

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MACIE ST. JAMES

*kissed* by her  
fake fiancé



*Falling in love was not  
part of the deal.*

# **KISSED BY HER FAKE FIANCÉ**

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MACIE ST. JAMES

Misty Mountain Mistletoe, Book 3

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Epilogue

The woman next to Holden Pryce was crying. She was being subtle about it, just occasionally swiping at her tears while staring down at the e-reader in her hand, but she was definitely crying.

For a good twenty minutes, she'd stared down at the same page in whatever book she was reading. Not that he was spying or anything. He was supposed to be watching the movie he'd chosen for his pre-dinner entertainment on this first-class flight that seemed like it would never end.

England to Chicago and Chicago to Knoxville. He didn't even bother upgrading to first class for the second leg of the trip. It was such a short flight, it wasn't worth it. But he couldn't imagine doing this eight-hour flight without legroom and a big cushy seat.

The flight attendant seemed to appear from out of nowhere, yanking Holden's attention from the tiny screen mounted on the back of the seat in front of him. "Beef, chicken, or veggie?"

"I don't suppose you have a big, juicy ribeye?" he asked the flight attendant.

She probably thought he was flirting. He came across that way sometimes without meaning to. He just had a friendly personality and a look that some women seemed to like.

The flight attendant shook her head, remaining coolly professional. "No, sir."

He breathed a sigh of relief that this wouldn't become a thing. He had enough going on with the drama to his left.

“Chicken,” he said.

“And your wife?”

The flight attendant's question threw him. Wife? He'd been married once, to a woman who'd given him his daughter, Jules. It hadn't worked out, so they'd divorced, and later, she died of cancer, leaving him to raise their daughter alone.

Holden followed the flight attendant's stare to the woman seated next to him. His supposed “wife.” One look at the woman's face rendered him speechless.

He'd traveled the world. He lived in one of the nicest neighborhoods in Brooklyn for a while so his daughter would have access to the best schools. He'd been married to a former teen beauty pageant winner and high school homecoming queen. But the woman next to him had a beauty that stopped him in his tracks.

She had long, thick lashes that served in sharp contrast to her long, blonde hair. That hair fell in waves around her face, accentuating her high cheekbones and full, utterly kissable lips. She reached up and wiped a tear with one finger, then looked over at the flight attendant as though having just been awoken.

“Sorry?” the woman said to the flight attendant.

“Beef, chicken, or veggie,” the flight attendant shot back, her smile still as coolly professional as before.

“Chicken,” the woman said. As the flight attendant jotted that down and started to move to the next aisle, his passenger-neighbor called out, “Wait. No, beef. I deserve beef.”

The flight attendant looked just as startled by the strange statement as he did. She deserved beef? Was chicken some sort of punishment and beef a reward? He'd had some good fried chicken in his day, so he'd probably argue with that. And he'd never turn down a chicken-fried steak, especially now that he was living in the South.

But there were more important things to address here than the merits of different types of protein. “Are you okay?” he asked in a quiet voice.

They were completely alone in this row. Just the two of them. The seat next to the window remained empty. He’d expected her to shift over, but she’d stayed firmly planted in the middle seat long after it’d been clear no one was showing up to claim it.

She looked over at him then, and he worried her stare would render him speechless. He was being silly. Like a man who’d never seen a beautiful woman before. He had to keep his cool.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Just going home for the holidays. There’s a lot of pressure, you know.”

He gave her a sympathetic nod but struggled to respond. He couldn’t really relate. His family was his daughter. It was just the two of them. His mother died when he was a teenager, and his father had never really been a part of his life. He was the stereotypical guy who seemed to have it all...until you dug a little deeper.

“Navigating family dynamics during the holidays can be tough,” he said.

He hoped that sounded sympathetic enough. He was suddenly grateful for the quiet Christmas he had planned with his daughter, J.J. Yes, he might have the headache of finding a nanny when he had to get back to work at the start of the year, but at least he wasn’t dealing with a critical parent or a politically divisive brother-in-law like some people.

“It’s worse than that,” she said. “They think I’m bringing my fiancé home.”

The plane might as well have plunged hundreds of feet the way his insides reacted to those words. So, she was engaged. Of course, she was. A beautiful woman like her wouldn’t be available. Besides, it didn’t matter. He’d vowed not to date until J.J. was out of high school, at least, and that meant he’d stay single for another decade, at minimum.



“He couldn’t get away?” Holden asked, curious about a man who would leave a beautiful woman to travel across the ocean alone.

“He dumped me,” she said. “Just two months after he asked me to marry him.”

“Oh.”

The surprise in his voice was a natural reaction, but he had to force himself to do it. He felt like a complete jerk about it, but he was trying to ignore the way his heart lifted at the news she wasn’t engaged. She was single.

Yeah, he was a jerk.

“Sounds like a moron to me,” Holden said.

Had that actually slipped out? Oops.

The look she tossed him told him the words surprised her too. But she let him off the hook by not addressing it.

“I guess I can’t be too mad,” she said. “They’d been friends since childhood. They grew up in the same town, and she’s worked for his parents since high school. He always had a crush on her, but she didn’t realize how she felt about him until he got engaged to someone else.”

“And after proposing to you, he chose another woman? That doesn’t make sense.” He shook his head, staring past her at the pitch-black night sky outside the window. “I’ve only proposed to a woman once, but I didn’t look at another woman from that point on.”

She was still staring at him, and he realized his words likely had her assuming he was married. Probably for the best. She was hardly in the mood to be romanced right now, anyway. In fact, if he were her, he probably wouldn’t date for at least a year, maybe longer.

“Yeah, well not all guys are good ones,” she said with a sigh. Then she thrust her hand toward him. “I’m Faith.”

He stared down at her hand. Shaking hands seemed too impersonal, but what was he going to do? Hug her? Kiss her?

Yes, he'd definitely like to kiss her.

"Holden," he said, sliding his hand into hers.

At first contact, something unexpected happened. A jolt of electricity shot through him, and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. Yes, this was definitely next-level attraction. Was she feeling it too?

She quickly averted her gaze and pulled her hand away. That answered his question. Luckily, the flight attendant was finishing up with the row ahead of them. An awkward silence fell over them as they waited, and he worried she'd go back to pretending to read her book. But instead, she watched the flight attendant hand a plastic cup of wine to the woman seated in front of him.

Maybe he should offer to buy this woman a drink. That'd be the nice thing to do. He'd never been much of a drinker himself, and having a daughter made him even less interested in the stuff, but a drink could be just what the woman beside him needed.

"You know what I could really go for?" Faith said as the flight attendant rolled her cart toward them and handed each of them a small square napkin. "A diet soda. Do you have that? I never drink soda anymore. I know it's bad for me, but I've had a rough day."

Holden wasn't sure how long he sat there, staring at the woman, jaw gaping. He'd expected hard liquor with the first part of that statement, but diet soda was her indulgence? This woman was getting more intriguing by the second.

The flight attendant smiled down at her. "Sure do."

She named four different types of diet soda, and Faith thought about it a few extra seconds before finally deciding. She chose the last of the four that had been named.

"You know what?" he asked when the flight attendant turned to him. "I'll take a soda too, but not diet."

He named the sugary version of her diet one, and the flight attendant poured both. Meanwhile, they lowered their trays.

“You probably think I’m a weirdo,” she said. “Sitting here, crying over a broken engagement and consoling myself with a sugar-free carbonated beverage.”

He shook his head. “Sounds like my kind of woman.”

Whoa. Slow down, buddy. What was he saying?

He rushed to clarify. “My idea of a fun Friday night is watching an animated movie and sharing a bowl of popcorn on the sofa with my daughter.”

He had to add that last part because watching animated movies on a Friday night sounded strange without the daughter part of it.

“You’re a dad?” she asked. There was no mistaking the respect in her tone. “How many kids?”

“Just one,” he said. “She’s eight.”

He didn’t miss the way her stare quickly flashed to his left hand, which was settling the napkin under his drink. Nope. No wedding ring. He’d taken it off the day they signed the divorce papers.

“Do you live in Chicago?” she asked.

They were on a plane bound there, so that was a logical question. But Chicago was also a popular layover airport, especially for international flights like this one.

“No, I’m heading to East Tennessee,” he said. “A little town called Misty Mountain.”

She gasped just as he was lifting his cup to take a drink. He paused and eyed her curiously over the top of his drink.

“You’ve heard of it?” he asked.

“You could say that. It’s exactly where I’m heading. My family lives there.” She laughed. “I guess I’ll be there a while...or until I figure out what I’m going to do.”

“You’re from Misty Mountain?” he asked, hardly able to believe it. What were the odds he’d be seated next to someone from Misty Mountain on his flight from England to Chicago?

Faith nodded. “Born and raised. Not many people move there after the fact.”

She was giving him a strange look. He got it. He’d chosen a small mountain town *because* it was so small. Plus, it had a tourist trade, and he’d invested in a helicopter tour business that was thriving.

“I’m a newcomer,” he said. “But people have been good to me.”

She stared at him as though seeing him for the first time. If living in Misty Mountain was what it took to impress this woman, he was glad he made the move.

He lowered his drink and held it toward hers to propose a toast. “To Misty Mountain. Best town on Earth.”

She smiled and tapped her cup to his. They both took a drink, locking eyes. That was when he knew he didn’t want to walk off this plane and never see her again. They’d both live in Misty Mountain at the same time. He had to find some way to keep her in his life once they were both home.

Faith had planned to sleep on the flight from London to Chicago. Instead, she found herself sharing her life story with literally the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

Holden Pryce was his name, and his last name was a suitable one. The guy reeked of money. Yes, they were both seated in first class—a very expensive ticket, to say the least. Faith had gotten a last-minute upgrade from a sympathetic reservation worker at the airport. The worker also had an ended engagement in her past. The result was a nice, cushy seat in first class next to a super wealthy guy.

But it wasn't his current location that made him seem wealthy. It was the designer logo on his quarter-zip pullover and the jeans that looked way too well constructed. It was the way he carried himself—like he was confident in who he was. Like he owned the world and the rest of them were just allowed to share it with him.

“And that's my story up to now,” Faith said.

After dinner, they'd each snuggled under their separate blankets and reclined their chairs, pillows under their heads. This was the sort of easy conversation she should have been able to have with her ex, Dan. Things had never been like this between them. That should have probably been a red flag.

“So, your sisters are Charity and Ana Ardmore,” he said.

She smiled. “Charity, Faith, and Ana Grace. Grace makes more sense with Charity and Faith, I know, but Ana was

named for my grandmother. The plan was for her to go by Grace, but Ana stuck.”

“If you have a daughter someday, you can name her Hope,” Holden said.

Her smile fell slightly. He hadn’t meant any harm with those words. He didn’t know she was thirty years old with a ticking biological clock. As the dad of an eight-year-old, he’d already done the whole “get married and start a family” thing, so he wouldn’t grasp that kind of pressure.

“I met your sisters,” he said. “Charity and Ana. Ana was just at my house not long ago, and Charity and her boyfriend sat across from me at the dinner theater.”

“Boyfriend.” Faith stared at him, trying to comprehend that this guy—a complete stranger—knew more about her sisters than she did. “Charity has a boyfriend?”

Holden frowned. “Some guy named Nic.”

“Nic Winters?”

After thinking about that for a few seconds, he said, “Oh wait. I have it in my phone.” After tapping around for a couple of minutes, he found it. “Yes, Nic Winters.”

Charity and Nic were back together. Faith really had been out of touch.

“That might be good,” she said. “People will be all distracted by their romance. Nobody will be worrying about what’s going on with my pathetic love story.”

Holden had been returning his phone to the pocket attached to the seat in front of him, but her words seemed to give him reason for pause. He sat back, his blanket now having fallen to his lap.

“If you’re newly engaged, I imagine that will be the biggest news at Christmas,” he said. “You probably should just get it all out in the open from the start. Then everyone can forget about it.”

Yeah, that sounded easy enough, but he didn’t know her family. Her overachieving, super successful family.

“My dad’s the town dentist,” she said. “Everyone loves him. My younger sister Ana is a model and TV host.”

“*Fix It Up*,” he said. “They were shooting an episode of her show in town just last week.”

At those words, Faith’s jaw dropped. Nobody had told her that, either. Just how out of touch had she been?

She had to stay on track here. “Charity, the sister dating Nic, was a straight-A student all through school. Popular, homecoming queen...you name it. Now, she runs a successful interior design business.”

Holden wasn’t wowed by any of that. It shouldn’t surprise her, though. The man was obviously a success in his own right. But he didn’t know the history. He wasn’t the one who’d grown up feeling invisible in a town where everyone knew everyone else’s business.

“For a while, it was looking like I had my own exciting story,” Faith said.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. It was easier to open up this way. Even though he wasn’t looking at her right now, she felt his attention on her.

“I was the sister who moved to Europe, ran my own shop, and got engaged to an Englishman. It all sounded so exotic.”

“To whom?” he asked.

She couldn’t help but notice his use of the word “whom” instead of “who.” The guy was educated. It was what she’d admired so much about her ex. He was smart. Intelligent men made her feel secure.

“To the town,” she said. “People gossip in Misty Mountain. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him shrug. “I’m sure they do. I’ve got a lot going on. I don’t really have time to worry what people are saying about me.”

Now she looked at him, seeing him through the eyes of the people she’d grown up with. In that small town, a guy with apparent money and success who was also just about the best-

looking guy Faith had seen... Yeah, she could only imagine how people like Josephine Strongblossom and Judi Trapp had reacted to having a guy like him in town. No doubt they were watching his every move.

“Sometimes I think it’d be fun to give them something to talk about.” He laughed. “Something scandalous. There are no single women in town, really. It might be fun to hang out with a woman and get everyone really riled up. But I have my daughter to consider.”

“Your daughter could be in on it. She’d probably get a kick out of watching everyone gossip about nothing.”

Was it wrong to suggest he loop his daughter in on a deception? To be honest, though, the town gossips deserved it. In elementary school, Faith was friends with a girl whose parents divorced because both of them were having affairs with other parents in town. Eventually, that friend moved away because the gossips were so brutal toward her mom. Not her dad, who’d also been having an affair, and not the man who’d been having an affair with her mom. Just the women involved.

For that reason, Faith would love to see some of those people taken down a peg or two. But that wouldn’t happen. Instead, she’d be the one they’d gossip about. The woman who’d been sent to England on a six-month contract with her job, and while there, had fallen in love with the guy she’d met at the coffee shop next to his parents’ store. As far as locals knew, she’d just gotten engaged and was well on her way to planning her wedding.

Yeah, she’d definitely be feeding the gossips this Christmas.

“Honestly, I could use a wife right now.” Holden’s words snapped her attention right back over to him. “I’m trying to start a new venture. That’s why I was in England, meeting with investors. Would you believe they asked me if I was married?”

Faith frowned at him. “Isn’t that illegal?”



“In job interviews, maybe, but when someone’s giving you a bunch of money, all bets are off.” He sighed. “I told them I have a daughter and that my wife died.”

Faith gasped. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

Here she’d been, talking about her own problems, when this guy was a single dad to a girl who’d lost her mom. And he’d lost his wife. She felt like the most selfish person ever to walk the Earth.

“It’s been a while,” he said. “My daughter is eight, and we were divorced before her mom died. It just didn’t work out. I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

Her eyes went wide, but he still wasn’t looking at her. He stared straight ahead. Maybe it was easier for him to talk about it if she wasn’t looking at him. She shifted to stare straight ahead too.

“I usually don’t tell people that,” he said. “It’s just too complicated. I say her mother’s gone, and I have a nanny to help out, but finding a nanny has gotten a lot more difficult too. Moving to your small town...”

*Her* small town. Yeah, it still felt that way, even though she’d been gone for a couple of years. Funny how that worked.

“I guess my point is I could use a wife to help with the nanny situation and impress investors,” he said. “I could maybe get the investment money I want. But I plan to stay single until J.J.’s off to college. I want to give her my full attention. She deserves that. I just wish it wasn’t hurting me in business.”

“It’s just one investor.” She looked over at him again. “I’m sure there are plenty who will see you as an amazing man raising a daughter on your own while running what’s obviously a successful business. What is it you do, anyway?”

“Helicopter tours.”

He looked over at her. When their eyes met, she saw why it’d been easier to stare straight ahead. The air around them seemed charged when they looked at each other. It’d been even more intense when they’d shaken hands.

What would she do if he leaned forward and kissed her, right here, right now? Nobody was watching. Most of their surrounding passengers were asleep. Would she stop him? Absolutely not. She'd enjoy every second of it.

His gaze lowered to her mouth. He was thinking about it too. Maybe she should lean forward a little—

“Oh!” she said as the airplane jerked suddenly. It was slight—just enough to get her heart racing, and not in a good way.

She'd never really gotten comfortable with flying. A few flights back and forth to England didn't make her a seasoned traveler or anything. Faith gripped the blanket tighter, clutching fistfuls of the cloth as she looked around.

“It's okay,” he said. “Just a little turbulence. It's to be expected.”

His voice was calming, soothing. And suddenly, he asked a question that was so out of place, it must have been designed to calm her nerves.

“What about you? What do you do for a living?”

That was not a question that eased her mind. Not one bit.

“I'm unemployed, apparently.” She laughed. “I was transferred to England for work, but I quit that job when my fiancé's parents hired me to run their shop. I'm trained in hospitality management and have plenty of experience managing a store. I'm really good at running a business now, if you know anybody with a shop that needs managing.”

“Not off the top of my head.” He frowned and looked off into the distance as he seemed to think through some possibilities. “If I can get things going, I might eventually need some help. And my tour business sure could use someone to handle booking. We have software, but people still love to talk to someone on the phone.”

“I can help.”

Why had she blurted that out? She in no way planned to beg for a job from this guy.

“Do you have any experience as a nanny?” he asked.  
“That’s what I need help with most.”

That question pulled her attention back to his face, the drama with the plane slipping further from her mind. She shook her head.

But he continued to stare at her, studying her. His eyes narrowed. He was thinking of something. Coming up with an idea. And she suddenly found herself wondering just how much nannies were paid.

“I think I have an idea that would work for both of us,” he said. “Faith Ardmore, will you fake marry me?”

What seemed like a good idea forty thousand miles up in the air was sure to come crashing down once he was on land again.

And that was exactly what happened. With his feet planted firmly on the ground, Holden was questioning everything about this brilliant plan. A plan, by the way, that Faith had immediately dismissed as absurd.

Yet here they were, standing in the Ardmore family living room, explaining to a dentist and his well-educated wife that they were in love and planning to get married.

“I don’t understand,” Faith’s mom said, her eyes squarely on her daughter. “This isn’t the man you’re engaged to. This guy lives on a hill in Misty Lakes.”

“In Penny Pincher’s old house,” her dad, Dr. Ardmore, added.

“Penny Pincher.” Holden laughed.

It was a strange nickname, given simply because she’d put pennies on candy canes at Halloween back in the day. All he’d known until the gossip made its way to him was that an older lady lived in the house before him. After she died, her kids took care of putting the house on the market, and there it sat for several years until finally, he bought it.

“It was love at first sight,” Faith said with a shrug. “It happens. It only deepened on the flight over here.”

“We shared a common love for all things Misty Mountain,” he rushed to further explain.

“And the comforts of first class.” She tossed a smile at him, and their eyes met and held. “Great soda and soft, cushy blankets.”

They’d rehearsed all of this. She’d insisted her parents wouldn’t accept their story at first, and he’d believed her. But he hadn’t counted on the sparks that flew between them every time their eyes met. It was like nothing he’d ever experienced. Her parents *had* to be picking up on it.

“Ahem.” Her father cleared his throat as if in answer to his most recent thought.

“So, the two of you are getting married?” her mom asked, her gaze darting back and forth between Holden and Faith. “When?”

“Probably spring.” Faith shrugged. “I’ll be staying in his house at least until I find a place of my own.”

“You absolutely will not.” Her mother glanced over at her father before continuing. “We don’t believe in living together before marriage.”

Holden broke in there, glad they’d prepared for this particular part of the conversation. “I have a mother-in-law suite. Your Penny Pincher friend had that whole wing closed off. She didn’t want to pay for utilities. But I opened it all back up.”

“Best of all, you could always move in someday if you need it,” Faith said with a big smile. She’d mentioned that during their planning too, and they’d both gotten a laugh. “It has its own bathroom and kitchen. Everything you need to live. Besides, I won’t be living there for free.”

She’d agreed to help Holden with his business and his daughter in exchange for a place to stay. It was the perfect arrangement for her right now. She could get some money coming in, as well as boost her resume by including her work with his business.

It benefited him too. He needed help with his daughter and a fake relationship for work purposes. It was the perfect arrangement for both of them.

“I’ll also be helping with his business,” Faith told her mom. “And his daughter.”

That was when her mom took a seat. They’d all been standing, having broken the news as soon as they walked through the front door.

“You have a child,” Mrs. Ardmore said. “I knew that, but I totally forgot about it in all the ruckus.”

Holden immediately went into defensive mode. “She’s eight. No trouble at all. I just need someone I trust to keep an eye on her, especially when I have to go out of town on business.”

He was trying to get this new venture going, but he needed capital. All his other funds were tied up in investments, so he had to track down the cold, hard cash necessary to start up something new.

But Mrs. Ardmore didn’t need to know any of that. She didn’t care about those boring details, anyway. What she wanted to know was how this was going to affect her family. In particular, her family’s reputation. He might have grown up in New York City, but gossip wasn’t limited to small towns. As a divorced single dad, he could speak from personal experience on that.

“I’ll take good care of your daughter,” Holden told both of them. And he meant every word of it. They might not be getting married for real, but she’d be in good hands as long as she was working for him and living under his roof. “She’ll be staying in what could technically be called the nanny’s quarters. I’ll make sure people know we’re not living together like we’re married.”

“Nanny’s quarters,” Dr. Ardmore said. “I’m pretty sure those are two words that have never been uttered within Misty Mountain city limits.”

“Not about real life here,” Mrs. Ardmore said. “I’ve seen it in some movies, though.”

“And that British TV show we were watching.” Dr. Ardmore looked over at his wife. “Remember, we were joking about Faith living like that over there in England.”

“Little did we know, she’d be living that way here in our very town.” Mrs. Ardmore shifted her gaze to her daughter. “So, do we need to talk about the situation in England?”

“Are you going back, you know, to get your stuff?” Dr. Ardmore asked.

“Everything I own is in my luggage.” Faith gestured toward the door.

They’d tossed her bags in the back of Holden’s SUV when they arrived at the Knoxville Airport. They were both exhausted, so he’d let her nap on the long drive, telling her not to worry about a thing. He’d done enough worrying for both of them on that last part of the trip.

“Speaking of my SUV, we really need to be going,” Holden said.

He hated to be a party pooper, but he’d been gone for five days. As jet lagged as he was, he was dying to see his daughter. Besides, he’d burdened the town pastor and his wife enough. Mrs. Murray had volunteered to watch his daughter, refusing to take any money for her trouble. He planned to drop a generous tithe on the Baptist church website as a thank you.

“You have to come back for dinner,” Mrs. Ardmore said, pushing herself to her feet. Her husband, who was still standing, reached out as though to offer help, but she didn’t need it. Not tonight. “I know you both are probably tired, but it’s Christmas Eve.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Holden saw Faith take a deep breath. She knew she had to do the family thing. But they had gotten zero minutes of sleep.

“She’ll be here,” Holden said, looking over at Faith with a smile. “There’s plenty of time to nap this afternoon.”

“You’re invited to dinner too,” Mrs. Ardmore said to him. “I’d love to meet that daughter of yours. She has the most beautiful voice. I heard her sing at the square.”

That drew Faith’s gaze back to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her eyebrows were arched and her mouth slightly open. She was curious.

“Thank you,” he said. “That means a lot. And we’d love to come for dinner. If that’s okay, of course.”

Now Mrs. Ardmore broke into a big smile, and he let out a sigh of relief. She wasn’t just extending the offer out of politeness. She’d genuinely welcomed him and J.J. to her home for dinner.

There was another reason for that sigh of relief, though. The pressure to make Christmas Eve special no longer rested solely on his shoulders. They’d have something to do—something besides eating takeout alone in the kitchen while talking about where Santa and his sleigh might be.

“That was something,” Faith said as they walked toward his Range Rover. “I still don’t think they believed us.”

Holden had been digging his keys from his pocket, but those words froze his movements. “What do you mean?”

She stopped in front of the passenger door. He’d locked it—not necessary in this town, but he still had New York habits. That meant she had to wait for him to hit the button on the key fob.

But he didn’t stop with unlocking the door. He pulled it open for her and waited for her to climb in. She didn’t move immediately, though. She had more to say.

“My parents are pretty smart,” she said. “I don’t think they bought for a second that we’re really engaged.”

“So, they think we’re scamming them for some reason?” he asked. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“No.” She shook her head and looked back at the house, still not making a move to climb into the now-open vehicle. “They’re probably curious what we’re up to, so they’ll go



along with it. Mark my words. When we finally tell the truth, they'll say they knew it all along."

Holden mulled that over as he secured her inside the vehicle, then walked around to the driver's side, glancing back at the house in the process. It was decorated for Christmas, but not the children's wonderland he'd created for his own daughter. No, this was a much cozier Christmas look, complete with lights, wreaths, and a Christmas tree showing through the front window.

As they were backing out of the driveway, he asked his next question. "Do you think they'll tell your sisters we're pretending?"

Stopping at the end of the driveway, he glanced at her. She was biting her bottom lip as though thinking through his words.

"I don't think they will," she finally said. "Which means the secret stays between us and my parents."

"And my daughter," he said, pressing the gas pedal. "It'll be like a fun game."

But Holden couldn't deny the pit in his stomach. He worried he was setting a bad example for his daughter, and that gave him second thoughts about what he'd agreed to do. But he'd made a commitment. And besides, he was enjoying spending time in Faith's company. He had a feeling J.J. would like her as much as he did.

And that was what had him smiling as he flipped on the radio and switched the station to the one that played Christmas music.

Faith normally loved kids. They tried her patience at the store, but that had only been because parents tended to treat those aisles as a daycare. Kids would run up and down, sometimes even knocking things off and breaking them. Faith had been told to try to reduce it but not make parents pay when it happened.

As she stood on Pastor Murray's front porch, though, fear gripped her. What if she wasn't a good nanny? What if his daughter hated her on sight?

That last one was a real possibility. After all, her mother had died after her parents split up. Even knowing all this was pretend, she might give Faith a hard time. That was what happened with stepmoms in movies and books, anyway.

