

LOVE FOR THE SINGLE MOM



FROSTY PINES CHRISTMAS
RUBY HILL

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Love Light Faith

Love for the Single Mom

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“G oodnight, honey. I love you.”
“Love you too, mom.”

Kaitlin smiled to herself as she pulled the bedroom door closed, shutting it softly behind her. Heading downstairs, she let out a slow breath of relief as she stepped into the kitchen and closed the door behind her.

“That girl exhausted herself today at the park.” Her mom, Martha, smiled at Kaitlin as she leaned back against the door. “Although I had to tell her a thousand times not to climb the trees. It’s so cold, and they’re so slippery, I was afraid she’d fall and hurt herself. She’s desperate to get back up them, though.”

Kaitlin let out a wry laugh. “Sarah’s always loved being outside. She’s more squirrel than child sometimes.”

Martha laughed along with her, then gestured to the coffeepot. “Can I get you a coffee?”

Nodding, Kaitlin smiled back at her mom. “Thanks. Normally, I’d say no at this time of the evening, but I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.”

Her mom shook her head. “You’re going to exhaust yourself, Kaitlin. If you’re not giving your time to Sarah, then you’re giving it to the business!”

Acknowledging this with a small smile, Kaitlin took the mug from her mom and took a sip, almost scalding her tongue in the process. “Thanks.”

“You know I’m happy to help out wherever I can,” Martha continued when she said nothing. “But I’m worried about you.”

“I think that’s part of your job as a mom, isn’t it?”

That made her smile. “I guess it is, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong when I tell you that you’re taking on a lot with this bakery expansion. Yes, you have Louise, but she’s only a part-time assistant.”

Kaitlin paused before she answered, seeing the worry spinning in her mom’s eyes. “I understand you’re worried about me, and it means a lot to me to know that you’re thinking about me and wanting to help me out where you can... but I got this.”

Martha nodded and looked away. “I know you do.”

“And it’s not a big expansion,” Kaitlin continued quickly. “All I’m doing is adding a few more savory options to the bakery. That way, people might think about coming to me for lunch.”

“I understand that.” Martha put one hand on Kaitlin’s cheek for a second. “I’m hoping you’re not going to take on too much. You’re already working so hard, and the Sprinkles and Crumb bakery *is* doing well, isn’t it?” Her hand dropped back to her side. “You’re not struggling for anything, are you? You know I’d be more than happy to—”

“The bakery is doing great,” Kaitlin told her firmly. “You are such a generous person, Mom, and I promise that, if I were struggling, you’d be the first person I’d go to.”

“Okay.” With a smile, her mom pushed one sleeve up and then the other. “So, what can I do to help?”

Kaitlin smiled. “You want to help make some pastries?”

“Sure, why not?” Martha nudged her lightly. “After all, I was the one who got you into this baking idea in the first place.”

“That’s true,” Kaitlin admitted, laughing along with her mom. “I still remember making pancakes with you when I was

really small. It's one of my first memories.”

“Really?” Martha’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s a very precious memory to me. It’s the first time you ever wanted to help me out in the kitchen.”

“And I guess I’ve never stopped.” With a smile, Kaitlin hugged her mom for a few seconds, then stepped back. “Okay, so I’ve got some pastries to make, and then I’ll do the filling for them tomorrow, to make sure they’re as fresh as possible. I’ve also got to whip up another batch of cream cakes.”

“How about I start with the pastries, and you get on with the cream cakes?”

Kaitlin nodded and went to wash her hands. “Sounds good to me.”



“GOOD MORNING.”

“Good morning! What can I get you?”

Scarlett yawned, and Kaitlin laughed. “Coffee?”

“Yes. Please.” Scarlett waved one hand toward the freshly made muffins on the counter. “And one of your delicious muffins, please. Any flavor will do.”

“Coming right up.” Watching her friend out of the corner of her eye, Kaitlin tilted her head. “You doing okay?”

“I’m great.” Scarlett yawned again and then shook her head. “I’m a little wiped.”

“I can see that.” Still smiling, Kaitlin turned to make the coffee. Everything in the bakery was as fresh as she could make it, and that included the coffee. It wasn’t anything special—people could go to Steamy Mugs for that—but it was nice to be able to offer customers a drink to go with their cakes. “How are things coming along for this year’s Christmas production? I’ve been so excited about it. *A Christmas Carol* is one of my favorite Christmas stories.”

Scarlett closed her eyes for a second, and the smile fell away from Kaitlin's face. "Not good?"

"No, it's great." Scarlett's eyes opened, and she heaved out a long sigh. "This might sound crazy, but I'm trying to make the production a little... bigger this year."

"Oh?" Kaitlin handed Scarlett the coffee and the muffin. "Sarah told me you got new lights on the stage." Ever since Sarah had started school, she'd gone along to Scarlett's after-school drama group. Three years later, it was still the highlight of Sarah's week, especially now that Scarlett had managed to get her own space for the community theater.

"Yup." Scarlett grinned suddenly. "I'm glad she noticed them. I've been adding little touches here and there to the stage since I've gotten a little more funding—and the lights are only the first part!"

"That sounds great, Scarlett. Sarah's been going on and on about the Christmas production and how much you've given her to do."

Scarlett's shoulders lifted, then dropped. "That's because Sarah is a great actor. She knows her lines, she knows what she has to do, and where she has to stand. She listens and takes it all in, so I feel like I can trust her to do a little more. I think she's going to be a fantastic Ghost of Christmas Past."

"Well, I'm thrilled you've given her such a big part," Kaitlin replied as Scarlett swiped her card to pay for her coffee and muffin. "It really does mean a lot to her—and to me."

"Thanks. She's really great, Kaitlin."

Kaitlin's heart flooded. "Thank you. I think so, too." Tilting her head, she lifted an eyebrow. "And is Charlie going to be back in time for Christmas?"

Scarlett beamed. "Yes, he'll be here at the end of this week! And that gives us five weeks until Christmas, so he'll be back in plenty of time to help out."

"That sounds great."

Charlie Williamson was Scarlett's fiancé, and an A-list actor, whose name was currently emblazoned all over one of the up-and-coming Christmas movies, heading to theaters in less than a week. Charlie had moved back to Frosty Pines a little less than a year ago, but it had only taken a few months of being back for him to propose to Scarlett. Kaitlin didn't think she'd ever seen Scarlett so happy.

"He *definitely* has to be in the show somehow. That camel scene from last year was hilarious!" Snorting with laughter, Kaitlin shook her head as Scarlett began to chuckle.

During the production of the Nativity, Charlie had crept across the stage in an ill-fitting camel costume to help out one of the kids with their lines, and Kaitlin hadn't been able to forget it.

"I'll make sure he has a camel costume at hand, ready to step in whenever he's needed," Scarlett promised, just as the door opened behind her. Backing away, she lifted her muffin in Kaitlin's direction. "I'll see you and Sarah later?"

"Six o'clock sharp." Kaitlin grinned as Scarlett smiled, gave her an awkward thumbs up, since she still held her coffee in one hand and the muffin in another, and headed out the door, thanking Maverick as she went for holding it open for her.

"Maverick, hi." Kaitlin shivered lightly as a blast of cold air came running around the bakery. "Looks pretty cold out there this morning."

"It sure is." Maverick gave her a smile, then his order, his light brown hair flopping forward over his forehead before he pushed it back with one hand. He wasn't someone she knew well, but he was a fairly regular customer, which she appreciated. "Oh, and can I get a tray of your cupcakes?"

Kaitlin grinned at him. "Back on shift, then?"

"You got it." Maverick chuckled, paying for his order as his brown eyes flicked to her and then back to the card machine. "Cupcakes give a sugar rush to the guys heading

home, so they get there safely, and they also give all of us *on* shift a kick to get going.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Kaitlin smiled at him and handed him his order. “Firefighters need as much energy as they can get, I suppose.”

“We sure do.” His eyes twinkled, and a zip of electricity ran down Kaitlin’s spine, but she ignored it, making sure to thank him for stopping by before turning around, not letting herself watch him as he walked out the door.

Sure, Maverick was easy on the eyes, with that strong, athletic build that came from all the training he needed to do as a firefighter, but she was much too busy with the bakery and with her daughter to think about anything like that. And as far as she knew, Maverick might already be taken!

All the same, no harm in admitting he’s gorgeous.

Smiling to herself, Kaitlin went to the back of the bakery and pulled out another tray of cupcakes from the shelf, all waiting to be iced. No doubt he’d be back tomorrow, and she wanted to make sure she had enough cupcakes to go around.

“Come in! The door’s open.”

Maverick grinned as his brother came through the front door and then walked into the living room, only to stop dead.

“Really?” Cameron rolled his eyes.

“Yes, really.” Maverick gestured down at himself. “You think it’s too much?”

“I think you going on a third date in a week is too much.” Eyeing Maverick’s shirt and dark jeans, Cameron shook his head. “You’re really going all out on this dating thing.”

Maverick shrugged. “That’s because I want to find someone.”

“So you keep saying.” Cameron’s eyes narrowed. “Honestly, it’s like you turned thirty and, bam, you’ve decided you want to settle down.”

“Yeah, that’s about right.” Maverick smiled back at his brother. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Cameron admitted with a small smile. “I guess it’s that I’ve never seen you take this so seriously before. You were always so relaxed when it came to dating, and now you’re going on a third date in one week.” His head tipped. “You remember that you’ve only *just* turned thirty, right?”

“Sure I do, but there’s no time like the present, right?” Chuckling at the way Cameron shook his head, Maverick

straightened his shirt one last time before heading to the kitchen for a glass of water. “And if this one goes well, then I’ll be coming to your restaurant for my second date.”

“Uh... thanks, I guess.” Cameron followed after him, then dropped a book onto the kitchen table. “That’s the book you were looking for.”

“Is it?” Setting his now-empty glass down on the table, Maverick turned around and picked it up. “Thanks. I’ve been wanting to read this one for ages.”

“Sorry it took me so long.” Cameron grinned suddenly. “I guess I don’t have as much time for reading as a firefighter. All you guys do is hang around and wait for that bell to go off, right?”

Maverick laughed without rising to the bait. It was an ongoing joke between himself and his older brother, but he wasn’t up for any teasing right now. If he was honest—which he wasn’t about to be with Cameron—he was already feeling a little nervous about going to the Frosty Pines Diner for his date. “Fair enough.”

“Really?” Cameron arched an eyebrow. “That’s all you’re going to say?” Chuckling, he shoved his hands in his pockets. “Okay, so what’s her name?”

“Who?”

“Whoever it is that’s gotten you so flustered,” Cameron said emphatically. “Is this your first date with her?”

Maverick nodded, rolling his neck to ease some of his spiraling tension. “Her name is Sophie. I only met her last week at the Polar Snap Sports Bar. She’s not from around here, though.”

Cameron frowned. “So where’s she from?”

“She’s from Snapwen, so about thirty minutes away.”

“Yeah, if you’re driving really fast,” Cameron threw in, grinning. “More like forty-five minutes to an hour.”

“All the same, it’s not too far.” Maverick set the book back on the table and went back through to the living room. “And I

like her. She's gorgeous and easy to talk to, so I guess we'll see if we hit it off!"

"She said yes to a date, so that's got to be a good sign." Following after him, Cameron made his way to the front door as Maverick picked up his jacket and slung his arms through it. "I hope it goes well."

Maverick smiled, ignoring the churning in his stomach. "Thanks. So do I."



"HI, SOPHIE."

"Hi." Leaning forward, Sophie kissed his cheek, and instantly, Maverick's skin began to burn, sweeping down through him and setting his hair on end. He hadn't been expecting her to get so close so soon. When she stepped back, it took him a second to catch his breath, gazing into her blue eyes and seeing the soft smile edge up the corners of her lips.

First date, Maverick. Don't rush this.

"Thanks for coming back to Frosty Pines for our date. Next time, I can go to you."

"Next time?" Sophie arched an eyebrow. Her long blonde hair flowed lightly over her shoulder as she smiled at him. "I like a man with confidence."

"Thanks." Maverick smiled, not quite sure whether it was actually confidence or stupidity which had made him say that. "Shall we sit?"

"Thank you." When she touched his hand and sat down in the chair he held out for her, Maverick's body heated up all over again. So far, so good. "So, tell me about yourself, Maverick."

Sitting down opposite, Maverick took a second to answer, thinking about what would be best to say. He didn't want to overwhelm her with too much information at one time. "Well, I guess what's important to know about me is that I work as a

firefighter here in Frosty Pines. I'm actually the fire chief, which is a little crazy. The old fire chief, Brooker, retired last year, and so I went for it. I didn't think I'd get it, but it just goes to show how hard work pays off."

Sophie's blue eyes widened. "Wow. That's great! So what sort of responsibilities do you have?"

"Basically, I have to make sure that the station runs efficiently and that everyone is at the top of their game. There's the equipment to look after, the paperwork to do, and I go out and help with the education of fire safety with the kids at the school, but apart from that, I'm still a hands-on firefighter. I go out with the other guys whenever I'm needed. We're only a small station, so it's important I'm involved."

"That's amazing. You must work really hard."

Maverick smiled back at her. "I enjoy what I do." His smile faded. "I don't mean that I like seeing fires or anything, more that I like keeping people safe and educating them on how to be safe around fires and things like that."

Sophie laughed, reached across, and settled one hand on top of his. "Don't worry. I didn't think you meant it that way for a second." Her eyes danced as he looked down at where her fingers were resting on top of his, only for her to pull her hand away again and pick up the menu. "Okay, let's see what's good here."

Letting himself watch her for a few seconds, Maverick smiled and sat back in his chair, letting out a slow breath as some of the nerves which he'd been battling finally laid themselves to rest. Sophie was just as easy to talk to as he'd remembered, getting him talking almost as soon as they'd sat down.

Maverick thought that maybe a second date would be in order as the date continued to go well, with the conversation flowing easily.

"So, you've told me you work at your dad's business, but that's about all I know." Maverick looked straight back at Sophie as he set down his fork, his risotto finished. "You've

spent most of the night trying to make sure you know as much about me as you possibly can, and I've barely learned anything about you!"

Sophie smiled, her cheeks a little flushed. "I like learning about you, Maverick."

"I appreciate that," he replied, his smile growing, "but I still want to hear about you."

"Okay, so what do you want to learn?" Sophie picked up her wine glass and took a sip. "Ask me anything."

"Anything?" Letting the word play around on his lips, he grinned when Sophie blushed, although she didn't look away. "I'll start with an easy question, then. Want to tell me what you like to do in your free time?"

Sophie smiled back at him. "You mean, apart from going out to dinner with a gorgeous firefighter?"

A curl of heat wrapped itself around his neck and flashed down to his stomach as he grinned back at her. "Sure. Aside from that."

"Well, I like old movies," she told him, swirling her wine gently as she looked away for a few seconds, as if she was a little afraid of what his reaction might be. "And I like to go out hiking on the weekends."

"Really? That's great!" Maverick smiled when her eyes darted to his. "I love hiking. Maybe we could go together sometime."

She smiled, her eyes warm. "I'd love that."

"Do you like to read? I just got a new book from my brother, one I've been waiting for ages to read," he continued, seeing her smile begin to fade away. "I read fiction, mostly."

"Reading?" Sophie shook her head and, for the first time since they'd sat down together, frowned hard. "No, I'm not into that. I'm a little surprised you are, to be honest. I didn't think that was the sort of thing firefighters would do."

Not taking any insult, Maverick merely smiled. "I didn't think I'd get into reading, but when you're a firefighter, there

can be times when you're waiting or resting, and reading really helps."

"Oh." Sophie bit the edge of her lip for a second, her gaze darting away. "I thought you'd be working out or training most of the time."

A bark of laughter ripped out of him before he could help it, and Sophie's face immediately ran scarlet. "Sorry, I don't mean to laugh," Maverick said quickly, trying to contain himself and apologize at the same time. "That's a part of it, sure. We definitely need to make sure we're in the best physical condition we can be, but a lot of the time, we're resting or doing paperwork or cleaning equipment."

"Right."

Was it just him, or was there a slight stiffness to Sophie's tone now? Maverick's smile broke into pieces, and he tried to find what else to say, only for the server to come over to see if they wanted dessert. Thankfully, once they'd both ordered—with Maverick making sure Sophie knew he was planning on paying for the evening—she had her smile back on her lips.

"They make the *best* apple pie here," Maverick told her, as she smiled back at him. "I've never had better."

Sophie tilted her head. "Have you ever lived anywhere else?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "I went away for college, but I came right back afterward. My parents still live here, but they've gone to stay with my sister for an extended break over Christmas and the New Year in New York."

"Do you like New York?"

He shook his head no. "I'm too much of a small-town guy to live in a big city."

"I like living in a small town, too." Sophie's smile softened as she looked back into his eyes. "It's a place where you can be seen, you know? The city feels like you're one face among a thousand others, and none of them are distinct." Dropping her head, she looked away from him again. "That's how I saw it, at least."

“That’s exactly how I felt, too.” His heart lifted when their gaze met and held again. “I earned a degree in sports science and psychology, but it wasn’t a degree that led to a job. I would have had to earn an advanced degree before I could have started to apply for jobs in that field, but I really didn’t want to. So, I came back here and took on the job at the fire station—and I’ve never looked back.”

Sophie smiled back at him. “I never even got a chance to go to college.” A hint of wistfulness came into her voice, her eyes falling away from his again. “My dad needed me to help out at his business—he’s into real estate, but in a *big* way. I’m his secretary and financial manager, but I’m not sure it’s what I want to do in the future.”

“What do you want to do?”

A twinkling laugh made his lips curve.

“That’s the problem—I’m not sure! I have plenty of time to think about things, though. I don’t want to rush into a new career without being sure I want to go for it.” Getting out of her chair, she excused herself, gesturing toward the restrooms before stepping away.

Smiling to himself, Maverick looked across the restaurant, thinking about just how great this date was going. Sophie was gorgeous, and so far, apart from that slight blip where he had laughed, and she had blushed like crazy, things had been going well.

A sudden, fiery heat tore up his chest, his breath hitching as his eyes locked onto someone sitting across the room; someone who had only just taken their seat and was smiling as two other guests came to sit opposite her.

His stomach dropped.

Isn’t that Kaitlin?

What was the reason his gut twisted and his hands got all gnarled up? He saw Kaitlin almost every day at the bakery. What was it about seeing her here at the restaurant that was making his mouth go dry?

She hadn't noticed him yet, so even though he had told himself he ought to look away, Maverick let his gaze linger, trying to concentrate on slowing his breathing and making sense of why that heat had torn through him. Kaitlin's blue eyes were flashing with laughter as she smiled across the table at her daughter and someone Maverick figured was Kaitlin's mother, given the similarities in appearance, although her hair was a little grey compared to Kaitlin's blonde head.

A twist to his stomach had him fighting for breath when she flipped her hair over her shoulder in one smooth motion, her eyes still sparkling. It wasn't as if she was doing anything out of the ordinary. She wasn't attempting to flirt with him; she didn't even know he was here! And yet, somehow, a fire which he couldn't seem to put out burned in his blood.

"Hey." Sophie sat back down and immediately frowned. "Are you okay?"

