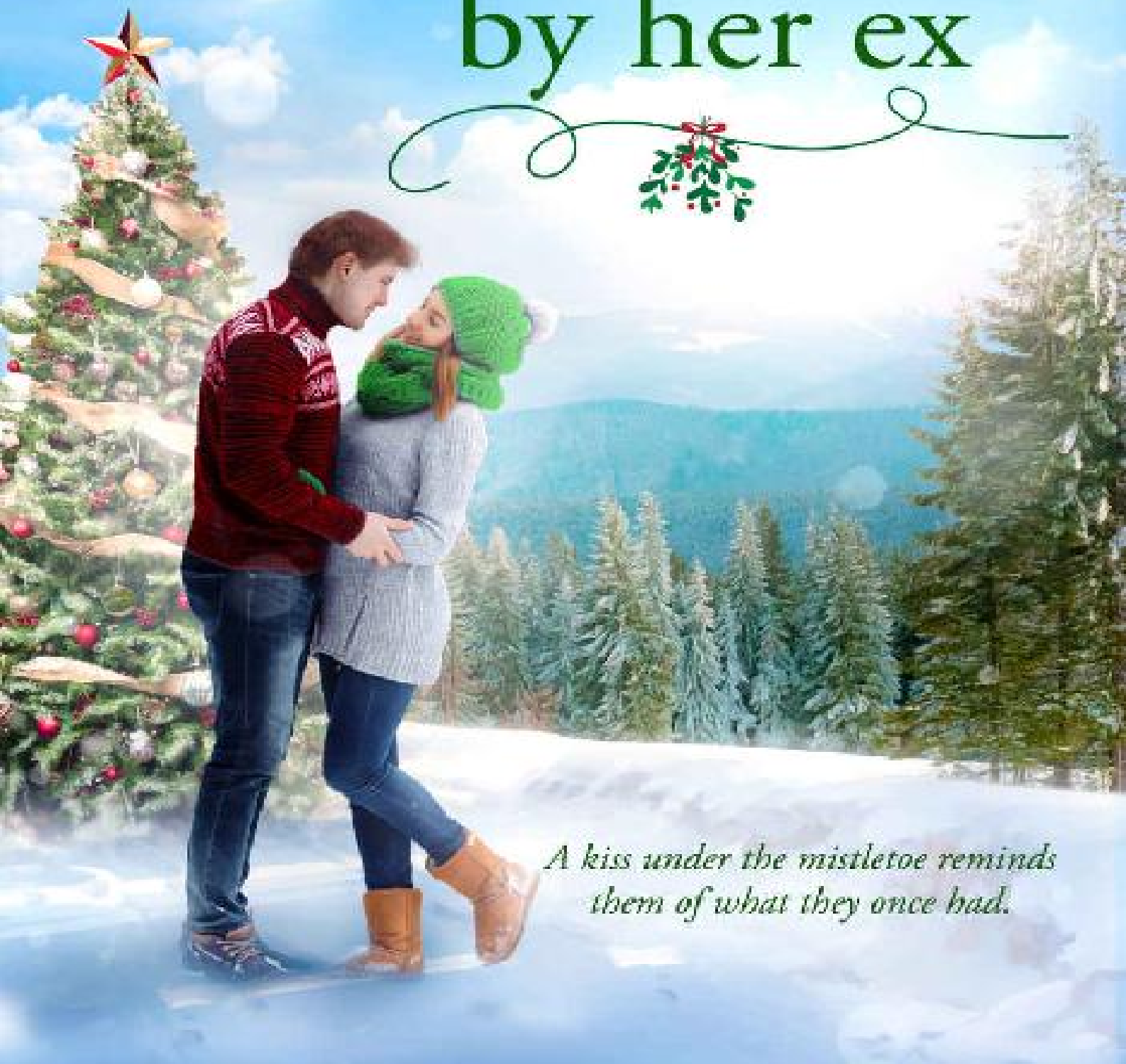


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MACIE ST. JAMES

*kissed*  
by her ex



*A kiss under the mistletoe reminds them of what they once had.*

# **KISSED BY HER EX**

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MACIE ST. JAMES

A Misty Mountain Mistletoe Novella

Version 1.0926

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Epilogue

This was one of those days when Charity Ardmore needed four hands and two brains. In fact, if someone could just clone her, that would be great. But she had to settle for one of those four cup holders that the Misty Mountain Café kept around for just this situation.

“Watch out for the mistletoe!” Joe, the café’s owner, called out just as the door miraculously opened for her.

She couldn’t see who the polite person was, but she threw out a “Thank you” as she passed through it.

“Charity?”

No no no no no. Not today. Not now. Not when her hair was in complete frizz-ball mode.

But she pasted a smile on her face, turned, and sent up a prayer that she looked better than she thought. “Nic Winters. What are you doing here?”

It was a ridiculous question, considering today was Black Friday. Everyone with family still living here was in her hometown of Misty Mountain, Tennessee, for the long weekend. And they’d all come downtown for the Christmas tree lighting.

“Just visiting the folks for the weekend,” he said. “You know... Thanksgiving.”

“Excuse me.”

A voice interrupted whatever Charity might have said. An older man was trying to get to the door they were blocking. Nic nudged his head to the right, then turned and took several steps in that direction.

Charity followed. The whole time, she was scrambling to figure out what to do here. Should she say she had to go or stay and talk to him for a few more minutes?

“You still live here?” he asked. “I figured you might have moved away to work with your sister.”

Charity had two sisters, but he was obviously referring to the one who had her own TV show. Helping Ana with her on-camera renovation projects would be a natural fit for Charity’s talents, considering she was an interior decorator by profession.

But this was a sore subject between them when they dated. She’d told Nic long ago she loved Misty Mountain and had no intention of leaving. That hadn’t changed since Nic dumped her a few weeks into his first semester of college eight years ago.

“I bought a cabin in the Misty Lakes subdivision,” she said.

“Misty Lakes.”

He arched his eyebrows. He’d been away so long he probably had no idea how much that particular area of town had grown. There were now modest homes in what was once the town’s most upscale neighborhood.

“You said you’re here all weekend?” she asked, mostly to make conversation. Keep things casual.

His mouth spread into a smile. “We should get together while I’m here. Maybe have a cup of coffee.” He looked down at the four cups she held in front of her.

“That would be great,” she said. “My phone number is on my website. Or you could just email me.”

His smile faded slightly at the word “email.” Did that sound too formal? They hadn’t seen each other for eight years,

and the last time things had been...weird between them. He'd dumped her by phone a few days later.

What did he expect? The red-carpet treatment?

"I really have to go," she blurted before she lost the confidence to say the words. "Great seeing you again."

She turned and willed her legs to move, but they didn't. She seemed stuck in this spot.

"Charity."

That was the second time in a few minutes that he'd said her name—a name he'd said many, many times from second grade through senior year. They'd been friends first and boyfriend-girlfriend later. That was what made it even harder for her to stand here in front of him, knowing he was little more than a stranger at this point.

She turned back toward him, pasting a friendly smile on her face. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

The emotion in his big blue eyes made it clear this was an apology he'd been thinking about issuing for a while. She felt the weird urge to apologize, too, but for what? For telling him she never planned to live outside Misty Mountain? That she didn't want to leave her family?

She didn't regret that, even for a second. Yes, both her sisters had moved away, but they weren't like her. Misty Mountain was in her blood. Besides, her parents were still in town. As long as they were around, she wasn't going anywhere.

Finally, she realized she was just standing there, letting the coffees and cocoa go cold while he waited for some sort of response. So she gave him a nod and said, "Thank you," then gathered her courage and started toward the square.

It was a short walk, but she actually breathed a sigh of relief when she decided Nic could no longer see her. Of course, she doubted very seriously he was still standing there. He'd surely headed into the café seconds after she'd walked



away. But now she could focus on work, which was what she needed to be doing anyway.

“Coffee!” her best friend Noelle called out with a clap as Charity approached. Matt, the town’s mayor, was standing next to her. They were both at the bottom of the steps that led to the raised platform that held the gigantic Christmas tree.

The platform stayed up throughout the Christmas season, and they used it to host various events. The local high school band played one night, a church choir sang, and there was even a play put on by the local dinner theater. It was all part of what made Misty Mountain the best town in the world—in her very biased opinion, anyway.

“Hopefully, it’s still warm,” Charity said, sliding the cup holder toward Matt.

He grabbed two cups—one for himself and one for the town administrator. Tonight, the administrator was climbing up on that makeshift stage, along with some people from the city council, to officially light the tree.

Noelle took her cup and sipped. “Perfect. Here, let me toss that for you.”

She reached out for the cup holder, which now held only Charity’s peppermint hot cocoa. Joe only did those during the holiday season. She’d been looking forward to it but running into her ex had ruined that for her.

“It’s go time,” Matt said as soon as Noelle returned from a trip to the nearby garbage can.

With a nod, Noelle slipped into place behind the group, and Charity took a deep breath and started up the steps, peppermint hot chocolate in her left hand. All she had to do was introduce the mayor, then she could slip back down the steps and slink into the background where she liked to stay.

She set her cup near the steps so she could grab it on her way down. She’d do this one quick thing and be gone. It would take only an extra half-second or so.

But as she grabbed the microphone, her eyes were busy scanning the crowd for signs of that head of wavy auburn hair.

Her ex had gotten so handsome in the years since she had last seen him. Movie star-level good looks. It seemed patently unfair, since he'd dumped her.

“Good afternoon, Misty Mountain.”

Her voice seemed unnaturally loud—obnoxious, even. Could they turn this thing down?

But her voice had the effect of quieting the crowd. Within seconds, all eyes were on her. Only a few murmurings and a couple of crying babies remained.

“Misty Mountain’s tree lighting is a tradition,” she said. “It goes all the way back to the 1970s when the mayor at the time decided this town was the perfect place to spend the holiday season. Today, we have tons of tourists, as well as seasonal residents, and some of them are here today. And then there are the lifetimers like me who were born and raised here and will be here the rest of our days.”

She had written this introduction last night. At the time, she couldn’t have even dreamed that Nic Winters might be somewhere nearby. Hopefully, he was still behind the door of that coffee shop, well out of earshot. But if he was outdoors and nearby, he would hear every word.

And she’d made it clear, once again, that she had no plans of ever leaving. Nothing had changed in that regard.

Not that it mattered. He was in town for another day at most. No way would she let him near her heart so he could stomp on it before he left town.

“The man I’m up here to introduce needs no introduction.” She let out a nervous laugh. “But I’m going to introduce him, anyway. Put your hands together for our mayor, Matt North.”

The audience began clapping, even though she’d bet at least half of them had no clue who the mayor of this town was. Even if some vacationed here every year, this was a new mayor.

Matt appeared on stage, followed by his entourage. Noelle breezed past her best friend just as Charity was handing the microphone over to him. She swooped down and grabbed the

cocoa cup, continuing down the steps before anyone could stop her. Nobody had specified whether she should stay on the stage or leave.

She didn't have a choice. She had stuff to do. She was the one who'd put this event together. She'd made sure the white lights were functioning and the vendors were set up on the outskirts of the crowd. Until it was over, she had to hover and make sure nothing went wrong.

But as she headed to the area behind the stage where the production crew was set up, she saw a small crowd gathered. Her assistant, Jayne, was on the outskirts of the group. She caught Charity's eye as she approached.

"Charity!" she called out, rushing toward her boss. "We have a situation."

Nic Winters stood near the most famous structure in Misty Mountain. It was a tacky bronze statue of the town's founder, Louis Ames. It'd rested back here, mostly forgotten, since its dedication in the seventies.

But right now, it threatened to steal the show from the forty-foot tree in the center of Town Square. All because of the mistletoe someone had hung on the statue's hand.

Charity's voice cut through the air. "Good afternoon, Misty Mountain."

Frowning, Nic looked at the crowd around the statue. Couples were taking turns kissing under the mistletoe, while other couples snapped pictures. They were so caught up in what they were doing, they obviously didn't realize the ceremony was starting.

Nic, on the other hand, stepped away from the mistletoe hanging from the bronze index finger and headed straight toward the center of the square. He kept going until he had a clear view of the stage.

His first love had just taken the mic and stepped up to the middle of the stage. Until about fifteen minutes ago, Nic had thought he was over Charity Ardmore. She wasn't just his first love. She'd also been one of his best friends in both elementary and middle school.

In fact, she'd been such an important part of his life for a full decade, it was hard to believe he'd walked away eight years ago and never looked back. Every time he came to town,

though, he thought of her. He wondered what it might be like to run into her again.

All this time, he should have just come to the tree lighting. His parents weren't into that sort of thing, his sister was too work obsessed, and he'd never wanted to come alone. But tonight, he needed something to lift his spirits, so here he'd ended up. Within five minutes of parking, he held the door for the first woman he'd ever loved.

Charity waited for the noise to die down, glancing nervously to her left. He assumed the person she was introducing was over there—probably the man or woman who was heading up this tree-lighting ceremony. Unless Charity was the one doing that. If so, he'd settle in for the show.

She scanned the crowd, and he wondered if she was looking for him. Or maybe seeing him again had no impact on her at all. It would serve him right. He was the one who'd broken up with her not long after he left for college. By phone. He could still hear her crying on the other end of that telephone line.

He'd been immature. That was the best explanation he could give for it. He wanted a clean slate when he started his freshman year at Ohio State. He wanted to be free to date without being tied down to someone back home.

But in college, he'd always felt like something was missing from his relationships. It was something he'd had with Charity. Over time, he'd stopped thinking about it so much and had even gotten married. That marriage hadn't lasted, but he'd loved her. It just became clear, over time, that they were on two different paths.

That seemed to be a pattern for him.

“Misty Mountain's tree lighting is a tradition,” she said. “It goes all the way back to the 1970s when the mayor at the time decided this town was the perfect place to spend the holiday season. Today, we have tons of tourists, as well as seasonal residents, some of whom are here today. And then there are the lifetimers like me who were born and raised here and will be here the rest of our days.”

Nic was taking a sip from his coffee when those words filled the air. He nearly choked on the liquid as it went down. That answered his question. She'd never for a minute regretted telling him she planned to live in this town for the rest of her life.

That hadn't set well with Nic. He had plans, and they went way beyond living in this bubble. He was *not* going to become his parents.

"Put your hands together for our mayor, Matt North."

Charity's voice pulled Nic out of his thoughts. He could just stand here and watch her. There was no harm in that, right? Then he'd finish his coffee, toss the cup in the trash, and head straight to his truck.

It would take time, but he'd forget about her just as he had the first time. Eventually, he'd be able to drift off to sleep at night without the memory of her face poking at him, keeping him tossing and turning. And it would be easier this time because he wouldn't have gotten his heart involved.

But as Matt grabbed the mic from her and took center stage, Charity didn't join the group behind him. Instead, she kept walking, passing Matt's entourage and leaving the stage.

Nic hadn't planned for that. Would she be down here in the crowd, milling around? Could he go talk to her if he wanted to? At least stand close to her, maybe?

Wait, that sounded a little creepy. He was not a creep. He needed to get out of here, to put some distance between the two of them.

Taking a final sip of his coffee, he turned with every intention of heading toward the overflow parking lot on the other side of what used to be the bookstore and boutique. But as he walked, he cast a glance to his left—to that statue he'd ignored for most of his life. A statue that suddenly intrigued him.

Scanning the area to make sure nobody was watching, Nic tossed his empty cup in a trash can and started toward the statue. The crowd was gone, apparently having drifted over to

watch the tree lighting. It was just Nic and Louis Ames, founder of Misty Mountain. A bushel of mistletoe hung from that finger, strung on one of the bendable wire hooks used on Christmas ornaments.

He could easily remove it, even though it had been tightly wound there. But why would he do that? He still believed in romance...for other people. Maybe even for himself if he someday recovered from his failed marriage. His failure as a person.

A strange sound caught his attention just as he was stepping back to leave. It was the sound of high heels on concrete. He realized as he turned that those high heels were on the feet of his first love.

“Charity?” he asked for no reason in particular.

She skidded to a halt nearby, but her gaze only lingered on him a few seconds before she shifted it to the statue. “We have to get that mistletoe down. Noelle hung it. She had a stepstool.”

Nic was trying to focus on her words, but he couldn't seem to get past how beautiful she was up close. Had her cheekbones always been that prominent, her lashes that long? And her light brown hair was the perfect midway point between straight and curly. She always used to complain about how frizzy it got in the dry weather, but everything about it was perfect. Everything about *her* was perfect.

“Stepstool,” he said.

That was the one word he could pick out of everything she'd said. She'd mentioned Noelle, her best friend. They'd always been close. He thought he'd heard at some point that Noelle moved away, but maybe, like him, she was here for the holidays.

“She put mistletoe on the bronze statue using a stepstool,” Charity said. “She had an idea.”

Charity returned her attention to him and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. He looked from her to the statue and back again.

Sighing, she set her coffee cup on the ground. Then she walked over, stood beneath the mistletoe, and rose as high as she could, demonstrating that even the tips of her fingers didn't reach. It probably had a little to do with the platform that had been built beneath Louis Ames's feet. But the height was what made it so easy for everyone to step below the hand of the statue and get their kissing photos.

"I need someone slightly taller to reach up and pull it down," Charity lowered off tiptoe and stared at him.

She needed his help...or a stepstool. The former was easier to get right now.

"People seemed to be enjoying themselves over here." Nic gestured toward the crowd. "They might even want to come back when the ceremony is over. It became a sort of photo booth. You know, like the kind they have at weddings. They set something up, and everyone has fun snapping pictures and sharing them on social media."

"I get it." She nodded. "It's good publicity. That's why I urged Charity to put it there. I knew it would help promote our town, and the more people who visit, the better things are for my interior design business."

She was still standing under the mistletoe, and Nic was struck with the sudden urge to walk toward her and kiss her. No, that wouldn't be a good idea. Not at all. No matter how much this magnetic force seemed to be pulling him in that direction.

He took a couple of steps toward her and looked up. "You know, that's one thing we never did. Three Christmases as a couple, and..."

He pointed up. He'd lowered his gaze back to her face, so he was looking right at her. He swore she was blushing.

"Illegal," she blurted.

That took him by surprise. He blinked several times in rapid succession, then looked up at the mistletoe again. He was trying with all his might to piece together what part of this was illegal.



“Kissing under the mistletoe is illegal now?” he finally asked. If so, they’d passed some strange laws since he’d been gone. “There’s no law against it where I live. Not that I know of, anyway.”

Not that he kissed people under mistletoe all the time. That might be how it came across, though. He bit his tongue. He should just stop talking.

“Defacing this structure,” Charity said. “Apparently, the police chief is here somewhere. They think he might be cracking down on the mistletoe that’s all over town.”

That *would* be a crime in a town this size. “I don’t think anybody’s going to jail over this.” He gestured toward the mistletoe again.

“That’s not the point.” She looked up. “I’ve done everything I can to make this the best tree lighting Misty Mountain has ever seen. The illegal mistletoe will tarnish all the hard work we’ve done. Especially if people start posting about it on social media.”

A bunch of people were going to post about it on social media, judging by the photo-taking he’d seen. But he couldn’t imagine anyone would hold that against the town, her, or her best friend.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

What was he doing? He needed to just grab that mistletoe, hand it to her, and get out of here. Then he’d spend the rest of the weekend holed up in his parents’ house to avoid running into her again before he left.

But it was too late to rush off. Her expression had changed.

“Of course, I’ve changed.” She crossed her arms over her chest and met his stare, unflinching. “I was a kid.”

“You were eighteen.”

“And now I’m twenty-six. There’s a big difference. I’ve lived a lot of life since the last time you saw me.”

What did that mean? Maybe she was married. If so, wouldn’t somebody have mentioned it to him?

Probably not. He still stayed in touch with some of his high school buddies, but none of them lived here anymore. Like him, as soon as they graduated, they left town for college and never looked back.

He checked out her left ring finger where it rested against her right upper arm. It was completely bare. But she'd definitely had some relationships during that time.

Jealousy surged at the thought. He had no right to be jealous, though. He'd been married, after all. Besides, it wasn't like he expected her to put her love life on hold after their high school romance came to an abrupt end.

"I get it," he said. "But I'm talking about the fear." He took another step closer to her. "You always lived life on the edge. You went first when we did that zip line, remember?"

She stared at him, her expression completely unreadable. At one time, he'd been able to read her like a book. Something had changed. She didn't wear her heart on her sleeve anymore.

"I'm still adventurous," she said. "I just have a business to run, and I take it very seriously."

Another step. He was too close to her now. He expected her to back up, but she didn't. She seemed frozen to the spot.

"You don't even know me," she said. "Not anymore."

Somewhere off in the distance, the crowd burst into applause and cheers. It may as well have been happening in a different world. Where he stood, only one thing mattered—the way she was looking at him right now.

An outward force seemed to push him forward. He crossed the remaining inches between them, putting his arms around her and pulling her toward him as he captured her mouth in a long, mind-blowing kiss.

**W**hat. Was. Happening?

When Nic took those remaining steps toward her, the sizzle in the air between them became impossible to ignore. She'd been battling it the whole time. It was exactly why she'd stayed put, right under the mistletoe. Right where someone stood if she wanted to be kissed.

How could she have let this happen? And why couldn't she stop it?

Somewhere far off in the distance, the crowd applauded. It felt like the crowd was still applauding.

The lighting! She'd missed it all. She assumed from the cheers, it had gone well. This could have been disastrous. How could she be so irresponsible?

Those thoughts had her pulling back immediately and glancing over his shoulder. What if somebody saw them?

Nobody was looking in their direction. She breathed a sigh of relief at the realization. The closest group of people was a good sixty yards away—half the length of a football field. Besides, all eyes were on the events happening in front of them, not behind them.

"I have to go," she blurted.

Without waiting for a response, she rushed around him, not even bothering to swoop down and grab her coffee cup as she went. She'd get that later, when the coast was once again clear.

She didn't stop moving, even when she got to the crowd. Noelle was here somewhere, wearing that elf costume. If there was ever a time when she needed her best friend, it was now.

But the crowd was moving in the opposite direction. Charity was swimming against the tide in as close to the literal sense as possible without water being involved.

She was pretty sure she walked for a good thirty seconds without progressing even an inch toward that stage. She scanned the crowd for Noelle's velvety green hat. Once she spotted it, she could start moving in that direction. But there was no sign of it.

Somehow, Charity managed to find a break in the crowd and make her way toward the stage. It was packed with people—families who wanted the kids to see the tree up close. She spotted the mayor, some of his entourage, and lots of familiar-looking locals, but not a single trace of a beautiful blonde in an elf costume.

“Charity!”

She heard her name and started looking around. It wasn't the voice of her best friend, though. The voice came from her assistant, Jayne.

They had no trouble meeting toward the right of the stage. The crowd in that area had pretty much dwindled to nothing by then.

“Where have you been?” Jayne asked. “We've been looking everywhere for you. Did you get the mistletoe down?”

Charity didn't bother to suppress a moan. No, she had not gotten the mistletoe down. It had been exactly why she'd gone to the statue, but instead of doing her job, she had a make-out session with her ex.

Okay, so one kiss that didn't even last thirty seconds wouldn't qualify as making out. But she deserved every bit of grief she was giving herself over this.

“I couldn't reach it,” Charity said. “You don't happen to have a stepstool handy, do you?”

Eyes wide, Jayne shook her head. Yeah, of course she wouldn't.

"We'll just have to count on the mercy of a tall stranger," Charity said.

She was already looking back in that direction. She needed to come up with an excuse to delay walking toward the statue. For all she knew, Nic could be hanging around, waiting to see if she'd come back.

But no, that was silly. He would have headed home along with the rest of the crowd.

"You know what?" Jayne asked. "I'll go check it out. You probably want to finish up here."

Charity nodded. That was a good idea. She could prove to everyone, including herself, that she was serious about making this event a success.

But as she checked in on everyone and helped break down the equipment, her mind was racing. What had just happened? What did it mean?

The answer to that was simple. It meant nothing. Nic was going back to Virginia at the end of the weekend, no matter what happened. He'd made it clear almost as far back as middle school that he couldn't wait to get out of this town.

And it was clear that he was happy now. She had no idea what he did for a living, but he seemed relaxed. Compared to the stress ball that she was twenty-four seven, that said a lot.

When she finally came back around the stage, Matt was standing at the bottom of the steps. "Thanks for all your help."

"You're welcome," Charity said, suddenly realizing this was the first time she'd slowed down long enough to take a solid breath since that kiss.

Speaking of that kiss... She really could use her best friend right now.

"Have you seen Noelle?" Charity looked around. If anybody would know where her friend-turned-tree-lighting-elf

was, Matt would. “I was trying to find her when I got caught up in helping break everything down.”

“She went off in that direction.” Matt pointed toward the area of the square with the statue. “I assumed she was going home.”

Charity let out a long, shaky breath. That was what she’d feared. She could, of course, drop by Noelle’s place. It wasn’t out of the way. Or she could just call her. Mostly, she felt like she needed a lifeline right now. She was like someone drowning, grasping for the nearest object.

She didn’t need that, though. She was fine. She was a grown woman. She’d gotten over Nic once. She could certainly get over the most amazing kiss of her life. A kiss that should have been familiar but wasn’t. A kiss that had gotten deep into her heart and buried itself there.

“Is everything okay?” Matt asked.

The concern in his expression made Charity aware that the distress in her head had no doubt taken over her expression. She shook her head.

“I’m just tired,” she said. “I should get home. I have a dog that needs to be fed.”

Matt nodded but didn’t look convinced. They said their goodbyes, and she headed straight for the statue. She wanted to steer clear of it, but her assistant had gone to check on the mistletoe and disappeared. Charity checked her phone several times for a message and found absolutely nothing.

Okay, maybe part of the reason she checked her phone was to see if there was a text from Nic. She had, after all, invited him to track down her phone number on her website.

That was before the kiss, though. Before he’d reminded her just how devastating their breakup had been to her.

Charity’s steps slowed as she neared the area surrounding the statue. It was completely deserted. Most importantly, the mistletoe that had been hanging from the finger was gone. Her hot cocoa cup was gone, too. Was Nic responsible both for its cleanup and the mistletoe removal?

There was one way to find out. Pulling her phone from her back pocket, she called her assistant.

“Hey, Jayne,” she said, working hard to remove all traces of stress from her voice. “Where are you?”

Charity looked around. It was a useless maneuver. This part of the square was as empty as it was on a normal day.

“I was waiting to hear back from you,” Charity continued.

“Oh, sorry,” Jayne said. “I was taking those ornaments back to storage, remember?”

Charity squeezed her eyes closed, took a deep breath, and let it out. Yes, she’d completely forgotten that was what Jayne was supposed to do after the event. But she’d expected her assistant to at least communicate whether the statue was back to being legal or not.

“Did you take the mistletoe down?” Charity asked.

“No, it was gone when I got there. There was nobody around. I just assumed Officer Reeser grabbed it.”

Enzo Reeser was the police chief. He could be a bit of a Scrooge, but Charity remembered him from high school. Although he’d kept to himself back then, he’d grown up to be a handsome, super competent police officer. But she felt like he had to play tough guy to ensure people took him seriously.

“I’ll come help you,” Charity said. “I’m finishing—”

Jayne interrupted. “You just go home and relax. Take care of that adorable pooch of yours.”