"Why, Faith Ardmore," Mrs. Murray said as she opened the door to see Faith and Holden standing there. "I heard you'd be spending Christmas Eve with your new fiancé in London."

Faith winced. Yeah, this wasn't going to be easy. How could she have imagined it would?

"She's with me now," Holden said.

His tone was a little brisk. This time, Faith held in her wince, instead giving a big smile. A smile that said, "I'm happier than ever, despite being dumped just days ago."

"Wow." Mrs. Murray looked from Holden to Faith. "Well, I'd say it surprises me, but weird things have been happening

in this town this Christmas. All year, actually. This seems to be the town to come to if you want to find love. Right now, there's all this stuff about mistletoe."

"Mistletoe?" Faith looked over at Holden, who shook his head, as if to say, "Don't ask me."

"It's hanging all over this town," Mrs. Murray said. "You'll see. Every restaurant, shop... Look at me, standing here, yakking your ears off. You probably want to see your daughter. Come on in."

Your daughter. The words were no doubt meant for Holden, but they hit Faith in a way she hadn't expected. Was that what strangers would think when they saw the three of them together? Two parents, one daughter? She'd never been seen as a parent before, and she'd thought she had at least a year before she even started thinking about being one.

But now she was fake engaged to a dad. She was a future stepmom. That was how people would see her, anyway. Weird, but the thought of that was like that big, cushy blanket she'd snuggled beneath on her first-class flight here. Or maybe it was being next to Holden that gave her that feeling.

Safe. Secure. Like she'd finally come home.

"Daddy!"

The voice came from behind Mrs. Murray, who stepped back, pulling the door with her. She revealed a girl with long, wavy dark hair who wore a long-sleeved red T-shirt with the words *Santa loves me* printed on the front. Her red-and-white striped leggings matched the stripes on her sleeves.

Holden stepped through the door and grabbed his daughter in a big hug. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed like she didn't want him to get away again. Faith could only stand there, staring at the scene. It was the most touching thing she'd witnessed in as long as she could remember.

"She's been asking about you all day," Mrs. Murray said. "Couldn't wait for you to get here."

“We found a Santa tracker app,” the girl said, leaning back to look up at him. “Can you put it on your phone?”

“Sure.” Holden suddenly looked over at Faith, as though just remembering she was still standing there in the cold with the door open.

“Oh dear, come on in,” Mrs. Murray said, obviously realizing that at the same time he did. “It’s cold out there.”

“We should be going anyway.” Holden looked down at his daughter. “Go get your stuff.”

“It’s right there.” Holden’s daughter pointed to an area to the right of her against the wall. Faith couldn’t quite see that area from where she stood. “Are you my new nanny?”

That was directed at Faith, who hadn’t prepared an answer. Her gaze flew to Holden’s face for help.

He glanced at Faith before returning his attention to his daughter. “Why don’t we get going? I’ll explain in the car.”

As Holden scooped up a backpack and coat, the girl continued to stare at Faith. The stare wasn’t filled with suspicion or even animosity, though. She seemed genuinely curious about what was going on here, and how could Faith blame her?

“It was so nice having you here, J.J.,” Mrs. Murray said to the girl as her father helped her put on her coat. “Any time you want to come back and spend the night, you’re more than welcome. My kids are grown now, and I didn’t realize how much I missed having a little one around.”

Faith felt Mrs. Murray’s eyes on the three of them as they headed out the door. There was something about the way she watched them that said she was missing being a young parent herself. Faith had all that ahead of her—just not with this man. Despite how gloomy things had seemed twenty-four hours ago, she was now filled with hope for the future, thanks to the strange deal they’d struck.

Holden waited until they were buckled in and the car was started before introducing them. “J.J., this is Faith Ardmere. You remember Miss Ana, right?”

“Ana Ardmore.” J.J. gasped. “I got to be on her show.”

Faith smiled back at her. “That’s my sister.”

Although she’d twisted uncomfortably in her seat to look at Holden’s daughter, Faith felt far more relaxed now that she knew Holden’s daughter wasn’t going to hate her on sight.

“Miss Charity is Faith’s sister too,” Holden said. J.J. frowned and tilted her head slightly, at which point her father prompted, “We met her at the dinner theater, remember? With Nic.”

“I remember.” J.J. nodded. “They were nice.”

She still couldn’t believe she’d missed the news that her sister and Nic were back together. That her sister was dating someone seriously, period. How had she missed such important family news?

But Faith knew the answer to that. She’d been pretty self-absorbed for the last few months. Getting engaged was a big thing, and she’d already thrown herself into wedding planning. When combined with getting all her Christmas gifts purchased and shipped, she just lacked the mental energy to focus on anything but making it through the day.

“We have a secret to tell you,” Holden said.

He was twisted around in his seat too, but he didn’t have to twist quite as far. J.J. was seated directly behind Faith, making it easy for Holden to see her from the driver’s seat.

J.J. looked from her dad to Faith and back again. “You got married on your business trip.”

Holden didn’t say anything at first. Faith watched in her peripheral vision as his eyes widened and his mouth fell open. He was speechless.

But Faith wasn’t. “We’re pretending to be engaged.” She glanced over at Holden, whose expression had softened a little. He nodded in what she assumed was approval for her to continue. “Your dad needs a little help with work stuff for the next few weeks, and I just want the gossips to stop speculating about me.”

J.J. frowned. “So, you’re not my new nanny?”

Faith nodded. “That’s exactly what I am. But we’re pretending to everyone else we’re more than that. Does that make sense?”

“I don’t believe in lying,” Holden said. “You know that. But I also have a really big business thing coming up, and it seems like being engaged might help with that.”

There was confidence in his tone, but Faith knew the internal struggle. He’d mentioned it while they were waiting at the airport during their layover. They grabbed coffees and sat at their gate, working out their plan. It had been a good move since they’d been on a packed flight and hadn’t been able to sit together.

“It’s more like a game,” Faith said, just as they’d planned. “We’re having fun with all the people around here who can’t stay out of our business.”

“I *so* get that.” J.J. rolled her eyes.

“You do?” her dad asked. There was surprise mixed with relief in his tone. He’d been afraid she’d tell them it wasn’t nice to lie, at which point they probably would have dropped the whole plan. It was clear that his daughter was his world.

“So, Chase is my friend, right?” J.J. started. But Amber A. —” She looked over at Faith and said, “That’s what I call her because there are four Ambers in my class. Anyway, she told Camryn that I must like Chase. I think she likes him. But now Chase won’t talk to me anymore. If people would just mind their own business.” She shook her head. “It’s so ridic.”

“Ridic?” Faith looked at Holden.

“Short for ridiculous,” he told her. Shaking his head, he started the car. “Let’s get home. I have some work to finish, and we all need to rest up for tonight.”

Faith had a smile on her face as they headed up the hill toward Holden’s gigantic house. She was going to like hanging out with this eight-year-old for the next few weeks. In fact, she might enjoy it so much she’d have a tough time leaving when the time came.

Holden would feel guilty about the work Mrs. Ardmore had put into this Christmas Eve dinner, but she seemed just about the happiest person he'd ever seen. She wore a Santa hat and dangling snowball earrings with a red cardigan covered in Christmas designs. Her husband wore a plain red sweater that he'd no doubt chosen to match his wife's.

"I'm so glad you could join us, Mr. Pryce," Mrs. Ardmore said as she crumbled corn chips on top of her chili.

This was the Ardmore Christmas Eve tradition, Faith had explained. A chili buffet that included options like spaghetti noodles, corn chips, cheese and sour cream, and crackers. Holden was a simple man. He just crumbled crackers on his. But J.J. was loving the whole chili pie thing.

"Please, call me Holden," he said. "I'll be family soon."

"I still can't believe you're engaged to a different guy than before." Charity shook her head.

"I know," Mr. Ardmore said. "I was all excited to head over to Europe for a wedding this spring. Hey, why'd you kick me?"

He stared at his wife, seated catty-corner from him at one end of the table. She shot him a glare.

Holden got it. Mentioning the European wedding was probably rubbing salt in what was still a very new wound. But Faith, seated on the other side of J.J., didn't seem bothered by

it. She was busy crumbling crackers on top of her chili, which she'd piled on top of noodles.

"I can't believe it surprises you," Mrs. Ardmore said. "Everyone's coupling up these days in this town."

"They didn't meet in this town," Charity said. "Plus, there was no mistletoe bringing them together."

Faith spoke up then. "Mistletoe?"

Charity rolled her eyes before explaining. "Noelle and I plastered this town in mistletoe just before Thanksgiving weekend. She needed something to cheer her up. All the stuff with her dad dying—"

"Oh yeah," Faith said. "How's her mom doing?"

"Pretty well. The mistletoe was just to bring a little cheer to our town."

"A little *love*," Mrs. Ardmore corrected. "We had plenty of cheer."

"Our goal was to get three couples together before the new year," Charity said.

"I thought it was by Christmas," Nic paused eating to say.

"Nope." Charity shook her head. "The end of the year. And I say Noelle and Enzo count too. They kissed under the mistletoe before all of us."

"But Noelle said three more couples would get together under the mistletoe *after* she and Enzo kissed," Nic pointed out.

"Enzo Reeser and Noelle are a couple now?" Faith asked. "Just how long have I been out of town?"

"This has all happened since Thanksgiving," Mrs. Ardmore said.

"We also moved to town while you were away," J.J. said. "That's big news, right?"

"Huge." Mr. Ardmore smiled at Holden's little girl. "And there's still plenty of time for one more couple to get together



by January first.”

“What are you talking about?” Mrs. Ardmore said. “There’s a happy couple sitting right here. Faith and Holden. That’s your third couple.”

“But the mistletoe didn’t bring them together,” Charity said. “That’s the point. They have to kiss under the mistletoe and fall in love.”

Mrs. Ardmore nodded toward the back of the house. “I have some mistletoe hanging right out there on the back porch. Remind me after dinner, and we’ll make that happen.”

She said that as though him kissing Faith Ardmore was a chore she’d check off her list. He’d been thinking about kissing Faith since he first looked into her eyes on that plane. But that had been less than twenty-four hours ago, so it wasn’t like he’d had all that long to dwell on it.

“You’re missing the point,” Charity said, setting down her spoon and wiping her mouth before continuing. “Mistletoe has to kick off the romance to count. Holden and Faith already fell in love over in England, then flew over here together to celebrate Christmas.”

Yes, that was the story they’d spun. It had been a bit too over the top to suggest they met on the plane overnight and had not only fallen in love but decided to get married. People would naturally assume she’d met him and called off her engagement to the other guy, and that was what they’d let everyone think.

He was just hoping people would be polite enough not to ask too many questions. The whole lying thing just wasn’t within his comfort zone.

“I suppose you’re right,” Mrs. Ardmore said.

“You should kiss under the mistletoe anyway,” J.J. said.

Of all the things he might have expected to happen next, that would have been the last. Holden looked over at his daughter, who was happily adding more sour cream to her bowl of chili like she hadn’t just said something outrageous.

“What do you know about kissing under the mistletoe?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “I see movies.”

Then she smiled at him before spooning another heap of beans, corn chips, and way too much sour cream into her mouth. His eyes met Faith’s over his daughter’s head. She seemed to be fighting a smile.

At least she was in good spirits about this whole conversation. He, meanwhile, was struggling to imagine what it would be like to kiss Faith Ardmore. Or even put his arms around her and pull her close.

Yeah, maybe this dating boycott was starting to get to him.

“The Baptist church has its Christmas Eve service tonight,” Charity said. “We should all go. That was something we always did growing up.”

“You kids go do that,” Mrs. Ardmore said. “I’m going to turn in early. It’s been a long day, with one daughter leaving town and the other coming back.”

That was right. They’d mentioned Ana had headed off to the Virgin Islands for a shoot that morning. Mrs. Ardmore had expected to have two daughters for Christmas, and that was exactly what she’d gotten. They just hadn’t been the two she’d originally assumed.

“Can we go, Daddy?” J.J. asked. “Can we, can we?”

“I don’t know. We probably should get to bed early. You know what they say about Santa.”

“He’s still on the other side of the world,” she said. “We have plenty of time.”

How could he argue with that logic? She’d been checking his app all afternoon, so she was more aware of Santa’s supposed whereabouts than anyone. Plus, Holden loved that his daughter wanted to go to church on Christmas Eve. He just hoped it was a tradition she would continue as she got older.

“I’m all rested up,” Faith said with a smile. “But I’m not sure Misty Mountain’s ready for us to make a public

appearance as a couple yet.”

“Oh, everyone will be so happy to see you.” Mrs. Ardmore clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Josephine and Betty have been asking about you.”

“I’m sure they have,” Nic said. “They like to stay on top of all the local gossip.”

The gossips. Holden had heard about them.

“Yeah, those are the ones I’m worried about,” Faith said. “If they see us together, it’ll be all over town by morning.”

Holden shrugged. “May as well get it out there. But I’ll bet people will be so distracted by it being Christmas Eve, nobody will even notice us.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Faith said. “If we’re the center of attention, you owe me a peppermint latte first thing the morning after Christmas.”

He thought about that for a second. He’d never been a guy to pass up a good bet. Not when it was something fun like this.

“And what if I’m right and nobody notices us?” he asked.

“Then I’ll owe you a latte?”

He shook his head. “You haven’t seen my coffeemaker.”

“It’s fancy,” J.J. said. “It even makes the foamy stuff on top.”

“I love cold foam on my coffee,” Mrs. Ardmore said. “I may just head on over to your house for coffee tomorrow morning.”

“Come on over,” he said. “In fact, you’re all invited. J.J. will be opening her gifts, and then we’ll just be sitting around.”

“Can we make cinnamon rolls, Dad?” J.J. asked.

He smiled at her. “Sure.”

“Sounds amazing,” Charity said. “But you two have to come with Faith for Mom’s Christmas lunch.”

“Two o’clock.” Mrs. Ardmore pointed at Holden. “Be here.”

“We will,” J.J. said. When she saw her dad flash a look in her direction, she just shrugged. “I can’t wait.”

How could he argue with that?

“You didn’t say what Faith owes you if you win the bet,” Nic said.

There was mischief in his eyes as his gaze skidded from Faith back to Holden. The first thing that popped into Holden’s mind was a kiss. No mistletoe required. But he wouldn’t want her to kiss him as part of some sort of wager. And besides, everyone else at this table would assume they’d already kissed at least once if they were engaged.

So, he came up with a great idea.

“If I’m right about the crowd at the church, you get to take J.J. to the ice show next week,” he said.

“The one with fairytale characters?” Mrs. Ardmore asked. “That seems like so much fun.”

“Yeah, that sounds like more of a reward to me.” Faith flashed a smile at J.J., who smiled back. “But I wouldn’t want to take your ticket.”

“It’s okay,” J.J. said. “Dad just looks at his watch the whole time.”

Guilt slammed into Holden. His smartwatch was constantly buzzing with one alert or another. He tried to limit how often he glanced at it, but if an emergency popped up with his helicopter tour company, he needed to be on top of it.

“You know what?” Holden asked. “I’ll get an extra ticket so all three of us can go. And I’ll leave my watch at home.”

He could work that out with his pilot. Maybe tell him to call his phone multiple times in a row if there was an emergency situation.

“And if I lose the bet tonight, I’ll buy the refreshments,” Faith said.

All the talk about the ice show had veered his mind off track. Oh, yeah. They'd been talking about going to the Christmas Eve church service together.

"All I know is you kids had better get going," Mrs. Ardmore said. "The service starts in less than half an hour, and you still have to park."

Those words got everyone going. Chairs were scraping against the floor and dishes were being rushed over to the sink, all while Mrs. Ardmore urged everyone to leave the dishes to her. But Charity and Faith double teamed at the sink and had the dishwasher loaded in a matter of minutes while Holden and the other guys cleared off the table.

Only as they were rushing out the door did it hit him just how happy he was. It was the feeling of family. He mulled it over all the way to the church, and as he pulled into the parking lot, he figured it out. Family. This feeling of being surrounded by people who loved each other. It was something that had been sorely missing in his and his daughter's lives.

He just hoped he and J.J. wouldn't get too used to it.

**H**olden owed Faith a peppermint latte. That much was clear as soon as they walked through the door of the biggest church in Misty Mountain.

Not that there was a doubt in her mind. She knew this town. She had full faith that they'd be the center of attention at the Christmas Eve service.

"Faith, I didn't know you were home."

"Who's this handsome man?"

"Is this the fiancé we've been hearing about?"

And those were only the questions from the people immediately surrounding them after they chose a pew toward the back. They didn't even have to walk up the aisle to draw the attention of those seated in the front three-fourths of the church.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Pastor Murray appeared in front of the congregation. But she only fully relaxed once everyone was absorbed in his words.

"I guess I owe you a latte," Holden whispered in her ear as they sat down after the second hymn.

She looked over at him with the intention of flashing him a victorious smile. Instead, their eyes met, and her breath caught. Yes, she was attracted to him. That was a given. But was it possible he felt the same?

No, a guy like him would never be interested in an average person like her. He might date a small-town woman, but when it came to marriage, super-successful guys married super-successful women. Or at least women who felt at home at fancy dinners and expensive charity fundraisers.

“Dad,” J.J. said when the service ended and everyone was standing. “Can I go say hi to Mrs. Murray?”

“Of course,” Holden said. “We’ll just go grab some hot chocolate. Meet us in the lobby.”

The lobby was packed, and the line for hot chocolate stretched halfway across the room. That didn’t deter Holden, though. He headed straight for it, and Nic joined him.

“Talk to me,” Charity said once they were alone. “You really fell in love with this guy that quickly?”

She hated lying to my sister, but somehow it didn’t feel like that much of a lie. Faith wasn’t in love with him, but she could see how it could easily happen if she stood even the remotest chance of winning over a guy like him.

“We just clicked,” Faith said. “I can’t explain it beyond that.”

Charity smiled and glanced over at Nic. “I can relate. Obviously, I didn’t just meet Nic for the first time, but we definitely clicked in a way we didn’t as kids in high school.”

Faith shrugged. “There’s something about the life experience that you bring to a relationship when you’re older.”

“I think some call that baggage.” Charity laughed. “Are you sure you’re okay with the other engagement falling through?”

Faith nodded again. She was surprised how easily the lie came, and how much it felt like truth.

“It was never right between us. Deep down, I knew that. He was charming and handsome, and I was over there alone. I think I was just looking for some security.”

Charity’s eyes widened. “It’s a good thing it fell through, then. Can you imagine if you’d ended up married to him and

realized all this too late?”

Everything had happened so quickly, Faith hadn't had time to process it all, but Charity's words hit home. What if she'd actually married Dan? She would have uprooted her entire life to move over there permanently, only to realize later that he was all wrong for her.

Or, far more likely, what if they'd gotten married, only for him to realize he was in love with his lifelong friend? Faith would've had to rush home, tail between her legs, with a failed marriage behind her.

“Yes, I definitely dodged a bullet,” Faith said.

“I hope this means you're moving back for good,” Charity said. “It would be awesome to have my big sister back. Especially if we could talk Ana into it too.”

Those words brought a tidal wave of emotions. Faith wanted to be here in Misty Mountain. She wanted the comforts of home, being surrounded by people she loved.

There was a problem with that, though. It was only a matter of time before the entire town thought she was in love with Holden Pryce. Not just in love with him but engaged to him. They'd expect wedding planning and then a wedding, but sooner or later, she'd have to admit they'd been lying all along. And that would be even more embarrassing than admitting her engagement to some guy on the other side of the world had ended.

Maybe she hadn't thought this through.

“Got it!” Nic called out as they approached.

He held two disposable coffee cups while Holden somehow managed to balance three. Faith grabbed two of them, already scanning the area for signs of J.J. She wasn't out here yet.

“There's your mistletoe,” Nic said.

“What do you know?” Charity smiled. “I wouldn't think you'd find mistletoe in a church lobby, but there it is.”

“You didn't hang that one?” Holden asked.



“Nope. It was probably Mrs. Murray. She’s a bit of a romantic.”

This whole conversation was happening as Holden and Faith quietly sipped their cocoa. It was delicious—rich and creamy. Just what she needed to soothe herself right now.

“So, here’s what we do.” Nic looked back over at the piece of greenery hanging from the ceiling near the Christmas tree. “You two kiss. I’ll snap a picture and send it to Noelle, telling her we found her third couple. She wins.”

“What does she win?” Holden asked.

Faith couldn’t seem to form words. Her heart was beating so fast, she was sure everyone around her could hear it.

“Noelle will probably say it doesn’t count because you two were engaged before you kissed,” Charity said.

“She might not know that, though,” Nic said. “It can’t hurt to try.”

Faith watched this interchange between her sister and a guy they’d known most of their lives. A guy she’d previously known as her sister’s ex. What if this wasn’t about Noelle and some bet? Was it possible the two of them suspected Faith and Holden were putting on an act? Maybe their fixation on the mistletoe was a way to push the two of them together.

No, that was absurd. Nic and Charity wouldn’t play matchmaker like that, would they?

“Let’s do it,” Holden said, his words jerking Faith from her thoughts.

“I’ll hold your drink,” Nic said.

That left her hand free for Holden to grab. As she adjusted to the comfortable feel of his hand around hers, he tugged her toward the tree.

Luckily, the lobby had emptied at lightning speed after everyone had grabbed some of the free cocoa, so they wouldn’t have much of an audience. It was Christmas Eve. Everyone was eager to get home.

Was it her imagination, or was he moving awfully quickly toward that mistletoe? He was practically pulling her along, and it wasn't like she was dragging her feet. Was it possible he was eager to kiss her? Or maybe it was just to get this over with so everyone would leave them alone.

When he turned to face her, she went a little weak in the knees, but she managed to place herself under the mistletoe. That put her close to him—so close.

“We have to do it,” he said with a smile, tilting his head slightly to the left. “For our audience.”

Everything about that smile told her he wasn't just doing this for the audience. It was flirtatious. She'd never had a man this handsome flirt with her.

He reached up with one hand and touched the side of her face, brushing his thumb along her cheek. She held her breath, knowing if she didn't, a sigh would slip out.

And then his head was lowering toward hers. The breath she'd been holding seeped out just before his lips touched hers. That one kiss told her that her life would never be the same.

**H**olden had expected this kiss to be mind-blowing. But there was one thing he hadn't expected. That he wouldn't want it to stop.

And that was a problem, considering they were in a church lobby. Off to the side, yes, but still visible to anyone who happened to look over in their direction.

Faith tasted like chocolate. No surprise, considering they'd both been sipping it seconds ago. But on her lips, it was somehow sweeter, more intoxicating.

How long could he get away with standing here under this mistletoe, kissing her like this? The rest of his life wouldn't be long enough.

“Awesome!”

The word, said on a whisper-shout, made its way to his ears. He knew that whisper-shout. He'd know it anywhere. And nothing would force the end of this kiss like his daughter's voice.

He stepped back and dropped his hands to his sides, feeling like a criminal who'd been caught in the act. *No, I wasn't kissing that woman. It was just your imagination.*

When he finally dared a glance in that direction, J.J. stood between Nic and Charity, a big smile on her face. In her hands was one of the cups of cocoa.

The three of them weren't the only ones watching. The pastor's wife stood behind J.J., smiling at the two of them.

“It’s so good to see someone making use of that mistletoe,” Mrs. Murray said. “And a newly engaged couple at that.”

Holden let out a sigh of relief that at least that piece of gossip made its way around town. Being new here, the last thing he’d want was for the town to label him as some sort of womanizer.

“Couple number three!” J.J. said. “Miss Charity’s friend said three couples would get together under the mistletoe this year.”

“I’d say it’s more than three,” Mrs. Murray said. “Why, the pastor and I might have even kissed under the mistletoe a time or two this year. They hung that stuff all over town.”

Holden couldn’t help but smile that the pastor and his wife still kissed under the mistletoe. He could only hope to be that in love once he reached their age.

What was he saying? He wasn’t going to be married that many years. If he did marry again, it would be after J.J. was grown, and by then he’d already be in his late forties.

“Three *new* couples,” Charity clarified. “And I think the rule is that the mistletoe brought them together.”

“Or what?” Mrs. Murray looked over at Charity, who’d now turned slightly to face her. That made Holden aware that he and Faith were still standing under the mistletoe.

“Just some sort of game Noelle is playing with her boyfriend, Officer Reeser,” Charity said.

“Well, tell him he needs to lighten up,” Mrs. Murray said. “Mistletoe brings everyone together. These two are probably more in love after kissing under that mistletoe than they were before.”

The whole group looked over at Holden and Faith. What a strange thing to say. Why would they be more in love now than the other times they’d kissed?

But they hadn’t kissed before tonight. He’d almost forgotten about that.

“We should probably get going,” Holden said, if for no reason than to stop this conversation before it got really awkward. “I’m sure someone will wake me up way too early in the morning to open her presents.”

“Are you staying with your parents, dear?” Mrs. Murray asked Faith.

Holden certainly hadn’t expected that question to pop up so soon. “She’s staying with us in the nanny quarters. It’s a separate area of the house. She’ll be helping with my business and with J.J. over the next few weeks.”

Wait. That was the real arrangement. Maybe he shouldn’t have shared that. But he definitely wanted to make sure people didn’t think they were living together, especially since it might eventually come out that they weren’t getting married.

“Oh, how nice,” Mrs. Murray said. “I know J.J. is going to love having you around.”

J.J. was beaming as she looked over at Faith, and that filled his heart with happiness. All Holden cared about was that J.J. was okay with everything. But that brought a new problem, and it hit him as they said their goodbyes and headed toward the door. What if J.J. got attached to Faith? It would break her heart when their arrangement ended and they had to split up. How did he protect his daughter against that?

What had he gotten them into?

Faith was alone. Completely alone. The full force of it hit her the next morning when she woke up in a gigantic bedroom that smelled like fresh paint.

“I should have spent the night at my mom’s house,” she said as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and pushed herself to her feet.

Those thoughts continued as she brushed her teeth and tried to make her hair look less bedhead-ish. She was in the process of heading back out to the room to get dressed when a sound outside her door stopped her in her tracks. It was followed by J.J.’s voice.

“Miss Faith? You have to come see.”

Faith looked over at the three pieces of luggage against the wall. One was on the ground, open, with only her nightgown and makeup bag missing from it. The nightgown was on her body and her makeup bag was in the bathroom.

“I have to get dressed,” Faith said.

“Put on your robe and come on,” J.J. said. “I’ll wait.”

She’d wait. What robe? She didn’t have a robe. She probably should get one, though, especially if she was going to be living here.

“It’s in the closet,” J.J. said. “Dad keeps it there for guests.”