Maverick blinked once, twice, then nodded. "Sure. I'm fine. Sorry. I got... distracted."

Instantly, Sophie twisted her head around to where Maverick had been looking, and instinctively, he winced as Sophie's head turned back around.

"Someone you know?" Gesturing in Kaitlin's direction, Sophie's smile remained hidden, her eyes suddenly a little darker.

"Yes, she runs the local bakery," he told her quickly. "It sounds weird, but it's a little odd to see her outside of it. We've never really talked—"

"Why? Do you want to?" The sharp crack of Sophie's voice had Maverick starting in surprise, looking back into her face and taking in the way her brows pulled together, how her jaw set tight. Obviously, she wasn't exactly pleased that he was busy thinking about—or even talking about—someone else when he was out on a date with her.

Not that I can blame her for that.

"No, not at all." Clearing his throat in the hopes of shattering the growing cloud of tension above them, Maverick

shifted in his chair and turned his head a little more, trying to find a comfortable position to sit in a way where he wouldn't be able to see Kaitlin. Strangely, everything seemed to be tense, and even though he'd done nothing wrong, guilt began to nudge at him. "Ah, great. Here comes dessert." His eyes went back to Sophie's. "And I really hope we can do this again."

Sophie's eyes were assessing him, and Maverick took in a slow breath, keeping the smile pinned to his face out of sheer effort rather than out of any real happiness.

"Sure."

Letting out his breath in a rush, Maverick's shoulders slumped as he grinned across the table at Sophie, but she didn't seem to even notice, too busy prodding at her apple pie with one spoon.

"Great." Maverick picked up his own spoon and smiled back across the table at her, although this only won him the smallest hint of a smile from Sophie. "I've really enjoyed tonight, Sophie. I don't want to wait too long until our next date. Are you free this weekend?"

Sophie's lips pulled into a bunch at one side of his face, only to nod. Stabbing her spoon into a piece of apple pie, she put it in her mouth before he could ask her anything more. Maverick lapsed into an uneasy silence, looking at Sophie and then taking a piece of his own apple pie, silently wondering why his gaze kept going back toward Kaitlin—and why his heart was so desperate for him to take another look.

“Can I go outside?”

Kaitlin glanced out the window. It was a cold but clear day, and she nodded. “Sure. Be careful, okay? Stay in the yard.”

Sarah nodded, edging toward the door. “I’ll be careful.”

A frown darted across Kaitlin’s brow, seeing how her daughter wouldn’t look at her, wondering exactly what it was Sarah was planning on doing outside. Maybe she and a friend had arranged a playdate in the yard without Kaitlin knowing.

Shrugging inwardly, Kaitlin measured out a little more flour, hearing the door open and then close again. With a sigh, she reached forward and rapped on the window, catching Sarah’s attention.

“Coat!” she mouthed, laughing to herself when Sarah’s shoulders dropped, and she shook her head.

It didn’t seem to matter to Sarah that it was freezing outside, whereas Kaitlin could already feel the chill coming from the window where she’d knocked on it. The door opened, and a draft ran through the house, though Kaitlin refrained from yelling at Sarah to shut the door behind her, waiting until Sarah had gotten her coat from the closet before hurrying back outside again. This time, when the door shut behind her, Kaitlin let out a slow, calming breath. Sarah could be precocious and a little stubborn... but it wasn’t like Kaitlin could complain about those traits. Sarah was the very essence of her mom.

“Okay, so...”

Running one thumb down the recipe, Kaitlin went in search of eggs, setting them down in a bowl beside the sugar. This was to be a new, improved cupcake recipe, provided it all went well. Kaitlin was excited to give it a try. The oven was already fired up, ready and waiting, so all she had to do was go through the method carefully.

Her thoughts went right back to Maverick the second she started creaming the eggs and the sugar. Exactly why she'd wanted to come up with a 'new and improved' cupcake mixture, she couldn't exactly say, but there had definitely been a thought there when Maverick had come in for his cupcakes. She'd tried to ignore that part, tried to tell herself that Maverick wasn't anyone special, and that she was doing her best to make sure she gave her customers her very best. But all the same, the attraction was definitely there.

Which is dumb, because I don't have time for a man... or for even thinking about dating.

“You've got a look on your face that says you're thinking about something.”

Kaitlin jumped in surprise, then turned to smile at Martha. “Sorry, Mom. I've been working on a new recipe, and I guess I got all caught up in it.”

“No problem. How about I fix us all dinner?”

“Would you?” Kaitlin shot her a glance. “That would be great. It's not very often I get an afternoon off from the bakery, and I want to make sure I take advantage of it.”

Her mom smiled back at her. “No problem. Is Louise at the bakery today, then?”

Kaitlin nodded, adding a couple of spoons of flour before folding it in carefully to the mixture. “Tuesday afternoons can be quiet, so I told her I'd take a few hours off, and she can call me if it gets too busy to handle.” A glance at the clock made her smile. “But it looks like she's been just fine. She should be closing up now.”

“You should do this more often,” Martha told her, rolling up her sleeves before going to wash her hands at the sink. “You need time away from the bakery, even if it is to do more baking!”

Laughing, Kaitlin finished adding the flour as her mom began to rummage through the refrigerator. “You know I appreciate you, Mom, right?”

Martha turned back quickly, reaching to give Kaitlin a hug. “Sure I do, honey. You tell me every day.”

Smiling, Kaitlin went back to what she was doing, her mind going to this same kitchen a little over seven years ago, when her mom had walked into the house and told her everything was going to be okay—and she’d been right.

I remember telling Scott I was pregnant, right here in this same kitchen. Her jaw tightened. And I remember his reaction.

When Scott had walked out on her on the very day, she’d told him she was pregnant with Sarah, she had been left alone in Frosty Pines. She’d moved to the small town to be with Scott. This was the place she’d thought they could grow old in together, but that day the charming small town had suddenly felt strange and cold.

The life she and Scott had shared, the happiness she’d thought they’d have, all dissipated like a cloud blown into nothingness by a sudden, furious wind. If it hadn’t been for her mom, Kaitlin couldn’t imagine what would have happened to her. Martha hadn’t wasted a second in moving to Frosty Pines to be with her, going so far as to help Kaitlin financially, so she could buy the house she’d been renting from Mr. Marsters. Then, once she’d sold her old place across the state, she’d given Kaitlin money to kick-start the bakery. Without her mom, Kaitlin wouldn’t even *have* the bakery, wouldn’t have gotten it to the place it was now, and definitely wouldn’t have had anywhere near the same amount of happiness and contentment she did now.

“How about I fix us some—”

Martha's words were broken apart by a sudden scream from the backyard. Without even hesitating, Kaitlin dropped what she was doing and almost ran outside, calling Sarah's name. Her heart thundered, blood roaring in her veins as anxiety wound itself through her, tying itself around her throat. That scream *had* to have come from Sarah.

"Sarah? Where are you?"

"Mom?"

Relief poured through Kaitlin as she looked all around, one hand at her heart as she tried to spy Sarah. "Sarah? Where are you, honey?"

"Sarah?" Martha was right beside her. "Sarah? Did you scream? Where are you?"

Silence burned in the air for a few seconds, and Kaitlin looked all around her, her mind flooded with confusion. Why couldn't she see Sarah? And why had her daughter screamed like that?

"Mom?"

Sarah's voice was a little wobbly now, and instantly realizing the truth, Kaitlin closed her eyes and let out a slow breath. "You climbed a tree?" Opening her eyes, she stepped forward, looking up into the trees that lined the edge of the yard. "Where are you?"

"I'm here."

It took her a few seconds, but eventually, Kaitlin spotted one small hand waving at her from the branches. There were a few trees all clustered together, and in the summer, Sarah was always halfway up one of them. In the winter, however, Sarah had always been given strict instructions *not* to go climbing, since the risk of slipping and falling was greater, and so far, she'd always paid attention.

Until today.

"You need to come down, honey." A bubble of frustration formed, but it quickly burst at the realization that her daughter was upset and scared. "Sarah? What's wrong?"

“I—I slipped.” Sarah sniffed, her hand wiping at her eyes. “My foot hurts.”

Kaitlin swallowed at the fear which immediately began to claw at her throat. “You slipped coming down the tree?”

“Yes.”

Exchanging a glance with Martha, Kaitlin drew in a long, steadying breath and tried to keep herself calm. Letting Sarah see how scared *she* was wouldn't help anyone.

“Okay, so maybe I can come up to you?” Moving closer to the trees, she looked up at them doubtfully. “If I come up, then we can come down together.”

“I don't think that's a good idea, Kaitlin.” Her mom put a hand on her arm, holding her back. “What happens if you both get stuck?”

Kaitlin licked her lips. “What do we do, then?”

“Mom?” Sarah let out a long, drawn-out sound, crying hard now. “I want to come down. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I climbed the tree. I just wanted—”

“It's okay, honey. It's okay!” Trying to inject a little lightness into her voice, Kaitlin stepped back so she could see Sarah again. “I'm not mad. I only want you to get back down safely. Nana and me are going to figure out a way to do that. All you have to do is hold on tight, okay?”

Sarah rubbed at her eyes with one hand, her legs wrapped around one thick branch, the other hand clinging to a thinner branch to her right. “Okay. But Mom? I'm cold.”

“I know.” Kaitlin shivered violently, half from fright, half from the cold. In her mind's eye, she had a vision of Sarah slipping and falling to one side, crashing to the ground in a heap. If her daughter's hands went numb, there was a chance that could happen. “We need to call the fire station.”

Martha's eyes flared. “Good idea. I'll make the call. You stay here and talk to Sarah.”

“Okay.” Watching her hurry back into the house, Kaitlin took in a deep breath, set her shoulders, and then turned back

to Sarah. “Honey? Nana went to call the fire station. Someone’s going to come and help you out.”

“The fire station?” Sarah’s voice was quieter now. “Will they be able to help me?”

“Sure they will.” Smiling despite her worry, Kaitlin wrapped both arms around herself, wishing she could hold her daughter close. “Remember those big, long ladders they have? I’m sure they’ll be able to use those to bring you back down here.”

“Okay.” Still sniffling, Sarah dropped her head a little. “I’m sorry I climbed the tree, Mom. Nana told me not to, but I wanted to come up to my favorite spot.”

Now wasn’t the time to be reprimanding Sarah—to be honest, this was probably going to be a lesson in itself—so Kaitlin pinned a smile to her lips and kept her voice light. “You’ve always been so great at climbing trees. It must be hard not to be able to do that in the wintertime, though. What can you see from all the way up there?”

Realizing how high it was, Kaitlin shuddered inwardly, but kept her gaze on Sarah. She wasn’t exactly great with heights herself, but it was the realization of how far Sarah would fall that was making her heart quake.

“I can see all the way across to Mrs. Taylor’s house.”

Kaitlin let out a long, slow breath before nodding. “Great. I think...”

Her words died away as the sound of sirens came racing across toward her. One hand went to her heart as she looked up at Sarah again, her smile still a little shaky. “Listen, honey! That’s the firefighters coming to help you out. You hold on for a little longer, and they’ll be right there to get you.”

Sarah sniffed. “Okay, Mom.” Scrunching her face up, she scrubbed at it with one hand, the other still holding tightly to the branch. “I’m getting really cold.”

“The second you get down, I’ll go make you some hot cocoa, and we can snuggle up close.” Silently praying Sarah’s fingers wouldn’t slip until the firefighters got to her, Kaitlin let

out a breath of relief when two firefighters came hurrying into the yard.

“Hey, we got a call about someone being stuck in the trees?”

Kaitlin turned to the first one, her eyes flaring. “Maverick?”

“Hi, Kaitlin.” He didn’t smile. “Is it your daughter?”

“Yes.” Turning, she gestured to where Sarah was. “She’s stuck. The tree is too slippery to get down safely, and she’s getting really cold.”

Maverick nodded. “Okay.” Taking a couple of steps closer, he called up to Sarah. “Hi, Sarah, I’m Maverick, and this is Jesse. We’re going to come and get you, okay?”

“Okay.” Sarah’s voice was soft, quiet with either cold or fright.

“I’m going to go with Jesse and get a ladder, okay?” Maverick took a step back and, to Kaitlin’s surprise, put his hand on hers, pressing her fingers gently. “I’ll be right back.” He looked into her eyes and smiled. “She’s going to be okay.”

Kaitlin said nothing, swallowing tightly and squeezing his fingers back, trying to express her gratitude, since her words weren’t working right now. Maverick’s brown eyes held hers for a second longer, and then he stepped away, leaving her and Sarah alone again.

“Here.”

A gentle touch to her shoulder had Kaitlin jumping as Martha pressed her coat around her.

“You need to put this on before you freeze,” she continued as Kaitlin pushed her arms into it. “They’re going to get her down safely, Kaitlin.”

“I know they will.” Her whispered words left a confidence behind that Kaitlin couldn’t shake. Maverick being here, squeezing her hand like that and telling her they were going to get Sarah down safely, had left her with a swell of both relief and a certainty that everything was going to be okay.

“Hi, Sarah.”

Sarah eyed him, her face pale. “Hi.”

“This is a great spot, huh?” Maverick put a smile on his face while, at the same time, assessing exactly how they were going to get Sarah down. Right now, it looked like all he needed to do was guide Sarah down the ladder, but if she was too cold and chilled to move, her hands too frozen to grip onto the ladder, then it meant they’d have to come up with a different solution.

“Mom told me not to climb the trees. Nana did, too.”

“Is that right? I get why you did, though. You can see a lot of Frosty Pines from here.”

That earned him a small smile back. “Yeah. I can see into Mr. Thomas’ backyard, and he has a big dog.”

“Really?” Maverick grinned. “Maybe you should go ask him if you can meet his dog. I’m sure he’d be happy to introduce you.”

“Do you think he would?” Sarah’s eyes lit up with a sudden interest, and Maverick immediately gave Jesse a thumbs up. No, they wouldn’t need a Plan B. He was going to be able to get Sarah down without any real difficulty; he was sure of it.

“I think he would if you asked him,” Maverick confirmed. “But to do that, you’re going to have to come down.”

Sarah's hand immediately tightened on the branch. "I'm scared." The light had frozen in her eyes, her face fixed in an expression of fear.

"I can see that, but it's okay. I'm here now, and I've got this special harness for you to put on. *And* there's this big ladder all the way up to you, and the other firefighter, Jesse, he's going to stay at the bottom with your mom and your nana to make sure that they don't come climbing up here to get you."

That made Sarah's lips curve just a little. "My mom wouldn't come up here."

"No?"

Sarah glanced down and then closed her eyes. "No. She's scared of heights."

"But you're not." Waiting until Sarah had opened her eyes again, Maverick reached out and held out the harness. "Now, we're going to slip this on, and then you're going to be as safe as can be, okay?"

Nodding, Sarah followed all of his instructions, and soon, the harness was on. Letting out a slow breath of relief, Maverick stepped into the leg lock position and leaned closer, making sure the harness was on correctly before attaching it to the pulley rope he'd already secured to the tree.

"Okay, you've done a great job so far." The harness was to keep Sarah safe, and the pulley could be used if Sarah wasn't able to climb down—but he hoped that wasn't going to happen. "And you're going to show them how great you are at climbing by climbing down this ladder with me."

A glistening tear fell onto Sarah's cheek. "What if I fall?"

"Then I'll be right here to hold on to you, and this harness won't let you go anywhere." He didn't tell her that she wouldn't slip, that she wouldn't lose her grip, only reassured her that he was going to be right here for her. "Come on. We can do this together."

It took a long time for Sarah to even think about moving. Her eyes searched his face, as if she was waiting for him to tell

her that it was okay, they could make a different plan, but Maverick just waited, looking back at her with a small smile on his face, and eventually, after what felt like an age, Sarah nodded. Her lip caught between her teeth as she listened to Maverick's instructions, a slight whimper of fear escaping when she tried to sling one leg over the branch toward him.

"I can't." Another tear dripped onto her cheek. "I'm scared, Maverick."

"I get that, but you can be brave, too." His feet were anchored to the ladder in a leg lock, a thick branch at his back helping him even more as he held her hand tightly, the other hand ready to swoop out and help her climb onto the ladder. "All you have to do is swing that leg around, and I'll help you to step onto the ladder. Do you think you can try it? I promise you won't fall." His hands tightened gently. "I've got you."

Sarah sniffed and scrubbed at her nose with her free hand, making Maverick's smile grow a little. Whether or not she realized it, Sarah had already let go of the branch she'd been clinging to and was now holding onto him. With a few more words of encouragement, Sarah finally lifted her leg over slowly, moving it an inch at a time, her breathing coming in quick, sharp gasps.

"I'm slipping!"

"No, you're not. You're right here, holding onto the ladder."

In one smooth motion, Maverick half lifted, half guided the little girl onto the ladder, one leg still locked to it as the harness held her secure. "And there we are. You're on!"

Sarah was right in front of him now, although he still had one hand on the harness, making sure to hold her tightly just to give her that little extra sense of security. Her hands were white holding onto the rungs, but she was on, at least.

"Sarah, well done!"

"You hear that?" Leaning closer, Maverick settled one hand over Sarah's, feeling how cold her hands were. "That's your mom and your nana. They're both so proud of you!"

You've done a great job so far. Do you think you can climb down now? Remember that you've got me and the harness to keep you safe."

"I can do it."

Confidence was edging into Sarah's voice, and Maverick turned his body slightly to give Jesse another thumbs up. The way Sarah was speaking told him that she was going to climb down herself.

"Okay, then, let's go." Moving down one rung, he encouraged Sarah to step down, and slowly, they began to make progress. Sarah's confidence grew with every rung she moved down, the harness keeping her safe and secure so that even if she did slip, nothing would happen.

"You're doing so well, Sarah!" Adding his own voice to the flurry of encouragements from both Sarah's mom and her nana, Maverick glanced over his shoulder. "We only have another five to go, and then you'll be back on solid ground, okay?"

Sarah didn't say anything. Instead, she continued to move down, slowly and carefully, one after the other, until finally, he was able to step aside and let Sarah step down the final rung.

"Sarah!" In a second, Kaitlin had scooped her daughter up in her arms, holding her tightly, harness and all. Her eyes were squeezed shut, tears staining her cheeks, and Maverick smiled softly to himself, glad that he'd been able to help with a scary situation for both mom and daughter.

"She did great," he told Kaitlin once she'd set Sarah down. "All she needed was a little encouragement, and then she stepped onto the ladder all by herself."

Sarah put one finger in her mouth as Jesse bent to take her harness off her. "Thank you, Maverick."

"That's no problem." Maverick smiled as Sarah came to hug him, bending down to her level. "You did a great job, *but*," he finished as she stepped back, "I think you should listen to your mom and to your nana from now on. They're telling you not to climb the trees for a good reason, right?"

Nodding, Sarah darted a look up to her mom, then looked away. “Yeah. That made me really scared.”

“But don’t let that put you off climbing.”

To Maverick’s surprise, instead of telling her daughter that she wasn’t to climb trees ever again or encourage the fear as a reason to stay back from them, Kaitlin bent down and looked into her daughter’s face.

