

A romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing in a field. The man is wearing a light blue shirt and grey pants, and the woman is wearing a grey top and tan pants. They are standing in a lush green field with a white house and mountains in the background. The sky is a soft purple and blue. The title "Matched with the Boss" is written in a large, purple, serif font at the top of the image. The words "Matched" and "Boss" are in a larger font than "with the".

Matched with the Boss

USA Today Bestselling Author

MACIE ST. JAMES

MATCHED WITH THE BOSS

MACIE ST. JAMES

Misty Mountain Matchmakers, Book 3
Version 1.0820

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Something was up at Misty Mountain's only dinner theater.

That was Jordan's first thought as she pulled into the giant parking lot next to it. It didn't take a rocket scientist to come to that conclusion, though. The lot, which had been empty almost every morning of the nine years she'd worked there, was notably *not* empty today.

She counted two SUVs, four pickup trucks—two with tools sticking out of the bed—and one tiny two-door car. She knew that car. She'd know it anywhere. It belonged to her mother, Josephine Strongblossom.

Frowning, Jordan pulled into the spot next to her mom's car. Parking there made her feel a little protected. She shifted into park and stared at the brick building in front of her.

There was no way to see what was going on from here. The only way was to get out of the car, walk around to the front, and peer in the front doors. The entire front of the building was glass, but the rest of the building was brick. She'd never figure anything out from this position.

That was why, a few minutes later, she found herself in front of the door, face pressed close to it, when suddenly it burst open, threatening to knock her backward. It would have done just that if someone on the other side of the door hadn't yelled, "Hey! Watch out!" It was a male voice, and it didn't belong to the owner of this theater, Jim Jasper.

The door stopped moving suddenly, and Jordan found herself standing there, staring at it. At some point, she'd grabbed the handle and now clasped it in her right hand.

Finally, she came to her senses and tugged, pulling it open just a little. On

the other side of that door was her mother, and she had wide-eyed surprise on her face.

“Jordan, dear. I had no idea you were standing there.”

Jordan blinked at her mom, who now stood in the doorway, not budging. She wore a pink baseball cap covered in diamonds, along with a matching pink T-shirt and shorts. She looked like she was heading out for a day of errands, so it was possible she’d just been driving by and decided to pop in.

When Jordan’s youngest sister had headed off to college four years ago, things had taken a turn for her mom. It wasn’t that she was bored so much as...restless. She threw herself into her friendships with Judi Trapp and Betty Jenkins, longtime friends of hers who had more time on their hands than pretty much anyone else in town.

And that was when they become the Misty Mountain busybodies. If something was going on at the dinner theater, her mom would have to know about it so she could report it back to her friends.

“Come on in,” her mom said, pushing the door toward her.

Jordan stared at her mom for far longer than probably seemed normal. This was all...weird.

Normally, Jordan would be inside, starting up the coffeepot. Instead, she was standing there, uncaffeinated, looking at her mother on the other side of the door. There was no telling what was going on inside.

But curiosity finally propelled her forward. Jordan pulled the door open the rest of the way and slipped inside, standing next to her mom, unable to move as she took in the scene in front of her.

First, the floor of the lobby was covered in plastic. She’d noticed that the second she set her canvas sneaker-covered foot on top of it. The rustling sound was jarring, but not nearly as jarring as the two guys in front of her prying the top off the ticket desk.

Everything else was gone. The point-of-sale system, the posters on the wall, the sign that read *Tickets*...

“What is this?” Jordan finally found the strength to ask.

Both guys stopped what they were doing to turn and look at her. Clearly, she’d interrupted their work. They’d seen her on the other side of the door— or maybe the “Watch out!” hadn’t been about her at all.

“Lucky!” the man with the prying tool in his right hand called out.

Lucky. No, it couldn’t be. This day could *not* get worse.

But it did.

The door to the left of the concession stand was propped open and through it walked the man she'd avoided for fourteen years. Since the night he'd rocked her world with the most unforgettable kiss of her life.

And then he'd never spoken to her again.

Seeing her didn't seem to have nearly the same effect on him as it did on her. He looked over at his guys, then came to a stop next to the ticket desk. As he turned from the workers to Jordan and her mom, his expression remained completely neutral.

"Jim had to run out," Lucky said.

As though that explained everything, he turned and walked back into the auditorium. Jordan stared after him, unable to believe what she'd just heard. He couldn't just drop that bomb and walk away.

She looked over at her mom, said, "Excuse me," then clutched the strap of her purse and marched toward the auditorium. She had to put a pause on her outrage, though, when she stepped inside the doorway.

It was darker in the auditorium than anywhere else, and her eyes took a second to adjust. She saw no signs of him initially. Lucky had disappeared so quickly, he couldn't have gotten far. But then, over to her right, she finally spotted him pulling framed photos off the wall.

Angling her body toward him, Jordan crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "What is going on here? I'm the manager. I run this place."

"Take it up with your boss," Lucky said without looking at her. "I'm just here to do a job. The job I was hired to do."

"You were hired to tear up the town dinner theater?"

That question stopped his movements. He stared at the wall a long moment before setting the frame down and turning to face her.

"Jim should have told you," he said.

There was a hint of sympathy in his expression. It made him almost a decent human being. But the expression almost immediately shifted, and he went right back to being the cold, heartless multimillionaire who'd stomped on women's hearts all his life.

She was almost afraid to ask. "Told me what, exactly?"

"He should have told you what was up," Lucky said. "I know he was keeping it top secret, but you're running things around here. You should be in the know. Unless..."

Jordan's eyes widened as his voice trailed off. Lucky's eyes narrowed just slightly, then he shook his head.

“No, he’s keeping you around,” he said. “He told me this morning that you and I will be working together to drag this place into the twenty-first century.”

“Working together,” she repeated.

Her and Lucky. Whose idea was that? Oh, right. Jim Jasper’s.

“Looks like it,” he said. “I’d love to stand around and discuss this project with you, but I’ve already sat through those meetings. Hours of them, mostly through video chat. I’d rather the owner give you the rundown. We aren’t touching your office, so you can go hide out in there until Jim shows up. I have some demolition prep to do.”

With that, he turned back around and picked up another painting, lifting it with one hand like it weighed only a couple of ounces. He grabbed the other picture with his right hand and headed toward the lobby, forcing Jordan to step back to let him by.

Each of those paintings had to weigh at least twenty pounds, but he made it look effortless. Still, she couldn’t help but notice the way his muscles bulged as he carried them.

Yeah, he was right. She definitely needed to go hide in her office. Otherwise, she might remember why the sixteen-year-old version of herself had been so hurt when he discarded her like yesterday’s news.

One thing she could not afford to do was go back to crushing on Lucky Howard. She’d leave that up to the rest of the town.

Besides, she’d left that insecure, vulnerable part of herself behind a long, long time ago.

Jordan Strongblossom was all grown up.

Lucky was trying to ignore that fact as he cleared all the walls, moving items from the lobby and auditorium to the large storage closet. Unfortunately, that closet just happened to be only a few yards from Jordan's office.

All of a sudden, his mind was stuck on that one kiss fourteen years ago. He'd never forget that kiss.

The funny thing was, he'd only done it on a dare. Literally. He was at a friend's house, and they were playing a game called "Seven Minutes in Heaven." The last thing he'd wanted to do was climb into the closet with a girl he barely knew, but Jordan Strongblossom was, hands down, the most beautiful girl in town. Maybe in the entire state of Tennessee.

So, he'd spent a full half hour hoping and wishing she'd be the one whose name he drew. They didn't have to kiss the full seven minutes—they didn't even have to kiss at all. But both of them had entered that closet and immediately found each other, kissing for every second of that seven minutes. He'd dare say it was the *best* seven minutes of his life.

That kiss had also shaken him to the core.

Lucky Howard had a rule about relationships. The girl always had to like him more than he liked her. Not just a little more, either.

It was a rule that carried into adulthood. He did *not* fall in love. And he certainly didn't give up control of his heart.

There had been one time somebody had gotten his heart racing so fast, he was sure it would jump right out of his chest. And that was a kiss from high

school—a kiss from the girl best known for starring in every single production their drama department put together. A kiss from Jordan Strongblossom.

“This could be good for both of us.”

Those words drifted out from Jordan’s office the tenth or eleventh time Lucky slipped into the storage closet. He’d taken a short break to talk to his guys and down some of the coffee Jim brought in for them. That was the only way he knew the guy had shown up—the one cup of coffee left in a cardboard drink holder on the folding table they’d set up in the lobby.

“I just don’t see why I wasn’t included in the planning,” Jordan said.

Lucky shouldn’t listen. He was eavesdropping.

He set down the two sconce lights he’d been carrying, taking great pains to make as little noise as possible. Now he should exit, maybe give the two of them privacy. But he seemed to be frozen to the spot.

“You care about your employees,” Jim said. “I knew you’d have a hard time sitting on the news. This way, when you let them know they’ll be on furlough for sixteen weeks, you can honestly say you had no idea this was coming.”

“Sixteen weeks?” she asked.

Lucky winced. Shaking his head, he exited the storage closet. If the guy was really concerned about Jordan’s relationship with her employees, he’d tell them himself instead of pushing the dirty work over to her.

Jerk.

Lucky had barely made it halfway across the lobby when he heard his last name being called. “Howard! Get in here.”

He barely suppressed a wince at the command. He might refer to Jim Jasper as the boss man, but he was the client. Lucky was in charge of this project and would do whatever it took to make sure it was a success. But he was not going to be ordered around like some sort of errand boy.

Luckily, he’d mostly be dealing with Jordan, although she probably thought he was the world’s biggest jerk. Who could blame her? Besides, she might very well be right. But he’d sure take *her* as a boss over Jim Jasper.

Still, she’d be easier to work with than Jim Jasper. Her pleasant demeanor told him they could probably work well together once they got past any awkwardness between them.

Nodding to his guys, he snatched up his coffee and headed straight for Jim’s office. It wasn’t Jim who had him rattled right now. It wasn’t even the

thought of being cooped up in an office smaller than the storage closet. It was knowing he'd be cooped up in that office with a woman who seemed to scramble all his senses whenever she was near.

That was something he'd definitely have to overcome.

He stepped into the doorway, not budging an inch inside. In fact, he was pretty sure his toes were barely touching the seam that separated the office's linoleum flooring from the outdated laminated wood flooring in the hallway. It might stink that a bunch of people wouldn't be able to work for a few months, but this place badly needed something.

"Come on in," Jim said. "Have a seat."

Lucky would have sworn there was only one chair on either side of the desk before today. Had someone pulled this one in? Maybe it had been there all along and he just didn't notice. Whatever the case, Jim was on the side of the desk where Jordan should have sat, and Jordan was in the guest seat. Her nameplate was even on the desk, making it clear that was her domain, not his. That irked him on her behalf.

"Jordan, meet Lucky," Jim said, staring down at his phone distractedly. "Lucky, meet Jordan. I don't know if you know each other."

"We've met," Lucky said, giving her a nod before plopping down into the seat next to her.

Jordan was holding a coffee mug, and in that moment, Lucky realized Jim had mentioned nothing about grabbing her a cup when he went out to get coffee for his crew. Had he just left her out of the whole thing? She'd had to make her own coffee?

He didn't need to like his clients, but he was starting to develop a real distaste for this guy.

"Welp, I have to go," Jim suddenly said. "I'm heading to Texas later today, so I'll trust the two of you to take care of everything. I'll be communicating mostly through Jordan here, so if you have questions or need something, float it through her, she's been running this place for almost a decade now."

"Actually, I didn't take over as manager until a few years ago," Jordan said.

"Oh, yeah." Jim nodded slowly, staring off into the distance with a thoughtful expression. "Too many irons in the fire." Slapping his hand on his desk, he made eye contact with Lucky. "I filled Jordan in on the basics, but you can take over the rest. We'll be down for sixteen weeks, barring any

delays. We have Eileen Montgomery coming in for Christmas. She's huge with the over-sixty crowd. Had a couple of country hits back in the nineties."

"So, our performers won't be coming back," Jordan said.

Jim pursed his lips and shook his head. "Afraid not, but they're on contract, anyway."

"A contract that's been auto-renewed for years," Jordan said.

"Old talent's gotten stale." Jim gestured wildly. "As has everything else in this place. It's time to bump things up a notch. Better to revitalize the place than shut it down completely, which was what we were facing if we kept going as we were. We can't have empty seats every night."

"They weren't—"

Jordan didn't get any more out before Jim interrupted with a loud scrape of his chair against the floor. He stood and said, "Jordan's in charge. I leave this in your capable hands."

His eyes were on Lucky, so it wasn't clear he was directing that at both of them. If Jordan was his boss, hers were the capable hands here, right?

It didn't matter, anyway. Jim snatched up his iced coffee and left.

Once he was gone, Lucky looked over at Jordan. "He didn't bring you coffee?" It was a simple thing, really, but it still bugged him.

"I don't like that fancy stuff." She gestured toward his cup. "Just black coffee with a little creamer, and I'm happy."

He was suddenly aware that where he sat effectively trapped her in her spot. If she wanted to get around him to go sit behind her desk, she couldn't.

It was impossible to avoid looking at her. Even out of the corner of his eye, he could see those beautiful brown eyes and those lips that had once kissed him back. Plus, she smelled like lavender mixed with honey—

Grabbing his own coffee cup, which he'd set on the edge of the desk, Lucky stood. "We have to get ready to move all the tables and chairs out of the auditorium. Maybe we can get together a little later and I can catch you up on the project?"

She was looking up at him, and the expression on her face made him wonder if she was about to be sick. Maybe her coffee grounds had gone bad. Or maybe his words were nauseating her.

"You're taking all the tables and chairs out?" she asked.

He squeezed his eyes closed. He'd love to give Jim a piece of his mind for not discussing all of this with his manager. This was no way to run a business.

“Not today,” he said when he dared to open his eyes again. “We have a truck coming to pick all that up next week. Right now, we’re focusing on the lobby.”

“You’re taking the desk out,” she said.

That was right. She’d been in this office a while. That meant she was in for a big surprise when she emerged. The ticket desk was gone, and the guys were currently working on removing the dusty faded drapes that covered the walls.

“They are.” He nodded. “I have the plan on my tablet. We can go through it, maybe over lunch?”

Lunch seemed a little personal, but it was nothing like that. It was the one time he felt okay about splitting up from his crew. He was shorthanded this week, as he had crew members finishing up projects. One of those projects was wrapping up, so he’d at least have more hands on deck later in the week.

“Sure.” She nodded. “Sounds good. Thank you.”

She wasn’t looking at him now. Instead, her stare was pointed toward the wall behind him, and her eyes looked a little glassy. He couldn’t blame her if she was dazed. Her world as she’d known it previously had been completely upended, and her boss hadn’t even had the decency to talk to her about it.

Lucky couldn’t make that up to her, but he’d do whatever he could to keep from making it worse.

Jordan tapped the End button on her phone screen and set the phone face down on her desk. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She was just seconds from putting her own face down on her desk when movement out of the corner of her eye grabbed her attention.

“Sorry,” a guy Jordan recognized as one of Lucky’s workers said. “Am I interrupting?”

He was holding his baseball cap in his hands in front of him. The peach-colored shirt with the Lucky Howard Construction logo was now covered in dust.

“No.” She shook her head, leaning back. She gestured toward her phone. “I was just taking a second between calls. What’s up?”

“My boss sent me to tell you we’re going to lunch. He said you two have a meeting or something?”

Lunch. Right. They were supposed to have lunch together to discuss the project.

She hadn’t forgotten about it, not for a second. It had been in the back of her mind all morning. She just hadn’t realized the morning was coming to an end.

“I’ll be right there.” She slid her chair back a little to reach her desk drawer.

Lucky had said they wouldn’t be redoing her office. At least something would stay the same. The way things were going, though, it wouldn’t surprise her if Jim got to the end of all this renovation and replaced her, too.

Sighing, she grabbed her purse and stood. Maybe she was in a sour mood

because she'd spent the morning calling the employees scheduled to work tonight to tell them the bad news. After lunch, she'd tackle the ones who weren't working until later in the week.

She was walking down the hall, settling her purse strap on her shoulder, when she got her first glimpse of the lobby. The hallway opened up into it. For four years, she'd taken that path and seen the ticket desk directly in front of her—nine years, if she counted the time she'd worked in this theater as a performer. Now the ticket desk was gone—just an empty floor, covered in plastic. She looked around, puzzled.

Where had they taken the desk? Was someone hauling it off to the dump in one of those pickup trucks she'd seen in the parking lot?

"Hello?" she called out.

Absolutely no answer, so she headed over to the auditorium. She braced herself for what she'd see when she stepped through the door, but it was refreshingly the same as it had always been. The chairs were still in place, the stage looming ahead, dark until someone flipped on the lights.

All she had to do was glance to her right, though, and she'd see that the framed posters from previous productions were now gone. They'd been carted off somewhere—storage, she hoped.

"Be back here at one!"

That sound came from behind her in the lobby. It was the unmistakable voice of Lucky Howard—unmistakable because her heart automatically did a little leap.

Hopefully, a couple of days of working with him would erase this automatic reaction. She was no longer a schoolgirl with a crush. She was a grown woman with a few serious relationships behind her, including a failed engagement.

Jordan spun and moved, full speed ahead, toward the door. She was running through the list of lunch options as she went. They were next door to the family-style buffet her boss owned, but she steered clear of that place. It was the same soggy Salisbury steak and instant mashed potatoes they served dinner theater guests every night.

"Oh!"

"Whoa!"

Those two words came out simultaneously as Jordan and Lucky nearly ran into each other in the doorway. Jordan had been so lost in her thoughts, it hadn't occurred to her Lucky might be on the other side of that doorjamb.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was going to set this down and text you to meet me backstage.”

That was when she noticed the plastic bags. They were huge, and they hung from each of Lucky’s hands.

“Food?” she asked, barely able to squeeze out that one syllable.

“I figured I’d save us some time,” he said. “I have to be back on the job at one, and we have a lot to discuss. My tablet’s backstage.”

He pointed toward the auditorium with the bag in his left hand and nodded. That was her cue to go, yet she was still frozen, staring at him. And her gaze had unfortunately landed on his left bicep.

As she stood there, thinking about how strong his arms were, Jordan’s mind flashed back to that night in that closet. It had been so dark she couldn’t see anything, but she could still feel his arms around her. His strength as he pulled her toward him. She felt safer in that moment than she had in her entire life.

“Ahem.”

The sound of him clearing his throat jerked her out of her trance. It brought her back to the present, when she was gawking at a man’s arms.

“Oh.” That seemed to be her favorite word these days. “Yes, backstage.”

She turned and headed into the auditorium—an auditorium that was more familiar to her than her own small house. Her tiny log cabin in the mountains was an investment. Someday, she hoped to get married and have a family and turn her first home into a vacation rental. It would hopefully bring in money for years to come.

Her legs were shaking as she navigated the areas between the dozens of tables, each surrounded by chairs. There was a backstage door to the left of the stage, and she kept her eyes on it, trying her best not to think about the man behind her and those strong, strong arms.

When she got to the door, though, she had to turn and face Lucky. His hands were full, so he couldn’t open it for himself. She deliberately kept her gaze forward, afraid to look in his face. Afraid to show the attraction she was desperately trying to stuff deep, deep, deep inside.

“I love this little area over here,” he said, his voice carrying back to her.

She closed the door, fumbling with the knob for far too long. It was secure, but she was having a hard time forcing her feet to move away from it.

Finally, she took a deep breath, told herself to stop being weird, and started in that direction—one foot in front of the other, right hand clutched

around her purse strap to ground herself. He was just a man. A man who was here to do a job. A co-worker, really. That was how she should think of him.

“Thanks,” she said, vaguely aware he’d given some sort of compliment, but not sure exactly what.

“I always knew you as an actress,” he said.

She reached the seating area and sat on the chair catty-cornered from him. The chairs were pushed up to a square table that was primarily used for card games when cast members got bored during rehearsals.

“I mostly retired from that,” she said. “I’ve understudied a couple of times in a pinch, but I’m at that in-between age. I can’t play the older mom-and-grandmother-type characters, but I’m a little too old to play the ingénue.”

Ingénue. That was a pretentious word if she’d ever uttered one.

“That’s ridiculous.” He leaned forward and reached into the bag, pulling out a foam container. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I got both chicken and tuna salad, plus some fruit and cheese. Anyway, you don’t look a day over twenty-five.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but she wasn’t sure if it was a compliment or not. She liked being thirty—all of it except the fact that she’d hoped to be a mom by now. Marriage and motherhood seemed farther away every day.

“I didn’t get drinks,” he said. “I seem to remember you have bottled water.”

She hopped up so fast, her calves pushed the chair back. It made a loud scrape, similar to the one her desk chair had made when Jim stood up in her office that morning. Her purse also slammed against her hip, reminding her it was still hanging from her shoulder. The whole thing was just...awkward.

“I’ll be right back.” She sloughed off the purse, squeezing around the table to go to the women’s dressing room where they kept the fridge. Seconds later, as she returned from the dressing room with the waters, something occurred to Jordan. “You’re redoing the dressing rooms, too? And the stage?”

Lucky’s attention had been on the foam containers on the table in front of him, but her question drew his attention back to her. His expression changed as he turned around, though. He had a “breaking bad news” look on his face. He took a deep breath, and his eyes softened a little.

“Apparently this Irene woman—”

“Eileen,” she automatically corrected.

Funny, she’d never heard of the woman before this morning, but she’d looked her up on her phone. Eileen had a string of hits in the nineties, but it

looked like she'd been dormant for a while. She lived in Nashville, though, so a gig in the mountains of East Tennessee a few hours away probably wasn't all that bad a deal for her. Still, Jordan wondered what Jim was paying this woman.

"Eileen," he said. "He wants her dressing room to be decked out. It looks like you've had everyone cramped into one room for a while."

"Ladies. Men."

Jordan pointed in the direction of each. They had a couple of changing rooms and a large mirror, along with an old, worn-out sofa against the wall in each room. It was nothing fancy, but it did the job.

She settled in front of her food, water on the table for each of them, and popped open the container. Her eyes widened at what was inside. She didn't even know where he'd gotten this, but it looked delicious. The chicken salad had large chunks of grapes, and the cheese and fruit were in separate compartments.

"You can choose crackers or rolls," Lucky said, opening a separate foam container. "Or just plain. I wasn't sure what you liked. I figured this covered all the bases. There's also pie."

Now he had her attention. She loved sweets. It was the one thing that made staying a size two to land lead roles, even in local productions, so tough. She liked food too much and hated exercise even more.

"So, you're not acting anymore," he said, skipping back to what they'd been discussing before she'd rushed off to get water.

She supposed there was plenty of time to talk about the project. That was what they were here for. But they could make idle chitchat while they were eating, then hop on the tablet afterward.

"Not unless they need me to step in," she said. "It was kind of a dead end in a way, since I didn't want to pack up and move to a city with more opportunity. I was never the type who could live in New York City or battle the competition out in California."

As she spoke, Jordan was tearing the plastic wrap off the fork. It was quite the challenge, mostly because her hands felt a little trembly. She didn't want him to see the effect he had on her. She'd actually be mortified if he knew.

"I remember watching you in those high school plays," he said. "They used to let us out of class each semester to watch, remember?"

That brought an automatic sigh from Jordan. "They cut that out my senior

year, right before they eliminated the drama classes altogether.”

He was staring at her, his own plastic fork held above his container as he leaned forward. The table was awkwardly low, especially for someone as tall as him, but it was better than nothing, she supposed.

“There are no more plays?” he asked.

Jordan shook her head. “They dropped most of that stuff—music classes, art, theater, drama...”

She’d heard they were bringing art back, but mostly as a way to justify Coach Wolf’s position on the faculty. Maybe if they needed something for the basketball coach to do, they’d start up the theater program again.

“It’s such a shame.” He shook his head before digging back into his food. “How do young people know they have talent if they can’t try it out while they’re young?”

“We hire some for our productions here,” she said. “Well, I guess we *used to* hire some for our productions here. I should start talking in the past.”

“This Eileen person may need some kids in her show, right? You never know.”

It wouldn’t be the same. Jordan was in denial about just how much things were going to change. Managing a dinner theater with nightly shows was completely different from running a nightly show featuring a once-famous musician singing to an audience of fans.

He looked around. “So, where’s the kitchen?”

“Kitchen?” She’d finally gotten the fork out of its wrapper and was digging into her chicken salad, but this question paused her movements for a moment.

“It’s a dinner theater, right?”

Oh, that. “The buffet next door provides the food. Jim owns that, too.”

That seemed to have caught his attention. He was staring at her now. She couldn’t tell if his wide-eyed expression meant he was surprised or impressed.

“Buffet food?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She took a deep breath, slowly letting it out. “I’m sure you’ve looked at our reviews. Customers hate the food. Do you think I’ll have a job?”

The words spilled out of her mouth. She wasn’t sure where they’d come from. It had definitely been on her mind all morning. Letting go of cast and crew with no way to guarantee there’d be work in a few months was the

hardest thing she'd ever had to do. It had left her considering her own future here in Misty Mountain.

Lucky was still staring at her. "Why wouldn't you?"

His eyes were a unique shade of blue. They were truly intoxicating. And she was someone who'd worked with her fair share of attractive people. Next-level gorgeous, in fact. But none of them held a candle to this guy.

"My expertise is in putting together stage shows, not concerts," she said. "Seems I'm about to outlive my usefulness."

He was still watching her, and the scrutiny was making her nervous. Maybe she should shift the conversation to something that wasn't her.

"He said nothing to indicate that he plans to replace you, if that helps," Lucky said. "Besides, I'm sure you're the most qualified person in town. How hard can it be to shift your skills a little? Sure, maybe I'm an optimist, but I think it's going to work out."

Somehow, when he said those words, she believed him. Who knew she'd be able to find inspiration in something Lucky Howard said? Lucky Howard, the guy who'd kissed her in the closet, then ignored her until literally a few hours ago.

Maybe she needed to keep an open mind. Lucky Howard could be a good influence on her, after all. She could do worse than to learn from the wealthiest, most successful man in town.

Lucky's new boss smelled like honeysuckle. It was one detail Lucky had forgotten about Jordan Strongblossom, but it slammed back into him as he sat next to her.

They'd pulled their chairs together to look at the screen, and the move had put her far too close to him. Her intoxicatingly sweet scent had taken him right back to that closet.

He could almost feel the knit of her T-shirt as he pulled her closer... Every time he shoved those thoughts aside to resume the task at hand, his mind would drift right back there again.

"The tables are this close together?" Jordan asked, looking in the direction of the stage. She couldn't see it from here, but no doubt it was clear as day in her mind. "We're just going to pack people into the audience like... sardines?"

His eyes widened as he leaned over a little to look at her from a comfortable distance. Lucky had dated beautiful women—he'd started with pretty much all the locals around his age back in the day. Now that most of those women had grown up and either moved away or married, he tended to date out-of-towners only.

In all that, he couldn't think of a woman he'd ever seen who was this beautiful. She was an actress, so it made sense that she'd need to be easy on the eyes. Or maybe it was that being an actress had her working at it a little harder.

