

NEWS

'LOVE'S CHRISTMAS JOURNEY'

SYNOPSIS

On the Western frontier, young pioneer widow Ellie King travels on stagecoach to visit her older brother Aaron and his young kids for Christmas in their small town of Haddonton. A few months before, her own husband and daughter were killed in a tornado and Ellie was the only survivor. Ellie is still mourning their loss when she arrives in Haddonton and meets her niece Annabelle and nephew Christopher. Aaron, also a widower, hopes to offer his sister comfort during the holidays. Ellie gets settled in, and also meets Erik, an eighteen-year-old kid who was abandoned by his criminal father several years ago. Aaron took Erik in, but most of the townspeople don't trust Erik.

Her first day in Haddonton, Ellie walks to town with Annabelle and Christopher, where Aaron, Haddonton's trusty sheriff, is already on duty. Ellie meets the town's mayor, William, his wife and his teenage daughter Suzanna. He tells Ellie about the community's exciting events leading up to Christmas, and news of a new railroad; he hopes all the Christmas activity will attract railroad developers to Haddonton. Erik joins them, and William isn't pleased to see Erik at all. Only Ellie notices there is something romantic going on between Erik and Suzanna they are trying to hide.

Ellie continues her welcome tour and trips and falls right into the arms of handsome Michael, the deputy sheriff and a good friend of Aaron. Michael is immediately taken with her. That night, Aaron tells Ellie he has to leave for a few days to go to the county land office and negotiate buying land close to his property for farming, and asks Ellie to watch the children. Aaron also mentions his trip to Michael, and asks him to check in on Ellie and the kids while he's gone. Michael is glad to help, since he is already developing feelings for Ellie.

Ellie takes Annabelle to town, where she has to rehearse at the church for the Christmas Pageant. Wandering through town, Ellie overhears conversations about the railroad—it seems a lot of people stand to profit from it intersecting their land, including a disgruntled lawyer, Mr. Weaver, who is anxious to see the development plans. Ellie notices his rude insistence.

Aaron says an emotional goodbye to his children and leaves for his trip. The mayor and his family invite Ellie, the kids and Michael for dinner at their house. William isn't happy Erik has tagged along, but asks him to run to the well for water, and Suzanna goes with him. In the barn, William has left the railroad plans out in plain sight, but quickly folds them up.

Then, William goes to check on Erik, and is shocked to see him and Suzanna mid-kiss. William explodes at both of them, and demands Erik get off his land. Erik apologizes and runs off. Suzanna is very upset at dinner, and wanders outside to find Erik hiding in the barn. He asks her to run away with him, but she refuses. Later that night, Weaver sneaks into the barn and takes the railroad plans, accidentally knocking over his lamp and starting a fire. Weaver flees the scene as William runs out and notices the railroad plans are gone. Suzanna boldly admits Erik was hiding in the barn earlier in the night. William wants Michael to arrest him.

(more)



NEWS

HALLMARK CHANNEL/ 'LOVE'S CHRISTMAS JOURNEY' – Synopsis – Page 2

Back at home, Erik is missing. Ellie asks Michael to keep an open mind once he finds him, but the next morning, Ellie sees Erik walking home. Ellie questions him about the fire. He denies starting it, and Ellie believes him, but tells him he has to find Michael and plead innocence. He reluctantly agrees, but Michael has no choice but to lock Erik up; he is the only suspect. Weaver and his assistant Bersen both insist to Michael they were working late the night of the fire.

Unable to do anything more for Erik, Ellie takes Aaron's kids to the church, where she has organized an event for several of the town's children to write letters to St. Nick. At the same time, Aaron has reached the county land office and signed a deed. As he's leaving, he puts his wallet away while a mysterious man watches him, then follows him into the woods. The two have a confrontation and the man shoots Aaron in the leg. He falls into a deep ravine, unconscious. At home, Annabelle and Christopher grow worried about their dad; they both asked St. Nick for his safe return. Christopher wants to go look for him, but Ellie says no.

Ellie invites Mrs. Thompson, the general store owner, over for dinner and asks her about Weaver, admitting she thinks Weaver is to blame for the stolen railroad plans and fire in the mayor's barn. Ellie knows Weaver is very interested in those plans, and Mrs. Thompson agrees he is a snake. With the kids asleep, Ellie leaves to spy on Weaver's office. But Christopher also sneaks out to find his dad. Stealing a horse from the barn, he rides off, but veers away from the path. Hearing coyotes, he is suddenly scared and can't turn back.

