’ve got that part covered.” Madeleine’s dad Henry had agreed to document her wedding day with the help of his assistant.

She sat back. After a beat, she said, “I hope I can be like you and Clara. No regrets. Just beautiful memories of a perfect day.”

“It wasn’t perfect by any means.”

Madeleine shrugged. “You know what I mean. I want a wedding that I can look back on fondly.” She gazed down at her engagement ring A.J. had done such a good job choosing. A brilliant sapphire sat between two small diamonds in a vintage-inspired setting. It was beautiful without being over-the-top. Modest but enchanting. “I want a wedding that feels like us and celebrates our love.” Madeleine grimaced. “That sounded really cheesy.”

“No, I understand.” Clara smiled as she entered the room. “I think every bride wants that, but then you get to the day and realize ...” She shrugged and looked to Nancy, seemingly searching for the right words.

“None of it matters as much as you thought it did.”

A knock sounded at the front door.

“I’ll go get that.” Clara left and Madeleine heard A.J.’s voice coming from the front hall.

“Is Maddy here?” The sound of footsteps grew nearer.

Madeleine turned just as A.J. entered the room. Her stomach clenched at the expression on his face. Something was wrong. He’d been in a meeting with one of the elders and their officiant, Sam, to discuss wedding details and using the church building. It was supposed to be very straightforward.

“What is it?” Her voice raised in pitch.

A.J. took a deep breath. Seeing him out-of-sorts amped up her anxiety. He never worried about small stuff, so whatever was bothering him must be big.

“They won’t let us use the church building on Christmas Eve.”

No. A tight ball of anxiety formed in her chest, and her lungs stopped cooperating.

*Deep breaths, Madeleine.*

“What?” Clara stood behind A.J., her mouth hanging slightly open. “But I asked Sam to put it on the calendar.”

“We forgot about the Christmas pageant.”

Her stomach dropped. A sickening chill crept over her. *Of course.* How had she not put two and two together? She sucked in another breath.

“You’re right.” Clara ran a hand through her short hair. “But why wasn’t it on the church calendar?”

A.J. shrugged. “Probably no one thought to put it on.”

Nancy let out a *hmm* from the corner.

Madeleine gasped. “Wait.”

Clara turned to her at the same time, a panicked expression on her face.

“The invitations.”

“I know,” A.J. held his hands out. “I told them the invitations had been made already.”

“No.” Madeleine grabbed her phone from her back pocket. No time for a text. She punched her mom’s contact on her phone.

She shook out her right hand as she paced the floor, clutching the phone with her left. “Come on, Mom. Answer, answer.” She inhaled slowly through her nostrils, but her heart still raced.

When voicemail clicked on, she hung up. Three pairs of eyes watched her from across the room.

“Well?” Clara asked, wringing her hands.

“She didn’t answer. I’ll text her to call me back right away.”

“Tell her it’s an emergency.” Nancy’s voice was shrill. “Oh, dear.”

Clara rubbed Nancy’s shoulder comfortingly.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” A.J. turned back and forth between the women in the room, obviously startled by everyone’s reaction.

“Mom is at the post office mailing the invitations right now.”

“Let’s go catch her. We can take my car.” A.J. clasped Madeleine around the waist, steadying her. Finally, the calm-and-collected A.J. had returned.

Madeleine’s phone rang, and she tossed it in surprise, nearly dropping it on the floor. A.J. caught it right before it landed, handing it to Madeleine.

“Mom?”

“What is it, sweetie? What’s wrong?” The sound blared from Madeleine’s phone. She must’ve hit a button and put her mom on speaker.

“Did you mail the invitations?”

“I thought you said this was an emergency.”

“Mom!” Madeleine growled in frustration.

“Yes, I mailed the invitations.” Mom matched her aggravated tone of voice. “I don’t know why you don’t trust me to—”

“Go back!” Several shouts joined hers from the others in the living room. “Mom, we can’t mail the invitations. The date is wrong.”

“What? No it isn’t. December—”

“Just trust me. We have to get those invitations back.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll call you later.”

Madeleine sank to the couch.

“I think we should still go to the post office, just in case.” A.J. held out a hand, and Madeleine took it, letting him pull her back to standing.

While they were on the road, Mom called again. “They won’t

let me get the invitations back because my name isn't on the envelopes.”

“Okay, A.J. and I are on our way.”

“Hurry, the post office is closing soon.”

They were only five minutes away. Madeleine wasn't worried about making it on time. She was worried about what would happen when they arrived.