But no, this was natural beauty. She'd been born with those pronounced cheekbones and those gold flecks in her almond-shaped brown eyes.

“That was my design,” he said, tugging his gaze back to the tablet. “Mr. Jasper said he wants to triple the audience capacity. This does it.” Using his thumb and index finger, Lucky pinched inward, bringing the image back so they could see the full picture. “Over here will be the two-seater tables. Then we have four-seaters and some tables for bigger parties.”

“That makes it a little inflexible,” she said. “What we need to do is make all the tables two-seaters. Then we can push them together and pull them apart as our crowd needs change.”

“Can’t you sell tickets based on capacity? When you run out of four-seaters, just show they’re sold out.”

Jordan shook her head, and he tried to keep his gaze on the screen. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he saw the stubborn set of her delicate features. The way her dark hair caught the overhead light as she moved, creating a mesmerizing sheen...

“We get a lot of walk-ins,” she said. “We offer tickets on the website, but we rarely sell out.”

“That could change,” he said. “You’re bringing in a celebrity artist. People will come to town just for her, right?”

“Good point.” She took a deep breath and let it out. “I don’t know how popular this Irene person is—”

“Eileen.” Now he was correcting her. “Her last hit was in 1998. ‘Get Out of Here.’”

She looked over at him, leaning to her left a little. There was a slight crease between her brows as she eyed him in confusion.

“‘Get Out of Here,’” he repeated. “That was the name of her last big hit. It’s very country.”

“So, you looked her up?” she asked.

“I was curious. I needed to know what the vibe would be. Was it more country-pop or old school? Definitely old school.”

He smiled as he remembered how completely twangy the music he heard was. But Jordan was studying him now. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, and her head was tilted so slightly, it was barely noticeable.

“You listen to country music?” she asked.

Lucky shook his head. “I’m more of a classic rock guy myself, but my ex-girlfriend was really into country. She dragged me to a few concerts. It grows on you.”

Why was he talking about Becca? He hadn’t mentioned her in months.

That relationship ended badly. It was the first time in his life he was dumped, and it was a huge blow to his ego, even though he'd been the reason she'd dumped him. Him and his refusal to commit after two years.

"The TV reporter," Jordan said.

He'd taken a big swig from his water bottle, but her words made his swallowing wonky. He choked a little but managed to get things on the right track.

"You know Becca?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know her any more than anyone else here does. I see her on the news sometimes. Usually unintentionally. She pops up on something I'm watching. Not that I'm avoiding watching her or anything."

That was a strange thing to say. Why would he think she was avoiding watching his ex on TV?

He decided to move past it. "Yes, Becca and I dated for almost two years. It was a doomed relationship, though. Both of us are married to our careers. Besides, she needed someone who was interested in taking a backseat to her."

Through all of that, Jordan watched him, eyes still narrowed. He'd said a lot. Too much, in fact. Why was he opening up to this woman he barely knew? A woman whose honeysuckle scent was threatening to overwhelm all his other senses. A woman who was essentially a business colleague.

"I do that," she said.

Those three words seemed out of place. He looked over at her, fully aware there was a frown fixed on his face.

"Pick people who are all wrong for me," she said. "I was engaged to a guy. An actor." She laughed. "I make it a rule to never, ever date actors for that very reason."

"What reason is that?"

He was confused. There were similarities between the two of them, he assumed. They both dated people who liked being in the spotlight.

"I'm not a good coat rack," she said, digging a grape from her chicken salad and popping it into her mouth.

"A coat rack?"

She chewed and swallowed, then said, "The person on the red carpet who holds a significant other's coat. Or purse. Who stands off to the side while photographers shoot the important person. It's something I've heard friends who date actual celebrities complain about."

Yeah, that was the perfect descriptor. Becca didn't walk red carpets, but

he had found himself waiting, patiently, while she talked to a fan. And he'd snapped so many photos of his ex-girlfriend with strangers' phones, he was pretty sure he could qualify as part of the paparazzi.

The relationship had seemed a good fit at the time since Lucky wasn't a fan of attention. He was perfectly fine with blending into the background. But in Becca's world, he was her boyfriend. It did start to bug him, after a while, that people treated him like he was *lucky* to be with her. That he was crazy for not proposing—or “locking it down,” as her friends' husbands and boyfriends called it.

“You were engaged?” he asked, doubling back to the words she'd said earlier.

“Yep,” she said. “It seemed like it would work out perfectly. I like being behind the scenes, anyway. The problem was, he had no respect for Misty Mountain or East Tennessee in general. He always acted like he was too big for this place.”

“Let me guess. He moved to New York or L.A.”

“Nashville,” she said. “He's done some country music videos, but mostly stage productions. I guess he's pretty big stuff, compared to what he would have been here. Anyway, the leading lady in one of his plays was apparently more interesting than me. That's who he's dating now.”

“He cheated on you?”

She shook her head. “No. He dumped me first. I guess I should be thankful for that. He could've done that thing where everyone knew he was cheating on me *but* me.”

Lucky looked down at the tablet, which was now in his lap and had gone dark at some point, completely forgotten as he shifted his focus to talking to her. They were probably running out of time, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He wanted to continue this conversation. To learn more about her even if it meant revealing a little more of himself than he found comfortable.

“I was never the type of person who could just follow around after a superstar,” she said. “That's why I avoid dating actors. Not that I have to be the center of attention. I just don't want to be...a secondary character in someone else's life.”

“Aren't we all stars of our own lives?” Lucky asked.

Wow. That was deep. Uncharacteristically deep. But all he could think was maybe he should have used a stage play instead of a movie in that analogy.

“Sort of,” she said. “Actually, that’s a good point. I have to think about that.” She looked over at him, a smile on her face. “I’m not very good with a hammer.”

He blinked at her, trying not to get distracted by those gold flecks in her eyes. Looking at her made it tough for him to concentrate on the conversation, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself to look away.

“A hammer to help you out around here,” she said, no doubt seeing the confusion in his expression. “I’m supposed to take charge, I guess, but I’m not really sure where I fit in all this.”

Oh...*hammer*. She was thinking that helping him meant picking up a tool and getting to work.

“I have a pretty large crew,” he said. “Right now, I can only dedicate two guys to the project, but there will be more before the week’s out. Mostly, I just need you to keep an eye on things, make sure we’re on track. And I guess you’ll be doing stuff to let everybody know you’re closed.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “I’ve been trying not to think about that.”

When she broke the stare, it was easier for him to return his attention to the tablet. But after pressing the button that pulled up the lock screen and lifting the tablet to his face to unlock it, he just stared down at it, noting they only had a few minutes before this lunch hour came to an end.

“I have to make sure everybody on my crew knows first,” Jordan said, taking a deep breath and letting it out. “I hate firing people even when it’s merited. This isn’t merited.”

“You’re not really firing all of them, I thought.”

“I can’t make any promises.” The seriousness in her tone was enough to get his attention. This was really bugging her. “Not until I know what’s going on. I don’t want to string them along if they could be getting other jobs.”

“Misty Mountain’s probably about to lose a bunch of good entertainers, that’s for sure,” he said.

Maybe her ex-fiancé could get them work in Nashville. Or they could join one of the shows in Gatlinburg. Maybe a community theater in Knoxville. He knew nothing about any of that, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Next up, I’ll have to work on marketing,” she said. “Starting with promoting the fact that we’ll be closed for a while and getting everyone excited about the changes.”

“My sister!” he blurted. He looked over at her and immediately saw from

her frown that he needed to explain. “She’s doing a bunch of marketing for ___”

“The auto repair shop,” Jordan finished for him. “We worked together at the festival.”

“I didn’t see you there.” Disappointment dragged him down a little. He hated that he’d missed that.

He’d whizzed through the town’s annual festival on Friday night, grabbing a Chicago dog and briefly talking to the owner of that repair shop for a little while. He then blew back out. Usually on Friday nights, he was beat. He only stopped through to make an appearance, showing anyone who cared that he supported the community.

And he did. He just needed some downtime every now and then.

“I’m supposed to have lunch with her soon,” he said. “Why don’t you join us?”

Why had he said that? The lunch was supposed to be a chance for him and his sister to bond, catch up... They were long overdue for a meeting like that. Bringing Jordan along would keep that from happening, right?

It was clear what he was doing. He was deliberately bringing someone else in because he knew he had been a bad big brother. A bad son, a bad boyfriend, and a bad friend, too. He’d made work his life, and now he was thirty-one years old with nothing but a fat bank account to show for it.

Not that a fat bank account was bad. But it was clear his life was as empty as that giant log cabin he’d built up at the tallest point in Misty Mountain.

“I’ll have you both over for dinner,” he said. Yes, he was liking this idea better all the time. “I’ll grill steaks or chicken. We can hang out...”

He bit back the rest of that sentence. The words “by the pool” just seemed a little more showy than he wanted to be. Lucky took great measures to avoid being the type of guy who threw around his money to impress people.

But something weird was happening here. It was something he hadn’t experienced, even with Becca. It wasn’t that he wanted to impress this woman. It was that he wanted to give her a memorable evening. He wanted her to walk away from his house with happy memories, seeing him as a good guy.

All he could think was that it went back to the night of that party. They’d both been teenagers, and while he couldn’t speak for her, he’d been obsessively worried what everybody else thought of him.

No, that couldn’t be it. He’d have to think about it. Right now, she had his

brain tied in knots.

“Boss!” a voice carried back to them, bouncing off the walls and seeping through the cracks into the backstage area.

It was one of his employees, back from lunch and looking for him. The guy probably just wanted to let his boss know he was here, but the last thing Lucky needed was to be caught hanging out backstage with their beautiful client. He had to keep his head in the game.

“I need to get back out there.” Pushing himself to his feet, he set the tablet on the table and began grabbing up their empty containers.

“I’ll get all that,” Jordan said. “You go take care of your employees. If you need anything, I’ll be in my office all afternoon, breaking bad news and ruining people’s lives.”

Those words drew his attention back to her face. There was a hint of a smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. This bothered her deeply. As a boss himself, he knew the pain. He’d fired more than a few workers, including people with families to feed. It was never easy.

But this was different. This was breaking her heart. It made her even more intriguing. She was a good person, deep down. He could stand to learn a few things from her.

But that was all it could be. At the end of this project, he’d walk away and never speak to her again.

He couldn’t let her get into his heart. He’d learned from a young age what happened when you lost control of your emotions to someone else. Whatever he’d felt that night in the closet had reminded him that even *he* wasn’t completely immune to a beautiful woman. If he couldn’t physically distance himself from her, he’d definitely keep an emotional distance.

He could do this. He had decades of practice pushing people away.

Five full days of working under the same roof as Lucky Howard. Five days should have been enough to make her immune to those light gray eyes, that intense stare.

But here Jordan was, on Friday night, standing in his driveway. And she couldn't help but feel a little weak in the knees at the sight of him.

She gestured toward her car. "I wasn't sure where to park."

Lucky scanned the area, and she took that opportunity to admire how he looked in a golf shirt and jeans. She was used to seeing him in the Lucky Howard Construction T-shirt, same as his employees. He also usually wore a baseball cap with his company logo. But tonight he went cap-free, his dark brown, wavy hair catching the glow of the sunset.

"It is a little confusing," he said. "But yeah, most guests park here."

Lucky's driveway had a portico that someone could drive through to get to a second area right in front of the house. She'd chosen the area on the outside of that portico, feeling like the other part was for someone who lived here, not a guest.

But hers was the only car she saw. She'd expected Lucky's sister to beat her here.

"Maddie's running late," he said. "She asked if it was okay if Denver tagged along."

Denver was Maddie's boss, but he was also her boyfriend. Jordan had seen that coming long before it made its way through the Misty Mountain rumor mill to her ears. She'd worked with the two of them at the Wilson Automotive booth at the town festival. Their chemistry had been glaringly

obvious.

There'd been some weird sort of tension between the two of them on Sunday, though. Jordan couldn't quite put her finger on what was happening, and she'd been too busy handing out flyers and talking to people to give it much thought. But even with that, there was still something between them that she longed to have.

Tonight, though, the two of them showing up here would change the dynamic a little. It wasn't just Jordan and Lucky hanging out with his sister. It was Jordan and Lucky hanging out with a couple. That made it double date-like, didn't it?

"Come on back," Lucky said. "I just put the potatoes in the oven, so I probably shouldn't stray too far from the patio."

Oven. Patio. She was confused, but she followed him through the portico and toward the front door. It had been quite the drive to get up here, considering he was at the top of the steepest, curviest road she'd ever experienced in these mountains. But that meant the view must be spectacular.

As they neared the front door, it hit Jordan just how massive this log cabin was. It was two stories and *wide*. It was probably five times the size of her tiny cabin.

Lucky pushed the front door open and stepped inside, holding it for her as she stepped through. Her goal was not to look at him. Every time they made eye contact, her knees got shaky.

She didn't have to worry about that, though. The second she crossed the threshold, her attention was captured by the high ceiling. It was one gigantic room with a full picture window on the back wall.

That was when it fully sunk in. Jordan was dealing with a guy who had money. Not just more money than the average person, either. More money than anyone in town.

She had known that about him, of course. She might have avoided running into him, but there was no getting away from how successful he was. His name was plastered on signs all over town. He was the guy to go to if you needed something built and had the money to buy the best.

"I know it's a lot," Lucky said.

He'd stepped up to stand next to her—something she hadn't realized until she heard his voice. She jumped and took a deep breath to compose herself.

"It's nice." She looked around again, staring up at the high ceiling.

Yes, she made the mistake of glancing at him. And now her knees were

wobbly again. Staring up at the ceiling was supposed to be a way to ground herself. It didn't work.

"It's a lot for one person, I know," he said. "I wish I could say I built it with plans to have a family here someday. I didn't. It's all for show."

His honesty was surprising. It even drew her attention back to him, despite her resolve to keep her focus elsewhere.

"I'm a developer," he said. "This is what I do. If I want people with big bucks to trust me with their projects, I have to show that I'm doing well. It's the reason I invest in ridiculously overpriced jeans and sneakers and have pool parties, inviting clients and their spouses. It's all for show."

He'd said that twice, which made her think he was really trying to get the point across. Or maybe he didn't realize he was repeating himself. Whatever the case, she had to pull her gaze off his face.

This time, she stared straight ahead, out the window, suddenly noticing something. "You don't have a view of the mountains."

"I do from the upstairs bedroom. But the view from the living room isn't so bad, either. Come on."

He gestured and led her farther into the room, over to the area with a cushy sofa and two love seats. One of the couches was pointed straight at the window, which displayed a waterfall. An actual waterfall. It was attached to a pool...or was that a pond? Maybe a lake? It was so gigantic, she couldn't imagine it was an in-ground swimming pool.

"I had to go all the way to Florida to find someone to set this up," he said. "Pool companies are few and far between in the mountains, and I wanted to do this."

This was a gigantic rock formation on the other side of the humongous pool. It was definitely a pool. The water was too blue to be anything else. Even more water poured down from the rocks, reminding her of the time her family had vacationed at the state park that had a waterfall. They'd had to hike for the better part of a half hour to get to it. This was in his back yard.

"I can give you all a grand tour of the house later," Lucky said. "Let's go check on the potatoes."

Let's. As though they were making the meal together.

He headed to the left, toward a kitchen area that was part of the main, high-ceilinged room. Near the kitchen was a door that led out to the patio. The second it cracked open, the sound of rushing water filled the interior of the cabin. The whole thing felt surreal—a combination of the great outdoors

with the chill of an air-conditioned cabin.

“The fans keep it from getting too hot out here,” Lucky said, holding the door for her.

Jordan stepped through and looked around, trying once again not to appear too wowed by her surroundings. She didn’t want to look like someone who had never been anywhere fancy before. She’d certainly traveled and even did a residency in Atlanta for a couple of months. She just preferred life in Misty Mountain to all that.

“It cools down a lot up here at night,” he said. “It’s the elevation. Plus, there are some misters over there, if you don’t mind getting your hair and makeup a little damp.”

Right now, she definitely minded that. She’d put extra effort into getting ready tonight, telling herself she’d do that for a visit to anyone’s house. But deep down, she knew she was trying to look good for Lucky Howard.

“Maybe later,” she said. “You’re right. It’s not bad out here. I’m sure the waterfall helps, too.”

He stepped around her and moved to his left. That was when she saw the kitchen. That was the best way to describe it. There was a grill built into a counter area that also had an oven and stovetop. The oven was on. She assumed that was where he was roasting the potatoes. But he headed over to the area of the counter that was closer to the house and opened the door on a counter-height refrigerator. He pulled out two bottles, pushed the door closed with his foot, and started back in her direction.

If she was honest, she half-expected him to hand her something alcoholic—not because of anything she knew about him, but because people seemed to always be shoving wine or beer at her. Instead, he was holding out a bottle of water.

“I have soda, too, if you like that,” he said. “I tried to keep the sugary stuff out of my diet, but every now and then, I indulge.”

“This will be fine,” she said.

She breathed a sigh of relief that she wouldn’t have to defend her desire to stay alcohol-free. It just wasn’t her thing, and besides, who needed the empty calories? If it was between a bowl of ice cream and a glass of wine, she’d take the ice cream, hands down. But then, she had a vicious sweet tooth.

“There’s a hot tub, too.” Lucky gestured to his left with the hand holding the bottled water. “I don’t use it this time of year, of course, but I keep it

running, just in case. Sometimes it cools down up here enough at night for my guests to want to hop in, but not me. Too hot. Did you bring a swimsuit?"

Jordan shook her head, looking over at him, her eyes wide. She definitely wouldn't have the courage to wear a bathing suit in front of him. If others were here, maybe... But still, she didn't even know he owned a pool until she saw it from his window.

"I didn't mention swimming when I invited everyone," he said. "Maybe I can have all of you back this weekend for a pool party."

He was staring at her as he said those words, and that stare was making it hard for her to concentrate on what he was saying. Pool party. This weekend. Did he mean just the four of them? Was he planning to bring more people in on the fun?

"I'm being rude," he said.

Suddenly pulling his eyes off her, he gestured toward a seating area that was behind her. It was centered in front of the waterfall and included a plush white couch and matching chairs that had to be impossible to keep clean. In the center of those couches and chairs was a fancy fire pit. It was square with blue pebbles that matched the water in front of them.

"Did you do all this yourself?" She gestured toward the furniture. "Pick things out?"

He laughed. "No. Charity Ardmore is responsible for that."

Charity Ardmore was an interior decorator now. Yes, Jordan had heard that. She was also the little sister of Ana Ardmore, the model-turned-home improvement show host. There was another sister, too—Faith. The three Ardmore sisters had grown up here, but two had moved away, including the model.

All three sisters were gorgeous, which means it would make sense that Lucky might have dated one of them. The weird thing was, Jordan had no recollection of Lucky dating Ana, Charity, or Faith Ardmore. It was possible it had just flown under her radar.

Maybe he was still dating Charity?

"We've been good friends for years," he said, as though reading her thoughts. "She's like a sister to me. We went together to Knoxville and looked at some stuff, but in the end, I just turned it over to her. I really don't have time to..."

He gestured, but his voice drifted off. Jordan, meanwhile, felt a surge of relief that they weren't a couple.

Wanting more than anything to push past this part of the conversation, she turned and headed over to the couch, uncapping her water as she went. At some point, without realizing it, she'd started squeezing the bottle, and she still had a tight grip on it. When the cap finally came off, water spurted out, trickling down the sides and coating her hand. She felt the splash on her feet and almost gasped, but she held it in somehow, hoping he wouldn't notice.

Not daring to breathe, Jordan continued forward. The water actually felt good on her feet. It cooled her down a little and helped snap her out of her thoughts. She headed over to the sofa against the window—the one that faced the waterfall—and took a seat on the far cushion, pushing herself as close to the armrest as she could. That would give him plenty of room.

But Lucky wasn't behind her. He remained over in the kitchen area. Did that mean he hadn't noticed her little spill as she walked in this direction? Hopefully.

She took a quick sip of water and recapped it. Maybe he also wouldn't notice that a good third of the bottle's contents was now missing. Only as he turned and started toward her, his stride confident, did she notice that she'd left a huge puddle halfway between the couch and the outdoor kitchen. If he saw that, he'd know something had happened—something she was trying to cover up.

Sure enough, he glanced down at it and frowned but kept coming toward her. Instead of sitting immediately, though, he stopped at the chair to her left and looked over at the waterfall.

"I guess that makes it kind of noisy out here," he said.

It suddenly hit her that they'd been speaking pretty loudly to be heard over it. That would be even more necessary over here, where the noise seemed to be louder for some reason.

"Maybe I should turn it off," he said.

"I like it."

And she did. There was a reason for that, though. It made her feel safe. The sound surrounded, even enveloped, her. As Lucky turned to look at her, his head cocked slightly, she realized that was why she craved protection above all. She needed a bubble around her heart to keep it safe.

Then he came over, water bottle still in his right hand, and plopped down at the other end of the sofa. Just as she expected, he kept the middle cushion free between them. She wondered if he noticed how tightly she was pressed against the armrest.

“I pretty much live out here,” he said. “When the weather’s nice, anyway.”

“When it’s cold, you have this fire pit.” She gestured toward it.

Lucky shook his head. “It puts out very little heat. It’s mostly for looks. When it turns cold, I hang out inside on the sofa that overlooks all this. Sometimes, I turn the waterfall on just for the view.”

“I could see that.” She nodded. “People pay big money to travel for a view like this.” Again, she was thinking about her family’s trip to the state park, although she didn’t really consider that big money.

“I’ve had clients ask if I could put something like this in their backyard.”

She looked over at him. He’d said earlier there was nobody around here who did something like this.

“New business venture?” she asked.

His smile widened, and she knew the answer to that before he even spoke. “I don’t really have time to take on something like that.”

“You just need a new team. Another branch of Lucky Howard Construction.”

“Lucky Pools. I like the sound of that.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. Throughout the week, she’d been listening to the sounds of work all around her office. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he had multiple teams. They descended on the theater midweek, and the chaos had kept her in her office. At this rate, they’d have the project done by the end of the summer—way ahead of schedule. But she knew nothing about building construction. Maybe tearing out what was already there was the easy part.

“Sorry your workplace has become a disaster zone,” he said, once again somehow responding to her unspoken thoughts. “It can’t be easy, working while surrounded by plastic and dust.”

That was hardly his fault. He was doing his job—a job he’d been hired to do.

“I could have done worse than to work with the most respected construction guy in town,” she said.

That brought another laugh, but he still hadn’t taken his eyes off the waterfall. “I think I’m pretty much the *only* construction guy in town—at least, operating at this scale. There are a few individual contractors, but most of the good subcontractors work with me. I know the guys who do what they say they’re going to do.”

“That’s huge,” Jordan said. “I remember talking to the mayor about his rental cabins when I bought mine. He owns a bunch. He said it’s almost impossible to find someone who will show up to fix things when you need it.”

“Yep.” He hesitated a long moment, and she could almost feel the frustration coming from him. When he spoke again, there was clear tension in his voice. “There are people who know how to fix things and people who know how to run a business. They aren’t always the same. My job is to run the business.”

“And you can fix things.”

“Of course,” he said. “But managing people keeps me pretty busy these days. So, are you thinking about owning rental property?”

His question threw her for a second. Then she remembered mentioning she’d spoken to Matt. They were seated next to each other at an event before he was mayor. When she found out he owned vacation rental cabins, she pummeled him with questions.

“In the future,” she said. “I bought a little cabin closer to town. Someday, if my finances allow, I’m thinking about upgrading. At that point, I might turn my current home into a rental property.”

“Vacation or long-term?” he asked.

“Vacation seems to be the way to go here. Not a lot of people looking to rent a place in the mountains, and there are apartments for those who are.”

“You make a good point,” he said. “Vacation rentals can be tricky, though. Lots of people in and out, and the pressure to allow pets is pretty big in this area. Most people want to bring their dogs with them when they come to the mountains. Managing all that just seems like a lot of...work.”

The one thing she didn’t mention was her vision of this future included a husband and kids. Running her rental property was something she imagined doing as an actual job someday, maybe even rolling it into multiple properties.

“Property managers around here take a fortune.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how anyone makes money with the cut they take.”

“I figured I’d manage it myself. I’ve been running a theater long enough.”

“So, you’re thinking of this as your full-time job? You *do* have plans beyond running Misty Mountain Music.”

Funny, but she didn’t even know if it would be called that anymore. It was a silly name—a name they’d given it back in the seventies when it was a

nightly dinner show featuring a local folk singing group. The name had stuck.

“Not anytime soon,” she said. “I need this job to continue for a while.”

Again, she was leaving out the marriage portion of this dream. She was barely holding onto her job, so the idea that her boss might someday give her a generous raise was laughable at this point.

“If I can help in any way, let me know,” he said.

He was looking at her again, and the offer made it impossible to avoid meeting his eyes. She immediately regretted it when she found herself locked in his stare. It was the kind of stare that threatened to erode the protective bubble she was trying to build around her heart. The bubble she’d fooled herself into believing the waterfall created.

No, she wasn’t safe. She wasn’t safe at all. And no waterfall could change that.

This wasn't Maddie's first visit to her brother's house. Lucky had hosted his entire family here a few times—usually during the summer when he grilled for them, just as he had tonight. Holidays were spent at their parents' house in the neighborhood near Maddie's apartment.

But something was different tonight. He wondered if it had to do with his resolve to spend time with family.

"I guess you haven't heard," Maddie said almost as soon as they were seated, plates full of food in front of them.

That got Lucky's attention. He'd turned off the waterfall—for now, anyway. It'd become clear soon after they arrived that it was impossible to have a conversation with that thing going.

Funny, but he didn't notice it when he had clients and business associates over. Tonight, though, he didn't want to miss a word anyone said, especially Jordan, who was seated next to him.

"Heard what?" Jordan asked, pulling her napkin from beneath her silverware and settling it on her lap.

"My roommate heard from her Aunt Judi that they're planning a protest," Maddie said.

Her roommate. Maddie had two roommates, but the one she was referring to was Lauralie, whose aunt was Judi Trapp. Judi hung out with two of her own best friends, and one of them was Jordan's mom, who'd shown up at the theater the first morning he'd worked there. Or so he'd heard. He'd been in the auditorium when it happened, and by the time his interaction with Jordan was over that morning, Josephine Strongblossom was long gone.

“They’re taking it to the mayor, Matt,” Jordan said as though everyone at the table didn’t know who the mayor was.

“Exactly,” Maddie said.

“I’m confused,” Lucky said, sure he must have missed something. “What are they protesting?”

“The renovation of the theater,” Jordan said.

Wait. How did she know that?

“My mom told me,” Jordan said on a sigh, no doubt seeing Lucky’s perplexed expression. “She told me they’ve been talking to the mayor.”

“Huge waste of time,” Denver said. “You can’t stop progress. These old-timers can scream about it all they want, but it’s not going to change a thing.”

“Hey, one of those old-timers is my mom,” Jordan said. “Besides, that’ll probably be us someday, sitting around talking about the good old days when the town only had one family buffet.”

“And one dinner theater,” Lucky said.

Everyone looked at him, and he had to go back through what he’d just said. Denver was especially attentive. He seemed to be shooting a warning look at Lucky.