Holden kept a robe in the closet for his guests? That sounded pretty fancy.

Sure enough, when she opened the door, a burgundy-colored velvety robe was the only thing hanging there, aside from a bunch of empty hangers. She reached out and touched it, feeling the smooth cloth beneath her skin. It wasn't just some cheap robe he'd bought at a discount department store. No, this was the kind of robe seen in luxury hotels.

"I'll be right there!" Faith called out, pulling the robe from its hanger.

Her entire body relaxed as the material wrapped itself around her. This was the next best thing to having Holden wrap his big, strong arms around her and pull her into a hug.

J.J. nearly fell into the room when Faith pulled the door open. Apparently, she'd been leaning against it. She looked up at Faith, her big smile lighting up her eyes. Faith couldn't help but notice she wore a similarly plush pink robe, but hers had the face of some sort of cartoon character covering it in a pattern.

But Faith barely got to look at it before J.J. called out, "Let's go!" and took off, running as fast as her legs would carry her toward the stairs.

They crossed the little bridge that went over the driveway to the other part of the house. Faith half-expected J.J. to rush through the doorway, letting it slam behind her, but instead, she stopped just outside of it and waited for Faith.

"There are some presents for you too," J.J. announced as they passed through the door.

"How—"

Faith stopped herself from finishing that question. In J.J.'s eyes, Santa would have brought the gifts, so it wouldn't be weird to her that there were gifts under the tree for someone who hadn't even lived in this house—in this town—twenty-four hours ago.

"Good morning." Holden was seated on the sofa next to the tree, holding a mug of coffee. "I made one for you. Extra

creamer, two packs of sugar.”

He gestured toward the end table on the other side of the loveseat where he sat. There were only two cushions, one for each of them.

“You remembered.”

She smiled. There was something comforting about that. They’d both had coffee on the plane as they were approaching Chicago. She wouldn’t have imagined he’d paid attention to how she preferred her coffee, let alone remember it a day later.

“Of course,” he said. “There was no time to waste.”

He looked so content. She walked over to the loveseat and sat before grabbing her coffee mug. She definitely needed some caffeine to deal with her natural reaction to how handsome he was this morning. He wore pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved jersey shirt. The pajama bottoms were dark green with white Christmas trees all over them. On his head sat a baseball cap, but enough of his wavy, sandy blond hair poked out to let her know he was trying to contain his bedhead.

“Everybody opens our presents together, right?” J.J. asked.

“Why don’t you get started on a few?” Holden asked. “That’ll give us a chance to wake up.”

J.J. didn’t argue with that. She settled on the floor in front of the tree, shuffling through the presents to find the one she wanted to open first. They were all wrapped, even the ones from Santa.

“How did you have time to do all this?” she whispered after the initial dose of caffeine had cleared her mind a little. “Did you have help?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “I wish. I did most of it before I left on my trip. But things were still being delivered yesterday afternoon. I was rushing to wrap them.”

Faith glanced over to make sure the eight-year-old wasn’t listening. She was making so much noise, ripping wrapping



paper off a large box, she wouldn't be able to hear them if she tried. She clearly wasn't trying.

"Where was J.J. when all that stuff was arriving?" she asked.

"In her room. She can entertain herself for hours."

J.J. stopped unwrapping just in time to hear that last part. "I'm not entertaining myself, Dad," she said. "I'm rehearsing."

"Rehearsing?" Faith's eyebrows shot up. "Are you in a play?"

That question stopped J.J.'s work at opening her present. A long flat box with red wrapping rested on her lap.

"I'm applying for a summer program in New York," she said.

"J.J. is a very talented singer," Holden said, pride clearly coming through in his voice.

"Oh wow," Faith said.

She'd ask her to sing, but they were still getting to know each other. Besides, J.J. was back to ripping wrapping paper.

"That sounds so exciting," Faith commented to Holden.

"Luckily, she can fill out the application online and attach a video of her audition," he said. "But she's working hard to prepare. We have a vocal coach that comes three days a week, and J.J. has assignments she has to complete between those times."

"Cool!" J.J. said.

She held up the item she'd just unwrapped. A skateboard.

"There are some kneepads in there somewhere," Holden said.

J.J. was already digging through the presents again. They sat quietly, sipping their coffee, both smiling at J.J. as she squealed over her gifts. An instant camera, an airbrush kit, a craft kit, and some sweaters. She was surprisingly excited about the sweaters.

After gift number eight, J.J. frowned. “Nobody else is opening.”

Holden looked over at Faith. “I guess we’d better jump in.”

She followed his lead as he set his coffee mug on the table next to him and waited for J.J. to hand out gifts. Should Faith offer to help? Wasn’t that what a nanny would do?

But by the time she could overthink it, the gifts were already distributed for her and Holden. There were only two for her, but it still astounded her. They’d only met yesterday. How could he possibly have gotten gifts for her?

Someone who had money could make anything happen—even same-day delivery of gifts on Christmas Eve.

“I picked this one for you myself,” J.J. said as she handed a third gift to Faith. “I hope you like it.”

J.J. stepped back and stared at it for a second before turning, seeming to realize she still had gifts to open. With a big smile, she rushed back to her original seat, where a heap of gifts still waited for her.

“Okay, this is how we do this,” Holden said as they each held a wrapped package, ready to open. “Everybody opens at once. One, two, three, go!”

Giggling, J.J. tore into hers. Faith started out slowly, delicately sliding her finger under the taped end of the square box. But soon enough, she realized she was the only one taking that sort of care. Holden was ripping open his gift with the same level of impatience as his daughter. So Faith did the same.

Only as she pulled the item out of the box did she realize father and daughter had stopped opening their gifts. The two of them were watching her, expectant smiles on their faces.

“Wow,” Faith said as she held up the present, clutching the handle. “This is exactly what I need. I had a stainless-steel tumbler over in England, but I left it. It wasn’t as pretty as this one, though.”

It read *World's Best Nanny* and had a metallic sheen to it. Not only had they tracked down this gift for her on short notice, but it had a message on it that couldn't have made it easy to find.

“Did you like living in England?” J.J. asked. She'd shifted her attention from her gifts to her dad's new friend. “How long did you live there?”

“For more than a year,” Faith said. “There were plenty of great things about living there, but I missed this town and my family. I was going to move over there permanently, but, well, things changed.”

“I'm glad you didn't,” J.J. said. With that, J.J. resumed opening her gift.

“It says it keeps coffee warm for up to twelve hours,” he said. “But you can also put cold stuff in there. It has a really cool snap-shut lid and a loop you can hang from a carabiner.”

J.J. laughed. “Carabiner? That's not a real thing.”

“It certainly is,” Holden said. “I'll show you later.”

Faith was shocked to feel tears stinging the back of her eyes as she stared down at her new tumbler. This was the nicest thing anyone had done for her in a long time. Maybe it was just all she'd been through, but being part of this family, even as temporary as she knew it was, meant something to her.

That was something she hadn't even known until now. She missed feeling like a part of something. This one simple gesture made it clear to her that even when she was engaged and working for her fiancé's family, she felt like an outsider. It was always as though they were welcoming her as a guest.

The funny thing was, that was exactly the way she should have felt with Holden and J.J., but she could already see herself as part of this family. And that was not a feeling she could get used to having.

**M**ake Christmas special for J.J. That was Holden's number one goal every year on December twenty-fifth. This afternoon, for the first time in a long, long while, he felt like he'd actually accomplished it.

"We forgot the cranberry sauce," Mrs. Ardmore said just seconds after they'd finally sat down at the table. They'd even finished the blessing and started passing bowls around.

"I'll go grab it." Charity pushed her chair back and stood. "It wouldn't be Christmas if Mom didn't forget the cranberry sauce."

"That's not true," Mrs. Ardmore said. "Sometimes I forget the deviled eggs."

The deviled eggs were right there, in an interesting little contraption. It was a tray, but it had rows of egg-sized indentations. He probably should have seen something like it by now, but deviled eggs weren't something he'd even heard about until they moved to Tennessee.

"So, tell us what you got for Christmas," Mr. Ardmore said to J.J.

She was the only child at the table—something he had a feeling would change soon enough. Probably in a year or two, as in love as Nic and Charity seemed to be.

"I got a skateboard," J.J. said. "And a mini keyboard so I can learn to play the piano."

Holden smiled. “We were just telling Faith that J.J. is auditioning to get into a summer program in New York.”

“New York?” Mr. Ardmore said, his expression and tone showing he was impressed.

“That’s where they’re from originally,” Charity told her dad.

“So, it’ll be like going home,” Mr. Ardmore said.

“Except this is a pretty exclusive program.” Holden continued cutting a section of turkey while he spoke. “She’ll be living in a dorm with other young singers her age.”

“It’s at one of the performing arts schools,” J.J. said. “And super hard to get into, so I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“With your talent, they’d be nuts to pass you by,” Mrs. Ardmore said. “Besides, I’d bet you’ll end up on the radio by the time you’re in your twenties.”

J.J. looked confused, and Holden couldn’t help but laugh. “The radio is how people used to get all their music.”

“Unless they bought the record, in which case they’d go to the record store,” Mrs. Ardmore added.

“Dad, can I get a record player?” J.J. asked. “Amber S. has one.”

Mr. Ardmore looked confused. No doubt he wondered why she was referring to one of her friends with an initial for her last name. They’d have to go down the whole “group of Ambers” rabbit hole if he explained why she used initials for most of her friends. Instead, he moved to keep the conversation on course.

“I never thought vinyl would come back in style,” Mr. Ardmore said.

“What’s vinyl?” J.J. asked, looking around.

“Records,” Holden explained. “They’re what you’ll play if you get a record player. Records are made from vinyl, so people call them that.”

“Oh.” J.J. nodded.

“You do have some Christmas money to spend,” Holden said.

“And some savings,” J.J. said. “Miss Ana gave me that money for helping out with her show.”

“You got paid for that?” Mrs. Ardmore’s eyebrows shot up in the air as she looked at the eight-year-old. “That makes you a professional TV star.”

J.J. lit up. “It does?”

Faith nodded. “Maybe we can go shopping this week. I’ll take you while your dad works.”

Holden reached for the butter for his roll. “I’m supposed to be off this week, but I have to admit, I’m not a big shopper.”

“He’s not,” J.J. told Faith. “He gets bored.”

“Well, then, you and I will go over to the outlet mall tomorrow morning,” Faith said.

“Tomorrow?” Charity set her fork down, wiped her mouth, and reached for her glass of tea. “It’ll be packed.”

“The whole week after Christmas is a nightmare,” Mrs. Ardmore said.

“I like the challenge.” Faith smiled over at J.J. “Are you ready to battle the crowds?”

“You know what?” Holden set his own drink down and looked over at the two of them. “I’ll go with you. I could use a new sweater. Maybe the two of you could help me pick one out.”

Had he lost his mind? Here he had someone offering to spend the day traipsing around the outlet mall with his daughter, and he was passing up the opportunity to skip it and get some work done. That was not like him at all.

But the more he thought about it, the more he had to admit he liked the idea of spending the day with his daughter and this woman.

“Maybe we’ll grab some lunch at the Japanese place,” he said.

J.J.'s smile widened, and Holden knew he'd done the right thing. J.J. would get to experience shopping with a female adult for the first time since her mom died. But even more important—she'd get to once again feel what it was to shop and have lunch with two parents.

Okay, so Faith wasn't a parent. And J.J. shouldn't see her that way. This shouldn't be all that much different from going shopping with one of the nannies he'd hired over the past year. Why did it feel different? And how did he stop himself from thinking of her as more than someone who was helping out around the house?

Because if he didn't get control of that, he wouldn't be the only one getting hurt. J.J. would too.

It was a little too cold to be outside, but Faith wouldn't trade this for anything. It was Christmas night, and she stood on the square watching as the local community theater troupe performed the nativity for what had to be most of the town's residents.

"Shouldn't this have been done last night?" Holden whispered to Faith as they watched.

Faith shook her head and rose on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "They don't want to compete with the big church service. They've always done this on Christmas night."

She was squished in next to Holden, J.J. having rushed off to hang out with a group of Ambers and one Jenelle. Charity and Nic had drifted off at some point and were somewhere else in this crowd, leaving Faith and Holden surrounded by people she'd known most of her life, including Gavin Mundy, a super smart guy she'd avoided in her younger years. He had a tendency to talk for hours about some random subject he was passionate about.

"Your daughter should audition for the Playhouse," Nancy Chesney told Holden in one of the breaks between scenes. "With her voice, they'd probably choose a play custom-made for her to be the lead."

Holden and Faith exchanged a look, and Faith nodded. It made sense—if, that was, J.J. was interested in acting.

"You know, it might look good on her application for that program," Faith said.



“We could be watching her up here next year,” Nancy said.

They had to stop talking because the next scene started, but Faith’s head was still spinning over what had just happened. It wasn’t about J.J. or performing in community theater. It was the way he’d looked at her after Nancy made the suggestion. Like he was getting her thoughts on it.

It was silly. He’d do the same with a nanny, too, right? Single dads asked for opinions from nannies all the time. But those nannies were experts on children and therefore had expertise in the area. Faith was the last person to ask for advice on parenting.

“Cold?” Holden asked about halfway through the final portion of the performance.

She looked over at him. They were standing so close, she couldn’t help but remember that kiss they’d shared under the mistletoe. All it had done was make her want to kiss him again.

“A little.” She nodded.

He smiled at her, then put his arm around her, pulling her against him. “No, that won’t work,” he said.

Faith frowned. It worked just fine for her. In fact, if they could stand here like this all night, she’d be happy.

“Move in front of me,” he said, just as the disappointment was sinking in. “This way, we’ll both stay warmer.”

She did exactly as he said, moving to stand in front of him. When he put his arms around her, she squeezed her eyes closed. This was perfect. In fact, she’d pay the people on stage extra if they’d continue for another hour or two.

It wasn’t just his arms around her, either. He pressed his head close to hers in a move that didn’t seem to have anything to do with keeping warm. Did he want to be close to her?

When he released her to applaud at the very end, Faith’s mind stayed scrambled for at least a couple of minutes. Her insides had turned to mush at the feel of his arms around her, and all she could think about was when it might happen again.

Would they have a reason to hold hands or hug or kiss in the near future? It was likely, considering they were posing as an engaged couple.

“Let’s go find J.J.,” Holden said, holding out a hand.

She’d swear that intensity in his eyes hadn’t been there before. Without breaking the stare, she slipped her hand into his and let him lead her through the crowd.

There was nothing romantic about them holding hands this way. It was purely functional. Necessary, even, considering how crowded the square was tonight. They’d be split up in seconds if they didn’t connect somehow.

J.J. was exactly where she told her dad she’d be—at the far end of the platform near the Christmas tree. Instead of a large group of friends, though, she stood with only two girls who appeared to be about her age, along with an adult couple. Faith assumed the couple parented at least one of the girls.

“Dad!” J.J. called out the instant she spotted him. She began rushing toward him, meeting him more than halfway. “Can I spend the night with Amber?” She pointed back toward the group she’d just left. Faith assumed at least one of the kids was named Amber. “Her mom said she could bring me home in the morning.”

“I thought we were going shopping tomorrow,” Holden said, dropping Faith’s hand.

Faith continued to smile down at the little girl. “It’s fine if you need to cancel.”

“We can go after,” J.J. said. “We can go to the Japanese place for dinner instead of lunch. Please please please *please?*”

Holden looked at Faith—a move that once again warmed her heart. “How can I say no to that many ‘pleases’?”

Faith shook her head. “You can’t.”

Shrugging, he turned back to his daughter. “I guess I can’t say no to that but tell her parents I’ll come get you. Maybe around noon.”

“Yes!” J.J. whisper-shouted the word. It was a cry of victory. “Mrs. Webster always makes us healthy peanut butter waffles, so don’t worry about lunch. Love you.”

She threw her arms around her dad and gave him a big hug. Then she ran back to the group. The mom waved at Faith before shifting her stare to J.J. as she returned.

“*Healthy* peanut butter waffles?” Faith asked.

“The peanut butter is organic, and she uses natural honey instead of syrup. I think the waffles are wheat too.”

None of that had anything to do with the reason Faith was frowning. Actually, peanut butter waffles sounded delicious. In fact, maybe she should get the recipe and make it for J.J. and her dad.

The frown was because she was surprised. Swapping recipes with other moms wasn’t something she thought she’d do until she had her own kids. But it was a total nanny thing to do, so she’d put it in that category.

“I guess it’s just the two of us.” Holden turned to face her, giving her a smile. “I don’t know about you, but I’m craving peanut butter waffles now.”

Faith laughed. “I was just thinking the same thing. We could stop at the grocery store and grab some frozen waffles and a jar of real peanut butter. I’m sure we could even find organic versions of everything if you prefer it.”

“The grocery store’s closed,” he said. “Everything’s closed. Do you know what? I can whip us up something. Come on.”

This time, he didn’t grab her hand as he took off. The crowd had thinned considerably by then, so holding hands wasn’t required to keep from being separated, but she hated the disappointment that filled her. Yeah, she wanted to hold hands with him for reasons that had nothing to do with making it through a crowd without separating.

She was his employee, technically. She had to stop thinking about him any other way.

“Whew,” Holden said as soon as they were in his SUV, doors closed. “This might be a sign I’m a bad parent, but I can always feel the stress lift away when I know someone I trust is taking care of J.J.”

He buckled his seatbelt and started up the SUV as she stared at him. “What do you mean? Why would that make you a bad parent?”

“I’m supposed to love every second I spend in her company and count the seconds until we’re together again, right?”

She wasn’t a parent, so she wouldn’t normally offer her two cents here, but he’d asked. “Parenting is hard. I don’t know how you do it on your own.”

He glanced over at her again. They were stuck in a line of traffic, waiting to turn onto the main road from the square. The glow from the nearby streetlights shined directly down on them, and as usual, she was blown away by how handsome he looked.

“It’s not so much that parenthood is hard.” His eyes narrowed as he stared through the windshield. “It’s that I’m constantly worrying about her. Did you know I kept my eyes on her the whole time we were on the square?”

“You weren’t watching that performance?” Funny, but she hadn’t even noticed he was distracted. “How did you even see her?”

“How could I miss the pink sparkly Santa hat?”

“You could see that through the crowd?”

“I’m taller than you, remember?”

That made sense. He was at least six-foot-two or three. She, on the other hand, was five-foot-five. Just because she couldn’t see over the tops of heads didn’t mean he couldn’t.

“I have to keep my eyes on her,” he said. “I know this is about as safe a town as it comes, but it’s a dad thing. Whether we’re living in New York City or Misty Mountain, I feel this constant need to protect her.”

“And now you know she’s safe,” she said.

She immediately second-guessed those words. What if they put thoughts in his head? Thoughts that maybe he shouldn’t trust so much that J.J. was safe just because she wasn’t with him.

“I know someone else is looking out for her,” he said. “No, it’s not that, actually. Can I be honest?”

He looked over at her then, and his expression, combined with the question he’d just asked, made her heart feel like it had been wrapped in an embrace. She tried to shove the feeling aside, but it persisted.

“Of course,” she said. “Anything you say stays between us.”

He could trust her. That was important—especially since they were keeping a secret from the entire town, including her family.

“I have no idea what I’m doing with this parenting thing.” He took his foot off the brake and pressed the gas, following the line of cars onto the main road, only to get stuck in another line of traffic. “You get married and you plan a family, and one day your wife tells you she’s pregnant. You get all caught up in the excitement of that and you know your entire life is going to change, but it doesn’t really sink in until that baby is here.”

“I always assumed I’d know what to do when the time came,” she said. “And there’s usually a lot of people around willing to help out.”

“Sure,” he said. “If you have parents and siblings.”

She didn’t want to ask for specifics on that. Something in his voice told her that he was speaking from experience, though. He didn’t have parents? Siblings?

“And a spouse,” she said instead.

“I never expected to become a single father,” he said. “Even divorce wasn’t in the plans. My grandmother raised me alone, though. My mom couldn’t raise me, and my dad wanted

nothing to do with me or my mom, so my grandmother took over. She died before J.J. was born. Her name was Julianne. That's what we named J.J. Jules for short. Her mom always called her J.J., though, and when she passed away, I shifted to calling her that too."

He was all that little girl had now. And she was all he had. Faith sat with that information for a minute or so, struggling to find words that would make it better. There weren't any.

"My grandmother had money," he said. "In that sense, I had it easy. She sent me to the best schools, and when she died, I got a sizable inheritance and put a lot of it aside for J.J., but I invested some of it, and from there I just got lucky."

"I'd say it's more than luck," she commented. "You seem like you know your stuff when it comes to business."

"Yes, but somehow, I was steered to the right people. I partnered with a guy starting a tech business in the automotive space. It became a huge success, and we were bought out. I used part of that money to invest in some property and start my own helicopter tour business right here in Misty Mountain."

He pulled into the Misty Lakes subdivision and started up the road to his house. It sat on top of a hill with a view of the mountains from the back.

"And now you live in Penny Pincher's house," she said as she admired the Christmas decorations in his front yard, visible almost from the subdivision's entrance.

"Penny Pincher," he said. "Did you know her name is actually Janet Metzger?"

Faith gasped, but she was grateful to have moved on to lighter topics. "Penny Pincher has a name?"

"Had a name. You know she passed away, right?"

"Obviously," Faith said. "You wouldn't be living here otherwise. But yes, I was still in town when that happened. A bunch of people went to her funeral. I heard her kids had to do a lot of work on the house."

“She kept so much of it closed off.” He shook his head. “Not just the area where you’re living now. All but her bedroom, the living room, and the kitchen. She just closed the vents and the doors and kept it all cooped up. She didn’t want to spend the money on electricity, I assume. Everything smelled kind of stale.”

“I’m sure the décor was pretty outdated too,” she said.

“I guess that’s why it sat on the market a while before the kids finally figured out they needed to make some changes.”

“And that was when you spotted it,” she guessed.

“I would have bought it as it was.” He pulled into the driveway and pressed the button on his rearview mirror to activate the garage door. “I just wanted a nice place to raise my daughter. We found it.”

Faith looked over at him, and even though he wasn’t watching, she gave her most compassionate smile. “You don’t need blood relatives to have help raising your daughter, you know. In Misty Mountain, we look out for each other. You’d have support from people all around you here, including from me and my family. Even after I’m no longer working for you.”

It was painful to even say those words. She didn’t want to think about a time when she wouldn’t be a daily part of this man’s life. But she wanted him to know from the start that she was here for him. She already cared about him and his daughter more than she wanted to, and she could only imagine those feelings would get stronger as time went on.

He looked over at her then, and she swore there was a tear in one of his eyes. “That means a lot,” he said. “More than you’ll ever know.” And then he took a deep breath, turned back to face front, and pulled his SUV into the garage. “Now, I’m going to make you a New York breakfast.”

As Holden sat on his living room rug, plate on the coffee table in front of him, he was having a hard time remembering what he normally did on Christmas night. They didn't have a tradition, J.J. and him. Things had been so topsy-turvy for most of her life, he'd failed to establish a routine. That was something that needed to change.

"Maybe this should become our Christmas tradition," Holden said, thinking out loud.

He was at the end of the coffee table, while Faith sat catty-corner from him, her back against the couch, staring at the Christmas tree. She'd finished her breakfast sandwich—eggs, bacon, and sharp cheddar on a poppy seed bun.

"What's that?" she asked. "Breakfast for dinner?"

"Eating at the coffee table," he said. "Sounds as good as any other Christmas tradition, right? What does your family normally do on Christmas night?"

She didn't answer right away, making it clear they didn't have a tradition either. Finally, she said, "When we were kids, we'd go to the square like we did tonight. Even if there wasn't something going on, we'd just walk around and look at the tree one last time. Now that we're all grown, I don't know..."

"Last year, J.J. and I watched *Polar Express*," he said. "It's one of her favorites."

"I've never seen it." Faith looked over at him. "Is it good?"



He shrugged. “J.J. liked it, but to be honest, I’d rather spend time hanging out.”

“You were hanging out,” she said. “You just watched a movie while you hung out.”

He made a face at her. “You know what I mean. This is a great tradition.” He gestured toward the table. “Home-cooked food, sitting on the floor in front of the tree, just talking like people used to do before there were phones and so many distractions.”

Faith laughed. “Don’t talk like we didn’t grow up with distractions. My mom had to make us get off our handheld gaming consoles and turn off the TV at Christmas time. But I get what you’re saying.”

“The simple art of conversation,” he said. “People talking to each other rather than being entertained all the time.”

Not that being entertained was all that bad. He was still reeling from what it felt like to have his arms around Faith, holding her close while they watched the performance. He might have claimed it was for warmth, but in truth, those moments with his arms around her had fed his soul like nothing had in a long time.

“I never imagined I’d have to bear the load for two parents,” Holden said. “I make an effort every night to have a good conversation with J.J., but half the time I have no idea if what I’m doing is good parenting.”

“It seems like you’re doing a great job to me. She’s an amazing person.”

“She is, isn’t she?”

The compliment warmed him more than she could ever know. In fact, it was the nicest thing someone could say about him these days. Being a good parent was his biggest goal in life.

“Christmas is especially challenging,” he admitted. “The worst part is, she always tries to seem strong. She never wants me to see that it bothers her that her mom’s no longer around.”

She nodded toward his front yard. “Is that the reason for all the decorations?”

It was so bright out there, the light streamed in through the blind-covered windows. When combined with the glow from the gigantic Christmas tree, there wasn't even a need to turn on a lamp.

“It's a front yard any kid would dream about,” she said.

He smiled. “Yeah, I think her friends appreciate it more than she does. She's gotten used to it. The tough part is that it was so easy to get all this done when we lived in New York. Here, I had to track down a company that could do it for me. Luckily, there was one in Knoxville, but it's still not quite what we had in New York.”

Her eyebrows arched, and he could imagine what was running through her mind. Yeah, it was extravagant, but he'd spare no expense when it came to J.J.

“Part of it's my upbringing.” He picked up his drink and took a long sip while he thought through how he was going to explain it. It was way too complicated to boil down to a sentence or two. “Being raised by my grandmother, it was just the two of us, just like me and J.J. Mom had been an only child too, so I didn't have cousins. There was no one my age to hang out with like other kids had.”

Wow, this sounded like a pity party. He certainly didn't want to be a Christmas Day downer. Still, for some reason, he felt like she should know this about him. He wanted her to understand where he came from, who he was as a human being. He wanted her to really get to know him, and if she decided to run, then it was never going to work in the first place.

