Miracle on Mall Drive

PAOLINA MILANA

Copyright © 2020 by Madness To Magic.

MIRACLE ON MALL DRIVE is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Cover Design by 100Covers.com
Interior Design by FormattedBooks.com

First paperback edition November 2020.

ISBN 978-1-7354364-1-8 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-1-7354364-8-7 (Ebook)

www.madnesstomagic.com/books

This book is dedicated to those in my life who have helped me learn such incredible lessons about courage, judgement, compassion, connections, understanding, forgiveness, and love.

"*If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.*"

—*Love Actually*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This story has been asking to be told for decades. And the characters in these pages finally banded together, a choir of voices in my head, refusing to be ignored until I wrote them down. Throughout the whole creative process, I had my doubts. *What in the world was I doing writing this Christmas Eve story?* One day on a hike in the canyon near my Californian home, a place where I talk to God, I asked Him if this story was what I was meant to be doing. On my drive home, His answer came to me on a license plate belonging to a car that nudged itself in front of mine. It said: XMAS EVE. You may think that was coincidental—or even a bit crazy. But I know it's not. It's the magic that happens to me—and to all of us—when we take time to listen and to see and to read the signs that life and the powerful forces from beyond give to us.

This book would not be what it is without a team of powerful forces right here on Earth that came to help: Author and mentor Jennie Nash, along with her Author Accelerator editors Michelle Hazen and Sheila Athens; Samantha Clements who served as pied piper in helping to align this story's ensemble of characters; and to Kendra Muntz who went above and beyond in her editing, asking the right questions, filling in the gaps, and adding such richness and depth to this story that I am forever grateful.

CHAPTER ONE

BETTY & LEO

Old School, New School

It took a minute for Betty to realize the car came to a stop. She looked up from her vintage Dooney & Bourke handbag, and stared out the window, still mindlessly playing with the wispy strings on her bag's fraying red handles. It had seen better days; then again, so had she.

The morning sun just broke through the darkness. Ghostlike halos outlined the skeletons of dormant oaks and maples that dotted the parking lot. Throngs of bundled-up shoppers—some cheerily chatting, others impatiently hopping around to stay warm—stood in lines that wrapped around the mall's main entrance. Braving the icy wind gusts of yet another Chicago winter, it seemed as if everyone for miles around had decided *this* was the place to be on the last shopping day before Christmas—weather and wait time be damned.

The Uber driver's expressive eyes tried connecting with hers in the rearview mirror. "I gotta say, Christmas Eve crowds scare me. Why anybody with half a brain would come within a hundred feet of this here Maplefield Mall today when you got Amazon delivering right to your door—I just don't get it. Look at 'em… They're all crazy!"

Betty's eyes met his with a twinkle. "Well, I'm perhaps the craziest one of them all." She gathered up her bag and coat, opened her door, and stepped out. "For the past forty years, I've been the mall Manager here, and *this* is my favorite day of the year. It's so full of miracles. I still believe."

"Merry Christmas!" the driver grinned.

He waved as he drove away, his license plate UBERJOE gradually becoming unreadable in the distance. Pulling out her phone, she tapped on the screen to give him a very generous tip and review: "Five stars for you, Joe."

She straightened the multicolored tweed jacket of her favorite Chanel suit and stopped to breathe in the scents of Christmas anticipation—sweet cinnamon spiced with seasonal pines. She swore she could smell a hint of snow in the air, too, but perhaps that was just wishful thinking. She desperately wanted this Christmas to be a white one. After all, it was going to be the last holiday season she worked here at this magical mall.

"Spoiler alert, folks," a booming baritone voice called out to the crowd. "It's Christmas Eve. December 24. The day before Christmas. I know, I know: *HUGE* surprise."

Betty rolled her eyes. She knew that voice all too well. Every time she heard it, she somehow expected it to be coming from something other than the walking stick of a man who had been by her side—at least professionally—for nearly her entire career. No matter the season, she found his silver head of hair and carefully groomed matching beard oddly comforting. It was silly of her, but his appearance made Betty feel as if she had her own private Santa Claus all year round—even if this Santa might be a skinnier, slightly less jolly version. She quickly made her way to Leo who stood holding two Venti cups from Starbucks. She gave him a mocking look of disapproval.

"What?" Leo blinked his crystal blue eyes, feigning innocence. "Every year has the same number of days in it, and yet, every year, the last-minute pileup on Christmas Eve gets worse."

"Well, what about leap years?" Betty said and then laughed. "Oh, never mind. Merry Christmas to you, Leo, and please tell me that one of those coffees is for me."

Leo bowed, as if she were his queen and he her loyal subject, and handed her a cup. "One peppermint mocha for m'lady. And please don't tell me this is some surprise to you, too. I've been bringing you these holiday drink concoctions for decades, almost since the first day we met."

"Yes, you have. Have I ever thanked you?" Betty laughed again and took a sip. Just one taste of her special, minty chocolate beverage automatically conjured visions of twinkling lights and sleighs.