“You understand now why Nana and I tell you not to climb the trees when it’s wintertime, right? But when it’s warm and safe, then you can get right back up there, like you’ve always done. Do you understand?”

Sniffing again, Sarah dropped her head. “I understand.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” Kaitlin pulled her daughter into a hug again, smiling up at Maverick. “And I’m so glad Frosty Pines has such a capable fire service.”

“Thank you. I’m glad we were able to help today.”

Kaitlin got to her feet and, before he could react, put her arms around his neck. “I’m so grateful, Maverick, really.”

It wasn’t the first time someone had hugged him after he’d turned up to help with whatever situation had taken place, but it *was* the first time he’d felt his heart turn over before thudding hard against his chest.

What was going on?

“It’s what we do.” His throat was scratchy when he tried to smile at her, reminding himself silently that he had a job to do. “I’m glad we could get Sarah back to you safely.”

“Thank you.” Her hands slid from his neck to find his hand. “I think you’ll be getting free cupcakes from now on.”

Laughing, he ignored the way rippling heat began to make its way up his arm. “No need for that. I’m just doing my job.”

“All the same, I want you to know how thankful I am.”

“It’s okay.” Before he could stop himself, his other hand had gone to settle on top of hers. “Sarah is safe, and I don’t think she’ll be climbing any trees again this winter.”

While Kaitlin laughed, there were still tears shining in her eyes, and Maverick's heart lurched with a suddenly fierce sympathy. It could have turned out a lot worse if Sarah had slipped or fallen. It wasn't worth thinking about.

"Don't let your mind go to what might have happened," he told her softly, disentangling his hands. "You've got Sarah back. She's not hurt. She's okay. Concentrate on that."

Kaitlin nodded and dashed one hand over her eyes. "You're right. Thanks, Maverick."

"No problem."

His eyes lingered on her as she walked back over to where Sarah had wrapped her arms around her nana. Smiling softly to himself, he turned and made his way over to Jesse, who had already climbed back up the ladder to take down the harness.

"Good job, Maverick."

"Thanks. She did well." Stepping forward, he picked up the harness as Jesse finished rolling up the ropes. "We'll get this away and then come back for the ladder."

Jesse nodded, and within a few minutes, the harness, ropes, and ladders were back on the fire truck, and Maverick and Jesse were heading back to the station.



"MAVERICK?"

Maverick started violently, the papers in his hand scattering. Spinning around, he saw Kaitlin at the door, one hand at her mouth, her eyes wide.

"Kaitlin." Closing his eyes, he put a hand to his heart. "Sorry. I thought I was the only one here. In the office, I mean."

"Sorry." Coming in, she set down two white boxes and then bent to help him pick up the papers. "I wanted to stop by."

“It’s late.” Her hand touched his accidentally as they both reached for the same paper, and Maverick yanked it back as if he’d been scalded. The electricity burning his skin forced him to step back, confused about what it was between Kaitlin and him. Nothing had been there before now, but ever since she’d wrapped her arms around his neck earlier that afternoon, there had been a shift. “I thought—”

“Sarah is tucked into bed, and my mom is at home.” Getting to her feet, Kaitlin handed him the papers she’d collected, her smile soft as she looked up at him. “I couldn’t sleep.” She went across the office to pick up one white box. “So I baked.”

“Oh.” Setting the papers down, he took the box from her and carefully opened the lid. Inside was a giant cupcake, with red and white swirled icing and sugar sprinkles on top. His mouth began to water. “You really didn’t have to, Kaitlin.”

“It’s not about having to.” She shrugged, her arms going around her waist. “I wanted to. There’s one there for Jesse, too, and I’ll have a tray of fresh cupcakes for the station ready and waiting for you to pick up tomorrow—on the house, of course.”

Maverick smiled and, unable to help himself, stuck his finger into the icing and then brought it to his mouth. His eyes closed. “Wow.”

“Thanks.”

When they opened, Kaitlin was smiling up at him, her blue eyes warm.

“These cupcakes look a little like Christmas, although it’s a bit early,” he added, grinning when she laughed. “I gotta appreciate that!”

“I’m glad.” Her hands dropped to her sides. “You’re working late, too, then?”

“Yup.” Setting the box down before he made a fool of himself by continually dipping his finger into the icing until there was none left, Maverick leaned back against his desk and smiled back at her. “There are a couple of guys on shift, but

they're asleep right now. Since I'm the fire chief, I get all the fun jobs, like doing the paperwork and writing reports."

Kaitlin winced. "Okay, so that's not so fun."

"No, it's not, but someone has to do it." For some reason, his gaze swept down her and then went right back up, sending fire into his blood that he hadn't a hope of putting out. A little embarrassed at what he'd done and what he was feeling, Maverick cleared his throat and looked away. He'd known Kaitlin for a long time, but they'd only been acquaintances—and now here he was, practically burning up from a single look. "I should probably get back to it."

Giving him a warm smile, Kaitlin gestured to the other white box. "Sure. Would you be able to pass that one on to Jesse as well, please?"

"Sure. I'll give it to him in the morning."

"Thanks." Kaitlin lifted one hand and gave him a wave, as well as another warm smile. "And don't forget to stop by the bakery tomorrow for the tray of cupcakes. I want everyone to know how grateful I am for you all."

Maverick smiled back at her. "Don't worry, I won't forget."

"See you tomorrow, then."

"See you tomorrow."

Even though he told himself to turn around, silently demanding that he pull his gaze away, the only thing Maverick could do was watch as Kaitlin walked out of his office and headed for the door of the station. It was only when the door closed behind her that he realized just how furiously his heart was beating.

Scarlett rushed through the door of the bakery as Kaitlin set another tray of cinnamon rolls on the shelf.

“Are you okay?” Scarlett’s eyes were wide. “I heard what happened. Is Sarah all right?”

“She’s absolutely fine.” Smiling, Kaitlin came around from behind the counter and hugged Scarlett. “It’s sweet of you to worry, but I promise, we’re both okay. Maverick and Jesse came and got her down.”

Scarlett let out a slow breath, taking Kaitlin by the shoulders and looking back at her with a steady gaze. “That must have been scary for you.”

“It was. But I’m okay. Maverick told me not to think about what *might* have happened—which was exactly what my mind was doing, by the way—and since then, I’ve been able to breathe a little easier.”

“I’m so glad.” Scarlett closed her eyes for a second. “You guys mean so much to me.”

“You mean a lot to us, too.” They hugged again, and then Kaitlin stepped back behind the counter. “Cake today?”

“Absolutely.” Scarlett eyed the cinnamon rolls. “Two of those, please.”

Kaitlin arched an eyebrow as Scarlett giggled, her face flushing a little. “Charlie gets back in a couple of hours. I want to be ready for him, and he *loves* cinnamon rolls.”

“Then you’re going to need more than two.”

Laughing, Scarlett gestured to the tray. “Go on. Give me four, then.”

“It’s great he’s back. When does he have to leave again?”

Scarlett pulled a face. “Probably sometime after the New Year, although since he’s hurt his wrist, I’m not sure if that’ll change things.”

Kaitlin frowned. “What did he do?”

“Slipped on some ice.” Scarlett grimaced. “He told me it’s not broken, but he does have a support to wear for a while, and he’s got to be careful with what he does.” Her brow furrowed. “And this might sound really selfish, but it does mean he can’t help me with putting the sets together.”

“That’s not selfish at all.” Setting out the cinnamon buns into a paper bag, Kaitlin set them on the counter as Scarlett swiped her card to pay. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m so busy with the production, and I can definitely do *some* of it, but because I’m always being pulled away, it’s difficult to commit to that.” Her eyes darted to Kaitlin and away again. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any free time?”

Kaitlin winced. “Probably not enough. I can definitely help out, but I’m not sure I’d have enough time to get everything finished.”

“I’m sorry.” Immediately, Scarlett waved one hand. “You’re so busy with the bakery and with Sarah, I should never have asked.”

“I want to help, really, but—”

“Anything I can help with?”

Starting with the astonishment of hearing a deep, male voice cutting through their conversation, Kaitlin leaned to one side, seeing Maverick standing at the door. He’d obviously come in when she’d been talking to Scarlett, with Scarlett blocking her view of the door.

Her heart leaped, and she smiled quickly. “Hey, Maverick. Thanks for stopping by. I have those cupcakes ready for you in the back.”

As she stepped away, she heard Maverick and Scarlett strike up a conversation, with Maverick asking Scarlett about the Christmas play. Smiling to herself at how thoughtful he was and how much he seemed to know about what was happening at Frosty Pines this Christmas, Kaitlin picked up the box of cupcakes, each decorated with red and white swirled icing, and then carried it back through.

“I could help with that, no problem.”

Scarlett gasped and grabbed Maverick’s hand—and a flare of heat seared through Kaitlin’s chest, leaving her breathless.

“Really?” Scarlett’s eyes were wide as Kaitlin set down the box on the counter. “That would be amazing. Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’s no trouble, and it’s good to be able to help out. I think the community theater is an amazing venture, and it’s gone so well this last year, I’d like to help support it in any way I can.”

Kaitlin blinked. “Are you talking about the Christmas play?”

“Yes. Isn’t Maverick amazing?”

Both Maverick and Scarlett turned to her at the same time, with Scarlett grinning widely as Maverick ran one hand through his hair, looking a little embarrassed at Scarlett’s praise.

“He’s going to help with the sets. Between the two of you, I’m sure they’ll be ready by the time Christmas rolls around. We’ve got five weeks from tomorrow.” Her smile faded a little. “Do you think that’s enough time? I’ve got everything you’ll need and all the instructions on how to put stuff together, but they all need to be painted, and there are a few extra things that—”

“I think we’ll manage just fine.” Maverick sent Kaitlin a wink. “We’ll be a great team, right, Kaitlin?”

That wink made her legs turn to water, and she gripped the counter tightly. “Sure.” Her voice was a little hoarse, and she couldn’t seem to return his smile. “It’ll be great.”

“Given how well you’ve decorated this place, I bet you’ll be putting me to shame with all your design ideas.” Maverick looked all around the bakery, taking in the fairy lights she’d strung up, which went in loops all along the walls on either side of the door. “Did you do this since yesterday?”

Kaitlin winced, a cloud of embarrassment hovering over her. “I couldn’t sleep last night, as you know. So I came down here, and while I was waiting for the cupcakes to cook, I pulled out all the Christmas stuff.”

“Wow.” Maverick’s eyes gleamed as the baubles she’d hung from the ceiling—a slightly different take on how to hang baubles—caught his attention. “I’m impressed, Kaitlin!” His head swiveled to the left. “And you’ve got a Christmas tree, too.”

“It’s only a small one.” Kaitlin watched his eyes, seeing him smile as she gestured to the little Christmas tree—a fake one, given that she couldn’t risk bugs from a real tree getting into her baking. “I figured it was close enough to Christmas to start decorating, although I haven’t gotten my Christmas music on yet.” Her eyes darted from Maverick to the mistletoe she’d strung above the door, her mind flooding with a sudden image of what it might be like if she accidentally got caught underneath it with him.

“Kaitlin?”

The cloud of embarrassment dropped down on her as she glanced back at Maverick, seeing him standing with his cell phone in one hand and his eyebrows gently lifted. “Sorry?”

“I was wondering if I could get your number?” Maverick gestured to his cell phone. “That way, we can arrange a time to be at the community theater together to see what we need to do. After that, I guess we can just turn up and do what we can, when we can.”

“Although working together would probably be more efficient.”

Kaitlin frowned as Scarlett turned innocent eyes to Maverick, only to then grin at Kaitlin. Was she saying that because she genuinely believed it, or because she wanted to try to push the two of them together? Kaitlin hoped it wasn't the latter. She didn't have time for dating... or at least, that was what she kept telling herself.

“Kaitlin?”

It took her a second to realize that Maverick was still waiting, an expectant look on his face.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She gave it to him quickly, seeing him smile as he tapped it in.

“Great.” Picking up the box of cupcakes, he pulled out his wallet to pay, but Kaitlin waved him away.

“On the house today, as a thank you,” she reminded him, relieved that her voice wasn't as hoarse any longer. “I guess I'll arrange a time with you soon to get up to the theater? I'm picking Sarah up tonight after the rehearsal, and we don't have any plans after, if that's any good? Or I can get my mom to look after Sarah a little later in the evening?”

Maverick grinned at her. “Both sound good. I'll get this back to the station, and then I'll be in touch. See you later.”

“Bye.” As Maverick walked out of the bakery, Kaitlin's stomach slowly began to untwist itself until she was able to let out a long, slow breath, unsure as to why she'd been so knotted up in the first place.

“You and Maverick, then.” Scarlett's eyes were dancing. “He's a good guy, Kaitlin.”

“You don't have to tell me that twice!” Grinning, Kaitlin held up one finger, as if she wanted to silence Scarlett's next few words. “Don't start. I get that he's a great guy, but I'm already crazy busy with the bakery and with Sarah.”

“You have your assistant now,” Scarlett countered quickly. “And you have your mom if you ever wanted to go on a date.”

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I think he might be a perfect match for you!”

Kaitlin shook her head, dismissing the idea outright. “Listen, I get that he checks a lot of the right boxes, but I can’t add anything else to my life right now.”

“Why not?” Scarlett tipped her head, her eyes searching Kaitlin’s, and her expression was suddenly thoughtful rather than teasing. “This hasn’t got anything to do with Scott, has it?”

It was like a punch to the gut. “No, it’s got nothing to do with Scott.” Her words came out more harshly than she’d meant, and quickly, Kaitlin closed her eyes and put one hand flat on the counter, dropping her head forward. “Sorry, Scarlett. I don’t mean to get defensive.”

“You weren’t.” Scarlett’s voice was quiet as she put one hand over Kaitlin’s. “I remember being absolutely horrified when you told me what Scott did, but that wasn’t what I meant when I asked if it had anything to do with him.”

Slowly, Kaitlin lifted her head and looked straight into Scarlett’s face. “What do you mean, then?”

“I just meant that you’ve had to do life pretty much by yourself. You have your mom, and I can tell how grateful you are to have her in your life, but you haven’t ever had anyone else there to help support you. You’ve done everything since that day practically single-handed. You built up your bakery, you raised Sarah, and perhaps there’s a part of you that says you don’t need to have anyone else in your life.” Smiling quietly, she took her hand away. “And I guess what I’m trying to say is, I agree with you. You *don’t* need a man to support you with your business or with Sarah. You’ve already shown that you can do that all on your own. But maybe you might think about what else you want in your life—and if you want love, then it’s totally okay to go looking for it. Scott took that all away from you, but it doesn’t mean you have to live the rest of your life without it... albeit with someone a lot better than Scott! Not every man is like him. Not every man would do what he did to you. In fact, around here, I’d say there are a

ton of great guys waiting for you to give them a second look... and perhaps Maverick's one of those guys."

Kaitlin managed a dry laugh, her heart beating a little too quickly for her liking. "I—I get what you're saying." What else was she supposed to say? Admit to Scarlett that yes, there might be a part of it that was scared to start dating again, just in case the next guy turned out to be exactly the same as Scott? Someone who turned around and walked away, shattering everything between them in one terrible moment? Over the last seven years, she'd told herself she didn't need a man beside her, didn't need to be loved, and that she could give all of her love to Sarah instead... but now part of her worried that Scarlett was right. She'd put her finger right on the place where it hurt, and Kaitlin didn't much like it.

"Well, I'd better get going." Perhaps seeing that she'd left Kaitlin with a lot to think about, Scarlett picked up her cakes and headed for the door. "I guess I'll see you this afternoon?"

"Sure." Kaitlin smiled and took a deep breath, trying to push away everything Scarlett had said. Now wasn't the time to start thinking about it, not when she had a full day of work ahead. "I'll see what I can do about the sets as well when I pick up Sarah."

"You *and* Maverick," Scarlett reminded her with a wink. "Okay. See you later."

With a shake of her head, Kaitlin tried to laugh off the parting shot Scarlett had thrown at her, but her heart refused to let it go. All in one moment, the idea of going to have a look at the sets with Maverick seemed a lot more exciting than it had when they'd first discussed it.

What if Scarlett was right, and Maverick was a perfect match for her?

“Kaitlin, hi.” Jogging across the hall to where Kaitlin was standing with Sarah, gesturing to wood panels propped up against the side of the stage wall, Maverick couldn’t stop his smile from spreading wide across his face. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem.” Her blue eyes darted to his, a smile flashing quickly across her face. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.” To his surprise, he meant it. It was as if he’d been waiting to see her again all day, but hadn’t realized it until now. Astonishment spread across his chest, and for a second, it was hard to take a breath.

“I hope the cupcakes went down well?”

“They were amazing, as always... although, did you do them differently this time?”

“Wait, you could tell?”

“Sure could.” He liked the way her eyes widened as a flush of color sent a blush into her cheeks. “They always tasted incredible, but today’s batch was extra special.”

Sarah slung one arm around her mom’s waist. “Mom’s been trying out a new recipe. I got to taste them.”

Maverick chuckled. “Is that so?” Bending down to her level, he smiled up at her. “Then they must have passed your taste test. Were you a harsh critic?”

Sarah giggled. “Very. “

Grinning back at her, Maverick gestured up to Kaitlin. “You watch those cooking shows with your mom sometimes?”

“I sure do.”

“Then maybe you’ll get to be one of those judges one day, since you’re already trying things out for your mom. I bet you’d be great at it, too.”

“Thanks.” Sarah leaned into her mom a little more. “I think Mom would win every competition, though.”

“That’s very sweet of you, honey.” Kaitlin tugged her daughter a little closer, though the pink hadn’t gone out of her cheeks yet. “Oh, look, there’s Nana.”

With a smile, Sarah flew off across the hall toward her, leaving Maverick and Kaitlin watching after her.

“She’s a great kid.” Maverick gestured to her. “What is she playing?”

“In the play, you mean?” When he nodded, Kaitlin grinned. “She’s the very enthusiastic Ghost of Christmas Past. She knows all of her lines, though. She takes it very seriously—and Scarlett’s a great teacher.”

“I’m sure she is.” Maverick smiled across the room for a second, watching how Sarah was hugged by her nana. One thing was for sure, this family had a lot of love to go around. “Okay, so let’s look at these sets and see what we’re dealing with.”

Kaitlin turned with him, gesturing to what was resting against the wall of the stage. “So this is only one of the sets. I think there are a few we need to do. I had a quick chat with Scarlett about it all before you arrived. She wanted to talk to you, too, but she’s on a call with Charlie right now.”

“Okay.” Maverick frowned, running one hand over his chin as his eyes took in the various boards for the set. “Right now, it doesn’t look like much.”

“There’s the outline, see?” Stepping closer, Kaitlin’s hand caught his arm for a moment, gesturing with the other. Her hand dropped the very next second, but not before lightning

shot through him, pinning him in place, even though Kaitlin had stepped forward. “First step would be to paint all this and then add in a few extra things here and there. For example, we could add actual curtains to the window instead of just painting them on, so we give it a little more depth.” Her head turned, her eyes finding his. “Does that make sense?”

Maverick blinked. “Yes.” *Yes? Is that all I’m going to say?* “Paint first. Got it.”

“I don’t think we need to do anything crazy,” Kaitlin finished with a smile. “Everything’s already set out, so basically, we paint in the lines!”