One thing he'd learned in his life was that love wasn't permanent. People came and went with the seasons. That was one lesson J.J. wouldn't learn, if he had anything to do with it. She'd never have to lose a parent again. He'd be there for her until she was grown. Until she was old enough to have faith that when she fell in love with someone, that person would stick around.

“So, did your grandmother decorate for Christmas?” Faith asked.

That was a good question. She probably assumed he turned his front yard into a winter wonderland because it was something he missed out on as a child. That wasn’t the case at all.

“She had me do it.” He smiled. “From the time I was about twelve, I’d climb up on that ladder and attach lights to the roof, and then I started doing the trees and the shrubs.”

This conversation had taken him straight down memory lane. He couldn’t help but smile. He missed Nana Pryce, for sure.

“She went overboard inside the house,” he said, still smiling. “Not a single surface wasn’t covered in some sort of trinket normally, but she’d replace them all with Christmas knickknacks the day after Thanksgiving. And then there was her Christmas village. It was basically a country by the time I graduated high school.”

“Your grandmother sounds like a great person,” Faith said.

“She was.” He nodded. “She did the best she could, raising me. I lost her right after my wedding. She never got to meet her great-granddaughter.”

“I like to believe our loved ones look down on us after they’re gone. They’re our guardian angels.”

The words surprised him. Sure, they’d gone to church the night before, but he wasn’t used to having conversations where religion came up. He supposed he’d gotten pretty bitter over it, having lost so many people he loved.

“That’s what my grandmother would want me to believe,” he said.

Faith frowned. “You don’t?”

He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. This was an even tougher conversation than death.

“I guess my life experience has made me a little bitter,” he finally said. “When you lose so many people who are close to

you, you start to think maybe if there was a God, he wouldn't be so unfair."

Now she was studying, but not judging, him. He appreciated that, but it shouldn't have surprised him. He'd somehow known from the moment he met her that he could open up to her about anything. He trusted her.

"Life definitely isn't fair." She shifted her gaze to the Christmas tree. "But there are so many gifts all around us, it's hard to believe that there's not a greater purpose for all of it. It's funny, but as devastated as I was a couple of days ago, I was relieved at the same time. I'd accepted that I was going to spend the rest of my life across a gigantic ocean from all the people I loved. My relationship ending took a huge weight off my shoulders."

"You must have been in love with him if you were willing to give up so much."

Now she shifted her gaze away from the tree, staring straight ahead thoughtfully. "I think I was in love with the glamour of it all. For the first time, I got to be the sister who was doing something exciting. People would say I'd moved to Europe, got married, started a family. Everyone in Misty Mountain would finally see me as successful. Or maybe it was just that they'd finally see me."

There was a lot of information packed into those words. And he had a feeling there was a lot she wasn't saying.

"Now, you're engaged to me." He added a big smile to that. "The town hunk."

That was said totally in jest, so when she didn't return his smile, he worried she thought he was serious. Or worse, didn't agree at all with his words. But the longer the silence dragged on, the more he realized this was a topic near and dear to her heart. It truly bothered her that she'd failed at something she didn't really want to do in the first place.

"I'm relatively new to this town," he said. "But if there's one thing I've noticed, it's that people gossip for their own

entertainment more than anything else. Nobody's judging you. What they're doing is living vicariously through you."

She looked at him then, her eyes suddenly filled with a sparkle that hadn't been there before. "I've never thought about it that way, and I don't know why I'm trying to impress people, anyway. It's not a specific person. It's just wanting to be that hometown hero. I may not be on TV every day, but at least they can say I left for some glamorous life somewhere else..."

"I lived in the city, just as Ana does now," he said. "It's highly overrated, and I think your sister Ana knows it. Nothing compares to life in this town."

Yeah, if there was anyone to ask about the glamour of living in New York, it was him. In fact, he'd traded in that so-called glamorous life for small-town living. He'd deliberately sought this place out. But he could never understand what it was like to grow up in a small town and come back to visit after leaving.

"This goes deeper than that," she said. "It goes back to our teenage years when Charity and Ana were the ones everybody talked about. They were the pretty ones. I was the ugly duckling sister."

There was no stopping his jaw from dropping at those words. "You were never an ugly duckling." He shook his head. "You can't ever make me believe that. You're probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

The words spilled from his mouth before he could stop them. If he was trying to keep this from progressing beyond friendship, saying she was probably the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen wasn't the way to go. Even if he meant every word of it.

"How about a movie?" he blurted, mostly to put an end to this conversation. Maybe she'd forget the compliment if enough time passed. "It doesn't even have to be Christmas-themed, although we could watch *Polar Express*. You said you've never seen that."

She smiled. “How about *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street*? I haven’t seen that one in years.”

“The original or the remake?”

“Original, of course.” She made a face. “That’s the only way to go. And find it in black and white.” She pushed herself to her feet and swooped down to snatch up her plate. “I’ll toss these dishes in the dishwasher and go change into the PJs you and J.J. got me for Christmas. Thank you, by the way.” She looked down at him with a gentle smile. “That meant a lot.”

“I’m just glad I was able to get you some gifts in time,” he said. “I know your parents had stuff for you to open, but I don’t know. It would have felt weird opening gifts in front of you.”

“I didn’t get you anything,” she said. “But next Christmas, I’ll make it up to both of you.”

He opened his mouth to argue with that, but nothing came out. Next Christmas, she wouldn’t be here. She’d be in town, and they could stay friends, but chances were, they wouldn’t exchange Christmas gifts.

Maybe he should just let it rest for now. He’d deal with severing ties when the time came. By then, maybe he’d be ready to handle it. Right now, he certainly wasn’t.

The Japanese restaurant was still covered in Christmas decorations. That didn't surprise Faith one bit.

They'd just spent four hours at the still-decorated outlet mall, following J.J. from store to store. Her dad had to step away multiple times to take work-related phone calls. If J.J. minded, she didn't show it, though. She seemed so caught up in buying new clothes for school with her Christmas money that she barely noticed whether her dad was hot on her heels or not.

"You sit with Miss Faith," J.J. said to her dad when he moved to slide into the booth next to her. "I want to be able to see you both when I talk to you."

Holden and Faith exchanged a look as she fought to hold back a smile. Holden could have insisted on sitting on the other side, but instead, he shrugged and scooted in next to Faith.

"You didn't want to sit at the hibachi grill," Holden commented to J.J. as they opened their menus.

J.J. wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "That's for kids."

The hibachi experience was hardly limited to kids, but Faith was glad they weren't sitting over there anyway. She preferred the cozy booth with Holden and J.J. to sitting side by side around a large grill with strangers.

"Dad, can I get the filet?" J.J. asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I might get that too.”

J.J. really was a dream child. Despite all she’d been through, *and* despite her father’s wealth, she was a well-adjusted, well-mannered kid. She couldn’t imagine a better child to have for her first-time nanny job.

But just as she’d gotten comfortable, Faith was brought back to reality. Brianna Jewell and Matt North appeared seemingly from out of nowhere, following the hostess to the booth directly across from them. Even though they were having dinner in a restaurant on the outskirts of town, it made sense they’d run into Misty Mountain residents. The outlet mall attracted a lot of locals, especially in the days surrounding Christmas.

“Faith Ardmore!” Brianna called out, a big smile on her face. “I heard you were back in town. Get out here and give me a hug. Sorry.”

Brianna flashed an apologetic look at Holden, who had to scoot out of the booth to let Faith exit. Only once she was in her old friend’s embrace did Faith realize this wasn’t a bad thing. Brianna wasn’t here to judge her or gather gossip. She was genuinely happy to see her.

“I heard Trevor Hargis followed your sister all the way to the Virgin Islands,” Brianna said, clasping her hands to her chest. “It’s so romantic.”

Faith’s eyes widened as her gaze scooted from Brianna to Matt. She was just now registering that the two of them might be a couple, but this was even bigger news.

“My sister and Trevor are in the Virgin Islands together?” Faith asked.

“I wouldn’t say together,” Matt, who’d already taken a seat and opened his menu, said.

Brianna stepped back and looked over at him. “It sure sounded like it to me.”

Matt closed his menu and shifted his body toward them. “Someone on the crew told someone here in town that he flew



all the way down there to tell her he loved her. And she loves him back. That's all I know."

That was a lot, especially considering it was about her own sister. Did her mom even know this information?

"And now you two are engaged," Brianna said. "I heard you were getting married. I assumed your fiancé was somebody over there. Who knew it was our very own Holden Pryce?"

Faith opened her mouth to correct her childhood friend, but before she could say a word, J.J. spoke up. "They're in *love*."

J.J. gave extra emphasis to the last word of that. Faith was both amused and surprised at how happy she sounded. She was grinning from ear to ear.

"The whole town's talking about it," Brianna said. "They all thought you were this quiet, super wealthy guy living all alone with your daughter. Little did they know you moved here because you'd fallen in love with our Faith."

"It's pretty awesome," Matt said. "But I think we should probably let them enjoy their meal."

"Oh," Brianna gasped, looking from Faith to Holden. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Why don't we get together for lunch one day? I'll grab my business card. I'm Matt's assistant now. Did you know that?"

Faith shook her head. What had just happened here? The whole town assumed that she'd been engaged to Holden all along? They'd painted her as the fiancée of the town's millionaire. Or was he a billionaire?

Whatever the case, he definitely was the most handsome, wealthiest guy in town, which also made him the most eligible bachelor. And Faith had snatched him up. At least that was how it looked to everyone else.

J.J. was shaking her head by the time Faith slid back into her seat, tucking the business card into the zippered pocket of her purse. She didn't know if she'd be able to get together with

her old friend—or anyone in town, for that matter. Not as long as this lie was going on around about her.

No, for now, she probably should just stick with J.J. and Holden. The more she said, the harder it would be when the truth came out. And the truth would eventually come out. She couldn't forget about that.

**H**olden slid the plate of scrambled eggs in front of J.J., who sat on the stool at the island, playing a game on his phone.

“What did I say about phones at the table?” he asked as he headed to the refrigerator to pull out the juice. “You don’t even have a phone yet and we’re already having this discussion.”

“I just have to finish this game,” J.J. said. “And besides, I’m not at the table.”

He rolled his eyes. His daughter was a talented negotiator, just like her father. He couldn’t get on to her for it. It would probably get her far in life.

“Good morning!” Faith called out as she breezed into the kitchen.

He nearly dropped the bottle of orange juice at the sight of her. He’d been hoping she’d be wearing the pajamas she’d had on when they watched a movie together a couple of nights ago. She looked so adorable in them. But instead, she was fully dressed in day clothes, having put on a pair of jeans and a thick red sweater. She’d even applied makeup. She looked like she was going somewhere.

“Reporting for work,” she said, probably noting his surprised expression. “I figured you probably have some things you need me to help with this morning, in addition to keeping an eye on J.J.”

J.J. spoke up then, eyes still glued to the screen. “You don’t have to keep an eye on me. I’m going to rehearse and then my coach comes over at two.”

Her wince at the end of all that told him something had happened in the game that she didn’t like. Finally, she grunted and set the phone down, then scooted her plate in front of her.

“I have a meeting with some potential investors this afternoon,” Holden told Faith. “I’ll be driving over to Knoxville. Really, if you could just keep an eye on things around here, it would be a huge help. We also need to discuss salary.”

“Eww,” J.J. said, holding a forkful of eggs close to her mouth.

At first, he thought she was talking about the breakfast. But she was staring at him, eyes narrowed.

“You’re not going to talk business stuff right now, are you?” J.J. asked.

Laughing, Faith started opening cabinets. “We don’t have to talk business.” She finally seemed to find what she was looking for. She pulled the glass down and set it on the counter before turning to look at J.J. “And your dad’s not going to pay me. Room and board are enough.”

“Absolutely not.” Holden shook his head. “The nanny’s quarters are for the convenience of the employer, not the employee.” He looked over at his daughter, who was eyeing her food with much more interest than the conversation. “And we aren’t talking business. We’re discussing our day.”

“And money,” J.J. said, looking up at him with a shrug. “*Boring.*”

“Wait until you’re the one making that money,” Faith said as she headed over to the refrigerator and opened it. “Is it okay if I make myself at home?”

He smiled at her stopping to question that after she’d already done exactly that. But Holden liked that she was familiarizing herself with the location of all the crucial stuff in

his kitchen setup. The last thing he wanted to do was direct her to every single item she needed.

“Please do,” he said. “And if you see a way things can be improved, feel free.” He gestured to indicate his surroundings. “I was just so excited to move in, I don’t know that I necessarily came up with the best place for everything.”

Faith uncapped the milk and poured to the halfway mark of her glass. Then she screwed the cap back on again and returned it to the refrigerator. He watched all that, only realizing he was staring after she stopped moving and turned to look at him.

“I can do that,” she said. “In fact, if you need anything organized, I’d love to. I redid my ex-fiancé’s parents’ store while I was working there. They said it had never looked better.”

“You should have her clean up your closet,” J.J. said, pointing at her dad with her fork. “It’s a mess.”

That last part was aimed toward Faith, who seemed to be fighting a smile. Holden, meanwhile, was mortified.

“I know where everything is,” he said.

Besides, organizing his closet was a little personal. It was just his pants and shirts and shoes, but the thought of a woman he was trying to impress going through all that made him want to crawl into a hole.

A woman he was trying to impress. Since when had she become that? Since the minute he met her. Man, he needed to get a handle on this before his feelings got involved.

“I’ll start with the kitchen,” Faith said. “And what about dinner?”

Holden looked over at J.J. She set down her fork and stared ahead thoughtfully for a long moment, probably running through her mental checklist of all her favorite meals.

“Meatloaf and lima beans,” he said, naming two of J.J.’s least favorite foods. That always got her going.

“Eww,” she said for the second time since Faith had arrived. “I say spaghetti.”

“We can’t have spaghetti every night,” her dad said.

“Why not?” That came from Faith, who was smiling as she looked from dad to daughter and back again. Whose side was she on, anyway? “I’d love to have spaghetti for dinner every night. Or maybe alternate with pizza and tacos.”

“I like the way you think.” J.J. looked over at her dad. “Can we do that?”

Holden tossed Faith a look that was completely in jest. He wasn’t all that strict with J.J. He just wanted her to be healthy. And spaghetti mixed with tacos or pizza or whatever was not the key to good health.

“At least one green food at every meal,” he said. “That’s the rule.”

Faith leaned against the area where the sink was and took a sip from her milk glass. “Salad is great with spaghetti.”

He started to argue that salad wasn’t the healthy sort of green vegetable he meant, but why be a fuddy-duddy? It was two days after Christmas, and they had a special guest in the house. He should pull out all the stops.

“I’ll tell you what.” He slid his phone out of his pocket to glance at the time. “I have to get on the road. You two figure out what you want for dinner and let me know. I’ll swing by and get the groceries on my way home.”

“I’ll cook,” Faith said. “You’ll be working hard all day, I’m sure, so it’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll help,” J.J. said. “After my practice, that is.”

He should jump in here and save Faith. She might not want to cook with an eight-year-old. As good a kid as J.J. was, cooking with her meant lots of management, especially when she taste-tested a little too often as an excuse to snack on the food as it cooked.

“That will be fun,” Faith said, and her big smile told him she meant every word of it. She straightened and took her

glass over to the sink. “We’ll come up with a list of what we need and text it to you.”

“Or we could just use the tablet to order it and have it delivered here.” J.J. pointed to the tablet they kept on the little desk next to the refrigerator. “I won’t go overboard, I promise.”

J.J. gave him her puppy-dog eyes. It was a look he could never resist. But he didn’t want to burden Faith with getting groceries ordered and delivered in addition to cooking dinner, even if it would take a load off him.

“We’ve got it under control,” Faith said. “You go kill ‘em at your meeting and don’t worry about us here.”

“Yeah, Dad, go kill them.” J.J. frowned. “Wait, is that a good thing?”

“In this context, it is,” Holden said. “Okay, if you two have everything under control, I’m going to shower and prepare for my meeting.”

He felt a little uneasy as he grabbed a bottled water from the fridge and started out of the room. But one glance at Faith told him he was leaving his daughter in good hands. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her. He did. If he’d hired a nanny he didn’t feel this attraction to, there would be no problem. She was far better than the last nanny, who’d repeatedly left his daughter unattended.

No, this uneasiness came from just how much he *did* trust Faith. Maybe J.J. wasn’t the only one he worried would get attached to the new woman in their life. Maybe he was worried that he too would get attached, which would make it all that much harder for her to leave when inevitably she had to. She deserved a husband and children of her own. She was still young. Young enough to start over with someone who didn’t have all this baggage.

He didn’t just need to keep his distance for himself and his daughter’s sake. No, he needed to keep his distance because he wasn’t the right one for Faith. He’d have to find a way to do

the right thing for all three of them, even when it felt like walking away from her would be all wrong.



Faith was pretty sure Holden hadn't intended to arrive home to find his daughter covered in flour. Faith was too, but the difference was that J.J. found it fun. She broke into giggles every time she looked down at her arms and saw that they were powder white.

"I see you two have been busy," he said, stopping in the doorway. He had a big smile on his face. That had to mean he had good news. "It smells good."

"We made dumplings," J.J. said.

"I'll clean up the mess," Faith said.

"You have to show him the pantry," J.J. told Faith.

He frowned. "The pantry?"

"The closet," J.J. said.

She pointed toward the door next to the refrigerator. It'd been packed with junk, which Faith had moved to an unused storage closet. That made way for the shelves she planned to add—with his permission, of course.

"Put your stuff down and sit at the table." J.J. shifted her extended index finger to the table. "It's time to eat. And no phones."

With a big smile, Faith and J.J. exchanged a look, then burst into laughter. Faith couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun. Maybe when she was a kid herself.

But the look on Holden's face made it clear he was confused. He somehow managed to smile, even when his brow was creased in what might have been a puzzled frown. Seemingly resigned to his fate, he shrugged and set his laptop bag on the floor next to the desk.

J.J. had set the table while Faith was finishing up the chicken. Holden took his spot at the head of the table, his plate, fork, and napkin in front of him. Together, they carried the large bowl of dumplings and smaller bowl of chicken over to the table, then J.J. ran back to get the rolls.

"This looks delicious," Holden said as he took it all in. "Thank you for going to all this trouble."

"You've been working hard all day," Faith said. "It was the least we could do. Your meeting must have gone well."

He scooped some of the dumplings onto J.J.'s plate, then his own, before handing them across the table to Faith. "It did. It was supposed to only be a couple of hours, but they wanted to loop in one of their partners who's traveling right now. It ended up being an all-day thing. And then I stopped in to see an old associate since I was already in Knoxville. I didn't get any of my own work done, but it was a great day of networking."

"No business at the table, either," J.J. said. "That's like phones."

Holden narrowed his eyes at his daughter. "We always talk about our day. I look forward to it."

"But business is boring." J.J. rolled her eyes. "Nobody wants to hear about investors and business partners and stuff. Let's talk about the ice show. I think you should take off early so we can go eat at the Mexican restaurant before the show."

Holden glanced over at Faith, who shrugged. This hadn't been something they'd discussed earlier, but J.J. spent most of that time practicing. By the time they'd put in their grocery delivery order, J.J. had to rush to get her practice in before her vocal coach arrived. After that, it was time to start making

dinner. Most of their talking had been J.J. telling Faith all about her friends while they cooked.

“I think I can do that,” Holden said. “I don’t have any meetings tomorrow. I just have to catch up on some work during the day, but I’ll take off a little early and we’ll go grab Mexican food. Does that sound good to you?”

His gaze landed on Faith, and all she could do was nod as she scooped up a bite of chicken and one dumpling. “Sure,” she finally said. “I love Mexican food.”

Their eyes met and held then, and her heart skipped a beat. It was getting harder and harder to deny that he felt the same attraction she did. When he looked at her like that, it made her insides all melty.

“Amber A. said she saw Santa,” J.J. announced, her words slicing right through the moment.

Holden jerked his gaze in his daughter’s direction. “We saw him at the mall yesterday,” he reminded her.

“No.” J.J. frowned at him. “The real Santa. The one who came to the Mexican restaurant.”

Holden glanced at Faith again, and this time, he appeared to be fighting a smile. “So that’s the real Santa, huh?”

“What was Santa doing at the Mexican restaurant?” Faith asked.

It was probably a stupid question. Santas had to eat too. As did men dressed in Santa costumes, which this guy absolutely had to be.

“Handing out presents,” J.J. said, speaking as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“He just showed up one night while we were eating,” Holden jumped in to explain. “He had a bag full of gifts.”

“Amber S. saw him at the very tiptop of the mountain.” J.J. pointed to the right of her, which was the direction the top of the mountain would be if you followed the strip all the way up. “He was talking to Mr. Howard.”

“Lucky Howard?” Faith asked. “The Howards grew up down the street from us.”

J.J. looked over at her dad. Of course, he didn’t know the answer to that.

“I assume, right?” Holden looked from J.J. to Faith. “He’s the only Lucky in town, right?”

Faith nodded, even though she couldn’t be a hundred percent sure. It was doubtful someone else had moved into town with that name in the time she’d been away.

“What was Amber doing at the top of the mountain?” Holden asked.

“She got new skis for Christmas.”

J.J. shrugged and flipped a dumpling into her mouth. She rested her cheek on her left fist as she ate. Like she couldn’t be bothered to hold her head up. Maybe cooking had worn her out.

“Your friend went down that slope?” Faith asked.

She didn’t know much about skiing, but she’d been up there, and it was ridiculously steep. Not at all something she’d expect an eight-year-old on a new pair of skis to tackle.

“No, they were just checking it out. They’re going to start on the bunny slope when it snows. Dad, can I get some skis? I want to learn.”

“We can rent skis.” Holden looked distracted. “We’ll have to get the right gear, though.”

He continued to stare straight ahead as J.J. started telling a story about learning to ride a bike. His mind was definitely on something, but it was probably not up for discussion in front of his daughter.

That was why Faith waited until it was just the two of them, cleaning up after dinner, to ask. “Is everything okay?”

“I’ve been wondering what that Santa guy was up to,” he said. “And I’ve heard I’m not the only guy in town thinking about putting a ski lodge at the top of the mountain.”

“A ski lodge?” She turned to look at Holden, plate in one hand. She was standing at the dishwasher while he was at the table, so thankfully, he didn’t see the surprised look on her face. “That’s a great idea. The town is long overdue for something like that.”

“I think so too,” he said. “But it’s a big undertaking, and I’m running into obstacles because I’m not a builder or a developer. I need capital to buy the land and get construction started. Then there’s the matter of manufacturing snow—”

“Why not work with Lucky?” she asked. “He’s a developer.”

“That’s the plan, but I need the financing first. If Santa’s sweeping this out from under me, though...”

She had to turn back to the dishwasher to hide the smile that spread across her face at those words. Misty Mountain had a diabolical Santa in town just to steal the dreams of one of its residents?

Absurd.

“What’s the story with this guy?” Faith asked, eager to help solve the mystery.

Holden arrived at the sink, bowls of food in hand. He looked around a second before setting them on the island, then heading straight to the cabinet where the plastic storage containers used to be. She had to stop and show him that she’d moved them to the storage area in the island, which had been completely empty when she started organizing.

“It’s an older guy in a Santa suit,” Holden said. “But not the kind of cheap Santa suits we saw on the guy at the mall yesterday. He wears red pants that look like normal dress pants, and his coat is the quality of one you’d pay top dollar for in a store.”

“And you saw him at the Mexican restaurant?” Faith asked, trying to piece it together.

“We were having dinner there when he showed up with a bag full of toys. The bag was just big enough to hold exactly the number of toys he needed for the kids who were there.”

As Holden spoke, he stood with his back to her, scraping leftovers into storage containers. She couldn't see his face, but he sounded serious.

“Seems like you think he’s the real Santa,” she said.

“No.” He set the bowl down and stepped back to stare straight ahead, lost in thought again. “It’s just that something’s not right with him. I can’t figure out what he’s up to.”

“Maybe he’s up to good.” She smiled. “There’s no such thing as a bad Santa, right?”

“I’m sure at some point in the history of humankind, there’s been a man who wore a Santa costume to do bad things, but this one seems like a good guy. I hear he tends to disappear mysteriously, though. Like, you’ll turn around and he’ll be gone, as though he vanished into thin air.”

“He’s a really fast runner,” Faith said. “With really quiet feet.” She laughed. “That’s the only explanation, right?”

He looked at her. “Has to be. Unless he’s the real Santa.”

They stared at each other a long time. But this stare wasn’t about attraction. It was about considering the idea that something really wacky might be happening in Misty Mountain.

Finally, Holden shook his head and returned his attention to his work on the island. Faith moved to the sink to rinse off some more plates and put them in the dishwasher.

“The guy came to town, made appearances all over the place, even handed out toys,” Holden said. “He didn’t take a dime of pay for any of it. He’s definitely up to something.”

“And you think that something has to do with you putting a ski resort at the top of the mountain?” she asked, trying to piece together where he was going with all this.

“I should have had all the investors I was pitching sign NDAs.”

“Non-disclosure agreements,” she blurted. “I’ve heard of those.”

“Exactly.” He nodded, snapping the lid on one of the containers. “Someone blabbed. Had to if it got out that there was a prime opportunity here in Misty Mountain, Tennessee.”

“And Santa jumped on it,” she said. “But why go undercover as a Santa?”

That made no sense to her. She opened the cabinet and grabbed one of the gel capsules for the dishwasher, continuing to speak as she worked to get the machine started.

“I mean, he could’ve just shown up as a normal tourist, right?” she asked.

“This way, he was able to get in the town’s good graces,” he said. “I’m sure our friend Matt has seen all the goodwill he’s been spreading, and Matt’s the mayor now. When our Santa guy goes in front of the commission with his proposal, they’re more likely to approve it because he’s likable.”

“You’re likable too,” she said. “In fact, in that area, I’d say you have an edge.”

No, he hadn’t been handing out Christmas presents to the town’s kids, but she knew the people around here. They were far more likely to support someone they saw as one of their own than some guy passing through town, Santa suit or not.

“I have to get on this,” he said. He put all the leftovers in the fridge and turned to face her. “Could you finish up here and maybe hang out with J.J. a little while so I can get some work done? I’ll be in the living room soon to join you guys.”

Faith nodded, but thoughts raced through her brain. J.J. would be disappointed that her dad wasn’t watching TV with them. Faith knew that much. But her job was to help him out, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

“I’ve got it.” She gave him a reassuring smile. “If she starts missing you, I’ll give you a nudge.”

His expression immediately relaxed. He was relieved. She was helping him in the exact way he needed right now. By the time she was done here, her goal was to help him learn to put J.J. first. Maybe by then, he’d work out the stuff with Santa stealing his business idea.