Oh, yeah. At the town festival, they’d discussed the top-secret plans for Misty Mountain Music. Why he’d confided in a guy he thought of as his mechanic, he wasn’t sure. At the time, he just felt the need to talk things through with another local business owner, and he suspected he could trust Denver Wilson.

In that conversation with Denver, Lucky had mentioned the top-secret fact that this dinner theater renovation could be just the beginning. Jim had plans for more than one dinner theater, as well as some other businesses in this town and elsewhere. Lucky wasn’t supposed to talk about any of that, though.

“Do you think there’ll be more than one?” Maddie asked.

“It wouldn’t surprise me.” Jordan shrugged. “He owns the family buffet, as well as restaurants across the South. He’s talked about franchising our little theater, but it never seemed like it’d do all that well.”

“Plays aren’t where the money is?” Maddie asked.

It was a complete guess—or so it seemed. But Lucky got the feeling it was a *good* guess. This Eileen woman would probably sell more tickets based on her name alone than the local community troupe ever sold.

“It can be,” Jordan said. “But not in a town like this. People are here on

vacation. They want to dance in their seats a little.”

“Ooh, you could put in a dance floor,” Maddie said.

“Don’t give Jim any ideas.” Lucky laughed.

Jordan finally dug into her chicken, giving Lucky permission to eat. It was rude for hosts to start eating before guests, especially when those guests were ladies. But the couple across from him had already started eating.

“Exactly,” Jordan said between bites. “The project is on track.”

Lucky paused in moving the bite of chicken to his mouth to add, “Changes could push our open date back. Let’s just keep the auditorium with tables and chairs and a stage for now.”

“This chicken’s amazing, by the way,” Denver said.

“I agree,” Jordan said. “It’s perfect. Crisp on the outside, moist on the inside.”

“My brother’s an incredible cook,” Maddie said.

That comment drew his attention back to his sister’s face. Her eyes sparkled with what appeared to be pride. She was proud of her brother. She was bragging about him. It was the first he’d seen of that in a long time, and it went straight to his heart.

“Thanks,” he said.

He meant the word for everyone at the table, but he kept his gaze focused strictly on his sister as he said it. He wanted her to know that he appreciated all the times she’d looked up to him—and there had been plenty growing up. He’d taken it for granted until it was gone. Until the two of them became estranged.

For reasons he couldn’t pinpoint, Lucky had always assumed it had something to do with his workaholic ways. He didn’t have time for much of anything in his life while he was building his business, but then he woke up one day and realized how empty his life was. Just day after day of getting up, going to work, and coming home to an empty house. A house that was *way* too big for him.

“So, wait,” Denver asked. “If they protest the remodeling of the theater, what does that mean for your business?”

“We lose the job.” The question brought his attention back to the conversation they’d been having before the brief detour. “At least that’s what I assume. But I don’t think their protests are going to do a thing.”

“Me, neither,” Jordan said. “It would be great. I should be cheering for the protests to work, right? It’d mean bringing my team back to work.”

“Nope.” Maddie shook her head. “All it means is dragging things out longer than they have to.”

“So they might stop construction?” Denver asked, still looking at Lucky. Concern was evident in his eyes.

“They might lose the woman they have lined up for the Christmas season.” Lucky looked over at Jordan. “You could end up just sitting on your hands for a while.”

“Months,” Maddie said. “Yeah, this isn’t good at all.”

“How do we stop it?” Jordan asked.

She set her fork down and lifted her napkin to her mouth, looking over at Lucky. He wished, more than anything, that he had a good answer for that. Something they could do to stop the town from gathering to protest this.

But maybe he could. “Your mom is one of the people protesting, isn’t she?” Lucky asked Jordan.

“And my roommate’s aunt,” Maddie said. “I think I know where you’re going with this.”

“You just need to get the three of them matchmaking again,” Denver said.

“Matchmaking?” Lucky asked. “What do you mean?”

Maddie laughed. “You must have missed all the drama.” She set down her fork and wiped her mouth. “Jordan’s mom’s friend crashed into my Jeep deliberately to get me and Denver together.”

Now Lucky had stopped eating. “That’s a pretty big accusation.”

“I could probably prove it if I wanted to,” Denver said. “Someone stole my truck from my driveway and parked it on the lot at work.”

Lucky glanced over at Jordan. From her frown, he assumed this wasn’t making any more sense to her than it was to him.

“Why would they do that?” Lucky asked.

“To force Maddie to pick me up and bring me to work.” Denver shrugged. “Not that I minded all that much. It was just annoying. Nobody wants to walk out of their house in the morning to find an empty driveway where a vehicle is supposed to be.”

“You can say that again.” Lucky laughed. “That’s why I park in the garage.”

“And you have security cameras,” Maddie pointed out.

“It’s cheaper than a security gate.” Lucky glanced over at Jordan, who was watching him. “I know I’m up here on my own, but there’s a lot of tourist traffic on these roads. You can’t be too careful.”

“That makes sense.” Jordan nodded. “I totally get it. I have a doorbell camera myself, mostly so I can see when packages are dropped on my porch while I’m at work.”

“We need one of those for our apartment,” Maddie said.

Denver paused eating long enough to grab his water and take a drink before speaking. “Anyway, we could technically verify one of those three women was involved in my truck being stolen.”

“Borrowed,” Maddie corrected.

“Borrowed,” Denver said. “I have video surveillance. It records to the cloud. I could pull it up if I needed to, but it was a harmless prank.”

“It was all in the name of matchmaking,” Maddie said. “Nothing distracts those three women like pushing a couple together.”

“It’s not just us, either,” Denver said. “Maddie’s roommates have also been matched by the three women.”

“Brianna and Matt and Lauralie and Sam,” Maddie said. “I can only assume they’ve run out of couples if their new project is stopping the theater remodel.”

“So, we give them a new couple to matchmake,” Lucky said.

He was already racking his brain, thinking of locals who were single. His longtime buddy Charity Ardmore wasn’t dating anyone, but who could the matchmakers fix her up with? There was definitely a shortage of single men around here, unless he counted the guys living up here in the mountains. Misty Mountain had attracted its fair share of digital nomads—mostly tech guys who could work from anywhere and had more money than they knew what to do with. But they tended to not interact with Misty Mountain locals.

Lucky was so lost in his thoughts, it took a couple of extra bites of his food to realize Denver and Maddie were battling smiles. They were looking down at their food, as though afraid to make eye contact.

“What?” Lucky asked, glancing over at Jordan, who was also avoiding eye contact with him. At least the corners of her mouth weren’t twitching. In fact, she didn’t appear to be the slightest bit amused.

“There might be two single people they haven’t matchmade yet,” Denver said.

“And one of them would be especially appealing,” Maddie said. “If Josephine Strongblossom wants grandchildren, that is.”

A loud *clank* signaled Jordan dropping her fork. She quickly snatched it back up again and stared at Maddie.

“Don’t give my mom any ideas,” Jordan said. “She’s backed off that stuff for now. I think she’s thrown in the towel since I’m reaching the ‘too old’ era of my life.”

“You’re never too old,” Denver said.

“Scientifically, that’s not accurate,” Lucky said.

Where had that come from? He’d blurted it out, not really thinking through the fact that they were discussing Jordan specifically. Women couldn’t have kids when they were fifty or sixty years old. He knew that much. But Jordan wasn’t fifty or sixty. Or even forty. She’d graduated the year after him, so he assumed she was thirty. And thirty wasn’t too old to have kids.

But what they were talking about was Mrs. Strongblossom matchmaking Jordan with someone. From the way everyone at this table was acting, he would assume he was their intended target. Get Mrs. Strongblossom to fix Lucky and Jordan up to take their minds off protesting the theater renovation.

This entire conversation had gone off the rails. And there was one thing he could do about it.

Change the subject.

“Who’s up for a pool party this weekend?” he asked. It had been a random idea, but the look on Maddie’s face told him it was a good one. “Invite your roommates and their boyfriends.”

Their boyfriends were Denver’s buddies, Lucky seemed to recall. Inviting them was only natural.

“That sounds great,” Maddie said. She shifted her gaze to Jordan. “You’ll be here, too, right?”

Jordan looked at him. Talk about putting her on the spot. It had never once occurred to him not to include Jordan in the invitation, but he supposed he’d have to say it out loud.

“Of course.” Lucky smiled over at Jordan before shifting that smile over to the other couple. “And this time, make sure you bring your swimsuits.”

The hammering had finally gotten to her.

Jordan had tried everything. Earbuds, headphones, noise-cancelling headphones... She'd even grabbed a pair of earplugs from the drugstore down the street. None of it worked—especially when they brought out the power tools. Work had become a construction zone.

And that was why she packed up her laptop and exited the building around ten o'clock Friday morning. Her boss strictly prohibited working from home, but he didn't mention a word about working from a location that wasn't the theater.

There was a franchise coffee place about a half mile from the theater on the strip, but it wouldn't be much quieter than her office. So instead, she headed to the town square, grabbing a parking spot in front of Misty Mountain Café, a small, locally owned place that would be dead from now until the downtown workers started rushing out of their offices to track down lunch.

"Miss Strongblossom!" Joe called out as she entered.

She gave him a wave with her left hand. She was already hoisting the strap of her laptop off her shoulder with her right.

The café had only a few bistro-style tables, and they were all unoccupied. That might change as the lunch crew stopped by for sandwiches, so she established her spot at the farthest table from the door.

By the time Jordan stepped up to the counter, Joe had a goofy smile fixed to his face as he asked, "What can I do you for?"

"I'll take the raspberry sweet roll." It was her favorite thing here, but she

rarely indulged. “And a coffee with a couple of pumps of vanilla.”

“Hot or cold?”

“Hot.”

Joe was tapping away on his screen, but she saw no judgment for the amount of sugar in her order. That was what she liked about this place. Not that she’d get judgment at the franchise coffee shop. She’d just rather order in an empty café than while surrounded by a bunch of tourists.

“So, how are things going with the theater?” he asked as he turned the screen around so she could pay. “I heard you’re redoing everything. Is your job safe?”

“I hope so,” she said. “Folks around here don’t like change much.”

“Tell me about it.” He laughed. “I updated the point-of-sale system and got complaints. Would you believe it?”

“Yep.” She smiled, remembering the outcry when he upgraded from an old manual register with a drawer to the digital one that had been in place until he moved to this screen. “You’d think they’d like progress.”

“You have the new young folks who want to pay using their phones and the older generation who brings cash in...and then everyone who falls in between.”

“It’s not just an age thing,” Jordan said. “Sometimes I pay with cash. It keeps me from overspending.”

But then, maybe she was part of the “older generation” he was talking about. She certainly didn’t mind change, though, especially if it made things more convenient.

“I hear they’re talking about a protest at Town Hall,” he said. “They’re calling for a big meeting.”

“About what?” she asked as she slid her credit card back into her wallet.

He turned the screen around and stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Your theater renovation,” he said. “I don’t want to be the one to break the news, but—”

“I’ve heard about some possible protests,” she said. “I don’t know the details, though. Nobody mentioned a specific meeting.”

“First, the bookstore closed, and now this. I hear tell that locals feel like the tourists are taking over their town. Like nobody cares about us anymore. Not that I include myself in that.” He laughed. “If tourists want to stop by and grab a cup of coffee on their vacation, I’m more than happy to help out. Unfortunately, the tourists stick to the franchise coffee shop on the strip.”

“They don’t see you all the way over here on the square,” she said. “Plus, parking is a pain. It’s just easier to stick to the shops on the strip with their own parking lots.”

Every now and then, someone came along, saying they were going to build an independent coffee shop and cater to tourists, but somehow it always got shot down. She suspected nobody wanted to compete with the big national coffee shop that ran people through their drive-thru like they were on an assembly line.

“Change is part of life.” He dropped his arms and smiled at her, then turned and headed back toward the room where he prepared all the food and coffee. “Your order will be right up.”

Jordan still had a frown on her face as she headed over to her seat. She saw her phone screen lit up from halfway across the room but thought nothing of it. Messages would pop up on her screen throughout the day—former employees, friends, Jim asking a question about payroll... But this text had a name in bold that jumped out at her as she slid onto her seat.

Lucky Howard.

Yes, she’d programmed him into her phone. Their texts back and forth had been strictly business, although she had sent him a text last night around seven asking what she should bring to the pool party Saturday. *Nothing* had been his response, followed by *I’ve got it covered*. Short and to the point.

She hated to admit how much time she’d spent analyzing those words. Had they been abrupt, or was it just her imagination? Was she hoping for more? It was completely out of line of her to do so, considering he was her boss’s client—which technically made him her temporary boss. But she couldn’t help it.

Like last night’s message, this one was to the point. *Where are you?*

Jordan lifted her phone and stared at it a long moment. She hadn’t stopped to tell anyone where she was going. Her thinking was that nobody cared. They were pulling up the flooring in the auditorium today. She’d waved hello to the group of guys when she entered the building that morning and prepared to stay out of their way.

Café on the square, she typed into the message box. But she didn’t hit the send button just yet. Instead, she stared at the words on the screen, overthinking them, as usual.

Finally, with a frustrated sigh, she sent the message and chided herself for being so weird about things. But she continued to be weird, keeping half an

eye on her phone screen as she waited for her food. Once she finished eating, she'd pull her laptop from her bag and set it up on the small round table.

Eventually, her gaze drifted to the window, and that was when she saw a black, larger-than-average truck parallel park in the space behind her car. She knew that truck. It belonged to Lucky Howard.

There was something intimidating about Lucky's truck. She thought that every day as she pulled into her parking lot at work. It was ridiculous that an inanimate object like a motor vehicle could intimidate her, but it did.

Her heart automatically skipped into double time as Lucky emerged around the hood of that vehicle. He was walking straight to the front door of the café. At the same time, Joe was heading toward her, plate with a sweet roll in his left hand and a large cup in his right. He'd put her coffee in a latte mug, probably because she'd asked for vanilla syrup in it.

Yes, her embarrassing dessert-like breakfast was about to be exposed.

"Looks like you have company," Joe commented as he approached.

At that very moment, the door opened and Lucky stepped in. Jordan forced her stare to remain glued on Joe as she struggled to make sense of what Joe had said. Looks like *she* had company. Where had he gotten that? Had he seen Lucky approaching and just assumed he was here to see the only customer? Or had word spread around town the two of them were spending a lot of time together lately?

No. There would be no way people could know that. They'd mostly been together inside the confines of her workplace. Unless a member of his gigantic crew had spread the word, which was possible. Still, though, it was more likely that Joe meant she wasn't the only customer here anymore.

She definitely had to get out of this habit of overthinking things.

"Thank you," she said to Joe, trying to look like she was cool and calm as she slid the plate over to center it in front of her. As Joe stepped back, he put Lucky right in her vision.

Lucky pulled back the chair across from her. "Can I join you for a second?"

She nodded, unable to get her vocal cords to work. So much for appearing cool and calm.

"I may have to get one of those," he said.

He was eyeing her sweet roll as he sat. Oddly, Jordan felt the urge to hover over it. Was that to protect it or hide it from his view so he couldn't judge her for her unhealthy breakfast choice?

Why couldn't she have opted for the oatmeal and fruit? That would have been a more respectable choice of breakfast.

She lifted the mug of coffee. "I highly recommend it." Caffeine would help her get through this.

"I thought you didn't like fancy coffees," he said.

Good point. "It's a regular coffee with a little vanilla in it. Just enough to take the bitterness off."

The honest truth, though, was that she felt obligated to order something if she was going to be taking up table space here. She had nothing against paying five bucks for a cup of coffee. She just couldn't really see the difference between that and the coffee she made at the office.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm sure you needed to escape the noise."

Guilt flooded her. "It's not your fault. You're just doing the job you were hired to do. I needed a few hours of focused work, though."

No point in telling him about the headache she had just brewing below the surface. And the way her ears seemed to ring for hours after she returned home each night.

"You have to order at the counter," she told him.

As though he didn't know that. Everyone knew that.

He nodded. "I probably should be getting back." But his eyes were still on her food. "I need an executive decision before we get too far into this."

An executive decision. No doubt she'd have to send this question up the chain to her boss. She hadn't been given authority to make executive decisions, unless the weekly supply order counted. She had a feeling toilet paper choice didn't count as an executive decision.

"Right," she said. "Sorry. I thought about tracking you down to tell you where I was going, but you've been so busy."

Besides, nobody had really spoken to her the past couple of days. She did her work, and they did theirs. She figured they were fine without her hanging around.

"I guess working from home isn't an option, since you're overseeing everything," he said.

"I know it'll probably surprise you, but my boss is a bit of a control freak. He thinks if someone's working from home, they're cheating him out of money."

Had she said too much? He was watching her now, not speaking, and with every second that passed, she second guessed her words a slight bit

more.

“Besides, yeah.” She searched her mind for a way to correct what she’d said. “He’s trusting me to oversee something. That’s a job that kind of requires being in the building.”

“I don’t see you as the type of person who would coast if you were at home,” he said. “You’d probably put in even more hours.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.” She laughed. “Before the construction, I was showing up early in the morning and sticking around until the dinner show was over, which was after ten.”

“Yikes,” he said, watching as she sliced into her sweet roll. “I have to get some of that. Be right back.”

When he returned a few minutes later, she’d taken only a couple of bites of her sweet roll. She forced herself to set down her fork and sip her coffee. She definitely didn’t want to clear her plate in a matter of seconds.

“I basically dittoed your order,” Lucky said. “I subbed black coffee for whatever that is.” He gestured toward her mug. He sat down again, his gaze landing on the window next to them and the street beyond it. “Your wiring’s a mess.”

The words came as she picked up her fork again and prepared to take another bite. It took her a second to process what he’d said. In fact, she stared at him a long moment, running those words through her mind, and still it didn’t make sense.

“Wiring?” she finally asked.

That brought his attention back to her face. His eyes were a little wider, and their intensity scrambled her brainwaves, as usual.

“The lighting for the stage,” he said. “It’s a fire waiting to happen. I’m surprised codes hasn’t shut you down by now.”

“Mr. Jasper handles all that,” she said. Then, realizing how that sounded, she rushed to add, “I mean, I don’t really get involved at that level. I don’t want to make it sound like he pays someone off or something.”

She was covering for her boss even now, but it was the truth. She had no reason to believe he’d done anything shady. He hired good people to take care of things.

But wait—wasn’t she one of those hired people?

“Should I have been getting that checked?” Jordan asked Lucky.

He shook his head. “You said Jim took care of that stuff. Besides, it’s not something you’d detect with the naked eye. You’re not going to burst into

flames tomorrow or anything. I just don't think it's wise to redo the whole place and leave that as it is."

"You need me to make an executive decision about the wiring?" she asked.

Unfortunately, that would require her to speak with her boss. Anything that might delay the project or add more money to it, she had to run by him first.

That would be fine, except she'd have to go back to the theater. Mr. Jasper might want to video chat. He tended to like to jump to video when she called or texted him. Doing that would reveal her location, though. He might be fine with her working from Misty Mountain Café, but she wasn't going to push her luck.

"No," Lucky said. "I need your direction on what to do with my crew."

Her direction? Why would she have anything to do with that? He was in charge of his crew.

He opened his mouth to say more, but the squeak of Joe's tennis shoes seemed to alert him to the fact that the café owner was approaching. His load was similar to what he'd brought for Jordan, with one notable difference. The coffee cup was a basic mug rather than the gigantic one that held Jordan's coffee.

"Can I get you anything else?" Joe asked Lucky as he set down the items.

Lucky shook his head. "This will be fine, thank you."

"You might want to take a look at the town website when you get a chance," Joe said, shifting his gaze to Jordan.

Jordan and Lucky exchanged a look. She snatched up her phone and stared down at the screen as Joe headed back toward the counter. While she opened a web browser and launched a search, Lucky emptied the contents of several packets of sugar into his cup, then stirred.

As the Misty Mountain site slowly loaded, Jordan realized she hadn't connected this phone to the café's Wi-Fi. At the top of the page was the standard picture of the *Welcome to Misty Mountain* sign that was near the outlet mall. That was what loaded so slowly.

Hand trembling, Jordan did her best to look casual as she reached for her coffee and lifted it. It was a little heavy for one-handed operation, but she managed to get it back to the table without spilling a drop.

"Monday night, seven p.m. Save Misty Mountain Music," Jordan read.

She tapped on the event date and time and another page opened up. While

it loaded, she made eye contact with Lucky. The concern in his eyes no doubt mirrored hers. But when she returned her gaze to the screen, Jordan actually gasped.

“What?” he asked.

Taking a deep breath, she read what was on the screen in front of her. “Lucky Howard and Jordan Strongblossom are working together to turn Misty Mountain Music into a concert venue. The noise and undesirable audience this will bring will forever change Misty Mountain as we know it. Join us in discussing what we can do to halt construction and keep Misty Mountain classy.”

That was it. The entirety of the message. But as she set her phone face down, next to her coffee mug, she was shaking her head.

“How did the two of us get blamed for this?” she asked.

“You’re the face of that theater. Always have been. Most of the people in this town couldn’t pick Jim Jasper out of a lineup. You should tell your boss about this.”

She sat back in her chair and looked down at her half-eaten sweet roll. He’d already dug into his. At least this news wasn’t disrupting *his* appetite.

“I thought about mentioning it on our call Monday morning,” she said. “But I’d pretty much decided nothing would come of the whole protest thing.”

“It’s something,” he said. “I guess we should go to the meeting.” He shoveled another bite of sweet roll into his mouth and watched her as he chewed.

She sighed. “I don’t know if I want to stand there while the whole town gangs up on us.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll protect you from the angry mob.”

The corners of his mouth twitched upward a little, and that one move, combined with his words, managed to warm her heart toward him a little more. She thought she was making progress and putting some distance between them, but obviously not.

“They may get what they want,” he said.

She’d picked up her fork again, preparing to enjoy this sweet roll in spite of the town turning against her, but now she paused to look at him. “What do you mean?”

“We need an electrician for the wiring work, and my guy is on a job in Knoxville for the next two weeks. I checked around, but so far, no bites from

the electricians I know.” He sighed. “Next up, I expand the search and see if I can get someone reputable in Knoxville to do the work.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t mention it just yet.” She hesitated, her fork halfway through the bite she was cutting off the sweet roll. “My boss might try to take over and choose the electrician for you.”

“Let me make some calls,” he said, tossing his napkin on top of his now-empty plate. “I’d better be getting back to work. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon at my house.”

She nodded. “I’ll probably be back to the theater later today. I just need to get some work done.”

“Understood.” He smiled and grabbed his plate and cup as he stood. “See you later.”

He hesitated a long moment. And in that moment, she wondered if he was going to say something else. Something that indicated he wanted more.

If he did that, how would she respond?

But she didn’t have to worry about that. After that brief hesitation, he turned and headed back toward the counter, depositing his dishes and giving her one last wave as he walked out.

This was what Lucky imagined when he built this backyard. A future where friends would come over and hang out. He'd cook burgers and hotdogs, and they'd laugh and splash in the pool.

But as he closed the grill cover and slipped the spatula back onto its hook, he couldn't help reminding himself they weren't his friends. Maddie was his sister, and over time, he hoped her boyfriend Denver became his friend. They were likely to become brothers-in-law, at the very least.

The others were people he talked to from time to time when he saw them around town, but he didn't know them. Not well enough to call them anything more than acquaintances.

Maybe that could change, though.

And then there was Jordan, a woman Lucky couldn't seem to shake from his mind no matter how hard he tried. She wasn't a friend. Technically, she'd qualify as a business colleague—his client's employee. But the way he thought about her these days went well beyond all of that.

He didn't think about kissing his friends and colleagues. He didn't wonder what it might be like to put his arms around them, to simply walk down the street holding hands.

Yeah, he couldn't remember having it this bad for a woman before.

"Need help with that?"

The male voice pulled him from his thoughts. He turned to see Matt approaching from the door to the house. Just a few minutes earlier, he'd asked for directions to the restroom.

"I think I've got it," Lucky said, gesturing toward the closed grill cover.

“I just have to let them cook for a few minutes. The key to a good burger is not to flip them too many times and only press the grease out at the end.”

Why was he telling Matt all this? He wasn't sure. Lucky was great when it came to discussing business, but small talk had never been his strong suit.

“Sounds like a plan.” Matt nodded. “You like that grill?”

That question threw Lucky. He'd turned around and was looking out at the group of people playing pool volleyball. Jordan was playing alongside his sister. He kind of liked that the two of them were becoming friends. He hated to look too deeply into why he felt that way.

“It's pretty good,” he said. “I wanted to go with the Deluxe, but they were out of stock, and they weren't sure when it would be back in. I needed to get something soon, so I went with this.”

“I have an outdoor space, too,” Matt said. “I thought about putting a pool in, but I'm not much of a swimmer.”

Lucky smiled and looked back out at the pool. He'd left the waterfall going for now. It cooled the water down in addition to creating a nice view.

“I'm not either, to be honest,” Lucky said. “I got it mostly for things like this. Having people over, grilling out.”

That assumed he had a large group of friends to hang out with. At this point, he'd only ever hosted family and business connections. He wished he could say he leaned more heavily toward family and not business, but no. His back yard had become a showroom of sorts. A way to impress potential clients and make them hire him.

“I've started to think about what it would be like with a family someday,” Matt said. “I don't plan to move as long as Brianna's okay with staying where we are. Kids love pools.”

“Kids love pools.” Lucky nodded. “You could always bring them over here.”

Matt laughed. “Thanks, man. Yeah, I guess mostly what I need is a friend with a pool.”

“Or buy a rental with one,” Lucky said. “Then you could just use it when nobody else is.”

“The liability on that.” Matt shook his head. “No way.”

That got Lucky thinking about Matt's rental properties. Maybe he could be a help with the one thing Lucky needed most.

“Do you know any good electricians?” Lucky asked. “I need one pretty soon.”

Matt thought a second, then said, “Trevor Hargis. There’s also Rich Kemper.”

“Tried both.” Lucky sighed. “All the best ones stay busy.”

“I might be able to track someone down.” Matt was looking out at the pool just as Lucky had, squinting, his head cocked slightly to the left. “Let me check my contact list and see if I can come up with someone.”

“That would be awesome.” He turned back around and lifted the grill top.

“You know you were my first choice for the Rossdale Road project,” Matt said.

That caught Lucky’s attention. Matt was building a group of vacation rental cabins near the base of the mountains called Misty Ridge. It was a great location, and he’d probably do well with all the renters who didn’t like navigating curvy roads to get to their cabins. He passed the sign all the time and couldn’t help but notice another construction company had its name on it. That company was a smaller operation out of Knoxville that built a lot of the rental cabins in Misty Mountain.

“We talked about a rec center with a pool,” Matt said. “I even spoke with a contractor and drew up some plans. But when I started looking into insuring it, the liability...”

“A pool can be a big selling point, though.” Lucky grabbed the spatula and poked at the closest burger to gauge its level of doneness. “Parents look for stuff for their kids to do at night. Going back to the cabin and changing into their swimsuits is the answer to that.”

Lucky had his own fond memories of summer vacations with his parents. They usually didn’t travel far. They’d head to Gatlinburg or go to one of the beaches in Florida. One year, they went to the Space Center in Huntsville. All those vacations had one thing in common. They stayed at a hotel with a swimming pool, and he and Maddie would play in the water for hours. During their younger years, their parents had to practically drag them from the pool to get them to bed.

