

On Christmas Avenue

by

Ginny Baird



Itzel and Dennis swung their gazes back and forth between Evan and Mary like they were watching a ping-pong match. Evan shooed them away before they could break out the popcorn. “Do you mind?”

Itzel smoothed back her short choppy hair. “Oh, right.”

Dennis took the deputy’s hat he held in his hand and placed it in on his head. “I was just leaving.”

“*Sure you were,*” Evan heard Itzel whisper to Dennis before she shut the door, but not all the way. She left it open a crack and then walked away *very slowly*.

Dennis seemed to be taking his time, too. He shoved his hands in his uniform pants pockets and pretended to admire the artwork that had hung on the corridor walls for as long as Evan remembered, while whistling “Jingle Bells.”

Evan raked a hand through his hair, then winced when he hit the tender spot on his head. “Who told you to decorate the courthouse building?” he asked Mary, trying not to let his discomfort show.

She met his gaze and grinned. “Nobody told me to. I offered. The mayor was all for it.”

Naturally, she was. Add one more thing to the check-out list. *Ca-ching. Ca-ching.*

“Um-hmm,” he mumbled. “The mayor.”

He slid open his top desk drawer, hunting for the roll of antacid tablets he kept on hand. He located the package and popped one in his mouth before thinking of Mary. He extended the package in her direction.

Her eyebrows arched. “Er...no thanks.”

Evan chewed on the peppermint-flavored antacid, pondering the price tag for so much fancy decorating. It had to be steep if she was covering this three-story building. Plus,

it had a basement. And a large entryway with a staircase.

“The courthouse decorations didn’t cost Clark Creek anything, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she said, and motioned around the room. “This extra bit of Christmas cheer is *lagniappe*.”

Evan shut his desk drawer. “Lan-yap?”

“It’s what they call a business bonus in New Orleans.”

“So, you’re originally from New Orleans, then?”

“No. But I lived there. Lots of other places, too.” She shrugged. “When I was growing up, my mom and I moved around a lot.”

He considered her a moment, noticing she was nicely dressed in tailored black slacks and a red turtleneck beneath her business jacket. She had a well-put-together look that was casual yet professional. “Why the bonus?”

“Because I appreciate your business. I mean, *we* at Dav-enport Development Associates do.” Her dark eyes shone brightly. “Besides that,” she continued, “it appears that nearly every other part of this town but here is decorated to the hilt. And, oh...” She peered out his window. “The gazebo. We’ll need to work on that.”

“We rarely decorate at the courthouse,” he informed her.

“The mayor’s office looks festive.”

Of course it did. It was inhabited by his mom. He moved the reindeer sculpture aside and its weight ripped his ledger. She winced.

“Look, Ms. Ward.”

“Please, call me Mary.”

He nodded. “Mary.”

“May I call you Evan?”

“Uh. Sure,” he said, grappling with his thoughts. He stared down at the reindeer on his desk and then up at her. “Look, Mary,” he started anew. “I appreciate the gesture and all. I’m just not one for a lot of Christmas clutter.”

“Clutter?” she asked, aghast.

“Extra fuss and glitter.” He gestured to the coat rack she’d placed in front of the window. “Twinkling lights and tinsel aren’t really my style.” While he enjoyed the holidays as much as the next guy, he wasn’t a huge fan of going overboard.

“No? Oh. Well. That’s a shame.” She frowned. “I guess I won’t bring the rest of the stuff in, in that case.”

There’s more? “Thanks for the thought, though.”

She glanced back at the coat rack and then at his desk, wearing a downcast expression, and Evan worried that he’d hurt her feelings. “Want me to—?”

“No, no. Leave it. Everything’s fine.” He raised both hands. “Just enough!” He paused to study her. “How did you know the courthouse wasn’t decorated, anyhow? Did the mayor mention it?”

“No, I saw that with my own eyes when I got here, and I happened to have a few spare decorations in my SUV.”

“Ah.” What sort of person kept surplus holiday decorations in their vehicle, on the off chance they were needed? A Christmas Consultant, apparently.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” He gestured toward a chair, mentally preparing his delivery. While he didn’t want Mary sticking around, he aimed to be gentle in urging her departure. The sooner she left, the better off Clark Creek would be financially, and there were a lot of people Evan cared about in this town.

When she was situated, he said, “It was good of you to come here and I appreciate your efforts, sincerely I do. All of us in Clark Creek do. But I’m afraid we’ll need to make this a short stay.”