**B**y lunchtime the next day, Holden had gotten to the bottom of the mystery. He knew exactly what was happening under his own nose in his own town.

“Dad! You *have* to get ready.”

J.J.’s voice cut into the silence in the kitchen. He’d set up his laptop at the table—something he did whenever J.J. was practicing. His office was a little too close to her bedroom, making it impossible to concentrate.

“Sorry.”

He pushed away from the table, still not taking his eyes off the screen. In the eleventh hour, he’d stumbled upon a big piece of news. A name found in a gigantic pile of city council meeting records. Lucky Howard had apparently shown up at one of the meetings to discuss developing that land. That explained why he’d been spotted at the top of the mountain, although he still couldn’t confirm why the guy in the Santa costume was there.

Holden didn’t know the specifics of Lucky’s financial situation, but the guy had a pretty thriving business going. He was the top developer in Misty Mountain, and a good developer was exactly what the project at the top of the mountain needed. In fact, Holden had hoped to talk Lucky into joining him once he had the financing in place. It looked like he’d waited too long to have that conversation.

“I’ll hop in the shower and be with you two in a minute,” Holden told J.J.



He kept true to that promise. Not that Holden ever took all that long to get ready. But today, he did spend a little extra time shaving and getting dressed.

When he came through the entrance into the living room, he saw it was not a second wasted. Faith looked amazing. She wore her hair pulled up off her neck, curled wisps framing her face. Her forest green sweater sparkled as it caught the light. She wore slightly more makeup than usual, but it didn't look overdone. It was just enough to accent those big brown eyes and make her high cheekbones pop.

"Hi," he said, his voice packed with far more emotion than he expected.

Her mouth spread into a smile. "Hi."

J.J. covered her mouth to suppress a giggle, alerting him to the fact that their cheesiness was pretty obvious. "You two." She sighed. "Can we just go? I'm starving."

Exchanging a quick smile, Faith and Holden followed her to the garage. Once they were speeding down the driveway, J.J. asked a question that reminded Holden of something he'd wondered several times over the past couple of days.

"Where's your car, Miss Faith?"

A long silence followed in which Holden was thinking he might have to remind J.J. it was rude to ask personal questions. But it wasn't really personal...unless she couldn't afford to buy one or something.

"I had one before I went over to England," she said. "I was sent over there for a temporary work assignment, so I planned to come back and have it waiting for me. But then, when it looked like I was staying permanently, my dad sold it for me. So basically, I have no car yet. It's something I need to do."

"We could go car shopping," J.J. said. "Can we, Dad?"

He smiled. "I don't think car shopping is nearly as fun as you think it would be."

"Not at all." Faith shook her head. "But I'd be open to tracking one down online if you could help me test-drive it."

You could take a look at it and make sure it's a good buy."

"I'd be happy to."

He assumed if her dad sold her old one, she probably had enough money to buy a new one. Or at least to make payments on a loan. He'd fill out whatever paperwork was necessary to show she was reliably employed. He could even make her an employee of his business if it would help.

But what would happen when they inevitably had to go their separate ways? Would she then need to come off the payroll? Would that make things more complicated? He wasn't sure.

"You should get a sports car," J.J. said. "Pink. And the kind that doesn't have a top on it."

"A convertible?" Holden asked.

"Yeah, one of those."

He glanced back at his daughter, catching her smile in his peripheral vision. Then his gaze skidded across Faith's relaxed expression before he returned his attention to the road. With all the stress he'd been through that day, it was nice to just be seated here in this car with the two of them. It felt like his stress level had gone from a ten to about a two in a matter of minutes. In fact, the second he laid eyes on Faith tonight, his tension had melted away.

"I have to talk to Lucky Howard," he said as the earlier stress suddenly flashed through his mind. He'd debated not bringing it up in front of J.J., but it wasn't like it was anything she couldn't hear. "I think he's in cahoots with the guy we talked about last night. In fact, I know he is."

"They're not doing anything wrong, are they?" Faith asked, confusion clear in her voice.

"No, but I want to get to Lucky as early as possible. I might be able to turn things around."

It seemed so clear to him now. It was the perfect solution. There was no reason he should just lie down and let Lucky and

some fake Santa snatch his business idea from under him. No, he could make this work.

“No business, Dad,” J.J. reminded him from the backseat. “Only chips and salsa and ice skating for the next four hours.”

“Four hours?” His eyes widened. “The show’s four hours?”

“I think she’s including dinner and the drive to Knoxville in that,” Faith said.

It was automatic, his reaction to something commandeering the next four hours of his life. But as he held the door for his daughter and Faith at the Mexican restaurant, it occurred to him that there were worse things he could do for the next four hours than spend time with these two. In fact, whether they were watching figure skaters glide around on ice or sitting at home watching a movie, this was where he was at his happiest. He just needed to turn off work for a few hours and enjoy.

“What do you know? There’s your guy.”

Faith said that as he stepped inside, the door slamming right into his backside. He’d stopped a little too soon, apparently. He followed her stare to the booths on the far wall, where Lucky Howard sat with a woman Holden recognized as Jordan Strongblossom.

“You can go talk to him if you need to,” Faith said. “We’ll go ahead and order drinks. Sweet tea for you?”

Holden nodded, still staring at Lucky. He didn’t want to interrupt the guy’s date, but he really did need to talk to him.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” he said, nodding his thanks to the host, who already had two menus in hand and was ready to lead them to their table.

“Lucky!” Holden said as he approached the table.

Lucky had a huge smile that Holden understood all too well. It was the look of a man who was truly happy with the woman seated across from him. Strange that suddenly he could relate to that again. It had been so long.

But he didn't have time to dwell on that. Lucky shifted his gaze over to Holden, already looking puzzled. His brow was furrowed, but his smile remained in place.

"Holden Pryce!" Lucky said. "We were just talking about you."

Holden shifted his stare over to Lucky's date-girlfriend.

She shook her head. "Not us."

"No, I was talking to William Martin about you," Lucky corrected. "He said you were looking for some investors. I think I have an idea."

Those words were the last thing Holden expected to hear. "William Martin?"

Lucky laughed. "The guy in the Santa outfit. I know it sounds absurd but trust me. It was the weirdest thing. I came home one day and saw a business card on my door. No idea how the guy knew where I lived. But I called him. Would you believe his phone number registers on my phone as the North Pole?"

Holden would believe that, but he didn't say it. He just shook his head numbly.

"When I called him, he asked me to meet him at the top of the mountain," Lucky continued. "I'll be honest. I almost blew him off. For all I know, the guy had plans to push me off the top of that mountain. But when I arrived, there was this red pickup truck parked there, and he stood out there in that red coat and those red pants, not acting the least bit cold even though it felt like it was a hundred degrees below zero up there."

"Santa doesn't get cold," Jordan pointed out with a teasing glint in her eye.

Lucky flashed her one of those loving smiles before returning his attention to Holden. "He said he had a business proposition for me and pointed to all the empty land. He talked about what a draw a resort would be. I thought it was his idea, and he wanted to hire me as a developer. In the end, though, he gave me your name. Weird, huh?"

“Doesn’t sound too weird to me,” Jordan said. “Do you know him?”

Holden shook his head. What was happening here?

Lucky shook his head, too. “Who knows what’s going on with the guy? Anyway, let’s get together for coffee or lunch one day this week. Or we can wait until after the first of the year if you’d prefer.”

This was better than he could’ve imagined. He’d been prepared to give Lucky a sales pitch, even before this William-Santa character had stepped into the situation. This allowed him to skip right past that and discuss the opportunity.

He agreed to meet and returned to the table to find Faith and J.J. laughing over something. Even when J.J. asked to borrow his phone to play her game, he didn’t mind.

Yes, everything was exactly as it should be.

**F**aith assumed she knew what to expect from an ice show. She was wrong.

She'd seen plenty of figure skating in her time—mostly sports competitions on TV. It was always the same. Beautiful, glittery costumes on graceful people skating to some sort of classical music. They either skated solo or as part of a couple. This was an actual show, complete with colored lights and a story.

The best part of the performance was that she got to watch it seated next to Holden. The seats were narrow, so they were packed together, her arm pressed against his. In fact, she'd swear he was leaning toward her a little. But that could be because the guy on the other side of him was encroaching on his space. Whatever the reason, she didn't mind.

“Dad, I have to go to the restroom,” J.J. said the second it was clear they were at intermission.

Holden gave a nod. “Let's go.”

“I'll take her,” Faith said. Of course, she would. It made total sense. “I have to go, anyway.”

“Oh,” Holden said.

He seemed surprised by that offer. If Faith wasn't here, how did that work? Did he stand with J.J. in the long line for the women's restroom, then wait outside? Did he take her into the men's room? Neither sounded like a good option.

Yeah, they needed Faith in their lives if only for situations like this.

“I’ll go to the men’s room then grab some refreshments and meet you two back here,” he said.

Faith assumed that meant they’d have plenty of time, but then she saw the line for the women’s room. They passed the men’s room, and the line wasn’t even close to the length of the women’s, which was more of a large cluster of a hundred people or so than a line. It definitely looked like Holden would have plenty of time to grab refreshments and beat them to their seats.

“They’ll hold the show if we’re not finished yet,” J.J. told her once they got to the end of the line. “They can’t start without all these people.”

Faith smiled down at her. “Do you think?”

“I know.” J.J. nodded. “We do this show every year.”

That was news to Faith. “Your dad brings you here every year?”

J.J. shook her head. “Not this one. We went to one in New York every Christmas. My mom used to take me when I was little.”

When she was little. As though, at the age of eight, she was a full-grown adult now. It was cute.

“Dad took me last year, and that’s when he was looking at his watch the whole time. His messages pop up there. That’s how you know he’s bored.”

“Maybe some of the messages are emergencies,” Faith said. “I’m sure his pilots have questions sometimes that need to be answered quickly.”

“It’s much better now,” J.J. said, sounding much more mature than her years. Maybe she hadn’t been so far off with that comment about when she was little. “Where he used to work, he had to take calls all the time. And email. Tons of emails.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t like email.”

“Me, either.”

Faith tried to remember the last time she had to deal with that sort of thing. She had personal emails, of course, but they were mostly spam these days. When she'd quit her corporate job to help run her ex-fiancé's parents' store, she left corporate life, and the constant barrage of emails that came with it, behind.

That would change soon enough, though. In fact, she was already mapping out a game plan for starting her job search. Now she had experience running a store, but she'd moved to England as a museum curator for a business based out of Knoxville. She just had to find a way to spin that work into a job that paid well.

Maybe Holden would let her do some marketing work for his business. That was where her interests were these days, and if he'd let her put him on her résumé, she could possibly get a job out of it.

"I think you're good for him."

J.J.'s voice pulled Faith from her thoughts. All around them, people were talking and laughing. Meanwhile, this little girl's words had gone straight to her heart.

"Your dad?" Faith asked, knowing that was exactly who J.J. meant.

"Yep." She nodded. "He smiles a lot now. He's doing stuff like this without looking like he wants to be somewhere else. It's like he always wants to be right where he is when you're around."

A surge of emotion almost knocked Faith over, it was so strong. She wasn't even sure what to say in response. Luckily, J.J. let her off the hook by quickly launching into a story about her friends. But her words stuck with Faith as they returned to their seats and Holden handed Faith the bucket of popcorn for all three of them to share. He'd bought each of them bottled waters. He'd even grabbed a handful of napkins to make sure they were well taken care of.

As the lights dimmed and the opening notes of "Silent Night" rang through the air, Faith felt especially sentimental. It



wasn't just the song or the Christmas costumes and props. It was being here with Holden and J.J. This was Christmas. This was what it was all about. The feeling of family, of belonging, was something that had been missing from her life for so long. She didn't ever want it to go away.

Holden owed Faith a peppermint latte, and today was the day to pay that debt. The drive-thru line at the franchise coffee shop on the strip was too long, though, so he parked and walked in. If it saved time, he never minded going to a little extra trouble. It was all about efficiency.

“Holden!”

He heard his name called out as he was standing in front of the counter, looking at the menu. He usually just grabbed a black coffee with a splash of creamer at these franchise places, but Faith had him curious about the peppermint latte. She made it sound as good as pumpkin pie.

He turned to see Nic Winters standing in the area where customers waited for their drinks to be made. Holden walked over, arm outstretched, and they shook hands.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Holden blurted.

Was he ready to discuss this yet? Yes, after what he’d learned over the past couple of days, he was definitely ready to loop Nic in on his plans.

“We need to schedule a meeting,” Holden said. “I mentioned an upcoming project. It’s pretty big. Assuming you’re still open to a job here in Misty Mountain.”

Nic had relocated to Misty Mountain after falling in love with Faith’s sister, Charity. As far as Nic knew, the two of them were going to be brothers-in-law, so it made sense that

Holden might help him out with a job. But he'd first hinted at it to Nic long before he'd met Faith Ardmore.

"A ski resort, I heard," Nic said.

"Nic?" an employee called out.

Nic held up a finger to tell Holden to wait and rushed over to grab his order. All Holden could do was stare at him, trying to process the comment he'd just made. Shaking his head, Nic turned the coffee cup around to show Holden his name, printed on a sticker on the side, as he walked back.

"They add a 'k' at the end, every time," Nic said.

But Holden's mind was still reeling from what Nic just said. "How did you hear about the ski resort?" Holden asked, careful to keep his voice down. The last thing he needed was for someone else to overhear. "I haven't told anyone."

Nic shrugged. "It's all over town. But you need some investors, right? You know Matt does that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Invests. He has a bunch of properties around town. Rentals for tourists. What you're doing could be right in his wheelhouse."

He was so blown away by this conversation. He'd done everything he could to keep things secret, but maybe somebody overheard at the Mexican restaurant the other night. No telling in a town like this. Gossips got a hold of something, and it was all over.

"That might be too steep a price for an investor like that," Nic said, looking off into the distance while pressing on the lid of his coffee cup. "But if several investors pooled their funds—in fact, maybe the whole town would want to invest. You might even get the city to pay for part of it. And Matt's the mayor. Yeah, Matt's the one you should be meeting with."

He hadn't allowed much room for Holden to respond to any of those statements, but now he paused, seeming to remember how this conversation started.

“But wait,” Nic said. “How do you see me being a part of it?”

“I need somebody to run it. You seem like the perfect person.”

Nic frowned as he took a long sip from his coffee. “How do you figure?”

“You ran a huge farm before coming here, right? I need someone who knows how to handle the day-to-day stuff. Assuming this goes through. I certainly don’t expect you to put your job search on hold, but if we can get this moving before you find something else, it would be a huge load off.”

“I’d love to work with you,” Nic said. “Especially since it looks like we’ll eventually be family.”

Uh-oh. That could be a problem. Nic would have no way of knowing that Holden and Faith weren’t really getting married. But eventually, the truth would come out. Maybe, in this instance, Nic wasn’t the best man for the job.

That bothered him for reasons beyond that, though. Holden suddenly felt a little sad that this guy wouldn’t be family. He liked sitting around the Christmas table with him, Charity, and Faith’s parents. That was one thing he hadn’t planned—getting attached to Faith’s family, even in the small amount of time he’d spent around them.

But then, he hadn’t counted on getting so attached to Faith, either. He was supposed to be keeping his distance. That was starting to prove impossible.

“Think about it,” Nic said. “Go ahead and grab your drink. Here.”

Nic reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He had to balance it on his thumb to make sure he kept the cup in hand. Before Holden could offer to hold his coffee for him, Nic whipped out a business card and handed it over.

“You have my phone number now,” Nic said. “Shoot me a text and maybe the four of us can go do something one night. We can go to the Playhouse or something. You can bring J.J.

too, if you think she'd want to hang out with a bunch of boring grown-ups."

As Holden headed over to the counter to place his to-go order, he mulled over the offer. J.J. would be more than happy to spend the night at a friend's house so he could, in fact, go on a double date with Nic and Charity. But there was something about continuing to get close to her family that bugged him. And he wasn't sure what to do about it.

**J**.J had a plan, and it was a plan Faith was all too happy to help with. She wanted to spend the weekend at her friend's house—one of the Ambers. Faith couldn't keep up.

It seemed like only yesterday she herself had been just a kid, begging her parents to let her go hang out at her best friend Bethany's house. Now she wished she'd spent more time around her family. At some point, her world had shifted to her friends, especially once she got to middle school. But those times with her parents and sisters were some of her best memories.

"Here he comes," J.J. whispered as the roar of the garage door opening made its way to the kitchen.

Faith smiled as she set the fancy glass full of sweet tea next to the plate of food they'd made for Holden. Plates for all three of them, actually. Fried pork chops, baked potatoes, and green beans—his favorite meal, according to his daughter.

"What's all this?" Holden asked as soon as he stepped into the room.

He wore a button-down shirt and dress pants for his second meeting with the investors in Knoxville. It must have gone well because he'd been there the better part of the afternoon.

"Your favorite dinner," J.J. said.

Holden set his laptop case in its usual spot and turned to face them, eyeing his daughter skeptically. "What are you up

to? You want something, don't you?"

J.J. giggled, giving away that indeed she did. So much for waiting until he had his belly full of his favorite foods to ask her question.

"Sit." Faith gestured toward the seat. "It's dinnertime."

She and J.J. took their usual seats, figuring he'd follow. They'd both dressed up. Faith wore a buffalo plaid sweater and black pants she'd grabbed from storage at her parents' house. J.J. wore a brown velvety dress with a silky ribbon around the waist. Faith had helped fix her hair, braiding it and adding ribbons. Her goal was to look as sweet as possible so her dad said yes.

"We should do this more often," Holden said as he slid onto his seat.

"Have pork chops for dinner?" Faith asked.

As far as she could see, sitting down to dinner with his daughter wasn't all that unusual. He'd said it was his favorite time of the day. They sat down without any TVs and caught up on things.

"Get dressed up for dinner," he said. "You both look beautiful tonight."

"And you look very handsome." J.J. tossed him her sweetest smile.

Holden narrowed his eyes as he picked up his fork, tilting his head slightly. "You're definitely up to something, but I'm going to let it slide for right now. I have something more pressing to attend to. This delicious dinner."

J.J. exchanged a look with Faith. Even though they'd met only a few days ago, Faith could read that look. She was weighing whether to push or to wait. Faith lowered her gaze to J.J.'s plate to communicate that she should eat now, talk later.

"This is amazing," Holden said after swallowing the first bite. "The gravy makes it."

"Dad never makes gravy with his pork chops," J.J. said. "She's a better cook than you are. I think we should keep her."

Faith froze at those words. They were said with a big smile and a lighthearted tone, but Faith wasn't sure how they'd hit Holden.

"Hey!" He frowned at his daughter. "I'm sitting right here."

"You're a great cook," J.J. said. "But Miss Faith is very, *very* good."

She gave an even bigger smile to Faith than she'd been sharing with her dad. Exactly who she was trying to butter up?

"I was the oldest, growing up," Faith said as she cut into her own pork chop and dragged it through the gravy. "Mom taught me how to cook so I could help out. I was only twelve years old when she first left me alone at the stove."

"Wow." J.J. looked at her dad. "Can I learn to cook?"

"I think that's exactly what you're doing with Miss Faith." Holden looked over at Faith. "You're teaching J.J., like your mom taught you."

Faith struggled to define the emotions that washed over her. Happiness mixed with sadness, maybe? She had to hold it together. Getting all teary-eyed would definitely ruin this dinner—and J.J.'s plans.

"My sister called today," Faith blurted. Anything to change the topic. "She said you ran into Nic."

His expression changed. Had she said something wrong? She was supposed to be keeping him in a good mood.

"When I was getting coffee," he said. "I guess I forgot to mention it."

Faith shook her head. "No big deal. She said that you two mentioned something about us all going out, maybe for New Year's Eve."

"New Year's Eve." Eyebrows arched, he looked over at J.J. "Do you have plans for New Year's Eve?"

J.J. glanced at Faith. Normally, she'd say the young girl was invited too, of course. She and Charity had even discussed



some family-friendly New Year's Eve ideas. But Faith knew what tonight was all about.

“I—kind of.”

J.J. glanced at Faith, who nodded her encouragement. There was no reason for her to be shy about asking. But she'd mentioned her dad could be overprotective, and he might not like what she wanted to do.

“Amber H's mom is taking her to Gatlinburg for the weekend, and she said she could bring three friends. She doesn't have any sisters or brothers. Like me. Her mom knows she likes having friends to hang out with. She has a... What's that thing called?” She looked over at Faith.

“Chalet,” Faith said.

It sounded amazing to her. A little cabin in the mountains for a long weekend... Wrangling four eight-year-olds might make that a challenge, but maybe not. She imagined being nostalgic for her own childhood as she watched the group of girls giggling and whispering late into the night when they were supposed to be sleeping. There was nothing like that sense of belonging. Of having friends who got you like nobody else.

A sudden longing to be a parent slammed into her. It was so fierce, she nearly dropped her fork. For the first time, that longing had nothing to do with a child depending on her and loving her. It was the feeling of being on vacation in a cabin in the mountains with her own children and maybe even some of their friends. Smiling as they giggled and whispered and kept her and her husband up late into the night.

It was that feeling of being a part of something that was her own. Her family.

“I don't know.” Holden set his fork down and wiped his mouth with his napkin. Then he sat back in his chair and stared at his daughter. “Are both her parents going to be there?”

“Yes.” J.J. nodded enthusiastically. She was in full convincing mode here. “We're going to play video games, shop, take a ride on the ski lift—”

“Whoa,” Holden interrupted. “The ski lift?”

“We went on it last time we visited, Dad.”

She rolled her eyes, and Faith winced. She’d specifically instructed her not to roll her eyes at any point during the conversation, no matter what her father said.

“It’s totally safe,” J.J. continued. “You’re belted in, and you know I’ll be careful.”

“But a parent won’t be with you when you’re on it,” he said.

Specifically, he wouldn’t be on there with her.

In that one conversation, Faith saw another side of parenting. The worry about your child. She could totally see how that would be stressful, and now she got why Holden was protective. He’d lost his ex-wife and the mother of his child. He’d never had both his parents around. Losing people was part of life for him. It was pretty much all he’d ever known.

But this was another level. This was his child. He was responsible for keeping her safe. Turning her over to a trusted parent was one thing, but sending her off to a busy mountain town with only two parents to watch four kids? Yeah, she got it.

“What if we go too?” Faith blurted.

Had she really just suggested that? She’d proposed spending the New Year on vacation with a man she was only pretending to be in a relationship with.

“We could get two separate hotel rooms,” she rushed to add. “Or a cabin with two rooms near where they’re staying.”

“I’m sure it’s all booked up,” Holden said.

J.J. nodded. “Amber’s mom said she reserved this cabin last September. She also has it for next New Year’s Eve.”

“It’s a popular place.” Holden took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Will you take your watch and promise to wear it at all times?”

“Watch?” Faith looked over at him. “Like a smartwatch?”

“Sort of,” he said. “It’s a tracker that also tells time. We’ve agreed she’s not old enough for a phone yet.”

“We didn’t agree,” J.J. countered. “All my friends have phones.”

“I still say third grade is too young for a phone,” he said. “Though, it would be handy in situations like this.”

“Exactly.” J.J. set her fork down and wiggled anxiously in her seat a little. “So, can I go? Please please please?”

Holden rolled his eyes. “Again with the ‘pleases’. Okay, if you wear your tracker *and* you have Amber’s mom text me when you get there. Maybe even have one of your friends send some pictures every now and then.”

Another great argument for a phone, but J.J. knew better than to press her luck. “We will, I promise,” she said, beaming.

“Now.” Holden sat back, his plate empty. “Who’s ready for dessert?”

“Are you sure I’m dressed okay?” Holden asked, looking down at his sweater and pants.

It was Friday night, and he’d just seen J.J. off for her long weekend in the mountains. He wasn’t sure if his nervousness was over that or tonight’s double date with Charity and Nic, but he changed sweaters four times and ended up going back to sweater number one.

“No, that’s perfect,” she said. “You look very handsome.”

“And you look beautiful, as always.”

He blurted that out before he could stop himself. It seemed the right thing to do to compliment her back, and it was exactly what he thought. In fact, she seemed to get more beautiful every day. But he was trying to avoid things getting too romantic between them. Trying and failing miserably.

“Thanks,” she said.

She was studying him, and he had a feeling it had nothing to do with the compliments they’d just handed each other. “You’re worried about her, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “That transparent, huh?”

It had been buzzing beneath the surface the whole time he was getting ready. He just couldn’t seem to shake this uneasy feeling. It was unfounded, he knew, but there was a disquieted part of his brain that seemed to constantly be at war with the logical side of it. The logical part of him knew J.J. was in good hands.

“Her friend’s mom texted to say they got there okay,” he said. “I can see her at the chalet on her tracker. I know they’re probably settled in for the night. It’s just...” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

She stepped forward and reached for his hands, taking them in hers and looking him in the eye. “It’s going to be fine. She has two adults and three other kids looking out for her.” She paused a moment, then said, “She’s going to be fine.”

It made no sense, but those words instantly calmed him. It had nothing to do with her reassurance that J.J. had people looking out for her and everything to do with the look in her eyes, the feel of her hands in his. He wasn’t pacing this big empty house alone, as he normally did when J.J. was off with her friends. He didn’t have to throw himself into work to get his mind off it, either. He had someone to go through this with him.

Suddenly, he couldn’t seem to pull his gaze away from her. All the emotions he’d kept tucked beneath the surface welled up in that one, heart-melting stare.

“Thank you,” he finally managed to say.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “For what?”

“For being here, for setting up this double date to take my mind off things...”

For so much he wasn’t saying. So much he couldn’t say.

“I still say we should’ve made a trip to the mountains for the weekend,” she said with a smile. “Finding two hotel rooms can’t be all that hard.”

“Let’s go,” he said.

He could probably make it happen. One call to his travel agent, and they’d be on their way. But he was afraid they wouldn’t be able to find two rooms close together—or even in the same hotel. And then he’d have to worry about J.J. *and* Faith.

The chime of the doorbell had both of them splitting apart like a lightning bolt had crashed down between them. The

other half of their double date was here.

Holden pulled the door open to Nic's smiling face, which quickly turned to a frown. "You're dressy." He looked over at Charity, standing next to him. "I told you we probably should go somewhere fancier than the pizza place."

"It's not like there are any better choices in this town," Charity said.

"The pizza place is fine with me, but I know of a better place," Holden said. "If you're up for it."

Nic looked at Charity, who said, "We might not be dressed for it."

"We're dressed for it." Holden turned to Faith. "This place isn't fancy. It's just...quieter."