“I get it,” Matt said. “I’m thinking about it.”

“And it would solve the issue of putting a pool in at your own house.” Lucky shrugged and stepped back, closing the grill cover again. “A pool at Misty Ridge, and you’ll always have a place to take them for a swim. In addition to my place, of course.” Lucky gestured toward the grill. “I think these are ready.”

Matt was looking out at the pool as he’d done earlier. The words seemed

to pull him out of his thoughts.

“Oh, we’re ready to eat?” Matt asked.

“If you could round everyone up, I’ll grab everything else.”

Lucky had to run inside for that. Buns, chips, and the potato salad and baked beans Maddie and her two roommates brought. Jordan brought dessert, and the guys provided the chips and some drinks. He’d told everyone not to worry about bringing anything, but it touched him, the way everyone pitched in. Like this was a true gathering of friends.

“Need help?”

Lucky was on his second trip to the kitchen when Jordan’s voice disrupted the silence in the house. She wore her cover-up with a towel tied around her waist. It was clear she was hesitant to step inside, though.

“If you could take these,” he said.

He grabbed as many hot dog and hamburger bun packages as he could hold and carried them over to her. Only as he got closer did he realize she might not have the capacity to carry that many.

Stepping back, she reached her hands out while holding the door open with her foot. He did his best to hand off the bread without dropping anything, but it wasn’t easy. And in the process, his fingers grazed her hands more than a couple of times.

Each touch, no matter how slight, seemed to send a shockwave through him.

Matt replaced her at the door, easily grabbing the handfuls Lucky handed over. Sam was behind him, followed by Brianna. Everyone wanted to help out. What did it say about Lucky that he was touched to have so many people eagerly pitching in? Maybe that he definitely needed to work less and socialize more.

He set the items he was carrying on the table while Denver rushed over to close the door. The next step was to shut off the waterfall. It was the second time in under a week he’d done that very thing. Maybe having people over could become a habit.

“Wow,” Matt said as Lucky returned to the table, sliding into the chair next to Jordan. “I didn’t realize how loud that was until it stopped.”

“We were yelling at each other the other day.” Maddie laughed. “You definitely don’t notice.”

“Maybe I’ll just get a waterfall for my backyard,” Matt said. “I don’t need the pool.”

“You could have a pond with a waterfall,” Lauralie said.

“Hey, what about that interior designer friend of yours?” Maddie asked. “Ana’s little sister.”

“Charity Ardmore?” Lucky asked.

“They lived down the street from us growing up,” Maddie explained to everyone else at the table.

“Didn’t you date one of those sisters?” Lauralie asked.

Lucky smiled. “No, that was Matt.”

He assumed everybody at the table knew that, but Jordan looked surprised. “Which one?” she asked.

“The model, of course,” Denver said, tossing a teasing stare in his friend’s direction. “Only the best for our Matt.”

“Not everyone can say they dated the mayor of Misty Mountain,” Sam joked.

Matt rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’m sure she has that on her list of credentials, along with the commercials she did for the major cosmetics manufacturer.”

“And walking in New York Fashion Week,” Brianna said.

“Plus, hosting her own show on one of the top cable networks,” Jordan said. “She’s the biggest celebrity to come out of this town, right?”

“Does that bother you?” Maddie asked. Her eyes immediately widened as she seemed to realize she’d put Jordan on the spot in front of everyone. “I mean, you know you could have easily done what she’s doing. You’re just as beautiful as she is and so talented.”

“Even more beautiful, I think,” Brianna said.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Jordan stared down at her plate. Lucky couldn’t help but notice she hadn’t taken a bite of her food yet. Everyone else was digging in. “Besides, it’s not just looks. She has that ‘it’ factor that makes someone a superstar. But I realized that sort of life wasn’t for me a long time ago. I love acting, but I don’t like the attention. And the idea of people snooping into my personal business gives me the creeps.”

“Definitely,” Lauralie stopped eating long enough to say. “That sounds like a horrible life. Photographers hiding out in trees outside your house, people constantly speculating over every single step you take. Just...no.”

“Ana always wanted to be famous,” Maddie said. “We’d put on these shows in her basement. Remember those?”

Lucky wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Maybe he could just crawl under the table or vanish into the swimming pool.

But the guys weren't going to let him off that easily. In fact, Matt and Sam exchanged a look, and that look said, "We have to give him a hard time over this."

They both had smiles on their faces as Matt said, "What kind of shows?"

"We had to follow Ana's instructions." Maddie twisted the cap on her water as she spoke. "She was a little...bossy."

Matt laughed, then seemed to catch himself as everybody turned to look at him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

Bossy was a good word for Ana Ardmore, but it was a compliment. Even as a teen, Ana had more confidence than any kid he knew. Maybe even compared to most adults. She knew what she wanted out of life and went for it. He had an appreciation for that. In fact, it seemed to be a character trait that was prized in men and not appreciated at all in women.

"We acted out scenes from movies and TV shows we liked," Lucky said. "I was the only guy in the group, so I had to play all the male roles. I finally figured out how to get out of it."

"He started having guy friends over more," Maddie said. "They wanted nothing more to do with him after that."

All those guy friends were gone now. It saddened Lucky more than a little. If they'd stuck around, he could see having get-togethers like this every summer. They could even bring their wives and kids.

Yes, some of them came home for holidays and reunions, and they'd hang out then. But it wasn't the same as having them around all the time.

"I was just thinking your interior decorator friend could help with your waterfall idea," Maddie said.

"She's an *interior* decorator," Denver pointed out. "That's the exterior."

Jordan looked over at Lucky. "I'm sure she could still do it, right?"

The respect he saw on her face warmed him more than he wanted to admit. "She might be able to offer advice," he said. "But I have a guy who can hook you up with something like that."

"The same person who did this?" Matt gestured toward Lucky's pool.

"No, that guy's out of Florida," Jordan said.

She looked down quickly, as though realizing she was speaking for Lucky like she knew as well as him. It was a very couple-like thing to do. Lucky liked it.

"Yeah, I know a local guy," Lucky said. "Well, if you consider Knoxville local. He could come give you a quote on something like this. It was the pool

that I had a hard time getting done locally. The prices are just way too high compared to what you'd pay in a more tropical location."

"It feels pretty tropical around here these days," Matt said. "But I get what you're saying. In this area, you only get four or five good months out of a pool. It's not necessarily a smart investment unless you just want one."

"I think I want one now." Maddie looked over toward the pool, her expression slightly dreamy. "To have a backyard oasis like this, even if you don't swim every day... It would be nice, right?"

"My future just got a lot more expensive." Denver narrowed his eyes at Lucky. "Thanks a lot, man." It was said in jest—the same teasing they'd done about his childhood torture sessions with Ana Ardmore and her sisters.

"Sorry," Lucky said with a laugh.

As they finished the meal and cleaned up, Lucky couldn't ignore the feeling that was settling over him. It was a sense of belonging—of being surrounded by people who wanted nothing from him but conversation and fun.

Yes, this was what he'd been missing for a long time. Maybe since high school. What he was trying to ignore, more than anything, was just how much the woman seated next to him contributed to that.

Jordan had never been much of a swimmer. In her younger years, she preferred to sit on a lounge chair and read. She'd get just enough sun for that slightly sun-kissed look, then retreat under an umbrella for the rest of the day.

But she had always enjoyed a good game. First, they'd played a few hyper-competitive rounds of pool volleyball, and now it was pool basketball. Lucky actually had a poolside hoop and ball that he kept in a small storage shed nearby. He'd tucked the volleyball net inside and switched it for the basketball hoop.

"Over here!" Denver shouted at Lucky, who had the ball.

Denver and Maddie were on their team, while Matt, Brianna, Sam, and Lauralie were the opposition. They'd been playing for at least an hour, maybe longer, and Jordan was trying to ignore how exhausted she was. She was having too much fun to stop.

Lucky aimed the ball in Denver's direction and boosted it upward. It arched through the air. Denver caught it with what seemed like very little effort, then aimed it at the hoop. With a *swoosh*, it went straight through.

"Yes!" Maddie called out as the moans and grunts of disappointment from the other team rang out.

That was the game.

Smiling, Jordan turned, preparing to walk toward the back of the group, but at some point, Lucky slipped in behind her. Her forward momentum slammed her straight into him before she could do a thing about it.

It seemed like a reflex for Lucky's arms to go around her while her hands

grabbed his upper arms to steady herself. Without even meaning to, they were in an embrace.

Time seemed to stand still as all of Jordan's senses went on alert. The feel of his muscle beneath her fingertips, the smell of chlorine that seemed to surround them, and the intensity in his stare as he looked down at her.

And then the sounds around them caught up to her, making her all too aware they weren't alone. Lucky seemed to have the same sudden awareness as his eyes widened and he lifted his gaze to something behind her, then looked back down at her again.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I didn't know you were coming back this way."

His tone was casual, but the intensity in his eyes remained. If there hadn't been people around, she would swear he might have lowered his head and given her the kiss of her life. For the second time.

"I'm okay," she somehow managed to force out.

"We have to go," a male voice called behind them, followed by the sound of sloshing water.

Jordan released her grip on Lucky's arms. Yes, it had become a grip. She was actually squeezing without realizing it. If he'd noticed, though, he hadn't said a word. Instead, he released his hands from behind her and stepped back.

Nothing to see here, folks. Just two people who accidentally collided.

Even *she* didn't believe that.

"We're having an early breakfast with the folks in the morning before church." Sam nodded toward Loralie. "We're going to call it an early night."

Lucky didn't buy that. Not for a second. It wasn't even dinnertime yet. They could hang out for several hours and still be in bed early. Besides, there was something they hadn't done yet. Something he'd planned to do after they finished playing...

"The dessert!" Lucky blurted out.

Jordan looked back at him, trying for a "don't worry about it" expression. It wasn't like she slaved over a hot stove for hours to make the key lime pie. It was a recipe her mom had shared a long time ago, and it was pretty much the easiest thing to make. Jordan's baking left something to be desired, but she was working on improving.

"We'll take a rain check," Maddie said.

She and Denver were heading out of the pool, followed by the other two couples. Everyone was leaving without even touching dessert. Was it

something personal?

No, Jordan knew better than that. After her collision with Lucky, she'd bet they were deliberately giving the two of them some alone time. They were leaving, whether or not they had a good excuse. It was touching but annoying, since the last thing Jordan wanted was for people to start assuming she and Lucky were anything more than client and employee.

"I guess it's just you and me for dessert," Lucky said.

She turned to look at him. At the side of the pool, their new friends were toweling off while standing in a circle, talking and laughing. She felt a little left out of all the fun. Maybe she should make an excuse to go over there. But she'd be lying if she said she'd rather be there than right here, standing in front of this man with his chiseled jaw and mesmerizing gray eyes.

"You can just save it for later," Jordan said.

"Oh, no." Lucky shook his head. "You're not leaving me with an entire pie to eat by myself. Get changed and meet me in the kitchen. Bring your sweet tooth."

Sweet tooth. Those two words echoed through her mind. It was the term she always used for herself, but there was no way Lucky could know that.

Jordan watched the rest of the crew disappear into the house, waving and calling out their goodbyes. Meanwhile, she took her time drying off, doing her best to make sure she wouldn't drip water from one end of his house to the other.

If she ever had a house with a swimming pool, she'd have an outdoor restroom. Or at least one with a door to the pool so soaked guests weren't tracking water everywhere.

Who was she kidding, though? She'd never have this kind of money unless she married a super wealthy guy, and that was very unlikely to happen. Aside from Lucky, the only other youngish guy she knew with money was Matt North, and he was not only taken but not her type at all.

"You don't have to do all that," Lucky said, coming up behind her.

He kept a respectful distance, grabbing one of the folded towels on a lounge chair four over from hers. He lifted it to his face first, drying it off before tackling his body. Jordan clutched her towel around her, covering herself from chest to mid-thigh, as she tried not to stare at him.

It was silly, she knew. All the other women here had proudly walked around in their swimsuits, but she felt on display. She hadn't noticed him checking her out or anything, but she still felt shy around him.

“I just don’t want to get water all over your house,” she said, turning back and grabbing a second towel.

Hoping the fastening she’d made of the towel by tucking one end into the wrap would hold, she used the other towel to pat some of the water out of her hair. That was where the biggest drips would come from.

“That’s why I have tile,” he said. “I knew I was going to put a pool back here, so I researched the best kind of flooring. Water mops right up.”

“But then you have to mop.”

He shook his head. “A cleaning lady comes in every morning while I’m at work, so I just have to soak up the biggest spots, and she makes it spotless.”

“A cleaning lady.” She sighed. “Now *that* would be nice.”

“Tell me about it. She does my laundry, cleans my dishes, even does my grocery shopping if I leave a list.” He looked over at the empty pool, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “I feel a little guilty, but I pay her well.”

She was all too aware she was staring at him as he dried off his arms, then wrapped the towel around his waist, looping it the same way she had. Stepping away from the lounge chair, she turned toward the door, eager to aim her gaze anywhere but at him.

“Ready to go inside?” he asked.

Right. She didn’t have to wait around for him. She was supposed to be inside, changing and meeting him in the kitchen later. He’d no doubt use the bathroom in his bedroom while she’d change in the guest bathroom he’d shown them. Nodding, she forced her feet to move, trying not to scrape the bottom of her feet on the concrete that surrounded the pool.

The house was quiet when she entered—quiet and super chilly. No surprise, considering she’d been out in the scorching heat for the past couple of hours. Anything below scorching would feel chilly right now.

Without even looking back to see if he’d followed, Jordan allowed the door to close behind her and headed straight for the bathroom. She walked far faster than she’d intended. Earlier, her tote bag had been on the floor with everyone else’s. Now it sat alone in a long hallway that had multiple doors.

The bathroom door was open, so she scooped up the tote bag and rushed inside, stopping to stare at herself in the mirror. A groan immediately escaped her. She was so not the type of person who could slick her hair back with no makeup and look great. Instead, she looked scary.

The good news was that she’d thought far enough ahead to slip a

cosmetics bag into her tote. She quickly removed her wet suit, slid it into the plastic bag she brought, zipped it up, and stuck it in her bag. Once she was fully dressed, she attacked her face with foundation, powder, and a light touch of mascara and eyeliner—just enough to make it look like this was how she woke up each morning.

Men always said they like a woman without a bunch of makeup, but in truth, they thought “natural” meant “flawless face and thick lashes.” She needed help to achieve that sort of look.

Glancing at her phone, Jordan’s eyes widened when she spotted the time. It was after six. How had it gotten so late? She’d come over in the early afternoon for what they’d termed lunch, but it had been a little on the late side for that. The plan had been to eat, swim, and be on her way home by now.

But she had no reason to rush out of here. Nothing was waiting for her but her empty cabin. She didn’t even have a pet. That was part of her future dream of a family and a white picket fence.

Somehow, she managed to make herself look decent. Maybe it was the time she’d spent outdoors that day, but she actually had a bit of a glow. She used her fingers to scrunch her hair, hoping to bring out the natural wave. More humidity could be a good thing for her hair, and tonight was an example of that.

Finally, she stepped back, took a deep breath, and stared at herself again. She should not be putting this much time and work into looking good so she could eat a piece of pie with her boss’s client.

Shaking her head at how ridiculous she was being, Jordan shoved everything back into her tote bag, slung it over her shoulder, and headed out, doing everything she could to keep her stride confident. Her knees were still shaky, though. That much was clear when she stepped into the living room and spotted him over in the kitchen area, standing on the other side of the island. He was staring down at his phone, and the pie she’d brought was next to him. He’d pulled it out of the refrigerator, along with some whipped cream, plates, and two glasses.

“Sorry I took a few extra minutes,” she said, not offering further explanation because...what could she say?

He looked up, his expression a little dazed as he took her in. He then set down his phone and stepped back. He’d put on a T-shirt and some shorts, pairing them with the baseball cap he wore a lot. It bore his construction company logo.

“No problem,” he said. “I have some milk...or water if you’d prefer.”

“Water will be fine.”

She set her tote bag on the floor next to the couch and walked that way. Yes, her knees were definitely still shaky. She just hoped he didn’t notice.

While he was still facing away from her, filling two glasses with ice and water, she climbed up on one of the stools on her side of the island. It had a back, so at least once she was seated, she could settle in and balance herself.

“Did you know they think key lime pie was invented by fishermen?” Lucky asked, turning and setting the glasses on the island. He slid one over to her. “They made it using rations found on their ship.”

“Really?” She eyed the pie. She’d never heard that before. “You don’t think of fishermen being bakers.”

“Apparently, one of the fishermen had a cook who perfected the recipe,” Lucky said.

“Did you know there are two ways to get to Key West, and both are a little precarious?” she asked. “One’s a two-lane road on a bridge that runs almost seven miles. The other is by plane, where you land on a really short runway.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” he said.

“I agree.” She smiled. “It’s definitely a bucket list item for me.”

He frowned at her, staring at her face and making her grateful she’d taken a little extra time with her makeup. “Aren’t you a little young for a bucket list?”

Flashing her a smile, he headed over to a drawer near the refrigerator. His smile stuck with her, though, as she struggled for words that would keep the conversation on track. There had been something flirtatious about it. A teasing glint in his eye. Had she imagined it? Maybe not, but flirting didn’t mean romantic interest. People flirted all the time—even contractors and clients.

“You’re never too young to have a bucket list,” Jordan forced out.

The words came out a little strangled. Hopefully, he didn’t notice.

“I plan to take a Mediterranean cruise,” she continued, staring straight ahead to try to refocus on the conversation. “Zipline over the treetops in Costa Rica and take one of those boats around Niagara Falls—”

“Maid of the Mist,” he said, turning back around. He had a butter knife in one hand and a pie spatula in the other. “I saw that on a sitcom once.”

She nodded. “I guess that’s what it’s called. I’m sure I’ll add more things

to the list as I get older.”

And have children, she silently added. If there was one thing she'd learned early on in life, it was never to mention wanting children in front of a guy she was dating.

Not that she was dating Lucky. Or interested in him.

Okay, maybe she was a little interested in him. More than a little...

“I need one of those,” he said.

He lifted the top of the two small plates and handed it to her. She set it in front of her, then reached out for the pie server.

“One of what?” she asked.

She'd gotten a little distracted with thoughts of not being interested in the man in front of her—a man with a smile that would probably haunt her thoughts, both waking and sleeping, for months, if not years.

“A bucket list,” he said. “It's kind of like a retirement plan. It's better to start early. If you wait too long, you run out of time.”

“That's an interesting comparison.”

She mulled it over as she grabbed the knife and cut a generous slice for him, expertly scooping it from the pie pan and setting it on the plate closest to her. Then she handed that plate to him.

“That was supposed to be your plate,” he said.

“I gave you the biggest slice.” She grabbed the second plate.

“Um, no you don't.” Lucky shook his head. “You have to have an equally big slice. Unless you really don't like pie...”

The hand holding the knife froze as Jordan lifted her head to look at him. That glint had returned to his eye, but this time, it seemed to be a daring look instead of a flirtatious one.

“That should be on your bucket list,” he said.

Jordan couldn't help but smile at that. “I'm not sure you understand how bucket lists work.”

“Maybe not, but what's the fun of denying yourself something you really want?”

He was talking about pie, but her mind had immediately gone to kissing him. If they were talking about things they were denying themselves, that would be at the top of her list. It was also something that was bad for her, just as eating three pieces of pie would spike her blood sugar, then cause a crash a little later.

Yes, kissing him might not physically harm her the way too much sugar

would, but she'd end up heartbroken. She did not want to have her heart broken.

“So, what’s on your bucket list?” She cut a slice that was smaller than his but bigger than she might have cut without his urging.

“Is it bad that mine all have to do with business?” he asked, handing her a fork.

She took it and set it on the plate. Then she fastened the cover back on top of the container her mom had given her for Christmas last year. Her mother was always handing things off to Jordan, claiming she didn’t want them anymore, but Jordan knew better. She was just making sure her daughter had a fully stocked kitchen.

“Bucket list items should be personal,” Jordan said. “You can have a bucket list for your business, of course, but those are called goals.”

Lucky held his fork and stared off to the side thoughtfully. She could tell she’d given him food for thought. Meanwhile, she picked up her fork and started to dig in.

“Wait!” He reached out his hand, touching her left wrist. The contact sent shivers up her arm. “Whipped cream.”

He looked down at his hand as he pulled it back. She told herself to say something, to make a move to let him know that brief contact had been no big deal. But it had been a very, very big deal to her.

He reached for the whipped cream, but there was a spoon on top that he seemed to forget about. As he lifted the lid, it landed on the counter with a loud *clank*.

“I can get another one,” he said.

“No, it’s fine.” She smiled. “Your cleaning woman seems to keep these counters squeaky clean.”

“I get some of the credit, too. I did a quick cleanup before you all came over today.”

Jordan smiled, grabbing the handle of the spoon he held out for her. Their hands didn’t touch that time, but she was still shaken from the previous contact. He slid the whipped cream toward her, and she scooped out a small portion—much smaller than she would if she was sitting here alone.

“Bucket list,” he said as though that should remind her to indulge.

She still smiled at his misuse of the term, but she scooped out a much more generous portion. By the time that second scoop hit her pie, it had more whipped cream than even her sweet tooth would have wanted.

Once she was finished, Jordan set the spoon inside and slid the container over to him, avoiding contact. No need to get all rattled again. She'd finally calmed her racing heart.

"So, I need a personal bucket list?" Lucky asked. "Does it have to be places I want to travel?"

She shook her head. "No, just things you want to do before you die."

"That's kind of morbid." He made a face as he snapped the lid back on the whipped cream and set the spoon on top. "I want to see every Marvel movie ever made."

She nearly choked on the bite of pie she'd just taken. "Marvel movies?" she asked. "Does that include the remakes and the originals?"

"They're all remakes, aren't they?" Lucky frowned. "Remakes of the original comic books, right?"

"So, you're a comic book fan?" She definitely wouldn't have taken him for that. But she had a stereotype of comic book fans that was probably grossly inaccurate. "That's something I didn't know about you."

"Not at all." He shook his head. "But I do like the movies."

"Well, good." She sliced off another small bite of pie and ran her fork through the mountain of whipped cream to get just the right ratio. "You've already seen some of the movies, which means part of your bucket list is complete. I would say movies and books count, but it's better to do something that has you seeing new places and meeting new people."

"I have to go to the movie theater in Knoxville to catch the newest Marvel movies," Lucky said. "Doesn't that count as seeing new places? Maybe I could go to a different theater in a different town."

Jordan shook her head, holding in a laugh. "Nope. There's nothing wrong with living through entertainment, but isn't there a place you want to see? Another part of the world?"

The bites of key lime pie he was slicing off were much bigger than hers, she couldn't help but notice. Although he did have a significantly smaller portion of whipped cream on each bite.

"I guess I haven't stopped to think about it," he said. "I've been so busy building my business, I'm afraid to stop for a vacation. Things might fall apart."

So, he was a workaholic. She hated to label someone, but it sounded like he was pretty aware of it himself.

"The thing about work is if you die tomorrow, your clients will eventually

move on and find other contractors,” she said. “Your employees will be sad, but they’ll have to get other jobs. The people who will truly miss you are your friends and family.”

He set his fork down and turned, walking over to the same area where he’d gotten the pie server and knife. He pulled two sheets of paper towel off a roll and came back, handing her one.

“I’ve been all too aware of that,” Lucky said as he settled back in front of his pie, grabbing a fork. “That’s part of the reason I wanted to have this pool party today. My sister and I have kind of grown apart over time. We see each other for holidays, but every year, I’m aware just how little we know each other these days. Now that she has a boyfriend and will probably be getting married, I’ve started thinking I may be an uncle in the next few years.”

Jordan’s breath caught in her throat. Was this where he’d reveal his excitement over being an uncle someday? Maybe he’d say it would be good practice for when he finally was a father.

A grin spread across his face, and he stared dreamily off into the distance. At that point, she was sure that was exactly what he’d say. But instead, he gave a shrug and looked down at the remaining slice of pie in front of him.

“I guess that’s my biggest bucket list item,” he said. “Be the best uncle I can be. Show my nephews and nieces all the fun things I saw and did as a kid. It’s pretty exciting when you think about it.”

Yes, it was exciting, but it was the way she felt about being a mom someday. And that was something that was non-negotiable.

She was thirty years old and couldn’t afford to waste precious months chasing after the wrong guy. If Lucky was putting all his future goals into the uncle bucket, she had to keep herself on the path of just being his work colleague.

No matter how tough it was.

Lucky remembered the last time he'd been called to Town Hall. He'd had no idea what was going on that night, but he'd been told it was important. Thinking it might affect his business, Lucky had squeezed into the crowded room and waited while Matt North rolled out some announcement about a citywide book club.

He'd love to kick back with a book. The closest he got to relaxing was hanging out on his back patio with his laptop, catching up on work.

Tonight, he had no choice but to show up for the meeting at Town Hall. This time, his business would be affected by the discussion. Still, he was a little annoyed when he had to park at the law office across the street from the square—even when he got lucky enough to grab one of the last few parking spaces there. Apparently, tonight's meeting was attracting a crowd.

He hopped out and wove his way through the rows of cars toward the square. Town Hall was at the corner, so at least he wouldn't have to walk as far as if he'd been going to the candy shop or the old bookstore. Those weren't really on the square as much as on one of the streets that jutted off from it.

He was so lost in his thoughts, it took Lucky a second to register the cobalt blue sedan pulling into the lot. He knew that car. In fact, at the sight of it, his heart skipped a beat. That was Jordan Strongblossom's car.

She braked as she pulled in, pausing to stare at him. He pointed to the left, where there were a couple of remaining spots near where he'd parked. It would save her at least a minute or so of aimless driving.

As she gave him a nod and started in that direction, Lucky looked around.

He should wait, right? Yes, he should definitely wait. He'd thought about asking her to carpool from the theater, but she'd been holed up in her office, working hard all day, and besides, he wasn't sure what time he'd be able to break away from work. But he'd been well aware that her car was gone from the lot when he cut out just fifteen minutes ago.

Cars whizzed by on the strip next to Lucky as he stood, trying to slow his hammering heart. They'd have to cross that extremely busy road to get to Town Hall.

Then Jordan came into view, and he forgot all about the traffic just steps away. She wasn't wearing the jeans and floral blouse she'd had on at work. Instead, she wore a fancy skirt suit—the kind he'd expect to see on the lawyers around here as they rushed to the courthouse. She even wore heels. That was something he definitely wouldn't recommend for rushing across this busy main road.

He looked down at his jeans and Lucky Howard Construction T-shirt. He probably even had some dust in his hair. Usually, he wore a baseball cap at work, but he knew he was coming here tonight and wouldn't have time for a shower in between. The last thing he wanted was to show up with hat hair.

“Should I go home and change?” he asked.

“You look fine.”

Her words drifted through the air toward him as he was lifting his head to look at her. By then, she was within a few feet and had slowed her steps.

Fine. That wasn't the word he wanted to hear from her. You look nice, handsome, hot... That was how he wanted Jordan Strongblossom to see him, even if she didn't say those words to his face.