She seemed nonplussed by his comment. “I don’t know what you consider ‘short,’ but if it’s about ten days, then I guess we’re in business.”

Before he’d been apprised of her plan by Nash, he’d been thinking two days—at the outside. And even that seemed

excessive, given that she'd already spent time in Richmond preparing her proposal.

Evan pushed back in his chair. "What I'm trying to say is that ten days is too long. Way too long for Clark Creek to pay a consultant, given our current circumstances." He spread his hands out on his desk, striving to sound firm but fair. "I'm sure you understand our budgetary constraints."

"I do."

"Which is why...your staying through Christmas Eve won't be necessary."

She sat up straighter in her chair. "I beg your pardon, but I believe that it *will* be necessary. So do the mayor and the town council."

He was a little thrown by her bullheadedness, but decided to carry on. "The mayor says you have a proposal?" She'd gone to the trouble to prepare one, so he might as well listen to her presentation, before saddling her with more disappointment.

"Yes." She reached into the satchel she'd set on the floor and withdrew some papers, handing him a business folder. "Here you are." She tugged at her jacket lapel, looking pleased with herself, and not the least bit intimidated by his lack of enthusiasm. She probably thought she could win him over with her glossy proposal...and that smile, like sunshine on a springtime day.

Evan averted his gaze from her mouth and opened the folder she'd handed him. As he'd anticipated, stellar financial projections filled the first few pages. Colorful bar charts showed revenues skyrocketing on Christmas Eve—not only for the local government, but also for every business in town. Yet there was no immediate indication of where that huge infusion of cash was coming from. He suspected she was paving the way for her huge reveal by starting with the promise of big money as an end result. If he hadn't been tipped off about the parade by Nash, he might have started

worrying about those “legalities” his mom had alluded to.

“What are you recommending?” he asked her, deadpan. “That the council go out and rob a bank? Because if you are, I’d better warn you, the Clark Creek Savings & Loan isn’t in any better shape than the rest of us are.”

“Ha! You’re funny.” She twisted up her lips and his heart thumped. It was an unexpected thump, pounding hard against his ribcage in a manner that was oddly distant, but vaguely familiar. He really didn’t like it. He found the disruption inconvenient.

She retrieved her folder, flipping to another page. “No, Evan,” she said. “I’m proposing a *parade*.”

The sass in her tone made his neck warm. Yet another inconvenience. He tugged at his uniform’s necktie as Mary continued.

“The town council and the mayor loved the idea,” she said. “We’re going to recruit sponsors from the neighboring town with the ski resort.”

Evan cleared his throat which felt scratchy and dry. “Hopedale?”

“Yes. They’re doing very well as a tourist destination. I talked to the director of their Chamber of Commerce and she was totally supportive.”

She handed her folder back to him and he set it on his desk beside that unwieldy reindeer sculpture. “I’m afraid you don’t understand,” he said, focusing on the facts. Much better to do that than contemplate the shimmer in her warm brown eyes. “I don’t have the resources to patrol something like that. My office is very short-staffed as it is.”

“Then, we’ll recruit volunteers to help out. And the payoff will be so, so worth it.” She angled toward him, becoming more animated as she cranked up her spiel. “We’re planning three sponsorship levels: Reindeer Team, Elf League, and Santa’s Circle. We’ll sell tickets to raise money, and—”

“Mary, wait.” He hated being the bearer of bad news, but

he also didn't want to waste more of her time. There was no earthly way she was going to convince him to endorse her parade plan. Even if she was a very convincing individual, certain things mattered to him more...like the future of his town. He was not going to sacrifice that.

"I'm really sorry to have to tell you this," he said, "but there's not going to be any Christmas parade. Not this year. Not in Clark Creek, anyway."

She stared at him blankly, like she was a kid and he'd just told her there's no Santa Claus. "What? Why not? This parade could save Clark Creek."

His stomach roiled. "What if it sinks it?"

She blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're talking complicated logistics. Traffic, parking, crowds that need regulating...an entire influx of visitors into Clark Creek—"

"Yeah, that." She leaned toward him, pointing to her proposal folder. "Holiday tourists happy to spend money. People who will boost the local economy at a crucial time of year."

She locked on his gaze and for a moment he lost his bearings. He drew in a breath, willing himself back on track. "And they'll overwhelm our roadways. And our scarce resources, while making a major headache for my already stressed office."

Mary gasped. "I thought you were supposed to help me."

"I am helping," he said. "By helping you understand our limitations."