"Let's go." Faith gave him a smile that felt like he'd been wrapped in a big hug.

Yeah, he had it bad.

The Back Porch was a restaurant attached to a quaint bed and breakfast halfway up the mountain. That meant it was past the Misty Lakes subdivision, where Holden lived. It was surrounded by cabins that were popular with tourists, but if someone needed a place to stay that wasn't a cabin, this inn had them covered.

"How did you know they wouldn't be packed?" Faith asked as they settled into a table in the far corner.

They weren't the only diners here tonight, but the place wasn't as packed as the restaurants in Gatlinburg would be that week.

"Unfortunately, this isn't somewhere people come in the wintertime," he said. "Misty Mountain's great, but we need more for tourists to do."

"Something you can help with," Nic said. He looked around. "Is it okay to discuss that here, or should we keep it quiet for now?"

Holden glanced over at the only other patrons in this part of the restaurant—an older couple Faith didn't recognize. Apparently, Holden didn't either because he said, "It's perfectly fine to discuss it among family."

"Family." Charity smiled. "I love the idea of the two of you working together."

Something about those words grabbed Faith's attention. Family. Of course, her sister believed that. She thought Faith

and Holden were engaged, and if that were the case, he'd be Charity's brother-in-law, and once Charity and Nic got married, they'd be related, as well.

But none of that would happen. There was no engagement. There would be no wedding. And now, it appeared that Nic and Holden were making plans to work together. That could make things really awkward when it came out that the engagement had been fake all along. Even if they went with the idea of telling everyone they'd just called things off, Faith supposed an ex working for her sister's husband would be weird.

What was that about weaving a tangled web by deceiving? That was exactly what they'd done. They'd created a mess she couldn't see a way out of.

"It's such a great idea," Holden said. "A ski resort that will attract tourists all winter."

"Is there enough snow here for that?" Faith asked. She was afraid to reveal just how little she knew about skiing.

"They'd use manufactured snow, right?" Charity asked. "I think that's what they do in Gatlinburg."

Faith held in a groan. She was hoping to help Holden take his mind off the "G" word tonight. And here it was, popping up in conversation.

"Exactly," Holden said, seemingly not affected by the mention of the town where his daughter was spending the weekend. "It's not cheap, but if you set it up right, there's serious money in it. And that's why we need the investment."

"The guys in Knoxville," Nic said.

Silence. Holden stared at Nic for what seemed like an hour but was probably just seconds. When he finally did open his mouth to respond, the server appeared. It was actually the woman who owned the place, Betty Preston.

"Oh my," she said, looking around. "You're the Ardmore sisters. I remember you when you were this big." She held her hand up to hip level, shaking her head. "I can't believe you're all grown."



“I can’t believe you recognized us,” Charity said.

“Of course,” Mrs. Preston said. “Your sister’s on that TV show. You three are the spitting image of your mother. I went to high school with her. Did you know that?”

Charity and Faith exchanged a look. No, their mom had never mentioned that. Not that Faith remembered. She’d seen Mrs. Preston around town all her life, and her mom had always stopped to talk to her when they crossed paths. But she’d never mentioned they’d gone to high school together.

“We were as close as two peas in a pod way back in middle school. We called it junior high in the Dark Ages.” She laughed. “Anyway, I don’t want to bore you with my life story. What can I get y’all to drink?”

Once Mrs. Preston scurried off with her drink order, Holden and Nic picked up where they left off.

“How did you know about that?” Holden asked.

“What?” Nic seemed to have lost the thread of the conversation during the brief interruption.

“The team I’ve been meeting with in Knoxville. Has that gotten out around town?”

Faith knew the last thing he wanted was for that information to get out. Someone could swoop in and grab the money before he had a chance to finalize things.

“Lucky told me,” Nic said. “Was he not supposed to? It might be my fault. I brought it up, and he seemed fine with opening up since I seemed to know what was going on. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned it, but when you said he was helping you...”

“It’s not final yet.” Holden sat back and looked around. “I guess I should stop being so paranoid. It’s not like there’s a long line of entrepreneurs eager to build a ski lodge in a town with minimal tourism revenue—compared to other places, anyway.”

“I have thoughts about that,” Nic said. “A better idea than getting funding from some guys in suits in some big city.”

Faith smiled at those words. She'd hardly call Knoxville the big city, but it was bigger than Misty Mountain, for sure.

"They weren't really in suits," Holden said. "They were young guys who looked like they just graduated college. They have some extra investment money and are looking to find businesses they can snatch up and make a profit on."

As the conversation continued, Faith could hear J.J.'s voice in her head, asking her dad not to talk business at dinner. That made her miss the eight-year-old. Not that she really minded listening to two guys go back and forth on this venture of Holden's, especially if it kept him from worrying about his daughter.

"I say keep it here in Misty Mountain," Nic said, tapping the table to emphasize his words. He paused while Mrs. Preston set their drinks down in front of them. Once she was gone, he picked up where he'd left off as he pulled the paper off the straw. "There have to be some locals with money who are eager to invest. Lucky, for instance."

"I need Lucky's help with gathering subcontractors and such," Holden said. "He's my partner in that sense."

"But he might be interested in investing too," Nic said. "There are others in town with money. Maybe not at yours and Lucky's level, but if it's a good business opportunity, they will at least throw a little money at it."

Okay, she'd been away a while, but surely a bunch of rich guys hadn't sprung up all over town while she was gone. "Who?" she asked.

"Matt for one," Nic said.

"The mayor?" Faith asked.

Charity nodded. "He's doing pretty well for himself these days. He has rental properties all up and down these mountains. He's building a group of them not too far from here."

"Also, his buddy, Denver," Nic said. "He's still small-time when it comes to investing, but his repair shop is doing really

well these days. I'm sure he'd love to hear you out. It's worth a try."

"We could bring everybody together for a town hall and see if Misty Mountain wants to invest in it," Faith said. "Isn't that what they do when they build sports stadiums in some towns?"

Nic smiled. "Yeah, I think that falls into a different category."

"Why?" Faith asked. "If a ski lodge stands to bring a bunch of business to Misty Mountain, it would generate tax revenue. People need somewhere to eat. Those tourists would inevitably come down from the mountain to patronize our local restaurants.

"Sounds similar to me," Charity jumped in to say. "Unless you think your ski lodge might not attract a lot of people."

Now they all looked at Holden. That thought hadn't even occurred to Faith. In the time she'd spent with Holden, she'd learned to trust his business ideas.

Holden stared thoughtfully ahead for a long moment before finally saying, "Being new to this town, I just didn't feel comfortable reaching out to strangers. I thought getting money, even if it meant going overseas to do it, would pull revenue into this town without taking anything from it."

"But you wouldn't be taking anything," Faith said. She hesitated as everyone looked at her. She was definitely not an expert in this area, but she offered her thoughts, anyway. "The town would feel like it was part of making the ski resort happen. When was the last time we came together to start a business?"

"The theater," Charity said. "I guess you weren't here for that. Over the summer, the theater was in jeopardy of being turned into something completely different. Jordan and Lucky saved it, and now it's doing great."

Oh, yeah. It was still a dinner theater, but better than ever. Faith's mom had told her about that.

“The town came together to boycott it, though, didn’t they?” Faith asked.

She struggled to remember what her mom had told her. It had even ended up on the news.

“They boycotted the owner turning it into a concert venue,” Nic said.

“It was still going to be a dinner theater, but with musicians performing,” Charity added. “They worried it would bring in the wrong kind of tourists.”

“What kind of musicians?” Faith asked, her surprise at this news coming through in her voice.

Nic laughed. “It was some country music star from a couple of decades ago. Hardly someone who would bring in the riffraff, but you know how people are about change.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Holden said. “People don’t like change, especially in a small town. I want to bring in a ski resort.”

“But you’re putting it at the top of the mountain in an area that has never been used,” Charity said.

“Prime skiing property,” Nic added. “Besides, it’s not like you’re cutting into the town’s existing activities. You’re building something on empty land.”

Holden said nothing. He was in his usual thoughtful pose, staring straight ahead. This time, he toyed with his straw, swirling around in his iced tea absentmindedly.

Just when Faith was searching for a way to change the topic to something more festive, Mrs. Preston appeared. “Okay, you folks are too serious. How about putting in your orders? Oh, and I forgot to say congratulations.”

They were all four staring at their menus when those words came out. Faith’s head popped up. This could only be about one thing...

“My line cook said you two are engaged.”

“Your line cook?” Faith glanced at Charity. “Does the whole town know?”

“Do you even have to ask that?” Holden laughed. “This is big news around here.”

“Sure.” Mrs. Preston smiled. “Nothing’s changed in Misty Mountain. Not much happening around here. Now, let me get your order, and I’ll play a little something for you. Get this party going.”

Faith had no idea what she meant by that, but she found out soon enough. After they put their orders in, Mrs. Preston returned, apron discarded. She waved to the couple, then stopped at Faith’s table.

“I have one rule,” Mrs. Preston said. “When I play, all four of you have to get up and dance. No excuses.”

Great. Faith was a horrible dancer. It was a talent she just didn’t have, but for the first time in her life, she wished she did. She certainly didn’t want to make a fool of herself in front of Holden.

But he looked just as reluctant as she was as Mrs. Preston launched into “Jingle Bell Rock.” She played the piano at the far end of the dining room with such finesse, Faith would have sworn she was a professional.

“I guess if we’re going to make fools of ourselves, we’ll make fools of ourselves together,” Holden joked.

Charity and Nic didn’t look the slightest bit uncomfortable as they took the spot nearest the table. They launched into a fun sort of two-step that seemed straight out of a dance class.

When had Charity learned to dance? Oh, right, she’d been a cheerleader in school. So had Ana, briefly. Either one of them would be far better prepared for this than Faith and her two left feet.

Holden grabbed Faith’s hands, and they attempted some extremely clumsy version of what the other couple was doing. Soon, the older couple at the table near the piano were up on their feet, dancing and smiling.

Something about that loosened Faith up. This wasn't about showing off dance moves. It was about having fun. Getting lost in the moment. And sharing that moment with Holden Pryce.

"Okay, now something a little slow," Mrs. Preston announced as she reached the end of the song.

Faith should have felt disappointed. The end of the song meant they could finish the dancing session and sit down and wait for their food. But instead, she was kind of glad to hear it. She didn't want this connection with Holden to end—dancing like fools, their hands clasped, and big smiles on their faces.

For a slow song, she didn't choose something Christmassy. Instead, she went with the more timely "Auld Lang Syne." It felt odd, slow dancing to something that wasn't normally slow danced to. Couples usually kissed when this particular song played.

Holden hesitated only a few seconds before slipping his arms around her and pulling her toward him. She rested her hands on his forearms, afraid to get too close. That left her awkwardly trying to figure out where to look. She could stare straight up at him, but that made her think about kissing him.

Faith finally focused her attention on the older couple near the piano. They looked so happy, so in love. There was no way to know they'd been married for years. They could be newlyweds who'd met later in life. But at the sight, she couldn't help but imagine what it might be like to grow old with someone. To be that couple dancing in the dining room at an inn on a Friday night.

What if that person she grew old with was Holden? She hadn't dared imagine anything like that. But suddenly, she couldn't imagine anyone else. He fit perfectly into her fantasy of vacationing in a cabin in the mountains with her kids. And having those kids in the first place.

But what if he didn't want more children? J.J. was eight, after all. With a new baby, he'd have to start all over, and it would no doubt bring up memories of what he'd lost.

No, it would be too much to ask of him—and of J.J. If she wanted a husband and a couple of kids of her own, she needed to find someone who'd share that dream. Not someone who had to bend his life to fit her dreams.

As the song came to an end and everyone started clapping, Faith easily separated from Holden, her thoughts still weighing on her. He'd probably seen it as no more than a dance, but for her, it had been eye-opening. Her future had flashed in front of her eyes, and it was a future she couldn't fit him into. And that hurt her heart more than she wanted to admit.

Something was up with Faith. She'd been quiet for the rest of their double date Friday night and when they'd gotten home, she'd gone straight to bed, claiming she had a headache. Even her sister seemed to think something might be wrong. She'd given Faith a few strange looks at the table.

Whatever it was, he was hoping she'd feel comfortable enough to open up to him. But he didn't want to pry.

Luckily, he was busy with work all day Saturday. Without his phone buzzing every few seconds, as it did during the week, he actually sat down and finished some changes to his business plan. The Knoxville investors had requested them. He still wasn't sure if he wanted to work with them. Nic had him all mixed up on the issue. But he'd promised the changes, so he'd shot them over.

But there was another project he was lining up. It was a surprise for Faith. He'd reached out to one of his virtual assistants yesterday morning to help with it, and she'd texted first thing that morning with a link. He entered some information, paid the fees, and it was all set.

Now he had to make sure Faith was ready for the surprise. Around midafternoon, he put a pause on his work and emerged from his office. The problem was, he couldn't find Faith. She wasn't in her room or the living room—her two usual hangouts. Her laptop wasn't in its usual resting place on the end table on her side of the sofa, either. Finally, he had no choice but to call out for her.



“Out here!”

He was standing in the kitchen when he finally got a response to his shouting. He pushed the door open and stepped out onto the back patio to find her seated in one of his rocking chairs, blanket wrapped around her, sipping from a coffee mug.

“It’s freezing out here,” he said.

She shook her head. “Not too bad with this blanket. I wanted to get some fresh air.”

She wore no makeup and had her hair pulled back in a ponytail, but he spotted jeans and tennis shoes. So at least she was dressed for the company she was about to get.

“I have a surprise,” he said, still closely gauging her expressions.

Confusion was clear on her face as she looked up at him. “Surprise?”

“You’ll see.”

He gestured for her to follow. He wanted to be outside when they pulled in. Unfortunately, that left the two of them standing on the front stoop, staring at an empty driveway.

She looked at him, brow still furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“Trust me.” It would have been nice if a few seconds later, something appeared. But the driveway stayed empty. “Maybe I should text to get an ETA.”

He reached for his phone in his back pocket, not sure who to text. The assistant? That was his only point of contact, unless the online forms he’d filled out had a name on them. Maybe he should check his old emails now.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I have my blanket. Do you need your coat?”

Holden shook his head. He wore a sweatshirt, which was hardly enough to keep him warm in this weather, but he wasn’t planning for them to stand out here for an extra-long time.

“Whatever it is, thank you,” she said. “You and your daughter have been way too generous.”

Why did this sound like some sort of goodbye message? His stomach lurched. He was not prepared for his time with her to come to an end.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Was it something I did? You’ve seemed a little distant since we danced last night.”

She shook her head. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just feeling a lot of pressure to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

He forced his mouth into something he hoped resembled a smile. “I can’t say I’ve had an easy time figuring out what I want to be when I grow up.”

“I’m thirty years old with a failed engagement and years of experience in a career that I don’t want to continue,” she said.

“Managing a store?”

“That too,” she said. “But my degree is in art history. I was a curator for a museum. That had me traveling all over the country and finally outside of it. That’s how I ended up in England.”

“And where you met your fiancé.”

“Ex-fiancé,” she corrected. He noticed she always made sure he was clear on that. “Yeah, just when I was trying to find a way to get back here, he came along and made me think about sticking around there forever. Anyway, I’m not sure my résumé will help me find the kind of work I want.”

“The kind of work you want?” he asked. “What exactly is that?”

“I love marketing,” she said. “I did all the social media for my ex’s parents’ store. I kind of became the face of their shop on one platform, and it got them a lot of business.”

Why hadn’t she mentioned any of this before? He’d had no idea. If there was one thing he needed, it was help getting the word out about his businesses. That would come in especially handy if he opened a ski resort here in town.

“Work for me,” he blurted before he could talk himself out of it. “It’d be a credit for your résumé, and I’ll pay you well. Whatever the going rate is for experienced marketing directors.”

Sirens were flashing in his head. *Stop. Don’t do this. It’s a mistake.* Eventually they’d have to part ways. Having her as his marketing director would not make that easy. Not in the slightest. But his heart was running things here. Apparently, it was looking for ways to keep her in his life. To make it impossible for him to separate from her. If she couldn’t be his nanny and live in his home a couple of months from now, at least she’d still be in his life.

But what happened when she someday met the man of her dreams, got married, and had kids? She’d be working for him. He’d have no choice but to stand by, watching it, knowing what could have been his.

No, a clean break would be best. Walk away and don’t look back. He might see her around town, but he wouldn’t have to work in the same office with her every day or see her name on emails and text messages. Worse—her first name and someone else’s last name. It pained him just to imagine it.

“How about this?” she said. “I’ll try out a few marketing tasks for your helicopter business. It will give me some things for my portfolio, and it’ll help you out. No extra pay required.”

She was already on the payroll. She’d asked for an hourly rate that he felt was way too low, but he planned to help her out in other ways—like what he was doing today. Her gaze slid off to the side, and her eyes widened, telling him his surprise had just arrived.

It wasn’t just one surprise, actually. It was five of them. Five different types of vehicles, pulling into his long driveway. Each had a big red ribbon on it. He’d paid extra for that.

He rushed to give his spiel before she made the wrong assumption. “I didn’t buy you five cars. I talked to your father. He told me what you used to drive and what he thought you might like. He said you’re partial to white, but if you like one

of these, they can swap it out for another color. We just weren't sure if you wanted an SUV or a two- or four-door car. They're here for us to test drive. Your own car lot, right in my driveway."

He wished more than anything, he could just let her pick the car out and pay the bill. He wanted to do that for her. He wanted to help. But he knew she wouldn't let him, even if he claimed it was her company car.

"I don't have to test drive them all," she said. "I know which one I want."

She started toward the fourth vehicle in line—the four-door sedan. The five delivery drivers stepped out of their vehicles and came around to introduce themselves. One was the sales manager, and he was all too happy to go through the details of the vehicle she'd picked out.

"It's perfect," she said. "Not too big, but it'll grow with me. It's something I could see myself driving five or ten years from now."

She saw herself driving the same car five or ten years from now? He hadn't kept a car more than a couple of years. He'd even thought about leasing since he was so fickle, but he drove back and forth to Knoxville too much for that.

As he watched her happily climb into her practical four-door sedan, tossing her blanket into the backseat, something hit Holden. Faith Ardmore was not like any woman he'd ever dated. Even his ex-wife had been a little irresponsible with money. This woman was practical and sensible—something his life had been missing for so long.

"Let's take it for a spin then," Holden said, handing his driver's license to the manager. He might have paid a lot of money to have these delivered, but the sales manager still wasn't going to let somebody take off without leaving some sort of identification behind. Holden climbed into the passenger seat before asking, "It's okay if I ride along with you, right?"

“Of course.” She smiled over at him. “Thank you so much for doing this.”

One of the salespeople had to move the SUV at the back of the line to let her out. Faith stopped to adjust her seat and the mirrors, so it took an extra minute or so. But then they were off, driving down the hill toward the subdivision exit.

Whether she was aware of it or not, she had a smile on her face. She was excited, her mood having perked up considerably since he found her sitting on the back patio. It was worth every dime of the delivery fee to see the smile on her face. And to know that something he’d done had put it there.

**H**e had cars delivered to his house. Who *did* that?  
Holden Pryce, that was who.

She couldn't suppress the smile as she pulled into Holden's driveway, pulling behind the last of the group of cars they'd dropped off. She'd driven the car up and down the strip, him laughing as she pretended to show off how fast the car could go from zero to forty—the speed limit on the busiest part of the main road that ran through Misty Mountain.

It wasn't like the car was a hot rod or anything. It was your basic sedan. But it was a luxury car compared to what she'd had before. It rode so smoothly, and Holden even managed to sync her phone to the screen so she could access her apps easily while driving.

"I'll take care of them," he said. "You go in and change."

Did they have plans she'd forgotten about? "I thought I'd just chill around the house," she said.

"No way," he said. "You're taking me to dinner. I'll pay, of course, but you drive."

He snatched up the keys from the cupholder and got out, heading toward the group of sales guys gathered near the front porch. She followed but continued to the front door. As she passed, she overheard Holden tell the guys they'd settle the paperwork Tuesday morning.

It couldn't be that easy. They wouldn't just leave a car with some stranger over a long holiday weekend. But as she went to

her room and changed, it occurred to her that he'd probably taken care of some things for her. Maybe he'd even put down a deposit to hold it until she could finalize it all.

Everything in her wanted to fight him taking care of her like that. But she couldn't seem to squash her contentment. He was her boss. He could help her when she needed it, couldn't he?

He didn't say how long she had, so she took a quick shower, dried her hair, threw on some makeup, and emerged less than a half hour later to an empty house. By the time she went out to the back patio to retrieve her laptop and phone, though, he'd emerged from his bedroom. The sweatshirt had been replaced by a gray sweater with black trim. Something about it set off his skin tone in a way that made him look more handsome than ever.

Yes, she was very lucky to have this guy as her boss.

"Where are we going, exactly?" she asked, fighting the urge to tell him how nice he looked.

His full attention was on his phone screen. She wasn't even sure he'd seen her yet.

"Knoxville?" He lifted his head, his gaze landing on her and his expression immediately softening. Did it always do that? "That would give your car a real workout."

There was a twinkle in his eyes. He smiled, and it tugged at her heart.

"You know what I'm craving?" she asked. "Some of Jackie's onion rings."

"Jackie's Diner." His eyebrows arched like he was impressed. "I haven't been there in at least a couple of months."

Now that surprised her. "You don't like the diner?"

Maybe she should have suggested somewhere else. A trip to Knoxville would be fine, but she was trying to come up with ways to keep it simple.

“No,” he said. “I mean, yes, I love it, but most nights I’m too busy to wait for J.J. to get ready so we can go out somewhere. It’s just easier to make something here. When we do go out, she always wants—”

“Chips and salsa,” Faith finished for him.

She’d heard those three words more in the past week than she had in her entire life. In fact, she was pretty sure J.J. would be happy eating at the Mexican restaurant every single night. Maybe even for every meal.

She started heading toward the front door. “Let’s go.”

“We’re this way.” Holden gestured toward the garage. “I pulled your car in. Your keys are by the door.”

She was still processing that as she turned and headed in the direction of the door that went to the garage. He’d parked her car there? Where he kept his own?

There was plenty of room. In fact, he could squeeze four cars into it, and he had only one.

Sure enough, her new key fob was hanging on the hook next to his. It all looked very intimate. Like she was part of the family, not just an employee. Not just a woman who watched his daughter and organized his kitchen cabinets. Not someone who was thinking about pulling away from him so she could set herself on a course to find the man she’d marry and have children with.

Opening the garage door only made it worse. Her car was parked next to his. It looked like it belonged there. It looked like she belonged in this house.

“Onion rings,” she said in an effort to ground herself. She’d just stay focused on the thrill of driving her new car to one of her favorite restaurants in the world and try to forget her attraction to this man.

But once they were in the car, it became an even bigger challenge. His presence seemed to fill any room he was in, and it was worse in this confined space. She hadn’t noticed it before because she was so excited to be driving again. She’d



lived in the city in London, so public transportation had been a breeze.

When they were out of the garage and on their way down the driveway, Holden spoke. “Nic texted an invitation to Lucky Howard’s New Year’s Eve party tomorrow night. He said it could be a great opportunity to network. Your sister’s going, and Matt will be there too.”

“So, your goal is to network,” she said.

He didn’t answer for a long moment, and she wondered if she’d lost him with her question. Finally, she realized he was once again mulling over his answer.

“Not really,” he said. “I guess I’m going more to make friends. It’s been a long, lonely road, and I’m ready to become part of the Misty Mountain community.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t done that before now,” she said. “I guess you haven’t been here very long, though.”

“It’s tough.” Again, he went silent for a long moment, then spoke again. “When you have a daughter, you can’t really do the social stuff like New Year’s Eve parties. She’s a little older now, but it’s not like I can reliably shuffle her off to her mom’s every other weekend and hang out with friends. I never know when she’s going to ask to spend the night somewhere and I’ll find myself with nothing to do. Well, nothing but bury myself in work to avoid hanging around that big house all alone.”

His honesty was going straight to her heart. He definitely seemed like a guy who had it all together. If he’d stayed to himself, she would have naturally assumed he didn’t want to be part of the community. It wasn’t like super wealthy guys were all that eager to hang out with people who lived paycheck to paycheck. And there were very few people in this town who even came close to his level of success.

But now that he mentioned it, she could see how being a single dad would be challenging, especially since all the people she and her sisters hung out with growing up had either moved away or didn’t have children yet.

“Anyway, it’ll be nice to get to know people,” he said. “Maybe eventually some of them will have kids too.”

“But their kids will be much younger than J.J., obviously.” She flipped on her turn signal as she waited at the light to turn left onto the road where the diner was. “Maybe by then you’ll be ready to have a newborn of your own.”

And just like that, she’d said it. The words that she’d been wanting to pass by him for days. She was too chicken to come out and ask if he saw himself having more kids. This was a passive-aggressive way to bring it up.

He laughed, and it hurt. The pain went straight to her heart.

“I’m done with that for good,” Holden said. “I just want to focus on J.J.”

Those were the words she’d been dreading. He didn’t want more kids. Starting a new family wasn’t in the cards for him.

She wrestled with this new revelation as she pulled into the diner parking lot and grabbed the closest space to the door. She should put an end to this for good. Maybe she could move in with her parents temporarily and tell everyone it hadn’t worked out. She could be honest and say he didn’t want more kids and she couldn’t give that up. Nobody would blame her for ending an engagement if that were the case.

As she stood just inside the entrance to the diner, it hit Faith just how proud she was to be standing beside this man. The townspeople would think that he was her fiancé. But sadly, the more people who saw them together, the harder it would be when they had to end this.

“There you are!” the diner’s owner, Jackie Castle, called out as he came rushing out of the back room. “The Missing Ardmore sister. I just saw Ana, and now you’re back. It’s about time.”

Arms extended, he walked up to her and gave her a big hug. Then he stepped back, holding his hand out to Holden.

“How are you, man?” Jackie asked.

Holden met his handshake. “Great.”

“Congratulations, you two.” Jackie looked from Holden to Faith, a big smile on his face. “You couldn’t have gotten a better woman if you tried.”

“Agreed.”

Faith looked over at Holden and found him staring at her. There was so much emotion in his eyes, it was almost impossible to believe he didn’t feel something for her too. And maybe he did. Maybe he was battling this attraction. Maybe it was turning into more for him.

But it didn’t matter. He didn’t want kids. It would never work.

How would she summon the appetite to enjoy Jackie’s onion rings? She wasn’t sure, but the bright smile on Holden’s face told her she had to try.