“If it ain’t Baroque, then don’t fix it.”

The second he said it, Maverick knew he should have kept it back. It was a terrible pun, and probably not one she’d even get, unless she knew a little about art... and from the way she looked back at him, her expression a little vacant, he figured she didn’t.

“Sorry.” Running one hand over his chin, he looked away. “That was supposed to be a joke. I don’t know all that much about art history, but—”

“Oh, *Baroque!*”

The next second, Kaitlin was laughing. In fact, she was laughing so much, she ended up doubled over, and the sound was so overwhelming, Maverick couldn’t help but grin—and then ended up laughing along with her, although most of his laughter came from the sheer relief of not being made to look like an idiot with his attempt at a joke.

“I’m so sorry it took me a while to get it.” Kaitlin wiped at her eyes, shaking her head. “I do know a little bit of art history—probably from when I was back in school—but it took a few seconds to click.”

“No, it’s okay. It was a terrible joke.”

“Are you two going to stand there laughing or actually help me out?” The playful, teasing voice of Scarlett broke them apart, and turning, Maverick grinned back at Scarlett,

who had one hand propped at her hip but a smile on her face and a glint in her eye. “Want to share what was so funny?”

“Nope.” Maverick shook his head furiously. “Absolutely not.”

“It was my fault. I should have laughed at his joke a little earlier.” Kaitlin was grinning, and Maverick laughed again, shaking his head to himself and quietly praying she wasn’t about to tell Scarlett exactly what he’d said. “We were looking at the sets—or this one, at least.” Flinging one hand out to it, Kaitlin held up one hand to start checking things off. “We’d need to paint it first, add a few extras after that, and then get it all together.”

“Yes, exactly. Even if you could just paint them, that would be amazing. Charlie’s here, too, and—”

“Oh, I forgot!” Kaitlin’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide. “I’m so sorry. I meant to ask you how he was. Did he arrive safely?” Her eyes roved around the room. “I thought he would be here.”

Scarlett looked down. “He got here safely, but, uh... he’s gone to get his wrist checked out at the doctor’s.”

Maverick frowned. “Did he hurt himself?”

“Yes.” Scarlett sighed heavily. “And then he made it worse when he picked me up and whirled me around.” Wincing, she glanced up, first at him and then at Kaitlin. “He said his wrist started to throb, so he went to the doctor to get it looked at again.”

“Oops.” Kaitlin came closer and put one arm around Scarlett. “That’s not your fault, though. It’s understandable that he was thrilled to see you.”

Maverick’s heart lifted as he watched them both. It was obvious that Kaitlin was a caring, considerate person. The way she wanted to comfort and offer encouragement to Scarlett showed that, and Maverick found himself smiling appreciatively.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay.” Wanting to add his own encouragement, he smiled when Scarlett looked at him. “And

he's got time to recover, right?"

Scarlett took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. He's got a while before his next project, and in a way, it's a relief it happened in between two projects."

"Exactly." Maverick was going to say more, only for his cell to ring. And excusing himself, he tugged it out of his pocket. "Hello?"

"Hi, Maverick."

It took him a couple of seconds to respond, and since he didn't immediately recognize the voice, Maverick had to pull the cell back from his ear so he could see the screen and the caller. *Sophie*.

"Sophie." A smile lifted his lips. "How are you?"

There came a beat of silence, and his smile crashed and burned.

"I'm going to have to cancel our date tomorrow, Maverick."

"Oh. Okay." His heart sank. It wasn't like she had said she wanted to reschedule or anything, just that she wanted to cancel. He had thought their date had gone well, but maybe she didn't feel that way, and he wouldn't push it.

"This is going to sound really dumb, but I've got a flat tire, and I can't get anyone to come to change it for me until the day after tomorrow."

"So you can't come to Frosty Pines," Maverick murmured, closing his eyes as relief poured into him. She wasn't canceling on him altogether, then. "That's okay, although I'm surprised it's going to take anyone all that long to come and help you out. It's not a big job."

Sophie said nothing, and Maverick nodded to himself, his free hand curling into a gentle fist in the hope she would say yes to his suggestion. "How would you feel about me coming to see you? I could fix that flat tire for you, no problem at all. You've got a spare, right?"

“I—I think so.” Doubt twisted through Sophie’s voice. “I’ve got to be honest with you, Maverick. I don’t know anything about cars. I don’t know if I’ve got a spare anywhere.”

Maverick grinned. “That’s okay. It’ll be fun to come and figure it out with you.”

“If you’re sure. It doesn’t sound like much of a date for you, but I would be very grateful.” Again, there came a few hints of uncertainty, but Maverick was quick to reassure her.

“I get to spend more time with you, and that’s a good thing,” he told her, turning around as his gaze hit on Kaitlin and Scarlett, who were still laughing together. In the very same second, his smile dropped, his heart began to slow, and the relief which had poured into him began to drain away. Instead, he was left with a dull, flat feeling which settled right in his heart, as if, in seeing Kaitlin, he suddenly wasn’t all that excited about going on a date with Sophie any longer. “Tomorrow night, then?”

“Thank you, Maverick.” Sophie let out a breath of relief. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, then.”

“Bye.”

Ending the call, Maverick stared down at his cell phone for a few seconds, trying to make sense of the tumultuous emotions which raged hard against each other deep in his heart. One second, he’d been thrilled that Sophie wanted to see him again, even under different circumstances from what they’d initially arranged, and then the next, he wasn’t even smiling at the thought of going to see her. Instead, he was busy looking at Kaitlin and wondering why his reaction to *her* was so strong. They barely knew each other, but what he did know of her so far, he definitely liked. They were building a friendship, nothing more.

Unless I want more than that with her?

Things with Sophie were new, but he was never the type of person to have multiple relationships at one time. It didn’t feel right, and it wasn’t what he liked to do—which meant he had a

decision to make. Either he was going to stick with Sophie, or he was going to cancel their date and see what happened with Kaitlin.

Except nothing was happening with Kaitlin. He could ask her out, and she could turn him down. His mouth twisted. Did he really want to give up on Sophie just in case Kaitlin might feel something for him? They'd known each other for years, and she'd never once shown any interest.

"You okay, Maverick?"

Kaitlin's voice filtered through his thoughts, and he looked up, smiling quickly. "Yes, absolutely fine. Sorry." Coming back toward them both, he caught the flicker of concern in Kaitlin's eyes. "It was Sophie. She's got a flat tire, so she can't make our date tomorrow."

Kaitlin didn't move or speak. Instead, she merely blinked.

"Sophie?" Was it just him, or was Scarlett's voice a little higher pitched than before? "I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

"I'm... not. Well, it's new," he admitted with a wry smile, which neither Scarlett nor Kaitlin returned. "Like I said, she has a flat tire, and she's having trouble finding someone to fix it. So, I said I could help her out."

Kaitlin exchanged a look with Scarlett—one which Maverick couldn't decipher—then smiled back at him. "So she's not from here?"

"No, but she doesn't live too far." Slipping his cell into his pocket again, he cleared his throat, no eagerness to share more about Sophie. "So, will we start laying out these sets? See which parts we're going to start painting?"

"Sure." Kaitlin turned away and grabbed the first part of the set, lifting the wooden board and heading to the door with it. Maverick frowned, only for Scarlett to explain.

"There's a room at the back," she told him as Kaitlin went through the door to the hallway which led to the dressing rooms. "I've got all the set stuff there, paint included. I took that one out so you could see what it was like and what you'd

have to do with it once it was done.” Her smile blossomed again. “I’d say that if you painted and decorated them in the set room and then brought them out here to be put together, that would probably work well. It would be better to keep the door shut when you can, though, if you want to stay warm.” She pulled a face. “There are a few maintenance issues, and one of them is that the heating in the hallway isn’t working right—but don’t worry,” she laughed, “there’s plenty of ventilation in the set room, so no concerns when it comes to the paint fumes!”

“Great.” He managed to laugh along with her, but as he took another bit of the set and began to carry it back toward the door, his heart began to thump hard, realizing that, between now and Christmas, he and Kaitlin were going to spend a lot of time in that little room together.

With the door shut.

“We’re going to start with creaming the butter and the sugar together.” Kaitlin smiled as her daughter set to work with the wooden spoon. “Now, usually, I might use the mixer for this, *but* I think it’s good for you to learn how to do it without that.”

“But it would make things a lot easier, Mom.”

Laughing, Kaitlin set one hand on Sarah’s back. “I know, but like I said, it’s a good skill to have. Did I ever tell you about the time I was making cookies and the power went out?”

Sarah lifted her head and looked up at her, eyes wide. “No.”

“Well, it did!” Kaitlin shook her head, remembering the night that had happened. “It was back when you were just about to turn four. Christmas was a big deal for the bakery—I was only really getting myself launched—and I wanted to make sure the Christmas cookies were ready for the next day. They’d been really popular, and I needed to make new batches every day. I was about to start mixing everything together when bam! The power went out.”

Goggling at her, Sarah’s hand stilled on the wooden spoon. “What did you do?”

Kaitlin smiled. “I found a torch, I lit some candles, and then I carried on.”

“With making the cookies?”

“Yes, right in the middle of this dark kitchen with only a few candles to help me. But I used all the skills I had learned and made them *without* using a mixer, and do you know what? People told me they were the best ones yet.”

“Is that right?”

A deep voice had Kaitlin yelping in surprise, and turning on her heel, her shoulders dropped at the sight of Maverick standing at the counter. The bakery was built in such a way that from where she was in the kitchen at the back, she could always see the counter, ready to greet any customers who came in. Having gotten lost in her story, she hadn't seen or heard Maverick come in.

“Yep, that's right. Luckily, the power came back on in time for me to bake them, though.” Putting a smile on her face to hide the way her heart was pounding, she came close to the counter. “But since then, I've just learned that it's important to know how to make cookies without a mixer when you're in a bind.”

“Just like I'm doing.” Sarah waved one hand at Maverick. “Hi, Maverick.”

“Hi.” Grinning, he propped one elbow on the counter and rested his chin on his hand, his eyes going back to Kaitlin.

Her world stopped for a second. Maverick had a lazy smile on his face, his dark brown eyes swirling like melted chocolate, his cheeks a little flushed from the cold. And inside, fireworks began to explode.

Except he's taken.

“Hi.” Clearing her throat, she dropped her gaze so she wouldn't have to look into his gorgeous face and lose herself in his eyes again. “I'm afraid I'm out of cupcakes.”

“That's okay. That's actually not why I'm here.”

“Oh?”

“I was wondering if you would be free to start painting the sets anytime soon? I did a little today, but I realized that we

actually needed to be there together to make some... artistic decisions.”

A teasing smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “You mean, whether to go for the Baroque style or not?”

When Maverick laughed, Kaitlin couldn’t help but grin, her whole body alive with a fierce, fresh energy that she knew Maverick had brought. When he’d talked about Sophie a couple of days ago, she’d felt her heart sink, but even knowing that he was dating Sophie didn’t mean that her *own* feelings weren’t going crazy. She was just going to have to find a way to contain them.

“Yeah, I guess.” With a shake of his head, he laughed again. “Deciding where the shadows are going to go, what colors to use, that sort of thing... there’s a lot of work here. Tomorrow night any good?”

Kaitlin hesitated. “Uh, yeah, I guess. I’ve got the Frosty Pines Christmas Fair in less than two weeks, though, so I’ll probably be next to useless next week when it comes to painting the sets.”

“That’s no problem.” Maverick smiled at her, looking a little relieved. Maybe he hadn’t realized how much he’d taken on when he’d offered to help. “Is that what these Christmas cookies are for?”

“They’re just a practice, but yes, I’ll have a lot of baking to do next week for the festival.”

“Want some help?”

For a second, Kaitlin didn’t know what he was offering. When she looked at him and saw his eyes drift toward Sarah and the mixing bowl, her heart clattered hard in her chest. “Oh, you mean with the cookies?”

“Sure.” Laughing eyes caught hers. “I can’t stay too long, but I’ve got some time now. I’ll be honest, I’ll probably be as good at making cookies as I am at painting sets, but the enthusiasm for it is there, at least!”

“Which I appreciate,” she told him honestly, going hot all over at the thought of having Maverick not only in such close

proximity, but also hanging around for a little longer. She was supposed to be doing everything she could to contain her feelings, but having him bake Christmas cookies wasn't exactly going to help those. "Uh... sure, so long as Sarah doesn't mind."

"Come on, Maverick!"

From the enthusiasm in Sarah's voice, Kaitlin lost all hope of pushing Maverick's offer of help away, and resigning herself to the fact that she was going to have to fight to push away any hint of interest in Maverick for the rest of the evening, she tilted her head in the direction of the kitchen. "Come on through—although actually, would you mind flipping the sign first?"

"Closing time?"

She nodded, watching his strong, lean frame as he walked across the bakery to the door. "You're going to have to roll up your sleeves if you want to help—literally, that is." Her smile darted across her face when he lifted an eyebrow, turning back to come around the counter. "There's a lot of flour involved."

"Right." Chuckling, he shrugged out of his coat, and Kaitlin quickly looked away, even though everything in her burned. Letting her gaze linger on a guy she couldn't have wasn't a good idea.

"I can take that." Holding her hand out, she took his coat from him, a spark making her jump when their fingers touched briefly. The scent of warm coffee teased her as she smiled quickly, hoping he hadn't noticed her staring like that, and she hurried away to the other side of the kitchen and out through the small door to the tiny space she called her office. Hanging up his coat on the hook, Kaitlin paused, closed her eyes, and took a breath.

I am only going to think about the Christmas cookies.

The silent mantra repeated itself over and over as she walked back out to the kitchen, only to stop dead as she took in the scene.

Her heart melted.

Maverick was nodding his head, his hands flat on the counter, but his head bent forward as Sarah gestured to the mixing bowl. He wasn't smiling, but he was nodding, clearly taking in every single word that Sarah had to say. Obviously, Sarah was telling him exactly what he needed to do or what she'd done already, and the look of concentration on his face made her smile. Giving Sarah his full attention, making it clear that he was listening to what she was telling him, told her more about Maverick's character than ever before.

Why does he have to be taken?

Dropping her head to hide the sight from her eyes, Kaitlin breathed out slowly, reminding herself that she was only supposed to be thinking about the Christmas cookies and nothing more. With a nod to herself, she stepped forward, and immediately, Maverick's eyes lifted to hers, and that warm smile beckoned her closer... and turned her legs to mush.

"Okay." Leaning heavily on the counter and turning her gaze to Sarah rather than to Maverick, Kaitlin smiled down at her daughter. "You told Maverick what we had to do?"

"I sure did."

Maverick nodded. "I got every word. Sarah's a great teacher—and I'm sure she's an even better baker."

Kaitlin's smile grew. "I think so, too! So, shall we start?"

"Maverick should make his own batch of cookie dough." Sarah's frown flung itself over her forehead suddenly. "I wanted to cut all the shapes out of this one myself."

About to tell Sarah that she needed to share, Kaitlin was surprised when Maverick lifted both hands to either side of him and nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"You don't mind?"

Maverick shook his head in answer to her question. "No, not at all. Now that I've learned what to do, I don't think it'll be a problem to whip up another batch of cookie dough." Seeing Sarah beam, he leaned a little closer to her, his arm bumping against her shoulder. A warm, smooth scent that reminded her of long summer days by the sea came

whispering down to her as he spoke to her out of the corner of his mouth. “You will help me, right? I haven’t baked in forever.”

She nodded. “Sure.” It was all she could say, her throat constricting a little as he moved away. Keeping her mind fixed on the Christmas cookies was going to prove a lot more difficult than she’d anticipated.

They quickly made the dough and then got to the fun part.

“So now you roll and then cut whatever shape you like!”

“Like this?” Frowning, Maverick dusted a little flour over the rolling pin and began to roll out the dough, although Kaitlin quickly noticed he was pressing down too hard.

“Not *quite* like that.” Laughing at his exclamation of exasperation, she stepped close to him. “You’re pushing the pin down into the dough too hard. We want to keep it about *this* thick.” Holding up her finger and thumb, she smiled as he scrutinized her hand and then looked down at the dough. “If it’s too thin, then the cookies will break once they’re out of the oven.”

“And we don’t want that.”

“No, we sure don’t.” Nudging him lightly, she grinned up at him as he pulled the dough together again. “You’re doing a great job, Maverick.”

His eyes snagged hers. “I’ve got a great teacher... and by that, I mean Sarah.”

It took her a second to catch the glint of humor in his eyes. Laughing, she leaned into him again, only for his hand to wrap around her shoulders and pull her tight against him.

“I’m only joking,” he told her, his mouth close to his ear as the laughter she’d had in her chest began to wrap itself in tight knots all around her heart. It had come on fast, but her feelings for Maverick were growing so quickly, it was a little overwhelming. Right now, all she wanted to do was turn herself into him, to slide her hand gently up his chest and around his neck, just to see what would happen. Did he feel the spark between them? Did he feel *anything* for her, or was it

only her own heart that was slamming around like crazy? The smile on her lips began to die away, and Maverick's eyes slowly began to darken into a deep, dark hazelnut brown as he looked down into her face. He wasn't smiling, either. Instead, he was looking back at her as if he'd seen a light in her eyes that hadn't been there before.

"I made a fire truck!"

Sarah's little voice shattered the moment, and Kaitlin turned away quickly, her face heating as she heard Maverick clear his throat. "A fire truck?"

"Yeah." Grinning, Sarah picked up the sleigh-shaped cookie. "Look, I used the shape of Santa's sleigh to make a fire truck. It's a bit squashed, but—"

"It looks great!" Stepping closer, Kaitlin smiled down at the creation. If she squinted a little, it did look a little like a fire truck. "And I bet it's going to taste great, too." Glancing back over her shoulder, she shot Maverick a quick smile. "I'll fire up the oven, and we can get these baking."

"I, uh..." Maverick ran one hand over the back of his head, dusting it with flour. "I think I'm going to head on home." For whatever reason, he wasn't looking at her, and Kaitlin's flushed cheeks grew fiercer with heat. "Thank you so much for letting me bake Christmas cookies with you." This was directed at Sarah, as well as the warm smile he sent her way. Kaitlin was left with nothing. "I'll see you both later."

"See you later." Her voice sounded weak, almost a little sad, as she watched him turn away and walk back out to the front of the bakery before the door opened and then closed behind him. That had been an abrupt exit on Maverick's part, and quite why he'd done it, Kaitlin wasn't sure. She'd thought he'd cut the cookies out, watch them bake, and perhaps even decorate them afterward.

Instead, he'd turned away and walked back out of the bakery without even a word of explanation, leaving her watching helplessly after him and wondering what exactly she was supposed to do with all the swirling feelings growing furiously in her heart.

“Can we talk about something else?”

Maverick blinked. “Uh... sure.” The smile he’d been wearing broke into pieces, replaced with a frown. Dinner and dessert had been finished about thirty minutes ago, and since then, they’d sat with a drink and talked, and he’d been sharing all about the community theater, Scarlett, Kaitlin, and Sarah. “Is there anything wrong?”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s great that you’re helping out with the community theater and doing your part to support it, but it’s not exactly exciting, is it?”