"Never."

"As the mall's General Counsel, you should remind me to do that. Would you please?"

"I'll have my legal team check into the statute of limitations on gratitude in my spare time." Leo arched one eyebrow and turned up the right corner of his lip in response. Pivoting, he followed her to the building's entrance.

Fumbling with her keys, Betty nodded to Elmer, the young security guard, who stood behind the glass doors she was trying to unlock. He quickly moved forward with his own jangling keys and opened the door for her. With a look of gratitude, slipping her keys back into her bag, she heard Leo slurp his coffee and give out a sigh of his own. His familiar habit always made her smile.

"Enjoying your drink, Leo?"

"You know it. Those frou-frou drinks can't hold a candle to old school mud."

She already knew his cup contained straight-up black coffee. Leo never touched the fancy handcrafted stuff. He was a basic black coffee kind of guy, and it was one of the many reasons she appreciated him.

The pair squeezed through the narrow entryway, careful not to swing the door open any further than need be, lest some seasonal shopper would attempt to get a jump on the crowds and slip through the door along with them. Once across the threshold, Elmer locked the doors behind them. A soft, low groan emitted from the disappointed crowds still waiting in the chilly weather outside.

Betty chuckled as they made it to the quiet safety of the massive, empty mall. "Thank you, Elmer. With all those keys on your ring, you always make me feel as if I'm being granted entry through the Pearly Gates."

Betty couldn't remember exactly when Elmer started working at the mall, but she knew it was more than just a few years ago. She had grown fond of his boyish charm, and he repeatedly impressed her with his work ethic. He was the kind of young man who, without a doubt, made his mom proud. Elmer reported for duty day after day, year after year, but Betty still didn't know him well enough to determine if he worked for the paycheck or for the girls. He had made it into college, that much she remembered him saying recently. He sure did love to strut around and show off his uniform, that much she could see, but beyond that, she knew little else about him. Betty smiled at the young man, wishing she could see his emerald green eyes more often, but the mirrored aviators he wore both day and night were part of his whole fashion statement, and it was one she didn't feel the need to disrupt.

"Just doing my job, Ms. Bryant. And nobody would mistake *me* for a saint," Elmer chuckled respectfully, lowering his head and peering over the top of his glasses. "Merry Christmas to you, and also to you, Mr. Sawyer."

Betty and Leo made their way across the main lobby which was festively decorated in a Winter Wonderland theme. Betty loved it, and she couldn't help but smile as she surveyed the snow-blanketed pathways leading to ice castles, gingerbread cottages, elf workshops, and, of course, Santa's golden chair where he and the elves would hear the wishes of so many awestruck children. Silver and ruby ornaments, glittering garlands, and shiny bows laced a forest full of spruce, pine, and fir trees. Large and small, the trees looked so real. Even the snow, created by a flocking effect, still fooled her into believing it had freshly fallen from the sky.

Several mall workers were rearranging and putting the final touches on this winter scene before the mall opened to the masses. As if playing scales on a piano, each staffer called out to them with "Good Morning!" and "Merry Christmas!" as they walked by. Betty nodded, smiled, and waved in response.

What would happen to all of them when they shut down the mall?

Betty didn't want to think about it, especially not today. It was Christmas Eve, and this was one she wanted to remember with nothing but smiles and good cheer, even if her heart was breaking.

She shook off any trace of melancholy, sipped her peppermint drink, and playfully chastised Leo: "You know I'm from the same 'old' school as you. Although I prefer the word 'seasoned.' I'm still hoping for a miracle, Leo. One day, you'll surprise both of us by trying one of these other-than-old-school coffee flavors. They're really quite yummy. I bet they'd do wonders to soften the Scrooge in you."

"Scrooge? Me?" Leo flashed his crooked smile.

Betty widened her already big brown eyes and playfully fluttered her lashes. When Leo looked at her in that way, she felt like a little kid again—ready for anything. No matter what the weather—rain or shine—and no matter the circumstances —feast or famine—Leo brought a fairy-tale kind of joy to her day. What would her days be like without him?

Turning her attention back to business, she stepped onto the escalator with Leo close behind her. As they slowly ascended to the second-floor executive offices, Betty surveyed her surroundings, taking it all in for what she feared might be the last time. A look of longing swept over Betty's face as she dwelled on the future of the mall and her own professional fate.

Betty's thoughts came to an abrupt halt as she felt an unexpected jolt in the middle of the escalator ride, causing her to lose her footing and fall back into Leo's tall frame.

"Betty, you okay?" Leo asked, balancing himself—and his coffee—with one hand gripped onto the rail and his other hand supporting Betty's bent elbow, making sure she remained upright. The two exchanged the briefest of glances, sharing more than one emotion without speaking a single word.

Betty momentarily lost herself in his eyes, wishing she could tell him what she felt for him. But that would be strictly unprofessional. She shook her head, steadied herself, and then held up her mocha, smiling as she joked, "Phew. Not a drop spilled."