It wasn’t his fault. None of this was his fault. She had gotten herself into this mess, and she’d have to deal with the consequences. She should have never let herself start falling for a man who didn’t fit her life goals. She’d already gotten engaged to the wrong person once.

When would she stop letting her heart lead her into situations that were not good for her? When would she learn?

Something was up with Faith, and Holden had an idea of what it might be. So he waited until they'd ordered and sat back, staring at her.

They no longer had the excuse of studying the menu to keep from talking about the issue at hand. Holden was a firm believer in getting things out in the open, and this definitely needed to be brought out into the open.

"You want kids," he said.

His words froze her. She didn't even appear to be breathing. As he watched her, he couldn't help but think how beautiful she looked tonight. She hadn't done anything that elaborate—just straightened her hair and put on a fluffy white sweater with jeans and knee-high boots. But one look at her filled him with so much emotion, it knocked the wind out of him. What was happening to him?

"Yes," she finally said. She took a deep breath and looked off to the left, seeming to have a tough time returning his stare. "Two at least. Hopefully, a couple of years apart in age, but I'm already thirty years old. If I don't start soon, it might be just one. Whatever happens, I definitely want my own family."

Her own family. That put him out of the running. He could never give a woman her own family. He and J.J. were a package deal—a ready-made family.

"You have it all mapped out," he said. "Was that what you planned with your ex?"

Now she shifted her gaze back to him. “We discussed it. You always discuss things like that before you get engaged for real.”

Unlike their engagement, which was the opposite of “for real.” They’d never discussed whether or not they wanted kids because they’d never committed to marrying each other.

He couldn’t. He had no plans to get married. He wanted to dedicate himself to raising J.J. until she was grown. Only then would he consider getting married again. By then, it would be too late to have kids.

Maybe if he repeated it to himself enough, his heart would listen.

“I want J.J. to have what I never did,” he said. “A dedicated, loving father. She’s already suffered so much loss in her life. When her mom and I divorced, I thought about dating again. I was planning on it and maybe even starting a family. But it’s different when your child doesn’t have a mother anymore. You’re her whole world.”

Faith nodded. She got it. She understood completely. So why did he feel the need to keep explaining? Maybe he was trying to convince himself.

“Bringing a woman into your life risks J.J. being hurt,” she said. “You mentioned that at the airport. You said we’d make it clear to her from the start that I was just the nanny and that we were pretending to be engaged. Our plan had one fatal flaw, though.”

This conversation was getting a lot heavier than he would’ve planned. That was made even clearer when a server showed up to set their drinks in front of them.

“Your food will be out shortly,” she said in a way too syrupy sweet voice.

Then she took off for another table. Living her young, carefree life while Holden’s seemed to be getting more complicated by the second.

“What fatal flaw?” he asked.

“We didn’t come up with an end plan,” she said. “We probably need one.”

“You want an end plan?”

A heavy weight was settling over him, making it tough to even reach for his drink. He was paralyzed with...

What? Fear? Dread was more like it. The words she was about to say were probably a hundred percent necessary, but he didn’t want to hear them. He didn’t want this to ever end.

“I’ve been thinking I should probably move back home with my parents until I can get my own place,” she said. “I’ll still nanny and help with your business, of course. But I’m thinking of a more structured job instead of a live-in situation.”

Now he was getting confused. “What do you mean?”

“When you need me to nanny, even if it’s nighttime or on a weekend, I’ll come and do that, but I’ll head home when my shift is done. During the week, I can work for you, but I’ll work from my home office and come over for meetings and such. That will help J.J. and—”

She broke off there. What was she about to say? She was setting these boundaries for a reason. Was it something he did? Maybe having those vehicles delivered to his house had been a step too far. But he’d made it clear that she was paying for the car, and he even worked with her father to make sure the vehicles he chose were in line with what she liked to drive.

“And...?” he prompted. “It’ll help you too?”

She didn’t speak for the longest time, merely swirling her straw around in her drink as she stared down at it. “The whole town thinks I’m engaged to you. But I’d like to start dating eventually, and it’s going to look weird if I’m jumping from a broken engagement right into the dating pool. Not that there’s anyone to date in this town.”

She laughed. It was a dry laugh, and not one that came from her heart. Laughing was the last thing he could do right now.

“You and your daughter have been so good to me,” she said. “The cars today, giving me a place to stay, helping me out with the fiancé thing...”

That last part she said only after looking around and making sure nobody was within earshot. Everyone was having such a good time at their own tables, it seemed like they’d gotten very little attention when they entered. Or maybe it was just that people were used to seeing them together.

“You’re helping me out a lot too,” he said. “You’re great with J.J. She’s never been happier.”

What was he saying? His daughter had never been happier, and he was planning to let this woman walk out of her life eventually? Was he making a big mistake by keeping Faith at arm’s length?

“She’s amazing.” Faith smiled. “I guess that’s part of it. I’m getting a little attached to her. No matter what happens, I want to stay in her life.”

“What’s going to happen?” he asked, afraid to hear the answer.

She shrugged and looked out the window. “Eventually, I’ll meet someone. We’ll get married and start a family. Hopefully, the person will want to live here in Misty Mountain. I can’t imagine living anywhere else now that I’m back. I’ll get a marketing job that allows me to work from home. But I’ll still be here. I might not be able to nanny, but I can be in J.J.’s life for real as a friend.”

Friend. That seemed weird. It all seemed absurd to him, actually. That he would someday have his daughter befriend this woman when he was no longer spending time with her.

But how could he ask her to remain in his life indefinitely? He couldn’t. No matter what, sooner or later they’d have to go their separate ways.

“We don’t have to discuss all this in detail now.” She shook her head. “I just wanted to run this by you. I’ll stay through the first of the year and tell my parents I’m moving back in because I want to be closer to them.”

As he started to speak, the song on the jukebox changed to a country ballad—one of those sappy sad songs about losing the woman you loved. He was shocked at just how much he related to that right now.

“This is too heavy a conversation,” she said. “We should be enjoying our night. I’m sorry.”

He frowned. “I’m the one who brought up the fact that I’m a single dad of an eight-year-old, which kind of makes me an island.”

“No man is an island.” She gave him a sad sort of smile. He wasn’t sure how to interpret that. “You live here in Misty Mountain, remember? We all help each other. So, think of your daughter as part of the community.”

If his daughter was part of the community, couldn’t Faith be part of the group helping raise his daughter? Wasn’t there some way to keep her a daily part of his life, even when she wasn’t working for him?

No. The answer to that was no. And no amount of rationalizing to himself would change it. He just had to accept the fact that she was in his life, as so many were, for a season.

But he couldn’t help but believe she’d been sent to him for a reason. And as he watched her gleefully take her first bite of onion ring, he knew part of caring about her meant he had to let her go when it was for her own good. He couldn’t tie her down for life with a man who had so much baggage.



Getting ready at Charity's house was the right thing to do. That was what Faith told herself as she stood in front of the full-length mirror, admiring the dress she'd bought at the outlet mall earlier that day.

Charity stepped from her bathroom, moving over to stand next to her sister at the mirror. After staring at their reflection for a moment, Charity commented, "Nobody will get us mixed up tonight."

Faith had picked a classy black knee-length dress with lace on the arms, while Charity went with an A-line bright red dress that shimmered in the light. Charity wore ballet flats that gave her more of a girl-next-door look, but Faith had on heels that gave her an air of sophistication.

"I have just what you need to really make that dress pop," Charity said. "Hold on."

Charity rushed back into her bathroom and came out with a bold red lip stain that promised to stay in place no matter what she drank or ate. She stood still and trusted her sister to make the lipstick look decent on her. Usually, bolder colors made her look pale and ghostly.

But when she once again faced the mirror, she was stunned at what she saw there. The lipstick color worked on her. It made her lips stand out in a way they never had.

"Holden's going to love this look." Charity smiled. "Not that he doesn't always look at you like you're the most beautiful woman in the world. Oh...to be that newly in love."

Faith turned to stare at her sister. “You’ve been dating Nic for what? Four weeks?”

“Yeah, but you two are reminding me of those earliest days for some reason,” she said. “I don’t know what it is.”

“I’m moving back in with Mom and Dad,” Faith blurted, mostly to change the subject.

But right away, it was clear she should have chosen a different topic. Charity’s eyes widened and her mouth opened slightly. No words came out.

“Just to give me a little space from things, you know?” Faith said.

She was digging a deeper hole here. There was no way to crawl back out. Not that she could see.

“Come over here,” Charity said.

She reached out a hand, and Faith slid her hand inside. She had no idea where they were going until they were across the room, where there was a chair near the window. Charity gestured for her to sit, and she complied, while Charity plopped down on the nearby bed.

“Talk to me,” Faith’s sister said. “What’s up with you two? You haven’t been completely honest from the start. You’re not really engaged, are you?”

Now Faith was the one left staring, stunned. Had her sister known all along? Of course, she had. Her family knew her like nobody else. Why she thought she could fool them was beyond her.

“I was dumped for another woman in England,” Faith began. “I had to fly home, tail tucked between my legs. I knew the entire town would be talking, including my own family. I had to do something.”

“You know your family would’ve had your back, no matter what.” Charity leaned forward, narrowing her eyes at Faith. “You don’t ever have to hide what’s really going on from us.”

“Mom and Dad know, don’t they?”

Charity took a deep breath, then nodded. “They weren’t going to say anything, but that first night—Christmas Eve—I pulled them aside and asked what was going on. They said that they couldn’t know for sure, but they were guessing that you and Holden were pretending to be engaged for appearances.”

“He was having trouble getting investment money.” Faith laughed. “I think he realizes now that it wasn’t necessary, but apparently one of the investors over in London asked if he was married. He thought he lost the deal because of that, and that it would be easier to land funding if he looked like he had his personal life together.”

Thinking about it now, he *did* have his personal life together. J.J. was happy and healthy and wanted for nothing. Of course, she’d be happier if her mother was still around, but that didn’t mean he needed to bring in a fake fiancée to give that sort of appearance. They might’ve done more harm than good with their plan.

“It was a mistake,” Faith blurted. “I thought I could pretend to be engaged to him and not get my feelings involved, but now...”

“Your feelings are involved,” Charity finished when Faith didn’t speak for several long seconds.

Faith nodded, tears starting to form at the back of her eyes. She’d spent so much time on her makeup, she hated to mess it up, but it felt good to get this all out. Even tears would feel good right now.

“Are you in love with him?” Charity asked.

Faith meant to respond with an adamant no—or at least say she wasn’t sure how she felt at this point. But instead, she found herself nodding, her head bobbing up and down as if it were detached from the rest of her.

“Does he know?” Charity asked.

Now Faith shook her head, although she should’ve shrugged in answer to that one. She had no way to know what Holden was thinking. He might’ve noticed days ago that she was starting to develop feelings for him.

“All my life, I’ve struggled to find my place in this town,” Faith said. “When I went to London, I realized just how... invisible I was here. I didn’t feel at home there, either—I missed Misty Mountain more than I ever thought I would.”

Faith paused, overwhelmed with emotion. It was like, in those few seconds, she was back there in London, knowing nobody and feeling out of place.

That didn’t change when she met Dan. In fact, it seemed to get worse. His parents babied him, and his friends never really welcomed her into their group. Her fiancé’s ex, on the other hand, was always around, always reminding Faith that she didn’t belong there.

“The one thing that made me feel better about being in London was knowing the story it told back here in Misty Mountain.” Faith smiled at the rush she’d felt, imagining people gossiping about her back here. “I was the Ardmore sister who moved to Europe and got engaged to a super-hot English guy with an accent. I used to daydream about what it would be like to bring him home to meet my family. The whole town would be buzzing about me. I’d be *someone* for the first time...ever.”

She may as well have been speaking another language, considering the way Charity was staring at her. It clearly made no sense to her sister.

“You and Ana were always the smart, pretty sisters,” Faith said. “You both were popular in school. Everyone liked you. I was...the oldest sister nobody ever noticed. It was backward. As the oldest sister, I should’ve been the one everyone noticed and used to compare, but that didn’t happen. I guess because this is such a small town.”

“What are you talking about?” Charity asked. “Everyone loved you. Do you know how many times in school teachers mentioned you and said you were one of their best students?”

Faith made a face. That was the first time she’d heard that one.

“It’s not like I was on the honor roll or anything,” Faith said. “I didn’t stand out.”

“No, but everyone liked you. You were fun and friendly and beautiful. You worked hard at your schoolwork and your friendships. You just didn’t see how great you were. You still don’t see it.”

“Part of me knows it’s ridiculous.” Faith laughed. “Most of me knows it, actually. It’s more of a feeling than something I’m consciously doing.”

“So, you unconsciously faked an engagement.” Charity tilted her head slightly to study her sister. She didn’t get it, and how could Faith expect her to? Faith didn’t really understand it herself. “What was the point of it?”

“It was a last-minute decision,” Faith said. “He needed someone to help out with J.J., and I was dreading coming home to a town that would whisper about me behind my back. If they thought I was engaged to the hottest, most successful guy in town, it couldn’t hurt, right?”

Charity’s mouth twisted a little, and Faith struggled to figure out what she was thinking. Then suddenly, she broke into a smile.

“First, Holden isn’t necessarily the most successful guy in town. It depends on what you define as ‘success,’ I guess. But he’s definitely not the handsomest. That honor goes to Nic.”

“Your opinion is a little biased,” Faith pointed out.

“My point exactly. You think Holden is the handsomest, wealthiest guy in town because you’re in love with him.”

Faith gasped. “Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

They devolved into a fit of giggles as they realized they were playing the same game they’d played as kids. But as the giggles waned, Faith let out a sigh.

“I miss Ana,” she said.

Charity nodded. “Me too. Hopefully she’ll be back soon, though. Mom said she and Trevor want to talk to us when this shoot is over.”

“That sounds like good news,” Faith said.

She didn’t know much about the Ana-Trevor romance, but it sounded like they had the gossips all riled up. If Trevor could somehow convince Ana to move back to Misty Mountain, life would be perfect.

Well, not so perfect. Not as long as she was living in the same town as Holden but couldn’t be with him.

“I guess I never really figured out what I want to be when I grow up,” Faith said. “You have your successful interior design business and Nic. Ana’s on TV every week.”

“My business may be doing well, and yes, I’ve found the man of my dreams, but how do you think I felt, hanging around here while you were over in Europe and Ana was a supermodel turned TV host?”

Faith laughed. “Even when you say it like that, I sound like a loser in comparison.”

Charity gasped. “Don’t you ever call yourself a loser. All three of us are winners, in every sense of the word. I think...”

She didn’t finish. She just hesitated, staring off to the side of Faith as she seemed to gather her thoughts. Or maybe she was gathering the courage to say whatever was on her mind.

“You think what?” Faith finally prompted.

At that, Charity took a deep breath, shifted her gaze to Faith’s face, and blurted, “I think we all worry way too much what other people in this town think. You know what? In the end, we’re basically just entertainment for them. Whatever they ‘think’ of us will go away as soon as the next big thing happens.”

Faith knew her sister was right. And it wasn’t that she worried all that much what people said about her. It was more that...

“I want to make my family proud,” Faith blurted as the thought hit her brain. “I want Mom and Dad to smile when they brag about all my accomplishments. You and Ana, too. I want to know that all of you are happy to brag about me when you run into Josephine Strongblossom at the grocery store or Charlotte Edmonds at the post office. Does that make sense?”

Charity began slowly nodding, but then she said, “No. It makes no sense at all. But I totally get it. I think we all want the same thing. Even Josephine Strongblossom and Judi Trapp want their families to be proud of them, whether it’s a sibling or their kids or their spouses.”

“They don’t have spouses,” Faith pointed out.

“Exactly. And even if they did, they’ve settled into a nice, comfortable, predictable life. They’re probably happy as clams, but it’s still not the same as falling in love. I’m in a new relationship and even I’m all swoony over the way you and Holden look at each other.”

The way she and Holden looked at each other. Was there a way? She knew when she looked at him, all kinds of emotions rushed through her, and she’d seen something in the way he looked at her, as well. If Charity saw it, even knowing that they were just putting on an act with the engagement thing, it stood to reason others did too.

And if everyone saw that the two of them had feelings for each other, it had to be real, right? She wasn’t imagining the way he looked at her. He was battling the same feelings she was.

That made her feel better, even if she knew it didn’t matter. Even if she knew that he had no intention of getting married and having children again. Even if they could never be together because their lives were on two completely different tracks.

“There’s nothing like new love,” Charity said, staring off to the side again wistfully. “We’re all just living vicariously through you. If it doesn’t work out.” She shrugged. “So what? Even the biggest gossips in town will feel bad for you. They

won't see it as a failure on your part. They'll just see it as it not working out."

"It's not going to work out," Faith said.

"You can't say that," Charity said. "I know you have feelings for him, and it's plain as day that he has feelings for you. It has to work out, just as it eventually worked out between me and Nic."

But Faith was shaking her head. "You and Nic are different. You have similar goals."

"What are you talking about?"

"Holden doesn't want children." Faith took a deep breath, realizing she wasn't explaining this correctly. She tried again. "He has a daughter, I know, but he doesn't want more. He said from the start, as we were coming up with our plan, that he has no intentions of getting married until J.J. is grown. He wants to dedicate his life to raising her."

"And you don't think those plans can change?" Charity laughed. "Nic never planned to move back to Misty Mountain. No way. But love has a way of rearranging your plans."

Faith shook her head again. "No, this is different. This is about his daughter. She already lost one mom—"

"He's scared she'll lose another," Charity finished for her. "I get that. But...things change. Trust me on this. Now, we need to get to Lucky's house before our guys give up on us. Put a pin in this for later?"

Breathing a sigh of relief, Faith nodded and pushed herself to her feet. This was definitely something that wouldn't be resolved today. But she could go to Lucky's house with her sister and have a good time. Maybe, just maybe, she could forget her worries and enjoy her evening with Holden.



Faith was late. Not just a few minutes late, either. She was over an hour late, and Charity was late with her.

“They’re on their way,” Nic announced, sidling up to stand next to him at the giant bowl of homemade eggnog.

Holden nodded, trying for an expression that said it was no big deal. He was having a great time with the guys and their dates. Never mind that his own date might be standing him up.

Date? Did she qualify as his date? They’d agreed to arrive separately since she was getting ready at her sister’s place. So technically, it could be said that they weren’t even coming to this event together.

“So, have you set a date yet?”

Nic’s question pulled Holden from his thoughts. He’d expected his new buddy to saunter away and go back to talking to the other guys. But instead, he was making conversation about a wedding that would never take place.

Lucky’s party had mostly centered on the kitchen and adjoining living room—something he did often, or so his girlfriend Jordan had said. The problem was, everyone else seemed at home here, while Holden felt awkward. Like the guy who’d crashed the party, claiming he was there with Faith.

“Not yet,” Holden said. “It’s all going to depend on where we decide to have it.”

Nic’s eyebrows shot up. “You haven’t chosen a venue yet?”

Holden hesitated. Should he have pretended they'd picked out a place? Was that something an engaged couple would already have done?

"I've had the big wedding," Holden said. "This will be my second. So, I'm leaving it all up to Faith. I'm thinking maybe something outdoors in the spring or summer."

"Well, you have plenty of spots for it up here in the mountains," Nic said. "You could even have it here on Lucky's back patio."

"Have what on my back patio?" Lucky asked, appearing seemingly from out of nowhere. He walked around the bar and grabbed the ladle in the punch bowl, scooping a generous helping of eggnog into the goofy moose mugs he'd set out for everyone. "I'm game, whatever it is."

"We were just discussing possible locations for Holden and Faith to have their wedding," Nic said. "Hey, I know. You own that helicopter business. Why don't you both rappel out of a helicopter?"

Lucky laughed. "Now *that* would be an entrance. But seriously, if you want to do it out back here, I'd be more than happy to accommodate you. I don't know how many it would hold. Come look."

And that was how Holden found himself standing with Nic on Lucky's back patio, along with Enzo and Matt. When Lucky rushed inside to activate the waterfall, the rest of the party relocated to the back patio too, gathering around in a cluster in the area with the outdoor kitchen. They were all standing near the cooking area in thirty-degree weather, checking out a venue for a wedding that was never going to happen.

"No doubt, Faith will have Charity and Ana in the wedding party," Noelle said. "How many groomsmen do you think you'll have?"

Groomsmen? He didn't even know one guy well enough to have a best man. He could have his two helicopter pilots in the

wedding party, but that seemed a little weird. They weren't friends. They were just the people he knew best in town.

"I'm not sure yet," Holden said. "It depends on how many bridesmaids Faith has, right?"

"You haven't discussed it yet?" Noelle's eyebrows arched as she glanced over at Lucky's girlfriend, Jordan.

Jordan gave her a shrug, then shifted her attention back to Holden. "There's nothing wrong with a small ceremony." She gestured toward the waterfall. "This location would be perfect for that, but if you want something big, you probably need to go with the church...or a venue that is made for larger weddings."

"Or a place that hosts weddings pretty often," Brianna said. "Really, Misty Mountain doesn't have anything like that."

"If you get married outside, you have to consider the weather." Lucky gestured toward the open sky above them. "We could stretch a tarp across here to keep everyone dry in a pinch."

"What's everyone doing out here?" Charity's voice rang out over the small area, and the entire crowd shifted to face the two of them.

Charity and Faith stood just past the door that led out to the patio. Faith closed it before turning to face all of them.

"Just checking out Lucky's backyard," Noelle's boyfriend Enzo said.

"We're planning your wedding," Nic announced.

That earned him a swift jab in the ribs from Noelle, who happened to be standing between him and Enzo. Holden saw it out of the corner of his eye. His full attention was on Faith, and not because she was looking around the scene with an expression of bewilderment. She was positively breathtaking in her knee-length dress and dark lipstick. Her hair fell straight around her face, softening her features without taking away from the sophisticated look.

“We should go back inside,” Lucky said, gesturing toward the door. “We’re all out here without our coats.”

“Besides, we can watch the waterfall from the comfort of the couch,” Jordan said. “That’s the best thing about Lucky’s house.”

Lucky’s house—a house that would belong to Jordan too when she married him. They weren’t engaged yet, but marriage was definitely in their future. He did well for himself, which meant he’d be able to provide for the woman he loved.

That was a feeling Holden could relate to. Suddenly, he wanted to provide for the woman he loved. He wanted to give her everything—a beautiful house, maybe a pool out back where their kids could swim when they got older... J.J. could even babysit someday.

He saw it all clearly now, and there was only one person he wanted that life with—the woman who’d just turned and followed her sister inside without even glancing in Holden’s direction. It hurt. Especially now that he’d known with just one look that there was no getting over this woman.

He’d been a complete idiot, sticking to some rule he’d set long before he’d even met her. Yes, before they started a serious relationship, he’d have to clear it with J.J., but she seemed to adore Faith. He couldn’t imagine she’d be anything but over-the-moon happy if they started dating. And if she wasn’t, he’d make decisions from there.

“Are you okay, man?” Nic, who’d stopped just outside of the doorway, turned to look at him.

When Holden didn’t answer immediately, Nic seemed to realize something was up. He looked back over his shoulder, then shut the door, coming toward him.

“Is it all this talk about the wedding?” Nic asked. “You getting cold feet?”

That was said in a teasing tone. Nic even added a big smile to the end of it. But Holden shook his head. It couldn’t be

further from the truth. His feet were warmer than they'd ever been. For the purposes of this analogy, anyway.

"I'm just realizing Faith doesn't really deserve me," Holden said. "I'm a moron."

Nic laughed. "Don't be too hard on yourself. We all feel that way at times. It's the women who keep us sane. We need them in our lives, right?"

"How did you do it?" Holden asked him, glancing over at the window. From here, he could see the group gathered inside, laughing and talking. Nobody seemed to have noticed the two of them hadn't come in yet. He was betting Charity and Faith had noticed. "You uprooted your entire life and moved back to Misty Mountain. That was a huge leap of faith."

"Well..." Nic laughed. "Charity was my first love. I broke up with her because I was a complete idiot. It just took me a decade and a kiss under the mistletoe to finally admit to myself she was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You broke up with her, and she took you back?" Holden asked.

"Not easily. It took some convincing on my part. When you finally wake up and realize what a fool you've been, the best thing you can do is fix the issue before you waste even more time."

That was deep, but it didn't really get to the heart of the issue bugging Holden. How did he let himself fall in love again?

"My first wife died," Holden said. "I guess you knew that. But it's not that. I've just had a tough time believing that anyone will come into my life and stay. And I don't only have myself to look out for now. It's also about J.J."

He didn't want to go into his entire history of loss. Really, when he thought about it, one person had been there for him. His grandmother. She died eventually, but for most of his young life, she'd been his person—the one who had his back, no matter what.

There was someone else who had always been there for him. His daughter. She wasn't going anywhere. Well, not until she turned eighteen and left for college.

"None of us is going to be here a hundred years from now," Nic said. "But there's no guarantee we'll even have tomorrow. All we can do is make the best of today. Listen to me. I sound like a poet. Charity would be proud."

At the very mention of her name, Nic lit up a little. There was a sparkle in his eye that wasn't there a second before.

Nic loved Charity. He had someone to walk through life with. A partner.

"Let's go get our women," Nic said.

Without waiting for Holden, he turned and walked back inside. Holden's mind was spinning as he followed, though. Had he blown things with Faith? He certainly hoped not. With a little sweet talking, hopefully they'd get things on track. Because no matter what, he was not going to lose this woman.

Every time Faith glanced in Holden's direction, he was looking at her, and the warmth in his eyes sent a sharp pain straight through her. At some point, she'd fallen in love with Holden Pryce. She'd done everything she could to avoid it, but it had been inevitable.

Charity, being the awesome sister she was, had stuck close to her side all night. They were squished onto the sofa with Noelle and Jordan, playing a New Year's Eve edition of Pictionary. It was women against men—or girlfriends against boyfriends. Jordan had felt the need to correct the latter of those two titles to girlfriends, boyfriends, and fiancés, pointing out that two of their participants were engaged.

The hits just kept on coming. That's what it felt like, anyway. They weren't engaged. They were faking, and they'd lied to their family and friends—the entire town, actually.

Most of all, she'd lied to herself. She told herself she could keep her heart out of this, knowing eventually she'd fall for this man. She'd set herself up to be hurt.

“Mistletoe!” Jordan called out, correctly naming the item Noelle had just drawn.

“Could Noelle have made it any easier for them?” Nic asked.

That was a good point. After all the talk of mistletoe lately, it was an easy guess for everyone on Noelle's team.

“Of course, the mistletoe queen would draw that,” Enzo teased. “Never mind that I won the bet.”