“Well, I’m not exactly into acting.” A little surprised at how negatively Sophie was responding, Maverick sat back in his chair and looked at her carefully. “I’m not very good at painting, either, but Kaitlin’s great at it. She knows what to do and what colors to use where, and I paint where she tells me to!”

A brief smile flashed across Sophie’s face, but it didn’t linger for long. “Right.”

“I’m excited about the production,” he said, aware that his defenses were rising but struggling to hold them back from his voice. “I think it’s going to be great.”

“I’m sure it will be.”

“Maybe you could come along to it with me.”

Sophie looked away. “Maybe.” The lack of enthusiasm in her voice and the dull, set expression on her face made it quite clear that she had absolutely no intention of coming with him to see the play. Maverick didn’t know what to say, and so he simply sat there, looking back at her. He’d figured that since Sophie was part of a small town, too, she’d understand what it was like for the town to come together to support each other, but she didn’t seem to show any sort of interest in what he was doing. In fact, she was doing everything she could to dissuade him from talking about it. He just couldn’t work out why.

“I think it’s time I headed on home.”

Getting up out of her chair, Sophie set her empty wine glass down on the table between them as he scrambled out of his. “Thanks for the meal.”

“Sure.” For whatever reason, she was already walking past him, and, a little confused, he reached out and caught her hand. “Sophie, what’s wrong?”

When she turned back to look at him, her blue eyes pierced almost right through him. “Nothing.” The smile on her face didn’t leap into her eyes, and Maverick’s heart filled with doubt. “I had a great time. Call me again soon.”

When her lips touched his, Maverick jerked in surprise, but then moved closer. The restaurant was quiet, and their table was right in the corner, so he didn’t hold back... but nothing really sparked. The kiss was sweet enough, and yes, he felt a gentle, pooling warmth, but it was nothing fierce, nothing strong or commanding. When she stepped back, her hand in his and a smile on her face, it took him a few seconds to plaster one back on his lips in return.

“Call me.”

Nodding, Maverick watched her walk away before slumping back down into his seat. That had been their first kiss, but it hadn’t been anywhere near as thrilling as he’d expected it to be. When it came to Sophie, all he had was confusion, and right now, that kiss had only made things ten times worse.

SCRUNCHING UP HIS NOSE, Maverick gestured to the set piece with his paintbrush. “What do you think?” A sidelong glance toward Kaitlin told him she was barely turning her head to look in his direction.

“Yeah, it looks fine.”

His mouth twisted. This was now the third time they’d gotten together to paint the sets, and with a little less than four weeks to go until the Christmas show, Maverick knew he needed to up his game and get more of the sets painted if they were going to be ready on time. While Kaitlin had seemed happy to work alongside him, she definitely hadn’t been as chatty as she had been before. Ever since that night he’d come to help her and Sarah make Christmas cookies, things had changed between them—although that was probably mostly due to him and the way he’d walked out so quickly. Sarah had come by the fire station the day afterward with the fire truck Christmas cookie she’d made, complete with fairy lights in the form of sugar crystals stuck all over it, and he’d been both happy and guilty at the same time. Being close with Kaitlin, seeing the easy way they got on together, and finding his heart going in somersaults whenever she got close to him, had been a little too much to take in, especially since he’d had a date with Sophie later that same evening.

Confusion ruled his heart and his mind. He was torn between Sophie and what he was beginning to feel for Kaitlin. The problem was, he had no idea whether or not Kaitlin felt anything back for him in return, and giving up what he had with Sophie for the sake of what he *might* have with Kaitlin wasn’t what he was ready to do.

But the more time he was spending with Kaitlin, the more difficult it seemed to go back out on yet another date with Sophie.

“It’s getting late.” Stretching, he smiled down at Kaitlin as she knelt on the floor, leaning forward to paint around one of the drawn windows on the set piece. “Are you going to stay? We could always come back tomorrow, even for a little while.”

“I can’t.” Her eyes darted to his and then dropped away again. “I’m busy.”

“Oh.” His mouth puckered.

“The Frosty Pines Christmas Festival is in three days, so I’m going to be baking like crazy.” The slight edge to her tone had him frowning, only for a swell of embarrassment to roar over the top of him. She’d already told him about the festival and how much she’d have to do in preparation for it. His heart suddenly dropped to the floor.

“Wait, I hope you’re not doing this when you’ve got a ton of stuff still to do for the festival.” When she glanced up at him again, Maverick closed his eyes, blowing out a long breath in an attempt to chase some of his own frustration away. “When I said it would be great to do this together, you didn’t have to say yes to me every time I asked you.”

“I said yes because I had some time,” she responded, a little tartly. “You don’t need to worry about me, Maverick. I’m able to give my time to both the bakery and the Christmas play.”

“But you don’t *have* to.”

This time, when she looked up, her eyes held his for a little longer than before. “Neither do you—and before you start telling me how busy *I* am, don’t forget how crazy things are with you, too. Didn’t you have to put out a fire at the auto repair shop last week?”

Nodding, Maverick stuck his hands in his pockets. “Yes, but it was easy enough to contain.” He didn’t mention the investigation into how the fire had started or how much paperwork there had been to do, either. “I don’t want you to exhaust yourself before Christmas, Kaitlin, and I’m sure Scarlett doesn’t, either.”

“I’m fine, okay? Out of everyone in this town, the last person I need worrying about me is you.” The sharpness of her words ripped at him, and he instinctively took a step back. With a groan, Kaitlin dropped her head forward and then, after a second, got up to stand and face him.

“I’m sorry.”

Maverick said nothing, a cold tension spreading a frost between them. Her words had bite, and they’d left an imprint.

“I’m reacting badly to you, trying to show that you’re worried about me, and I’m sorry.” Kaitlin put out both hands to either side. “I don’t respond well when it comes to people—well, guys—trying to look out for me.”

“And why is that?” It was a side he hadn’t seen of her before, a side which he wasn’t much sure he liked. The snappy, almost angry response had almost knocked him backward. “I only said it because I can imagine how thin you must be spread right now. And Sarah needs her mom at Christmas time.”

At the mention of her daughter’s name, Kaitlin’s expression softened. “She does, and believe me, everything I do is for her. I want to work on the set so that I can support the production, a production *she* is in. I work hard at the bakery to provide for her and for me, as well as to try and support my mama—although she’s never taken a penny from me, but I try and pay her back in other ways.” A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, but she looked away, her hands dropping back to her sides. “I’ve had to do life by myself for a long time. Yes, I have my mom, but it’s not the same as...” Wincing, she looked away. “It’s not the same when it comes to you—and please don’t ask me why that is. Trust me, you really don’t want a long, convoluted explanation!”

Resisting the urge to say that yes, he really *did* want to know what it was she was thinking when it came to him and why his questions had made her react so differently. Maverick forced a smile. “Okay.”

“Scott hurt me.” Kaitlin looked back at him steadily, her chin a little lifted now. “I told him I was pregnant with Sarah, and he could not have been more devastated. He walked out on me *and* on Sarah, I guess, and I haven’t seen him since that day—and I sure don’t want to see him, either!” The rueful smile danced across her lips, but faded quickly. “I’m not used to men caring if I am actually okay.”

“I do care about you.” Maverick spoke honestly, holding her gaze and finding his heart aching with a sharp pain over what she’d endured so far. He’d known from seeing her around that there didn’t seem to be a husband or a partner, but to learn exactly what had happened to her was difficult enough to hear, never mind to endure. He couldn’t help but admire her strength. “And I care about Sarah. We don’t know each other all that well yet, but I don’t want you to burn yourself out here and be good for nothing over Christmas. I can do a little more on the sets so you can concentrate on your bakery. I’m sorry I forgot about the Christmas festival. I should have remembered.”

When Kaitlin heaved a sigh, Maverick immediately frowned. What had he said to upset her? Was she about to snap out at him again?

“You’re very kind, Maverick.” When her eyes met his again, they weren’t filled with anger or frustration, but instead, a gentle glistening as she blinked furiously, clearly attempting to stop any tears from dropping down her cheeks. “I’m sorry I was so sharp.”

“Hey, it’s okay.”

Without meaning to, without having any intention of comforting her, Maverick’s hand reached out, and before he knew it, she was wrapped up in his arms. Her head was on his chest, just at his heart, and his arms were pulled tight around her waist. The shock of what he had done spread right across his chest, his breath catching as he stared straight ahead, wondering if she could hear how furiously his heart was beating.

Sighing, she leaned into him a little more, one hand sweeping lightly down his back. “Thank you, Maverick.” When she stepped back, Maverick’s hands lingered, catching her there in his arms, holding her back from moving away from him entirely.

The air grew thick, and Maverick swallowed hard. He had never meant to do anything like this, but now that he had, now he’d gotten this close to her, he didn’t want to let her go.

What about Sophie?

“I want you to be okay, Kaitlin.” Finally letting her go, he stepped back, dropped his head, and cleared his throat. “And I’ll make sure to stop by the bakery stall when I’m at the festival.”

“You’re planning to come along?”

The lightness in her voice made him smile. “Of course I am.” When he looked back at her, it was as if the fairy lights which hung around the room had gone to flash and sparkle in her eyes. A soft flush warmed her cheeks, a softness about her that practically begged him to wrap himself up in her again.

But he kept his hands by his sides and didn’t let himself step closer to her.

“Will you... will you be bringing Sophie?”

When he glanced at her again, the smile had gone out of her eyes, and her shoulders had dropped just a little.

“I guess.” They hadn’t talked about it, but yes, he figured it would be a good idea for a date. “Maybe I’ll get the chance to introduce you both.”

The second he said those words, his hands curled up into fists, his body reacting in clear revulsion at the idea. Kaitlin didn’t exactly smile, either. Instead, she murmured that it would be nice and then bent down to carry on painting, and Maverick was left with nothing else to say.



“Wow. Okay, so I was *not* expecting this!”

Scarlett laughed and grabbed Kaitlin’s hand, pulling her outside into the dark night as snowflakes began to dance all around them.

“Neither was I.” Kaitlin grinned, put both arms out, and spun around, snowflakes landing in her hair and on the tip of her nose.

The urge to kiss the snow away was so fierce, Maverick had to turn away completely, pretending to make sure the door was shut, so he had time to grab a hold of his emotions and bury them back down into himself.

“And just in time for the Christmas festival!” Scarlett exclaimed as she hurried back to the door, taking out the key and locking it up. “Anyway, I’d better get back home. Charlie’s waiting for me. I’ll see you guys again soon, and thank you both so much for this!”

“It’s been fun!” Kaitlin called as Scarlett made her way back to her car, waving one hand at them both. “And don’t stress out too much; it’s going to be great.”

“Bye!” Maverick smiled and silently demanded that his heart stop leaping about when Kaitlin turned back to look at him, a small smile on her lips and a twinkle in her eye.

“Scarlett always gets tense whenever it gets close to Christmas,” she told him, grabbing her blonde hair with both hands, wrapping it around and then pushing it to the back of her hood with one hand while pulling it up over her head with the other. “But she’s going to be great. She’s such a good teacher, and the kids adore her, Sarah included. She really brings out the best in them.”

“Speaking of, is Sarah back at home with your mom?”

“Yeah.” Kaitlin smiled up at him. “And she’ll be waiting for me, so I’d better get on home.”

“You got your car?”

Kaitlin shook her head. “I’m going to walk. It’s not far.”

“I can walk with you.”

Her eyes snagged on his, only for her to tip her head forward, as if she wasn’t quite ready to look at him. “It’s okay.”

“I want to, really.”

That was the truth. He really *did* want to walk with her, wanted to make sure she was okay getting home. It wasn’t as though Frosty Pines was a dangerous town, not in any way, but

the dark night and the cold and the snow brought out the protective instinct in him.

“I’m going to be fine on my own.” Kaitlin’s smile tilted. “I’ve walked home alone lots of times.”

“But it’s always better with company,” he challenged gently. “If you’d be okay with me being here, then I’d like to walk you back home. I don’t have my car, either; otherwise, I’d offer to give you a ride.”

Kaitlin’s shoulders dropped, and she winced. “I’m doing it again. I’m trying to push away your kindness just because there’s a part of me that says I don’t need it.”

“And you might not,” he agreed softly, “but are you saying you wouldn’t like my company? After all, I make the best jokes.”

This had her laughing, and Maverick grinned.

“I’d like that,” she admitted quietly. “Although maybe keep the jokes to yourself for a while.”

“Ouch.” Nudging her, he laughed when she giggled, falling into step beside her. “But okay, that’s fair.” They walked in silence for a while, their footsteps barely making a sound on the snow-covered path. The heavy quiet made him smile, knowing it was the sort of softness that only came when snow was falling.

“I do love Frosty Pines.”

For a second, Maverick wasn’t sure he’d heard her actually say anything or if he’d imagined it, given how quiet a murmur it was, but when she glanced up at him, the streetlights illuminating her features, he knew she’d spoken out loud.

“I love it, too.” Smiling back at her, he gestured to the houses and the streets in front of them. “I’ve always lived here, and I’ve never wanted to live anywhere else, not really. I went away for college, but I came right back here the second I could.”

Kaitlin’s steps slowed, and Maverick made sure to slow down with her. Did she want their conversation to carry on for

a little longer?

“I only moved here because Scott lived here,” she told him, though her head was turned a little away from him, her gaze on the street in front of them. “I did love it, though. Turns out *he* was the one to leave, not me.”

“It must have been a really difficult time for you.”

“It was.” Her eyes caught his for a second and then pulled away again. “After I finished baking and pastry training, I met Scott, and we fell in love. I moved here, got pregnant with Sarah when I was twenty, and figured that was it. We’d have a happy life here together in Frosty Pines, and I could think about a career once we were done having kids.” Her laugh was cold, hard, and brittle. “Except it didn’t work out like that.”

“It’s his loss, Kaitlin.” The urge to be a comfort grew so strong that, giving in to it, he put his arm around her shoulders, his hand squeezing gently. “You’ve done so well with the bakery *and* with Sarah since then.”

“Thanks.” To his surprise, she leaned into him a little more, and his hand decided to plant itself exactly where it was, meaning he couldn’t easily lift it from her shoulders. “The bakery was my mom’s idea. She saw it up for sale the same year I had Sarah, and she gave me the money—and the support—to go for it. I’m so glad she believed in me enough to do that.”

“I’m glad about that, too, otherwise I wouldn’t know where to go for my cupcakes.” The quip made her laugh, and Maverick grinned, a sense of deep contentment running through him. “In all seriousness, I do admire everything you’ve achieved and how much good you’ve brought out of a difficult situation. Sarah adores you. That’s plain for everyone to see, and you bring this town a lot of happiness.”

Kaitlin stopped, turned to look up at him, and before he knew it, she was back in his arms. Her hands were around his neck, pulling herself close to him as she whispered a ‘thank you.’

Electricity zipped from one side of his body to the other, making his heart slam hard against his chest. It set a fire alight in his core, a warming heat beginning to pool there.

He couldn't mistake this for anything else. He was drawn to Kaitlin, pulled to her in a way that he couldn't resist. When she leaned back, his head lowered, and he heard her swift intake of breath. He couldn't stop, couldn't pull himself back. He wanted to kiss her amidst the falling snow, as the cold tried to wrap itself around them both, to make its way in between them—but there was too much fire here, too much heat for it to take hold.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket, and he jumped back, his skin prickling. Yanking it out from his pocket, he resisted the thought to fling it away from him, to throw it as hard as he could so that he could pull Kaitlin back into his arms without distractions, but the name of the caller grabbed hard at his senses.

Sophie.

Closing his eyes, Maverick let out a slow breath. It wouldn't be right of him to kiss Kaitlin, to give in to what he was feeling without speaking to Sophie first. Sure, they'd only been out on a few dates, but that didn't mean he was about to ignore her, forget about her, or push her away without explanation. No, if he was going to do this right, then he would have to end things with Sophie before he even started thinking about kissing Kaitlin!

“Sorry, I—”

Opening his eyes, Maverick stopped short. He was alone in the darkness, the falling snow his only company.

Kaitlin was gone.

Her fingers were numb, but Kaitlin still managed to serve another cinnamon bun with a smile. She'd forgotten her gloves but remembered everything else, so that had to be a win, at least.

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem, and please do stop by the bakery again soon. I'll have lots of Christmas treats ready and waiting for the next few weeks!”

Smiling and waving another customer away, she got to the next customer and then the next until, standing there smiling, were none other than her mom and Sarah.

“Hey!” Kaitlin hurried out of the back of her pop-up stall and came around to hug her daughter and then her mom. “You made it okay, then?”

“We sure did.” Martha smiled back at her. “Sarah and I stayed back for a while after rehearsals today so we could help Maverick with a bit of the set painting.”

Kaitlin's eyes flared. “Really? That was good of you both.”

“We're just copying you, Mom.” Sarah's eyes traveled to the counter where all the cakes were laid out, ready to be picked up and eaten. “Miss Scarlett told me how much you'd done with the sets so far, so when I saw Maverick, I asked Nana if we could help.”

“And Nana said yes,” Martha grinned, pulling her granddaughter into a gentle hug. “I figured we could stay at

the theater until the Christmas Festival opened and then come down together.”

“Sounds like a great idea.” The idea that Maverick had been at the theater, painting sets without her, threatened to send Kaitlin into a tailspin, but she fixed herself with determination, dragging her thoughts away from Maverick as quickly as she could. “Can I get you guys something to eat?”

“Aren’t you due for a break soon?” Martha frowned. “Where’s Louise?”

“She’s on *her* break.” Smiling, Kaitlin lifted an eyebrow at her. “You’re worrying again, Mom. Louise is a great assistant, but she needs a break from the stall now and again. I sent her to go wander around the festival. It really is looking great this year!”

“And I heard that Cameron has a huge fire pit and a ton of marshmallows!” Martha laughed when Sarah’s eyes caught with a fresh excitement, lifting her gaze first to Kaitlin and then to her nana.

“You’ll have to ask your mom about that.”

“Yes, you can have some marshmallows,” Kaitlin laughed, and Sarah let out a squeal. “Go on, I’ll come and find you later.”

“Okay, sweetie.” Her mom kissed her cheek, took Sarah’s hand, and then walked away, leaving Kaitlin to climb back into her pop-up stall. The Frosty Pines Christmas Festival had been running for years, from what she knew, and up until a couple of years ago, she and Leo from Steamy Mugs had always shared a stall. But then both of their businesses had expanded, and they’d decided to take a stall each—and she was glad they’d done that. There wasn’t any rivalry or competition between them, only a sense of camaraderie and support, which she loved. Sure, she had coffee and cake, but she would always direct customers to the Steamy Mugs stall as well, since they sold a ton more variations than only plain coffee. In turn, she knew that Leo and Fiona, his wife, sent people over to her for cakes and bakes. It was part of what made the Christmas Festival so great and why she looked

forward to it every year, even if it was a ton of work beforehand.

“I’m back!”

Louise grinned at her as she came into the stall. Her face was flushed with the cold, but her eyes sparkled. “You go on for a break now, Kaitlin. I’ll look after the stall.”

“Are you sure?”