Jayne often stopped by to let Charity’s cavalier King Charles spaniel out. Charity had a small, fenced yard. She always tried to stop by to hang out with Gracie throughout the day, but sometimes she got tied up and Jayne had to do it.

“I will.” Charity started walking, eager to get back to the safety of her home. “Thanks for all you do. I’ll see you tomorrow at the parade.”

“Don’t remind me.” Jayne groaned. “See you then.”

Jayne's voice sounded unnaturally chipper at the end of that. She knew Charity dreaded the parade almost as much as she did. She helped organize that, too, every year, and it never, *ever* ran smoothly. It was just a matter of what type of chaos they'd face this particular year.

But anything beat tonight's drama. At least she wouldn't have to worry about guarding her heart from her ex. His family never attended the parade, even when the kids were young.

Pocketing her phone, Charity climbed into her car, taking a deep breath once the door was closed. She shut her eyes and tried to take herself back to how she'd felt when she'd last sat in the driver's seat of her car. It was a time before she'd had a clue her ex was back in town.

She had a feeling she wouldn't breathe freely again until Nic Winters was gone.



Nic was a traitor. Yes, a traitor.

That was his overriding thought as he exited the franchise coffee shop on the strip holding an iced vanilla latte with an extra shot of espresso. He should be going to Joe's Café, but he was kind of addicted to this exact morning dose of caffeine. Joe's coffee was inconsistent, to say the least.

"Nic Winters!"

The sound of a male voice cut into his thoughts. He knew that voice. He also knew that voice meant he'd been busted.

"Matt!" Nic called out.

If Misty Mountain's mayor was driving through the parking lot, maybe it was okay. He could assume Matt was here, buying from this franchise coffee shop too.

Matt was in a truck, his window rolled down. Now he held up a hand and said, "Wait right there."

Nic stood on the sidewalk, looking around the parking lot, feeling more than a little self-conscious. But if the mayor was going to hop out of his truck and talk to him in the parking lot of the non-local coffee shop, why should he worry? The mayor would get in trouble for it before he would.

Matt approached, hitting the key fob to lock up his truck. Nic scooted over to the left a little, taking another sip of his latte. He didn't want to block the doorway while people were rushing in and out. That was one thing about Joe's Café. The pace was slower, the people calmer, but maybe it was because

he'd been in there when everyone was celebrating the tree lighting. It might be a completely different story in the morning.

"I didn't know you were back in town," Matt said. "I guess a lot of people are."

Matt had been a senior when Nic was a sophomore, but it didn't really matter. In a town this size, people knew each other, especially being only two years apart. Besides, it had been tough to not notice Matt. He was a smart, popular kid. Anyone could see he was going places, even all the way back in elementary school.

"Just visiting the folks," Nic said. "I was at the tree lighting last night."

Matt smiled. "Yeah, that seems to get better every year. We have some standout organizers."

His eyes narrowed slightly at the end of that sentence. Nic could almost feel it hitting his brain that one of those organizers was Nic's ex-girlfriend. He'd be too classy to say anything outright about it, though.

"You know the parade's today," Matt said. "Are you planning to attend?"

No. He was going back to his parents' house to hang out. Maybe later, they'd head to the outlet mall or one of the restaurants in Sawyerville, a suburb fifteen miles away that his mom always gravitated toward.

Basically, anything to avoid running into Charity. That was how he'd managed to do it for the past eight years, anyway. He'd visited for holidays and an occasional week or two in the summer and stayed away from everyone. His mom just didn't hang out around town.

"Sure," Nic said.

Yes, that was the word that came out of his mouth. Why had he said that? He had no idea, but it had something to do with Charity's name passing through his mind.

He wanted to see her again. It was like being on a diet and craving a cheeseburger. He knew that cheeseburger was bad for him, but he'd eat it anyway. Why? Because he lacked willpower when it came to certain things.

A certain *person*.

"That's actually why I stopped you," Matt said.

Uh-oh. Matt was going to bring up Nic's ex, after all. But no, he wouldn't have a clue of the reason behind Nic deciding to go to the parade. In fact, there was no reason to think Charity would have anything to do with that parade.

But that wasn't entirely true. She and her family had attended every year from the time she was old enough to walk. Maybe before. And once they were old enough, Charity and her two sisters would always ride the Ardmore Bank float, waving to the crowd and promoting their dad's business.

"We need a truck," Matt said. "What do you drive?"

The question threw Nic off. He'd been watching people come and go from the coffee shop in a futile effort to distract his mind from memories of Charity.

Nic pointed to the left with the hand holding the coffee cup. "That truck over there."

Matt looked in that direction. "That's perfect."

"Perfect?"

"Perfect for pulling one of the floats." Matt kind of had a wince on his face as he turned back to Nic. "We're short one truck. I saw you and I remembered the big rig you always drove around."

His buddies always gave him a hard time about his love for gigantic trucks. His ex-wife had hated it. She was petite and struggled to step up into it and out of it when they had their occasional date nights.

"I don't mean to put you on the spot, man," Matt said. "And I wouldn't if we weren't in a pinch."

"No problem," Nic said. "I'd be happy to help."

The relief in Matt's eyes told Nic the guy was no doubt under a lot of pressure. Why he'd chosen to run for mayor was beyond Nic. It seemed like a lot of thankless job.

But he actually found himself looking forward to the parade as he headed back to his parents' house—everyone had turned down his offer to bring back coffee—and counted down the minutes until he needed to be at the high school. He took an extra hour or so to drive to the nearest carwash, which was past the outlet mall, and cleaned his truck inside and out before coming back to shower and get ready.

Yes, he definitely put way more preparation into this than he should.

By the time he arrived at the parking lot, Nic's heart was threatening to hammer out of his chest. There was no denying this was all about Charity Ardmore, and that was exactly who was standing in the parking lot when he pulled in. She had a clipboard pressed to her chest and was talking to a group of kids with instruments.

The parking lot was packed with floats, and most had trucks parked in front of them. He had no idea where to go, so he pulled into an empty parking space and got out to ask.

“Over there is—”

Charity stopped, mid-sentence, when she saw Nic approaching. Whatever she'd been saying escaped him. All he heard was the hammering of his heart as memories of that kiss flooded his brain.

She tilted her head slightly. “Nic?”

The kids she'd been speaking to formed their own circle, shutting her out of it. They seemed to be happy to have been set free from the conversation—whatever it had been.

“I'm here to help,” he said, hoping his voice sounded more casual than it felt.

“Help with what?” she asked, like she wasn't standing in front of at least a dozen Christmas-decorated trailers.

He gestured. “Your parade. You need a truck, right?”

Those beautiful brown eyes widened, and he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her again. That would be highly inappropriate, even if they weren't surrounded by people.

So instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and looked around. "I didn't know where to park, but I figured you'd tell me where to go."

Her eyes narrowed then. She seemed to be studying him, probably wondering how he'd possibly known they needed a truck. Maybe even wondering why she couldn't seem to get away from him when she'd gone a full eight years without seeing him.

"I ran into Matt this morning," he said, deliberately choosing to leave out where he'd seen the guy. "He mentioned needing some help here." He gestured toward the floats. "I guess I have the perfect truck for pulling something."

Was it his imagination, or did her shoulders seem to slump a little, the tension releasing? He'd solved a big problem for her. He was her hero.

He was surprised at how good that felt. Even if it wasn't true.

"My Santa's a no-show." She scanned the parking lot. "So, I was thinking about killing that float altogether. There's nothing to pull it, no one to play Santa..."

Now Nic was the one who was relieved. If he was pulling the float, he couldn't be the one in the Santa suit on top of it, right? This woman just might've been able to talk him into playing Santa if not for the truck. Nothing against playing Santa, but he wanted to look good for his ex, and parading around town in a Santa suit—literally—wasn't the way to do that.

"You know..."

She looked off to the side thoughtfully and his heart started racing. No. She was going there. She was probably about to suggest someone else drive his truck—maybe her—and that he hop into that Santa suit.

“Who’s your Santa?” he blurted, mostly to put off whatever she was about to say.

Looking at him again, she took a step closer. “Sid Renner,” she said in a low enough voice that nobody could overhear, not even the band members still standing a few feet from them. “He said he’d do it, but where is he? My assistant is trying to track down his phone number. I thought I had it, but somehow it never made it into my phone.”

Looking around, Nic frowned. Sid’s kids had been older, so Nic hadn’t spent time over at his house or anything. He’d just seen him in passing. But he’d always seemed like a good, upstanding citizen. Not at all the type who would flake out on playing Santa the day of the town parade.

It’d been a while since Nic had spent any real time around here, though, so what did he know? People changed.

Suddenly, movement over to his right caught his eye. “Is that why there’s a police cruiser pulling in?” Nic asked, a sinking sensation in his gut.

“Enzo!” Charity called out, as if he could hear. The windows on the police cruiser were up. She glanced over at Nic before rushing off. “Back your truck up to that float when you get a chance. I’ll hopefully have a Santa in a few minutes.”

“Enzo Reeser.” Nic shook his head. He hadn’t seen that guy in years.

Nic was climbing into his truck when he looked back in that direction. By then, Charity was pointing, with the hand that held the clipboard, toward the field house next to the football field. Had she just talked the Misty Mountain chief of police into playing Santa for the Christmas parade?

Yes, this would definitely be an interesting afternoon.

Charity didn't have time. That was her biggest problem now that she'd solved the shortage of Santas and trucks for the annual Misty Mountain Christmas parade.

All she needed was a few minutes to have an actual conversation with her BFF, but her best friend had agreed to play an elf on the Santa float. The same role she played at last night's Christmas tree lighting. Plus, the man Charity wanted to talk to that best friend about was the one pulling that float, so she had to stay far, far away.

Once the Santa float had pulled out of the parking lot, Charity took the back roads to the outlet mall—a trip that took at least triple the time it would have on the main road. It didn't help that the whole town was being routed up the mountain, then to the left and back toward town.

It was a slow crawl on the twisty, winding roads, but it gave her plenty of time to slow down, breathe, let some of the tension ease, and come up with a plan to stay away from her ex. Unfortunately, she'd wasted so much time at the parade start point, the parking lot was already full. They'd used an abandoned church parking lot near the outlet mall for the past three years, which at least gave them a little extra time to get the donated trailers back to their original owners.

As usual, a crowd was gathered around the area with a sign that read *Free hot cocoa*. Charity told herself she was scanning the crowd for signs of her best friend, but really, she was looking for Nic, and her heart immediately took off at a gallop

when she spotted that head of dark hair and the now familiar navy blue coat.

“Charity!” someone yelled as she approached the group.

It was Mark Barnes, a dad who volunteered to help out with the parade every year as a favor. She couldn’t be mad at him for calling attention to her. Instead, she pasted a big smile on her face and ignored the fact that Nic had turned to look at her. She saw him in her peripheral vision.

“What’s up?” Charity asked.

She was going for casual, but her voice came out sounding strangled. Like she’d just choked on a large swallow of liquid and was trying to get control of her vocal cords again.

“We’re running out of cups,” Mark said. “The extra ones never arrived.”

At those words, Charity’s steps slowed. Her mind was immediately spinning as she went into repair mode. It was the same as when the Santa hadn’t shown up. As frustrated as she was, she didn’t have time to worry about what had gone wrong. She had to fix it and fix it fast. These people wanted hot cocoa, and they were running out of cups.

Hot cocoa was a tradition. The parade participants put in time freezing on these floats, knowing there’d be hot cocoa at the end. Not having it would be a huge disappointment.

“I’ll go get some.” Charity started toward her car. It was amazing how fast she walked when it meant she was putting valuable distance between herself and her ex-boyfriend.

“Great,” Mark said. “Maybe you can ride with Charity, Nic.”

Keep walking. Keep walking and pretend you didn’t hear.

That was the command Charity issued to her legs, but they didn’t obey. They slowed, she turned. Every cell in her body might be screaming for her to get out while she could, but Nic was back there, and she’d just heard someone say their names in the same sentence for the first time in eight years.



Nic was walking her way, and she noticed he didn't have a cup of cocoa. They'd run out of cups before he got his cocoa, obviously. Maybe the cups were a big enough emergency that he needed to tag along. She was just going to run to the local grocery store and grab whatever she found there.

"My mom's at the outlet mall," he said. "She just grabbed a bunch. All we need to do is swing by and pick them up."

As he approached, his back was to the crowd, so he had no idea people were watching the two of them. They had an actual audience. Gossip about this would be all over town in no time.

Charity gestured in the direction of the outlet mall. "I can go meet her."

Why was his approach making her so nervous? He slowed to a stop, seeming to notice she was staring at something behind him. When he glanced back over his shoulder, people turned around, pretending they were minding their own business.

"It's the Sunday after Thanksgiving," he said. "And church is out now."

Church didn't affect it all that much. Not this time of year, anyway. Vacationers flocked to Misty Mountain's outlet mall as a Christmas shopping alternative to Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, which were jam packed with shoppers the weekend after Thanksgiving. They'd come to town, get a cabin up in the mountains, and spend Friday, Saturday, and Sunday shopping and enjoying the growing list of attractions on the strip. Anyone who'd lived here their entire lives like she had should know the mall was nowhere to go on Thanksgiving weekend.

"We'll just swing through and meet her outside the knife store," he said.

Her eyebrows arched at those words. There was a knife store in the outlet mall?

And besides, where had his mom gotten hot cocoa cups? Were they sold at the outlet mall?

“Let’s go,” she blurted.

Not until they were seat belted in and she’d shifted into park did something hit her. His truck was parked in this very lot.

“Couldn’t you go meet your mom yourself?” she asked. Her hands were trembling as she pulled out of the spot she’d chosen near the float designed to look like a giant tooth.

“I’m blocked in,” he said, gesturing to his left. “We were just discussing how we could get everyone out of the way so I could squeeze out. I didn’t want to send a stranger over to meet my mom.”

She pulled to a stop at the church exit, looking left and right. There was no traffic heading toward town, but there was a long line going in the direction of the interstate on-ramp. Sunday was the big day for visitors to go home.

“It’s still a small town.” She pulled onto the main road. “You could trust just about any of them to run over there. But yeah, I get what you mean.”

Something else hit her as the sign for the outlet mall came into view. She hadn’t seen his mom since high school. She wasn’t sure how that was possible, aside from the fact that the Winters family had never been very active in the Misty Mountain community. His mom wasn’t a fan of tourist attractions. She preferred franchise restaurants and shops.

“Is your sister with your mom?” she asked, her heart starting to race again.

She wasn’t just facing time with her ex, but seeing his family again, too. What did they think of her? He’d been the one to dump her, so it wasn’t like they could be mad at her for hurting their son. If anything, they should sympathize with her.

“Yeah...”

That one word was all he said, but it was packed with emotion. Frustration, exasperation, words he wasn’t quite going to say but was definitely thinking. She didn’t want to pry.

“My sister wanted to get all of her Christmas shopping done in one day,” he said. “One *afternoon*, actually. She does most of it online, but she’s kind of involved in her work. She moves at triple speed.”

That didn’t surprise Charity one bit. Natalia Winters had been an overachiever from the time she’d come out of the womb, practically. She was four years older than Nic, so she’d been away at college by the time he and Charity started dating. But she’d moved away like most of the kids did after high school graduation.

“What is it your sister does now?” she asked.

“Attorney in D.C.,” he said. “She loves it, but she seems to always have her nose buried in her laptop. Take a right here.”

They’d turned into the outlet mall and were approaching the point where they had to choose to go straight or hang a left. Charity slowed and flipped on her left turn signal.

“I guess that kind of stinks when you’re all supposed to be spending time together,” she said.

She could certainly sympathize. Her sisters hadn’t even come home for Thanksgiving. Faith was in Europe and Ana was starting some big project Monday in Hawaii. Her mom was disappointed, even if she didn’t show it.

“There she is,” Nic suddenly said.

Charity expected to see Nic’s mom and sister standing there, but instead, it was just his mom. She had a big smile on her face and a Santa hat on her head. Charity would bet there was a Christmas sweater under that beige down coat.

Ignoring the hammering of her heart, Charity pulled to a stop near the curb. Why was she so nervous about seeing her ex-boyfriend’s mom again? It was just weird.

Nic had the window down before she’d even come to a full stop. “Hey Mom,” he said.

She walked toward the car. A smile covered her face, but her head was tilted like she wasn’t sure what she was seeing.

“You remember Charity Ardmore?”

“Oh, my. Charity Ardmore. I haven’t seen you in years. You were just a kid last time I saw you.”

“We weren’t kids,” Nic said. “We were eighteen.”

“Oh, wait until you have kids of your own,” Mrs. Winters said to her son. “You’ll always be kids to me, even when you’re forty. Here you go. Do you think a hundred will be enough?”

“I would hope so.” Nic took the large, plastic-wrapped stacks of cups and looked over at Charity.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Charity blurted, realizing she hadn’t spoken. It had been kind of rude of her, but maybe it wasn’t a bad idea. After all, her voice sounded way too shaky.

“Oh, yes, dear,” Mrs. Winters said. “It’s so nice to see you, too. I’m afraid we don’t get around town much now that the kids are grown and moved away. How are your parents?”

“Great,” Charity said.

Since Nic and Charity had been friends from a young age, their parents knew each other long before they’d started dating. They’d sat next to each other at birthday parties and passed each other in the carpool line for years.

“Tell them I said ‘hi,’” Mrs. Winters said, then looked at her son. “Will you be coming home for dinner? We’re having leftover turkey again.”

She glanced at Charity for some reason before returning her attention to Nic. For a second, Charity wondered if the question was directed at her.

“Probably not,” Nic said. “I can heat something up when I get home.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Winters smiled at Charity. “You two be safe out there.”

What was actually happening? Was it assumed Charity and Nic were going to be hanging out together like old times? She didn’t want his mom to think that if it wasn’t true, but she wanted it to be true.

“Sorry about that,” Nic said as Charity pulled away. He’d rolled up the window almost as soon as his mom had slid the cups through it. “She’s in her own world.”

But Charity was smiling. “I always liked her. It’s weird I haven’t seen her around town since you left.”

“She’d pack up and move to a bigger city in a heartbeat. She never liked small-town living, but Dad’s years away from retirement.”

Surprise drew Charity’s eyes off the road long enough to glance at him. “Do you think he’ll retire?”

“Doubtful.” He shook his head. “Someone would have to lock him out of the building for him to end his practice. He loves what he does.”

Nic’s father was the town pediatrician. He knew all the families in Misty Mountain, but he didn’t socialize with them after hours, since they were technically patients. And that was part of the reason the Winters weren’t very involved in local goings-on.

Charity smiled. “That’s how my dad feels about the bank. My mom works there, too. Just part-time. I think she needed something to do to fill the days.”

“Your mom always was really social.”

Yes, her mom was the opposite of Mrs. Winters, as far as Misty Mountain was concerned. She loved knowing everyone by name, along with exactly what was going on in their lives. She wasn’t a gossip. She kept it to herself. But she definitely felt like the people in this town were family. It was one of the reasons Charity loved this town so much.

When they pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later, sadness overwhelmed Charity. She’d forgotten how nice this was—just hanging out with Nic. As nervous as being around him had made her yesterday, somehow that nervousness had worn off. Now she was just filled with the same feeling she’d always had around him. Comfort. Like this was exactly where she belonged.

And now he was leaving. It might be today, or it might be tomorrow, but like all the other Thanksgiving weekend visitors, he'd be hitting the interstate to go back home. And she'd be left with just the memory of their time together.

Why did he have to come back into her life again?

Charity was a hard worker. Nic knew that about her. She'd always been just a little more driven and a lot more energetic than his other friends, even in elementary school.

But now, standing next to her in that church parking lot, Nic saw her through the eyes of an adult. He was tempted to compare her to the other women he'd dated and worked with, as well as his ex-wife. Maybe it was an unfair comparison, but Nic couldn't help it. Charity Ardmore was an outstanding human being.

"I guess that's it," she said as they walked away from Mark's truck. They'd loaded everything up so he could take it back to his church, which had loaned the hot cocoa warmer to him. "Thanks for all your help. You didn't have to stick around. I'm sure you need to pack or something."

Nic stood next to her, watching Mark pull away. There was no reason for them to stand here, except maybe he didn't want to leave her side.

That explained his reason. But why hadn't she hopped in her car and left yet?

"Maybe I won't go home right away," he blurted.

It had been a feeling he'd fought for the past half hour as he worked alongside her. He was supposed to take the four-hour drive back to his office in Lexington in the morning. He never blew off work. But he suddenly had the urge to blow off work.

And it was all because of her.

“You told your mom you wouldn’t be there for leftovers,” Charity said.

That statement threw him off a little. Then he realized by “home,” she thought he meant his parents’ house.

So he went with the misunderstanding. “I could go for some Cloudtop pizza right about now.”

He turned to face her, trying to let her know from his expression that this was an invitation. Cloudtop Pizzeria had been the place to hang out growing up. Not only did they have great pizza, but it was locally owned and just steps from the square where they’d had the tree lighting.

On a Sunday night, the pizzeria wouldn’t be all that busy, and the sun was starting to go down. They were heading into the dinner hour.

“Do you go to the pizzeria every time you visit?” she asked.

“Haven’t been since high school.”

It was then, as the two of them stared at each other in that parking lot filled with floats, that he remembered the pizzeria was the location of their first date. He hadn’t had much money—or imagination—back in those days. And he’d been so nervous to go on an actual date with his longtime friend, he was afraid to suggest leaving town.

If she remembered, she didn’t say anything, though. Instead, she nodded and said, “It hasn’t changed much. You’ll like it. I probably should get home.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to have dinner with me?”

Pushy? Yes. But she’d actually started to take a step away, and in his panic, the words just spilled out.

Charity opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. Then she closed it again. But she twisted her body back toward him and crossed her arms over her chest. He held his breath, waiting for what she’d finally say in response.



“I want to,” she said. “I love spending time around you again. I miss our friendship, but you’re leaving town when? Tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Eventually.” She sighed. “Spending time together will make it harder when you do leave in a couple of days.”

“I might just decide to stick around Misty Mountain for the week,” he said.

This was ridiculous. He’d never for a second considered staying here beyond the weekend. His plan was to hit the road as early as possible Monday morning. He’d only be staying to spend time with her.

“Don’t you have to get back to Ohio?” she asked.

Ohio. It felt like a sore subject. Their last happy weekend together had been there. She and her sister Faith had driven up to visit him a few weeks after classes started, staying in a nearby hotel. But something had been off. That had been clear during the visit. And by the time she headed back home, he knew he had to end things. He’d broken up with her by phone, which had been a total jerk move.

“I don’t live in Ohio anymore,” he said. “That’s where I went to college. I live in Lexington.”

“Kentucky.”

The word wasn’t a question, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. What he did know was that the chill in the air was cutting into his uncovered face. He’d love to be somewhere with heat. Somewhere with the most delicious pizza anywhere.

“Yup,” he said. “You know what? I’m going to grab dinner. I’ll save you a seat.”

That put it entirely in her hands. But still, he waited at the church parking lot exit to make sure she got in her car safely. Then he pulled onto the main road and stressed all the way to the pizza place. He was surprised how much it meant to him that she take him up on his dinner offer.

It had been a long time since Charity last set foot in Cloudtop Pizzeria. For a while, it reminded her too much of her ex. They'd hung out here long before they dated. On top of that, this had been the location of their very first date.

But that wasn't why she stayed away these days. She just didn't have much time to hang out in restaurants. The only exception was when she met clients for lunch, but she either scheduled those at the café on the square or the restaurant in the resort off the strip.

"Welcome!" the two employees working the counter yelled out as Charity entered the pizzeria.

Charity smiled at them and gave a little wave. Then she stopped uncertainly just inside the door. This was a place where you ordered and paid before heading to the back room. They brought your pizza to you once it was ready.

Should she check to make sure Nic was back there before ordering? She hadn't seen his car, but she'd managed to spot an available space across the street in front of Town Hall. She knew from experience never to pass up an empty spot in downtown Misty Mountain.

Pulling her wallet out, Charity stepped up to the counter and stared up at the menu. Should she just order the same thing she always got when she came here as a teen?

"Are you with the man who got the full deluxe but left onions and peppers off one half?" the guy, who appeared to be high school age, asked.

There was no stopping the smile that spread across her face at the question. It was the exact order she and Nic always placed going back to when their parents dropped them off to meet other friends here. They both loved the deluxe because it had all the meats on it, but she didn't like peppers and onions and he didn't like mushrooms. Since she could take them or leave them, they left those off too.

“No mushrooms?” she asked.

The employee nodded. “And it's already paid for. We'll bring it out when it's ready. What would you like to drink?”

Charity ordered a water and headed back to the table. Her heart was pounding as she entered the dining room. Not a single thing had changed. There were even two arcade games in the back that she'd swear had been there at least all her life.

The tables in the center of the room were packed with young people—high schoolers, it looked like. The sight reminded her of the many times she and Nic had hung out here with their friends in elementary and middle school. Even in high school when they were dating, most of their hangouts had been a group thing.

When she looked past the high schoolers to the booths on the far wall, she spotted him. He was in the booth just ahead of her. He was staring down at his phone like he wasn't even watching to see if she might show up. What if she hadn't? Would he have tried to eat the whole pizza himself?

No, he probably would have taken the leftovers home and handed them off to his mom.

“Hey,” she said as she approached the table.

She shrugged out of her coat as she slid in across from him. Nic looked up from his phone like he'd just awoken from a nap.

“Oh, hi,” he said.

Charity narrowed her eyes and tilted her head slightly but said nothing. He may have been away a while, but they'd spent countless hours together as kids. She knew when he was faking surprise.

“I guess they told you I placed the order.” He set his phone face down on the table and looked around. “I always expect to find this place completely remodeled when I visit. I guess Crosby is still running it.”

Charity nodded. He took the place over from his grandpa. His dad died when he was a kid, and his grandparents raised him. She’d heard stories about him working here as early as middle school.

Nic looked toward the front of the restaurant, even though a wall wouldn’t let him see what was going on up there. “I always figure one of these days, I’ll hear he retired.”

“His kids will probably take it over.”

Crosby had two kids in Misty Mountain Middle School. One boy, one girl. It was inevitable they’d work here eventually, even if they didn’t start as young as Crosby had.

“Must stink to have your life mapped out for you like that,” he said.

“I can’t imagine.” She shook her head. “What if I’d had to work for the bank for life?”

“Your dad didn’t want you to do that?”

Charity shrugged. “I worked as a teller for a few years after high school. I was trying to figure out what to do. You know Brianna Jewell?”

He nodded. “She went to school with us.”

“She’s also dating the mayor now.”

He looked surprised at that. “Matt didn’t mention it.”

She doubted Matt would talk to Nic about his love life, but what did she know? “She and I became pretty good friends, working there together. She actually inspired me to start my own business. My friend Lucky—”

“Lucky Howard?”

Charity nodded. “They lived down the street from me, remember?” Nic didn’t respond, so she continued. “He runs

the most successful construction company in town now. Super rich. You should see his house.”

The employee who'd taken her drink order was approaching. Charity saw him out of the corner of her eye. She stopped speaking, waiting until they each had a drink in front of them.

“Thanks, Blake,” Nic said just before the guy walked away.