“I just might be a little underdressed.” He shifted his stare toward their destination, angling his body in that direction and away from her.

“You look like you've been working hard all day,” she said. “And I mean that in a nice way. That's exactly how they should see you. Let's go.”

She took off at a fairly brisk pace, but his longer legs allowed him to catch up with her in just a few steps. And then they were at the main road. As a car sped by, he reached out, his hand landing on her right shoulder blade. It was a reflex—a protective move—but once his hand was there, he felt weird about moving it. Would that call too much attention to the fact that his hand was on her?

A break in traffic finally came, and he dropped his hand and started across, looking both ways despite the fact that the only cars visible were way

off in the distance. They had plenty of time. But he felt the need, more than usual, to safely look both ways for vehicles.

It was an unfamiliar feeling. Yes, he looked out for the guys on his crew, and when he spent time around his parents, he did everything he could to take care of them, as well as his little sister. But this was different—this need to protect the woman who was with him. It was far stronger than anything he'd felt before.

“Wait!” she said once they had both feet safely planted on the sidewalk on the other side of Misty Mountain's main road. “We need a master plan.”

Lucky turned and looked at her. They were on display to anyone who passed by, and there were no doubt some locals passing by right now, possibly looking for a parking spot. In fact, he heard the gentle hum of a car motor behind them and knew someone was turning right onto the square, probably in a fruitless search for parking.

“We go in and hear what they have to say,” Lucky said.

That was common sense. The truth was, they were both running a little late, so the meeting would probably be underway when they arrived. That was by design—at least on his part. He was hoping to slip in unnoticed and only speak up if the situation called for it.

She shook her head. “I don't think it's going to be that easy.”

She wore sunglasses, so he couldn't see her eyes. He wished he could see her eyes. Was she looking at him or off in the distance? He couldn't tell.

“I heard someone's going to call on one of us to speak,” she said. “Maybe we should go up together. I don't have anything prepared, do you?”

Oh. No, he didn't. It hadn't even occurred to him that the two of them might be part of the agenda. Nobody had mentioned it.

“I say we field questions.” He shrugged. “I don't have anything to hide, do you?”

“Except for the fact that I'm not the one making the decisions,” Jordan said. “The decision maker doesn't even know this meeting's happening.”

That was news to him. “You didn't tell him?”

She shook her head. “I figured I'd scope things out, see if there was any real danger. Maybe we can head things off at the pass.”

“But he might have wanted to come speak,” Lucky said.

He'd assumed since the day had gone by without him hearing a word about it, she'd broken the news to her boss, and he'd told her to handle it. Or he hadn't cared at all. Jim had so many irons in the fire, it was highly likely

he wouldn't care when he did hear about it.

"He wouldn't have been able to make it, anyway," she said. "He's busy with whatever he's doing in Texas."

Texas. Yeah, Jim had said something about expanding there. Had he mentioned that to Jordan?

It sounded like Jim's mention of franchising the dinner theater wasn't just a pipe dream. In fact, that was no doubt exactly where he was right now. But he hadn't thought to clue Jordan in on any of it. Typical.

"Let's just do our best," he said. "But we have to show a united front. We're not working together to defraud the town. We're working together to carry out the wishes of the owner."

Jordan jumped in. "Who seems to know what's best for his theater?"

"Exactly."

Movement out of the corner of his eye told Lucky that Gavin Mundy was rushing across the street, avoiding traffic like the two of them had done. The last thing Lucky wanted to do was get into a conversation with Gavin. He was a numbers guy. He'd probably have statistics on how the theater change would affect crime in town. It was best that he didn't know those facts before he faced everyone.

"Come on." Without even thinking about it, Lucky reached out and grabbed Jordan's hand, urging her to walk at a fast pace.

He was aware of what he'd done immediately, but he didn't want to make a big deal out of it, so he continued to hold her hand. Finally, he released it, but only once they were safely standing on the sidewalk in front of Town Hall.

"Let's do this," Jordan said with confidence. She walked straight toward the door without even looking back.

He would have grabbed the door for her, but she already had it open by the time he got to her. The noise drifted out to him, though. Someone was yelling loudly. That was the unmistakable voice of Betty Jenkins.

Eyes wide, he stepped inside and found Jordan standing just inside the door. She had removed the sunglasses, and the surprise in her eyes reflected exactly how he felt. Yes, it had seemed to hit her what was happening, too.

Betty Jenkins was one of her mom's two closest friends. The three of them did everything together. They'd seemed to be attached at the hip since childhood. If one of them was upset about something, the other two would be, as well.

As he followed Jordan into the building, Lucky heard footsteps behind him. That would be Gavin, no doubt. Gavin, the guy who'd probably spotted the two of them holding hands as they walked up the sidewalk. But while Gavin could be a bit annoying, he was not a gossip. In fact, he seemed to have no interest in the personal lives of the people around him. That would work in their favor, hopefully.

If Lucky had hoped to slip in quietly, he was sorely disappointed. When he stepped in to stand next to Jordan, he was met with a roomful of people, all of whom had shifted in their seats to stare back at him.

Maybe that was in response to Mrs. Jenkins, who now stood glaring at the two of them, arms crossed over her chest. That made him aware that they were on full display where they stood now.

Lucky did his part to move away from the spotlight, scooting off to the side and hoping Jordan would follow him. He didn't mean to strand her over there. Surely, she didn't like the attention. But no, she and Mrs. Jenkins were having a stare-off.

It seemed to work. Within a couple of seconds, Jordan's mom stood and headed to join Mrs. Jenkins at the front of the room.

"I think it needs to be mentioned that my daughter and Mr. Howard are just doing their jobs. Jim Jasper is the real enemy here."

That shifted the attention back to the front of the room. The people who'd twisted in their seats to gawk at the two of them now shifted back around. Behind Jordan, the door squeaked open again, and in walked Gavin, file folder in hand.

"I have some numbers when you're ready," Gavin said, nodding in several directions. He then scooted around Jordan and took a seat in the back row.

That was a good idea. Lucky scanned the area. Gavin had taken the seat on the end, which would have been perfect for the two of them. He didn't want to shuffle past the guy to get to the empty seats between him and the other end of the row. But on the other side of the aisle and three rows up were some empty chairs at the end.

He headed in that direction, making a movement with his head as he passed Jordan. "Follow me," the head movement said. She was, of course, free to continue to stand back there, and she very well could have. Right now, he preferred to take the attention off the two of them if possible. And sitting seemed to be the best way to do that.

Scooting into the row, Lucky chose the chair three over from the end, giving Jordan the option to leave an empty space between them if she wanted. That was exactly what she did. By the time she sat down on the end chair, her mom had started speaking again.

“We can never forget the true people who run the tourist trade in this town,” Mrs. Strongblossom said.

Tourist trade. That made it sound evil. Did he need to point out that the “tourist trade” powered this town? There had never been a big job market around here, and they were too far from Knoxville to be a bedroom community.

“That’s a bit extreme,” Mrs. Trapp, the third part of the trio, said.

She stood in the aisle and turned to face all of them. She didn’t join her two friends at the front just yet, but that didn’t stop her from speaking her mind.

“Many of us owe our livelihood to people like Jim Jasper,” she said. “This town is becoming more popular with tourists, but we’re stuck. Our local population is dying. Young people are moving away once they’re old enough. If we want our kids and grandkids to have a future here, we need to let people like Jim Jasper bring us into this century.”

Lucky and Jordan exchanged a look. This was the first time in his thirty-one years that he’d personally witnessed the three women at odds. They seemed to do everything together, but who knew what happened when they weren’t out in public like this? Maybe they fought all the time.

“That’s not entirely true.”

Those words came from behind Lucky. Like everyone else, he twisted in his chair to look. It was Gavin, and once he was aware everyone was staring at him, he stood. His hands trembled as he pried apart the two sides of the manila folder and pulled out a sheet.

“This town had a population of a little over five thousand at the last census. In the past few years, we’ve grown to five thousand eight hundred and twenty-three full-time residents to date. Those are estimates. We don’t have an updated census yet, but that growth is notable.”

He looked up and scanned the room while still managing to avoid eye contact with anyone in particular. Everyone was staring at him, though.

“This town has always lost graduates, but we’re gaining twenty- and thirty-somethings,” Gavin said. “They’re people like me, living in the cabins up in the mountains, loving being out in nature. I would have chosen

somewhere else to live after college graduation, but when it came time to apply for work, I didn't have to move away. I got a job working for a company in Boston that's perfectly fine with me working from home."

Remote work. Yes, Lucky knew for a fact that Misty Mountain was drawing more of those types. There were even some retired tech entrepreneurs who'd earned a ton on their investments and retired to the mountains. One even lived sustainably, generating his own electricity and water. Lucky didn't know the guys personally—but he considered them neighbors and waved as he passed them coming up and down the mountain.

"That's what you people don't get!" Mrs. Jenkins shouted. No doubt she hadn't meant to shout—she'd felt the need to get her point across. "These newcomers come here for the peace and quiet mountain life brings. Misty Mountain has long struck a balance between providing a peaceful vacation away from all of life's stresses and giving people places to eat and have fun while they're in town."

"This is a remodel of an existing business," Jordan's mom said. "You act like they're building an entire entertainment complex right in the middle of town."

"It's a concert venue," Mrs. Trapp said. Apparently, she was on Mrs. Jenkins' side.

"Excuse me."

That came from Jordan. Surprised, Lucky looked to his left and found her pushing herself to her feet. He'd have her back, but he wasn't going to jump in unless either she asked him to or it seemed necessary. This was her business. She might not own it, but she ran it, and she put in the majority of the work on the place.

"I think maybe some people are misunderstanding what this place is going to be," Jordan said.

"Come on up here," Mrs. Strongblossom said, gesturing for her daughter to move forward.

Jordan's mom turned back toward her friends, which meant nobody in the audience could see her face, but it must have been a pretty powerful look. Both her friends shuffled back to their seats while Mrs. Strongblossom gave her daughter a nod and a smile, then joined them.

Others might not notice the slight wobble in Jordan's walk, but Lucky did. She was taking on the entire town—or at least those who'd shown up to oppose what was happening.

“There’s a proposed entertainer for the Christmas season,” Jordan said. “That artist will likely change every few months, maybe more often. These are musicians who appeal to an older audience. We’re not talking rock stars who will draw a bunch of young people to town.”

“Can we request singers we want?” Sid Renner called out.

Sid was one of the town’s many retirees. He worked for the courts until a decade or so ago. These days, he sat around complaining on social media all day, every day.

“You certainly can,” Jordan said. “The truth is, we don’t know for sure how these changes will affect the town, but I assure you, we won’t be appealing to some sort of criminal element. The people who visit will be people just like you and me. People who love a good show by an artist who knows how to make good music.”

Lucky narrowed his eyes. That was an interesting description. He wouldn’t say Eileen Montgomery had more talent than the musicians on the radio today. In fact, her music was marginal. But Jordan’s words seemed to appeal to the crowd all around him. He saw nods and exchanged murmurs. The “today’s music isn’t what it used to be” sentiment was definitely the right way to go with this crowd.

“That’s just what they want you to believe.” Mrs. Jenkins said, pushing herself to her feet. “Don’t buy it for a second. Jim Jasper has been selling us this bill of goods for years. He’s the one that got us in the mess we’re in now.”

Mess? Lucky didn’t consider this town a mess. Gavin had just pointed out that more people were moving here. The downtown area might be struggling, with the bookstore closing and the candy shop not exactly drawing in tourists in droves, but Lucky had never been busier. That wasn’t the kind of progress people like Mrs. Jenkins and Sid Renner wanted to hear about, though.

“I move that we put a pause on construction until the town can vote on what’s right,” Sid yelled out. “Where’s the mayor? How do we make that happen?”

“I’m right here,” Matt stood. He was on the front row. He nodded to Jordan, then turned to face Sid. “That’s not exactly how things are done. The city council approved the construction. The building already exists, and Jim Jasper owns it. He’s free to remodel and change it as he sees fit.”

“What about traffic?” Mrs. Jenkins asked. “There has to be some sort of traffic study on how this is going to increase the mess coming through town,

especially on weekends.”

“We have a maximum capacity,” Jordan said. “It’s never changed. We regularly sold out before this change, and it didn’t affect traffic that much.”

“I beg to differ,” Nancy Chesney said. “I’ve been stuck in that mess more times than I can count. Not to mention the traffic leading to all the new restaurants and shops in town.”

There weren’t that many restaurants and shops—not nearly enough to satisfy large crowds of vacationers looking for something to do. It was still a small town that attracted people who wanted a getaway.

But yes, there were definitely more attractions and restaurants than there had been when he was a kid. And traffic had increased, for sure.

“I say we protest,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “If you don’t want to hear our complaints here, then we’ll keep shouting until someone listens.”

At some point, Mrs. Jenkins had stood and was now facing the mayor, but she wasn’t the only one. Across the crowd, people were on their feet, and now even more rose.

Then came shouting, and eventually the group at large, yelling, “No more construction, no more construction!”

At some point, Jordan slipped into the aisle and stood at the end of the row, looking at Lucky. He scanned the area and gave her a nod.

Then, without a word, the two of them left the building—and the angry, shouting townspeople. The problem wasn’t solved, but sometimes, walking away was the best course of action.

Jordan stood on the stage at what was once called Misty Mountain Music, her laptop clutched to her chest. With everything happening these days, she felt at home here, on this stage. In fact, if she could just move her desk here and work, it would ease her mind a *lot*.

“Ready?”

She heard Lucky’s voice but didn’t see him at first. He was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, but the way the light shone in from the windows behind him, she couldn’t make out his expression. She just knew the set of those shoulders and that confident but casual stance.

“I suppose.” She sighed and looked down at the laptop.

They were supposed to jump on a video chat with her boss and explain all the stuff that had happened at Town Hall last night. But to say she was dreading it would be the understatement of the year.

He stepped into the room. “You did a great job last night. I have your back. If he gives you a hard time, we’ll remind him that we’re just the messengers.”

He had her back. They were doing this together. These were the words she needed to hear right now.

“Where do you want to set up?” he asked, starting toward her.

It was weird with the big, empty room and no seats. She was used to looking out over tables and chairs—or in other theaters, rows of chairs—when she stood on a stage. There should be an audience in front of her, even if the seats were empty. Everything was on hold. Lucky had sent his crew out on other jobs until they got the word from Jordan’s boss.

“We can set up backstage if you want,” she said. “I just wanted to take a few minutes up here. It’s weird, but I feel safe on this stage.”

Lucky had stopped in the middle of the room to stare at her. Maybe he sensed she was about to reveal something important about herself. Or maybe he was respectfully giving her a minute to work through whatever she was feeling up here. That was what her acting teachers would have done back in the day.

“I had my first kiss up here,” she said. “I was only fourteen.”

“Fourteen?” The incredulity came through in his voice.

“It wasn’t a real kiss. It was a stage kiss.”

“What does that even mean?” He tilted his head slightly, eyeing her quizzically. “Closed mouth?”

A laugh escaped her lips. “Not even that. In this case, because I was so young, they had him put his thumb over my lips and kiss his thumb.”

Lucky made a face, and that face echoed exactly how she felt about it at the time. Night after night, she had to pretend to go all swoony over a sixteen-year-old boy kissing his thumb while it rested over her lips. It had been beyond weird.

“Is that how all stage kisses go?” he asked.

“Not usually,” she said. “But they’re never as romantic as the real thing.”

The air in the room seemed to suddenly get heavier as her gaze landed on his face. She hadn’t meant to bring up the topic of kissing right now. They needed to stay focused on work stuff. But all of a sudden, all she could think about was what it would be like to kiss him.

“Show me,” he said.

There was no air left in her lungs. She tried, with all her might, to find words, but none came.

And then he was walking toward the stage, his gaze not straying from her face as he moved. He climbed the three steps and reached out. It took her a few seconds to realize he expected her to hand him the laptop.

Yeah, if they were going to kiss, the laptop had to go. But they weren’t going to kiss. She was going to demonstrate a stage kiss. It was two different things.

Lucky set the laptop on the ground next to them and straightened, looking down at her. Suddenly, she felt lightheaded. In fact, all the blood may have left her head altogether.

“Show me the stage kiss,” he said, probably because she looked like

she'd forgotten the original goal.

Somehow, she found words, even as he took a step closer to her. "There are a couple of ways to do it. There's the thumb method I mentioned, then there's kissing slightly to the right of the lips, but that only works if the audience is right over there. The closed-mouth stage kiss is the most popular, both for screen and stage. It looks good, but it's anything but enjoyable."

"How could a kiss not be enjoyable?" he asked.

"Well, for one, there are a bunch of people watching." She gestured toward the empty area where the audience would normally be. "If it's on camera, there's an entire crew on the other side of the equipment, not to mention all the people who'll be watching when it's finally edited together. Besides, you're usually thinking more about how it looks than how it feels. How it feels is...awkward."

"What if you have feelings for the person you're kissing?" he asked. "That happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"It's still not the same."

She took a deep breath and thought for a minute. How did she explain this, especially when she was having trouble forming thoughts with him so close?

"It's something actors have to explain all the time to significant others," she said. "You're in character, so it's the character doing the kiss. Besides, when you've rehearsed it over and over, with the director shouting 'more this' and 'more that,' it...loses even the slightest scrap of romance it might have had."

And that was the best way she could describe it. But instead of responding, he took another step closer to her. He wanted her to show him.

But when she looked up at him, she saw that intensity in his eyes again. That wouldn't happen in a production. If it did, she'd have to set clear boundaries, but it never had. She'd been lucky enough to have only worked with actors who showed pure professionalism, start to finish.

"With stage kisses, it's all about anticipation," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "You slowly move together, drawing it out...like...this."

With each word, she moved a little closer to his face. When she lowered her stare to his mouth, he moved closer, too. She felt the audience watching, holding its collective breath as they sensed the chemistry zinging back and forth between the two people in front of them.

All this worked better onscreen. Stage kisses weren't nearly as

swoonworthy, but she didn't tell him any of that. She couldn't speak. It took everything she had to stay upright as their mouths inched closer and closer.

Closed mouth. Chaste. Stage kiss.

She repeated those words over and over again as they closed the short space remaining between them. But his lips were already parting, and who was she to say something about that?

When they finally connected, any remaining thoughts fled. This was not a stage kiss. It was the kind of kiss that took her breath. His hand settled in the small of her back, and he pulled her toward him, holding her in that way she'd dreamed of so many times. But this wasn't a dream. It was reality...and it was beyond anything she could've imagined.

Finally, he pulled back and looked down at her. That intensity in his eyes had only increased, and he seemed just as breathless as she was. His chest rose and fell in quick, short bursts.

"Maybe we should try that again," he said. "I'm not sure—"

She cut him off by rising on tiptoe and pressing her lips to his again. If an audience were watching this, it would definitely be swoonworthy. This was the kind of chemistry that casting directors screen-tested for days to find.

They were a good minute into the second kiss when Jordan's back jeans pocket buzzed. It wasn't just the sensation, either. The zzzzz sound filled the air, making it impossible to ignore.

And she so wanted to ignore it.

But he stepped back, breaking the kiss and looking down at her. "Do you need to get that?"

No. She wanted to say no, but she was technically on the job. Even though the two of them were in the building alone, her sense of responsibility wouldn't let her blow off work because she'd rather be kissing her boss's hunky client in the middle of the morning on a workday.

So, she reluctantly dropped her arms to her sides and stepped back, which forced his arms away from her and back to his sides. She already missed his embrace, but when she pulled the phone out of her pocket and glanced at the screen, those thoughts fled.

Yep, it was her boss. She tossed Lucky a regretful glance, then tapped on the screen to answer the call. "This is Jordan," she said in her most professional tone.

"Hey, Jordan, it's Jim. I've got a few minutes to chat if you do."

She looked over at Lucky, who'd stepped over to where he'd set the

laptop and swept it up. Then, he gestured toward the backstage area. The same backstage area where they'd shared lunch on the first day of working together. She'd requested this video call by text, so it wasn't like the interruption was unexpected.

"Sure," Jordan said as she turned and headed in that direction.

Her legs were more than trembling now. They felt as weak and flimsy as spaghetti noodles. Like they might collapse underneath her weight. But her boss's brusque, overbearing tone helped ground her somewhat.

"I've been hearing some things from locals," Jim said. "Things I don't like. Videoconference me once you're back at your desk."

Jordan opened her mouth to respond, but she should have known better. The connection was already cut. She pulled the phone away from her face and saw the screen was clearly dark.

Sighing, she walked the rest of the way to the table. She slid two chairs together while Lucky opened the laptop and centered it between where they would sit.

"Ready for this?" she asked, sinking down into the chair.

She stopped to adjust the lid of the laptop so that both of them would be in the shot. The seats were lower than she would have liked, but this was the best place to do this.

Only after she'd pulled up the app and activated the camera did Jordan realize the lighting back here left a lot to be desired. They would have been better off squeezing behind her desk in her office. But she'd brought the laptop this way because this was her safe space. This was where she felt most comfortable.

If her boss cared about her location, he didn't show it. Not that he'd have room to talk. It was immediately clear both from the background and the noise that he was sitting in a franchise coffee shop—the same type of shop Jordan had avoided when she was looking for a quiet place to work.

This was going to be a challenge.

"What's going on over there?" Jim yelled, squinting at the screen.

If he thought talking to her over video chat would give him a visual update on things, he was wrong. Just two people sitting backstage in an empty theater.

Jordan decided to cut to the chase. "There was a town hall meeting last night. Some people are protesting the changes you're making to Misty Mountain Music."

“Mountaintop Entertainment,” he said.

Even in the small square she occupied on the screen, Jordan saw herself jump a little at that. “Is that the new name?”

Stupid question, she knew, but she had to ask. Mostly, she was prompting him for more information.

“That’s my business name for the whole franchise,” he said. “Each location will have the name of the town and the word ‘tonight’ at the end. Right now, I’m working on Fort Worth Tonight. Cross your fingers it goes through.”

So, he was franchising Misty Mountain Music. Only it wasn’t going to be Misty Mountain Music. The thing that bothered her most about it all was that he felt no need to loop her in on this.

“Lucky should have filled you in on the details.” Jim waved his hand in front of the screen dismissively. “I don’t really have time to discuss it right now. I need to know what we’re fighting at Town Hall. Should I get the mayor on the phone?”

Silence followed. Clearly, he was waiting for her response, but Jordan was having a tough time processing the information he’d just thrown at her—primarily the fact that he told Lucky this stuff and not her. And Lucky hadn’t shared it with her despite being expected to.

She might have no right to feel betrayed, but she did. The man seated next to her owed her nothing, but he’d just kissed her for the second time in history. That meant something, didn’t it?

“We’re handling it,” Lucky said.

Jordan’s eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t respond. She resisted the urge to look over at Lucky, continuing to keep her gaze glued to the screen.

“It doesn’t sound like you have it under control at all.” Jim leaned forward and narrowed his eyes at the screen. “Where are we with the construction?”

That was Lucky’s domain. Jordan sat back in her chair to indicate he was free to take the lead on the conversation. “That’s what I need to talk to you about,” Lucky said. “Do we need to plow forward, or should we put a pause on things until we’re sure what the mayor is going to do?”

Jordan knew the answer to that even before he spoke. She’d worked with Jim long enough. She’d known it all along, actually, but she felt the need to clear it with him first. That way, if the whole thing was shot down, her boss couldn’t blame her for okaying the construction continuing. After all, the

deeper they got into this, the more they'd lose if they had to leave the theater like it was.

"Let's get going," Jim said. "Time's a-wasting."

"There's a bit of an electrical issue," Lucky said.

"Electrical issue?" Jim boomed, his big smile crumbling. "What do you mean?"

Lucky went into extreme detail on the wiring in the auditorium. It was far more technical than either she or Jim needed, but her boss did a good job pretending he knew what Lucky was talking about. He had a habit of continuing his know-it-all attitude, even in the face of a subject he barely comprehended.

"I'll make some calls," Jim said. "We'll have an electrician there this afternoon. Meanwhile, get your guys back on the job, and Jordan, I want to see an updated video run-through by midweek. Got it?"

Jordan nodded. "Got it."

"Gotta go. Keep me posted." With that, Jim ended the call, leaving Jordan and Lucky staring at her laptop screen.

This was where she demanded answers. Jordan shifted in her seat slightly to look at Lucky.

That was a big mistake. How could she focus on being irked with him when she always went so melty at the sight of those light gray eyes?

"Sorry," he said. "Honestly, Jim blew a bunch of hot air in our meetings with big-picture ideas for what he wanted this to become." He gestured toward his right, she assumed to indicate the overall renovation project. "He mentioned franchising and said that was what he was doing in Texas, but I didn't think much about it. It's not like I was keeping it from you."

"It's not that." Jordan shook her head. "I run this place. He couldn't have sat down once and had a conversation with me about what he wanted it to become?"

"He's a bad manager," Lucky said. "That much has been clear from the beginning." He winced. "I guess I shouldn't speak so openly about my thoughts on the guy. He's your boss. It kind of puts you in a tough position."

No, she wanted him to open up to her. "Nothing you tell me is going to be repeated to my boss, don't worry. It's not so much that you knew all this and didn't tell me. It's that he's talking to you instead of me. That he let the person managing the construction know more than the person who would be running the entire place once it's finished."

“And the person who will be answering to the rest of the town about what’s going on here,” he said. “Don’t forget that.”

“Well, he did offer to call the mayor.” She couldn’t disguise the sarcasm in her voice. “Of course, he wouldn’t go so far as to hop on a plane and show up here a.s.a.p. to save his project. Why would he do that when he could just pick up the phone and call a guy he barely knows?”

A guy she and Lucky had hung out with just that weekend. In fact, come to think of it...

“I have to get together with Matt,” she said. “Do you think he’ll have dinner with me?”

She didn’t mean that in any sort of romantic way. For a long second, she worried that’s what he would think.

“Of course, he will,” Lucky said. “Do you need my help?”

Jordan started to say no, that this was something she needed to handle on her own, if only to prove she could. But she *did* need his help. Apparently, there were a lot of questions about Jim Jasper’s intentions, and they were questions Jordan couldn’t answer. In fact, some details might come out during the discussion. Whatever was going on here, Jordan needed to know sooner rather than later.

Yes, if this was becoming a place she wouldn’t want to manage, it was best she got a heads up so she could start looking for another job. Unfortunately, that search would probably take her away from Misty Mountain, since managing theatrical productions was all she knew.

“I guess I need to call my guys back to work,” Lucky suddenly said. “If construction’s back on, I don’t want to get too far behind.”

He pushed himself to his feet, and she did the same. She shut the laptop and snatched it up, along with her phone, following him out of the backstage area.

As she stepped out onto the stage, though, it hit Jordan what had happened right before her phone started to buzz. That kiss had been there in the back of her mind throughout the call, but now the memory came back full force. The way his lips had felt against hers. How secure his embrace had made her feel...

Yes, it would be a long, long time before that memory didn’t linger at the edges of her mind night and day.

When he got to the bottom step from the stage to the floor, Lucky turned, holding out his hand. Their eyes met, and her heart hopped into double time.