Louise smiled and nodded. She was young but enthusiastic and a good baker, and Kaitlin was grateful for her, especially at times like this.

“Okay, but I won’t be long.”

Practically shooing her away, Louise put on a smile and went to greet the next customer, leaving Kaitlin to make her way outside.

Her hands were still cold, so she tucked them into the pockets of her long coat, glad she’d remembered her scarf and bobble hat. Wandering through the crowd, she tipped her head back a little and smiled up at the Christmas tree, now twinkling with white, red, and green fairy lights and adorned with the baubles the children from the Frosty Pines Elementary had made especially for it. Sarah had shown her the one she had made one day after school a couple of weeks ago, and Kaitlin was excited to see if they could pick it out.

I love this time of year.

Yes, it was a crazy time when it came to the bakery and the Christmas rush, Christmas Festival, and Christmas goodies, but it held so much love, laughter, and fun that Kaitlin looked forward to it every year. She’d be exhausted once the festival was over, but in a good way, knowing that the energy she’d used up had been for a good purpose, the smell of cinnamon and coffee still lingering in her hair and in her clothes for a couple of days afterward. It always made her smile whenever she thought of the people she’d talked to, the excitement on Sarah’s face, and the coziness of being together with her daughter and her mom—although she hadn’t had a chance to do that yet.

Which means I should probably go find them.

Meandering slowly, she looked over the tops of the heads of the other guests as best she could, hearing the twinkling music coming from the fairground rides, which took over almost half the park. Back when Sarah had been small, there had only been two or three small fairground rides, but they had way more than that now, including a huge slide, which Kaitlin secretly wished she could go on. Sarah was always at the rides every year, but she *also* would go to get a hot chocolate from Leo and Fiona's stall, complete with a candy cane, so she could be there as well.

Figuring she'd head for the fairground rides, Kaitlin stumbled back sharply as someone knocked into her shoulder, hearing their loud exclamation of apology as she fought to get her balance.

"I'm so sorry!"

It was too late. Kaitlin fell back, her hands going behind her and scraping on the cold, stony ground. The next second, a strong hand was helping her up, and mortified, she brushed down the back of her coat and her jeans, not quite able to look at whoever was helping her out.

"Are you okay, Kaitlin?"

Her heart stuttered, and she glanced up into Maverick's face. He wasn't the one who had knocked into her, was he?

"I'm fine."

"I'm sorry. I really am." Another voice came toward her, and turning her head, Kaitlin managed a small smile in the direction of a blonde-haired woman who had both hands pressed to her lips, her eyes wide. "There's just so many people, and I didn't really look where I was going." Her gaze went to Maverick as her hands dropped back to her sides. "I was a little distracted."

A slow flush of embarrassment and upset began to make its way slowly upwards, and Kaitlin lowered her head, her hand going to where Maverick still held her arm, brushing her

fingers over his to encourage him to let her go. “I’m fine, Maverick. Thanks.”

“Right.” His hand fell, and he stepped back quickly, as if he’d only now realized what he’d been doing. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Absolutely.”

“I should have been more careful.” The young woman spoke again but shrugged, as if it was no big deal to have knocked Kaitlin to the ground. “Glad you’re okay.”

Maverick cleared his throat. “Kaitlin, this is Sophie. Sophie, this is Kaitlin, who I was telling you about.”

“Nice to meet you.” As she spoke, Kaitlin’s eyes darted back to where the young woman stood, seeing how her gaze was fixed on Maverick, although Kaitlin caught a glint she didn’t like in her eyes. Wincing, she looked away again, silently telling herself that she had no reason to dislike her. Yes, she had knocked into her, but it was a busy place, and it was probably just accidental.

Unless Maverick told her about what almost happened between us?

The thought was pushed away the very next second as she forced a smile. No way would Maverick have shared that with Sophie. Telling the person he was dating that he had almost kissed someone else wasn’t exactly going to go down well.

“Are you enjoying the festival?” Trying to keep her tone light, she directed it to Sophie, watching as she nodded, but still didn’t so much as glance at her. In fact, she hadn’t said a word since Maverick had made the introductions. “It’s my favorite thing that happens in Frosty Pines.”

“Mine too.” Maverick smiled at her, his dark eyes catching hers and practically begging her to gaze back into them for a while, but Kaitlin quickly looked away. This was an incredibly awkward moment, and the only thing she wanted to do was step away. It had been three days since their almost kiss, since the moment when she’d looked up into his eyes and wanted to wrap her arms around him and lift her face to his. Three days

since they'd been interrupted by his cell phone, broken apart by an incessant ringing which had brought them both back to the present rather than being lost in the fog of twirling, dancing emotions. When he'd spoken out loud, when he'd said Sophie's name, she'd known how close she'd come to making a mistake and had turned around and walked away.

There had been silence from him ever since.

It wasn't as though neither of them could pretend there wasn't a spark there, a desire beginning to tug them closer together, but given that Maverick was clearly still dating Sophie, Kaitlin didn't want to get in the middle of all that. She wasn't the sort of person to try and steal a guy away from another woman, and from the way Maverick had dropped his head and muttered Sophie's name before raking his hand through his hair, she figured he was struggling with what to do.

But perhaps turning up to the Christmas Festival, hand in hand with Sophie and knowing he'd run into Kaitlin, had been his way of showing her that he'd made his choice.

"I—I'd better get going." The silence which ran between the three of them was awkward and strained, and since Sophie hadn't exactly tried to either make or join in the conversation, Kaitlin figured it was time for her to step away. "I wanted to go find Sarah on my break before I get back to the stall."

"Sure." Maverick's smile dimmed a little. "Say hi to her for me, okay?"

With a brief smile to Sophie, Kaitlin moved away without a word, but couldn't resist the urge to glance back over her shoulder. Sophie had immediately tucked herself right in beside Maverick, pulling herself as close as she could, and before Kaitlin could look away, Sophie threw a glance back over her shoulder and, much to Kaitlin's surprise, gave her a small, triumphant smile.

Kaitlin's stomach roiled, and she twisted her head sharply away, only to run straight into Scarlett.

“Kaitlin, hey!” Scarlett threw her arms around her. “I was just on my way to your stall. I thought... woah, are you okay?”

Opening her mouth to say yes, Kaitlin blinked back hot tears, which unexpectedly began to flood behind her eyes.

“What happened?” Instantly, Scarlett was beside her, one arm around her shoulders. “Is it Sarah?”

“No, it’s not Sarah or my mom. I’m fine, really. I—”

“You don’t look fine.” Scarlett frowned. “You’re whiter than I’ve ever seen you. What happened?”

Kaitlin shook her head wordlessly. What was she going to say? That she thought she’d somehow managed to fall half in love with Maverick, but he was dating someone else, and that someone else had thrown her a victorious smile that made her crumble to pieces inside?

“Come here.” Scarlett led her to the side of Santa’s workshop, which was a little quieter since the line to see Santa was out at the front of the tent. *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas* played over gently from where Santa sat, rubbing hard against the sweeping sadness rushing through her like a furious river. “You’re going to have to tell me what happened, Kaitlin, otherwise I’m just going to keep asking.”

Letting out a half laugh, Kaitlin rubbed one hand over her eyes, barely managing to keep the tears back. “You’re going to laugh.”

“I won’t, I swear.”

Wincing, Kaitlin closed her eyes. Somehow, it was easier to tell Scarlett the truth if she could shut out the sight of her. “Maverick’s been growing on me.”

Scarlett’s gasp had Kaitlin’s eyes flying open as her friend grabbed her hand.

“Wait, are you serious?”

“I’m half in love with him, Scarlett.” Groaning, Kaitlin flung her head back and looked up at the starry sky as though, somehow, it would pull her feelings away. “I haven’t felt

anything for anyone for a long time, and now, ever since he pulled Sarah down from the tree, I'm battling against this overwhelming need to get close to him." Her voice cracked as she spoke, and looking back at Scarlett, Kaitlin was forced to dash tears from her eyes.

"That's great, Kaitlin!"

"No, it's not. He's dating someone, remember?"

Scarlett's shoulders dropped, her face falling. "Oh."

"Exactly. But we've shared a few moments recently—the last one was three days ago, when he walked me home—and I was sure he felt the same pull I did, but each and every time, Sophie's interrupted it in some way or another." Sniffing, she looked away. "I'm glad of that, in a way. I don't want to be the one to push Sophie out of the picture. This has to be Maverick's choice, but given that he's showed up with her to the festival, knowing I'd be here, I'd say he's already made it."

"Does he know how you feel?"

Her broken laugh was Scarlett's answer.

"Maybe you should tell him."

"That would only serve to make things awkward."

Scarlett bunched her lips together, her frown floating down over her forehead, pressing her eyebrows low. "I get what you're saying. You don't want to get in between him and Sophie, but if you're feeling a spark, and so is he, then perhaps you should tell him how you feel. Maybe he's confused about what's going on. After all, you guys have known each other for a while."

"Yes, but we've never been friends like we are now." Kaitlin pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a slow breath. "I feel better having told you, at least. I just need to get a hold of myself." Giving herself a small shake, she dropped her hand and sniffed again. "For the next three weeks, I need to concentrate on the bakery and the Christmas play *and* on making everything wonderful for Christmas Day. Maverick doesn't need to be a part of that."

Giving her a small smile, Scarlett spread out her hands. “And after that? After Christmas is over and done with?”

“Then Maverick will either be out of my heart, or I’ll still be right here, struggling,” Kaitlin admitted with a shake of her head. “I can’t get in the way of what could be a great relationship for him, Scarlett. It wouldn’t be right.”

Her friend nodded, smiled, and then hugged her. “I’m going to pray it all works out for you before Christmas,” she murmured quietly. “Thank you for telling me. Can I go help out at the stall for a bit to give you a little more time away?”

Kaitlin was about to say that no, she didn’t need any more time, she could do it just fine, only to hold herself back. Her friend was offering her a little help, and she should take it. Scarlett wasn’t going to think less of her if she said yes.

“That would be great, Scarlett. Thank you.” With a deep breath, she set her shoulders. “I’ve been meaning to go and find Sarah and my mom. I’ll be back along to the stall soon.”

“Okay, take your time.” With a wave, Scarlett stepped away, leaving Kaitlin to wander back through the Christmas festival in search of Sarah, silently hoping that it was the last she would see of Maverick and Sophie.

Sophie was talking, but Maverick hadn't been listening. His mind was going back to what had happened at the Christmas Festival. It wasn't the only time he'd seen Kaitlin, they'd gone past her stall, and he'd suggested stopping to buy a cake or two, but Sophie had said she wasn't hungry... which was strange, given that she'd then gone on to buy a hamburger from the stall set up and run by the Polar Snap Sports Bar and Brewery. It was the very reason she'd asked to come by here again for their date, just to sample another hamburger.

"I think Frosty Pines is a really great little town."

He managed a smile, finally paying her a little attention. "I think so, too." The Polar Snap Bar was quiet this evening, and the owner, Ben, was busy spraying fake snow onto the windows to make it look even more festive than it was already with the twinkling fairy lights strung from the ceiling, the red and gold ribbons tied in bows and draped along the counter and the bar, as well as the Christmas tree in the corner, though that still needed to be decorated. Right now, it looked a little bare.

"The Christmas festival was so fun." Sighing, Sophie tilted her head and smiled at him. "It was fun going with you."

"I think so, too." Realizing too late he'd said the very same thing as he'd done only a second ago, Maverick smiled quickly and tried to cover it. "I've always enjoyed going, and every year, it gets a little bigger and a little busier. A lot of

people come to it from out of town. It's great it's getting so popular. It means a lot for the town and for the small businesses, like Kaitlin's."

At the mention of Kaitlin's name, Sophie's smile slid away. "You talk about her a lot, you know that?"

Maverick frowned. "She's someone I see a lot. She's a friend."

"Still." Sophie sighed heavily, as if she wanted him to take note of her feelings, and turned her head away.

The frown on Maverick's forehead grew, pushing his eyebrows lower as he studied Sophie. His stomach was roiling as guilt began to push its way into his heart, though he fought it back just as hard. He hadn't done anything wrong. He and Sophie weren't exclusive—although he wouldn't date anyone else when he was dating Sophie as a matter of principle—and nothing had happened between himself and Kaitlin, either. Sure, there had been that *almost* moment, but he had pulled back thanks to his cell phone, and he wasn't about to let it happen again.

"She's really pretty."

Maverick blinked, then ran one hand over his jaw. Was this a trap? If he agreed, would that upset Sophie even more? Choosing to stay silent, he merely shrugged when she sent a piercing glance back at him.

"You're not going to say anything?"

"I've already told you she's a friend," Maverick replied firmly. "We see each other a lot right now because I'm helping paint the sets for the Christmas production, and so is she. Sarah's in the show, and—"

"Who's Sarah?"

"She's Kaitlin's daughter," Maverick explained.

"Oh." For some reason, this seemed to make Sophie relax. "Right. So was it Kaitlin who asked you to help out with the sets?"

“No.” Maverick shook his head. “It was Scarlett. We had the conversation in the bakery, that’s all.”

“I see.” Smiling now, Sophie reached across the table and took his hand. “Sorry I was a little cranky. You’re amazing, Maverick. You’re gorgeous, and I guess I’m worried that someone else is going to notice that as well. They might try to pull you away.”

A smile tried to push at Maverick’s lips, but his frown lingered, sending it away. “I’m not the sort of person who plays around, Sophie. Even if someone was trying to catch my attention, I wouldn’t do anything if we were still dating.”

Her smile grew, her eyes softening as she pressed her fingers to his. “I appreciate that, Maverick.” The warmth of her hand in his didn’t send any rushing energy up into his heart, didn’t make it slam about his chest in anticipation or excitement. Instead, he was confused, and a little irritated, not sure what Sophie was doing or what she meant by jumping from one mood into another after only a few seconds. He could sense that Sophie definitely didn’t like Kaitlin, but he couldn’t pin down why that was.

As Sophie got up to order another drink, he remembered what happened at the Christmas festival, and Maverick’s brow furrowed hard. He’d pointed Kaitlin out, had said he wanted to say hello to her, and as he’d slowed his steps, Sophie had kept walking—and the next thing he’d known, Kaitlin was on the ground, and Sophie had been looming over her. It wasn’t as though Sophie was taller or much heavier than Kaitlin, but she’d been walking with enough force to knock Kaitlin back, though when he’d asked her about it afterward, she’d said she’d thought he had been pointing out someone else. He’d taken it then to be an accident, but what if he’d been wrong? What if Sophie had done it deliberately?

Twisting around in his seat, he took her in, seeing her laughing and smiling up at the bartender as she ordered another glass of wine for them both. Sophie was beautiful, and yes, they got along well enough, but in the last few days, he’d begun to have doubts about the whole thing. The awareness that what he felt for Kaitlin was growing, as well as the

uncertainty over what he wanted with Sophie, meant he was one big, jumbled ball of confusion.

He might never have anything with Kaitlin. If he took the chance—ended things with Sophie and told Kaitlin how he felt—then he might end up entirely alone and with a shattered heart at the same time.

Would it be worth the risk?



“I THINK THIS IS LOOKING GOOD.”

“I’d say so.” Kaitlin got to her feet, then ran the back of her arm across her forehead, paintbrush still in her hand. “We’ve still got half to finish, right?”

“Less than half.” Maverick smiled, then tilted his head to the right, where the rest of the sets lay in pieces. “How long have we got to go?”

Kaitlin scowled. “A little over two weeks.” Her eyes turned to him. “Do you think that will be enough time?”

“I think so, although...” Hesitating, he turned to face her, smiling inwardly at the splatters of bright orange paint on her cheek but saying nothing so he wouldn’t embarrass her. “I think I might pull an all-nighter. You wouldn’t mind, would you?”

Her eyes flared. “You want to spend all night painting?”

“I think I could manage it. I have a day off on the weekend, so I could paint that night and then sleep all day!” Gesturing to the rest of the set pieces, he smiled and shrugged. “The kids will need to practice *with* the sets, I guess, so it would be good to have them finished as soon as we can.”

“I suppose so,” Kaitlin spoke slowly. “The sets are only going to be behind them, though. They don’t have to interact with them, but I see what you mean.” A light suddenly flashed in her eyes, and Maverick’s heart leaped furiously, his breath

catching in his throat at the warm smile that spread right across her face. “I haven’t pulled an all-nighter in years.”

Maverick’s chest tightened. “You’d want to help out, too?”

“Sure, why not? We’d get it done faster, right? I could get Sarah and my mom to help for a bit, and then my mom could take Sarah home. She won’t mind.” The light in her eyes began to dim as her smile shrunk. “Why don’t you ask Sophie if she wants to come along, too?”

“I guess I could.” The lack of eagerness surprised him, and his shoulders slumped. “I don’t think she’ll want to, though.”

“No harm in asking.” Kaitlin bent down next to the pot of paint, effectively ending their conversation. “This weekend, did you say?”

Maverick nodded. “Saturday night?”

“Great.” Her head twisted, her eyes catching his for a second. “I don’t have the bakery open on Sundays, so that works out fine for me. Scarlett will be thrilled.”

“I’m sure she will.” Maverick’s heart sunk a little, and he couldn’t seem to bring even the smallest flicker of happiness back. The idea of spending all night painting had been an exciting one—for him, at least—and the thought of being here with Kaitlin had made his blood run hot. The second she’d mentioned Sophie, however, it had turned to ice, freezing in his veins, and Maverick had to admit to himself that he was in trouble, caught between Sophie and Kaitlin. Yes, he could say that the reason he was trying to keep Sophie back from the painting was because he knew about her clear dislike of Kaitlin, but if he was honest with himself, that wasn’t the real reason. It was because he didn’t *want* Sophie to be there. He wanted to be alone with Kaitlin.

This isn’t working.

“Sorry, Kaitlin.”

She glanced at him. “What for?”

“I—I need to clear my head.” He waved a hand vaguely. “Paint fumes.”

It was a terrible excuse, given the amount of ventilation there was *and* the fact that Scarlett had made sure to purchase low-odor paint, but before Kaitlin could ask him anything more, Maverick had walked right out of the room, through the hall space and outside. The cold air burned at his bare skin, making him realize too late that he'd left his hoodie inside, having taken it off for painting. The snow still lay heavily on the ground, gleaming and glistening in the dull afternoon sunshine, but seeing it didn't make him smile. He was being slowly torn apart by his own two hands, by his own thoughts and desires. He was dating Sophie, but his interest in being close to Kaitlin was getting stronger every time he even so much as saw her. Yes, there might not be anything between them. Kaitlin might only see him as a friend and nothing more, but he couldn't keep dating Sophie when his heart was going after someone else. As much as he liked her, Maverick couldn't let himself linger in indecision. It wouldn't be fair.

He had to make a choice. And he had to make it soon.

Pulling out his cell phone, he looked down at it and found Sophie's number. He definitely had some reservations when it came to Sophie, and right now, they bloomed big and bright in his mind. She didn't seem to understand why he was giving his free time to the community theater and didn't feel the same sense of community that he did when it came to his hometown. Kaitlin did. Kaitlin was willing to give as much of herself as she could to help others out, even when she was busy with Sarah and with her bakery.

I guess there's only one way to find out for sure.

