

“You can’t have the wedding on Christmas Eve.”
“Pardon?” A.J. couldn’t trust his ears. Surely he’d heard wrong.

“You can’t possibly have the wedding on December twenty-fourth.” John Patterson, one of the church elders, stared back at him from across the room. His face was set in a scowl, but A.J. had a hard time taking him seriously when he wore a T-shirt that read *This is my corny costume* with giant candy corn on it.

The room was small, so their knees were practically touching. Sam Sullivan, the longtime preacher at Shady Springs Church, had an office about the size of a walk-in closet. But with all of the books lining every wall, it felt more like a cupboard. Somehow, Sam also managed to fit a large desk, a couple chairs, and several stacks of papers.

A clock ticked on the wall, marking passing seconds.

“But we already have the invitations. Madeleine hand painted each one.” A.J. looked back and forth between Mr. Patterson and Sam, hoping one of them could clear this situation right up. “Clara checked the calendar as soon as we started planning the wedding.”

“Well, I don’t know which calendar she checked, but she never asked me.” Mr. Patterson cleared his throat. “I would’ve told her we have the Christmas pageant that night.”

Of course. For a while, Shady Springs had skipped the annual nativity play. People were too busy or they couldn’t find enough children to participate. But this year, the parents had asked to bring it back. He’d seen the announcements about planning meetings and play practice—he just hadn’t realized what day the performance would be.

“The pageant is on Christmas Eve?”

Mr. Patterson looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “Of course, it is. When else would we have it? Halloween?”

He wasn’t opposed, although that might be a little soon, considering it was already October twenty-ninth.

Sam sighed. “We can’t reschedule Christmas. Not even for you and Maddy.”

“I mean, Jesus almost certainly wasn’t born in December ...” A.J. let the rest of his sentence trail off. Mr. Patterson and Sam were clearly not amused.

“Okay.” A.J. bounced his knees, racking his brain for ideas. Going back to Madeleine with this information was simply not an option. “Could we have the wedding in a different part of the building? Maybe we could use the fellowship hall while the pageant is going on in the auditorium.”

Sam and Mr. Patterson shared a look with one another before answering him.

“You don’t want that.” Sam winced.

“Weddings are chaos. Add a host of small children in costumes? Plus the live animals we’ll have in the parking lot?” Mr. Patterson shook his head. “No, you don’t want that.”

He hadn’t heard about the live animals. That might cause a bit of a traffic jam for their wedding guests.

“Okay, then what do you suggest I tell Maddy?”

Sam flipped through the calendar in front of him. Yes, the church still used a paper calendar and not digital.

“We’re supposed to host our missionaries from Honduras on December eighteenth. And there’s rehearsals for the Christmas play.” He tapped a date on the page. “How about December seventeenth? It’s the Saturday before.”

A.J. leaned forward to look at the day Sam suggested. There was something written down already. “That’s the day of the cookie decorating and caroling.”

Every year, some of the older ladies from the congregation baked several dozen sugar cookies, people donated frosting and sprinkles, and all the kids and their parents came out to decorate cookies before delivering them to the nursing home and singing carols. It was a much-loved annual event, and everyone would be upset if it didn’t happen.

“I’m sure we can move that around,” Sam said. “I’m trying to help you out here.” He turned to Mr. Patterson, eyebrows raised.

“I’ll talk to the parents and see what they say.” Mr. Patterson folded his arms so that only the tops of the candy corn on his shirt showed. “But we have a bigger problem than that right now.”

What could possibly be bigger than rescheduling the entire wedding? After invitations had already been made?

“In order to get married here, you have to complete premarital counseling.”

A.J. sighed in relief. “That’s not a problem. Maddy and I were already planning to meet with Sam for counseling.” He turned to the preacher. “If that’s okay with you. I know we haven’t set up any sessions yet, but I figured we’d have plenty of time between now and the wedding.”

“I’d be happy to walk you through the workbook I’ve used in the past, but...” Sam trailed off, waving his left hand with its empty

ring finger. “I’ve never been married. Because of that, I like to ask engaged couples I counsel to also interview a variety of married couples in order to get a perspective I’m not able to provide.”

“That makes sense.” A.J. had confidence they’d find enough married people willing to help them out. After all, it seemed like all his friends from high school and college got married ages ago. “I don’t think that’ll be an issue.”

“Okay. If you promise to complete your premarital counseling, we can move forward with the new date for the wedding.” Mr. Patterson rocked forward in his seat.

But they already *had* a date for the wedding—Christmas Eve. It was all Madeleine wanted. And all *he* wanted was to get married without causing his bride to hate him before they even walked the aisle. Why couldn’t people compromise a little? Who said a Christmas play had to be in December?

He turned to Sam, mentally pleading for some assistance.

Sam set both hands on his desk, his fingers splayed. “Let’s agree to wait to send those invitations until we find a solution.”

Giving a quick nod, A.J. stood. “I just wish one of you would volunteer to tell Madeleine the news for me.”

Mr. Patterson laughed good naturedly as he walked out of the office. But A.J. didn’t find any of this funny.