Yes, it was still there, whatever this electricity was between them. She hadn't imagined it. They could shift the talk to business all they wanted, but there was no getting away from it. Not for her, and apparently not for him, either.

"Careful," he said, looking down at the steps.

She'd climbed up and down those steps more times than she'd passed through the doorway of her house. If he wanted to help her, who was she to argue?

Jordan slipped her hand in his, gripping the laptop and phone tighter with her left hand to make sure she didn't drop them. He held her hand as she descended the steps, letting go when she reached bottom. Then he turned, gesturing for her to get out ahead of him.

She was definitely overthinking all of this. He'd helped her down. That was it. It didn't mean anything romantic. But her legs were a little wobbly as she crossed the auditorium, her flats making a light tapping sound on the concrete.

When she stepped through the doorway and into the lobby, her entire body practically sighed with relief. But that was the exact moment the sound she'd heard finally made its way to her brain. She'd been so focused on the man behind her and the noises her shoes were making that she hadn't fully processed it. People were shouting.

And it was ridiculously close.

The visual was even more alarming, though. On the other side of the floor-to-ceiling glass that lined the front of the theater stood people. A lot of people. All were familiar faces, and those faces had angry expressions and signs.

Protesters lined the sidewalk in front of what was once Misty Mountain Music, and it looked like they were blocking the door. Jordan and Lucky had better have no plans to leave anytime soon.

Nothing could dampen Lucky's spirits like a bunch of angry protesters. To be fair, he'd never faced a mob like this before. He didn't even know how this worked. Could they block him and Jordan from exiting the building? Would the protestors eventually leave when they got tired or hungry?

"What should we do?" Jordan asked.

She was looking at him like he had the answers. Like he was the one who'd fix all this.

The problem was, he *wanted* to fix it. He wanted to be the superhero, rushing in to save the day. And he wanted to do that because of her. Because of those big brown eyes and that warm heart, intent on doing what was best for the theater...even if it wasn't best for her.

As he returned his attention to the mob outside, though, one thing was on his mind. That kiss. A kiss that had shaken him deep to his core.

It wasn't their first kiss, but he wondered if she even remembered that. He hadn't dared bring it up, but by now, he'd begun to think maybe he'd imagined it. A kiss in a closet more than a decade ago might have been forgotten by most people. Maybe she didn't even realize that was him.

"I'll talk to them," he said.

One foot forward, then another. He forced himself to keep moving, despite a complete lack of a plan. All of a sudden, he felt safer on the other side of that glass than in here with a woman who made him feel things. Things that were far scarier than a few dozen angry citizens with signs.

He stepped out front and let the door close behind him. That was when he

realized just how little space existed between that door and the first layer of protesters. He was almost nose to nose with Betty Jenkins, and she wore sunglasses and a very defined scowl.

“We’ve had enough,” Mrs. Jenkins said. She added a nod to that. “We’re here to stop Jim Jasper from ruining our town.”

“Jim Jasper isn’t here,” Lucky said.

Mrs. Jenkins crossed her arms over her chest. “Then get him here. What could he have to do that’s more important than this?”

“Open up more businesses that will line his pocket, that’s what.”

That was Sid Renner’s voice. He stood toward the back of the crowd. Up here at the front, Mrs. Trapp joined Mrs. Jenkins. Lucky chose to address those two women rather than the crowd at large, since they seemed to be the ringleaders.

“We have no interest in hurting the town in any way,” Lucky said. “We’re trying to make the best of the job we’ve been tasked with doing.”

“Not true.”

That came from Ruth Leggett. She stood behind the desk at Wilson Automotive for decades, quitting recently for no good reason whatsoever. He saw her around town from time to time and heard that she had complained to anyone who would listen about how rude the customers were at that auto repair shop.

“All the business owners around here are just in it for the money,” Ruth continued. “They don’t care about this town. And you’re one of them.”

“Yes!” a few others yelled.

More voices chimed in. Standing there, patiently waiting, Lucky processed some of the signs all around him.

Keep Misty Mountain safe!

Say no to big developers!

Save our town!

“I care about this town,” Lucky said, leveling his stare at Mrs. Jenkins. But all he got there was cold indifference. He shifted over to Mrs. Trapp. “You watched me during the day one summer when I was in second grade. Me and my sister.”

Mrs. Trapp smiled. “You were such an energetic little boy. I had a tough time keeping up with you.”

That was exactly the sentiment he was hoping to inspire in her. “You know I love this town and everyone in it,” Lucky said directly to her. “I

haven't taken on any job that would change the structure of this town. This building is going to remain exactly as it is. Jordan Strongblossom loves Misty Mountain even more than I do, and you know it."

"Exactly." Mrs. Jenkins gave a harsh nod. "Which is why we believe she's being manipulated."

His mouth fell open at that. Worse, there were nods behind her. People thought he had something to do with this.

"Lucky here is good people," Chuck Morrison yelled out for anyone who'd listen. "He's just as much a victim as Jordan is. It's that Jim Jasper guy. He's the real enemy here."

"Yeah!" someone else called out.

Even more murmurings from around the crowd.

"We have to stay focused." Mrs. Jenkins glared before looking back over her shoulder. "Turning on each other is exactly what they want to do to us."

It was clear she'd been riling these people up with conspiracy theories. The evil developers versus the longtime residents of Misty Mountain. The thinking was that if they let the developers win, they'd lose their town to the tourists in no time.

"How about this?" he asked. "I'll get Jim Jasper on the phone. One of you can talk to him, express your concerns, and then we all go on about our business while he figures out what to do."

Mrs. Jenkins narrowed her eyes. "Do you think I'm naïve, young man? I can't just be pushed around like one of your employees or contractors."

Lucky didn't push people around. He was very good to his employees. He resented the implication.

But coming back at her right now wouldn't help any of this. He had to put the cause before his pride.

Gesturing toward the group at large, he asked, "What can we do to resolve this?"

"Absolutely nothing." Mrs. Jenkins took a step closer, and he had to admit, he was battling the urge to take a step back. "Until Jim Jasper stands in front of us and tells us he's not going to ruin our town, we're not going anywhere."

Lucky scanned the crowd, buying time. He was out of ideas. He might run his own company, but he had no experience with protesters. He was a business owner, not a politician.

Politician. Yes, that was it. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

“Excuse me,” he said, looking at Mrs. Trapp. “I’ll just—”

Pointing toward the door behind him, he took several steps back. He said no more as he pulled on the door handle and slipped inside, stopping to lock the door behind him. Only then did he feel like he could breathe for the first time in the few minutes since he’d stepped out.

But when he turned around, he saw the empty lobby floor covered in plastic and walls stripped of all their original décor. Disappointment slammed into him—a feeling so strong, he had to stop a second and evaluate what was going on with him. What was with the disappointment?

There was one simple answer. He’d expected to see Jordan when he turned around. *She* was his safe space, not the inside of this theater. She was the one who would make the world seem right again.

When had that shift happened? He’d never depended on anyone else for security. He prided himself on not only being able to do everything on his own but being really good at it.

He looked in the direction of her office, but she wouldn’t be there. She’d be where he’d found her earlier—in the auditorium, maybe even on the stage.

“Save our town! Save our town!”

The chanting started up behind him, pushing him forward. He just hoped when he got closer to the auditorium, he’d be out of their view.

“Jordan?” he called out as he reached the doorway.

When he looked inside, he saw what he expected—sort of. She was seated in the center of the stage, legs crossed, head down. Her hands were clasped in front of her, her elbows balanced on her legs. He couldn’t see her face because her long dark locks draped down over it.

“You okay?” he asked without budging from the doorway.

Should he go to her or give her some space? He grew up with a sister, so one would think he’d know exactly what to do in a situation like this. But his first reaction when he saw a woman upset was to fix things for her. He was learning the older he got that sometimes people just wanted to know you were there for them. To know you cared.

“This is my town,” Jordan said.

When Jordan lifted her head, he saw she wasn’t crying. In fact, even from here, he could see the fire in her eyes. She was angry. Furious, even. Could he really blame her?

“I have as much right to live in this town as they do,” Jordan said. “They’re supposed to be the people I trust. Betty Jenkins and Judi Trapp are

more like aunts than my real aunt is. I feel like going out there and giving them both a piece of my mind.”

She didn't move, but he wanted to stop her, just in case. “That wouldn't be a good idea. There's a lot of people out there.”

“And they're our neighbors,” she said. “People we grew up with. Why are Betty and Judi doing this? I'm calling my mom.”

With that, she reached over and grabbed her phone, which she'd set on the stage next to her. While she did that, Lucky headed back out to the lobby to take a peek at what was happening outside. Maybe by some miracle, they'd all given up and gone home. He could hope.

But no, they were still out there. They weren't looking in his direction. They were turned slightly, staring off to the side.

Emboldened by the fact that their attention was focused elsewhere, Lucky stepped out into the lobby. He took long, confident strides toward the window, eyes peeled for the object that had captured everyone's attention.

He immediately spotted what everyone was looking at—a camera with a reporter standing next to it. The reporter was interviewing Betty Jenkins.

Jordan wasn't the type to call her mom to get her out of scrapes. This wasn't about that.

This was about her mother's two best friends creating chaos outside her workplace. If anyone could talk sense into Betty Jenkins and Judi Trapp, Josephine Strongblossom could.

"Mom's on her way," Jordan called out as she stepped through the doorway into the lobby.

She'd already braced herself to see that mob again. It had upset her so much the first time, she'd retreated to the stage, where she'd taken deep breaths as she thought through what to do.

But now, her focus went to Lucky, who stood near the window. Was he crazy? They'd see him. They'd probably start banging on the window, yelling for them to open the door or something.

"We have to call Jim." Lucky turned to look at her. "The media is here."

"The media?"

Shaking her head, she shifted her gaze to the window. The group outside was turned toward the lower end of the strip.

"What are they looking at?" she asked.

"There's a TV camera," Lucky said. "Only one I can see. But it's both a reporter and camera, looks like." He turned to face her. "Betty Jenkins is talking to them."

Betty Jenkins talking to reporters could not be a good thing.

"Is it your ex?" she asked.

Why was that the first question she asked? Maybe because he looked so

bothered.

But he shook his head. “Rival station.” He laughed. “Yeah, that would be just the thing to make this worse.”

“Maybe we should call the mayor,” Jordan said.

It wasn’t that she was disregarding what Lucky had said about calling her boss. It was more like she was procrastinating. That was not a call she was looking forward to making.

“That’s a great idea.” Lucky pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll call him.” He tapped on the screen and, within seconds, turned back to look outside.

Matt’s voice came through the speaker. “I’m already on it. I parked at the buffet, and I’m walking over. These people have filled your parking lot.”

That sounded about right. The angry mob had taken over the entire sidewalk in front of the building, and they had to park somewhere.

“See you in a minute,” Matt said. The phone went dead.

“He’s coming in here?” Jordan asked.

“Doubtful,” he said. “That reporter will probably grab him. If she doesn’t get him, the crowd will block him from coming in.”

Suddenly, the noise outside swelled. She couldn’t make out what they were saying, aside from the words “Matt” and “mayor” every few syllables.

“There’s no way he’s making it through that crowd,” she said, stepping up to stand next to Lucky.

Even though she was closer to the crowd, she had his protection. She felt safe next to him. Not just because of how strong and imposing his presence was, but also because she knew nobody in this town would mess with her as long as she had Lucky Howard standing next to her.

“Look,” he said, nodding.

His arms were crossed over his chest, and he wore a slight grin. When Jordan followed the direction of his stare, she saw immediately what had put that smile on his face. Matt was squeezing in front of the group, hands held by his head, palms facing the crowd, as though to show he meant no harm. He scooted sideways, crowd surfing in a sense, until he reached the door.

Matt tugged on the door. It didn’t budge.

“It’s locked,” Jordan gasped.

She rushed over to unlock the door. It felt, in a weird way, like she was saving him from a bunch of swarming, bloodthirsty zombies. But nobody was trying to pull him back. They were shouting things at him, but they kept it

verbal, not physical.

“Whoa,” Matt said as he stepped inside.

Jordan grabbed the door handle and quickly locked it as soon as he was inside. Nobody was reaching out for it or anything. She’d just slipped into some sort of survival mode that she didn’t fully understand.

“That’s a passionate crowd,” he said.

“Passionate is a polite name for it,” Lucky said.

The frustration came through in his voice. His throat sounded a little constricted, like he was forcing the words out.

But Lucky was walking toward him by then, hand extended. “Thanks for coming inside, man.”

Matt laughed, returning the handshake. “Thanks for letting me in. They would’ve eaten me alive. But yeah, my goal was to get in here to talk to you even before you called. We’re going to tackle this together, I assume?”

Jordan glanced at Lucky, whose expression of alarm probably mirrored her own. He was asking them if they needed his help. Or maybe he was saying he needed their help.

“We need to be forming a united front here,” Matt said, looking at Jordan. “I want your thoughts.”

Her eyes widened at those words. When was the last time someone had gotten her thoughts on anything important? Her own boss didn’t even let her know he was planning this until she showed up for work to find it already in progress.

“Do you think the changes happening here are good for the town?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know if my thoughts really count here,” she said. “Jim Jasper owns this building. He can do with it what he wants, right?”

“Not necessarily.” Matt glanced over at Lucky, then back at her. “When he pitched the idea to us for approval, he spun this as a dying venue, literally gasping for its last breath.”

A bit melodramatic, but that didn’t surprise Jordan. In fact, the future of this business must have hung in the balance if Jim took time out of his supposedly busy schedule to make a plea to the city council in any form.

“You can look at our sales figures,” Jordan said. “We’ve operated at a profit for years. A *substantial* profit. Most of that goes into Jim’s pocket.”

Maybe she was saying too much here. She didn’t want to sell out her boss. But if the town wanted to know what they were dealing with, she had to

be honest.

“I don’t think what he’s doing will hurt the theater as far as the renovation.” Jordan gestured and looked around. “You can see from what’s left that the décor was more than a little dated. We needed a renovation, and maybe bringing in big stars will help elevate the entertainment to some level he sees as beneficial. But I don’t think the town is necessarily wrong. It could increase traffic and bring in a different type of tourist.”

Only as she reached the end of that little speech did she notice the expression on Lucky’s face. As he watched her talk, his features had hardened considerably, and the light in his eyes had dimmed a little.

She’d gone too far. She’d spoken from her heart, but she put his project in jeopardy. This was his living she was affecting.

“What about you?” Matt asked.

They both were looking at Lucky now as they waited for him to respond. Jordan was holding her breath, weighed down by the importance of his next words. What if she learned he put profit over what was right? What if he said something that changed what she’d come to believe about him?

The second his gaze landed on her, though, she knew that wouldn’t happen. She was once again safe with him.

“I can’t speak to anything but the job I’ve been hired to do,” Lucky said. “Renovating the theater is a good idea, in my professional opinion. It needs to be brought into the current decade. Not trusting Jordan Strongblossom to know what’s right for this theater and this town is the wrong move. And that’s also my professional opinion.”

“You run your own business,” Matt said. “So do I. I’ve been thinking the same thing. Jim Jasper has never been a resident of Misty Mountain. He blew in here, set up a couple of businesses, and put people in place to run them day to day.”

“And right now, his attention is on another business in a completely different state,” Lucky said. “The crowd is demanding to talk to him, but I’m not sure we could even get him on the phone.”

“Not long enough to tackle all this drama,” Jordan said.

Matt looked from Jordan to Lucky. “You two are the ones here, dealing with the fallout. And that’s why your opinions are the ones I’m going to trust.”

“What if someone else bought this business?” Lucky asked.

“There’s no way we could force Jim to sell.” Matt looked at Jordan.

Yeah, she was the one who supposedly knew her boss best. And maybe that was true—at least of all the people in this town. She'd spoken to Jim at least once a week for her entire adult life. He'd spent plenty of days at this theater, making changes, barking orders, and expecting Jordan to comply. But as soon as he left town, she'd do whatever she had to do to make him happy while still running things the way she knew worked best.

"We can't force him to sell," Matt said. "But if it was a good enough offer, he might take it."

Jordan laughed. "If only I had that kind of money. Maybe I should have bought that lottery ticket the last time it was up into the millions."

"It wouldn't cost millions to buy him out," Lucky said.

The wheels were turning. Jordan knew that look. Funny how they'd known each other such a short time, but she could already read his expression.

"It's not just that," Matt said. "We make him lose interest in running this place."

Now Jordan's wheels were turning. "We don't have that kind of time."

It wouldn't surprise her if the mob out front annoyed her boss to the point that he wanted to say goodbye to this town forever. But that couldn't be guaranteed, and they didn't have months or years to wait for Jim Jasper to get bored with Misty Mountain and his businesses here.

"Do you think someone would want to buy this place?" Matt asked.

"The town could buy it." Jordan smiled. "We could pool our resources and take it over."

"That won't be necessary," Lucky said. "I think I know of a couple of smart investors who would see the value of a property like this. Especially when we all know this town is going to grow over the next couple of decades."

Matt smiled, glancing over at the crowd on the other side of the window. "I've always envied those brilliant souls who bought property in places like Branson and Pigeon Forge back in the day."

"There's still time to get a deal here," Lucky said. "You know that as well as I do. And you also know as well as I do that you're one of the best minds in property investment."

Matt's brow furrowed, and his frown deepened. Obviously, he was just as confused as Jordan was right now.

Bang bang bang.

The sound caused all three of them to jump. They turned to the right to see a beautiful woman holding a microphone and pointing to her right. The reporter. No doubt, she was indicating the camera guy standing at the edge of the crowd.

“Let’s move to the auditorium,” Lucky said. “Away from this audience.”

Jordan cast one last look at the crowd outside the window as she followed Matt and Lucky into the auditorium. Lunch was drawing closer, and she’d eventually get hungry. She’d have to find a way through that crowd to go get something to eat. There was a back door, of course, but she’d have to sneak past this crowd to get out of the parking lot—on foot or by vehicle.

Even though these were people she’d known her entire life, she didn’t feel safe pushing her way through them. And that was the most unsettling part of this.

For years, Lucky had considered putting some money into real estate in this town. He'd watched as, one acre at a time, prime property was snatched up by outside developers. Property that increased in value with each passing year.

Lots like the one Misty Mountain Music sat on were prime real estate. Of course, one reason for that was the location. It was next to the most popular tourist attraction in town—the gigantic family buffet also owned by Jim Jasper. Both of his businesses were on the main road—a road that was sure to be packed with even more businesses if the tourism industry continued to grow here.

“Exactly how would this work?” Matt asked.

They were seated around the table backstage. Jordan had gone out front to try to call her mom again. She'd been gone a while, though, and Lucky was starting to wonder if he should check on her.

“We'd be equal investors in buying the property from Jim Jasper,” Lucky said. “The day-to-day operations, we'd leave up to Jordan. Of course, we'd factor in what the town wants.”

A big smile broke out over Matt's face. “So, in essence, the town would be taking back the theater from Jim Jasper.”

“Guess so,” Lucky said. “But it's a good investment for both of us. At least I see it that way.”

Matt nodded. “I kicked myself for missing out on some of the commercial properties in this town. Can you imagine if we bought into this area right out of high school?”

Lucky took a deep breath, then let it out. “Hopefully, in twenty years, people will be saying they wish they’d had the foresight to buy this property when it was available.”

“But it’s not available,” Matt pointed out.

Lucky looked in the direction of the front of the theater. They couldn’t see it from here, of course, but if they got really quiet and listened intently, he would swear they could hear the shouting of their friends and neighbors.

“It won’t take much to convince old man Jasper to walk away from this mess,” Lucky said. “He might even try to build a separate complex more in keeping with his new franchise.”

“Good luck getting it past the planning committee.” Matt laughed. “After this, I have a feeling they’re going to think twice before approving construction—or *reconstruction*, in this case.”

Lucky shook his head. He never thought he’d see the day when townspeople would protest changing the inside of a building.

“Hello?”

It took Lucky a second to realize the voice wasn’t his imagination. It was loud and clear—not the faint chanting he might or might not have been able to hear all the way back here. No, that female voice was coming from the auditorium.

“That’s Brianna.” Matt pushed himself to his feet.

“I think they’re backstage.”

That was Jordan’s voice.

At that, Lucky stood, too. They’d barely started walking when the door to the backstage area opened and in walked not Brianna or Jordan, but Lauralie. She was carrying two gigantic brown paper bags.

“Is someone hungry?” she called out.

Lucky’s empty stomach suddenly grumbled to life at those words. It was nearing one o’clock, and he hadn’t dared to think what they’d do about lunch. They were kind of trapped here.

Of course, if he had to fight his way through the group to get food for them, he would. But knowing he didn’t have to brought a sigh of relief.

Behind Lauralie came Maddie, who also carried brown paper bags. Lucky was trying to piece together where they might have gotten all this food. Whatever it was smelled good. Brianna came next, carrying one of those multi-cup holders.

“Could you grab the door for Jordan?” she asked.

Matt was closer, but he had to stop to give his girlfriend a quick kiss. Lucky didn't mind, anyway. He'd walk miles to help Jordan if she needed it.

That thought slammed into him as he neared the door. When had he gotten that far into things? Was it the kiss? No, it had been long before that. Maybe it had been the day he'd sat in this very room, sharing lunch with her and talking about their lives. Maybe it started all those years ago in that closet and his feelings for her had just lain dormant until she came back into his life.

Whatever the case, there was no turning back now. He pushed the door open gently, not sure how close she was standing to it. When he peeked around it, though, he saw her, carrying a multi-cup holder that matched Brianna's. Four cups in Jordan's, and four cups in Brianna's.

"Did you reach your mom?" he asked.

Jordan shook her head. "She's not answering. But Lauralie called, asking me to let her in, so I stayed to unlock the door for her."

"Are we expecting more people?" Lucky asked.

He looked behind her, verifying nobody was back there. Six people were backstage, but he'd counted eight cups.

"Sam and Denver are on their way," Jordan said.

She hadn't moved yet. He was standing there, holding the door, while she stood frozen in place. Their eyes locked in a stare neither of them seemed to be able to break.

Yes, she felt it, too—whatever this was. All they had to do was get past their current drama, and they could figure out where to go next.

"Food," he said, mostly to pull himself out of this spell they both seemed to be under. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Her mouth curved upward in a smile, and his heart immediately warmed at the sight. It was unfamiliar to him, this feeling of joy at making someone else happy. It was something that had been sorely lacking in his life for a long, long time.

There weren't enough seats around the small table, so they settled into a big circle on a rug nearby. Matt jumped up to let Denver and Sam in, while Jordan recalled the many times she'd seen cast members gathered on this very rug, laughing and bonding during rehearsals and before performances.

"That's what we're doing," Lauralie said. "Of course, two of us are related, and most of us have known each other for a while, so maybe it doesn't count as bonding, really."

Lucky exchanged a look with his sister. "We have a lot of lost time to

make up for,” Lucky said. “And I can’t wait to do just that.”

Maddie smiled at him. “But first, we have to save you from the mob out front.”

That prompted Lucky to pause. He took a deep breath and let it out. It had been easy to forget why they were all here, as they dined on the burgers and onion rings the women had picked up from the diner. He might not be able to hear the chanting of the people out front anymore—if he ever could—but that didn’t mean they weren’t still out there.

“Whoa, Nelly!” Denver called out, his voice filling the backstage area. That pronouncement was followed by the slam of the backstage door behind Sam and Matt, who’d come in behind Denver. “That crowd is out of hand.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said. “Denver told them all his big plans for this building.”

Denver paused, halfway between the backstage door and where they were seated. “A live concert every night. Me and my band. You all can play instruments, right?”

Sam rolled his eyes, but they’d arrived at the group by then. He squeezed in next to Lauralie while Denver took his saved spot next to Lucky’s sister.

“I’m sure that’d go over well,” Lauralie said.

“It would certainly take care of any traffic worries,” Lucky cracked. “Especially if I’m one of the performers.”

“Hey, people will come from all over to hear my singing,” Denver joked, reaching forward to grab one of the few burgers left in the center of the group.

“I’m going out to talk to them after we finish eating,” Matt said as he returned to his seat. “I can’t promise it’ll make a bit of difference, but I have to give it a try.”

“What are you going to say?” Brianna, who was seated next to him, paused eating to stare at her boyfriend. “Are you in favor of construction continuing or against it?”

“Against it.” Matt exchanged a look with Lucky.

There was a question in Matt’s expression, and Lucky knew what it meant. He, too, wondered if they should open up about their plan or keep it under wraps. But they were all friends. They were in this together.

“How’d you get off work, anyway?” Matt asked Denver, swiftly changing the subject.

“Shut the shop down. I’ve got my mechanics handling things.”

“Wilson Automotive is fully staffed now.” Maddie smiled.

“Thanks to your marketing help.” Denver looked over at Lucky. “They had to explain to me that marketing is important in recruiting employees.”

“I could’ve told you that.” Lucky glanced at his sister. “But yeah, I might need your help next time I’m hiring someone. I think I’ve tapped out all the good laborers in Misty Mountain.”

“So, you recruit from other areas.” Maddie shrugged. “Who wouldn’t want to move to the mountains to work?”

“Jordan might be able to help you with that, too,” Matt said. “She knows a thing or two about recruiting people from other areas.”

“I know a lot of out-of-work actors right now, that’s for sure,” she said.

“You might want to keep them close by,” Lucky said. “I just heard a rumor that someone could be interested in buying this place and keeping the entertainment exactly as it has been.”

“Or however you think it should be,” Matt said. “It would be your theater at that point. Your call.”

Jordan frowned as her gaze moved from Matt to Lucky. “I don’t understand.”

“Matt and I want to buy this place,” Lucky said.

“It’s an investment,” Matt explained.

“A smart one,” Denver said. “Property alone in this area of town is a wise buy.”

“I’d go in on that deal if I weren’t a poor schoolteacher.” Sam punctuated that statement with a bite of burger.

“Or a struggling auto repair shop owner,” Denver said.

“How are you going to get Jim to sell?” Jordan asked. Her eyes were sparkling, though, and for the first time in days, she seemed to have perked up.

She was looking between Matt and Lucky, so he wasn’t sure who was meant to answer. Luckily, Matt jumped in, so he didn’t have to.

“That’s the big one-two punch,” Matt said. “I’ll go out there and make a bold statement about how the town will not stand for this. Maybe the rest of you can join me. Except for Lucky and Jordan, of course. We don’t want anybody to lose their jobs.”

“No way,” Lauralie said. “I stand by my friends.”

“Me, too,” Maddie said. “I’m not turning on my brother. Do you know how that would look to the town?”

“Maybe we go all in.” Lucky hadn’t planned on saying those words. They just came out. Now that he thought it through, though, it was a good idea. “Both Jordan and I turn on him. We side with the town.”

Yes, the more he thought about it, the better the idea sounded. Why hadn’t he thought of it a long time ago?

“That’s risky, isn’t it?” Brianna looked over at the two of them. “If he refuses to sell, you’d lose your jobs.”

Lucky shrugged. “He’s going to have to sell.”

“With the entire town against him, I don’t know that the building committee would allow it to continue. Obviously, I can’t influence their decision one way or another, but we know those people do. We really don’t think they’re going to side with Jim Jasper on this.”