“I don’t think you did,” Brianna said from her spot on the loveseat next to her best friend, Lauralie. “I saw a picture of Holden and Faith kissing under the mistletoe, and we all can see how in love they are. That’s couple number three right there...”

“Those two were already engaged before they kissed.” Nic rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t count.”

“Whose side are you on?” Charity said. She was Noelle’s best friend and, therefore, would fight for her to win.

“Yep.” Noelle gave a big nod. “Especially since I specifically said the mistletoe is the magic that pushes them along.” She looked over at Faith. “Did mistletoe deepen your relationship in any way?”

Faith’s eyes immediately went to Holden, standing with the rest of the guys behind the loveseat. He was holding a mug of eggnog, but his eyes stayed firmly on Faith.

“Yes,” he said. “That one kiss was the most powerful kiss I’ve ever had. I’d say I knew I loved Faith from the moment I saw her, but that made me realize that I’d never loved anybody more. Aside from my daughter, anyway.”

“Aww,” Noelle said as Charity looked over at Faith.

She knew what her sister was thinking. *Are you hearing this? He means every word of it.* And Faith couldn’t see how he didn’t. Sure, maybe he was trying to help Noelle win her bet, but he was staring at Faith that way again. The way that made it hard to believe he didn’t have feelings for her.

“Okay, fine,” Enzo said. “You win.”

“What is it you win, exactly?” Matt asked.

“She has to cook dinner for me every night for a month,” Enzo said.

“And if you’d won?” Nic asked.



Everyone turned to look at Enzo. “Same,” he said. “But I was going to do takeout. We all know I’m a horrible cook.”

Everyone laughed. Well, everyone but Noelle, who mock-glared at him. Holden wasn’t laughing, either. He was staring at Faith, his gaze still as intense as when he’d said those words.

“Holden was just telling us earlier what a great cook you are, Faith,” Lucky said. “Sounds like you could even open your own restaurant.”

Eyes wide, she shifted her attention to Jordan’s boyfriend. Nobody had suggested anything like that before. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“Her cooking was legendary around the house growing up,” Charity said. “Mom started teaching her when she was barely old enough to reach the stove. She took over by the time I was in middle school. Did most of the cooking. She makes some amazing chicken and dumplings.”

“She and J.J. made those,” Holden said. “She’s been showing J.J. how to cook.”

“Perfect,” Noelle said. “You can show Enzo some tricks, then. He owes me dinner every night for a year.”

“A year?” He looked around the room. “Nobody told me it would be that long.”

Faith couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll see what I can do. But I guess, growing up, it was my way to stand out. Everyone else in the house had special talents. I wanted to learn to do something.”

“Are you kidding?” Jordan asked. “In school, everyone wanted to be like Faith Ardmore. You were the oldest of all the sisters. You were beautiful and smart and always knew the answers to everything.”

“See?” Charity asked, pointing at Faith. “That’s what I told you. It has nothing to do with the grades on your report card.”

“I stunk in school,” Lucky said. “Whenever there was a test, I just froze up. I knew the answers the night before, but

the second you put that piece of paper in front of me, I was toast.”

“That was me,” Faith said. “But it wasn’t just that. Ana and Charity were cheerleaders—”

“In middle school,” Charity interrupted. “Neither one of us made the high school squad.”

“Yeah, that middle school squad had, like, a billion people on it, didn’t it?” Enzo asked.

That earned him a harsh look from Noelle. It was a loving look, but the, “Hey, you’ll hurt her feelings” messaging was clear as day.

“No, he’s right,” Charity said. “It didn’t take too much to make the middle school squad. Ana and I practiced for hours in our room in elementary school. We were both determined to make it because we thought it would make us—”

“Popular,” Noelle said, rolling her eyes. “Seriously, what difference does any of that make now?” She leaned forward and looked at Faith. “Seriously.”

“I lied.”

The two words popped out before Faith even realized she was going to say them. She certainly wouldn’t have planned to make a confession. Not here. Not tonight.

Holden spoke up then. “Faith, I don’t think—”

“No, I should get it out,” Faith said. “These are our friends. Old friends and new. I don’t want to kick off the new year on a lie. Holden and I lied.”

The room had gone suddenly, eerily quiet. They probably could’ve heard a pin drop. But it was too late to back out now.

“I cared so much what everyone thought, I made up my engagement, and I pulled Holden along for the ride,” Faith said. “I asked him to pretend to be my fiancé. I was just too embarrassed to have been dumped by my fiancé after only being engaged for a couple of months. I was coming home, shunned and embarrassed. I just wanted... I wanted people to respect me.”

Silence. Faith couldn't look at anyone. She just stared down at the hardwood flooring, wishing a hole would open up and swallow her.

"I can't let you take all the blame for it," Holden said. "It was my idea."

Was it? She certainly didn't remember that. She knew they'd concocted the plan together, but she couldn't recall at this point who'd mentioned what first.

"I've been hiding for a long time around excuses," Holden said. "I had a whole plan in place. No dating until my daughter was grown. I didn't want her to lose someone again. But what I didn't face was that *I* didn't want to lose someone again. I wasn't even still married to my ex when she died. Nobody knows that. It's something I don't talk about."

Silence. Faith lifted her head and looked directly at Holden. He was staring straight at her, looking more awkward than ever with that moose-shaped mug in his hand. For some reason, that alone made her want to go wrap her arms around him.

"I cared way too much what the town thought," Holden said. "I'd never lived anywhere like this. I assumed the gossips had malicious intent. Really, they just...well, most of the people around here want nothing bad for us. They just like talking about us."

"You can say that again," Enzo said with a dry laugh. Then, seeming to realize everyone was staring at him, he added, "Oh. Did I say that out loud?"

"You did," Noelle said. "But Holden's right. I think we're all guilty of worrying what the Josephine Strongblossoms of the town are saying about us."

"Hey!" Jordan said. "My mom's not the only gossip in town."

"Not by a mile," Charity said. "The town's full of them. And every single one of them would give her last dime to help one of us if we needed it."

“The men too,” Nic said. “They can be just as bad about gossiping.”

“Wait a second,” Noelle jumped in to say, staring directly at Holden. “I just heard what you said about Faith a few minutes ago. You’re in love with her.”

“You knew you loved her from the second you saw her,” Charity said. “But the mistletoe made you realize you’ve never loved anyone more.”

“That’s what you said,” Enzo jumped in to say. “I heard it.”

“Me too,” Jordan said.

“Me too,” Charity added.

Faith started to ask whose side they were on, but her gaze had locked with Holden’s from across the room. His mouth pitched into a slight smile, telling her that he had no plans to retract his words from earlier. He’d meant them.

“I can say that I felt the same about him,” Faith said. “I knew it from the second I looked at him. He was seated next to me on the flight from London to Chicago—”

“Wait a second,” Charity interrupted. “You didn’t meet over there?”

Oops. Another thing they hadn’t been upfront about.

“We met for the first time on the plane,” Holden said. “We were seated next to each other in first class. She was crying...”

He broke off there, probably wondering if he’d revealed too much. Since it was all on the table tonight, though, Faith didn’t mind.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do,” Faith recalled. “We started talking—we talked all night, actually. It was the best eight hours of my life.”

“And then we got to the airport and grabbed two coffees and kept going.” Holden laughed. “I didn’t sleep a wink, even after we got home. I don’t know how I did it.”

“Pure adrenaline,” Nic said. “I can relate.”

“When you find the woman you love, you don’t need sleep,” Lucky said.

Everyone looked at him then, and he shrugged. That shrug said he realized it was cheesy, but he meant it. And Faith could relate. She’d taken a nap in Holden’s guest bedroom that afternoon, but only because she was so tired, she couldn’t keep her eyes open another second. And once she had that brief nap, she was good to go until bedtime.

“It’s all because of that mistletoe,” Noelle said. “I knew it was magic.”

“That Santa stepped in to help too,” Nic said. “I still don’t know what his deal was.”

“William Martin?” Lucky said. “Just an investor wearing a Santa costume.”

“Impossible,” Nic said. “The guy just vanished into thin air. He was there one second and gone the next.”

Lucky shrugged. “I can assure you he’s one hundred percent a normal guy. Just a retired teacher who served in the military back in the day. He acted like he had a big project for me, but all he wanted to talk about was you.”

Lucky turned his stare on Holden then, as did everyone else in the room. The investment. Faith had almost forgotten about all that with her own internal turmoil. But yeah, that was one of the main reasons he was here tonight.

“We’ve all discussed it and we’re in,” Matt said. “All of us. The group at large. We’re pitching in to help you build it and make it happen. Whatever you need, this is your group.”

Holden looked around, and Faith could see the emotion in his eyes. He was seeing the magic of Misty Mountain right in front of him. It didn’t come from some guy in a Santa costume who showed up with magic bags full of presents to make kids smile. It didn’t come from some investor in England who wanted to stick his nose in his personal business. No, it was here. It was this community.

“And I say once it’s built, we have a party just like this one,” Enzo said. “Hold some rooms for us at the ski resort

next year. We'll ring in the new year with a big punchbowl full of eggnog and some moose glasses, overlooking the ski slope."

"With no snow," Charity said.

"We don't need snow for the night to be magical," Noelle said. "Now, I don't want to alarm anyone, but have any of you looked at the time lately?"

Gasping, Faith glanced at her phone screen and confirmed it was, indeed, one minute before midnight. They'd gotten so caught up in playing games, they'd forgotten the whole reason they were here.

"Grab your hats and let's get ready!" Charity called out.

And then they were scrambling—rushing over to the area where the refreshments were to get their hats and noisemakers. There was even a little gadget that shot out confetti. Faith hated to mess up Lucky's floors, but he'd insisted it was all part of the fun.

She and Holden came together, just as all the other couples did. Unlike the others, though, they stood back a little, taking some space for themselves. He put his arm around her and pulled her toward him, smiling down at her.

"They seemed to have taken it all pretty well," he commented as the group around them counted down the seconds.

"I think so," she said. "That's what's great about this town. Everyone has your back, no matter what."

"I'm learning that," he said. "I never imagined when I moved here that I'd be joining an extended family. The family I never really had."

As Faith looked up at him, she saw that he'd come to some realizations tonight. This was his family. They were all here for him. She could've told him that from the start, but maybe it was something he had to learn for himself.

"That's what's great about Misty Mountain," she said. "You're finally home."

“You’re my home,” he said.

And then, as the group around them got to four and three, Holden didn’t wait. He lowered his head and captured her mouth in a heartfelt kiss that was long overdue.

Faith didn’t care how the rest of this year went. This one kiss already made it the best year of her life so far.

Holden's plan was to make breakfast. Problem was, he couldn't find anything.

"Pans are over there," J.J. said.

Her voice had him nearly jumping out of his skin. He spun around and found his daughter climbing up onto one of the stools at the island. She wiggled onto the seat until she was centered, then stared at him.

"I thought you were still asleep," he said. "I was going to make some cinnamon rolls, then come wake you up."

"Can I help?" J.J. asked.

She wore her PJs, and her hair was all mussed. Normally, he'd have her do some small part of the task, asking her to get dressed first. But not today. Today, he wanted to cook, side by side, with his daughter.

"Where's Miss Faith?" she asked.

"She moved back to her parents' house." He opened his mouth to say more, but before he could get a word out, her face lit up.

"You did *not* blow it with Miss Faith," J.J. said. "Go tell her to come back. You two belong together."

Holden's eyes widened. That was not the response he'd expected. Not by a long shot.

"She's still in our lives," he said, turning to face her, breakfast totally forgotten. "But you think we belong



together?”

J.J. rolled her eyes—something he normally asked her not to do. Right now, he didn’t mind.

“You’re in *love*,” she said. “Anyone can see it. And I like her. A lot. If you blow this one, I’m going to stop speaking to you for at least a week.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her threat. All this time, he’d been worried how she’d feel about him dating. It turned out, she didn’t mind at all—as long as it was the right person.

“So...you don’t mind if I date her?” he asked, just to make sure they were clear.

“Not just date her,” J.J. said. “I want a little sister or brother, so you have to get married. Oh, and I don’t want to call her my stepmom. Stepmoms are mean in fairy tales. She’ll be my second mom.”

As lighthearted as she was being about this, Holden had to know something for sure. “Your mom will never be replaced. You know that, right?”

Again, J.J. rolled her eyes. “I don’t think she replaces my real mom. But how many kids get a second mom? Especially one as cool as Miss Faith. Did you know she worked in real museums?”

“In Europe, at that,” he said.

“I know.” She smiled. “We have to go over there sometime so she can show us. Can we make French toast?”

And just like that, the conversation about Faith was over. She sat on her stool and stirred the batter for the French toast. When the time came, Holden pulled a chair over so she could stand on it, dredge the bread through the batter, and slap the slices of coated bread onto the pan. He supervised the whole thing, but only because he didn’t want her to get injured. She was learning to cook, just as Faith had when she was too young to reach the stovetop without help.

The doorbell rang just as they were taking their final bites of French toast. They still had a few pieces left, but they were

both stuffed.

“Is that Miss Faith?” J.J. asked, her face lighting up.

Without waiting for her dad’s answer, she climbed off the stool and rushed from the room. If she’d waited around, he would’ve told her that it couldn’t be Faith. She was moving stuff into her parents’ house that weekend. But that thought was replaced by the sudden realization that she was rushing for the front door with no idea who was on the other side of it.

He’d raised her well, though. When he got to the living room, she was looking out the front window. She turned, her face still lit up. He fully expected her to tell him Miss Faith was standing on the other side of that door. But she surprised him.

“Santa!” she said in a whisper-shout.

Santa? It couldn’t be. New Year’s Day had come and gone. He’d met Faith at the car dealership to sign all her paperwork, and now life was back to normal. If J.J. hadn’t just gotten home from her trip to Gatlinburg, he would’ve been hard at work, but he’d taken the rest of the week off to spend with her before she went back to school on Monday.

“I’ll get it,” Holden said, giving J.J. one of his protective looks. She slid into place behind him as he peered through the peephole.

Yep, it was Santa. He had on that red coat with the white fur trim, but there was no Santa hat on his head. Instead, it was a red ball cap.

“May I help you?” Holden asked as soon as he whipped the door open.

“Good morning!” Santa said, thankfully not uttering the signature “Ho! Ho! Ho!” Holden expected.

“Good morning,” Holden said, but he was frowning at the guy, totally at a loss for what he might be doing here.

“I don’t think we’ve met.” Santa held out a hand. “William Martin.”

“Holden Pryce.” Holden shook the guy’s hand, then stepped back. “Come on in.”

Should he have invited the guy in? For someone who was always overly cautious, Holden sure was trusting this guy. But something about him told Holden he could definitely be trusted.

“Good morning, young lady!” William said to J.J., who was staring up at him like he was a movie star.

“Are you the real Santa Claus?” she asked.

William shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I’m just a guy who looks a lot like him. The real Santa is at the North Pole, resting up after a very busy holiday season.”

“There sure are a lot of people in this town who think you’re the real deal,” Holden said. “Apparently, you have a habit of vanishing into thin air.”

William laughed. “Yeah, I have a stealthy walk. Been told that all my life. But mostly, I just don’t like goodbyes. I disappear on people when they aren’t looking. Ever snuck out of a party when people thought you were going to the bathroom? That’s me. I’m the sneaker-outer.”

Holden wasn’t so sure about that. He’d never seen the guy disappear, but people sure had sounded like there’d been some unexplained vanishings. Still, he wasn’t going to push it.

“Why don’t you go get dressed?” Holden asked J.J. “Mr. Martin and I have some business to discuss.”

Clearly, this non-Santa had shown up here for a reason, and whatever that reason was, it wouldn’t do J.J. any good to watch a guy who looked like Santa be anything but. Besides, she wasn’t a fan of business talk, so this would just bore her.

That was probably why she didn’t argue. She just cast one last smile in William’s direction and rushed off in the direction of her bedroom.

“Great little girl you have there,” William said. “You’ve done well by her. And I know you and Miss Ardmore will be very happy together.”

Holden would ask how the guy knew about that, but by now it was pretty much all over town. Besides, this guy had a habit of helping out new couples, from what he'd heard. William Martin was almost as much a matchmaker as the mistletoe had been.

"I have something for you." Santa reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, folded up. As he handed it over to Holden, he saw it was a large check. "Just a little something to start your business."

The second he unfolded it and saw the number typed on it, Holden's eyes widened. There were six numbers in that little box. Six. With a comma right smack-dab in the middle.

"I don't understand." Holden opened his eyes to look at the guy, who was standing there with a big smile visible beneath that gray beard.

"Your ski resort is going to change Misty Mountain forever," Santa said. "It'll bring people from all over, pouring money into this town. Mark my words. I want to see it happen, so this is my donation. I won't take no for an answer. I have a sizable sum in the bank, and I want to do some good in the time I have left. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to skedaddle."

He said all that without taking a breath. That left Holden no way to slip a few words in—a protest of some type. But suddenly, William put a finger over his mouth as if to say, "Shh," then turned and walked out the door. He didn't look back as he went.

Weird. Shaking his head to himself, Holden looked down at the check. For the first time, he noticed the address at the top. William Martin was there, sure enough, but it was the address that really caught his attention. North Pole, Alaska.

The guy actually *was* from a town called "North Pole."

Holden turned, planning to shower, get ready, and take J.J. out to the movies or something. They'd stop by the bank first and deposit this check into his business account. Not that he

didn't trust the guy—he just wanted it safe and sound before he could somehow manage to lose it.

But just as he reached the doorway leading out of the main room, his doorbell rang again. William Martin was back? Maybe he'd changed his mind.

Heart sinking, he headed back and looked through the peephole again. Standing on the front porch wasn't a guy in a red coat. It was a beautiful blonde.

Pulling the door open with a big smile on his face, he held the check up to show her. His smile froze, though, when he realized something.

Aside from Faith's car, the driveway was empty.

“Where did he go?” he asked, looking around.

Faith turned, following his gaze toward the driveway. “Who?”

“Santa. I mean William Martin. His truck should've been in the driveway.”

Shrugging, Faith turned back to look at him. “There was nobody around when I pulled in.”

Holden stepped forward and looked around. “Did you pass him on the road leading up here?”

She shook her head. “The whole road from the entrance to here was empty.”

He'd disappeared. Again.

“Well, he said he was stealthy.” Holden stepped back, holding up the check to show her. “He's donating money to my project.”

Faith stepped inside the house and looked around, probably searching for signs of J.J. “You mean investing?”

“He didn't seem to expect anything for his money. He wants to help the town.”

“Wow,” Faith said.

What was he doing? He had the most beautiful woman in the world standing in front of him, and he was talking business?

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her toward him. “I talked to J.J. this morning,” he said as he looked down at her. “She said if I blow this one, she’ll stop speaking to me for a week.”

“Only a week?” Faith asked, but her smile made it clear that the words meant a lot to her. “Did you tell her you didn’t blow it?”

“I’m hoping I didn’t.” He pulled her even closer, giving her a full-on hug. This was where he was meant to be. Holding her close. Keeping her safe. “I plan to do everything I can to make both of you happy.”

“Already done.” She pulled back and smiled up at him. “Now, we probably should cash that check before you lose it.”

“I was thinking the same thing. How about an after-Christmas matinee?”

“Sounds perfect.” She looked in the direction of the door. “Should I go get J.J.?”

“She’ll be here soon enough. Meanwhile, I’m going to steal a kiss from my fake fiancée.”

She’d be his real fiancée soon enough. Until then, he was going to enjoy every single day as her boyfriend.

**T**he maid of honor was only nine.

She was the youngest member of the wedding party, but it totally fit. It wouldn't have been the same if she was a flower girl or the daughter of the groom.

No, J.J. Pryce needed to be standing up there next to her second mom-to-be.

Holden smiled at his daughter as she split from his best man, Lucky. He and Lucky weren't just business partners these days. Over the past year, they'd become close friends.

Since Holden had been part of Lucky's wedding party, he'd been a natural to stand up here with Holden. His now-good friends Matt, Denver, and Nic were up here too.

On J.J.'s side were Charity and Ana. Faith's sisters were both happily married now, but Holden and Faith were the first couple to get married at the brand-new ski resort at the top of Misty Mountain.

The opening strains of "Here Comes the Bride" started, and Holden's heart leapt into action. Faith stepped into the doorway, her hand looped through her father's arm as her gaze connected with Holden's. Even here, all the way across this gigantic, high-ceilinged room, sparks flew between them the second they looked at each other.

He would've thought it impossible, but he loved this woman more than ever. His heart felt like it might explode, he was filled with so much emotion at the sight of her. She was

beautiful—gorgeous. It seemed impossible there could be anything on Earth this breathtaking. And she was pledging to spend the rest of her life with him.

How had he gotten so lucky?

Her eyes stayed on him as she walked up the aisle between rows of chairs. Everyone was standing, staring at her, but he barely noticed. He only had eyes for Faith Ardmore.

He'd proposed to her in the summer, during a trip to the beach with her family. J.J. had helped him hide the ring under a big shell, then kept an eye on it while he went to get her. She'd hidden behind a rock, videoing the entire thing on her phone, while he got down on one knee, right there on the sand, and proposed.

When they'd returned to everyone, they'd been officially engaged, and J.J. was on her way to getting her "second mom."

"Love you," he mouthed to Faith as she stepped to stand in front of him. She mouthed it back and gave him a big smile before they turned to face the preacher together.

This was the second time in his life he'd said vows in front of a preacher and all the people he loved. One thing he hadn't expected was how much more it would mean the second time around. He'd been through a failed marriage. He knew what he'd done wrong—the mistakes he'd made. He was stronger, a much better man now. And he would spend the rest of his life proving to her that he wasn't going anywhere.

And neither was she.

As they kissed for the first time as a married couple, the audience cheered. And then they were following the wedding party out of the main room of the ski lodge and into the restaurant, where they'd have their reception.

"This is the best day of my life," she whispered into his ear as they had their first dance.

"It's only going to get better from here," he whispered back.



## EPILOGUE

**C**hristmas morning came early at the Pryce house.

But this year, it wasn't J.J. pounding on their door to tell them Santa had come. This year, it was their newborn, crying in his crib down the hall.

"I'll get him," Holden said, settling a hand on Faith's arm to encourage her to stay exactly where she was.

"I need to—"

Holden didn't let her finish. "You need to sleep."

He'd never tell her this, but he didn't mind getting up early with the baby. Not at all. In fact, some of his favorite times over the past few years had been rocking in that chair in the nursery, first with their daughter, Emory, and now with their son, Easton.

But today, when he opened the door, that rocking chair wasn't empty. Instead, J.J. sat in it, wearing her Santa PJs with her hair all mussed. In her arms was Easton, and she was rocking him as she smiled down at him.

"What are you doing up?" he said.

She looked up at him, still obviously very groggy, and said, "Shh."

This time, he said it in a whisper. "What are you doing up?"

"Santa came," she said. "Do you think I could sleep in?"

J.J. was twelve now, and way too mature for her years. Maybe it was being a big sister. She loved the role.

“You never could wait to open your gifts,” he said. “But what time is it?”

He really needed to put a clock in here. During the day, he had his phone on him at all times, but when he stumbled in here at night, it remained on the charger next to his bed. He was always clueless as to what time he entered and how long he was in here before Easton was tucked peacefully back into his crib.

“Christmas isn’t about me,” she whispered. “It’s about Emory. She’s so excited. I can’t wait to watch her open her gifts.”

He believed she was excited about that. But he also knew J.J. She didn’t want to admit that the sight of Santa still made her giddy, even if she said she didn’t believe in him anymore.

“Still, you really should go back to bed,” Holden said, stepping into the room with every intention of taking Easton off her hands. “It’s going to be a long day, what with all your cousins coming over and all.”

The Pryces were hosting Christmas for the first time this year. While Faith’s parents loved having everyone over, the family had outgrown their kitchen. Besides, now that all three sisters lived on this property, near the top of the mountain together, it was just easier to have group events in one place.

Soon after their wedding, Holden had bought this large chunk of land. He and Nic had grown the ski lodge to a profit almost immediately and the needle just kept ticking upward from there. Ana’s husband, Trevor, now managed the place full-time, while Lucky and his crew were busy with the additional chalets the successful ski resort had brought to the mountain.

Business was good in Misty Mountain, and it was only getting better.

“Dad?” J.J. whispered.

“Hmm?” he asked.

He wasn't sure if he was distracted or still groggy from sleep. Maybe a little bit of both.

“Do you think maybe I could watch Emory and Easton when you guys go out for New Year's Eve?”

Oh. That. He'd forgotten to mention it.

“We're not going out for New Year's Eve,” he said. “We're staying right here and having everyone over.”

J.J.'s eyes widened. It was a first. The last few years, he'd hosted a party at the ski resort, but the resort was self-sustaining now. He'd pop by to make sure everything was okay, but Trevor and his crew had everything under control. Hopefully, even he'd be able to join the family as they relaxed and enjoyed the last evening of the year at home for the first time since before the ski resort was up and running.

“So, all the cousins will be here?” J.J. asked.

Holden nodded. “Like today. But if you don't get any sleep, you'll be too grumpy to enjoy it.”

J.J. narrowed her eyes at him. She wasn't buying that. Not anymore. It wasn't much different from him saying that if she didn't get to bed early enough, Santa wouldn't visit.

Sometimes he missed her being young. But while he wouldn't trade a minute of his time with her growing up, they were in a great place now. They were exactly where they belonged.

“What's going on in here?” Faith asked.

She stood in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. She looked just as groggy as he still felt, but his heart soared at the sight of her.

Smiling, he gestured toward J.J. “She's taking care of things for us so we can go back to bed.”

“Ha!” J.J. said. “I say we get Emory up and start opening presents.”

Holden fully expected Faith to turn her down and suggest they all go back to bed. But instead, she straightened in the

doorway and said, “I’ll get the coffee started. Meet me in the living room.” Then she took off.

“I guess I’ve been outnumbered again,” Holden said.

But he had a smile on his face as he crossed the room and took Easton from J.J.’s arms. “Go get your sister up. Let’s get this party started.”

As he followed his oldest child out of the nursery, his youngest in his arms, Holden’s heart was full. All his life, he’d craved this feeling of family, of belonging. And now, living here in Misty Mountain, he had more family than he could’ve ever dreamed. He was the luckiest man alive, and he’d never take a day of it for granted.



GET Noelle and Enzo’s love story in [the prequel novella](#), *Kissed by the Scrooge*. It’s free with newsletter signup.

Want more Misty Mountain? Don’t miss the Misty Mountain Matchmakers series. Book 1 [is available here](#).