At Weaver's office, Ellie searches for the missing plans and finds them just as Weaver walks in, stopping her with a pistol pointed in her direction. As Ellie and Weaver face off, Michael appears in the doorway, his gun aimed at Weaver. He takes Weaver to jail to await trial for starting the fire and stealing the railroad plans, and Erik is set free. Everyone heads home, not knowing Christopher is still with his horse in the woods, scared and lost. When Ellie wakes up the next day, she realizes he is missing. She tries to remain calm as she sends Erik to town to get Michael for help, and insists on going with Michael to find Christopher in the woods.

Ellie and Michael look for Christopher all day while he struggles to find his way home. The two set up camp when night falls in an old mine drift. Michael reassures her this isn't her fault, and she realizes she is starting to have feelings for him. In the morning, Michael finds Christopher's horse, and follow his tracks back into the woods. They find Christopher near a poisonous berry bush, on the ground, horribly sick from the berries. Thinking fast, Ellie grinds up a plant and water medicine and feeds it to the boy. They rush Christopher home, but he is only asking for his father.

In the ravine, Aaron, fighting infection and fever, struggles to pull himself up the hill. When he reaches the top he is surprised to see a wagon pulled by a team of horses. A mysterious bearded man named Nicholas, who bears a strong resemblance to Santa, steps out, anxious to help Aaron find his way home. Nicholas brings Aaron back to his cabin and tends to his wounds.

Aaron's horse is found back in Haddonton, and Michael, concerned, calls a meeting in the town square to gather a search team. Michael leads the men out on horseback, despite threats of a

(more)



NEWS

HALLMARK CHANNEL/ 'LOVE'S CHRISTMAS JOURNEY' – Synopsis – Page 3

storm, but not before kissing Ellie goodbye. A violent storm starts pounding down on the town as Ellie reads the children to sleep. Then, a window is blown out by the wind and glass flies everywhere. Erik suggests they spend the night in the barn, where there are no windows, but Ellie refuses, still scarred by her family's deaths in her own barn at home.

The next morning, the skies are clear, but most of the Christmas decorations in town have been ripped down. Ellie takes the kids on a walk to assess all the damage. Stopping in the sheriff's office, she is devastated to learn the search party for Aaron turned back because of the storm—everyone except Michael. In the cabin, Nicholas keeps a vigil over Aaron, waiting for his fever to break before attempting to get him home. Aaron is surprised Nicholas seems to know things about him—his name and his children's names—but is too weak to question it. Nicholas promises him he will be back home by Christmas morning.

William meets with the railroad developer, who breaks the news to William they've decided not to bring the railroad to Haddonton. All the townspeople have gathered to hear the news, and are so distraught, they decide to cancel all Christmas festivities—there is nothing to celebrate. Michael returns from the search, but wants to gather more men and go back out into the woods to look for Aaron. Ellie begs him to stay a little longer, admitting she needs him. Ellie reminds the kids they have to keep faith their father will return, just as they've helped her keep faith she can move on from her family's death. She wants them to help the town revive their hope and Christmas spirit.

Ellie and the children beg William to reconsider canceling the town's Christmas festivities. William slowly starts to come around, and suddenly grows determined to give the town a merry Christmas. With Mrs. Thompson, Michael and Erik on board, everyone starts campaigning to get people to forget about the railroad, and remember what Christmas is really about. As William goes door-to-door, though, he encounters a backlash from men who were counting on the railroad to make them rich. Erik steps in to defend the mayor. Seeing the boy's true character, William has a change of heart. He extends a peace offering by granting his permission for Erik to date Suzanna.

Soon, everyone is banding together to get the town sparkling just in time for the Christmas pageant, as Nicholas drives Aaron in his wagon toward home. Aaron asks Nicholas how he will ever repay him, but Nicholas has no Christmas wish. Aaron tells him he wants snow, and Nicholas says he'll see what he can do. Ellie and Michael are worried about Aaron, but as they watch the town light up with Christmas spirit, Ellie admits she is glad she came to Haddonton, and announces she has decided to stay and be with him. Michael is overjoyed, and kisses her.

On Christmas morning, Ellie is woken by the sound of Aaron walking in. After hugging him and waking the kids, Ellie walks outside to thank the man who brought Aaron safely home, but Nicholas is already gone. Michael arrives and the family spends Christmas together as Nicholas drives off in the distance, magically disappearing in the air. And that night, the happily reunited family is surprised with another Christmas miracle as a light snow begins to fall.

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