“Chuck Morrison is out there,” Lucky said as it suddenly hit him. “Isn’t his wife on the building committee?”

“She sure is.” Matt nodded. “I didn’t see him out there. It was all a blur as I was forcing my way through.”

“My mom hasn’t shown up yet.” Jordan sighed. “She was supposedly on my side.”

“At least she’s not out there with her two best friends,” Maddie said reassuringly.

Denver looked at his girlfriend. “It’s like we discussed. She likes the idea of her daughter being trapped in here with one of the town’s few remaining single guys.”

As Lucky worked to process those words, he didn’t miss the glare his sister tossed in her boyfriend’s direction. One thing was clear. He’d just spoken up about something he wasn’t supposed to.

“What do you mean?” Jordan set her burger down and picked up her napkin, leaning forward a little to stare directly at Denver.

Lucky’s eyes widened as Denver stared down at the onion ring he’d just pulled from the container. The message was clear. He wasn’t saying another word.

“We were just joking around, mostly.” Maddie looked at Jordan. “What if your mom and her friends started all this up to push you two closer together?”

Denver pointed at Lucky and Jordan with his onion ring. “And the fact that the two of you are basically blocked in here—”

“And your mom didn’t show up, you just said,” Sam added.

“No way.” Jordan shook her head. “Even they wouldn’t go this far.”

“Ha!” Maddie set down the ketchup packet she’d been struggling to open. “Betty Jenkins rammed her car into the back of mine to give me an excuse to get to know Denver better.”

“She could have just pulled the plug on Pixel Bots,” Sam joked, naming the video game at the local pizzeria that Denver and Maddie had been competing on for years. “That would have brought you two together with a common enemy.”

“That enemy being microchip failure?” Denver asked.

“Or the lack of concern about bringing in a repairman,” Matt said. “No surprise. Some archaic video game in the back of the restaurant isn’t a pizzeria owner’s top priority.”

“And one of those women had my truck stolen from my driveway and delivered in front of the repair shop, remember?” Denver said. “All to give Maddie an excuse to come pick me up.”

“And we won’t even talk about the mysterious text messages we received,” Lauralie said.

“Who knew those three women could figure out how to spoof a phone number?” Sam laughed.

“You’re saying they brought the whole town together to protest just to play matchmaker?” Lucky asked.

Nods all around. Lucky would argue that the idea was absurd, but after all he’d just heard, was it? They were spoofing phone numbers and ramming into cars in the name of playing Cupid.

“Betty Jenkins organized all this,” Maddie said. “She’s been the ringleader all along, as far as I know. Nobody was even complaining about it until she got started on social media.”

“And next thing we knew, they were holding a big meeting in the backroom of the candy shop,” Sam said. When everybody looked at him, he shrugged. “I heard rumors.”

“The candy shop is where they moved their book club,” Brianna said. “The bookstore closed, and they had to meet somewhere.”

“And they packed the entire town in there?” Jordan asked.

“It was just a core group at first.” Brianna shrugged. “They each brought their own friends. The group just grew and grew. When they came up with the idea for the town hall meeting, they posted it on social media.

“That’s all you have to do these days,” Maddie said.

Lucky nodded. “Especially in a town this small. So how do we handle things now that we know we might be dealing with matchmakers?”

“Easy.” Maddie looked over at the two of them. “You two stay here. We have to keep up with the protests until Jim Jasper backs down.”

“Now that’s a plan,” Denver said.

“Can I finish my burger first?” Matt asked.

Everyone looked at him. The wrapper on the rug in front of him was empty, aside from one mostly eaten onion ring and some leftover ketchup.

“It looks like you’re already finished.” Brianna made a teasing face at him.

“Not with this one.” Matt reached forward and grabbed one of the two remaining burgers from the center.

Lucky looked over at Jordan, who appeared overwhelmed. He couldn’t blame her. It was a lot, especially if her mom was one of the three women behind all this. If they’d gotten the entire town riled up over some changes to a business just to matchmake her daughter, how would that make her feel?

More importantly, how did he feel about that? He wasn’t sure yet.

“**H**ow do we know when it’s time to come out?” Jordan asked.

They were seated in the chair on one side of the table, staring out over the empty backstage area. They’d cleaned up the trash and deposited it into the bin in the auditorium that the workers had been using. Then they’d come back here and hidden out while their friends took on the town of Misty Mountain.

“I’ll sneak a peek in a few minutes,” Lucky said, leaning toward her and shifting his phone to landscape mode. “Matt just sent this.”

Leaning toward him to view his screen gave her the tingles from head to toe. It would never get old, this feeling of being secure in his presence. She just hoped his feelings for her were as real as hers were.

The clip was from a local news outlet out of Knoxville. The woman who appeared on the screen was the same one they’d spotted on the sidewalk earlier. Maybe that was good news. It could mean no other outlet had reported it.

Should she forward this to her boss? She’d wait for direction on that.

“In the tiny town of Misty Mountain, there’s a fight brewing as local residents battle to save a treasured local business.” The reporter turned slightly, and the camera panned to capture the Misty Mountain Music sign. “This dinner theater has been a part of the Misty Mountain community since the 1970s. It’s changed hands a couple of times, but today’s owner, Jim Jasper, wants to turn it into an entertainment venue. We spoke to a few residents earlier today about this change. Here’s what they had to say.”

Mrs. Jenkins’ face filled the screen. “It goes against everything this town

stands for. Jim Jasper does not have this town's best interests in mind. His top priority is his bank account. Well, we're tired of our town being used for wealthy developers to get wealthier."

As the reporter narrated, the scene switched to shots of the protestors in front of the theater. Jordan's eyes widened as familiar face after familiar face filled the screen. Friends, neighbors, former classmates...all people she trusted and loved.

It felt like a betrayal until she remembered the plan they'd discussed earlier—a plan that would put her and Lucky on the side of the rest of the town. Misty Mountain versus Jim Jasper. Maybe it wasn't such a betrayal, after all.

"Misty Mountain is growing." Matt's face filled the screen, the crowd chanting "save our town" behind him. "But we also have to balance that with maintaining the small-town charm that we've always loved. I'm definitely going to take the concerns of the community back to the building committee, and we'll discuss how the change in the nature of this business will affect the town. As mayor of Misty Mountain, the people are my top priority."

The video switched to a live shot of the reporter, standing where she'd been at the start of this news segment. "There you have it," she said. "As you can see now, the streets are empty, and the protestors have gone home." The reporter gestured toward the area behind her. Indeed, the sidewalk in front of Misty Mountain Music was empty. "But it shows you the power residents have to make a difference just by showing up. For WALC News, this is Mila Murdock."

That was the end of that. The screen paused, and Lucky pulled the phone back in front of him. He also moved his body away from Jordan, making her aware of how much comfort she'd gotten from his presence. She felt a little more...well, *vulnerable* now, even though his chair was only inches from hers.

"Guess we're safe to go out." Jordan pushed herself to her feet.

She snatched up her phone and shoved it into her back jeans pocket. She'd just go home. That had always been her safe place. But somehow, she knew it wouldn't be the same.

He was her safe place now. When she was around him, things felt right.

"I owe you a huge apology," Lucky said.

Those words seem to siphon the air from her lungs. She was afraid to look at him. Was he going to apologize for kissing her? For leading her on

and making her think there might be something more than friendship between them? Could her heart take it if those were the words that came out of his mouth?

Yes. She was strong. She'd survived his rebuff the first time they'd kissed. She'd survive it again.

She spun and looked down at him, working up her best completely clueless look. But the earnest expression on his face gave her pause.

"Fourteen years ago, I saw you at a party," Lucky said. He took a deep breath and then pushed himself to his feet. As he turned to face her, he crossed his arms over his chest. "You were the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. They were playing a game."

"Seven minutes in heaven," she said.

"And at first, I thought it was a great idea," he said. "I was a kid, really. I had a lot of growing up to do."

"Didn't we all?" She smiled. "I remember that party. My best friend dragged me there. I was trying to find a way to sneak out. I would have snuck out as soon as the closet thing started, but she was my ride."

He was staring at her now, and her nerves notched up for a completely different reason. They were talking about that one party that had never quite left her memory. Just the mention of it sent her back to those days, returning her to the mind of a shy sixteen-year-old.

"There was only one girl at that party I wanted to kiss," Lucky said.

Those words drew Jordan's attention back to his face. The intensity was there again—that stare that made her knees go a little weak. The air around them seemed to have gotten incredibly thick...and charged, as though electricity were zapping between the two of them.

"I felt the same," she said. "I was trying not to look at you because you were the guy all my friends had a crush on. It was almost like you were the school celebrity. You were just so cute."

She wasn't overstating it. Misty Mountain High had been a small school, but there was no avoiding that high school hierarchy. The popular group clumped together at one small table in the cafeteria, while artistic types like Jordan stuck together in their own little clump. But as with any high school, the less popular kids watched the popular kids like they were megastars. They might pretend they didn't want anything to do with them, but if a guy like Lucky Howard showed you attention, it meant something.

"You weren't too scared to look at me," he said. "I remember staring at

each other from across the room.”

That brought a smile to her face. Every time she'd caught him looking at her, she felt like doing a little cheer. She didn't want to get her hopes up that he thought she was attractive, but that night was the first time she ever felt beautiful.

“The whole thing terrified me,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Kissing me...*terrified* you?”

He took a step back, staring up at the ceiling and taking a deep breath. He seemed to try to collect his thoughts before finally speaking again.

“Like I said, I had a lot of growing up to do back then,” Lucky said. “I thought it was best to stay in control, to always date girls who liked me far more than I liked them.”

“A player,” she said.

She'd heard that about him before they'd kissed. Actually, she probably would have said those very words afterward. Following their kiss, she was suddenly tuned in to anything anyone said about him, and she also watched as he went through multiple girlfriends in a short time.

He was a heartbreaker, someone to stay away from. Everyone knew that. She kicked herself for the longest time for buying, even for a second, that he might want to have something to do with her after they exited that closet.

“I knew that about you,” she said. “I tried to shove the kiss out of my mind. I said you were on a mission to kiss every girl in town. Or in our school, anyway.”

Tilting his head slightly, he frowned at her. “You saw me that way?”

Jordan nodded. “You seemed to be dating someone new every time I turned around, and your exes didn't have nice things to say about you.”

Slowly, he began to nod. “I deserved that. Like I said, I was immature. But I was also scared.”

“Terrified,” she said.

“Terrified. That's exactly what that kiss made me feel. But in general, I was just scared. That's how I felt about women from the time I was old enough to notice them. I knew falling in love would make me vulnerable, and I never wanted to be vulnerable.”

“That was why our kiss terrified you?” she asked.

Maybe she was being presumptuous there. She'd terrified him with a kiss. It seemed absurd that kissing her might have that effect on one of the hottest guys in town, but that was what he'd said, right?

“I felt myself slipping,” he said. “In that seven minutes—”

“I think it was more like eight.” She suppressed a giggle.

“Oh yeah, we definitely went over,” Lucky smiled. “They had to knock on the door.”

She’d never forget that. She was so caught up in that kiss, it was almost as if the knock came from another world. And she wanted to avoid going back to that world as long as possible.

“We had to walk out of that closet in front of everyone,” she remembered. “People were cheering, like you’d won a prize.”

“I had,” he said. “The best prize there. But yeah, that was highly inappropriate. I should have told them all to zip it.”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault. I chose to stay in that closet until someone banged on the door, too.”

“Either way, I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” Lucky looked her directly in the eye. “I walked out of that closet a different guy than I had been before.”

That confused her. From what she’d seen, he’d gone right back to his old behaviors. She saw him walking down the hall, holding Darci Dresden’s hand, just a week later. They dated for a few weeks and then he’d been on to Holly Messner, a sophomore who was on the cheerleading squad.

“I was restless,” he said. “I dated one girl, then another, trying to convince myself that what I felt in that closet had been my imagination. Every time I saw you, though, it took me back there.”

“Every time I saw you, I was mortified.”

The look on his face made her regret those words. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. Maybe “mortified” had been too strong a word.

“I felt like I’d been the butt of some joke,” she rushed to add. “Like you charitably kissed the dorky theater girl on a dare, then went back to dating popular kids.”

Once the words were out, it hit her for the first time that he’d never thought of it that way. Confusion flashed in his eyes, and then he took a step closer to her.

“Popularity is a weird thing,” he said. “I never thought of myself as a popular kid. Or anyone I hung out with, for that matter. There were, what? Seventy people in our graduating class?”

“Sixty-three in mine,” she said. “I don’t know about yours.”

“It was a pretty small school. Which was why I was on the football team

in the first place, and football players were automatically paired up with the cheerleaders. There was a lot of pressure to date the girls we were all hanging out with. But I never once thought of you as a ‘dorky theater girl.’ I was in awe of what you did, and most of the kids who graduated with us would say the same.”

“So, when you kissed me and never even glanced at me again...?”

He picked it up from there. “It had nothing to do with who you hung out with or your extracurriculars. I couldn’t take my eyes off you when we got out of class to watch your performance in *The Addams Family*. There was one reason I steered clear of you after that kiss.”

“You were scared,” she said.

“In that closet that night, it felt like I’d stepped in quicksand. I was losing control. I could see myself falling, handing my heart over to you.”

“Which meant I could break it.”

“Exactly. I was never going to leave myself vulnerable. And that continued into adulthood.”

Until now? That was the question. She didn’t dare speak it out loud, though.

Why was she so afraid to believe this might be good news? She hated to get her hopes up, that was why, and the reasons weren’t all that different from Lucky’s reasons.

As that realization hit her, Jordan stood a little straighter. They weren’t all that different. And there was safety in that, wasn’t there?

“I wait for the other shoe to drop,” she blurted, suddenly feeling safe opening up to him in ways she’d never been open to anyone. “I think the point is we’re all afraid, but if you don’t ever let yourself be vulnerable, are you really living?”

As their eyes met and held, she felt something shift between them in a good way. Maybe it wasn’t just between them. Maybe the something that was shifting was deep inside her—a trust she’d been lacking in relationships for most of her life.

“I feel safe with you,” he said.

The words elicited a gasp from her. It was involuntary, but he would have heard it. The gasp was in response to him saying exactly what she was thinking.

“That’s what’s scared me the most over the past few days,” she said. “When I’m around you, I feel secure—like nothing can hurt me. Not even an

angry mob of townspeople.”

Lucky laughed. “I can take them on any day. It’s falling in love that has me wanting to run for the hills.”

“Do you want to run now?” she asked.

She braced herself for the answer. But for the first time, she wanted to face it. Whatever fears he had, they could work through them together.

“Only if you’re running with me.” He groaned. “That was pretty cheesy, wasn’t it? It sums up exactly how I feel.” He reached out and put a hand on each of her shoulders. “I think we have a fight on our hands. Us against the town of Misty Mountain.”

“We can do it.” She smiled up at him. “They probably don’t want to mess with us and our friends.”

Lucky looked around the room. “They showed up for us.”

“Even brought food,” she said.

“I have a feeling they’ll be with us for the duration, especially if my sister ends up marrying Denver Wilson.”

She took a step closer, putting a hand on each side of his waist. She’d been so caught up in what was going on with the two of them, it had been easy to forget the sense of belonging she’d had as they all sat in a circle, talking about the future of this business.

In fact, it had been a long time since she’d felt that sense of belonging. All the way back to her theater days. And it meant more to her than she’d realized.

But it wasn’t just her new friends. It was this man, the one who made her feel invincible. The man she’d battle dragons alongside, as long as he was with her every step of the way.

As his face lowered, and he captured her in a long, sweet kiss, she knew, no matter what happened, everything was going to be fine. Perfect, actually. They’d work it all out together.

Lucky stood next to Maddie in front of a roomful of people at Town Square. On the front row, to his left, sat Mrs. Jenkins, flanked by her best friends. To his right, the front row was filled with their friends.

Jordan sat next to the empty seat reserved for Lucky—if he got the chance to sit down. Next to her was his sister, Maddie. Jordan and Maddie seem to be getting closer each day—he’d even taken to hinting about Jordan becoming her sister-in-law someday. Lucky and Jordan had only been officially a couple for a little over three weeks, but it was pretty obvious to Lucky, Jordan, and everyone else in town that they were in this for the long haul.

As planned, Matt would speak first. He was the mayor, so it made sense for him to start. Lucky would pick up when they began discussing details of the construction. Jordan would take her turn once they were finished, telling everyone about her preliminary plans for the future of the Misty Mountain Playhouse, which was the new name the business would operate under.

“Okay, everyone, let’s get started,” Matt said.

The discussion lowered to a murmur at the back of the room. Gavin Mundy grabbed a seat on the back row, just as he’d done at the meeting several weeks ago. The very meeting that put them on the path they were on now.

Matt cleared his throat and looked around, hands clasped in front of him. “I know you’ve all been waiting to hear an update on the Misty Mountain Music reimagining.”

“Ha!” That came from Mrs. Jenkins, who had a surly expression as she

sat, in the front row, arms crossed over her chest. “Reimagining.”

She seemed to catch Lucky staring at her and clamped her mouth shut. He didn’t make a face or anything, but if he could speak to her right now, he’d ask her to be patient. This meeting was about addressing her concerns.

Matt continued as though she hadn’t spoken at all. “The construction will continue as planned.”

Grunts across the room made it clear this news was not welcome. Sid Renner even shouted out, “Seriously?”

“Hear him out,” Nancy Chesney yelled out.

“Thank you.” Matt nodded to Nancy. “The inside of the theater is badly in need of an update, plus much of the old décor has already been stripped away. Lucky here will be able to give you more details on that work, but there are some changes the town will be happy with.”

“Eileen Montgomery will no longer be coming to town,” Lucky said. “Instead, Jordan Strongblossom will be putting together the biggest production in the history of Misty Mountain. Jordan will tell you a little bit more about that in a few minutes.”

Matt took over from there. “The biggest news is that Jim Jasper no longer owns Misty Mountain Music.”

“We bought it,” Lucky said. “And our goal is to keep it exactly as it was before.”

“But with a new name.” Matt smiled and glanced at Jordan. “Misty Mountain Playhouse.”

“Not exactly as it was before,” Jordan spoke up from the front row. “Better.”

Lucky smiled at her, and she smiled back. That one small exchange went straight to his heart. Yes, she was definitely his safe space, and he was hers. Just looking at her made it easier to say the next words.

“Misty Mountain is going to continue to grow.” He looked out over the crowd, ignoring that glower coming from Betty Jenkins’ direction. “We’re going to market the theater beyond this community. We’re promoting it across the region and maybe even the entire country. We hope it becomes an even bigger attraction.”

“And we’ll serve better food,” Matt added.

That brought applause, but not from the three ladies to his left. Even Mrs. Strongblossom sat, unsmiling, hands crossed in her lap.

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest?” Sid called out.

Lucky looked over at Matt, who kept his cool despite the fact that he was apparently going to be under attack over this. Maybe they should have asked that all questions and comments be held until the end of the meeting. But who was he kidding? That wouldn't have stopped the Sid Renners of the town.

"As you know, I have a lot invested in Misty Mountain," Matt said. "I own some rental cabins, and I'm starting up our town's first rental cabin community."

"And an onsite rental business," Matt's girlfriend pointed out.

Brianna had owned the town's only bookstore until it closed at the start of summer. Matt was taking over the site where Brianna's bookstore once stood. His plan was to open the town's first-ever vacation rental office there. If someone showed up in town without reservations, they could just pop in there and grab a cabin somewhere. He wasn't one hundred percent clear on the logistics, but that was how he understood it.

"I'm more than willing to step down as mayor if it becomes a problem," Matt continued. "But buying this property has allowed me to make sure the best interests of the town are kept in mind when we reopen."

"In other words, if we hadn't stepped in to buy it, Jim Jasper was going to do whatever he wanted," Lucky said.

It hadn't been an easy sell. First, Jordan had begun sending over all the information about the protest. She'd stretched it out over several days, forwarding the nasty emails they were getting along with some images of the crowd that kept showing up outside the theater. Mrs. Jenkins was always front and center at those, and Jordan's mom was noticeably absent.

"What kind of shows are you going to have at this place?" Betty Jenkins asked.

Lucky's gaze darted over to his girlfriend's face. Matt was looking at her, too.

Nodding, Jordan pushed herself to her feet, coming up to stand next to Lucky. He'd be more than happy to take a seat and keep her front and center, but he had a feeling she wanted him here. In fact, if she could stay up here with him while he took on the town, that would be great.

"We're doing a performance of *A Christmas Carol* for the theater's grand opening," she said. "We want it to be huge. We're hoping the entire town can get involved. We need set designers, costumers, makeup artists... We'll bring in professionals, but we'd love for the citizens of Misty Mountain to be a part of our cast and crew."

“And we’ll need extras,” Lucky said. “Lots and lots of extras.”

“That’s why we picked *A Christmas Carol*,” Jordan explained to the group. “There are crowd scenes, and we can have many of you up on stage alongside the actors.”

“And we want to hire local actors, too,” Matt said. “If any of your kids or grandkids have ever wanted to be on stage, we’re going to do a big audition when it gets closer to opening.”

“This is your theater,” Jordan said. Then she quickly corrected, “*Our* theater,” including herself in that.

She smiled over at Lucky. She didn’t just mean the two of them. She meant the entire town.

But when he turned his attention back to the audience, he saw expressions had changed. There weren’t nearly as many frowns, and people seemed friendlier. It had been a long time since he’d seen those kind faces around town, and he’d missed it.

But mostly, he noticed people looking from him to Jordan and back again. Apparently, their friends and neighbors were catching on that there was something going on between the two of them. They hadn’t kept it a secret, but he’d been too busy to pay attention to whether the word had gotten out yet or not. Even in normal times, he wasn’t one to keep his ear to the grapevine.

“I guess this is where we can open it up for questions,” Matt said, looking over at Lucky and Jordan.

They both nodded. He was just thankful Jordan hadn’t rushed back to her seat as soon as her part was finished. He liked having her next to him.

“Who’s doing the catering?” Charlotte Edmonds asked.

“We’re still looking around for someone to manage the food part of things,” Jordan said. “But if you know anyone...”

“My son runs one of the biggest catering companies in Nashville,” Charlotte said. “I’m sure he could recommend someone.”

“That would be great.” Jordan nodded.

“We should keep it local,” Sid Renner said.

Lucky narrowed his eyes at Sid. “Do you know anyone who grew up here who has that kind of experience?”

There were, of course, kitchen managers all over town. Jordan could reach out to the person who ran the kitchen at the resort or the diner. But most of them had been in their positions for a while, and they weren’t looking

to poach other business's top workers.

"How hard can it be?" Sid looked around. "We all cook, right?"

"Running a dinner theater is not the same as cooking in your kitchen, Sid," Mrs. Strongblossom said. "I'm sure Jordan's looking for professionals."

"Exactly," Jordan said. "But the good news is, we will need a full kitchen staff. Cooks, line preps, servers... It won't be buffet-style like Misty Mountain Music."

"Who's excited about the new playhouse?" Matt asked, raising his hand.

Lucky and Jordan raised theirs, as well, but as they scanned the audience, no other hands went up. People began looking at each other, and for a long, heart-stopping moment, Lucky was sure all of this had been for nothing. The town was still unhappy. They might not even support the newly renovated playhouse when it opened.

But suddenly, Jordan's mom's hand shot up in the air, followed by Mrs. Trapp next to her. Then Mrs. Trapp smacked Mrs. Jenkins with the back of her hand, at which point, Mrs. Jenkins uncrossed her arms and reluctantly lifted her hand.

It was as though that one move gave everyone permission to support the three people at the front of the room. That was when Lucky knew, without a doubt, that Mrs. Jenkins had been the ringleader.

One by one, hands went up in the air, and soon, every person in the place had a hand up. At least from where he stood, Lucky saw no gaps.

He looked over at Jordan, who returned his stare and gave him a big smile. They'd done it. It had taken a lot of hard work, but they'd managed to wrangle the town theater from the hands of a greedy businessman.

"I was never against it." That came from Nancy Chesney, who popped up from her chair, standing and looking around the group. "How many here were only protesting because those three women talked you into it?"

Hands lowered, but not all of them as Lucky stared, mouth open, frozen in shock. He estimated around a couple dozen people with their hands still in the air.

"I don't control you," Mrs. Jenkins said. She looked over at Mrs. Trapp. "We just made the suggestion that this might not be the best idea for our town."

"Oh, come on," Mrs. Strongblossom said. "We don't lie, remember? We might not tell the whole truth all the time, but when asked, we're always honest."

“We’ve been matchmaking,” Mrs. Trapp said. “It started with Brianna and Matt.”

“But we really got going with Lauralie and Sam,” Mrs. Jenkins added. “At that point, it became a competition, so when I saw the chance to push Maddie and Denver together, that’s exactly what I did.”

“That went a little too far,” Denver said, leaning forward to look at her. “I won’t say exactly what you did, but I’m pretty sure laws were broken.”

“Well, then, arrest me,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “But no harm was done in the end.”

Lucky wasn’t sure about that. From what he’d heard, Mrs. Jenkins had rammed her car into the back of Maddie’s Jeep, but he wasn’t going to bring that up. If she’d gotten away with it, who were they to call it out?

“So, all of this was a setup?” Jordan asked. “You were just... matchmaking?”

“No-sir-ee,” Sid said. “I was one hundred percent against a bunch of hooligans coming into my town.”

Hooligans? Lucky had a feeling Sid was woefully uninformed about Eileen Montgomery’s target audience. Maybe he just liked to be angry.

“Me, too,” Mason Chambers said.

That sentiment was echoed by several people, then followed by townspeople shouting out their complaints. They still weren’t happy with the progress being made in town. They wanted it known that before any new construction came along, residents should be given sufficient notice. They should show up at the planning meetings and make sure their voices were heard.

“I have something to say about that,” Gavin Mundy said, his voice carrying over the crowd.

Everyone stopped talking and people started shifting in their seats to look back at him. He seemed fidgety as he stood, not making eye contact, as usual.

This time, though, he didn’t have a file folder in hand. His messenger bag was hanging, crossbody-style, and his hands were empty.

“I was present for a lot of those meetings,” Gavin said. “But this goes back to the beginning of the summer. This town currently has thirty-four single adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two. That doesn’t include the people who’ve moved to the cabins and don’t come down except to go to the bank and post office. Since June, these three women have managed to matchmake nearly one-fourth of the town’s single twenty-

somethings.”

Neither Lucky nor Jordan was in their twenties anymore. But he wasn't going to question Gavin's numbers—not when he was helping make their point.

“That takes some serious skill,” Gavin said. “I say we applaud them.”

And that was exactly what happened. People started clapping, and the first row to Lucky's right, the one that contained their entire friend group and his sister, stood. Lucky and Jordan began clapping, too—all of them turning to face the three town matchmakers.

“Come on up here,” Matt said, gesturing for them to step forward.

That was when Lucky took his cue. He grabbed Jordan's hand and led her back to their chairs. In their row, everyone had taken their seats by then, along with the rest of the audience, so he and Jordan did the same.

It was nice just to be out of the spotlight. He'd prefer to stay there. His girlfriend might be a former actress, but behind the scenes was where he belonged.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Strongblossom said.