Charity immediately felt guilty that she lived in this town and didn't know the names of the guys who worked at the pizzeria. But she never came here.

What she really felt guilty about, though, was carrying on and on and on about Lucky Howard and his money. That had been a little tacky.

So, she took a deep breath and backtracked a little. “Anyway, Lucky had a client who needed help staging a house to sell it. He knew I was really good at picking out furnishings and suggested me. I started doing it on the side while I worked at the bank, and next thing you know, I had my own business.”

“Next thing you know.” Eyebrows arched, Nic tore the paper off his straw before sliding it into his drink. But he had that teasing glint in his eye that she'd missed so much. “I'm sure it took a lot more work than those four words indicate.”

Charity laughed. “You can say that again. But the Christmas season is my best time of year. I have a list of rental cabin owners who have me put their decorations up every December. I might even have to hire some help.”

“Sounds like a business of its own,” he said. “In fact, I'd love it if somebody would come and decorate my place for Christmas every year.”

“It's seasonal, though,” she said. “No way can I live all year on what I make from Thanksgiving to just after New Year's Day.”

“And the tree lighting ceremony and parade—you do all that for free?”

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “I volunteered to do it when I was building my business. It’s a lot of work, but it’s also a great way to give back to the community. Good for networking, too.”

He smiled. “Not that everyone in town doesn’t know you already.”

“We get a lot of rental cabin owners who show up for things like the parade,” she said. “A few of them stay in their cabins for Thanksgiving weekend. They want to be part of the festivities, too. I’ve gotten some business from it over the years.”

“Interesting.”

It probably wasn’t, but he was humoring her. Eager to take the focus off herself, Charity said, “So, what is it you do now in...you said Lexington?”

“I’m the crop manager for one of the largest farms in Kentucky,” he said. “Yes, Lexington. I guess you could say I got a little closer to home than I was in college.”

Home. Funny that he still called Misty Mountain that. Did he realize it? She decided not to mention it.

“It makes visiting easier, I’m sure,” she said. “Do you stay busy when it turns cold like this?”

“There are plenty of winter crops,” he said. “Asparagus, spinach, onions... We supply a grocery store chain that’s semi-local, as well as quite a few local ones throughout Kentucky and Ohio. But I don’t want to bore you with business talk. How is it you’re not married with a bunch of kids running around by now?”

She nearly choked on the drink of water she’d just taken, although she should have been prepared for such a question. It hadn’t even occurred to her he might ask it, though. The problem was, she didn’t have a good answer.

“How many eligible men do you think live here in Misty Mountain?” she asked. “Well, not counting the people who hole up in the cabins in the mountains and don’t talk to any of us, even when they do come down.”

Nic made a face. “There are people who actually do that?”

Charity nodded. “I guess your parents didn’t tell you. We’ve attracted quite the digital nomad population.”

“Digital nomad.” He paused to roll the two words around in his head. “I assume that’s someone who works from wherever they want?”

“Yup. I hear that’s what’s going on up there. Not my type. I never did like the whole lumberjack beard thing.”

Now he seemed to be struggling to make his swig of liquid go down the right way. Once he regained his composure, he said, “You’re telling me the digital nomads have lumberjack beards.”

“No idea,” she said. “I would assume so, though, right? It’s all about sustainability. Living off the land. Keeping things simple while they tap, tap, tap away on their computer keyboards.”

She knew so little about any of this. It was all just local gossip. But she’d passed a few of them in their beaten-up pickup trucks in flannel shirts coming up and down the road that led to the tip-top of the mountain. They were mountain men with money in the bank.

The whole thing seemed fascinating to her. But she wasn’t fascinated enough to try to get to know anyone.

Sitting back and looking around, she continued. “Anyway, I almost got married a couple of years ago. Well, we were talking about getting married. We never really made it to the point where he popped the question.”

How much of this did she want to explain to her ex-boyfriend? If they’d never dated, Charity would be more than excited to spill all. This was Nic Winters, her high school boyfriend and prom date, not Nic Winters, her childhood best friend and confidante.

“What happened?” he asked.

She stared at the teenagers having a blast in the center of the restaurant. Life seemed so much simpler when they were

hanging out here. Couldn't they go back to the days when the only worry they had was whether or not they got a good grade on Friday's math test?

"We were already like an old married couple," she said. "I don't know what it was. Everything on the surface seemed perfect. He wanted to move to this town and even looked into opening a real estate office here. But he was dead set on routines. Even when he wasn't visiting, we'd get on the phone at the same time every night. He'd come in on Friday nights and take me to dinner at the same place—the Mexican restaurant off the strip. I started to realize we'd become more like friends than two people in love, and I didn't want to marry someone who was just a friend."

"Absolutely." He nodded. "Although there are benefits to getting comfortable in your couple routines."

A bolt of jealousy swept through her. He said that as though he knew from experience.

"What about you?" she asked. "I don't see a wedding ring."

"I took it off when the divorce was final."

Whoa. He'd been married? If jealousy had surged earlier, it threatened to boil over now. All this time, it'd been easy to just assume he was living a single life, doing nothing but working. But of course his life had gone on. It just hurt more than she could have imagined to know he'd said "I do" to someone else. Someone who wasn't her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know."

Nic looked at his left ring finger. "It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. We both knew it was for the best, but that didn't make it hurt any less. It felt like a failure, you know? I don't really believe in divorce, but it takes two people working together to make it last."

"How long were you married?" she asked.

"Just a year and a half. We worked together on a farm in Indiana."



So he'd lived somewhere else before he settled in Lexington. Interesting.

"It seemed like we had a lot in common, but she didn't want kids." He looked down at his hands, and she wondered if he was thinking about the wedding ring that used to be there. "That was a huge surprise. She didn't mention it. We'd been married a few months, then she dropped that bomb on me. I just couldn't imagine going the rest of my life not being a father. It's important to me, you know?"

She nodded. "Me, too."

"You'd make a great mom."

Those words went straight to her heart. Nobody had ever told her that. It was strange—such a simple thing. But she'd begun to worry in the past year or so that motherhood might not be in the cards for her. Maybe she was destined to only have her career, her friends, and her family.

It wouldn't be so bad. If her sisters ever got around to having children, she'd be a good aunt. And her friends would have kids.

"I wish you were still around," she said, feeling a rush of emotions all of a sudden. "I miss our talks."

She meant every word of that. He might be her ex, but he'd once been one of her closest friends. That had made their breakup doubly painful.

But she didn't want to think about that right now. She just wanted to enjoy the last hours they'd spend together before he left town for good.

“I was a jerk.”

Nic uttered those words somewhere between his third and fourth slice of pizza. He'd been watching her talk about the various friends they'd had that left town and never came back. She seemed to know who had what job, who was married, and who had kids. It made him wonder if she tried to keep up with him. But he deliberately left his name and face off the internet, so she wouldn't have even found his city or his job in a web search.

“You were a jerk?” She set her half-eaten pizza slice down and lifted her napkin to pat the perfectly clean area around her mouth. “What do you mean?”

He waited as she lowered the napkin back to her lap. No reason to wait. He was just trying to gather his thoughts. What exactly was he planning to say here?

“I broke up with you by telephone,” he said.

She'd picked up her slice of pizza again, but now she froze, staring at him. It was clear that, like him, she was trying to gather her thoughts.

“You were seven hours away,” she said. “It wasn't like you could just drop by my house to have that conversation.”

“It was only three weeks until Thanksgiving. I could have waited.” He took a deep breath and let it out. Truth time. “My friends talked me into it. They said I didn't want to be tied down during all the parties coming up. I didn't even care about

that. Mostly, I just didn't want to keep stringing you along. I wanted you to be able to go on with your life."

Charity stared at him for a long, long while before finally lowering her gaze to her pizza and setting it down. Then she put both hands in her lap and sat back against the cushion again.

"I visited you with my sister," she said.

"I guess we never really talked about that weekend you went to the homecoming game with me and my friends."

It was actually just him and his roommate, a nice guy who'd dropped out of school at the end of freshman year and gone back home to work in the family business. He just hadn't enjoyed college. But they'd met some of his other friends at the game, and those were the ones who'd asked him later what he was doing tied down to a girl who lived way back in Tennessee. "Tied down" were the exact two words they'd used.

"Peer pressure," he said, trying to remember where he'd been in his confession. He quickly jumped back in again. "You just kept talking about all the great things going on here in Misty Mountain at the time. But I felt like I'd finally gotten away. Like there was a whole world out there, waiting for me to explore."

"And that's what you're doing," she said.

He laughed. "Hardly. I've traveled, sure, but..."

That was where his words broke off. Where was he going with this? He had no idea.

"I know it's hard to believe, but I've traveled, too." She sat forward and picked up her pizza slice again. "I spent two weeks in Europe with my sister, Faith, over the summer. She's living over there right now."

"Europe."

He didn't mean to sound so impressed, but her sisters were pretty accomplished. One had her own TV show and the other was living in Europe. Or maybe that didn't count as an

accomplishment. But he assumed whatever she was doing over there was impressive.

Not that Charity wasn't impressive in her own right. She ran her own interior design business and appeared to have become a respected member of this community. That was just as impressive as someone who moved to Europe or had her own TV show.

After swallowing the bite of pizza she'd just taken, Charity continued. "Faith ran a museum for a while, and now she manages a boutique for her fiancé's family. They're pretty well known in their small town."

"So, she moved from an American small town to a European one."

She nodded. "In the English countryside. It's beautiful, but \_\_\_"

"It's no Misty Mountain."

He knew Charity all too well. She loved this place. She felt like it was part of her.

But she wasn't answering right away. She looked thoughtful.

"It's not the town itself." She looked around. "It's the people." She gestured to indicate the teens seated at the tables nearby. "Even these kids. I don't know who they are or who their parents are, but I guarantee if I saw their parents, I'd recognize them. There are familiar faces all over the place. And everyone looks out for each other. My sister has that, yes, but it's not the same when you didn't grow up there. You know?"

He knew. He totally got it. He was constantly telling people where he was from and explaining where Misty Mountain was located and what it was like. Nobody he'd dated—not even his wife—knew much about his childhood. The couple of times he visited his family with his wife in tow, she'd seemed bored with the place, mostly looking at her phone when she could be enjoying the passing scenery as he drove them in and out of town.

“You did me a favor,” Charity said. “Otherwise, I might’ve put my life on hold until you graduated. You gave me permission to move on with my life.”

That bugged him, and he had no right to be bugged about it. The eighteen-year-old version of him wanted freedom. At the time, he’d told himself she was just his high school sweetheart. He’d find that love again with someone else, no problem. But he was starting to wonder if he’d been wrong about that.

“This was great.” Charity sat back, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She then pressed her hand to her stomach. “I ate way too much, but I forgot how yummy this pizza was.”

Yummy. That was a word she’d used all the time when they were kids. He’d forgotten all about that. He’d also forgotten about the dimple in her right cheek when she smiled and the way her eyes seemed to sparkle when she looked at him.

At least they’d sparkled back then. Not anymore.

“You can have Cloudtop pizza any time,” he reminded her.

“But I don’t,” she said. “I’ve been at parties and get-togethers where they ordered pizza delivery—”

“Cloudtop delivers now?”

Charity shook her head. “That’s the problem. One of those franchise places near the outlet mall delivers all up and down the strip, even up into the mountains. Cloudtop really should look into that.”

“Or one of those delivery apps. You don’t have those here, I assume.”

“We can download the apps like anyone else, but it just says there are no drivers nearby. You’d think some of these high school kids would be all over it.”

He gestured toward the front of the restaurant. “What do you say we take a look at the tree?”

She blinked in surprise. “Tree? Where?”

“On the square. Where else?”

Why was he feeling so bold? She could easily turn down any of his requests to spend time together. But this might be his only chance, and he wanted to make the most of it.

“It’s probably cold out there,” she said. But she was already sliding out of her side of the booth, coat clutched in her left hand.

“So, we bundle up.”

That was his suggestion. What he was thinking was he could put his arm around her and cozy up to her for warmth. That would have been the way he would have behaved last time they were together in this town. Back before he’d broken up with her.

He waved goodbye to Blake and Chuck. He’d gotten to know them briefly when he’d arrived. They both were going to Misty Mountain High. They’d had a quick conversation about the high school football coach, Sam Wolf.

“I’m going to have to make a point to stop in more often,” Charity said as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Town Hall was across the street, and he saw Charity’s car parked there. She’d nabbed a good parking spot. He had to park in front of what used to be a boutique but was now apparently a candy store.

“I hardly ever come downtown for fun anymore,” Charity said.

“You come downtown for work?”

They’d started toward the square. It was a short walk from the pizzeria. In fact, he could see the glow the tree was casting on its surroundings from here. When combined with the wreaths on the streetlights and the lights on Town Hall, Nic was really starting to get in the Christmas spirit.

“I meet clients at the café sometimes,” she said.

“Where I saw you.”

That had lurked at the edges of his mind all day—the memories of seeing her last night. They'd run into each other at the coffee shop and kissed under the mistletoe not long after. It almost seemed like a dream, but it wasn't. It had really happened.

“I was grabbing coffee for Noelle and Matt,” she said.

She'd crossed her arms over her chest as she walked, and he wondered if that was because she was cold. Or was she protecting herself for some reason? Maybe a little bit of both.

“I just ran in for some of Joe's famous peppermint hot chocolate,” he said. “It's been a while.”

“That's what I was getting,” she said. “His coffee...”

“Leaves a lot to be desired,” Nic finished for her.

Charity laughed. “Nobody says those words out loud, but we all think it.”

“I guess nobody's ever told him,” he said.

“He gets a lot of business from the downtown workers who grab a cup on the way into the office.”

“But how many of them run through the drive-thru on the strip now?” He made a sheepish face. “Actually, I have a confession.”

They were on the square now, facing the tree, and she came to a stop, looking over at him. “What?”

“I stopped by that coffee shop on the strip to get a latte this morning,” he said. “That's where I ran into Matt. He said you needed a truck.”

“Matt was getting coffee there?”

The surprise in her voice made him wonder if he'd messed up. Had he just outed the mayor as not shopping local? He definitely had.

“Don't say a word,” he said. “He didn't swear me to secrecy or anything.”

“Maybe he was picking up coffee for his family.” Charity shook her head. “He should definitely be getting his coffee from Joe.”

“He headed in to get a latte for himself,” Nic said.

He could have covered up for the town mayor at that point, but he trusted Charity. She wouldn't say a word to anyone. They'd kept many, many secrets over the years, and neither one of them had ever betrayed the other's trust. Even in the end, he'd been faithful to her and as honest as he could be about his plans to move away from Misty Mountain permanently once he had his degree.

“You did a great job on the tree,” he said.

Now he had his arms crossed. He wasn't sure if he was doing it because he was cold or because it was the only way to resist the urge to put his arm around her and pull her toward him. That would definitely be inappropriate.

“I can't take credit for that,” she said. “A full team of volunteers decorates it every year.”

Nic looked over at her. “Where'd they get the decorations?”

“I picked those out. They were using the same ones year after year. I gave it an upgrade a couple of years ago. It'd be nice if we could afford all new ones every year, then donate what we don't use to a nonprofit, but I don't think people notice that it's a repeat.”

Shaking his head, Nic studied the tree for a moment. “To be honest, I never noticed the decorations. It was always the lights that caught my attention.”

“That's the trickiest part. We have to make sure the lights work before we get the whole town out here, but we also have to test it undercover.”

“How do you do that?” he asked. “This tree isn't exactly hidden.”

“We test it in the daytime,” Charity said.



The only other couple he saw was exiting the square. That meant the two of them would be completely alone. It was a Sunday night. He assumed work and school tomorrow meant everyone had already gone home for the evening. This was probably the perfect time to see the tree, especially if he wanted to be alone with her.

“Let’s go take a closer look,” he said.

Dropping his arms from their crossed position and shoving his hands into his pockets, Nic started in that direction. Tonight, he’d do just about anything to prolong his time with Charity.

The tree was raised on a platform. It was the same platform that’d served as the stage for the tree lighting. As a kid, he’d begged his mom to climb up there, and she’d wisely kept him on the ground. But not tonight.

He looked back at Charity, following just behind him. “I’ve always wanted to do something.”

He didn’t wait for her response, instead heading straight for the steps on the far right side of the platform. There were the steps Charity and the mayor had climbed at the ceremony last night.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

He was already halfway up the steps. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

“Nobody’s supposed to be up there,” she said. “There’s a sign.”

“We’re the only ones here.” He gestured to indicate their surroundings. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

By then, he was up on the stage, looking down at her. He gave her a big smile.

Eyes wide, she looked around. Was she afraid someone would catch her here and fire her as tree-lighting ceremony coordinator? It was a volunteer position, so that was doubtful.

Finally, with one last look around, she apparently changed her mind and started walking toward him. He held back a

smile as he walked over to the tree, mostly to get a close-up look at the ornaments.

“I need you to come decorate my apartment,” he said. The sound of footfalls behind him indicated she was getting closer. “I just have a miniature Christmas tree that sits on the table.”

“You don’t have a full Christmas tree?”

He shook his head. “It’s artificial.”

That was pretty obvious. There wasn’t a Christmas tree farm with tiny trees growing, was there?

Stepping back to stand next to her, he kept his eyes on the tree and said, “I’m not home much. They have me working pretty long hours, especially this time of year.”

He shouldn’t imply anyone made him work long hours. He chose to be married to his work. Besides, it wasn’t like he sat in an office all day, staring at a computer screen. Yes, there was some of that, but most of the time, he was out on the property or running to meetings with the family who owned the farm.

“So you live in an apartment?” she asked.

There was no judgment in her tone and nothing wrong at all with living in an apartment. The self-consciousness he felt about it was one hundred percent on him.

Yes, he should be a homeowner by now, but he and his ex had never put down roots in Lexington. They’d planned to buy, and then things had fallen apart. He had the money for a down payment, and he certainly could find a home with a mortgage cheaper than what he was paying in rent, but he still felt like he was in transition.

“Yeah,” he said. “I signed a year lease on this place.”

His ex kept the other apartment they lived in, which was nicer and less expensive. But he didn’t need to get into those details.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a quiet voice. “I didn’t realize it was so recent.”

“It wasn’t, really. We separated last Christmas and she finally filed in March. It’s been final since summer.”

She didn’t need to know all this. Why was he talking about Em? Discussing past relationships was never a good idea, even if he wasn’t planning to date the woman standing next to him. He needed to change the subject.

Luckily, Charity changed it for him. “Do you plan to buy a house when your lease is up?”

He finally looked over at her. She was still staring at the tree, just as he’d been doing. It definitely seemed easier to talk when they weren’t facing each other.

“That’s the plan,” he said. “Even if I don’t stay in Lexington, it’s an investment. I might even look for a house I can rent when I move somewhere else.”

Charity didn’t say anything immediately, so he shifted his attention back to the tree. But finally, he looked over at her. Was she judging him because he rented instead of owned? If she lived in Misty Lakes, he assumed she owned her house.

No, that wasn’t it. She wouldn’t care about something like that. So, what was up with the silence?

“You took the mistletoe down.”

Her words interrupted his train of thought. They were spoken as she turned to look at him, her eyes filled with something he couldn’t quite identify. He welcomed the change in topic, though.

“You said everybody was making a big deal out of it.” He shrugged. “I grabbed that and the coffee cup. I kept it.”

The look of surprise on her face made him realize he hadn’t been completely clear. She probably thought he meant the coffee cup.

“I kept the sprig of mistletoe,” he rushed to explain. “Or is it a bushel? I don’t know what it’s called. Anyway, I kept it in case you want it back, but it wasn’t looking very healthy this morning. My mom jacks the heat up so high, the poor thing probably thought it’d landed in a tropical climate.”

Charity was smiling. He considered that a win.

“It’s not mine,” she said.

“What’s not yours?”

She gestured in the direction of the statue. “The mistletoe. Noelle did all that. I helped her, but it was her idea. She bought it and hung it all over town. Basically, I drove the getaway car.”

“You said she bought it. Why did she need a getaway driver?”

“She hung them all over town.” Charity crossed her arms over her chest and looked around. “I don’t think the police really approve of it. At least that’s what I heard last night. But Noelle’s goal is to bring the joy of Christmas back to Misty Mountain.”

Was he missing something? “I didn’t know it had ever left.”

To illustrate his point, he looked over at the tree. The lights were bright enough to cover the entire square and then some.

“It’s Noelle, more than anything,” Charity explained. “Her dad died a few years ago. She’s spending time at home right now so she can help her mom downsize. I guess she thinks we need a little romance in this town.”

The sadness in her tone told him she might agree with that. Did she need a little romance, too?

“I know you were close to Noelle’s parents,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “He was sick for a while. Not that being sick is a good thing. Just that it wasn’t sudden.”

“Right.” He nodded. “Still, her mom’s pretty young to be widowed.”

“Exactly. She seems to have no interest in dating. Noelle was a little worried about her, being all the way in Knoxville. I wonder if she thinks finding her mom someone will make it easier for her not to live nearby.”

“She thinks the mistletoe will help her mom find a man?”

That brought a frown to Charity’s face, although Nic wasn’t entirely sure why. Then he realized she was thinking through what he’d just said.

“I don’t think it’s direct like that. I think maybe she just wants everyone in town to find love.”

“Maybe including herself,” he suggested.

Charity laughed. “Maybe that’s it. She had to have hung at least fifty bushels of mistletoe around town. She didn’t even go up into the mountains.”

His mind ran through the possible mistletoe-hanging spots around town. It didn’t seem like the area would be big enough to hang fifty of anything without him seeing them every few feet.

“Show me,” he said.

It was an impulsive move, mostly designed to keep her around him a little longer. Any excuse that would draw them together.

“Show you what?” she asked.

“The mistletoe.”

She looked around. “There’s not any around here.”

“Okay, where’s the closest one?”

She pointed in the direction of the pizzeria. “We hung one near Town Hall. There’s a little area with a bench off to the side of the building. We hung some off a tree. There was the statue, too, of course, but you took that bushel.”

As if he needed reminding. That was the mistletoe that had encouraged him to kiss her. An amazing kiss he’d never forget, as long as he lived.

“Show me the one by Town Hall,” he said.

Wow, had he gotten bossy, or what? Charity eyed him for a long moment without saying a word. He was sure she was going to bust him on looking for an excuse to hang around her.

What other reason could he have for wanting her to show him mistletoe? Except maybe...?

Okay, yeah, that thought had crossed his mind too. Before the night was over, he was going to steal another kiss. And mistletoe was the perfect way to make it happen.

Santa Claus was up ahead. He was standing on the sidewalk in front of Town Hall.

At first, Charity thought he was a mirage, then maybe a mannequin. When he moved, her next thought was that he was collecting for one of those charities that had volunteers standing outside in Santa costumes. But this was an odd time and place to do that. He'd have better luck on the square, where a few tourists might be milling around, looking for something open after eight o'clock on a Sunday night.

"Is that your missing Santa?" Nic asked.

He'd shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked, and she wondered if he was cold. She'd thrown on her trusty gloves, which she kept tucked inside her pockets at all times. It was chilly outside, but not as cold as it would be in the coming weeks. Funny, but she didn't feel that chill nearly as much as she normally would have. Maybe it was the exhilaration of being with Nic. It could be the same adrenaline rush that had kept her warm during the tree-lighting ceremony.

"No," she said.

"I almost forgot. Sid Renner was your no-show."

"I haven't had a chance to track him down and find out what his excuse was," Charity said.

They stopped in front of the pizzeria and looked both ways. There were no cars, no people in sight. In fact, only a

couple of vehicles remained parked on this street, and they were in front of the pizzeria.

“Good evening!” Santa called out as they crossed.

Charity couldn’t take her eyes off him as they came to a stop on the sidewalk in front of him. The guy was a very convincing Santa. He would have been perfect for the parade. Where was he earlier that afternoon?

“You two sure are out late on a school night—or a work night, as the case may be.”

Out late. She smiled. Only in Misty Mountain would someone think *this* was late.

“I don’t recognize you,” Charity said. “Are you from around here?”

At that, he laughed. It was an authentic Santa sort of laugh. This guy was good.

“Just hanging out,” Santa said. “I got a cabin up in the mountains. I thought I’d spend my Christmas season in this beautiful town.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at the North Pole?” Nic asked.

Charity glanced over and saw the teasing look on his face. Should she go along with this or try to figure out who this particular Santa was?

“Too cold.” Santa shook his head. “It’s the mountains for me.”

“I do a lot of volunteer work for the mayor,” Charity told the guy. “We have a lot of Christmas stuff coming up. We don’t have a huge budget for our Christmas events, but we could pay something if you would be open to doing a little work while you’re in town.”

“I assume you’d want me to wear this costume,” the guy said.

He was wearing it now. On a Sunday night in an empty area of town.

“Do you dress like this all the time?” Nic asked.



“Only when kids are around,” Santa said. “I wouldn’t just hang out around the house like this.” He shifted his gaze to Charity then. “But yes, I’d be happy to help out with anything you need. I won’t take any money, though. I love seeing the way kids’ eyes light up. In fact, I’ll probably be here every night, just hanging out and talking to the fine people of this town.”

Charity had the guy’s number. He was retired, likely without a wife at home. Otherwise, his wife would be with him right now. Being out around people, dressed as Santa, brought him joy. She couldn’t think of very many better ways to spend retirement.

“Do you have a business card?” Nic asked.

Charity opened her mouth to point out that “Santa” wasn’t a business, but then closed it again. She couldn’t speak for the guy. Maybe he did have a business card. Maybe he wasn’t retired. Maybe he was a professional happiness bringer.

“I don’t, son.” Santa pulled a cell phone out of his coat pocket and looked at Charity. “What’s your number? I’ll call you, and then you’ll have mine.”

Nic looked over at Charity. She saw him out of the corner of her eye and guessed it was a protective move. He was wondering if she felt safe with this stranger having her number. But he was Santa—well, dressed like him, anyway. Besides, her phone number was listed on the internet for anyone who knew her business’s name to find.

She recited her number to him and noticed he had a red cell phone case. Bright, solid red. He tapped on the screen with his thick forefinger, then smiled, the beard moving with his mouth. It sure looked like a real beard. The Santa hat wasn’t like the cheap ones that came with costumes, either. It was red with fur lining at the forehead, and the Santa suit was more like a big red coat over a pair of red, fitted trousers. If they weren’t red, they’d look like any other dress pants. On his feet were black tennis shoes—not boots. Was it a costume or normal clothing?

“Got it,” Charity said as her phone lit up with a call. But her jaw dropped as she stared at her phone screen.

“Well, better be going.” Santa slid his phone into his pocket and looked around. “It’s a little past my bedtime. You two kids be good.”

Once he’d stepped away, Nic turned to face Charity. “What’s wrong?”

She turned her screen for him to look at, realizing too late it had probably gone dark. She turned it around, unlocked the screen, and pulled up the call in her history to show him.

“Look where his phone is registered,” she said.

“North Pole, Alaska.” He looked in the direction the guy had gone, but he’d turned the corner by then, so they couldn’t see him from here. “That guy takes his Santa-ing seriously.”

That hadn’t even occurred to her. She’d be embarrassed to say what her first thought had been when she’d seen that location.

“Of course, he’s not the real Santa,” she said, laughing at the screen. Who was she trying to convince—herself or him?

“You can register a phone number in a city you don’t live in,” he said.

