

Christmas in Bayberry

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FROM ALL APPEARANCES, MARTHA WOULD be spending Christmas with them. And though Kate had a lot to learn about Wes's mother, she knew the woman loved chocolate. That left Wes. Nothing like saving the hardest for last.

She wanted just the right gift for Wes. Their time together had meant a lot to her and she wanted to give him something to remember her by. So far, she'd purchased a sweater and black leather gloves, but she had nothing for him that was unique or memorable.

The rest of her shopping would have to wait, though. She and Wes had agreed to deliver the Christmas baskets at lunchtime.

She headed to his B&B, but he wasn't there. Knowing how hard he'd been working, she headed to the candle company. She couldn't wait to see him. She had absolutely no idea how she was going to stand the distance when he returned to New York, but she shoved aside the disturbing thought. She'd deal with it later.

Although she hadn't been able to find anything special for him in the stores, she did have something she'd made him the night before. She hadn't been sure about giving it to him, but in the light of day, she

was feeling more courageous. And she didn't want to wait until Christmas Day.

Kate hurried home, picked up the little gift and headed to the office. The building was quiet and dark, but when she made her way to his office, she found the lights on. Wes was nowhere in sight. But he must be around, because his laptop was open on the desk. She moved behind the desk and looked for the right place to leave the heart-shaped bookmark and a copy of *The History of Bayberry*.

When she cleared a space next to his laptop, a folder fell to the floor and papers scattered. She sighed at her clumsiness. She knelt down to pick up the papers. As she did, her gaze skimmed over the sheets.

"Bayberry Candle Company" was printed across the top of each sheet. The breath caught in her throat. This was it—the evaluation of the company.

Kate knew she shouldn't look, but it was like watching a train accident: You just couldn't turn away. As she assembled the pages in numeric order, she noticed on the next-to-last sheet a header that read: "Conclusions."

Her heart clenched. She stared at the words.

Please let it be a vote to keep the business operating.

Please. Please. Please.

Her gaze skimmed down the page. And then it stopped.

Her heart stopped too.

"Recommendation: sell."

Sell? No. No. No. That can't be right.

She read it again. But that was exactly what it said. Her worst nightmare had come to life.

At the sound of footsteps, she hurriedly put everything back as she'd found it. She reached for the book, but she fumbled it, and the book landed on the floor with a loud thud. She leaned over, picked it up and rushed out the door. She couldn't talk to Wes, not right now. A storm of emotions choked up her throat.

Kate blinked repeatedly as she found her way to the back exit. Fortunately, her rubber-soled boots didn't make a sound on the tile floor as she made her escape.

"Kate?" The familiar male voice echoed down the hallway.

She came to a halt. She knew that deep, rich voice could only belong to one person: Wes.

A wave of conflicting feelings washed over her. She was excited to see him after that toe-curling kiss. And yet she was upset with him for recommending the sale of the candle company. The logical part of her brain told her it was just a function of his job—the reason he was in Bayberry. But she couldn't dismiss the disappointment that he'd confirmed the worst possibility.

As Wes approached, Kate stood frozen, torn between throwing her arms around his neck to repeat that unforgettable kiss, and telling him what she thought of his report in no uncertain terms. Instead she did neither, and just stood immobile as he blocked her way out of the building.

"Kate, I was hoping to catch up with you. Today's the Christmas basket thing, isn't it?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

He cleared his throat. "Something has come up. I won't be able to go with you. I'm sorry. I hate to leave you shorthanded—"

"It's okay." She hoped her voice sounded normal. She just had to keep her emotions in check for a few more moments. "I should be going. Excuse me."

"What's wrong?"

"I...I have to find someone to help with the baskets. Excuse me."

He moved to the side. "Sorry."

She brushed past him.

"Kate?"

She kept going, forcing herself to walk instead of run, but she didn't want him to see her face. She was losing her tenuous hold on her emotions.

How could he act as if everything was normal? Did he know what he was going to do to this town? Her heart broke, imagining this small community shattering, everyone going in different directions. None of their lives would ever be the same. Her past and future were gone.