Calling Sophie's number, Maverick nodded to himself, shivering lightly against the cold. He didn't expect her to want to help with the community theater because, deep down, he was sure she didn't share the same values as he did, and perhaps that was reason enough to end things between them.

"Sophie? Hi, it's Maverick." Clearing his throat, he took a deep breath of cold, frosty air and set his shoulders, his head lifting as he gazed out across the town of Frosty Pines. "I had an idea to run by you. We're in a real rush here at the community theater trying to get all the sets painted before the

production in a couple of weeks' time. I've said I'll do an all-nighter to get the last few sets painted up and ready for the kids, and I was wondering if you wanted to help me with it."

Her answer came quickly, and Maverick's eyes flared, only realizing then that his free hand had been clenched into a tight fist, nails cutting lightly into his skin. Instead of clarity, all he was left with was another burning twist of confusion—and all the agony that came with it.

“Thank you for all of your help, Sarah!”

Kaitlin watched as Maverick held his arms out wide, then hugged Sarah for a second.

“You’ve done a great job.”

When Sarah stepped back, Maverick held out his hand for a high-five, which she hit with a grin. Kaitlin’s heart warmed, seeing the happiness on Sarah’s face, aware of how much Maverick’s praise would have given Sarah a boost. Sarah *had* worked hard, making sure she painted carefully and within the lines as best she could, though now it was time for her to head home.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay staying here?” A hand slipped around Kaitlin’s shoulder, and she turned her head away from Maverick and Sarah, smiling at Martha.

“I’m sure. These need to be finished, but I don’t think it’ll take too much longer. I doubt we’ll need all night.”

“You be careful.” The glint in her mom’s eye had Kaitlin frowning. “Come home whenever you need to. Don’t worry about these sets. I can come and help finish them if needed.”

“Careful about what?”

Her mom smiled gently. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed the looks you two have been sharing these last few hours—the ones you’ve been trying so hard to hide from everyone else?” Her voice lowered. “He’s got his date with him, though, honey

—although why he thinks he should be dating anyone when you're right here is beyond me.”

Kaitlin's face flamed. “I don't know what you're talking about, Mom.”

“Sure you don't.” The soft smile on Martha's face didn't stop her eyes from searching Kaitlin's expression. “All I'm saying is, be careful. You've been hurt enough already. Don't go getting yourself tangled up in a connection that can't go anywhere.”

With a kiss to Kaitlin's cheek, her mom headed to the door, telling Sarah to go say goodbye to Kaitlin. A small hurricane flung itself into Kaitlin's arms, and, laughing, she dropped a kiss on the top of Sarah's head and held her tightly.

“Thank you for all your hard work,” she murmured, trying to ignore the twisting in her stomach when she thought of the next few hours working alongside Maverick and Sophie. “Go get some sleep, okay? I'll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. Mom?” Sarah tilted her head back, her eyes twinkling. “Nana says I can get some hot cocoa before bed.”

“Did she?” Kaitlin hugged her daughter again. “I think you deserve it. Have fun with Nana.”

“I will. Bye!” Waving, Sarah bounced toward where Martha was waiting and then walked out with her, still chattering about what she might add to her hot cocoa since it was almost Christmas. Kaitlin grinned to herself. No doubt Sarah would wangle a candy cane in there.

“She's a great kid.” Maverick's voice rang around the room, and as the door shut behind her mom and Sarah, Kaitlin's breath wrapped around her chest, her smile cracking at the edges.

“Thanks.” Taking her eyes away from him and noting that Sophie hadn't said anything yet—although she hadn't exactly talked a lot since they'd gotten together a few hours ago—she bent to pick up her paintbrush. “She's worked hard.”

“I think we've *all* worked hard.” Sophie cleared her throat and looked pointedly at Maverick. “All that talk about hot

cocoa has made me hungry. Want to go get one?”

“I don’t know if Steamy Mugs is still going to be open.” Maverick ran one hand over his hair, his eyes roving around the sets they still had to paint. “I brought us snacks and drinks, though. I’m sure there’s—”

“I really want one, though.” Sophie’s voice had taken on a whine, and Kaitlin turned around entirely, not wanting to put herself between Maverick and Sophie. Her opinion of Sophie so far had been that she was quiet, although that could just be from being a little shy. Now, however, she was beginning to think Sophie was used to getting what she wanted one way or the other, which, to her mind, wasn’t exactly a good trait.

“Okay.” Maverick let out a slow breath. “Then why don’t you go get one? It’s not far, and I can give you directions.”

“Wait, you won’t come with me?”

Kaitlin closed her eyes for a second and took in a slow breath of air. There was a lot to do, and by the time Sophie—and possibly Maverick—went to get a hot cocoa from Steamy Mugs and came back, at least thirty minutes would have passed. It wasn’t a huge amount of time, but all the same, it was time that could have been spent working on the sets.

“I need to get this done.” Maverick’s voice had taken on a slightly darker tone. “I don’t want hot cocoa. The reason I’m here is to work on the sets, and I really want to concentrate on that.”

“But everyone needs a break, and I’ve done so much already.” Tilting her head, Sophie’s voice took on a wheedling tone. “Come on, Maverick. It won’t take us long.”

Kaitlin’s jaw tightened, but she kept painting the set piece with long, methodical strokes. She didn’t like this. She didn’t like hearing Sophie try to manipulate Maverick into doing what she wanted by whining and cajoling and complaining about how much work she’d done. Maverick didn’t deserve to be treated like this. He was a good guy, someone hard working and kind, and to hear him being pushed this way wasn’t sitting well with her.

“Like I said, I’m going to stay here.”

Sophie pouted. “How about Kaitlin goes to get it, and we both stay here? That means that the two of us can keep working, and only one of us goes to get the hot cocoa. I mean, I could go, but I don’t know Frosty Pines very well, and I’m scared I might get lost. It’s dark and—”

“I don’t want anything, thanks.” Kaitlin glanced over her shoulder and looked to where Sophie was standing, her foot tapping on the floor and her arms crossed over her chest. “I’m not really in the mood for hot cocoa.”

“Coffee, then?” Sophie’s eyes narrowed a fraction, as though Kaitlin was being deliberately obtuse. “It doesn’t have to be hot cocoa.”

“No. Thanks.” Kaitlin threw a quick glance at Maverick and then turned her head away. Maverick’s face was bright red, and he had dropped his head forward, as if a little embarrassed over what his date had been suggesting.

“Why doesn’t anyone want to go?” The whine in Sophie’s voice had gotten stronger, and Kaitlin squeezed her eyes closed, her frustration growing into a heavy ball that rolled around the pit of her stomach. “We’ve been working so hard for so long, and this Steamy Mugs place will close soon, so if we don’t go now, we won’t get anything at all!”

“That’s why I brought snacks,” Maverick reminded her, his words grating a little at the edge. “If you want a hot cocoa, then I’m happy to tell you where to go. I said that I’d be painting the sets tonight, and I’ve made that commitment. I don’t want to duck out on it.”

“But you won’t be!” Sophie exclaimed as Kaitlin set her paintbrush down, a sense of resignation dampening her frustration. “You’re only taking a break and getting a hot cocoa with me.”

“And like I said, I don’t want to go.”

“But—”

“I’ll go.” Turning around, Kaitlin brushed one hand over her forehead, not quite able to look at either Sophie or

Maverick. "I won't be long."

The smile that split Sophie's face was one Kaitlin couldn't help but notice, even though she wasn't looking directly at her. The smile spoke of satisfaction, as if she'd known that, somehow, she'd get what she wanted, and as Kaitlin walked to the door, her shoulders slumped with the recognition that *she* had been the one to give in to Sophie's whining.

"You don't have to go, Kaitlin."

Maverick touched her shoulder, but Kaitlin didn't even look back. "I won't be long."

Stepping out into the theater space, Kaitlin crossed the floor and headed to the front door, pushing it open and walking into the cold evening air. Her feet felt leaden, her shoulders rounding a little against the cold as she realized she'd stepped out without her coat.

Her eyes closed, and for a second, she swayed on the spot, wondering whether she ought to go back and get it or if she should just trudge through the cold without it. The thought of going back in to see Sophie and Maverick together wasn't one she could stomach, not after how Sophie had acted, so, resigned, she turned her face to the wind and began to walk.

"Kaitlin!"

Looking over her shoulder, Kaitlin's stomach flipped as Maverick came hurrying out after her.

"Your coat."

With a hand that was already beginning to freeze, she took it from him and quickly pulled it on. "Thanks, Maverick." Her eyes lifted to his, his features illuminated by the streetlights above their heads. "One hot cocoa coming right up."

"Kaitlin, wait." His hand caught hers, and flames began to burn along her skin, chasing away any lingering sense of cold. Keeping her head turned away, Kaitlin swallowed at the tightness in her throat, hating the feelings which began to swirl and grow at the mere touch of his hand on hers.

How could she feel so much when he was there here with his date?

Shame began to burn in her heart, and when he came to stand beside her, his hand still holding hers, she couldn't even lift her head to look up at him.

"You don't have to do this."

"I know I don't." Biting her lip, she kept her gaze away from him. "But I'm going to."

"Why? Sophie is going to be just fine without one."

"Because she wasn't going to stop going on about it until either you went with her, or I went to get it and left the two of you alone." A sudden sharp stab of pain pierced her, and she caught her breath, her eyes flaring as she looked directly up at him. "Is that what this is about? She doesn't really want a hot cocoa, she wants to be alone with you? Because if that's what it is, then don't mind me. I'll go right on home and leave you guys to finish up with the sets."

"No." Maverick moved closer, his eyes piercing hers. "Even if that is what she wants, it's not what I want. You shouldn't have to go get this hot cocoa, Kaitlin. If Sophie wants it, she can go get it herself. I made a commitment to doing the sets, and I was the one who suggested we do an all-nighter—or as long as it takes to get the job done—and I'm not going to step away from it because my date wants a hot cocoa." When his head lowered, Kaitlin couldn't think, couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Everything she wanted was right there in front of her, and all she had to do was close the space between them.

Except he's still dating Sophie.

"I didn't think she'd turn up tonight." Maverick's harsh laugh doused the fireworks beginning to explode in Kaitlin's head. "I thought—" A groan escaped from him as he bit down on his words. "Never mind what I thought. She's here now, and..."

"And so am I." Kaitlin finished his sentence for him, letting out another sigh and turning away, even though his

hand still held hers. “You go enjoy some time with her like she wants, just the two of you painting the sets. I’ll be back later.”

“What if that’s not what I want?”

Snow began to fall in light drifts around them both, and, a little confused, Kaitlin looked back up at Maverick, trying to pull her hand away but making such a poor effort, it was easy enough for him to hold on to. “What do you mean?”

“What if I don’t want to be with Sophie?” Maverick spoke simply, lifting his shoulders. “I’ve been so confused, and I haven’t said a word to you about it.”

The way her heart was leaping up, only to drop back down again, was making her a little dizzy as her pulse began to race, only to slow down again. “What do you mean?”

Maverick took a deep breath, his breath frosting the air as he spoke. “I’m beginning to think there’s someone else who might be a better fit for me. I like Sophie, sure, but there’s something else—*someone* else—who’s kept grabbing my attention.”

Kaitlin’s heart began to turn in somersaults, and she couldn’t speak, her throat closing up as words stacked behind it.

“When I say I’ve been confused, it’s because of what I’ve been feeling for this other person,” Maverick continued, snow beginning to speckle his dark hair. “I’ve been seeing her in a different light these last couple of weeks, realizing that there’s actually more to what I feel for her than just friendship. But at the same time, I’ve been dating Sophie.” Wincing, he shook his head and looked away. “And a part of me has been worried that there’s nothing really there for *her*. I’ve worried that if I end up breaking things off with Sophie, I’d find myself with a broken heart. I’ve been careful and considered, but I realize now I’ve been *too* cautious.” His gaze slowly swung its way back toward her. “I’ve held back from facing this for far too long and ended up in a tangled mess.”

“A mess that isn’t too late to sort out,” Kaitlin replied, her voice a thready whisper as she looked up into his eyes and saw

all the questions she'd been asking herself answered. "I can't... I—"

"I need to talk to Sophie." Maverick closed his eyes and, after a few seconds, let go of her hand. "Not tonight, but later, once I've had a chance to think everything through. I want to be honest, both with her and with you, Kaitlin—if you'll listen to me."

Everything in her was on fire. She wanted to fling her arms around his neck, press her mouth to his, and whisper against them that yes, she didn't need him to hold back from telling her everything now, but instead, she bit her lip, lowered her head, and stepped back, not able to look up at him any longer. Their hands released, and she was left with only the cold wind for company.

"I'd better go back inside." Maverick shoved his hands into his pockets as if he was afraid that, if he didn't, he'd end up grabbing her hand again. "Are you sure you're okay with getting that hot cocoa? There's really no need."

"No, I'm fine. I'm going to go get it." With a set of her shoulders, Kaitlin drew in a long breath and finally let herself look into his eyes again. "It'll be good for me to have a little time."

The corner of Maverick's mouth curled up as if he knew exactly what she meant by that. With a lift of his hand, he turned on his heel and stepped away, leaving Kaitlin to turn and walk in the opposite direction.

“**T** here you are.”

Maverick spun around in surprise at the sound of Sophie’s voice. The last time they’d spoken had been when he’d been painting the sets late into the night, and now, three days later, the last thing he expected was for her to come walking through the door of the community theater. He’d told her that evening that he needed time to think about a few things, and while she’d seemed confused about what he meant, she’d shrugged and told him to call her when he was ready.

It seemed now she’d decided not to wait.

“Sophie.” His heart didn’t leap with happiness at the unexpected surprise. After all, he’d spent the last three days sorting through in his head what it was he needed to talk about with Sophie and, after that, what it was he wanted to say to Kaitlin. He’d been planning on calling Sophie tonight, once he’d finished up with the sets, but she’d pre-empted that conversation by just showing up.

“I was worried.” Sophie smiled, reached up on tiptoe, and kissed his cheek. “You said you’d call, but you didn’t.”

“I told you I needed to think.” Maverick moved back a little, putting distance between them. “I didn’t expect you to —”

“Yes, you said you wanted to think, but I wanted to tell you there’s nothing you need to worry about. Of *course* I’m going to want to be exclusive.” Sophie trilled a laugh when

Maverick's mouth fell open in shock. "I already told Michael that we weren't going to be a good fit."

"Michael?" Maverick blinked, confusion flooding every part of him. "You were dating someone else?"

"Sure." Sophie shrugged. "We weren't exclusive, and I like to keep my options open, but don't worry, I always preferred you."

Maverick swallowed hard, the tightness in his throat spreading down through his limbs, building tension into his frame. "I didn't realize that."

"That's because I didn't tell you." She laughed again, but Maverick's jaw only set tight. "I wanted to see which one of you would ask me to be exclusive first, but in the end, I knew I'd choose you."

"Is that right?"

Sophie shrugged lightly. "Sure. Michael's a rancher, and he works hard, but he doesn't have a lot of time for me. *And* he expects me to learn how to ride." Shuddering, she shook her head. "There's no way I want to do that."

"And I'm somehow better because...?"

"Because you're sweet and kind and funny." Sophie smiled at him, tilting up at him. "Although I think you're way too generous with your time. I want all of that just for me."

A punch to his gut had him recoiling inwardly. "But you helped with painting the sets. I thought—"

"Oh, I only came along so you wouldn't be all alone with Kaitlin." Sophie waved a hand and laughed again. "Call me crazy, but I didn't like the thought of the two of you being alone together." Her gaze slid away from him. "It's not like that's what I want to do regularly—volunteering, I mean."

A flood of heat rushed through him, but it wasn't the pleasant kind. Instead, it left him feeling hot and embarrassed with a sense that he'd been deliberately duped and had only just realized it now. If he hadn't already made his decision, then this would have done it.

“And it’s not like I’m planning on coming to see this Christmas show, either,” Sophie continued, her eyes twinkling as if she’d made some sort of joke. “Who wants to come see a children’s production?”

Instantly defensive, Maverick lifted his chin. “I do.”

“But you have to say that, don’t you?” Sophie rolled her eyes. “It goes with the job, I suppose. You can’t help kids in a difficult situation if you’re unapproachable and scary. Me, though?” She fluttered her fingers at him. “I have none of that, and I can guarantee you, the last place I want to be is sitting down in between a bunch of kids.”

A chill wrapped itself around his heart. “I love kids. Sarah, for example, is great.”

Sophie sighed at him, propping one hand on her hip and narrowing her eyes a little. “I get that she’s Kaitlin’s daughter, but you don’t have to go out of your way to be nice to her.”

Every single word coming out of Sophie’s mouth solidified Maverick’s decision. He didn’t feel sad or upset but relieved, as if this confirmation pushed him even more in the direction he’d been longing to go these last few days.

“I’m guessing you don’t want kids?”

Sophie frowned. “I’m not saying that. I’d *think* about it, but it would take me some convincing. For the moment, I’m happy to stay as far away from them as I can.”

“Then we’re not going to work out.”

The strength of his words seemed to knock Sophie back. Her blue eyes widened, and she stared back at him, her hand falling from her hip back by her side, her mouth a little ajar, like she couldn’t quite believe he’d told her things were ending between them.

“That’s it,” Maverick told her when she said nothing. “I had fun getting to know you, but we’re not going to work, Sophie.”

Sophie blinked furiously, her cheeks staining pink. “What do you mean, we’re not going to work out? Things have been

going great!”

Maverick shook his head. “No, they haven’t been. I’ve been thinking about this, and some of the things you’ve said, even now, have made me see how different we are. Yes, you make me laugh, and we have had some good conversations and enjoyed ourselves, but when it comes to what I love and what I think is important, we just don’t align.”

“Then you change,” came her answer, one shoulder lifting in a half-shrug. “You make it work somehow.”

“Except I don’t want this to work out.” His words were a little harsh, but Maverick spoke clearly, seeing the flash of pain in her eyes. “I hate to speak so callously, but that’s the truth. I love my small town, Sophie. I want to give my time to it, to volunteer where I can, and to support my community, in the same way they support me. You don’t. You want me to give all of my time, every single spare minute, to you. On top of that, I think kids are great, and you’re set on pushing them away, and if I’m honest, I don’t like the way you’ve tried to push me into doing what you want sometimes.”

“You’re talking about the hot cocoa, aren’t you?” Her words came spitting out of her as Sophie’s eyes pierced him, going right into his very heart. “I wanted some you-and-me time, and now you’re going to break up with me because of it?”

“Except that wasn’t why we were there,” Maverick shot back. “We were there to volunteer. It wasn’t about you and me.”

“And then you ran out after Kaitlin,” Sophie continued, as if Maverick hadn’t said a single word. “You can’t take your eyes away from her, even when I’m right there! I’ve seen it. Are you sure you’ve not been dating her, too, and just haven’t told me about it?”

Maverick’s jaw flexed. “No. No, I haven’t, Sophie.” He didn’t let himself say what was on his mind, didn’t remind her about the fact that, up until only a few minutes ago, he hadn’t known anything about this ‘Michael’ or that Sophie had been dating him, too. “The reason I want to end things is that I can

see that we don't mesh, don't fit in the way that I'd hoped we would. I hope you can understand when I say that this isn't worth either of our time."