She stood in the center, Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Trapp on either side of her. Mrs. Jenkins had her arms crossed over her chest, but her expression was far less of a scowl than it had been since this meeting started.

“I owe the young people over here in the front row an apology,” Mrs. Strongblossom said. “We all three do.” She looked over at Mrs. Jenkins, who glanced at her, then resumed staring straight ahead. “We were a bit meddlesome. When the bookstore closed, I guess we needed an outlet for our frustration.”

“That's not it,” Mrs. Trapp said. “It all started because we saw an obvious spark between Brianna and Matt. They just needed a little urging. And then there was my niece, Lauralie.” Mrs. Trapp looked over at Lauralie with a big smile. “We've all thought Coach Wolf was just about the dreamiest guy in town.”

“Besides Lucky,” Mrs. Strongblossom said.

“Matt and Sam aren't bad to look at, either,” Mrs. Jenkins added.

Laughter spread throughout the crowd. The comment was so out of character for Mrs. Jenkins, it had no doubt surprised all the longtime residents around them. Personally, he found it a little amusing that these women had their eye on the guys in town, even if their purpose for studying them was to pair them up with the young women they knew and loved.

“Betty’s the one who took it to the next level.” Mrs. Strongblossom looked over at Mrs. Jenkins, who matched her stare with a glare.

She dropped her arms back to her sides and looked down at the crowd. “They’d already fixed up Brianna and Lauralie. They dared me to find a couple to put together. They were sure there was nobody else in town to fix up.”

“We didn’t dare you,” Mrs. Trapp said. “It was a statement of fact. You said you could find someone. Next thing we know, you’re ramming into cars and pulling out car parts and tampering with vehicles.”

“You did that all by yourself?” Denver asked.

Mrs. Jenkins narrowed her eyes at him. “What? Do you think I can’t disable a car battery on my own?”

Lucky wasn’t going to touch that one. But yes, he would assume Betty Jenkins wouldn’t know how to disable a car battery.

“You watched a video online that walked you through it,” Mrs. Strongblossom said. “Don’t act like you know how to do this stuff off the top of your head.”

“I’d like to see you do it after watching one video,” Mrs. Jenkins shot back. “And, for the record, I didn’t break the law when I hit Maddie’s Jeep. I paid for the damage out of my pocket. I had my son pose as my insurance agent to make it seem like the payment came from my insurance company.”

“We’re getting away from the point,” Mrs. Trapp interrupted. “After Maddie and Denver, there was only one couple left to fix up.”

They all looked over at Lucky and Jordan. He had his arm around her, draped over the back of her chair, and she was leaning into him a little. They no doubt looked like the happy couple they were.

“All I wanted out of my life was to see my children happy.” Mrs. Strongblossom pressed her hands to her chest. “Now that my oldest daughter has found her one true love, I can get back to my everyday life.”

“Ha!” Mrs. Jenkins said. “You won’t stop until all your children are married off and you have grandchildren running all over the place.”

“This is true,” Mrs. Trapp said. “And we all feel the same.” She looked around the room. “Doesn’t everyone want to see their children happily married so they can get grandchildren?”

Lucky didn’t have to look back to know a lot of people were nodding. And many of these people already had grandchildren. They nodded along anyway.

“So, when I saw Lucky remodeling the theater that morning, and then my daughter arrived...” Mrs. Strongblossom looked over at Jordan. “Well, let’s just say the wheels in this head of mine started turning. I had no idea they’d kissed in a closet way back in high school.”

Jordan straightened in her chair a little, and Lucky found his own breath catching. What? He looked around, his gaze landing on Liz Barrow, seated directly behind him.

“Everyone knew,” she said with a wince.

“You can’t keep a secret in this town, boy,” Christopher Padilla said.

Christopher’s son went to school with Lucky. They’d spent many hours at each other’s houses growing up. In fact, now that he thought about it, Christopher’s son was at that party, so no wonder he knew.

“Everyone in town knew, apparently,” Mrs. Strongblossom said as Lucky turned back around in his seat.

“I knew,” Mrs. Jenkins said.

“Me, too,” Mrs. Trapp added.

Lucky shook his head, his mouth formed in the start of a question. But he wasn’t sure which question to ask. Why? How? What on Earth would compel people to discuss seven—okay, *eight*—minutes in a closet fourteen years ago? Or maybe they’d been discussing it all fourteen of those years.

Mrs. Trapp gave Lucky a sympathetic stare. “There’s obviously a spark between the two of you. It was clear back then, and it’s clear right now. It’s just so...”

With that, Judi Trapp looked toward the ceiling with a dreamy expression. Kissing in a dark closet was something worth swooning over? He wouldn’t describe it that way if it was anyone else.

But yes, he’d been in that closet with Jordan. He knew that kiss had been something he never, ever would have escaped. Eventually, even if these three women hadn’t intervened, he would have fallen in love with this woman. Maybe he’d begun falling in love with her fourteen years ago.

“All I had to do was mention that Lucky was fixing up the theater in front of these two women.” Mrs. Strongblossom looked at each of her friends in turn. “The next thing I knew, this one was staging a protest.”

Her gesture was specific to Mrs. Jenkins, who gave a big shrug. Lucky still had questions, and he was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one.

“So, the entire protest was staged to get the two of us together?” he asked.

“Not entirely,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “It’s completely unfair what that man

was doing to Jordan. She's worked her tail off for that business for all these years, and he's just going to change it to something entirely new."

"And as it turns out, getting people riled up about change isn't all that hard," Mrs. Strongblossom said, looking out over the crowd.

"Some of you are still upset," Matt said, turning in his seat to look in the direction where all of Sid's shouts had originated.

"Nah," Sid called out. "That theater is the least of our problems."

Had the guy completely changed his tune or what? Lucky would turn in his chair to look at him, but he was afraid to make eye contact. If Sid and the entire town were backing off their protests, he wasn't going to argue.

"We're here to make a vow," Mrs. Strongblossom said. "Right, ladies?"

Both Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Trapp nodded, and Mrs. Jenkins said, "No more matchmaking."

"Can we get that in writing?" someone from the back called out. Lucky couldn't identify the voice.

"They've matchmade everyone in town." That was Nancy Chesney's voice. "They're running out of people."

"They can matchmake me," Sid Renner said. That brought some chuckles.

"Nobody wants to look at your grumpy face every day across the dinner table," Mrs. Strongblossom teased. She was smiling as she said it.

Were they flirting? Maybe Lucky and his friends could play matchmaker next—pair up all the older single people in town. It would serve them right.

But no, he had too much on his plate for personal stuff. He had to get this dinner theater up and running. Once that was over, he was pretty sure he'd be ready to settle down and start a family with the woman seated next to him...if she was game.

He'd do everything he could to show her he was the one she wanted to grow old with.

Mrs. Strongblossom looked at Matt. "If that's all, Matt, do you want to call an end to this meeting?"

Matt shook his head. "You're in charge now. I turn the gavel over to you."

"Let's go eat!" Mrs. Strongblossom called.

There was no mention of where this meal would take place, but Lucky knew from experience that they'd pile into the pizzeria across the street. He'd grab his friends and find somewhere a little less crowded to eat.

His friends. He couldn't help but smile to himself at that thought. It was nice to finally have a personal life and to be spending so much time around his little sister.

Yes, the three women up front had no idea just how many gifts they'd given the eight people seated in this front row. Maybe, over time, they'd see it, though.

“My coat is missing a bunch of fur,” Charlotte Edmonds said, stopping in front of Jordan.

That problem was presented to Jordan as she stood backstage. It was opening night, and the last thing she wanted to hear was a costuming problem, especially since it was so last minute.

“Just face the audience at all times,” Cheryl, the wardrobe assistant they’d brought over from a theater troupe in Knoxville, told the woman with the malfunction. “We’ll fix it afterward.”

“Shhh,” Donald, the stage manager, urged suddenly.

The audience broke into applause. The curtain was being pulled. It was showtime.

“It’s friends and family night,” Cheryl reminded Jordan, stepping up to stand next to her. “This is where we get all the bugs worked out.”

Jordan smiled at her friend, who’d returned to Misty Mountain to help out two years after leaving for a better job in a bigger city. That was the best thing about being fully in charge here. She could hire the people she wanted, and often those people were friends and former colleagues.

Only once they reached the final scene could Jordan finally breathe freely again. And then came the final bows. It might not be the first official production, but they were running through things exactly as they would need to go tomorrow night, when they debuted to a full house. That group was a combination of tourists and locals who weren’t part of the VIP group tonight.

They were already sold out for a full three weeks, which put them midway into December. Some locals had complained that they hadn’t been

able to get tickets for the dates they wanted, but Jordan considered being that busy a good thing.

“We have one last person who hasn’t come out for her applause yet,” Donald said into the microphone.

His voice blared through the speakers that were stationed throughout the auditorium, but he was standing just feet from Jordan. She turned and tossed him a puzzled frown. Every single actor associated with the production was on stage.

“She’s the woman who put this whole thing together, and she’s kept this theater running for years. Put your hands together for...Jordan Strongblossom!”

As she stood, frozen to the spot, applause boomed through the building. It was far louder than the claps and cheers the stars of the show had gotten. That wasn’t right. She definitely didn’t deserve this sort of praise.

“Get out there.” Cheryl gave her a slight nudge.

That was all it took to get Jordan’s feet moving. It was either go forward or topple, face-first, toward the floor. She felt like she was in a daze as she stepped out onto the stage, the glare of lights obscuring the audience in front of her.

That was for the best. It had been a long time since she’d been on a stage in front of a crowd. She’d forgotten how terrifying it was—even more terrifying when it was your own hometown.

The star of the show, Pamela, was a friend who’d brought her mega-talent all the way from Nashville to help out an old friend. As Jordan approached, Pamela grabbed a bouquet from someone beneath the stage and walked over to hand them to her.

“Great job,” Pamela mouthed and stepped back—way back, leaving Jordan standing front and center.

In fact, everyone had stepped back. This definitely was awkward. It was way too much attention.

Then someone emerged through the blaring light. An outline at first—but an outline of someone she knew all too well. The *only* someone who could calm her nerves right now...or ever. Lucky.

He smiled at her as he approached the stage. He was wearing a suit. She hadn’t seen him since earlier that afternoon, and at that point, he’d been in his usual T-shirt and jeans. It had seemed a little weird that he hadn’t rushed backstage to give her a quick kiss for luck before the show started, but maybe

he was saving the surprise for after the show.

The most noticeable thing about him was his nervousness. He seemed to be shaking as he approached, his jaw clenched and his chest rising and falling in quick bursts. That mirrored how she felt about being up here in front of the entire town. No surprise. He'd made it clear he was definitely a behind-the-scenes kind of guy.

He came to stand next to her—not kissing her, just taking her one free hand and turning her toward him. As she tried to piece together what was happening, he went down on one knee.

This was the moment. A moment she had not a single clue was coming.

“Jordan,” Lucky said. Reaching into his right jacket pocket, he pulled out a small velvet box.

“Wait!” Pamela said.

She stepped forward and held her lavalier mic out to Lucky. He looked at it, and for a long second, Jordan was sure he was going to say no to the request. But he gave a nod and reached out, taking the mic and clipping it to his suit.

“Jordan,” he repeated. Reaching over, he let go of her hand and pried open the box, then turned it around so she could see the diamond ring nestled inside. “Will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Howard?”

She couldn't get the words out, so she nodded, tears welling in her eyes as his image blurred in front of her. He pulled the ring out, sliding it onto her left ring finger.

“Is that a yes?” someone asked from behind her.

She knew all this would be a blur later. She just hoped someone was capturing it on video.

Without taking her eyes off Lucky, Jordan took a deep breath and forced her frozen vocal cords to make noise. “Yes!”

Eyes filled with emotion, Lucky stood and gave her that kiss she'd been waiting for since well before the curtain went up that evening. It was worth the wait. Besides, they had a lifetime of kisses ahead of them.

If she thought the applause was loud before, it was deafening now. The audience was on its feet when she glanced over in that direction, her left arm clutching the flowers to her chest as Lucky held tightly to her right. They faced their friends and family together, looking out over the crowd of people who'd been with them since childhood. Her parents, his parents, their friends...

And right there, at a table to the far left of the stage, were the three matchmakers who'd had a hand in getting them and all their friends together. Jordan smiled and nodded at them. It was her way of saying "thank you."

Normally, everyone would rush offstage and wait as the auditorium cleared, but it was friends and family night. The VIPs who would usually be ushered backstage to their loved ones filled the audience. These weren't just Misty Mountain residents. These were family members of the cast and crew, and some had traveled from other states.

Maddie rushed onto the stage, giving both Lucky and Jordan hugs. They were the first of all their friends to get engaged, but the others wouldn't be far behind. She was sure of it.

"He's setting a high bar for the rest of us," Denver joked as he gave Jordan a hug and Lucky a slap on the back.

"Tell me about it," Matt said. "Look at that ring."

"I wanted something that reflected her personality," Lucky said.

The tears welling in her eyes had made it tough to see details. All she knew was something in that velvet box was sparkling like crazy.

Now that she glanced down at her left ring finger, though, she saw what Matt meant. *That* was a ring.

Never, in her wildest dreams, had she imagined someday having an engagement ring like that. But she never would have imagined marrying a man who had his own pool, complete with a waterfall, in his backyard. His gigantic cabin was certainly a step up from the eight-hundred-square-foot cabin she'd been living in most of her adult life.

"Stick with me," Lucky said. "I can hook you up with someone who will find the perfect ring for you when it's time."

That was one thing about Lucky. He always shied away from talk about his success. But he was constantly helping out his friends and his family. He'd figured out how to make a lot of money for himself, and now he wanted to help the people he cared about do the same.

"I'm so excited for you!" Brianna said, rushing around Maddie and Denver to give the two of them big hugs.

Matt was trying to make his way over, but he'd been pulled into a conversation with none other than Gavin Mundy. Lauralie just kept going without him, though.

"I can't wait to help you plan." Lauralie grabbed Jordan's hand to take a peek at her ring. She squealed. "This is so exciting."

Sam came around the other side to congratulate Lucky. Denver crept over that way, too, giving the three women a chance to huddle.

“We have to get together and talk all things wedding,” Jordan said with a big smile. “I want all of you to be my bridesmaids.”

Squeals and screams filled the air as the four women shared even more hugs. People were staring at them, but Jordan didn’t care.

“What about your little sister?” Lauralie asked.

“She can be my maid of honor.” Jordan handed the flowers over to Maddie, who offered to take them to her dressing room. As she walked off, Jordan continued. “There’s room enough for everyone.”

No doubt Lucky would choose the guys as his groomsmen. He didn’t have brothers, and as far as she knew, there weren’t any closer friends than the ones he’d made lately. He always said that he’d long neglected his friendships, and he was so glad the matchmakers had brought all these amazing friends into his life.

“Maybe we should do a destination wedding,” Jordan suggested.

But she knew that wouldn’t happen. They’d get married right here in Misty Mountain. There were plenty of venues, but she wanted to have the ceremony on this very stage. They’d worked together to remodel this place, so it felt as much like home as their own two houses.

“We’ll have plenty of away time when we take our beach trip this summer,” Lauralie said.

Brianna turned to face Jordan. “You are coming on our beach trip, right?”

Jordan smiled. They’d mentioned it a few weeks earlier. It seemed perfect. Four bedrooms for four couples. But none of them would be married yet, so the girls would probably pair up in two of the rooms, and the guys would take the other two. Maybe they could make it an annual thing, and by the following summer, each married couple would have a bedroom.

At some point, Jordan’s mom had grabbed the microphone. “May I have your attention, please?”

All smiles faded as everyone turned. Josephine Strongblossom was standing at the center of the stage with Jordan and all her friends to the right of her. Jordan couldn’t help but notice her mom didn’t have her best friends flanking her as she normally would. Even though she was surrounded by people, she was tackling this crowd alone.

“I know we all just had dinner, and normally they would have rolled out the dessert options, but this is friends and family night.” Josephine

Strongblossom's mouth spread into a smile. "We made our special desserts and handed them off to the kitchen. If you'll all go back to your tables, they'll bring your sweets out to you."

As she spoke, waitstaff carried out big trays full of treats. The first group of servers headed straight toward the stage, where the four couples stood with some of the other members of the cast.

"As some of you already know, I made sunrise bread for Matt and Brianna. Sunrise for the hope a new relationship represents. Plus, I included blueberries to represent Matt's eyes and cherries to represent Brianna's lips."

One of the servers climbed the steps and headed toward their group of friends and lowered his tray. There were paper plates, each with four small bites of dessert on it.

"The pineapple coconut cake is for Sam and Lauralie," Jordan's mom said as Jordan reached out to take one of the plates. "A blend of their favorite sweet stuff."

Jordan held her breath as she tried not to stare too hard at the other four portions. They were cakes, but she couldn't identify the type. One slice was filled with multicolor sprinkles.

"We all know Maddie and Denver first met on the leaderboard of their favorite game," Jordan's mother said. "What does any competition need? A celebration. So, I made a celebration cake in honor of the two of them."

Jordan looked over at Maddie, who had a huge smile on her face. She was honored. Jordan completely got it. Few things in life made her feel as loved as her mother making a special cake for her. She'd loved that, growing up.

"The last one was the toughest." Mrs. Strongblossom looked over at Jordan and Lucky. "I know my daughter better than anyone else in this world. I know what sweets she likes..."

"Pretty much all of them," Lucky joked.

"But with Jordan and Lucky, it's all about luck," Mrs. Strongblossom continued. "We're all lucky when we find our true love, but the two of them found each other twice. The second time was the charm."

Everyone was staring at Jordan and Lucky now, and she found herself feeling self-conscious. How had she ever gotten up in front of a large audience to perform?

The answer to that was simple. As an actress, she'd been onstage as a character. Tonight, she was up here as herself, and it was a little off-putting. But having Lucky next to her certainly helped.

“There are several different types of lucky desserts,” Mrs. Strongblossom said. “They all share one thing in common. They have a prize hidden somewhere in the dessert. If you find the prize in your portion, it’s good luck.”

Jordan looked down at the dessert tray while her mother talked. There was only one dessert on that plate that hadn’t just been described. It looked like it was a piece from a Bundt cake with its beige center and glossy exterior. But she couldn’t say that for sure unless she saw the original.

“It’s called an almond cake,” Jordan’s mom continued. “In one of the slices being distributed, there’s an almond. Be careful biting into it. I wouldn’t want someone to break a tooth. If you get the almond, you’ll have seven years of good luck.”

How she came up with seven was beyond Jordan, but she loved the theme. Their couple dessert was almond cake. She could go with that.

Lucky looked over at Jordan with a teasing smile, and for the second time that night, Jordan’s vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. One spilled over on her cheek, and she wiped at it with her free hand—the one that wasn’t holding the bouquet. The one with the brand-new engagement ring. She was surrounded by friends, and her mom had just made a dessert for her—a dessert that was being offered to friends, friends’ family members, and fellow Misty Mountain residents.

Every time she didn’t think she could be happier, something else happened, making her heart soar a little higher.

As everyone rushed to grab a plate of dessert and start tasting, Jordan and Lucky somehow managed to find each other. They held a bite of their almond cake, neither having taken a bite yet.

“We have our own dessert,” he said.

She smiled up at him. “I guess we’ll have to serve it at our wedding.”

“First, we have to see if it tastes good or not.”

Jordan gasped in mock indignation. “Are you suggesting something my mom baked might not be delicious?”

Lucky shook his head and smiled down at her. “Your mother really made all four of these desserts?”

As Jordan glanced over his shoulder, she spotted her mom squished around a table with her friends. All three women had turned down the offer to be in the play, but they’d handed out programs at the door and planned to do that every night throughout the Christmas season. Yes, Jordan could easily

pay people to do things like that—or just set them on a table—but the Misty Mountain community wanted to be a part of this theater, and she was more than happy to give everyone one sort of role or another.

“My mom always has help with her baking and her cooking.” Jordan returned her attention to his face. “The three of them love to cook together. They usually fight over the recipes, but in the end, my mom always wins.”

“Well, let’s see if one of us gets seven years of good luck,” he said.

She had a good answer for that. “I don’t even have to bite into it. I’m already looking ahead at the seven best years of my life. That makes me pretty lucky.”

“I’m the one who’s lucky.” He laughed as he realized what he’d said. “No pun intended.”

Shaking her head, but smiling, Jordan lifted the dessert to her lips. She took a tentative bite off one corner. It was delicious—just enough almond flavor, but also moist enough that it stayed completely intact even after she bit into it.

“Wow,” he said. “Your mom continues to amaze me with her baking skills.”

As she took in the compliment, Jordan tried another bite, but this time, her teeth didn’t sink into it. She was so busy looking at him, it didn’t hit her at first what it might be. But then, she pulled back a little and looked down. Yes, she’d gotten the almond.

“I got it,” she said, turning the piece of cake around to show him the almond.

His eyes widened as he looked down at the small nut. “Should we announce it?”

She looked up at him and shook her head. “Maybe it’s something we should keep to ourselves for a little longer.”

“I like that.” He smiled. “In fact, maybe we should just keep it to ourselves forever. Seven years of good luck.”

“And then some.”

They both took another bite of their cake, then turned and walked toward the edge of the stage to sit with their friend group. As they sat, in a row, staring out over the audience, Jordan suddenly felt like the stage was exactly where she belonged. But only if the people closest to her were up there with her.

EPILOGUE

The guys were fighting over the grill again. That much was clear to Jordan before she even stepped out onto the back patio.

They'd turned the waterfall off, as they tended to do when everyone was over. So, she could hear the conversation surrounding whether a hot dog should have light char or heavy char or no char at all.

She stopped at the door to the patio and smiled out at the scene in front of her. This was home.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out, pulling her sunglasses down from on top of her head. It was so bright out today, she needed the shades in front of her eyes until she woke up a little more.

They were all here—Lucky, Denver, Sam, and Matt were at the grill, while Maddie and Lauralie were seated around the table. Brianna sat on the ground next to a big baby pool they kept near the table on days like this to keep the little ones cool.

“There she is!” Maddie called out as Jordan headed toward them. “Our napping expectant mom.”

Naps had become Jordan's best friend in her second trimester. Although she and Lucky had been the last among their friend group to get pregnant the first time, they were making up for lost time. They had not one but two babies on the way, which meant the sixth month was brutal.

“Sorry,” Jordan said. “I haven't been sleeping well at night.”

“I slept like a log with this one,” Brianna said, tweaking Caleb's nose. He was two and a half and a bundle of energy. Right now, he was splashing so hard, she was sure there would be no water left in the pool soon.

“I’m not ready for those sleepless nights again.” Lauralie shifted in her seat. She was three months pregnant with their third. They’d just broken the news over dinner a few nights ago.

“I can’t wait until they’re big enough to play in the big pool,” Jordan said on a sigh.

Before they knew it, their twins would be in that big pool alongside their cousins and friends. Eventually, they wouldn’t even need adults in there with them. Nothing made her happier than knowing their back yard would be the setting for so many great memories.

“Don’t worry,” Lauralie said. “We coated the kids in a layer of sunscreen. They’re safe from the sun.”

“Chemical free and waterproof, of course,” Maddie added.

Luralie looked over at her friend. “Did we have chemical-free sunscreen growing up?”

“I don’t remember it,” Maddie said.

“Me, either.” Brianna shook her head, jumping into the conversation from where she sat. “I don’t know how we survived childhood.”

“Imagine living in my time,” Jordan said. They all turned to look at her. “They hadn’t even invented sunscreen yet. We had to hide behind dinosaurs if we wanted to avoid the sun.”

Her friends made a face at her. It was an ongoing bit between the four of them. They teased her about her age, even though she was only a couple of years older, and she teased back, even though they were only a couple of years younger. The same banter went on with the guys. It was all in good fun, of course.

“Be nice to my wife,” Lucky said.

He was approaching the women, having parted from the battling grill masters to head their way. He walked around the table and gave his wife a kiss.

“Did you have a good nap?” he asked.

Jordan nodded. “Sorry I slept so long. I set my alarm, but I snoozed a couple of times.”

“We were just going to let you sleep until the food was ready.”

He stepped back and looked at the kids. He was always keeping his eyes on them. It hadn’t surprised Jordan one bit that he was so protective. It was the same heroic nature she’d sensed in him from the start. He was one of the nicest guys alive, but if you messed with his family, watch out.

When he turned back to face the women, he had a big smile on his face. “What do you all think about upgrading our beach house?”

Each summer, they went to Florida, but the four-bedroom beach house Matt invested in before they were all married had gotten a little crowded. They’d casually thrown around the idea of buying another one since the original beach house had become a lucrative investment. They rented it out throughout the year to vacationers. Matt was even looking into buying some condos up and down the coast as vacation rental investments.

“I’m more of a mountain guy myself,” Lucky said. “But that once-a-year change of scenery helps recharge my mind.”

Plus, it was clear that even though he liked the mountains, Lucky enjoyed water. His construction business had expanded to include backyard landscapes. Not just pools, but water features like the one he had in his own backyard.

“I say we add some bunk beds to the current house,” Maddie said. “Remember when we were kids, how much we loved bunk beds?”

Lucky smiled at her. The two of them had made up for lost time after reconnecting. They’d even been in each other’s wedding parties. It had brought the entire family closer, and now they made a point to get together every Sunday night for dinner.

“This would be the two of you going in on the investment?” Brianna asked.

“All of us,” Lucky said.

Denver and Sam had gotten more involved in real estate investing as their group spent more time together. Denver’s auto repair shop was thriving, and Sam and Lauralie were doing well, too. They’d bought a house together and turned Sam’s modest cabin into a long-term rental.

“I’m up for another remodel,” Lucky said with a shrug.

His words took Jordan back to the months they’d spent together at the theater. Their relationship had been new, but those early days of sneaking kisses in her office were some of her happiest memories.

“Can we wait until the babies are here?” Lauralie asked. “The last thing we need to be doing now is starting a big project.”

“We’ll do it this fall,” Lucky said with a shrug. “Everyone will be settled by then. I’ll talk to the guys about it. Matt and I could head down there for a long weekend and get things underway.”

“Did I hear guys’ trip?” Matt asked as he approached with a large platter

full of hot dogs.

It was time to gather the kids and get everything set up to eat. As they scrambled to their feet, Lucky filled Matt in on the plans. They were still preliminary for now, but Maddie knew her husband. Once the wheels were put in motion, he'd keep rolling, full speed ahead, until the project was finished.

"Don't get too excited about your getaway," Jordan said as she stepped closer to Lucky.

Her protruding belly made it tough to get too close to him. They'd gotten used to side hugs lately.

"No way." He smiled down at her, putting a hand on each shoulder. "I miss you already, and I don't even know when we're going."

"You two," Maddie said.

The eye roll came through in her tone, but Maddie was one to talk. She and Denver stole a quick kiss before she settled her youngest back into her baby carrier so she could tend to her oldest.

As Jordan stepped back and watched the chaos all around her, she couldn't help but smile. This was what she'd waited all her life for. This feeling of family. Of belonging. Of being surrounded by people who loved her. This was what small-town living was all about. She couldn't wait to see what was in store for all of them.

It was pure luck that she'd been able to nab the friends, the job, and the perfect guy. A guy named Lucky.



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