As they distanced themselves and took their first steps up the now-disabled escalator, a high-pitched, sing-song voice rang out: "I am *sooooo* sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, Ms. Timbers," Leo said, using his soothing voice. "It's not as if you stopped the blasted thing on purpose."

With an iPad and stylus pen in hand, the childlike voice continued, "Oh, but that's just it. I *did* stop it on purpose. As soon as I realized it had been accidentally left running all night."

On the landing, Betty stopped with a quizzical look as her gaze set on the young woman she knew was here to facilitate the mall's closing. And if, by some miracle, they did manage to keep the place open, she figured she was looking at her successor. Color-blocked from head to toe, the 25-year old's exterior projected a level of "Girl Boss" confidence today's professional millennials wielded like a medieval suit of armor. Betty knew this attitude well, thinking back to when she was so young and felt so much in charge. "Darci, why would you stop the escalator, especially while we were on it?"

"The mall doesn't open for another thirty minutes," Darci replied, glancing at her rose gold Apple Watch. "Escalators are one of our biggest energy zappers."

"You've got to be kidding…" Leo scoffed.

Darci's eyes widened. "No, I'm not. Our average unit has a 7.5 horsepower motor and runs 16 hours each day, seven days a week. That's 10,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity in a year. Do you realize how much that adds up to in terms of our budget?"

Betty suppressed the urge to burst out laughing at the earnestness before her. Darci was so young, so ambitious. She was smart for sure but in all her book learning and data-driven analytics, she somehow missed the chapter on common sense.

"I understand. Tell me, Darci, had Leo and I rolled head-over-heels down the escalator when it stopped, aside from the dry-cleaning bill to get peppermint mocha out of my suit, what other costs might we have incurred?"

Darci nervously shifted her weight from one foot to the other, tapping her stylus against her hip. She was just as aware as Betty of the newly minted crack in her armor. "I didn't realize you and Leo—or anybody—was on it, Ms. Bryant. I'm sorry." The apology didn't sound terribly sincere, but it was an effort nonetheless.

Leo shook his head, this time raising both eyebrows. He knew he should officially do something about Darci. After all, this wasn't the first time her short-sightedness had put people in harm's way and the mall in jeopardy. But given that she was hand-picked to work here by the real estate tycoon who owned this and many other shopping centers, he knew his efforts would be futile.

"No harm done," Betty said, a touch of benevolence in her smile. She had crossed swords with Darci before.

Repositioning her winter coat on her arm, Betty took a deep breath and led the way down the corridor as Leo and Darci trailed behind.

"Mr. Wiggins called to say he's flying in from Dallas this afternoon," Darci said. She hesitated, expecting a reaction. When she didn't get one, she continued. "He said he'd be here in time to wish you bon voyage."

"You mean, he'll get here in time to give her a kick out the door no matter what his General Counsel advises," Leo mumbled under his breath but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Betty chimed in, robotically responding, "Oh. Yes, Darci, how thoughtful." She turned the corner, finally arriving at the office that she had called home for so very long. Standing in the doorway, she took another sip of her mocha to subdue the sigh that threatened to spill out from her chest. Rows and rows of stacked moving boxes leaned up against one wall like giant-sized Jenga blocks, just waiting to fall. All of her years of overseeing the mall were now filed away, her memories packed up and seemingly littering the floor. The antique desk's richly polished mahogany top peeked out from the mound of beautifully wrapped gifts that sat atop it, all of them patiently waiting to be opened.

"What's this?" Betty took a few steps closer to admire a potted cactus sitting on her desk. She hung up her coat on the free-standing wooden rack in the corner, all the while keeping her eyes on the mystery plant. It seemed a bit out of place growing in a red-and-white candy-cane-striped planter. Do a cactus and Christmas candy belong together?

"That's a Christmas cactus," Darci answered her unspoken question.

"Really? I don't think I've ever heard of it." Betty's eyes twinkled. "So lovely. Thank you, Darci."

"Oh, no, it's not from me. I saw it earlier sitting on your desk and Googled it. It said it's only supposed to bloom on Christmas Day." Darci shrugged.

"Hmmm. I don't see a card…" Betty said upon further investigation. "You didn't see who left it?"

Darci shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"Leo?"

"Not me. I gave the gift of coffee."

Betty set her bag on the chair, bending down ever so slightly so as not to drop it. Given its aging state, she knew its days were numbered. It was then that she saw *him,* nestled into the folds of the cactus, peeking out between its shiny leaves.

"Oh, too funny! Elf on the Shelf." She said, feeling the joy flow up through her from her belly. "Here you are again." She turned with a grin to eye Darci and Leo. "And *still* no one is taking responsibility for your daily spying on me this entire month?" She bent down to whisper in the elf's ear, "Has there been any 'undesirable behavior' reported back to the big boss? Can you tell me who's on the naughty list and who's on the nice list this year?"

Darci lowered her head, avoiding Betty's glare.