Sophie snorted and shook her head, her arms folding across her chest as she turned her head away. "This isn't what I want, Maverick." Her head jerked back toward him, her eyes cold. "I ended things with Michael for you!"

His shoulders lifted, then fell. "This has to be the way things end between us, Sophie. I hope you find someone who makes you happy."

Yet again, her arms fell to her sides, and her mouth gaped suddenly, as if she hadn't been expecting him to push her away completely, perhaps believing that somehow, she'd be able to convince him to keep her. Maverick didn't move, could barely breathe as he held her gaze steadily, quietly praying she would understand that he was telling the truth.

After a few minutes, Sophie let out a huff of breath and, with a small exclamation of indignation, turned sharply and stormed out of the community theater.

Maverick watched her go, relief beginning to pile up in his heart. When the door shut, he blew it out in one breath, bending forward, his hands on his thighs as he dropped his head low.

Things with Sophie were over. He had to hope that now, a new and better connection could build with Kaitlin—as long as she felt even a flicker of interest for him in return.



"YOU GUYS HAVE DONE A GREAT JOB."

"Thanks. Maverick did most of the work!"

Maverick caught the side glance Kaitlin sent him, but laughed, slung one hand around her shoulders, and tugged her close. "That's not true. You did a lot, Kaitlin, *and* when you were crazy busy with the Christmas festival as well."

“The kids are going to appreciate this,” Scarlett promised, her hands bunched up at her chin as she took in the sets. “Are you able to stay for the rehearsal?”

Maverick resisted the urge to look at Kaitlin. “I can.” Quietly hoping she could stay, too, he smiled at Scarlett. “And I can help move the sets about if that would be any good? I know Charlie was going to do some of that, but with his hurt wrist, I figured he might be able to use the help.”

“That would be incredibly helpful.” Scarlett beamed up at him, just as Kaitlin chimed in.

“I can help, too—and at the performance itself, if you like?” She darted another glance up at Maverick, but he couldn’t tell if it was hope or concern flickering in her eyes. “Only a week to go, right?”

Scarlett nodded, took a breath, and then dropped her hands back to her sides. “Yep. But it’s going really well, and the kids are ready. We need to get through the evening rehearsals with all the moving parts as well as the costumes, and they’ll be set.”

Kaitlin laughed, and Maverick smiled at the sound.

“Sarah is thrilled with her costume. I don’t think she’s going to take it off even once the production is over!”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Maverick added, with both women smiling up at him. “Want me to get these sets up on stage, then? The kids are arriving soon, right?”

Scarlett nodded. “In about ten minutes, but there are costumes to put on first before we get to the actual rehearsal.”

He nodded. “I can get them all up on stage by then.”

“And don’t let Charlie help,” Scarlett warned as Kaitlin came by Maverick to help him. “He wants to, but he’ll end up injuring that wrist even more if he lifts anything heavy. I asked him to go make sure the dressing rooms were ready, but when he comes back in—”

“We’ll make sure he stays away.” Kaitlin nudged Maverick lightly, her eyes glowing gently. “We’re a good team, right?”

“Right.” Maverick smiled back at her, wishing he could scoop her up in his arms right then and there and tell her everything which had settled in his heart ever since they’d had their all-nighter painting those sets together almost a week ago. First, things had ended with Sophie, but now, he had to tell Kaitlin the truth of what he’d been feeling, what he’d been battling while dating Sophie. So far, he hadn’t found the right time. He’d either been at the fire station or trying to sleep while Kaitlin had been busy with her bakery, and they hadn’t even caught a single moment together, not until right now.

“I think if we trundle these out into the hall, there’s a door and a ramp to push them up to the top of the stage.” Kaitlin smiled but looked away. “Scarlett’s done a great job of getting these ready with the wheels and all.”

“Well, her dad does own the hardware store,” he answered with a grin. “But yes, she’s done a great job.”

It took them about thirty minutes to have all the sets ready and in place, and in that time, the kids—including Sarah—had arrived and gotten changed into their costumes. Kaitlin had slipped away for a few minutes to say hello to Sarah, but now stood beside Maverick again in the wings of the stage, ready to help shift the next set into place when the time came.

Maverick shifted his stance a little, leaning toward Kaitlin a little more and letting himself draw in a long, slow breath simply so he might haul a bit more of whatever scent Kaitlin wore into himself. There was vanilla and mandarin, and it practically dragged him closer to her.

“Scrooge’s employees were frozen in their seats, but he wouldn’t let them have another piece of coal for the fire.”

Maverick smiled to himself as the children playing the employees shivered violently, letting their teeth chatter.

“Sarah’s not on for a while yet,” Kaitlin whispered to him, glancing up at him for a second before she dropped her gaze away again. “They have a lot of scenes here first.”

“Kaitlin.”

When she looked up at him again, Maverick's heart ached with everything he felt for her. It had been one big ball of confusion, but now, it was more than clear what it was he wanted when it came to the gorgeous woman in front of him.

“I ended things with Sophie.”

Her eyes flared, but she didn't say a single word, just looking up at him as the lights from the stage flickered shadows across her face.

“She wasn't right for me. It took me a while to realize the truth about why I felt that way, though.” Maverick dropped his gaze and shook his head, keeping his voice as a low whisper. “It wasn't just that she didn't feel the same way about her small town as I did, or that her community spirit wasn't exactly thriving. It was because I was beginning to feel things for someone else.”

Kaitlin's breath hitched, and when he reached out to take her hand, it took a few seconds for her fingers to curl around his. Maverick's hopes began to flicker as he looked into her eyes, wondering if the reason she was holding back was because this wasn't what she wanted. There had always been that risk, always been the threat of a broken heart, but even if she turned around and told him that this wasn't a relationship she could be in right now, ending things with Sophie had still been the right thing to do.

“I don't know if you want to hear this, Kaitlin, but the truth is, I'm falling head over heels in love with you.” His heart burned furiously as he spoke, somewhere between relief and fear, a little afraid now that she wouldn't respond in the way he'd hoped. “This probably isn't the best time to say it, and I definitely could have been more open with you before now, but I'm telling you now, at least.” His hand let go of hers, releasing her so she could decide whether or not to step closer to him. “That's the main reason I ended things with Sophie—because I realized I was falling in love with you.”

Before Kaitlin could say anything, the kids burst into a song, and Maverick started violently before jumping into action. While the kids were singing at the front of the stage,

they had to change the set to where Scrooge sat in his bedroom, waiting for the ghost of Jacob Marley. Everything he'd said flung itself out of his head as he focused on shifting set pieces. Charlie appeared out of the shadows, too, one arm still in plaster as he helped as best he could. Soon, everything was in place, and with a sigh of relief, Maverick stepped back.

His shoulders dropped as he looked all around backstage. Charlie was standing next to Kaitlin now, and she was laughing at something he'd said, all without even a second glance over to where he stood. She didn't make any effort to come over to him, didn't gesture for him to join them. Instead, she simply stood there and watched the kids through a tiny gap in the set pieces, whispering to Charlie now and again.

Had he just been rejected?

I *'m at the bakery. Can you stop by? I'll be here late.*

Kaitlin sent the message, then set the cell phone on the counter before wiping her sweaty hands down on her apron. Christmas was less than a week away, and she was closing the bakery for a few days, both before and after Christmas. It was time she wanted and needed to spend with Sarah and with her mom, time to give her a break from the hard work that came with running a bakery.

But right now, the only thing on her mind was Maverick.

They hadn't spoken since yesterday, since he'd confessed the truth to her about his feelings. She hadn't known what to say, distracted by the performance, by making sure she moved sets at the right time, and on top of all that, wanting to see Sarah perform her part as the ghost of Christmas Past. Once the rehearsal had been over, once she'd congratulated Sarah and held her tightly, she'd gone to find Maverick, to tell him that they needed to talk at a more private moment, only to be told that he'd already gone. He had a shift back at the fire station, Charlie had said, and so she'd been left with no other choice but to head home without talking to him.

Sarah had been full of excitement over the performance, and Kaitlin had smiled and listened and tried to be filled with just as much excitement as her daughter. But her mind had been fixed with thoughts of Maverick and everything he'd told her. Not knowing how to reach out or what to say, a little upset

with herself for not managing to speak with him before he'd disappeared, she'd waited until this moment to get in touch.

Just have to hope he turns up.

With a sigh, she went to wash her hands, a little surprised at how nervous she was. Her stomach was roiling, her heart was beating like she'd run a marathon, and sweat was beading on her forehead... all from sending one single message!

Rolling her eyes to herself, she washed her hands quickly and then set to finish up sorting out the bakery. All of her cakes and bakes were gone, apart from one box of cupcakes, which she hoped to drop by the fire station. The Christmas decorations, she'd leave up until after the New Year, including the mistletoe she'd hung right above the door. Her eyes strayed to it, and with a sigh, Kaitlin shook her head to herself. Things had gotten so mixed up and then had sorted themselves out so quickly, it had been hard to take it all in. Instead of Maverick dating Sophie, he had told her that he was in love with *her*, that she was the reason he'd ended things with Sophie. Everything she felt when it came to Maverick, the feelings she'd been trying to push away or keep hidden, knowing he was dating Sophie, were now free to come to light, to blossom, to grow, and to fill her up completely.

It was a wonderful feeling.

The door opened, and Kaitlin spun around sharply, her heart stopping dead for a second as she looked into Maverick's face. He was breathing hard as if he'd been running, his face flushed with the cold air, his eyes vibrant and alive as he searched her face.

"I got your message."

Sharp breaths punctuated his words as he came a little further into the bakery, the door swinging shut behind him. Kaitlin stared at him for a second or two before regaining herself, hardly able to take in that he'd gotten here so quickly. She'd expected a message back telling her either yes, he'd be able to stop by, or no, he wouldn't be coming to see her, but instead, Maverick had clearly thought showing up in person was the only answer he needed to give her.

“I’m sorry we didn’t manage to talk yesterday.” Swallowing at the tightness in her throat, Kaitlin quickly untied her apron and set it down before coming around from behind the counter. Hadn’t she just washed her hands? Why were they so damp again already? Putting them behind her back, she lifted her shoulders. “I got distracted with the play, and when that was over, and I came to find you, you were gone.”

“I had a shift.” Maverick was still breathing hard, and Kaitlin frowned gently, looking up at him while still standing a few steps away. As if he knew what she was thinking, Maverick shrugged both shoulders. “I ran here. I couldn’t wait a second to see you again.”

“Oh.”

The simple explanation filled her with light, a warmth beginning to surround her as though he’d pulled her right into his arms. Her message had meant so much to him. He’d dropped everything to come here to be with her, no doubt wondering what she was going to tell him in response to what he’d told her.

“You’re killing me, Kaitlin.” A gruff laugh broke from Maverick’s mouth as he pushed one hand through his hair, turning away a little. “I chose the wrong time to be honest with you yesterday. Doing it in the middle of the play when we were supposed to be doing the sets and when Sarah was on—I’m sorry. It all started tumbling out, and when it did, I couldn’t stop it.”

“I’m glad you did.”

Those four words had Maverick’s expression lighting up. It was like someone had switched on a light behind his eyes.

“I wanted to tell you how much I’ve found myself being pulled toward you these last few weeks,” she continued, aware of the tremble in her voice. “I have been angry and upset with myself, knowing that you’ve been dating Sophie and telling my heart to forget you. I caught the spark between us, especially after that night in the snow, but I figured that, since you turned up with Sophie at the Christmas festival, knowing

I'd be there, and that you'd see me, it was your way of showing me you'd made your choice."

"No." Maverick shook his head firmly. "No, that wasn't what I meant by it at all. I was beginning to feel a lot for you, but at the same time, I was dating Sophie. I thought I liked her, too... but then I realized that what my heart wanted was to be with you and *only* with you." Spreading out his hands, he let them fall back to his sides. "I'm only sorry it took me so long to work out my true feelings."

Kaitlin smiled at him, a gentle glow on her cheeks as she held out one hand and moved closer. "But you're here now."

"I am." His fingers touched hers, and electricity surged, her body tingling with a sudden flurry of anticipation. Lifting her eyes above her head, she glanced back at Maverick and then looked up again. It took him a second, but eventually, his gaze followed hers just as a laugh broke from his lips.

"Wow, okay. So did you hang it there on purpose, or...?" Hearing the next Christmas song begin to play in the background, he let out a rumbling laugh. "And you didn't do this on purpose, either?"

Kaitlin laughed along with him as the first strains of *All I Want for Christmas is You* began to play. "I sure didn't plan that," she told him, her hand settling lightly against his chest, only to slide up around his neck as her breath began to wind its way around her heart, squeezing it into a faster rhythm. "But the mistletoe? Yeah, I hung that there, and Maverick?"

His eyes searched hers. "Yes?"

"I've thought about standing under this with you," she murmured, aware of the fire beginning to spread from where her hand had settled against his neck, rushing down into the rest of her body. "And I thought about what it would be like to kiss you."

A soft gleam came into Maverick's eyes as he smiled back, his fingers pulling from hers only to sweep across her cheek, pushing back a tendril of hair behind her ear and leaving smoke behind every whispering touch.

“I don’t want to make you wait any longer, Kaitlin,” he whispered, beginning to lower his head as he took a couple of steps closer.

A faint fear that she might have forgotten how to kiss immediately evaporated the seconds their lips touched. It had been forever since she’d kissed someone—the last time had been with Scott—but with Maverick, it came as easily as breathing. The world tipped itself from one side to the next as his head slanted a little, deepening their kiss, and so Kaitlin clung to him, holding onto him as if he was her anchor and letting him go would mean drowning. His hands were at her hips, then slid around until she was pulled as close to him as she possibly could be, searing heat encompassing every part of her.

Her heart was filling slowly, the emotions which wound through her beginning to twine together into something new and unexpected but fierce. When he drew back, his breathing matching hers in pace and speed, she wanted to say it, wanted the words to come, but they couldn’t, not when she was too overwhelmed by everything he’d given her in this one moment.

“Kaitlin?”

Looking up at him, she smiled, stars still in her vision. “Yes, Maverick?”

“This is the perfect song for our first kiss,” he whispered, one finger trailing lightly down her cheek. “Because this Christmas, Kaitlin, all I want is to be with you.”

EPILOGUE

“**Y**ou all set?”

Maverick grinned as Kaitlin stuck one finger in her mouth, but nodded.

“Hey, you’re not nervous, are you? You’re not even *in* the play!”

“I know that.” Laughing, she tugged her hand out of her mouth and swiped at him playfully. “I’m nervous for Sarah—and for Scarlett! She puts so much of herself into these productions, and I want it all to go perfectly.”

“Hey.” Smiling, he came closer and tugged her against him for a few seconds. “Even if it doesn’t, it’s still going to be great.”

She nodded. “You’re right.” Her smile lifted a little when he grinned down at her. “I’m glad you’re here, Maverick.”

“It’s the only place I want to be.” Dropping his head, he kissed her lightly but then pulled back, knowing now wasn’t exactly the right time to be getting himself all tangled up with Kaitlin. They’d already enjoyed a wonderful Christmas dinner together, with Kaitlin being good enough to invite Cameron over as well, and Maverick had enjoyed every second of it. Cameron hadn’t had a chance to ask Maverick exactly what was going on with him and Kaitlin yet, but Maverick had seen the questions building in his eyes as they’d laughed and talked and enjoyed each other’s company over a delicious Christmas feast. Sarah had been everything a child should be on Christmas day—excited, eyes sparkling, overjoyed about

every little thing that happened—and Martha had been a very gracious host, as he'd expected.

Smiling, Kaitlin's eyes fluttered closed, and she leaned into him even more, her arms going around him to clasp at his back. "You know, we could stand here and forget all about the sets."

"We could." Tempted, Maverick lowered his head and caught her lips with his again before breaking the kiss with a sigh. "But we'd better not."

Kaitlin laughed softly and, after another moment or two, let her hands loosen so she could move back a little. "After?"

"After." The fervency in her eyes made him grin, and he was about to lower his head again, only for a cough to interrupt them.

"So *this* is the reason you left me and Martha to do the dishes?"

Chuckling, Maverick grabbed Kaitlin's hand as they turned toward Cameron. "I take it everything is spotless and sparkling?"

"Of course." Cameron lowered his head as if he were bowing. "Just as you'd expect—and we made it to the play with time to spare." Grinning, he shrugged his shoulders. "And I figured, since I'm so good at being helpful, I should offer to help out here, too, and Scarlett directed me toward you guys. Although, from the looks of things, you don't need my help with anything."

Kaitlin giggled, her cheeks flushing as Maverick rolled his eyes at his brother. "Very funny. Actually, I think Charlie could use a hand. He's on the other side of the stage—and hurry up. The kids will be coming on stage any second."

"Okay." Charlie winked broadly. "Although I'm sure you're only saying that to get me as far away from you both as quickly as I can."

Maverick didn't think Kaitlin's face could get any hotter, and with a chuckle, he turned and wrapped his arms around her again, letting her bury her face in his chest.

“Don’t worry about Cameron. He’s never been in love before, so he doesn’t get it.”

It took him a few seconds to realize what he’d said. Kaitlin’s head lifted, the smile gone from her face, her blue eyes wide as she stared back at him. There wasn’t any immediate desire to claw back those words, to tell her he hadn’t meant it or that it was a slip of the tongue. Instead, he took a breath and smiled down into her eyes.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Kaitlin.” The words came spilling out, his heart filling up right to the brim as he settled one hand gently against her cheek, letting his thumb brush lightly across her skin. “I get that it’s been quick, but that’s how I feel. I don’t want to hold anything back. I’m in love with you, and I want you to know that, even if you don’t feel the same way. I—”

“Of *course* I feel the same!” Kaitlin interrupted him before he could finish, leaping into his arms and hugging him so tightly, he lost his breath for a few seconds. They clung to each other, marveling at this new revelation and everything it brought. Maverick wrapped his arms as tightly as he could around her, burying his face into her hair and inhaling the sweet scent of jasmine and spice. Squeezing his eyes closed, he tried to think of a time when he’d been as happy as he was in this moment, tried to think of a circumstance where he’d been so contented, but nothing came to mind. Kaitlin was his everything. She filled in all the empty spaces in his life, the cracks in his heart and the hollow in his soul until he was complete. Falling in love with her had been easy. His only regret was that it had taken him so long to see her.

“Maverick.” Kaitlin’s whisper brushed his ear, and when he leaned back, her mouth was on his. Their kiss was long and tender, as if the profession of love had already strengthened the bond between them. It wasn’t until Maverick heard Scarlett’s voice and the excited whispers from the kids that he forced himself to break apart from Kaitlin, though he still clasped her hand in his.

“I’ll never manage to focus after this,” she murmured, leaning into him gently. “You do pick the worst times for these

things, Maverick.”

Laughing, he acknowledged it with a rueful smile. “I can’t help it. When it comes to you, I can’t hold back.” Dropping a kiss to the top of her head, he smiled back at her tenderly. “Merry Christmas, Kaitlin.”

Her eyes held his, a soft smile on her lips. “Merry Christmas, Maverick.”

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