She was aware of that. She still couldn’t get past the fact that it actually crossed her mind that he might be Santa Claus. She definitely needed to get more sleep.

“Or maybe he moved to North Pole, Alaska, because he likes playing Santa,” she said. “Let’s go take a look at that mistletoe.”

That last suggestion was her way of changing the subject. Only as they started walking did it hit her that she’d made it sound like she was actually eager to get over to the mistletoe. And maybe, in a way she didn’t even want to admit herself, she was.

**S**even. That was how many mistletoe bushels were in the walkable area around the town square.

Charity seemed surprised by that. Apparently, Noelle had hung more than she realized. And now they were in his truck on the way to find more.

“I don’t want to keep you out too late,” she said. “My work hours are flexible, but I’m sure you have to leave early.”

She’d climbed into his truck when he said he wanted to see the mistletoe they placed near the diner where all the high school kids hung out. There was also one near the grocery store where the locals shopped when they wanted to stay away from tourists.

“If I were going to take a woman somewhere to get romantic with her, it’d probably be up in the mountains,” Nic said.

Charity smiled, staring out the front windshield as they headed down the main road. “That was my argument. Noelle kept insisting she wants to make sure locals are the ones who see these, whether they’re seniors in high school or seniors getting a Social Security check.”

“This brings back so many memories,” Nic said.

It was a weird thing to say, considering he’d been to this diner as recently as last summer. He had met up with one of his high school buddies. Sometimes, he’d also come over to the diner and grab breakfast while he was in town, sitting at

the counter and talking to the owner, Jackie, about old times. But what brought back memories was driving down this road with Charity. Everything felt right, like he was exactly where he needed to be with exactly the right person.

“Yeah, I don’t come to this area of town very often,” she said.

He flipped on his turn signal to enter the diner parking lot. No traffic was on this road right now, so he had the luxury of looking over at her.

“You never go to the diner?” he asked. “What do you do for fun?”

When she didn’t answer right away, he guessed what her response would be. She answered exactly as he expected.

“Work.” She shrugged. “I love what I do.”

She sounded like him, but he had a good reason. He’d been going through a rough time. He worked nonstop because it was all he had right now. He didn’t even have a pet.

Even though he knew he should, he had no interest in getting into the dating scene. Plus, most of the friends he’d made since moving to Lexington had been his ex’s friends. It wasn’t even taking sides—she’d just been the social butterfly between the two of them. When things didn’t work out, he’d been left on his own.

“Noelle and I will probably hang out now that she’s spending the month in town,” Charity said. “We’ll watch cheesy movies and order a pizza. I like spending time with my parents too.”

He turned into the diner parking lot and pulled into a parking space at the very end of the sidewalk, away from the windows and front door. They were parked directly in front of a bushel of mistletoe hanging from an outdoor light.

“I guess if I lived in a big city, I’d be going out every night and living some sort of exciting life,” she said. “Is it weird that it doesn’t interest me?”

He smiled. “Doesn’t really interest me, either, but I hardly live in a big city.”

“That’s what I pictured you doing, though.”

She pictured him living in a big city? Did that mean she’d thought about him enough to imagine what he might be doing now?

When he looked over at her, their eyes met, and he knew he didn’t need mistletoe to kiss her. He definitely didn’t need to stand out in the cold on a sidewalk in front of a closed diner. He could kiss her right here, right now, on the front seat of his truck, just like he’d done years ago when they were dating.

“Do you remember our first kiss?” she asked.

The question threw him off. He’d been thinking about giving her the second kiss of the weekend.

“I didn’t plan it.” He stared out the front windshield at that bushel of mistletoe. “I’d been thinking about it a long time, believe me, but I never thought you’d go for it.”

“It was so sudden.” She giggled. “You pulled me off to the side when we walked out of the dance and kissed me.”

“Your mom was out there in her car, waiting for us.” He sat back in his seat and looked over at her. “I couldn’t kiss you inside the school gym with everyone watching. But I knew if I didn’t kiss you then, I’d never get the chance.”

“You would have gotten the chance,” she said. “Eventually. But it was perfect.”

“It took me so much courage to even ask you to that dance.”

“I was scared you were asking me as a friend.”

He shook his head. “I was hoping you’d see it as a date even though everybody thought we were going as friends. You looked so beautiful that night. Not that you didn’t always look beautiful. Still do.”

Smooth. He was a real Casanova. Normally, he was a little better with women, but all this talk about kissing had him

reverting to his teenage self.

Charity laughed. “We thought we were so cool.”

“Well, we were fifteen.”

“Wow. We were, weren’t we?”

They’d been freshmen at the time. He hadn’t technically been allowed to date yet. Neither had she. But they mostly hung out in groups until he had a car. Even then, group hangouts were the norm, so it wasn’t like they ever spent that much time alone together.

“I had a crush on you starting in about fifth grade,” she said.

That surprised him. “Me, too. My birthday party.”

“Yep. Laser tag.”

The biggest surprise in all this was that they’d never discussed any of it before. There had been one moment during laser tag where he’d saved her. They’d stood, frozen, staring at each other, and for the first time, he saw her not as his friend but as an actual girl.

“It was also the first time I liked a boy like that.” She sounded ashamed to admit it. She even winced. “I mean, not counting celebrities.”

He laughed. “Yeah, and if I count celebrities, I’d have to say it was the first time I liked a girl who was even close to my age.”

They were both smiling by then, but those smiles faded as the weight of the conversation settled around them. All this talk about kissing. But in truth, he’d been thinking about kissing her from the first time he’d seen her at the coffee shop yesterday. Kissing her once hadn’t been enough to satisfy his craving.

As he leaned toward her, Nic knew this wouldn’t be a short kiss. Not even as short as last night. Tonight, he’d take his time. He’d enjoy every second of this because who knew when he’d get a kiss like this again?

Maybe he stuck around a little longer.

That was the first thought that went through Charity's mind when she woke Monday morning. They were the words Nic had spoken when he dropped her off at her car.

"Maybe I'll stick around a little longer," he'd said.

She smiled, gave him one last kiss, and said, "Thanks for everything."

As she drove home, she'd wondered what she'd meant by those words. Thanks for everything? What did that even mean?

But she didn't have time to dwell on it. She had a busy morning. She only allowed herself a few seconds to glance toward the coffee shop on the strip as she passed on her way to her first meeting. She had a day full of decorating cabins for Christmas, followed by a lunchtime meeting with a potential client.

A meeting that was canceled midmorning.

So she made a phone call. And by noon, she was heading down the mountain toward the diner—her suggestion as a place to meet her best friend for lunch.

"Miss Ardmore!" Jackie, the owner and diner's namesake, called out as she entered.

Charity smiled at him. "Good morning."

She wondered if he knew which of the Ardmore sisters she was. The adults around town had always mixed up their names when they were younger. It wasn't as bad now that her two sisters had left town, but Charity was still occasionally called Faith.

"Right over there," Jackie said.

He pointed to his right, where Noelle sat in a booth, laptop in front of her. She wasn't looking at the screen, though. She was waving at Charity.

They exchanged a big hug, then slid into their opposite seats. Charity had never been more grateful to have her best friend in town, even if it was only temporary. She needed her right now.

"I thought I could get some work done if I got here early." Noelle looked around and leaned forward. "I've been here twenty minutes and four people have stopped by."

At that, Charity smiled. No surprise. She wouldn't dare try to work at one of the local businesses. That was something you did in a town where nobody knew your name.

A server approached, and Charity ordered a sweet tea while Noelle packed up her laptop and set her tote bag on the floor next to her. Once the server was gone, Charity took a deep breath and prepared to plunge in.

"I have so much to tell you," Noelle said. "But first, what's the deal with Nic being in town?"

Charity frowned at her friend. Her first sentence sounded like there was bigger news than Nic being in town.

"Why don't you tell me what you have to tell me first?" Charity asked. "There's not much to say about Nic."

For a moment, Noelle seemed to struggle, but her excitement was obviously threatening to spill over. Her words came out in a big burst.

"I'm dating someone," Noelle said.

Wait, what? They'd just seen each other at the parade. That wasn't even twenty-four hours ago. How could she already be



in a relationship? Or maybe she meant she had a date.

“Who?” Charity asked.

“Guess.” Smiling, Noelle crossed her arms over her chest.

Considering she hadn’t had even one date lately, Charity wasn’t even sure where to begin to guess. “Someone in this town?”

Charity looked around. Maybe scanning the half-empty diner would jar her memory somehow.

“Yep,” Noelle said.

“I know him?” Now Charity looked out the window. Still, no help to her memory. “Someone we grew up with?”

“You could say that.”

What did that mean? Charity mentally ran through the list of guys from high school. She narrowed down the list to the men who were still in town. Most were married with kids.

“You saw him yesterday,” Noelle prompted. “At the parade.”

That didn’t help much. The whole town had been there.

“*In* the parade or on the sidelines, watching?” Charity asked.

“On the float with me.”

Charity gasped. “Enzo Reeser?”

There was no denying it from the way Noelle’s face lit up at just the mention of his name. Wow. Her friend had it bad.

“When did this start?” Charity asked. The parade had been less than twenty-four hours ago.

“He tried to arrest me Saturday night.”

Charity frowned. Was someone playing a prank on her?

“Arrest you over the mistletoe thing?” Charity asked.

“Not really *arrest*. He took me to the station to have a talk with me. He’d confiscated a pile of the mistletoe we hung. It was right there on his desk.”

Charity must be missing something. “And you somehow ended up dating from that?”

Noelle paused as the server approached with Charity’s drink. They both ordered grilled chicken sandwiches and a fruit bowl.

Charity didn’t waste a second once they were alone again. “So he asked you on a date, I assume?”

“Not really.” Noelle smiled dreamily as she stared out the window. “We ended up on the float yesterday, and we went to dinner afterward.” She hesitated, then she looked around before leaning forward and whispering the next words. “We kissed.”

Yeah, Charity could see why she’d whispered that. Neither Noelle nor Enzo would want it getting out that the woman who played the elf at the Christmas tree lighting ceremony had kissed the chief of police—even if mistletoe had been involved.

“So that’s my news.” Noelle took a sip of her drink and sat back.

It was going to take Charity a minute or two to adjust to this. It wasn’t like her best friend to run around kissing men. She took anything like that very seriously. But how could they be in an actual relationship after just a couple of encounters?

“Have you been on a date yet?” Charity asked, still trying to piece it together.

“No, but we talked on the phone for three hours last night. It was like being in high school again.”

Only in high school, Enzo had been a bit of a geek. He’d changed a lot since then, beefing up and becoming part of Misty Mountain’s small police force. He was apparently so good at it that when the longtime police chief left the job suddenly, they put Enzo in as a temporary replacement. It was starting to look like it would be permanent, though.

“What’s your news?” Noelle asked.

Oh, she'd almost forgotten she had to actually talk about this. Normally, she told Noelle everything, even when they were limited to their multi-weekly video chats. But for some reason, today she just didn't want to talk about this particular thing. By talking about it, she'd have to admit she was sad he was gone.

"Nic and I spent some time together yesterday," Charity said. "And at the tree-lighting ceremony."

"Back up." Noelle made a circular motion with her hand. "How did you know he was back in town?"

"I ran into him coming out of the coffee shop." She smiled. "Almost literally. He was holding the door for me. I breezed right past him. If he hadn't said anything, I probably would've never known he was in town."

That wasn't true. She would have known on Sunday when he showed up with his truck.

"And then we kissed." Charity said that out loud, without even realizing she was going to say the words. At Noelle's startled expression, she added, "Under the mistletoe you hung on that statue."

"You keep skipping over important parts." Noelle sat forward, arms crossed in front of her on the table. She narrowed her eyes at her best friend. "Start at the beginning."

And that was exactly what Charity did. She relayed the conversation they had in front of the coffee shop, including his invitation to get together sometime. She also mentioned her rush to grab the mistletoe from the statue before they got in trouble and how that ended in a kiss.

"And then we kissed again last night," Charity said after discussing the dinner they shared at the pizza place. "He wanted to see all the mistletoe you placed, so I took them on a quick tour."

They'd skipped quite a few places, but she had a feeling Nic hadn't really wanted to see mistletoe. It had been an excuse to continue to hang out with each other. She had been searching for the same excuses herself.

“So now what?” Noelle, clearly hanging on her friend’s every word, asked. Their food had arrived by then, and Noelle was digging into her chicken.

Charity shrugged. “He’s gone. He left first thing this morning. He’s probably halfway to Lexington by now. I’m sure he comes home every now and then, but it’s pretty clear one thing hasn’t changed. He doesn’t want to live in Misty Mountain.”

“Is that what he said?” Noelle asked, slipping a grape into her mouth and chewing while she waited for the answer.

“Not in so many words, but it was clear that I belong in Misty Mountain, and he couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

“Are you sure about that?” Noelle asked. “You’ve always said it, but you could live anywhere. I’m sure interior decorators are in demand in Lexington.”

Charity was well aware of that fact, and she’d definitely thought about it. But she just wouldn’t be happy away from the mountains. Away from her family and friends.

“You’ll probably be moving back here soon enough,” Charity said with a shrug. “Even more reason for me to stick around. Someday I’ll meet someone who wants to live here, and we’ll be able to raise our children together.”

At that, Noelle made a face. It was an expression Charity couldn’t quite define. She stared off in the distance for a long moment, eyes still narrowed, frown still firmly in place.

“Are you sure Nic left town this morning?” Noelle asked.

Charity took a deep breath and let it out, looking down at her fruit bowl. Finally, she speared a strawberry and lifted it to her mouth.

“I wondered if maybe he stuck around a little longer,” Charity said. “But I can’t get my hopes up about that.”

“I think you can.”

Charity opened her mouth to ask her friend what she meant, but that was when she realized Noelle’s stare wasn’t thoughtful. She was looking specifically at something.

Finally, Charity couldn't take the suspense. She turned and saw what had captured Noelle's attention. Nic Winters was standing at the counter, talking to Jackie.

And that was when it stopped being a dream and started being a reality. Nic Winters was still in town.

Nic was overstaying his welcome in Misty Mountain. That was his fear, anyway. Nobody had specifically told him that.

His parents certainly didn't feel that way. In fact, his mom would love to have him around for the rest of the year, if not longer.

His sister headed to Knoxville to catch a seven a.m. flight before the sun even came up. Nic, on the other hand, slept in, then slept in some more. Finally, he hopped on his laptop, worked for a couple of hours, and told his boss, the owner of the farm, that he'd be working remotely for a couple of days. His boss didn't respond to the email, so he'd take that as the best "okay" he'd get from the guy.

"You're living in Kentucky now, I hear," Jackie said as Nic settled in at the counter. He was *so* looking forward to the burger and onion rings, he'd made a beeline for the counter and grabbed a stool. "How's that going?"

"Great," Nic said.

It was a lie. Well, maybe not a lie as much as not completely honest. If he was honest, he'd say his marriage had fallen through, his job didn't pay nearly as much as he'd hoped to be making right now, and he had to start over finding new friends after losing all of his in the divorce.

"We sure miss you here," Jackie said. "Say, don't you know those two young ladies over there?"

Jackie gestured, and Nic turned and saw both Noelle Yule and Charity Ardmere staring at him. Charity quickly turned back around once their eyes met.

“I sure do.” Nic turned back to Jackie. “I should at least go say ‘hi,’ right?”

“At least.” Jackie nodded. “I’ll keep an eye out, and if you stay over there, I’ll come get your order.”

There was something comforting about Jackie having his back. Something so very Misty Mountain about it. But he wasn’t going to crash his ex’s lunch. That would be rude. He’d just stop by for a quick greeting. Then he could come back and take his seat at the counter.

Nic didn’t even take off his coat as he walked over to the table. That would send a message he wasn’t intruding. Just stopping by to say...

“Hi,” Nic said as he approached.

Noelle’s gaze went straight to Charity. They were transmitting serious best friend energy. That was something he learned long ago. There was no substitute for the bond two female friends shared.

“I’m actually finishing up,” Noelle said. “I have to cut out. Why don’t you slide in here, and you can take over my side of the table?”

Yeah, *real* subtle. He looked over at Charity to see if she was shooting her friend warning looks. Instead, she stared down at her now-empty plate.

“I really don’t want to interrupt...” he began.

“Sit.” Noelle pointed at the booth.

She was gesturing and looking at something on the other side of Nic. But as he removed his coat and slid onto the seat, he saw nothing in that direction.

“You’re still in town,” Charity commented once he was settled and Noelle was seated next to him.

He shrugged. “I’m working remotely for a few days.”

A few days? When had a couple turned into a few? He'd only mentioned two days in the email to his boss, but he had a feeling his boss would barely notice he wasn't on site. As long as he had someone to do the boots-on-the-ground work when he needed it, there was a lot Nic could do from here. He'd have to go back, though, and he probably should return before the end of the week.

"Thank you," Noelle said as Jackie approached, ticket book in hand.

"No problem." After handing a check from inside the booklet to Noelle, Jackie looked at Nic. "What can I get for you, fine sir?"

Nic couldn't help but smile as he placed his order. A burger, onion rings, and a chocolate shake, plus a water.

"I'll take one of those, too," Charity said.

"A water?" Jackie looked over at her, a half-smile on his face. "I'm just messing with you. I get what you mean. You want one of those chocolate shakes. I could bring one shake and two straws."

That was Jackie. Always teasing. But right now, his joke made things a little awkward.

"Just bring two shakes," Noelle said, playfully slapping him on the forearm with the back of her hand. "And take this while you're going. I have to get home. I have a one o'clock video call."

Jackie gave Noelle a wink before rushing off with the order, her credit card, and her check. Silence settled over the table, and he noticed that Charity and Noelle exchanged a look.

"So, you're working from home while you're in town?" Nic asked, infinitely curious as to how that worked. "What is it you do, exactly?"

"Accounting," she said. "Bookkeeping, mostly. I can do every bit of it from home, but my boss is one of those people who believes if he can't see you, you're not working."



“How’d you get him to agree to this?” Nic asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Noelle tilt her head slightly. She was curious why he was asking so many questions, no doubt. If he was honest, he’d tell both of them that he’d been fascinated by the concept of working from home. He’d been jealous of his remote working friends for years now. The ones who could wake up in the morning and start working without even changing out of their pajamas. The ones who worked all day without having to get in the car and drive back and forth to a building.

But when he was honest with himself, he admitted it wouldn’t work for him. He loved the great outdoors, and he couldn’t imagine being cooped up in his apartment all day. No, he definitely had the best job for him.

“He knows he’s going to lose her,” Charity said. Noelle flashed her a surprised look, and Charity shrugged in response. “It’s true. You can do bookkeeping for anyone, anywhere, and live here.”

Noelle began nodding slowly. “I’ve been a loyal employee, but he’s been good to me too.”

“He hasn’t given you a raise in the four years you’ve worked for him,” Charity pointed out.

“Yeah, my rent keeps going up.” Noelle looked over at Nic. “I’d love to own a place, but everything’s just gotten so expensive in Knoxville.”

“Plus, you don’t want to put down roots there.”

“Exactly,” Noelle said.

Jackie was approaching by then. He handed over the ticket and moved to the next table, mouth open, as though ready to start speaking.

Noelle wasted no time signing the bill and setting it, face down, at the end of the table. “This is my chance to prove to my boss I can do this job from here. See you two later.”

She snatched up her laptop bag from the floor next to her and rushed out, waving a distracted goodbye to the two of

them. Charity watched her go before turning back to face Nic.

“She seriously could get a job like that.” She snapped her fingers, then, with a sigh, slid her empty plate toward the edge of the table. “Plenty of people would let her work from home.”

“Yeah, I’d love that too, but my job kind of requires I be on site,” he said.

That seemed to get Charity’s attention. “But you said you’re working remotely right now.”

“I can do a lot of it from here, but it’s a temporary thing. It’s only a matter of time before I have to do a health check of the crops. That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

He added a smile to that last statement, though he doubted she got his sarcasm. His pride would never let him admit to the woman seated in front of him just how little he earned in his position. He’d learned from being married to a much higher earner that money could create a power imbalance and lead to issues in a relationship, even when you swore it wouldn’t.

“I work pretty much everywhere,” Charity said, pausing as one of the servers appeared with a tray.

The server set a water and a shake in front of each of them, along with four straws. She smiled at Charity before walking away.

“I didn’t even ask for a water,” Charity said.

“I guess it’s a courtesy.”

Nic couldn’t help but remember Jackie’s comment about two straws in one milkshake. They’d never shared a shake when they were a couple. It seemed kind of cheesy, but he couldn’t help but see it as romantic now. This woman was getting inside his head, no matter how hard he fought to keep her out.

Desperate to get his mind off that track, he asked, “So what do you have planned for today?”

“I’m Christmas-ifying Misty Mountain, one building at a time. This afternoon, that means putting the tree up at the library.”

His eyebrows arched at that. “The library has the budget to hire an interior decorator?”

He shouldn’t be so surprised. Libraries had budgets, right? It was more than that, though. He was shocked the city of Misty Mountain would put money into making their library look good for only one season.

“Nope,” Charity said. “It’s volunteer work. I do it every year.”

Nic took a long sip from his milkshake and almost forgot what he was about to say as the flavors hit his tastebuds. He was getting a refresher on just how smooth and genuinely chocolate tasting the milkshakes at Jackie’s Diner were.

Once the swallow of shake was down, though, something else kept him from speaking. He laughed at the thought that flashed through his mind.

“Your name’s Charity.”

She was busy sipping from her shake, too, but she stopped to stare at him. For a second, she looked like she might choke.

“I was going to comment that you sure do a lot of volunteer work,” he explained. “And then I remembered your name is Charity.”

Looking up toward the ceiling, she seemed to think that through. “That probably should have occurred to me by now. Maybe that’s why I’m always donating my time.”

“Could be why people constantly request it from you. They assume you’re charitable.”

“I *am* charitable,” she said. “But I have to admit, it’s good for business. Anytime someone needs an interior decorator, who do you think they ask?”

“How often do people need interior decorators?” he asked.

“You’d be surprised.” Charity sat back and seemed to think through her next words, staring out the window for a long moment before speaking. “Most of my business comes from referrals. Lucky and Matt have been good to me. They both encounter a lot of people looking for help with their rental

cabins. Plus, the resort has me come decorate for almost every event they do.”

The resort. He almost choked on another sip at those two words. The property they called the Misty Mountain Resort was a nice hotel with a restaurant on the main floor. The restaurant had actual deer heads hanging all around. He’d bet there were more hunting and fishing conventions there than anywhere in the country.

“So, you’re going to the library after this?” he asked.

“That’s my plan.” She punctuated that with a long sip of her milkshake.

“I’ll go with you.”

At those words, she stopped sipping. Her beautiful brown eyes widened as she stared at him.

“You’re volunteering, right?” He shrugged. “I volunteer to help you out—if you’ll have me.”

“I thought you were working.”

That was a good point, but he was just going to go home and work on some reports while he waited to see if anyone needed him. He could be on call at the library just as easily as he could at his parents’ house.

“Think about it,” he said. “With both of us working, you’ll get it done twice as fast.”

Plus, he’d get to spend time with her. That was the real goal here. If he went home after lunch, he’d just be thinking about her the rest of the day.

She started to answer, but she had to put her response on hold while Jackie set his food down in front of him. By the time she spoke, he’d gotten so distracted by the delicious food, he’d forgotten how much he was hanging on the next words she said.

“Sure,” she finally said. “It’ll be fun.”

**I** *t'll be fun.*

Had she actually said those words? Charity had obviously forgotten how much work decorating the town library was.

“You forgot something,” Francine Donahue, the head librarian, said from her spot behind the circulation desk.

Nic and Charity stood side by side, admiring their work. They'd set up the gigantic tree to the right of the entrance and strung garland along the desk and in every doorway in the place.

But Francine was holding something very distinctive as she started toward them. Pinched between her thumb and forefinger was a bushel of mistletoe.

“We can't seem to get away from that stuff,” Nic commented.

Maybe it was a sign. Charity thought those words but didn't dare say them out loud.

“Where do you want us to hang it?” Nic looked around. “You probably don't want to create a traffic jam at the door.”

Francine let out a short laugh. “I hardly think people are going to be lining up to kiss under the mistletoe. When we have our annual Christmas party, it might be a fun photo booth sort of thing.”

“Photo booth!” Nic looked over at Charity. “A photo booth. I told you.”

It took a second to work out what he was talking about. That first night on the square, he’d mentioned that the controversial mistletoe hanging from the statue was attracting photos. When people shared those photos on social media, they often tagged the location, which offered instant promotion. So it stood to reason that a photo opportunity at the library would help promote it, at least locally.

“Where?” Charity stepped forward, eyeing the area.

Making things look good was her strength, but this brought a different challenge. She had to find an object that would hold the mistletoe. It had to be something that would drape it low enough so that it would be just above couples’ heads in photos.

“We need a really long ribbon,” Charity said, spinning back around to face Francine.

Francine smiled. “That, I can do.”

As she headed straight for the big room people reserved for meetings, Charity turned back around to admire the tree. But that only put her staring straight at her ex-boyfriend.

She didn’t like this, not at all. Or maybe she liked it a little too much. All she could think about right now was kissing him under that mistletoe.

He was at least five feet away, but he may as well have been standing directly in front of her. Electricity zinged between them, making it nearly impossible to look away.

“I can reach that,” Charity said, looking up at the light. She was grateful for an excuse to look away. “I just need to toss the ribbon up and have it loop over it. Then when I pull it down, I’m set.”

The silence that followed made his thoughts clear on that. It was a ridiculous idea. No way would it work. The laws of physics said whatever ribbon Francine brought would be way too flimsy to be able to carry itself over that dangling light.

The plan was to hang it from one of the many dangling fluorescent lights that filled the library. Funny, she'd never even noticed that the lights dangled before. This was the first year mistletoe had even been mentioned, so it wasn't like she'd had to look for somewhere to hang it in past years. Yes, she had a feeling Francine introduced it right now on purpose.

Yet another Misty Mountain Cupid?

"I think I probably can do it," Nic said. "But I'm going to need a regular-sized chair."

In this area of the library, the tables and chairs were shorter for the younger patrons. Adults and teens usually sat toward the back of the building where the books got progressively older.

Charity didn't wait around to discuss it, instead heading straight back in that direction. She found a chair within seconds and was on her way back. At the same time, Francine emerged with a full spool of ribbon and a pair of scissors.

"I figure we can cut it to the length we need." She looked from Nic to Charity, eyes wide. "How are we going to do this?"

That was a good question. "I think we'll need two chairs," Nic said.

He was already off, breezing past Charity, who had stopped below the very first light and was still holding the chair above ground. Finally, she set the chair down and watched as he retrieved a second chair.

"I don't—" she started.

"Trust me," he interrupted.

And then he gave her a wink. An actual wink. Was that flirtatious? It felt flirtatious. It felt like something he would have done when they were friends too, though. Before things got so complicated between them.

"I'll help you up." Nic held out a hand and Charity eyed it for a long moment before reaching out and slipping her hand into his.

She was shocked at how natural it felt. It was a feeling similar to the one that overwhelmed her when she settled into her big, cushy recliner at the end of the day. It felt comfortable. Safe. Right.

