

# *On Christmas Avenue*

by  
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Mary exited the print shop behind the courthouse after checking on her tickets. They'd be all printed up and ready by tomorrow. She'd have to bring her SUV around because the boxes would be heavy. At the moment she was on foot. One of the things she enjoyed about Clark Creek was the fact that you could walk almost everywhere. It was a very sweet town, which seemed to keep getting sweeter. She thought of Evan standing in the snow by the town tree and her face warmed when she recalled his handsome grin. It was apparent he'd been happy to see her, and she'd been *oh, so happy* to see him.

They were meeting tonight at the skating rink and she couldn't wait. At the same time, she felt slightly nervous about it, like she was going on a first date. But it wasn't a date—or was it? In her heart and head, she felt so confused. All she knew for certain was that she wanted to see Evan again. Alone. Just the two of them. So they could talk and have fun, and maybe not focus on the parade for once.

There was so much she was curious about. His background, and what it had been like for him growing up in Clark Creek. He'd mentioned the river and tubing and that had sounded like so much fun. She wondered what had

made him decide to leave Clark Creek and join the Army. And, ultimately, why he'd decided to come back again. Ironically, she already knew more about Marshall's and Nash's stories, both from what they'd told and from what she'd gathered from being in town.

Evan was much more guarded about everything. He had a tough exterior, and she had the sense he didn't let many people through those emotional walls he'd set up. She was pleased that he'd grown comfortable enough to let his guard down around her, because she liked the man he was underneath a lot. Someone caring and with a great sense of humor. Of course, the image he presented to the public was admirable too. And adorable, she couldn't help but think with a sigh.

Her phone rang and she pulled it from the purse that she'd tucked in her satchel. "Hello?"

"Mary, hi! It's Judy. How are things going?"

"Really moving along."

"That's great, because it's countdown time," Judy said.

"I know! Only three days until the parade. Can you believe it?"

"Yeah, it will be here before we know it." Judy paused and her voice took on a strange tone. "Mary. I wanted to ask you about that order you placed?"

"Order?" She thought back to Thursday. "Oh yes! My parade supplies! All taken care of. Should be arriving soon."

"Upper management in Seattle has a question." She drew in a breath and Mary wondered why she sounded so serious. Judy was starting to worry her. "It's about the T-shirts?"

"T-shirts? Well, um. They're fantastic. Long-sleeved with 'Christmas in Clark Creek' on them."

"It's not about the design," Judy said coolly, and Mary's heart hammered, because Judy had never sounded so serious. "It's about the number of them you ordered."

Mary rushed to defend her actions. "They're only ten

dollars each! And we're selling them for at least fifteen, maybe twenty. The town council approved the purchase."

Judy sounded incredulous. "For thirty thousand dollars?"

Mary stopped walking and bile rose in her throat. "What... what did you say?" she asked, feeling suddenly ill. "No, that can't be right. I only ordered three hundred."

"No, Mary," Judy said. "You ordered three *thousand*."

Mary's head felt light. "No. I'm very sure. I double-checked the number." She'd ordered three thousand of the smaller dollar items, but definitely not the ten-dollar T-shirts.

Then she remembered the computer glitch and the lights going out, and how when her computer rebooted, it took multiple tries before the T-shirt order went through. She thought she'd re-entered her information three or four times, but...surely not ten? She'd kind of lost count in the midst of her frustration.

*Oh no. No, no, no. No.*

If she'd honestly ordered three thousand T-shirts, in addition to their purchase price, they'd incur an enormous delivery fee. *Expedited delivery. Yikes.*

"Mary?" Judy asked. "Are you still there?"

"Um-hmm." Mary's head spun furiously. What was she going to do? If the order hadn't been processed yet, maybe it wasn't too late to change it. The rush delivery window was between today and Wednesday.

*Thirty thousand dollars.* That was a brand-new car. A nice one.

Or maybe, Clark Creek's entire future.

"I thought your budget for parade incidentals was ten thousand dollars? I'm talking, all in. Programs, souvenirs, shipping..."

"It was a mistake, Judy," she said, her pulse racing. "I can fix it."

"I really hope so, because that's a lot of cash for the company to absorb if Clark Creek can't come up with re-

payment.”

“I understand. I really do.” Sweat beaded Mary’s hairline and her face burned hot. “Don’t worry. I’ll call the merchandiser right away.”

She ended the call and dashed through the town square, heading back to the inn. She passed by the gazebo on her way and glanced up at Evan’s courthouse office on the second floor. Tiny Christmas lights twinkled in his window.

Mary’s heart sank. Everyone in Clark Creek had come to rely on her expertise, even—finally—Evan, and now she was letting everybody down. If she couldn’t amend this error with her order, she actually *could* bankrupt the town.

Mary scurried down Main Street then turned right on Maple, taking care not to slip on the slick sidewalks in her high-heeled boots. It was snowing again, but this time the snow felt like prickly frozen tears raining down from the sky. Even the heavens were crying.

How had this disaster happened to her? *How, how, how. How?*

“Morning, Mary,” Marshall said when she entered the inn through the front door. “How did everything go at the printer’s?”

She pasted on her brightest smile. “Ah, just great!” she said, unable to admit her world was crashing apart.

Marshall was just another person in Clark Creek who’d placed faith in her and who would be hurt by her ineptness. Nash and Chloe would suffer, too, as well as Itzel and Dennis, Leroy and Austin...and all of the other wonderful people she’d met.

With an extra thirty-thousand-dollar expenditure, it would be nearly impossible for Clark Creek to break even, much less turn a profit. Even with all those generous sponsorships, the town wouldn’t earn a penny from the parade. It would go into debt.

Mary couldn’t wait to get to her room and log onto her

computer. She dropped her satchel on the bed and sat down still wearing her coat. She logged into the merchandise website and pulled up her order history. Her orders for the magnets, flags, and coasters had gone through simultaneously, and looked accurate. Good. But that had been before the power outage, after which her internet connection had been spotty for several minutes.

She'd had to start over a few times with her order for the T-shirts, but she'd seriously thought it had only gone through once. She viewed the page with her previous orders listed and all were marked completed and delivered. Mary bit her lip so hard it pinched. Sure enough, the same T-shirt order had been placed *ten* times.

She found the customer service number and called it from her cell.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the customer service rep told her after she explained the situation. "Those T-shirts normally sell for twelve dollars. When you purchased them for ten you agreed to our nonrefundable sale conditions. Items like that are hard to take back. Because they're custom-designed, nobody else can use them."

"But it was a *mistake*," Mary practically wailed into her mouthpiece. Then she reined herself in, assuming a more professional tone. "I mean, this is a corporate account. I can't just—"

"You can put in a refund request if you wish, but there are no guarantees. We're basically shutting down for the holidays starting tomorrow, so nobody will get a chance to look at your ticket until after New Year's."