But she couldn't just stand there, holding his hand. Francine was watching, and no telling who else. The library was mostly empty, but there were a few people milling around here and there. The last thing she needed was word getting out around town that they were dating again. Then everyone would just feel sorry for her when he returned to Lexington.

Charity climbed up on the chair, but Nic didn't let go of her hand right away. When she looked down at him, it was clear he was trying to make sure she was stable. It had nothing to do with him having a hard time pulling away from her. She had to keep telling herself that or she might forget it.

Nic seemed to have no problem climbing up on the other chair. He didn't even need help. Once he was settled into place, he reached over and grabbed the ribbon from Francine, who stood nearby with her trusty pair of scissors.

"We need a weight," he said.

"You could weigh it down with the mistletoe," Francine suggested.

But Nic was shaking his head before she got to the end of that sentence. "No. Something we won't damage. This is going to be tossed over that light. Maybe some safety pins?"

When his gaze lowered and landed on Charity, it hit home just how close they were to each other. Too close. And it was ridiculous. She was thinking about kissing him again.

Maybe it wasn't so ridiculous, though. This was where mistletoe was going to hang, after all. This would be the kissing spot for the next few weeks.

"I've got it!" Francine said. "Be right back."

The sudden outburst threatened to tip Charity to the left a little. Somehow, she righted herself before she fell and made a complete fool of herself.



“Buttons,” Francine said with a big smile. “And they’re just the right size.”

She was so proud of herself, they had to make it work. But she was right. They were small square buttons with messages on them about reading. Nic and Charity read each one before Nic pinned it to the ribbon—four of them, all in a row.

“I think that’s probably enough,” Nic said. “We don’t want it to get stuck. Do you want to toss it, or do you want me to do it?”

“I’ll let you do the honors,” she said. “I think you know how I am at throwing things.”

A smile broke out on his face. He was remembering the many times she’d tossed something to him and fallen way short. But how did he know she hadn’t improved in that area over the years? Maybe she’d perfected her baseball pitch.

“You know what? I don’t need this chair.”

With that, Nic stepped down from the chair and slid it aside. Then he stared up at the light, moved around a little, and finally aimed and tossed.

It took seven tries, but he managed to get the ribbon to pass through the light and flop down toward Charity. By then, they’d attracted a small crowd. Everyone who’d entered while they were working on this had gathered behind Francine, and they’d drawn the attention of the few people wandering around.

“Perfect!” Francine said. “Let me go get the mistletoe. Who wants to be the first kiss?”

Charity was still standing on her chair, but she felt like she was on display. Especially in light of Francine’s words. She had to stand there, though, and wait for the mistletoe so she could attach it to the ribbon. Which meant she *was* on display.

“I don’t see any couples here,” Charlotte Edmonds, who stood there alone, said. “Except maybe the two of you.”

“Here it is!”

Francine's voice saved Charity from responding. She rushed toward them, a bushel of mistletoe in her hand. With all the matchmaking over the summer, nobody would blame Charity for wondering if Charlotte and Francine were up to something. But she was just being paranoid. Mistletoe was a natural matchmaker. It didn't need help from Misty Mountain busybodies.

Besides, people could try all they wanted, but there was no future for Nic and Charity. Even if they did kiss again, it was only putting off the inevitable. And the more she let herself forget that, the harder it would be when Nic did walk away from Misty Mountain again.

**M**onday night was salad night at the Winters house. Always had been, always would be.

Nic stood in the kitchen, admiring the spread his mom had set out. A large bowl of lettuce followed by a series of smaller bowls—tomatoes, chopped-up onions, cheese, some grilled chicken... He and his dad stood back, letting his mom go first.

“Does she set all this out when it’s just the two of you?” Nic asked his dad.

“She likes a good buffet,” his dad said with a chuckle.

His parents loved each other. That mattered more to Nic than ever before. His ex-wife’s parents had been divorced, and now, as a divorcé himself, he realized just what an accomplishment it was for two people to work through their problems and stay together. He would have done that with Em if only she’d been willing to work at it too, but she’d checked out of their marriage just a few months in.

“Don’t make me do this alone,” his mom said. She was already to the cheese by then, holding the little spoon that she’d used to scoop out small amounts.

“So, what do you do for dinner on Tuesday nights?” Nic asked, racking his brain for what they’d done growing up. He couldn’t remember for the life of him.

“Your mom either makes a meatloaf or pot roast, and then we eat on it Wednesday and Thursday nights,” his dad said, following Nic to the start of his mom’s buffet.

“And Friday night, we do pizza, remember?” His mom smiled at him as he picked up the tongs and prepared to grab a bundle of lettuce to drop into his bowl.

Pizza night. The two words reminded him of the meal he shared with Charity after the Christmas parade. His dad had always swung by Cloudtop Pizzeria to grab a stack of pizzas for the family. Delivery hadn’t been an option when he was growing up.

“Of course, on Monday mornings, your mom has book club now,” his dad said.

“Book club.”

Nic didn’t mean to sound so surprised. It wasn’t that his mom was lacking social skills or anything. She’d just always been a bit of a loner. She preferred a night at home reading to going out.

He always had a feeling that was one of the reasons she hadn’t stuck around Misty Mountain very much. The nearby suburbs allowed her to run in and out of grocery stores and shops without risking running into anyone she knew. She loved shopping. She just couldn’t be bothered with idle chitchat.

“I’m in a book club,” she said.

“In Sawyerville?” Nic asked.

“Here in town,” his dad said. Surprise came through in his voice. “She’s actually socializing with Misty Mountaineers.”

Misty Mountaineers. Nic had certainly never heard their town residents called that. But when he turned to look at his mom, he saw a little bit of hurt in her eyes.

“It’s not that I thought I was better than anyone else,” she said. “I just value my privacy.”

She grabbed a breadstick from the bowl at the end of her impromptu buffet and headed over to the table. Nic and his dad exchanged a look. That look clearly said “Uh-oh.”

“I get it,” Nic said, eager to push the conversation forward. He sprinkled some cheese over his lettuce, tomatoes, and

onions. “That’s one thing I don’t like about living in an apartment. Even in the apartment I shared with Em, everyone was in everybody else’s business. I had this one neighbor who ran out her patio door every time she saw me getting in or out of my truck.”

His dad laughed. “I get enough of that at work. I spend most of my day trying to move personal conversations along so I don’t run behind on my appointments.”

“Exactly,” his mom said. After setting her stuff down, she’d crossed to the refrigerator and retrieved the pitcher of sweet tea she’d made. “But it’s not that.” She paused near the counter where Nic had just piled a heap of cut-up grilled chicken onto his salad. “It’s more everyone knowing my personal business.”

Yeah, he *definitely* got that. He’d only been back in town a couple of days, and he’d felt the scrutiny everywhere he’d gone. It might sound paranoid, but he was pretty sure the entire town was buzzing about him and Charity. That would never happen in Lexington or nearby Sawyerville.

“Tell us about your day,” his mom said as soon as Nic sat down. “You said you were helping out at the library?”

Oh, that. He’d forgotten he’d mentioned that to his mom earlier. He’d just been making conversation at the time, with no idea it might come up later. She hadn’t said a word, so he thought he’d gotten off without explaining. He’d been wrong.

“Just helping decorate for the Christmas season,” he said. “Apparently volunteers do that every year.”

His dad sat down and pulled his napkin from under his silverware, dislodging it in the process. As he spread the napkin across his lap, Nic’s mother leaned forward, staring at her son through narrowed eyes.

“Why do I have the feeling Charity Ardmore had something to do with that?” his mother asked.

“Charity Ardmore,” his dad commented. “I haven’t heard that name in a while.”

How could his mom possibly know who decorated the library interior? She was deliberately not plugged into what was going on in this town. When he needed her to be clueless, she was a town expert, apparently.

“Yes, I ran into her at the diner.” Nic shrugged. “She said she was doing the work pro bono. I said I’d help. I got back in time to get my work done before everyone went home for the day.”

Nobody had said a word about him shirking off his work duties to hang out with Charity. They didn’t have to. He felt guilty enough.

“You’ve been working around the clock for years at that place,” his mom said. “Now that you don’t have anything tying you to Lexington, you should look for work somewhere else.”

His dad looked over at his mom, a teasing glint in his eye. “Maybe somewhere a little closer to Misty Mountain?”

Yeah, they both had his mom’s number on that. She was always angling for him to move home. His sister got away with it because her work required her to be close to Washington DC. But his mom seemed to think he might someday change his stance on living here.

“I like Lexington,” he said, aware of the defensiveness in his own tone. “Besides, everyone I knew here in Misty Mountain moved away a long time ago.”

Now his mother was the one with a teasing glint in her eye. “Not everyone.”

Yeah, he got it. Charity Ardmore was still in town. And if he moved back, he could date her. They could get married and settle down in a house and have salad night on Monday nights, meatloaf on Tuesdays, and so on. Maybe they’d even get wild and crazy and take a vacation outside of this region of the country. His parents never had.

“I tell you, I wouldn’t have wanted to run my practice anywhere else,” Nic’s dad said. “I’ve been a pediatrician since

before you kids were born. Now I'm seeing the babies of the babies I saw when you were kids."

He said that like it was a good thing, and to him, it definitely was. But one thing Nic loved about his life was there were possibilities. He might not be in his dream job right now, but he loved the work, and he could always pivot to something else and work anywhere he wanted. Nothing was tying him to any specific town.

"Maybe that's the point," Nic said. Both his parents paused eating to look at him. He rushed to clarify. "Nothing's tying me to Lexington. I could live anywhere. That wouldn't be the case if I settled in a small town like this. When you stay here as an adult, it's a lifelong commitment."

"Why, that's not true," his mother said. "People move away from Misty Mountain all the time. You just said yourself most of the people you knew are gone."

"The kids move," he said. "How many people who get married and have their kids here leave?"

His mom opened her mouth, then looked over at his dad. He'd be the one who knew better than she would. But Nic's dad simply stared straight ahead, fork held above his plate.

"Why would anybody want to leave?" his mother finally said when his dad couldn't seem to come up with any examples. "You have everything you need right here."

"You leave all the time," Nic pointed out. "Sawyerville has bigger grocery stores, all the retail shops you love, and need I point out that you can't have anything delivered here but pizza?"

"I get things delivered here all the time." His mom pointed in the general direction of the front door. "I order them online, and they're on the front porch the next day."

Yeah, that wasn't what he was talking about, and she knew it. "I just can't imagine living in one place all my life." He shrugged. "It works for some people. Obviously, you two love it. It's just not the right fit for me."

There. He'd said it. It was the same thing he'd felt all his life, but he'd never put it into words. Not to his parents, anyway. The idea of getting stuck anywhere, whether it was Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, or Timbuktu, made him immediately claustrophobic.

He didn't miss the look his mom and dad swapped before going back to eating. He was trying to figure out a way to change the subject when he felt his phone buzz in his sweatpants pocket. He'd changed into them as soon as he'd gotten back from helping Charity at the library.

"Oh." He set his fork down and reached into his pocket. "That might be the work email I've been expecting."

But when he glanced at the phone, it wasn't a notification from the irrigation specialist they'd hired to come out and rework their equipment. No, it was a text from a name he hadn't seen on his phone in a while. Eight years, to be exact. A name he'd never erased from his contacts—mostly because he never erased anyone from his contacts.

*You up for caroling?* Charity asked.

"Christmas caroling?" he asked out loud.

"Oh, yeah," his dad said. "That's tonight. The wife of the church pastor who handles it all is one of my patients. The carolers meet in the parking lot at the First Baptist Church. You should go do that."

"You used to go caroling when you were a kid," his mother remembered. She had a smile on her face before she covered her mouth with a napkin to wipe. "It was always so much fun."

His mom had never gone with him, so how would she know? She dropped him and his sister off at the parking lot and picked them up when it was over, along with the dozens of other parents who did the same.

That was the kids' group, though. He was assuming this was the night the adults caroled.

"What time does it start?" he asked.



His dad shrugged. “Beats me.”

“Probably soon.” His mom glanced at the clock. “You’d better hurry up and finish eating or you’ll miss it.”

He shouldn’t do it. He should stay here and get caught up on work. Spending more time around charity would only make this harder. What he needed to be doing was distancing himself from her.

But instead, he found himself typing, *What time?* Then he rushed to finish his salad. Yeah, his willpower was shot.

It was the perfect night for Christmas caroling. The weather had warmed up a little, as it sometimes did in late November, but there was just enough of a breeze to make the weather fall-like.

“Nic Winters!”

Charity was trying not to stare eagerly at the cars entering the parking lot when Trevor Hargis’s voice cut into her thoughts. She’d been basically pretending that Mrs. Apple’s description of her turkey casserole was the most interesting thing she’d ever heard. In truth, though, she hadn’t processed a single word the woman had said.

“I haven’t seen you in years,” Trevor said to the new arrival. “Where have you been hiding yourself?”

Trevor’s voice carried over to Charity, who started nodding even more vigorously. “I should try that,” Charity told Mrs. Apple, not sure what she was suggesting she’d try. “I’m sure my parents still have plenty of leftovers. They’ve been looking for a way to serve them so we don’t have to throw it all away.”

Despite her resolve not to look, Charity found her head turning just slightly. Just enough for her to take in Trevor and Nic. They were standing several feet away, on the outskirts of the crowd, and Nic was looking in this direction.

A surge of excitement passed through Charity. This was the feeling she’d missed with her ex. This was why they’d broken up. Even in the beginning, she hadn’t gotten this rush

of adrenaline, the rapid heartbeat that came when you were really, *really* into someone.

But she couldn't be into this particular someone. No, that was wrong. How did she turn it off?

"Okay everyone," Pastor Murray said. He was standing on the steps behind her, addressing the crowd of a couple dozen people. "My lovely wife Alison is handing out the songbooks. I see a couple of new faces this year. Welcome! Partner up with one of these old-timers, and they'll tell you how it's done."

By then, Charity had stepped away from Mrs. Apple to look up at Pastor Murray. Technically, Charity should be the one to help Nic since she'd invited him. But they'd done this so many times as kids, he should know the drill. Did he really count as a newcomer?

Yeah, when she turned around, he'd no doubt be hanging out with Trevor, who'd done this event before. Like her, he did a lot of volunteer work because it was good for his business. And because he wanted to give back to the community that had given so much to him.

But when she turned, Trevor had grouped up with Lucky and his girlfriend, Jordan. No surprise. Lucky was a contractor, and Trevor was an electrician. They'd worked together before at some point, although Charity didn't know the specifics. Charity had been talking to the three of them before Mrs. Apple started talking to her.

Meanwhile, Nic stood just behind her, looking like he was about to approach. "I guess you're my buddy," he said with a big smile.

Somehow, he managed to make those words go straight to her heart. Alison squeezed around him and handed both of them songbooks. She tossed Charity a big smile before heading back to her husband.

Pastor Murray and his wife had only lived in Misty Mountain a few years. He'd moved here from up north, replacing their longtime pastor when he retired. So Alison

Murray would have no clue who this handsome man talking to one of their longtime church members was.

“Are these the same songs we sang growing up?” Nic asked, opening the book and looking down at it. “If it’s the classics, I know them anyway, I’m sure.”

“All the classics.” She opened the book, which was the same one they used every year. “We start with ‘Silent Night’ to bring people to the door. It’s less threatening. Then, once we have them listening, we switch to ‘We Wish You a Merry Christmas,’ and if we haven’t been kicked off the lawn yet, we go into ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen’ and end with ‘Oh Holy Night.’”

“I’m not a very good singer,” he said.

“We have some strong singers.” She gestured to the people to her left. “Trust me. The concern tonight was getting the numbers.”

Wait, maybe she shouldn’t reveal the fact that she mostly reached out to him because they needed more people. Or maybe letting him think that was the right idea.

If she was truly honest, though, she’d admit she invited him because she wanted to see him again.

“I’ll do my best not to embarrass you,” he said.

He had a smile on his face as he said those words, but as his gaze connected with hers, she couldn’t seem to look away. She was filled with a longing so intense, it made her knees a little weak.

It wasn’t just that she wanted to kiss him again. She wanted him back in her life for good. She missed him already, and he was standing right here.

“Okay, everybody,” Pastor Murray called out. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The reason caroling had always worked so well in this town was that the church was only about two city blocks away from the Misty Lakes subdivision. That was where Charity lived now, but at one time, it had been reserved for the

wealthiest people in town. Back then, though, there had been far fewer houses beyond that entrance.

“This is where you live, right?” Nic asked as they stepped to the end of the line.

Trevor, Lucky, and Jordan were directly behind Pastor Murphy and his wife, not having waited around for the two of them. She wondered if they assumed she wanted to be alone with Nic.

“Misty Lakes has changed a lot since you lived here,” Charity said. “There weren’t nearly as many houses back then.”

Nic stared up ahead. Off in the distance, they could see the hill where the biggest houses were. Those houses had a good view of the mountains. But Charity and almost everyone she knew lived on this side of the hill, with no view whatsoever.

“It’s a nice place to live,” she said. “All these sidewalks. I take my dog for walks all the time.”

“I remember as kids, it felt like we walked forever just to get from one house to the next,” he said. “But everyone would answer their door.”

“Yeah, that’s changed.” She took a deep breath and let it out, suddenly aware that she’d been twisting the book around in her hands. It would get all bent if she kept it up. She stilled her hands and focused on holding it a little more casually. “We get a lot of unanswered door knocks, but enough people know we’re coming and we know the houses where church members live. We always make sure we hit those before we’re finished.”

“Just how long are we doing this?” He was scanning the rows of houses in front of them. It did look daunting.

“Same as when we were kids.” Charity glanced over at him. “A couple of hours.”

“Did we do this for a couple of hours when we were kids?”

“Sure did.” She smiled. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

“When you’re a kid, I guess it does.”

The line in front of them had come to a stop, so they did too. Everyone was waiting to cross the main strip—a challenge, considering the speed limit through this area was fifty. But it was a Monday night in Misty Mountain, and traffic was light.

They had to cross in groups, with those who'd already made it to the other side waiting for the rest to join them. Charity and Nic ended up with Mrs. Apple and her two friends, who were a lot braver than they should have been.

Nic reached out and put a hand on Charity's back to stop her from rushing after them. Not that she would have, anyway, but she liked the protective move. And she *really* liked the feel of his hand on her back.

"Let's go," he said after looking both ways again.

He reached out and grabbed her hand as they rushed across the street. They were holding hands. Yes, it was functional. There was nothing romantic intended by it. But it felt good anyway. It felt right. Just like their kisses. Just like spending time with him in general. It all felt...

Right.

She couldn't say which of them released the grip first. All she knew was they were soon on the other side of the street, not holding hands and looking over toward the rest of their group. By then, the last of that group was already passing the sign for the entrance to the neighborhood.

"Don't wait for us or anything," Nic said.

But Charity didn't mind. As long as she had Nic next to her, she was fine wandering into her own neighborhood alone.

"I didn't realize the first houses were so close to the entrance," he said.

"Oh yeah, you've probably driven past this entrance on your visits to town."

They walked in silence for a half minute or so before he spoke again. "Not very often. I guess you could say I kind of avoided running around Misty Mountain when I visited."

“Until this year,” she said.

“Until this year. I don’t know what made me decide to go to the tree lighting.”

“Your parents don’t usually go, I guess,” she said.

His mom was sweet as could be, but she’d never taken much interest in getting to know the rest of the town. As a teen, Charity assumed it was because her husband was the town pediatrician, and he wanted to keep a professional distance from his patients. But looking back on it as an adult, she wasn’t so sure about that.

“My mom likes her privacy,” he said. “She gets a little skittish about people knowing her personal business.”

Charity struggled to formulate a question to go with what she was thinking. It didn’t matter anyway. Before she could get a word out, the group had come to a stop while Pastor Murphy spoke to a woman walking her dog.

But Nic’s words continued to swish around in her head as they approached the door of the first house. Maybe that was where he got his aversion to living in a small town. He’d been raised by a mom who had to go out of her way to avoid shopping and hanging out in the town where she lived.

No wonder he wanted to settle down in a bigger city somewhere that would give him the privacy he wanted. And privacy was important to Nic Winters, just as it was to his mom. She just couldn’t believe it had taken her this long to piece it all together.

Yes, he was definitely done with this town. She just needed to accept it and move on, as hard as it would be.

Charity was in her element. It was clear to see that from the way she lit up every time they sang to a new household.

For Nic, the entire experience was surreal. At house after house, he saw people he played next to in Little League, sat behind in algebra, and worked alongside at the auto repair shop once he'd been old enough to drive. These people were parents now—all grown up.

He deliberately stayed away from social media, which meant he avoided sneaking peeks at what people looked like now. This was like going blindly into a high school reunion. Only it wasn't just his class. It was kids who'd been several years younger than him and some who'd been several years older. All had families of their own now.

"Everyone's married with kids," he commented to Charity as they started the climb toward the bigger houses.

"Those are just the ones who stuck around," she said. "Plus, we're deliberately visiting houses of church members."

He frowned. "Why would that matter?"

"Most of these people either met at church before graduation or they got together afterward."

"So the church is kind of like the town matchmaker."

That brought a laugh from her. He loved her laugh. He'd always loved it, even when they'd just been friends. It was one of those things that made him miss Misty Mountain. Not the



town itself, but the young person he'd been growing up here, when life had felt so full of possibilities.

"I assume in Lexington, people stay single for a long time," she said.

He almost laughed out loud at that. "Lexington is hardly a big city, but yeah, a lot of my friends are putting off marriage. My ex-wife and I had couple friends, but not many were married. Two lived together and one had just started dating."

Again, they walked in silence for a while. The only sound was the conversation up ahead of them and the sound of their footfalls on the concrete sidewalk.

"There's not much of a single life here in Misty Mountain," she said. "I have to admit, it gets lonely sometimes. I have my parents, of course, and my friends, but Noelle lives in Knoxville. Now that she's dating Enzo—"

"Wait a second. Noelle and Enzo are dating? How did I miss that?"

"It's new news," she said. "And don't say a word. She didn't tell me to keep it a secret, but I probably shouldn't have let it slip."

"You know you can trust me."

That was followed by another silence. More than anything right now, he wished he could read her thoughts. She remembered how many times they'd shared secrets, knowing the other wouldn't tell a soul. Was she still thinking about Enzo and Noelle and what their coupling up might mean for their friendship?

"Remember this house?" she asked.

The sudden change in topic made it clear Charity wasn't thinking about their conversation at all. She'd been staring straight ahead for most of that silence, and he didn't have to follow her line of vision to know what she meant.

Up ahead was the gigantic house that belonged to the woman they'd nicknamed "Penny Pincher." Legend had it,

she'd married a super wealthy guy who'd died, and now she lived in this house all alone.

But they'd given her the nickname because every Halloween, she gave each kid one penny taped to a candy cane. Since candy canes were traditionally Christmas treats, they always assumed she was passing out ten-month-old candy, bought in the bargain bin at the after-Christmas sales.

But the way the house looked threw Nic off. Penny Pincher never decorated for Christmas. They always knocked on her door when they caroled, and she never answered. The joke was that she probably worried they expected her to pay them.

"Penny Pincher died," Charity said in an appropriately somber voice. "Her family tried to get her to go to a place, but she didn't want to pay for it. Her neighbors kept an eye on her, though, and they called her kids when they knew it was getting close."

"So, who lives here now?" he asked.

"This guy who runs helicopter tours up and down the mountains. Apparently, he does pretty well for himself. He pays a company to do all this."

By "all this," she meant the winter wonderland happening in the guy's front yard. Not only was the house outlined in classy white lights, but they'd created a tunnel of lights covering the sidewalk leading up to the front door. On either side of it were lawn decorations—and not the kind that deflated in the morning. These were solid decorations, including an empty sleigh with nine reindeer and a plastic Santa.

"This is fancier than some of the places I take women on dates," he joked as they approached the tunnel.

Charity said nothing. And as they moved into single file beyond the rest of the group, he second guessed his wording. It sounded like he frequently went on dates when the truth was that he hadn't been on a date since his wife walked out on him.

He knew he had to get back out there eventually if he ever wanted to settle down. But this time, it had to be right.

This time, it had to be forever.

Finally, the tunnel ended, and they spilled out onto the lawn in front of the steps leading up to the porch. He was glad because it meant he could stand next to Charity rather than walking single file behind her. Plus, the slight chill in the air meant everyone huddled close together, which put him snug up against her, his left arm touching her right as they lifted their books.

Pastor Murray rang the doorbell, then turned back to face them. "I'm not sure Mr. Pryce will be home."

"He doesn't have a wife or kids," Mrs. Apple said. "He probably won't answer."

Everyone was suddenly staring at Mrs. Apple, which made Nic feel a little better about the confused look he threw in her direction. What did the guy's marital status have to do with anything? And how did she know so much about him?

"Good evening, everyone."

Nic faced front and saw a guy emerging from the house. He stepped out onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind him. Under his unzipped coat, he wore a maroon quarter-zip sweater, jeans, and shoes that looked like they must be designer. Nic knew the type. He met with grocery bigwigs occasionally, and they always waltzed in reeking of money.

But this guy didn't give off the same sort of vibe. He seemed approachable, nice, friendly. And yes, Nic got all that from watching him step out onto his front porch and cross his arms over his chest.

Pastor Murray gave the nod, and they launched into "Silent Night," but Nic was watching Charity out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly, he was thrown back to the fourteen-year-old version of himself, watching Charity's friends giggle over some guy. He felt that same pang of jealousy now. It wasn't even jealousy over something tangible. It was the thinking that this guy was someone Charity could go out with.

It was worse now because clearly there weren't that many eligible bachelors in Misty Mountain. If this guy was single and had all this money, why wouldn't Charity go for him? She'd be out of her mind not to.

Maybe he should push her toward him or set the wheels in motion so that someone fixed her up with him when he left. It would be the right thing to do as her friend.

But even thinking about that was the ultimate test of his feelings for her. He couldn't stomach the thought of her starting a life with someone else. Making this gigantic house a home, having children...

He was better off walking away from here and not paying any attention to what happened after he left. If he tried to think about Charity's future, he'd make himself crazy and give her false hope in the process.

Charity was exhausted. Beyond exhausted. It felt like a lifetime had passed since she stopped by her house for a frozen microwave dinner and a few minutes with Gracie. In truth, though, it'd only been a couple of hours.

“Hope you like marshmallows,” Nic said.

He was walking toward her, a smile on his face and a disposable coffee cup in each hand. They were the same cups from yesterday's parade. Charity donated the extra cups to this church. It was a thank you for letting them borrow the hot cocoa machine.

“You know I do.” She smiled but didn't get up from her seat. Instead, she reached out, and he brought the cup to where she sat. “Oh. Whoa.”

That was her automatic reaction at the sight of the pile of marshmallows in her cup. Was there cocoa underneath all that?

“That was an interesting tour of my hometown.” Nic slid onto the seat next to her with a sigh. “It was like I saw all the people I've been avoiding in one go.”

She hid her frown behind her cocoa cup. The pile of marshmallows bumped against the skin of her upper lip, threatening to create a big mess.

She couldn't imagine a single person he might want to avoid. Everyone was so friendly here. Even the super rich guy who'd taken over Penny Pincher's mega-mansion had seemed like a down-to-earth guy.

“Don’t get me wrong, I can see the appeal of small-town life.” He gestured toward Lauren and Jeff, a young couple exiting the building after having grabbed their cocoa. “It was a great place to grow up.”

Charity nodded. “It was, and it’s a great place to *be* grown up. Tourism is booming, which means more jobs around here. Plus, you never have to worry about crime. Everyone has your back. Not that there’s crime where you live.”

“Not really,” he said. “But I lock my door at night.”

She did too. There might be very little crime in this town, but break-ins could happen anywhere at any time. It just took a couple of extra seconds to stop and lock a door.

Charity took another sip of her cocoa and thought through her next words. She’d defend Misty Mountain to her death, but did she really need to defend it? Nic knew the benefits of this town more than anyone. He’d just said it was a great place to grow up.

His issue wasn’t with Misty Mountain. Never had been. It was with being trapped in the same town his entire life.

And trapped was how he saw it. In his mind, once you set down roots and started having kids, you couldn’t move.

That wasn’t true at all. But it was true for Charity. She had no plans to live anywhere else. So, anyone who married her would have to be okay with that.

“My sister’s getting married in June,” she said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him look over at her. No doubt he wondered why she brought this up now, but it was relevant.

“I’d love to be able to do all the stuff I dreamed of doing with my sisters,” Charity said, sighing. “Picking out wedding dresses, planning the wedding, raising our kids together... At one time, I even imagined the three of us having our houses on the same property. The kids would run from one house to another. They’d be cousins, but it would be more like they were siblings.”

“Sounds nice.”

Did it sound nice to him? Really? She couldn't imagine him ever even thinking about raising his kids on the same property as his sister. Both of them had big dreams, and those dreams pulled them away. Charity could say all she wanted about Misty Mountain's economy, but jobs were limited in a tourist town.

“My mom would love for one of us to move back here,” Nic said with a laugh. “Probably me more than my sister. She's already said she never plans to have kids.”

“You never know. Some of my closest friends growing up said they didn't want kids. They're almost all moms now. People change their minds.”

His sister was older, though—by several years. But women decided to have kids later in life all the time.

Still, that wasn't the point. The point was his mom wanted one of them back home, and neither of them seemed inclined to ever live in Misty Mountain again.

“I see the sadness in my mom's eyes when she can't have all of us together.” Charity crossed her legs and took another sip of her cocoa. “Thanksgiving was quiet. I could tell she felt like something was missing.”

“You were there,” he said.

“I get it.” Charity sighed, picturing their large dining room table, all decorated for the holiday with only three place settings. “My dad and I are around all the time. Holidays are for bringing everyone together. Ana is coming home for Christmas, but Faith hasn't committed yet. I think it's hard for her to get away from the store.”

Charity definitely understood that. Anyone else could take time off for the holidays, but retail meant helping all those last-minute shoppers. And she'd no doubt have to be right back at it for the after-Christmas sales. Getting to Knoxville would take Faith at least ten hours, and then she'd have to turn around and fly back again, with a layover in Chicago, almost as soon as they'd finished Christmas dinner.

“I have a feeling your mom is more grateful to have you here every day than you realize,” he said. “And once you give her grandkids, she’ll be plenty busy spoiling them.”

That bugged her in ways she couldn’t quite explain. He was talking about her having kids, and if it were anybody else, she’d light up at the topic. But this was Nic. This was the man the teenage version of herself had been sure would be the father of her kids when they were older. How could he so casually toss out those words? It didn’t hurt him at all to think of her starting a family here in Misty Mountain with a man who wasn’t him?

She needed out of here. She had to retreat to the safety of her house.

“I have to get home to my dog,” Charity said, pushing herself to her feet. Cocoa sloshed around in the cup but didn’t tip over the top, probably thanks to the large marshmallow cushion. “Thank you for helping out with this. It’s really— It was nice of you.”

As she spoke, Charity was backing up, edging toward the door. Inching closer to freedom.

“If I don’t talk to you again, have a safe trip back,” she said.

With that, she was done. She spun on one heel and walked quickly toward the door, taking her cup full of mostly marshmallows with her.



**I** *f I don't see you again, have a safe trip back.*

Those words stuck with Nic as he put out fires at work the next day. They had a big order for squash they couldn't fulfill. He'd gotten on the phone and arranged for a partner farm in Illinois to help out the grocery chain.

He should hop in his truck and head back. That would be the right thing to do. Charity had made it clear she was fine with him going back. It would be best for both of them if he just vanished. But he couldn't skip town just yet. He couldn't leave things this way between them.

And that was why he found himself looking for her when he headed into town for dinner. He could have eaten with his parents. His mom had made a casserole based on some recipe that was floating around town. Apparently, Mrs. Apple discovered some new way to make Thanksgiving leftovers not taste like Thanksgiving leftovers.

The Mexican restaurant. That was where he told his parents he was going for dinner. But that didn't explain why he'd swept through downtown, checking out the pizzeria and deciding it was too busy. He'd then swung by the diner—also too busy. With each sweep, he scanned frantically for signs of Charity's white sedan.

"This is ridiculous," he said to himself as he started toward the Mexican restaurant.

He could just pick up the phone and call her, maybe ask what she was doing for dinner. He could even swing by her

place and pick her up. She had a dog, so she'd have to stop by there before dinner if she'd been working all day. In truth, her plans were probably to eat at home, but it was still early enough that he might catch her before she dug into her solo meal.

He pulled into the Mexican restaurant parking lot, ready to park and shoot her a text. That was when he spotted it. He braked abruptly, the sight was so unexpected. It wasn't just that it was a white sedan. It had a small *Charity Interiors* sticker on the back bumper. Charity Ardmore was likely inside that building.

It didn't occur to him until he'd parked and started across the parking lot that she probably wasn't alone. A beautiful woman like her wouldn't have dinner by herself. If she wasn't having dinner with Noelle or her parents, she might be in there with a date.

The man from the mansion last night flashed through his mind—the one with the muscles and expensive shoes. The one who owned a helicopter tour company that obviously brought in a lot of money for him.

A large pink Christmas tree was to the right of the door, along with a bushel of mistletoe that dangled from the ceiling. They'd hung it a little low, which made him wonder if Noelle and Charity had anything to do with it. As soon as he lowered his gaze from the mistletoe, he was scanning the room.

“Hola!” a guy said, greeting him from behind the counter that was just past the Christmas tree. “Have a seat anywhere.”

It was a good thing he didn't say that last part in Spanish. Nic had two years of Spanish education behind him, but he'd hardly call himself fluent. Still, he managed a convincing enough “gracias” before returning to his room scan.

Charity was in the back corner of the restaurant at a booth. She was alone, but she could very well be meeting someone.

Nic stalled, not sure what to do here. If he took another seat without even saying hi, that would be awkward. But it might be even more awkward if he walked over and said hello

and she felt obligated to invite him to sit down. Or worse, she might tell him she had a date showing up any minute. Maybe her date was in the bathroom, washing his hands before his meal or something.

The guy behind the counter was pretending not to notice Nic was lurking. He had to do something. With long, confident strides, he headed straight toward the corner.

She made eye contact around the time he'd passed the last empty table. There were booths over on the other wall. He'd grab one of those after he greeted her.

"Hey." She sat back and tilted her head slightly.

She was smiling. That was a sign she was happy to see him. But there was also puzzlement in her eyes.

"I had no idea you'd be here," he said in answer to a question she hadn't even asked. "I was escaping my mom's casserole of leftovers, and this was what I was craving."

Seeing her was what he was craving, but that was something he had to fight. She had a basket of chips and a bowl of salsa in front of her, along with a glass of what was no doubt her favorite beverage, sweet tea.

"I had plans to meet Noelle, but she just texted that she's overloaded with work, so here I am." She sighed. "Have a seat. If you're alone, that is."

She probably assumed he was meeting a friend. Yeah, that would have been the smart thing to do. But then he couldn't have had dinner alone with her if he'd scheduled a meetup with one of his high school buddies.

Oh yeah. He didn't have any high school buddies still living here.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" he asked.

He didn't budge. He kept his coat on until she gave him a nod and a smile. Her half-smile and softened expression told him she was definitely okay with him sitting down.

"Things were a little weird last night," he said. "I wasn't sure if you were mad at me."

He shrugged off his coat and tossed it into the booth, sliding in after it. She was frowning. She held a chip between her thumb and forefinger as she stared straight ahead thoughtfully.

“They were?” she asked. “I don’t remember.”

Good. He certainly wasn’t going to remind her that she left suddenly. Maybe she hadn’t been upset after all. It very well could have been that she just realized her dog had been alone too long.

“Have you been watching the weather?” she asked.

The question startled him. He tilted his head in confusion. Was she making small talk, or was there something he needed to know?

“There’s a big snowstorm blowing in up north,” she said. “I doubt it’ll hit here, but your drive home might be affected.”

“When?”

“Tonight.” She shrugged. “It’s been all over the news.”

It didn’t surprise him that he’d missed something like that. He’d been so busy trying to prove to his employer he could do his job from here, he’d only glanced at his phone when it had something to do with work.

She broke a chip in half and dipped one of those halves into the salsa. Then she slid the salsa bowl over with her thumb so he could have some too.

“Snow is a big deal here in Tennessee,” she said after she downed the half chip. “It’s probably an everyday thing where you live.”

He shook his head. “Not quite not like when I was in school in Ohio, or even when I lived in Indiana. It happens just often enough in Lexington to be a pain.”

Like Tennessee, Kentucky didn’t invest in clearing side roads when snow happened. It just wasn’t often enough. But he was decent at driving in the snow, so he always managed to make it to work.

“I guess it’s too late for me to get back to Kentucky before it drops,” he said with a shrug. “If I’m snowed in here, I’ll get to spend more time with my parents.”

And her. He didn’t say those words out loud, though.

“What about your crops?” she asked.

“We have a team that takes care of that. I can manage it from here.”

Spanish Christmas music filled the air around them as he grabbed his first chip and took a bite. A server came over to take his drink order and hand him a menu and some silverware. Nic ordered quickly while the guy was standing there. It was obvious Charity had already ordered, and he didn’t want to slow things down.

Once the server was gone, they seemed to struggle to find conversation. He searched for something that would put them back on track...as friends, if nothing else.

“Mrs. Apple’s turkey casserole,” he blurted. “That’s what my mom made for dinner tonight.”

Charity was shaking her head as soon as the words “turkey casserole” came out of his mouth. “That casserole has gone viral.”

He frowned. “Online?”

“No. In town. Around here, it seems like one person does something, and soon it’s all the rage.”

“Turkey casserole is all the rage.” He laughed. “Sounds about right. My mom used to avoid all that, but she’s changed. She joined a book club in Misty Mountain.”

“The one at the candy store?” Charity asked.

He stopped chewing and stared at her. There was a book club in a candy store? His confusion obviously came through because she smiled as he resumed chewing.

“It was at Brianna’s bookstore, but that shut down, as I’m sure you know, so they moved across the street,” she explained. “To the candy store.”

Thankfully, the server brought his sweet tea, which gave him a few extra seconds to take in this information. As he peeled the paper off the straw and took his first sip, Nic processed what she'd just said.

“How does that work, exactly?” he finally asked. “Do they just set up their chairs next to the taffy pull?”

She laughed. “I guess that's exactly what they do. The candy shop isn't doing as well as they expected, or so I hear. Turns out, tourists don't really stray off the strip.”

“Yeah, I would've put a shop like that over near the dinner theater and buffet.”

Charity sighed. “They were hoping to take over the square downtown to drive tourist traffic.”

“That'd be good for the pizzeria.” But even he heard the uncertainty in his voice. It sounded like a bad idea all the way around. “I can't say I like that idea, though. What do you know? I guess I'm still protective of my hometown.”

“You can move away but this will always be your hometown. Same for all of us.”

As their server arrived with their food, there was a brief lull in the conversation. The all-too-familiar melody of “Feliz Navidad” brought a smile to his face. It was a simple thing, really. Just sitting across from his childhood best friend at the very start of the Christmas season. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he was happy. Truly happy.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!”

That sound, coming from the front of the restaurant, cut into Nic's thoughts. He and Charity looked in that direction at the same time. Sure enough, Santa from the other night on the square was standing under the mistletoe by himself. The suit he wore was identical to the one he had on the last time they'd seen him, but this time, he carried a matching red bag.

“Santa's here,” Charity said. “And it looks like he has some presents.”

Nic scanned the room. “I don’t see any kids around.” The place wasn’t packed, but it was busy enough for a Tuesday night. “What’s he doing?”

They were both watching him, so she probably was wondering the same thing. She shook her head and said, “I don’t think he’s here to eat.”

He went straight to a couple at a table close to the door. Reaching into his big bag, he pulled out a gift for each of them, then put his finger over his mouth as if to say “Shhhh.”

Wordlessly, they watched as he moved from table to table. Theirs was the last table he visited, and by then, other couples had unwrapped the gifts, so apparently it wasn’t something they had to keep wrapped until Christmas. What was the “Shhhh” gesture about?

“Hey, Santa,” Nic said as the guy approached.

Santa smiled and looked at each of them in turn. “Nic, Charity. Nice to see you again. I just have one gift for you. You’ll have to share.”

And then he gave Nic a wink as he reached into the bag, pulled out a gift, and handed it to him. It was flat and rectangular, like a box that might hold a bracelet or watch. Nic took the gift and looked at Charity.

By then, Santa was making the “Shhhh” gesture to them, too. Nic saw it out of the corner of his eye. And then the guy was off, the bag sagging sadly behind him. It might be Nic’s imagination, but it sure looked empty, which was impossible since it had seemed full when he entered.

“How did he know how many people would be here?” Nic asked, turning back toward Charity. “And how did he know which gift was ours?”

“Is our name written on it?”

He looked down at it. “No.”

It was wrapped in shiny red paper with a silver ribbon tied around it. The wrapping was beautiful. If the guy had done it himself, Nic was impressed.

Charity looked toward the front of the restaurant. “I guess his elves made these.”

The couple at the table near the door had been given what looked like ornaments. They were holding them up and admiring them.

“Our box is too flat to be an ornament,” Nic commented, looking back at the gift in his hand.

“Only one way to find out,” Charity said.

He shifted the box so one end was closer to her. “Do you want to open it?”

Shaking her head, Charity flashed him a big smile. “I’ll let you do the honors.”

Maybe she thought it was one of those trick gifts, like a can of peanuts that had fake snakes springing out. But none of the other gifts had been tricks. He was betting there was something Christmassy inside. Something for the Christmas tree, maybe. If so, he’d give it to her. She would no doubt have a full-size Christmas tree in her house instead of a miniature one.

“The other couples got two gifts,” Charity said as he slid his thumb under the paper to pull the tape away. “We’re supposed to share this one?”

“Maybe he thinks we live together,” Nic said.

Or maybe Santa was playing Cupid. Neither of them wore a wedding ring, and Santa may have sensed they were fighting an attraction. He wouldn’t know that they couldn’t be together. He’d just assume they were foolish young people, ignoring what was right in front of them.

Inside the wrapping paper was a plain white box. By the time he lifted the top of that box, Nic strongly suspected some type of jewelry was inside. But how would two people share jewelry?

Instead of jewelry, though, he found a rectangular slip of paper. He lifted his head to look at Charity, who was staring at the box curiously.



“A ticket?” he asked.

Yes, it was some sort of ticket. When he slipped his forefinger around it to pull it out of the box, not one but two tickets popped out.

He handed one to Charity while he read the print on the other. “*A Christmas Carol*,” he said. “‘Admit two.’ What’s the Misty Mountain Playhouse? Is that something new?”

“It’s basically Misty Mountain Music with an overhaul.” She continued to read the tickets as she spoke. “They renamed it earlier this year. It was a whole thing. There were protests.”

“Protests.” His eyebrows arched. “I didn’t know anything that exciting ever happened around here.”

“It was semi-exciting.” She laughed. “But these tickets are hard to get right now. It was sold out almost as soon as they announced it. A lot of locals are extras in the play, so of course their families want to go. That’s filling up all the seats.”

“So Santa managed to grab a couple of tickets?” he asked. “I thought he was here on some sort of vacation.”

She shrugged and smiled at him. “Santa can make things happen, I guess.”

That smile captured his attention, making it tough to pull his eyes away. He’d miss this face when he left town. He’d miss everything about her. Was it wrong that he was hoping for a snowstorm just bad enough to keep him here a few days longer?

He looked down at the ticket, checking the date. “This is tomorrow night.”

“Yep.” She stared down at the ticket in her hand. “If you have nothing better to do, I guess we’re going to a play.”

He smiled. He could think of nothing he wanted to do more.

Charity wasn't sure whether to be excited or disappointed at the light dusting of snow on the ground on her front lawn when she woke the next morning. But she didn't have time to think about it. She had too much to do if she wanted to get back in time for her not-date with Nic.

She did take a few minutes at lunch to check the weather forecast in Lexington. It looked like they'd gotten three to five inches—just enough to make the roadways a nightmare. Local news was doing the same thing they did in East Tennessee when it snowed. “If you can stay off the roads, please do,” all the online articles stated.

What little snow Misty Mountain had gotten was mostly melted by the time Charity pulled into her driveway. She'd given herself enough time to feed Gracie, shower, and change into the festive red lace dress she'd worn to a Christmas wedding a couple of years before. It wasn't that the Misty Mountain Playhouse had a strict dress code or anything, but dressy clothes were certainly okay, and she wanted to look nice for her not-date with her ex.

Her heart pounded frantically as she paced the floor nervously for a full seven minutes. She wore her coat and clutched her phone, waiting for that doorbell to ring. She'd texted her address to Nic, who insisted on picking her up, but the wait was excruciating.

When the doorbell finally rang, Gracie beat her to the door, barking as she always did. That sound signaled company was

here.

“Gracie, get back,” Charity said.

Finally, she sighed and scooped her up, wincing at the fur she’d no doubt have on her red dress coat as a result. But at least it allowed her to unlock and open the door without worrying that Nic would have to fend off an overeager spaniel.

Nic’s eyes widened at the sight of her. Or maybe it was the sight of her dog, who was waving all four paws in the air, trying to rush toward Nic but getting no traction.

“Sorry,” she said. “She loves company.”

“It’s okay.” He reached out and let Gracie sniff his hand before petting her. “I guess I should have asked if it was okay to pet her first.”

“Of course.” Charity smiled. Gracie was now sniffing Nic’s hand. “Let me grab my purse.”

She stepped back, stunned at how unprepared she was. She’d thrown her coat on but had totally forgotten her purse was still on the couch.

“Here, I’ll hold her.” Nic had both hands out, and Charity swore Gracie leapt into his hands.

By the time Charity had her purse and was on her way back, Nic was on the floor, kneeling in front of Gracie and petting her with a big smile on his face. He was a dog lover. She remembered that about him.

“Did you ever get a dog?” she asked.

His smile faded a little, and he stood. “I had one with my ex. A beagle. She kept him in the divorce.”

He didn’t say it outright, but something about his tone told her there was a lot more he wasn’t saying. No doubt it wasn’t his choice to let the ex have the dog.

“You’ll have to get another one,” she said.

“We have dogs at the farm.” He stood, and Gracie began running back and forth between the two of them. “And just

about every other animal imaginable. Since I spend most of my time there, I get my fill.”

Charity swept down to give Gracie a goodbye pet, refraining from her usual baby talk and promises that she'd be right back. Nic didn't need to see all that. When she straightened and turned to face him, Gracie grabbed a toy and ran around the living room, tossing it back and forth.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said.

When was the last time he complimented her appearance? It had been a regular thing when they were dating. Maybe even before. Whenever it had been, it'd stopped abruptly after he went off to school.

She hadn't realized until now just how much she missed the way he was looking at her. It made her feel like the most important person on the planet.

Yes, that meant more than she could possibly ever have imagined.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “You look pretty handsome yourself.”

*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

That was the sound of Gracie's paws on the hardwood floors behind her. It was coupled with the *slap-slap-slap* of her smacking herself with her toy as she swung it around.

“She does that when I get home too,” Charity said, looking back over her shoulder. “I can't tell if she's excited to see me leave or if she thinks she might convince me to stay.”

“Maybe she's practicing for when you return.” Nic smiled. “We'd better get out of here before she gives herself a concussion.”

Charity couldn't help but smile too. She also couldn't help but look back at her dog and say, “I'll be right back” in her usual dog mom voice. If Nic judged her for that, so be it. She couldn't leave the house without reassuring Gracie that she'd return.

“I hope you don’t mind the monster truck,” he said as he followed her up the walkway.

“Not at all.”

Maybe he’d forgotten they’d ridden in it before. Or maybe it was that she was all dressy tonight, so the pressure to have a certain type of vehicle was on.

“The sidewalk’s a little slick in places,” he warned.

Charity was already carefully setting down each foot. The last thing she needed was to slip and fall on her rear right in front of him.

“Thank you for driving,” she said as they approached the truck. “I would have met you there.”

“No way. Santa wanted us to go to this together, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

Speaking of which... She unzipped her purse and checked inside for what must have been the tenth time. She just kept making sure her ticket was still in the pocket. The last thing she needed was to get there and realize she’d left it at home. Since the tickets had been a gift, she wouldn’t have even been able to pull up her proof of purchase on her phone.

“It’s a bit of a climb,” he said apologetically as he pulled open the door and waited for her to climb up.

Yes, this time it would be a little tougher than when they’d gone mistletoe hunting. This time, she wore heels and a skirt. She didn’t mind the big truck. She just once again didn’t want to make a fool of herself.

“I’ve been told this isn’t the best truck to take on dates,” he said as she eyed the step up.

She glanced over at him. “How many dates have you taken this truck on?”

The question was said in a teasing tone. She hoped he took it that way. But she did feel a twinge of jealousy.

“None yet,” he said. “Well, if this is an official date, I guess it will count as my first since my divorce.”

Nic winced. She caught that just before she faced forward and put her foot on the step. Luckily, her skirt was A-line, not tight all the way to her calves. Otherwise, she might have had a tough time getting into his vehicle. She made a mental note that if she was ever a passenger in his truck again, she had to wear jeans. Dress pants, at the very least. Maybe some hiking boots to really prepare for it.

Once she was safely in the seat, buckling up, she breathed a sigh of relief. He was running around the front of the truck by then, apparently not concerned at all that he might slip on a surprise patch of ice. He made it around safely and climbed into the truck without much effort. Maybe that had a little something to do with the fact that he was over six feet tall.

And then he smiled over at her. “Ready to get the town talking?”

Charity sucked in a breath. “I didn’t think about that. We’re going to be seen by everyone.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry. They’ve already been talking about us.”

That was news to her. “What have they been saying?”

“I have no idea. I just assume they’ve been talking. Don’t you?”

Okay, to that she had to nod. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know two people who used to date in a small town would be talked about if they started hanging out together again. Especially since this town seemed to be so romance obsessed lately.

“May as well give them something to talk about,” Nic said. “They’ll move on to someone else soon, I’m sure.”

“Especially with all this mistletoe hanging around.”

She gestured toward the front windshield even though there was not a sprig of mistletoe anywhere in sight. If he’d hung some from his rearview mirror, would that give them an excuse to kiss?

She found herself thinking back to the night in front of the diner when he'd kissed her more than once. It had been like old times, sneaking in kisses where they could. Part of her had screamed not to let him into her heart, but she'd kissed him anyway. At the time, she was sure he was leaving town the next morning. May as well have fun while she could.

Then he'd stuck around. And things had gotten really, really complicated.

"So is old man Jasper still running the dinner theater and buffet?" he asked.

"Nope." She shook her head, glad for something that would get her mind off kissing him. "Lucky and Matt bought it from him. He was going to turn it into one of those..."

She waved her hand in the air in front of her, not sure what to call it. Did anyone know?

"What?" he prompted.

"Performance venue type of things," she said, still struggling to describe it. "He was going to bring in some country music star from way back in the day to perform."

He looked over at her. "Would that have been bad?"

"I guess it would have been." He probably knew why that would be bad without her having to explain it, but she did anyway. "The town protested, saying it would bring the wrong people into town." She laughed. "You know, those young troublemakers who are all into country music stars who haven't had a hit since the nineties."

By then, Nic was laughing too. "I'm going to have to see what kind of music this woman sang."

"It's exactly as you'd expect. Completely innocent. Not at all the type of music that would attract any sort of bad activity to town. I think it's more that people around here don't like change."

"Yep."

That was all he said. And the word seemed to hang in the air between them.

In the silence, Charity reviewed the conversation. Had she just given him another argument for staying far, far away from Misty Mountain? It was full of locals who fought change with everything they had?

She rushed to make up for it. “But the town is changing, whether long-timers like it or not. We have a lot of people our age, moving in and snatching up the cabins before the real estate investors buy them for vacation rentals. They pretty much stay to themselves up there, but they’re smart guys. Probably women too, but I’ve only heard of it being a male thing.”

“It doesn’t sound so bad to me, to be honest.”

Frowning, Charity looked over at him. “What’s that?”

“Moving to a cabin up in the mountains, away from everyone. It’s what I like about working on the farm. If things start getting to me, I just hop in my truck and take off to check out what’s happening with the corn or the squash. I could spend hours walking around on the property. It’s my therapy.”

“But living alone would be a little sad,” she said. “Especially if you’re up there with no one around. You could die and nobody would even know it.”

They were nearing downtown now, which meant the playhouse would be on the left soon. But he slowed just long enough to give her a look. She knew that look.

“That’s kind of morbid, don’t you think?” he asked as he sped up again, shaking his head and chuckling. “I think I’m a few years away from keeling over.”

“I would hope so.”

She didn’t mean that as it came out. She would hope he lived a long, happy life even without her. He got that, right?

He didn’t respond, and within seconds, it was clear his mind was on other things. A long line of vehicles waited to get into the playhouse parking lot, and his gaze scanned the landscape ahead of them.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Trust me?”



Charity nodded, even though his gaze stayed fully focused on the road. Trust him. She trusted him far too much. In fact, she'd trust him with her heart if she knew he wouldn't break it.

**P**arking a quarter mile from the playhouse was definitely no way to impress his date. Especially not with temperatures having dipped below the twenties and icy spots still on the ground.

But Charity was a trooper, walking alongside him in her heels, gloved hands in her pockets. When it was time to go home, he'd definitely pick her up at the door.

Luckily, by the time they got to the theater, the line had dwindled, which meant they didn't have to stand out in the cold on the sidewalk. They headed straight through the door, where they were greeted by Josephine Strongblossom, who had a big smile on her face.

"It's so nice to see the two of you together again," she said.

Nic and Charity exchanged a look. He'd heard Mrs. Strongblossom had been on a matchmaking kick over the summer. Long before that, though, she'd been an extreme gossip. If something was happening in town, she and her two friends knew about it, talked about it, and got everybody in town in on it.

"Santa gave us the tickets," Charity blurted.

Would that disqualify them somehow? Maybe the tickets weren't even real. Nic held his breath, worried this might be the end of their date night.

But Josephine seemed more interested in the tickets they'd handed her than Charity's words. She looked down at them,

eyes widening.

“Looks like Santa really helped you out.” Mrs. Strongblossom held the tickets up in the air with her right hand. “You’re in the center, row four. Best seats in the house.”

Best seats in the house? They might have to deal with their view being blocked if they were behind someone tall with a big head. Or someone wearing a hat. That was exactly what had happened when he visited the place as a kid. He always ended up wiggling around in his chair to see around people at the table in front of him.

“Betty will show you to your seat.” Mrs. Strongblossom pointed off to her left.

Betty was Mrs. Jenkins, the second of the gossipy friends that included Mrs. Strongblossom. Great. They were sure to run into Judi Trapp, the third person in their gossiping trio. But it didn’t matter. If one of them saw a couple together, all three of them would know about it soon enough.

As they stepped into the doorway, though, Nic realized just how much they’d changed the place. The floor didn’t just gently slope like it did before the change. They’d somehow managed to make tiers, which elevated each row much more than it’d been before.

“May I see your tickets?” Mrs. Jenkins asked without even a hint of a smile.

They really should have someone friendlier greeting people here. Everyone loved Mrs. Jenkins in her own way. She was a notorious grouch and said it like it was. Still, if tourists would be attending these shows, she wouldn’t be the best person to represent Misty Mountain.

Nic had both tickets now, so he handed them over to Mrs. Jenkins and looked around. Mostly, he just needed to reduce the weird tension in the air. Of course, Mrs. Jenkins didn’t show them to their table. She just pointed them in the general direction.

He automatically rested his hand on the small of Charity’s back as they started for their seats. If she minded, she didn’t

show it, but he probably shouldn't do that with the entire town watching.

Once they got to the table, they had a new dilemma. Which seats were theirs? There were four.

Nic looked at the tickets, then down at the number on the back of each chair. "Looks like these two are ours. We sit on the same side of the table."

"I wonder who's sitting with us." Charity stared at the two empty chairs on the other side of the checkered tablecloth-covered table. "If we'd bought the tickets, we could have invited Noelle and Enzo."

Noelle and Enzo. He kept forgetting the two of them were dating. He took Charity's coat and looked around for a coat rack. There were hooks all along the wall on the far side of the auditorium, and they were starting to fill up.

Luckily, he was able to grab two hooks for their dress coats. When he turned back around, Charity was seated.

She smiled up at him as he approached. "Thank you."

She had the menu open in front of her, and once again, he was struck by how beautiful she looked tonight. This would make a great picture to promote the theater. But he knew better than to stop and take one. If he had a shot of her on his phone, he'd probably look at it with longing far too often.

"Menus?" he commented as he scooted up to the table. "That's new."

"Yeah, they did away with the buffet-style dinner," Charity said. "I hear the food has really improved."

He bit his tongue. Anything would be an improvement over what they used to serve, but he didn't want to be rude. The food had always been provided by the buffet next door—bland potatoes, overcooked roast beef, gravy that tasted like it came out of a packet. Basically, since the former theater owner also owned the buffet, he stuck with inexpensive food that could feed the masses.

"Over here," Nic heard a male voice say.

The voice came from behind them, and they were so close, Nic had a sneaking suspicion it was coming from one of their tablemates. He looked up just in time to see a girl who appeared to be seven or eight years old. She wore a green lace dress that could have been picked to match Charity's red lace one and had a big smile as she looked at the two of them.

"We're sitting here," the girl announced.

"Let me check the tickets, sweetie," the male voice said.

Nic somehow knew before the guy came into view that it was the helicopter owner from their Christmas caroling last night. Holden Pryce.

Holden was busy looking down at his tickets and then comparing them to the numbers on the back of the chairs. Only once he'd pulled out the little girl's chair and squeezed around her did he glance at the two people staring up at him.

"I know you two," the man said.

"We were the Christmas carolers," Nic said.

His voice came out a little more brusque than he would have wanted. What was that all about?

"Right." The big, friendly smile stayed on the guy's face as he took the seat across from Nic. It made him feel guilty for immediately disliking the guy. "I'm a first-timer here. You?"

As though making up for his initial rudeness, Nic jumped into "help" mode. He went through his history in Misty Mountain and what he knew about this particular building. He would've expected Charity to jump in, but she was busy talking to Holden's daughter, who he referred to as J.J.

"So, what is it you do for a living?" Holden asked.

"Agriculture," Nic said. "I manage a big farm up in Lexington."

"Lexington."

Nic could see the unspoken question in the guy's eyes. What was Nic doing all the way in Misty Mountain if he

worked in Lexington? But it was just after Thanksgiving, so he probably understood that people would be in town temporarily.

“I manage crops for a big farm,” Nic added. “My degree’s in agriculture.”

He winced at his own words. What was with the information dump? For some reason, he felt the need to state his credentials with guys like this. Maybe he’d spent too much time in boardrooms recently.

“Sounds like an interesting job,” Holden said. “I may need to talk to you a little more. Do you have a business card?”

Nic glanced over at Charity as if to gauge her reaction to this, but she was giggling over something J.J. said. Nic didn’t have a business card on him, but he sent over his contact information using something called a V-card. He and his grocery distributor colleagues were constantly tossing V-cards back and forth.

Nic couldn’t help but wonder what this guy was up to. He surely had something in mind if he was interested in getting Nic’s information, and he doubted it had something to do with his helicopter tour business. Whatever it was, Nic was open to it. He was definitely in the market for a job change.

As long as that job didn’t tie him to one place for the rest of his life.

Charity couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun. In fact, this was the perfect evening.

It wasn't just that she was seated next to her first love and former best friend. It was the eight-year-old seated across from her who loved the color pink and amusement parks.

Out of the corner of her eye, she'd seen Holden get Nic's contact information and wondered what that was all about. She didn't know much about Holden Pryce, but now that she thought about it, someone had mentioned he didn't make all his money off his helicopter tours. He was a real estate investor, like Lucky and Matt. But unlike those two, he had properties all over the country.

Maybe he had a business proposition for Nic. Even if he did, though, it was doubtful it would bring him back to Misty Mountain. She had to drop any hope of that happening, once and for all.

As they sat facing the stage, watching her town's take on "A Christmas Carol," Charity felt Nic's presence behind her. It was so strong it was almost overwhelming. She wanted him to be in her life, even though it was an impossibility. The whole thing just made her sad.

But she put on a big smile as she said goodbye to Holden and J.J., promising to follow the little girl on her favorite social media app. Apparently, her videos had amassed quite a following.

“You and J.J. seemed to hit it off,” Nic commented as they exited.

Charity couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face. “She's adorable. I could have talked to her for hours. You and Holden hit it off too.”

He shrugged. “We were mostly talking business. Apparently, he's thinking about opening a ski resort of some sort here.”

“Ski resort.”

She nearly tripped in her surprise. He'd repeatedly insisted on going to get the truck to pull around and get her, but she out-insisted him. The walk in the brisk night air was good for her. She just had to manage to keep her footing.

“Misty Mountain doesn't get enough snow for skiing,” she said.

“Manufactured snow.” Nic shook his head. “It seems expensive to me, but apparently some places make it work.”

She'd heard of people skiing in Gatlinburg, and that town was hardly Aspen, Colorado. In fact, their snowfall was similar to Misty Mountain's.

A silence followed. Charity had a tough time coming up with a way to fill it. She was busy staring at the ground, looking for icy patches. Wearing heels had been a bad idea, but so far she'd managed to make it through the evening without falling flat on her face.

“I guess it doesn't really matter how much it costs if people are willing to pay to ski,” Nic said. “Anyway, he didn't say he was actually taking action yet. He definitely seemed interested in my agriculture work, though. Maybe he's thinking about starting a farm.”

Charity smiled at the thought of that guy in the mud with pigs and cows...all while wearing an expensive pair of sneakers. He had a ruggedness about him, but he also looked like a salesman—someone who knew how to run a business.



She wondered what the situation was with J.J.'s mom. Holden didn't wear a wedding ring. She had actually been racking her brain to come up with a friend she could fix up with him. Maybe he'd be interested in her sister, Ana.

"The guy appears to be single," Nic said.

Was he reading her thoughts? Sure seemed like it.

"Yeah, I was just thinking—"

Before she finished confessing she was considering matchmaking Holden with her sister, Nic broke in. "He's probably the most eligible bachelor in town. We were commiserating about being divorced."

"Really."

She looked over at him as long as she dared to before returning her attention to the ground. An icy patch could pop up at any minute.

"He's been divorced a couple of years. He has full custody of J.J. So whoever married him would become an instant stepmom."

Yeah, she wasn't sure how Ana would feel about that. She was so married to her career, anyway, it was doubtful she'd settle down. Especially not with someone who had ties to Misty Mountain. Although if he owned a helicopter tour business, surely he could somehow get her flights to take her back and forth from Misty Mountain to...wherever.

"J.J. is adorable, though," Charity said. "Any woman would be lucky to have her for a stepdaughter."

And she meant every word of it. Holden was older—probably in his early thirties. That made him closer to her oldest sister Faith's age, but she wasn't single. Ana was single and twenty-eight, so Charity had automatically put the two of them together in her mind.

But she knew neither sister would appreciate her playing matchmaker. Even if the guy was a handsome multimillionaire.

Nic was quiet as he opened the passenger door for her and waited for her to get in. There was a tension coming from him that she hadn't noticed before. Was he upset about something? Maybe he was just deep in thought about whatever was going on with his job situation.

She fastened her seatbelt and waited as he climbed in and started up the truck. She waited and waited and waited for him to say something. Instead, he pulled out of the lot and into the line of traffic on the main road.

"Is everything okay?" she finally asked. "You're being quiet."

"Fine." He shook his head. "Just thinking about work."

He didn't glance over at her, though. She would have expected a reassuring smile. Something was definitely off.

"I just have a lot on my mind," he continued. "I probably should at least be trying to figure out a way back to the farm. As soon as the roads are clear, they're going to expect me to be pulling into that driveway."

He was looking for an excuse to get out of town. She should have expected that. But the question was, how did that play into his sudden mood shift? Was he looking to get away from her...or from Misty Mountain? Was he starting to feel trapped? Why all of a sudden? Maybe it had to do with the talk of the ski lodge. That was when he'd gone quiet, after all.

And then traffic started to move. They were just a few minutes from the entrance to her neighborhood, so she'd better work it all in while she could.

"It was great spending time with you," she said. "If you do leave and I don't get to see you again, any time you're in town, be sure to send me a quick text. We can always get together for dinner at the Mexican restaurant. Or for coffee."

She was smiling by then, mostly to let him know that everything was fine between them. Yes, they may have kissed beneath the mistletoe and in the front seat of this very truck, but that didn't mean she expected this to become anything

more than just two exes who remained friends. That was how she wanted it to appear to him, anyway.

On the inside, though, she was crushed. Heartbroken. In some ways, it was even worse than the first time he'd broken up with her because she'd gotten a glimpse at how perfect things could be between them.

But there would never be a future for them. It was silly to even dream of one. He didn't want to live in Misty Mountain, and she didn't want to live anywhere else. But even if she did, it was clear he could live without her. That much she could see from the way he was acting.

"Sounds great," he said, but there was a tension in his voice that matched the overall vibe inside the truck. Yes, something was definitely bugging him, and she had a feeling it was her.

She couldn't get away from him fast enough. He'd barely pulled into her driveway when she was out of the truck with a "thank you." Jumping down from the truck to the driveway was no problem, but she was so eager to get away that she forgot that the ground might be slick. She rushed up the driveway and onto the sidewalk, eager to put some distance between herself and the heartbreaker behind her.

Too late, she remembered the large patch of ice she'd noticed earlier, when they'd calmly and carefully walked to his truck together. Her shoe landed directly on that icy spot and kept moving. Not expecting the forward momentum, the rest of her body twisted at an odd angle and soon she was falling, face first toward the concrete. She barely got her arms in front of her in time to stop herself from hitting the concrete face first.

So much for not falling on her face in front of him.

**T**hings could change in an instant.

Take tonight, for example. Nic was sitting in his truck, watching Charity rush to her door and telling himself this was all for the best. All was fine. She'd be safe in her home and he'd be on his way. But then things went south.

He was shifting into reverse when he saw her foot land on a patch of ice and slide. And then she was falling forward, toward the ground. He had the truck in park and was out of it so fast, he wasn't even sure how he did it. All he could do was run toward her, mindless of the potential ice patches on the ground. The only thing that mattered was getting to her and making sure she was okay.

She rolled over and was seated on the grass, a stunned expression on her face. But her eyes widened as she saw him nearing.

"I'm fine," she said.

Fine? No way was he taking her word on that. He knelt in front of her, looking her in the eye.

"What hurts? Did you land on your arm? Your leg?"

It was a silly question. She had both hands cupped over her left knee, so obviously it was her leg.

"It's fine," she said. "I just skinned it up a little." She shook her head. "I'll go in and slap a bandage on it. It'll be okay."

“I’ll help you.”

Nic prepared to refuse to take no for an answer. He stood and moved to her side, kneeling with both arms outstretched. What was he going to do? Lift her up and set her down? She wasn’t even looking in his direction. She was just staring at that knee.

And then suddenly she was in motion, trying to scramble to her feet. It was no easy feat, considering she was half on, half off the sidewalk. But he wasn’t sure how to help.

She was almost to her feet when she plopped right back down again. Her expression was nothing short of stunned.

“Are you okay?” he asked, kneeling next to her again. He wasn’t sure how to help out here. “Just wrap your arms around my neck.”

And that was how he ended up lifting her. It took him an extra few seconds to get in the right position to scoop her up, but she didn’t protest, which was exactly how he knew something wasn’t right. She would have argued that she could walk if she could stand upright.

Getting her inside the house was the biggest challenge, especially since she was worried about Gracie getting out. But she managed to pull the key from her purse, which was still draped around her neck, and unlock the door so he could push it open and get her inside.

“Stay,” he said to Gracie as the pup came charging toward them.

It took some footwork, but he managed to block the dog inside while he shoved the door closed with his hip. Then it was just a matter of getting her to the couch without tripping over the overeager pooch. Gracie was excited to see them, even if she had no idea what was going on.

“I just need to sit for a second.” She sat down, her head resting against the back of the sofa as she stared straight ahead. “I feel lightheaded.”

“Did you hit your head?”

The alarm was apparent in his voice. Maybe he should call for an ambulance. He could carry her out to his truck and rush her to the emergency room.

“No,” she said. “That’s what’s weird about it. It just felt like I was going to pass out for a few seconds there.”

He shifted anxiously from one foot to the other as Gracie ran circles around his feet. “Where did you hit?”

“I landed on my arm, but it feels okay.” She stretched it out. “And then my knee.”

She lifted her skirt, pointing her toes. When she saw what was beneath her skirt, she gasped.

“We need to bandage that up,” he said, ready to sprint into action. She’d skinned up her knee pretty badly, or so it appeared. “Where do you keep your bandages?”

“Through the guest bedroom,” she said.

It was a small cottage-style house, but there was something cozy about it. He noticed that as he rushed through the front bedroom and into the bathroom. The bathroom was attached to the master bedroom on the other side. Jack-and-Jill style, he’d heard it called.

He immediately found what he was looking for in a linen closet in the bathroom. A plastic container was on a middle shelf, surrounded by towels or sheets. A box of assorted adhesive bandages was squeezed in behind a bottle of alcohol. Grabbing some cotton swabs and a dark-colored washcloth that he wetted, he headed toward the living room.

By then, Gracie had somehow landed on the couch next to her dog mom and was snuggled up to her side. Charity had her hand on the dog and a smile on her face as she sat, eyes closed, head resting against the cushion behind her.

“I’m no nurse,” he said. “But I watched my mom clean up more than a few scrapes when we were kids.”

Charity’s eyes popped open, her gaze landing on the items he was setting on the coffee table. “I can do that. I just need to catch my breath, and I’ll be able to get on my feet again.”

“Sit. Stay.” Nic held out a hand, but she and Gracie both stared at him wordlessly. Since she wasn’t speaking, he took the opportunity to kneel in front of her and gently press the washcloth to her scraped knee. “It’s a superficial wound. I think it just got the top layer. It’ll probably hurt for a few days.”

Why was he saying all this? She’d had scrapes before. Everyone had.

“I feel like the world’s biggest klutz,” she said. “But all I could think, while I was lying on the ground, was that I can’t afford to be injured. Not during my busy season at work.” She laughed. “I was actually estimating how much of the work I could hand off to my assistant.”

She had an assistant? That was the first he’d heard of it. It made sense, he supposed, as busy as she seemed to stay.

“Do you have rock salt?”

When she lifted her head, her frown told him the lightheadedness must be lessening. “Rock salt?”

“So I can melt the last of the ice off your sidewalk.”

She waved her hand in the air dismissively. “It’ll melt off on its own by tomorrow night. I’ll wear my snow boots when I leave in the morning. Thank you, though.”

After seeing her bond with Holden Pryce’s daughter and learning what a great guy he was, Nic had already made up his mind to pack up and get out first thing in the morning. He’d trudge through whatever snow was left on the ground once he got to Lexington.

Yeah, he didn’t want to know if Holden and Charity got together and lived happily ever after. In fact, he’d go back to avoiding town when he visited his parents to keep from ever finding out.

That was his original idea—get out of town and never look back. But now, he wasn’t so sure. Maybe he should stop by in the morning and sprinkle some salt on her sidewalk. Yes, she was a grown woman, but he couldn’t help worrying about her, wanting to take care of her.

“It’s not as bad as it looked at first.” He pointed toward her knee. “I cleaned off the worst of it.”

Now that he could see what was beneath the blood and debris, it was just a patch. The injury was only a couple of inches wide. There were also a couple of scratches on her knee.

“This might hurt, though.” He set the washcloth aside and reached for the alcohol, unscrewing the cap and grabbing one of the cotton balls. It was his least favorite part as a kid, but it was also the most important. “It’ll only hurt for a few seconds. I’ll blow on it.”

Nic had looked away to return the alcohol bottle, and when he turned back around, she was gaping at him. “You’ll what?”

There was no stopping the smile that spread across his face. “It’s something my mom used to do. You’ll see.”

If there was something even slightly flirtatious about blowing on someone’s knee, though, it was lost here. She was wincing and saying, “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow” by then. She didn’t even notice his attempts to shorten the time of the sting.

“I don’t think you have a bandage that’s going to fit exactly.”

He pulled out the biggest one and held it over the area. It looked like it might fit, but the last thing he’d want was for the sticky part to adhere to the damaged area.

“It’s okay.” Charity waved her hand dismissively in the air again. “I’ll just drive up to Sawyerville and grab something from the drugstore in the morning.” She lifted her leg again and looked at the area. Then her gaze shifted over to him. “Thank you.”

The gratitude in her eyes went straight to his heart, making him feel like she didn’t expect someone to care for her. But she needed that. She needed someone to share her life with. Someone who planned to put down roots in Misty Mountain.

Someone like Holden Pryce.



That thought acted like a bucket of ice water over his head. He sat up straighter, took a deep breath, and looked around.

He reached out for her hand. "Let's see if we can get you on your feet."

Using her left hand to hold up her skirt, Charity slipped her right hand into his and stood. She wobbled a little at first but quickly seemed to get her bearings. And then she kicked off those high-heeled shoes and let go of his hand, standing with her skirt hiked up above the injured area.

"Thank you again for everything." She leaned over and scooped up Gracie with her one free hand, then set her on the ground. "I'm going to take Gracie out and go to bed. By the time I wake up, I'll be all healed."

The smile she added to the end of that seemed almost an afterthought, and it didn't quite reach her eyes. He suspected she was putting on a brave front, but deep down, she was hurt.

The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, but the longer he stuck around, the harder it would be for both of them. He needed to get out now before she started picking away at the wall he'd built around his heart again. Before he slipped and told her he was still in love with her. Maybe he'd never fully stopped loving her.

"Take care," he said as he stepped back. Then he turned and walked out the door.

It wasn't the goodbye he wanted. Not at all. He wanted to hug her, even if he couldn't kiss her. He also wanted to promise to stay in touch or at least let her know that if she ever needed him, he was there.

But doing any of that would risk his resolve to get out of Misty Mountain and never look back. And he couldn't take that chance. Not when he was so close to being stuck here.

Nic was gone. If even the slightest doubt had remained in her mind, it had been erased when she'd driven past his parents' house. Stalker-ish, she knew, but it had been something she'd done more than a few times when they were dating in high school. It just always made her smile to see his car in the driveway.

But today, that driveway sat empty. His gigantic pickup truck wouldn't have fit in their garage, so it wasn't like there was a chance he was still here.

"Hi, Gracie," Charity said, forcing false cheer to her tone as she entered her house after a long day of work.

She was still limping a little. Her fall hurt her ankle as well as her knee, but she'd stopped by her doctor's office and one of the nurses had taken a look. It was just a sprain that would heal itself eventually. She was supposed to stay off it and keep it elevated, but her job required her to be on her feet most of the day.

Her phone buzzed as she was limping toward the back door to let Gracie out. She pulled it out of her pocket with one hand while flipping the lock with the other. It was a text from her mom.

*You home?*

Charity stepped out onto the back patio and watched as Gracie made her way over to the small patch of grass between her back patio and her fence. It was chilly out, but if Gracie

had to freeze to go to the bathroom, Charity would freeze along with her.

She tapped on the microphone and said, “Just got home. What’s up?”

She’d almost forgotten about the text by the time her phone buzzed again. By then, she’d set it on the counter so she could make Gracie’s dinner. She still didn’t glance at it, but when she heard her front doorbell ring, she knew exactly who was out there.

“Hello!” Charity’s mom stood on the front doorstep, covered slow cooker in her hands. “Are you okay?”

Charity tilted her head to the right slightly, more worried than confused. “Of course.”

Was the town buzzing about the fact that Nic left? Did everyone assume she was heartbroken? Maybe this was her mother’s way of soothing her sadness.

Her mom looked down at Charity’s feet. “Did you break anything?”

Oh. So *that* was what this was about. She should have known all along.

“Let me guess.” Charity crossed her arms over her chest. “Dr. Meadows’ office called.”

Dr. Meadows was the town doctor. Well, the doctor for the adults, anyway. The kids went to Nic’s dad.

“I was worried about you,” her mom said. “The person who told me knows you live alone. With Nic gone, well...” Her mom shrugged. “Can I come in?”

This was so much to process at once. Who would have told her mom that she was there? It couldn’t have been someone who worked at her doctor’s office. Privacy laws prevented that, right?

“Who told you I was injured?” Charity asked as she stepped back and gestured for her mother to enter.

“That’s not important,” her mom said, stopping to turn to face her. Charity closed the door. “I’ll just say the doctor’s office is on the main strip. People can see the cars parked there.”

“And guess that I injured my ankle?”

Her mom shrugged. “People talk.”

This made no sense, but Charity knew better than to push. Her mom would not give up her sources. It wouldn’t surprise her if someone at the doctor’s office did tell her, though. Someone probably would jeopardize a job out of concern for a fellow resident in this town.

The sound of paws on hardwood alerted Charity to the fact that Gracie had finished her meal. She rushed right over to Charity’s mom, jumping up on her.

“Whoa there!” Her mom lifted the slow cooker.

Charity had been working on the jumping thing with Gracie, but there’d been so much going on lately, training had taken a backseat. Now it looked like she’d have plenty of time to spend with her dog.

“Let me grab that.” Charity reached out and her mom handed over the slow cooker. Then she looked down at Gracie. “Down.”

“Sit,” her mom said in a way too polite voice.

Gracie, of course, did none of that. But she did leave their visitor alone and rush to grab a toy to swing around.

“What is this exactly?” Charity asked, looking down into the pot. “Some sort of soup?”

“It’s a new recipe from Mrs. Apple,” her mom said. “Christmas soup.”

“Christmas soup.” Charity had never heard of such a thing.

“Just plug it in. It should still be at least a little warm. So when are you going to decorate for Christmas?”

Just the words had Charity suppressing a groan. She’d spent all day, every day this week decorating other people’s

spaces. Along with her assistant, she'd unboxed trees and ornaments and gone on numerous store runs to get hooks and garland when they ran out. Maybe she could pay someone to decorate her own cabin. She certainly didn't have the energy for it.

"I know." Her mom clapped her hands and looked at her. "I'll come over this weekend and we'll do it."

She had a big smile on her face. That smile faded as Charity walked around the kitchen counter that separated the kitchen from the living room area.

"You're limping," her mom said. "Are you sure it's not broken?"

"I couldn't walk on it if it was broken." Charity looked down at her ankle. "It's a sprain. I'm supposed to stay off it as much as possible."

But when Charity looked at it, all she could think about was Nic bandaging her wound last night. He'd taken such good care of her, even carrying her into her house. If she lived to be a hundred, that image would remain buried in her mind.

Her mom gestured toward the sofa. "Sit, sit, sit."

Yes, she definitely needed to sit. She walked toward the sofa, doing her best not to limp and holding in a wince at the pain that came from putting pressure on her left foot. She shouldn't have stood on it so much that day.

"Let me get you some ice." Her mom rushed over to the kitchen as Charity settled onto the sofa. She patted the cushion next to her and Gracie jumped up, settling into the spot next to her as she always did. Charity reached over with her left hand and pulled the lever to pop the recliner out, bracing it with her good foot to keep it from slamming forward.

"It'd be so nice if your sisters were here," her mom said. "We could decorate together like we did when you were kids."

"They're both coming in for Christmas, right?" Charity asked.

She felt bad that she didn't know this. She got most of her updates about her sisters from her mom. All three of them were so busy now, it was tough to slow down long enough to make a phone call or to send a text.

But that needed to change. Charity wanted to believe if they lived locally, it would be different, but deep down, she knew it wouldn't. That was one of the reasons living on the same property and raising their kids together had been such a good idea.

"Ana will be here the week of Christmas," her mom said. "Maybe sooner, depending on where her production schedule takes her. I think they're trying to wrap up the season. Faith may not be able to come home this year. The store closes at six on Christmas Eve and opens back up at nine a.m. on Boxing Day."

"Which is the day after Christmas," Charity said.

She knew that much from all the *Jeopardy* they'd watched as kids. It had been a clue more than once.

"Maybe we could just pack everything up and fly over there." Her mom returned from the kitchen, a sealed storage bag full of ice in her left hand. "It wouldn't be a bad place to spend Christmas."

Charity shook her head. "I couldn't go. I have a week's worth of New Year's Eve jobs lined up."

She was always in demand the last week of the year to help with local New Year's Eve parties. A couple of the jobs were volunteer work, but the rest were paying gigs that would help get her through the leaner winter months.

"Yeah, I didn't think that would work." Her mom sighed, stepping in front of her. "Which ankle is it?"

Charity pointed to her left foot. She was just glad her mom couldn't get a glimpse of her bandaged-up knee. It wasn't hurting anymore, but she'd covered it with a gauze bandage that made the injury look worse than it actually was.

"I really could do this myself," Charity said as her mom settled the bag of ice on her ankle. "You didn't have to come

all the way over here.”

“It’s not that far,” her mom said, standing and putting a hand on each hip. “I came over here to check on you.” She frowned and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Everyone needs someone to take care of them, even if they choose to stay single.”

Charity didn’t *choose* to stay single and her mother knew it. But she couldn’t help but think of Nic. How long would it be until he found someone to share his life with? Someone to bandage up after she took a fall? Someone who would give him the children he wanted?

No, she couldn’t think about that. She had to go on with her life as though he’d never come to town. She had to forget about him now. Otherwise, she’d sit here alone, pining for him, long after he’d moved on with his life.

Charity squeezed her eyes shut, mostly to push back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. The last thing she needed right now was to let tears come to her eyes. Her mom would worry about her even more.

She had to put on a strong front. She had to show the world she was just fine without Nic Winters. Maybe, eventually, she would start to believe it.

Wincing as the chill on her skin started to sting, Charity subtly lifted the ice pack and pulled the hem of her pants down to cover more of her ankle. She resettled the ice pack on top of it, keeping the cloth between the ice and her skin. While she did that, her mom came over and sat on the cushion on the other end of the sofa, angling her body toward Charity.

“You know I just want you girls to be happy,” her mom said. “Whether that means living in Misty Mountain or in Europe or even on Mars.”

“Mars?” Charity smiled. “I don’t think any of us would be very happy on Mars.”

“You know what I mean.” Her mom narrowed her eyes and frowned. “I think you live under the misconception that Misty Mountain is home.”

“Misty Mountain *is* home. It’s the only home I’ve ever known. It’s part of who I am.”

But her mom was shaking her head. “I don’t think so. You’ve convinced yourself of that, but no matter where you lived, it’s all about what happens when you walk in that front door at night and Gracie greets you. Once you have a family, you can live anywhere as long as you’re together.”

But she wouldn’t have a family if she left Misty Mountain. Her parents were here, as were her regular clients—the ones she’d grown to love.

She was comfortable here, happy. But something was sorely missing from her life, and it wasn’t just the husband and family she wanted so much. No, it was the man who had been in her life until she was eighteen and then again this week. It was a man who was just as much “home” to her as this town.

If she took her family out of the equation, she had to admit that Misty Mountain wasn’t the same without Nic Winters in it. She just couldn’t believe it had taken her this long to realize it.

“I’m not saying you move to Louisville,” her mom said.

It took Charity a few seconds to realize what she meant. “Lexington,” she corrected.

“Yes, Lexington or Louisville or Ohio or wherever he is. I’m just saying be open to the possibility that home might be more than just the property that holds your house.” Then, taking a deep breath, her mom let it out as she looked around. “Well, my work here is done. The Christmas soup should be properly heated by now. I can make you a bowl if you’d like.”

Charity shook her head, still feeling a little stunned. “I can do it.”

“Do you have crackers to go with it?”

Nodding, Charity watched as Gracie hopped off the couch. She tried to keep her from doing that—especially since sometimes she ran right into the coffee table when she did it. But when company was leaving, there was no holding the dog back.



“If you need anything, you know where we are. Just say the word and we’ll be here in two shakes of a dog’s tail.”

That was her mom’s ongoing joke.

Yeah, if she ever left Misty Mountain, Charity would miss her mom and her dad...and so much more. But what if she could be with Nic outside of here? It’d definitely be worth considering changing her life plans for a man who seemed to have worked his way into her heart. Maybe she didn’t have to say goodbye to Nic, after all.

Chaos reigned at the main house on the farm. Nic saw that as soon as he stepped through the front door. As he pulled it shut behind him, he paused to assess the situation. It was Friday afternoon, quitting time, and all Nic wanted to do was go home and crash in front of the TV.

But no. If he'd been called here, it wasn't good news. And the bad news would severely disrupt his night, if not his entire weekend.

"Nic, there you are. Come on."

That came from Nate, the oldest of the McFarland brothers. He'd arrived in the doorway that separated the living room from the foyer. He gestured for Nic to follow but didn't wait around to see if he actually did.

Of course, he did. He always did what he was told. He was responsible and reliable almost to a fault. It was exactly why he felt guilty the entire time he'd been in Misty Mountain, despite the fact that he'd been working night and day going back as far as he could remember.

"We have some root rot setting in down in Section Four-A," his boss, Joseph McFarland, said, not even looking up at him as he entered the dining room. "Were you aware of that?"

Joseph sat at the head of the long dining table where he conducted most of the farm's business. He'd set up his laptop, surround himself with paperwork, and summon family members and employees to come talk to him throughout the day.

“We have it under control,” Nic said, the tension coming through in his voice.

He stood awkwardly at the door, twisting his baseball cap between his hands like he was nervous. He didn’t like this feeling, especially when Mr. McFarland lifted his head and aimed his steely stare at him. Nic was his manager, but for some reason, Mr. McFarland had never really trusted him to do his job.

“We need to pull all those crops out,” Mr. McFarland said. “Otherwise, it’ll infect everything around it.”

“Not going to happen.” Nic shook his head. “We’ve contained it so it won’t spread, and that particular disease—”

“Did I ask for your opinion?” Mr. McFarland barked. “I’ve been running this farm for forty years. My dad for seventy before that.”

His dad had not run this farm for seventy years. And father and son had worked side by side for most of those years, so there was definitely some overlap. But that wasn’t important. He had to stay focused on the real issue here.

Now the others were staring at Nic with neutral expressions. Two were Nic’s employees and two were family members, including Nate. One was the operations manager he regularly worked with. How could Nic expect respect from others on the team when the boss was constantly belittling him like this?

“With all due respect, sir, I have a degree in agriculture,” Nic said. “You hired me for my expertise, and that’s what I’m bringing to this job.”

“I hired you to keep operations running and make sure things like this don’t happen in the first place,” Mr. McFarland said. “I’ll expect to see that section cleared away by early next week.”

With the freeze, that wasn’t going to happen, but there was no point in telling Mr. McFarland that. He knew everything.

Nic should just say his goodbyes and cut out. This was one debate he wasn’t going to win. But something rooted him to

the spot.

It had been like this since he returned late yesterday afternoon. He'd let his boss know he was back and got a snippy reply. He'd worked late to try to make up for it and shown up bright and early this morning, but his lack of sleep had gone unrewarded. If anybody ever noticed how hard he was working, they never showed it.

"I've been here four years," Nic said.

At that, Joseph, who'd resumed staring at his screen, stopped to look at him. The others in the room froze too, and all eyes were on him.

"Yeah?" Mr. McFarland said. "What's your point?"

"I love this farm, and I believe in everything you're doing. I would have been prepared to give even more of my life to helping you take it to its next phase. But I need to go where my talents are appreciated."

Joseph's face changed then. Nic would swear his normally ruddy complexion had gone a couple of shades paler. He even looked around as though anyone else in the room might get what was going on here.

"I'm quitting," Nic said. "I'd give two weeks' notice but I can't, in good conscience, oversee tearing out a bunch of crops that don't need to be ripped from the ground. You don't need me to funnel your orders down to the team. You can do that yourself—or get one of your kids to do it. I'm going home."

And with that, he turned and left, shoving his baseball cap back on his head as he walked. Home was not the tiny apartment with the two-foot Christmas tree on top of the TV cabinet. Home was Misty Mountain, and the sooner he got back to Charity Ardmore, the sooner he could start the rest of his life.

Charity was looking forward to her girls' night with Noelle. They would hang out at Charity's house, painting their nails and watching cheesy romcoms, just as they did when they were teenagers.

It was what she needed to get her mind off things. She'd spent her Saturday as she usually did in December—running from client to client. That left little time to think about the man who'd left her life only three days ago. And tonight would be yet another distraction.

"I'm almost there, Gracie," Charity said.

She tended to do that as she neared the final turn onto her street. Some part of her believed her dog could hear her when she did that.

But tonight was different. Tonight, her driveway was filled with cars.

"What? Why?"

Even as Charity asked those questions, she already knew the answers. Noelle's car was in the driveway, as was a Misty Mountain police cruiser that she was guessing belonged to Noelle's boyfriend, Enzo. Plus, her mom's car was there.

The sounds of laughter drifted out to Charity as she stepped from her car, which she'd parked at the curb. Through the curtains on her bay window, she saw the sparkle of lights and immediately knew what was happening.

"Surprise!" they called out as she entered.

Her mom, Noelle, and Enzo were standing near the tree. Each of them held one of Charity's coffee mugs. Gracie was nowhere to be found.

"We came over to decorate," Noelle explained.

Her mom stepped forward to give her a one-armed hug. "I know you've been so busy helping everyone else get ready for Christmas, you didn't make time for you. Oh, and we made eggnog."

"Non-alcoholic, of course," Enzo said.

"And if you're worried about Gracie, she's outside," Noelle said.

Probably noticing the panic in Charity's expression, her mom rushed to add, "Don't worry. She's not alone out there."

What? Who was out there with her?

As if in answer to her unspoken question, the door to the patio burst open and Gracie came rushing in. She raced for her owner, who was already kneeling to greet her. That was why it took her a few extra seconds to notice the man coming through that door.

Nic Winters.

"Our work is done," Charity's mom said, looking around. "I say we get out of here and let these two have a nice evening alone."

Charity looked at Noelle, tilting her head slightly. "You knew all this was going on when we were planning our girls' night?"

Noelle laughed. "No way. Nobody knew this guy was coming to town."

"I surprised everyone," Nic said. "You can blame me for the decorations too."

Her mom spoke up then. "He tracked down Noelle, who called me, and we all planned this together. I had to let them in and show them where you keep everything."

“We put all the boxes back where they belong,” Nic said. “Don’t worry.”

He was still standing just inside the doorway, never having strayed too far from the door to the patio. He was even still wearing his coat. It was like he was afraid to settle in because she might send him on his way.

“Let us know if you need us,” her mom said, giving her a hug goodbye and handing her the coffee mug.

That seemed to propel Nic forward. He grabbed Noelle’s and Enzo’s mugs and thanked them as they followed Charity’s mom out the door. It was all Charity could do to keep Gracie from chasing out after them. She had to run defense while still holding the coffee mug filled with eggnog.

Once the door was closed behind everyone and they were finally alone, Charity turned to face Nic. “You came all the way back to Misty Mountain to put up my tree?”

He took a deep breath and turned, mug in each hand. He headed straight for the kitchen. Charity followed, Gracie running around and nearly tripping her a couple of times.

Only as she reached the kitchen did Charity realize what was up with her dog. Nobody had given her a treat when she came inside. Charity set the mug on the counter next to the sink and grabbed a chew stick from the cookie jar. That sent Gracie on her way, sure to at least keep her occupied for a half minute or so.

Nic set the mugs in the sink and stepped back, standing against the area of the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room area. “I quit my job. It wasn’t just because of you. Or maybe it was. Spending time here in Misty Mountain made me realize how much I’ve given up of myself since leaving town eight years ago. I’ve let people walk all over me instead of fighting for the respect I deserve.”

He quit his job. She was having a hard time processing this new information. Was he here temporarily until he found something else?

“But it’s not just that.” He faced her fully now, hands clasped in front of him. “I don’t belong in Lexington. I belong here in this town with you. It doesn’t matter what I end up doing for a living. This is where I want to build my life, my home, my family. With you.”

Had she fallen asleep at some point? Was she dreaming? Going back as far as she could remember, he’d been sure he would never, ever stay in Misty Mountain.

“You don’t want to be stuck in this town.”

What was she doing? Was she trying to change his mind?

But she had to say these things. If he was going to stay, he had to be one hundred percent sure it was what he wanted. She’d hate for him to someday regret his decision.

“Sometimes you have to go away from home to really appreciate it,” he said. “Maybe that’s the reason I avoided spending time in town all those years when I visited. Deep down, I knew seeing those familiar sights and running into people from my past would remind me what I loved about the town. I wouldn’t want to leave.”

“But this time you came into town,” she said.

“This time I guess I was ready.” He took a deep breath and stepped back, looking around her kitchen. “The whole drive back to Lexington, it all just felt wrong. I kept telling myself everything would be okay once I walked into my apartment, but even then, it just seemed so empty, so lonely. I never really built a life there. Not even when I was married. It’s like I’ve always been waiting for the next thing.”

“And the next thing is here?” she asked.

He nodded and took a step closer to her. “With you. If you’ll have me, that is.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “No way you’re getting rid of me now. But for the record, if you ever wanted to leave Misty Mountain, I’d make it work. My mom had a talk with me, and she’s right. Home isn’t a city or a building. You’re my home. Well, you and this pesky little dog.”



That was said lovingly. Gracie was tapping her way around the kitchen, no doubt expecting another treat since two humans were standing somewhat close to where Charity stored them.

Something was still bugging her, though. She couldn't move past this point until she got it off her chest. So instead of taking a couple of steps to bridge the distance between the two of them, she crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at him.

“What exactly was up Wednesday night when you drove me home?” she asked. “Not the part where I fell and messed up my knee.”

He looked down. “How is that, by the way?”

“Fine. I'm better. I'm not going to be wearing heels anytime soon, though. Mostly because I don't want to fall again. Don't change the subject.”

He smiled and nodded, closing his eyes. When they popped open again, he said, “Holden Pryce.”

Those were not the words she had expected. In fact, if she'd made a list of all the things he might have said right then, Holden Pryce wouldn't even be on it.

“The helicopter guy?” She thought that through for a second. “Was it that he asked for your business card? Were you afraid he'd draw you back to Misty Mountain?”

“No, it was you.”

She stared at him, unblinking, not sure what to make of those four words. “Me?”

“You and his daughter really hit it off, and he's a super successful man. Not bad-looking for a guy, I suppose. He'd be the perfect match for you.”

The words seemed to suck all the air out of her lungs. She tried to comprehend what she was hearing, but it made no sense.

“You thought I was interested in that Holden guy?”

He shook his head. "I never thought that. It's not anything you did. Or anything he did. Just stepping back and looking at it objectively, he seemed like a better fit for you than someone who was determined to get out of town. I know it's ridiculous."

"It is." She nodded and shifted her weight from her good foot to her injured one briefly before shifting back again. "You know there's only one guy for me. That's been the problem all along. I actually thought that Holden guy might be someone to fix up with my sister."

"The one in Europe?"

Laughing, she shook her head. "No, the one who's in Hawaii or the Virgin Islands or somewhere even better right now, probably."

"That's a relief," he said. "I never thought you were interested in him or anything. I just wanted what was best for you."

"*You're* what's best for me," she said. "I guess, if I have to be honest, I never fully got over you." She sighed and looked over at Gracie, who was sprawled on the floor a few feet away. Returning her gaze to Nic, she continued. "It wasn't just that we dated. We were friends from a young age. You were my go-to when I needed advice. When Noelle moved away too, I felt like the ground had been pulled out from beneath me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really mean it. I was young and immature and I guess in a bit of denial. The thing was, I wasn't really breaking up with you. I was breaking up with Misty Mountain."

She laughed. "You may be the first person in history to break up with a town."

"I may be."

Charity let her arms fall to her sides and took a step closer. He put his arms around her waist and she reached up, resting her hands on his forearms.

"I've been holding this in for a while," he said. "But it was what I said the last time I saw you when we were eighteen and

still dating. It feels natural to say it again. I love you.”

The flood of emotions that rushed through her made it tough to talk at first. All she could do was stare up at him, wondering how she lived even one day without him in her life.

“I love you, too,” she said. “Now, kiss me so I can enjoy some of this eggnog and look at my beautiful tree.”

And that was exactly what he did. As his lips pressed against hers, his arms tightening around her, she knew she was finally home.

Nic stood at the back of the sanctuary at First Baptist Church—the very church where they’d met to go caroling. Had that only been a few weeks ago? It felt like a lifetime.

He’d stepped out for a minute to take a call, and now the plan was to head back to his pew and enjoy the rest of the Christmas Eve service with Charity. But Pastor Murray was wrapping up the service. He’d be better off staying back here until everyone filed out rather than making his way back to his seat.

“I hope you all have a blessed Christmas, and I’ll see you back here Sunday,” Pastor Murray said.

That was when Nic thought better of where he stood. Every pew was jam-packed, which meant he’d just be in the way. He stepped out into the lobby and eyed the hot cocoa machine.

That small move had him pushing back through the crowd, two cups of cocoa in hand, when Charity emerged. He handed her one of the cups.

“No marshmallows tonight,” he said.

She smiled and glanced over at the growing line in front of the machine. “Looks like you got it just in time.”

Nic nodded. “That work call gave me a head start on the competition.”

Those words brought a frown to Charity's face. "An emergency?"

He'd just taken a sip of cocoa, so he swallowed before speaking. "Some teens were smoking and tossing their cigarettes onto the ground. Dane wasn't sure how to deal with them."

Dane was one of the youngest park rangers on the team. Not that Nic was the most senior member by any measure. But his experience at the farm seemed to have junior rangers looking up to him.

"Better step out of the way or we're going to be trampled." Nic nodded over to the left at the people streaming from the sanctuary. "Are you ready to go?"

"Definitely."

She smiled and they started toward the exit. They were heading over to Charity's parents' place. Her mom was making dinner for all of them, including his parents and sister, who'd been invited to join.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Nic heard Santa before he spotted him. He was on the sidewalk to the right of the main entrance. People were streaming past and a couple of kids had stopped for a picture, but now they moved away, the mom waving her thanks before following her kids to the parking lot.

"Santa!" Nic said, looking around. He certainly didn't want to get in the way of any children who wanted to talk to him. "I thought you were heading back to the North Pole today."

Santa laughed, hands on his belly. Had this guy worn the same suit every day since arriving in town? Or did he just have a closet full of the same pants and jacket?

"I had to check in on my favorite couple," Santa said. "I finally figured out you belong together."

Nic looked over at Charity, who'd come to a stop next to him. She stared at the guy with the same quizzical expression

Nic no doubt had.

“How did you know we weren’t together already?” she asked.

“The mistletoe brought you together, of course,” Santa said. “And it’s going to bring other couples together as well. Just you wait and see.”

He pointed at Charity as he said those final words. Then he looked around.

“Well, I’d better be getting back to the cabin,” Santa said. “I have a lot to do tonight. There’s a little something hanging over there for the two of you.”

Sure enough, dangling from a light on a long string was a bushel of mistletoe. For a while, Nic had spotted those little green plants everywhere he went in town. Lately, though, they seemed to have disappeared. But this particular bushel looked bright green and healthy, like it had just been plucked from the tree.

“It was nice meeting you,” Nic said, reaching out for a handshake.

Santa laughed and reached out a white-gloved hand. “Nice meeting you too.”

He shook Nic’s hand, then winked at Charity before walking around them in the opposite direction from where most of the cars were parked. They watched him walk away, completely ignored by the people streaming out of the building, before Nic finally turned back around to face his girlfriend.

“I guess we could take a few extra seconds under the mistletoe before we head to the truck,” he said.

Charity smiled. “Santa seems to think it’s a wise idea.”

He glanced around. Everyone was either heading to the parking area straight ahead or the one that wrapped around the right side of the building and all the way to the back. They’d been lucky enough to grab one of the few remaining spots in front.

The mistletoe took them away from that, which was good news because it also took them away from the crowd. Nobody seemed to even notice the bit of greenery hanging all by its lonesome over here. But as they reached the corner, Charity suddenly skidded to a halt, her shoes making a slight scraping noise.

“Where did he go?” she asked.

Nic stopped too, taking a step back to stand next to her. “Who?”

“Santa.”

Nic followed her gaze to the large field next to the church. On the other side of it was a row of trees, but no way could the man have gotten over there by now.

“He must have parked over here,” Nic said, scanning the area. “But how did he get away so quickly?”

Had Santa just disappeared? If so, how?

Nic puzzled over it for a few extra seconds before finally deciding some mysteries were just best left unsolved. Instead, he looked over at Charity.

“I think we’re wasting some good mistletoe right now,” he said.

She laughed, probably coming to the same conclusion he had. Of course, the man wasn’t really Santa, but sometimes they were better off not knowing the real story. They stopped under the mistletoe, turned to face each other, and enjoyed a long kiss that he knew would be the highlight of his Christmas Eve.

## EPILOGUE

**T**he square was jam-packed for this year's Christmas tree lighting. It just might be the busiest ever.

Charity stood at the bottom of the steps next to the platform, scanning the crowd in front of the tree for signs of that goofy Santa hat Nic insisted on wearing. He was tasked with keeping their infant quiet and still while Charity and their three-year-old entertained the town.

"It's time," Noelle said.

As usual, Noelle wore an elf costume, but one thing had changed since that year Nic showed back up in town. Noelle's husband was now the one leading the tree-lighting ceremony.

Nodding, Charity looked down at her daughter, Amity, who was clutching the microphone between her two hands. "Are you sure you don't want me to carry that up to the stage?"

Amity nodded. "I can do this."

Charity smiled and put her hand on her daughter's shoulder, waiting patiently as she slowly made her way up the steps. As usual, she stayed close behind, keeping an eye on her as she struggled to get her short legs from one step to the next.

"I can do this" was Amity's favorite saying these days. Those four words summed up her daughter's stance on just about everything. Whatever challenge life threw her way, Amity wanted to tackle it...just like her parents.



But once Amity stepped into place and looked down at the crowd, the fear seemed to hit her. There were actual people out there, and they were looking at her, waiting to be entertained. They all had smiles on their faces and were immediately charmed by the little girl.

But Amity wouldn't see it that way. She didn't realize that, no matter what she said, they'd all think it was the most adorable thing ever.

"Hi," Amity said, but her mouth was a little too close to the microphone.

Charity crept forward, as though trying to stay low like that would keep anyone from seeing her, and pulled the microphone down a little. Then she prompted, "I'm here to introduce my favorite policeman."

"Policeman!" Amity said, then pointed to her left where Enzo stood, at the bottom of the steps, next to his wife. Like the audience, Enzo was smiling at the adorableness of it all.

Charity knelt beside her daughter, leaned toward the microphone, and said, "We're here to introduce our favorite policeman."

"Uncle Enzo!" Amity beamed as she said those two words. Amity called Enzo and Noelle aunt and uncle even though they weren't related. They spent so much time together, it was almost like they were family. "He's a chief police."

That was when Charity spotted Nic. He was as close to the front as he probably could have gotten. It was crowded there, but he stood in the center of it all, holding baby Oliver against his chest, facing the stage so he could see everything.

"And what's your Uncle Enzo going to do?" Charity asked.

Amity's eyes lit up as she pointed to the tree. "He's going to make the Christmas tree pretty."

"Exactly," Charity said. "Everyone put your hands together for your chief of police, Enzo Reeser."

As the audience burst into applause and Enzo took the mic, Charity lifted Amity and walked down the steps. It was just easier that way. She carefully descended the steps as Enzo talked about what an exciting year it had been for the town of Misty Mountain. And the town was continuing to grow, so there would only be more changes to come.

Once they were at the bottom of the steps, Charity set down Amity and took her hand as planned. She led her around the crowd toward the back. She and Nic had agreed to meet there once he was finished watching the festivities with their youngest, who was amazed by everything. If he got restless, though, Nic would be on his way back toward them early. It was just easier with young kids to hang out away from everyone. If they got fussy, they could make a quick getaway.

“Santa!” Amity shouted as they neared the back of the crowd.

The sound carried through the night air, drawing attention away from the police chief. Charity tossed an apologetic wince at a nearby family, who was smiling as they looked at the three-year-old.

She was so worried about disrupting the event, Charity didn’t process the subject of her daughter’s outburst until she saw him directly ahead. “That *is* Santa,” she said as much to herself as to her daughter.

Maybe she was imagining things, but it sure looked like the same Santa who had shown up here in Misty Mountain six years ago, back when Nic made the decision to return to his hometown for good. They hadn’t seen their Santa since that night outside the church, when he’d pointed them toward the mistletoe, then pulled a mysterious vanishing act.

Charity kept her eyes on him as she led Amity in that direction. His eyes weren’t on the two of them, though. He had a gigantic smile on his face as he stared up at the stage like it was the most riveting thing he’d ever seen.

“Hi, Santa,” Charity said in a hushed voice. As he turned to look at her, she knew without a doubt it was the same guy. “I don’t know if you remember me. You were here a few years

ago.” More than a few years, but who was she to quibble over exact dates?

“Yes, the young couple,” he said. “And I see you have a little one now.”

That was presumptuous. Amity could be her niece, for all he knew. But then she remembered he’d somehow known the two of them had not been a couple when he first saw them. He’d mentioned them working out their differences. She never had figured out how he knew that.

“Are you bringing me a bicycle?” Amity asked.

Looking down into the face of her daughter, Charity felt warmth flood her. The hopefulness and sheer admiration Amity had for this man in a suit was indescribable. It was exactly why parents took their kids to meet Santa every year.

“She wants a bike for Christmas,” Charity said, as if that explained further. “Not a real bike, of course.”

Charity and Nic had picked out an age-appropriate indoor tricycle that was low to the ground. Once she was old enough, they’d progress to an outdoor tricycle and eventually, a bike with training wheels.

“I’ll see what I can drum up for you,” Santa said. “I assume you live in this lovely town?”

Amity nodded, pointing toward her left. “Over there.”

It wasn’t like they were within pointing distance of their home. They lived in the Misty Lakes subdivision but in a bigger house, in an area that hadn’t been developed until a few years ago. Nic was a supervisory park ranger for the area of the mountain that was classified as a park, and Charity still worked in interior design. It was a job with flexible hours, but she’d had help this Christmas season, of course. Once Oliver was a little older, she’d be back to working full-time at it.

“Here comes your daddy,” Santa said to Amity.

Nic had apparently squeezed his way through the crowd and was walking toward them. His eyes widened as his gaze

connected with Charity's. They were thinking the same thing. Is this guy really here?

"Santa's bringing me a bike, Daddy," Amity announced.

Again, Charity winced at the sudden noise. Her gaze shifted to the crowd, but nobody was listening. All eyes were on the stage right now.

"Do you want to get a picture with Santa?" Nic asked.

And that was how they ended up doing the same thing they'd seen another family do that Christmas Eve so long ago. Amity snuggled up next to Santa, who knelt to be at her level. Oliver had to miss out, but once he was old enough, she'd make sure he got a picture with Santa too.

"Thank you," Nic said as Amity rushed back to them. "How long are you in town?"

"The whole Christmas season," Santa said. "I'll be heading out on Christmas Eve like last time."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Nic said. "You just disappeared. You walked past the mistletoe, and you were gone. How did you do that?"

Santa smiled at him. Then he did the same thing he did that evening at the Mexican restaurant. He put his finger in front of his mouth in the "Shhhh" gesture. Then, with a shrug, he smiled and turned his full attention to the stage.

As Nic and Charity moved back to the crowd, he settled Amity on his shoulders so she could see. Charity pushed Oliver in his stroller, continuing to move it back and forth even after she'd stopped so he didn't wake up. Something told her to look back at Santa, but she knew what she'd find. Sure enough, Santa was no longer back there.

She turned back to Nic and whispered, "Santa's gone."

He turned and looked, then chuckled. "I'm starting to think that guy really is Santa."

"I'm just glad he's back in town," Charity said. "Magic seems to happen when he's here."

Smiling, Charity faced front. She liked the idea of another round of twenty-somethings falling in love, maybe even kissing under the mistletoe. In fact, maybe she should get together with Noelle and buy up some bushels, then hang them all over town.

It had worked last time. She and Nic were proof of that.



WHY DID Sid Renner miss playing Santa? It has a little to do with Josephine Strongblossom. Read Sid's brief love story in [this bonus scene](#). It's free with newsletter signup!

You'll also get Noelle and Enzo's love story in [the prequel novella](#), *Kissed by the Scrooge*. It's available only to newsletter subscribers!

Don't miss *Kissed by Her Best Friend's Brother*, Book 2 in the Misty Mountain Mistletoe series. It's coming November 3rd. [Preorder now](#).