

Christmas in Bayberry

Jennifer Faye

WES CLEARED HIS THROAT. “So you came to Bayberry the same year I did.”

“Really?” She looked at him as though trying to picture him as a kid.

He nodded. “I remember you. Ninth grade, right?”

She stared at him. Her fine brows drew together as she pursed her lips. “You look familiar, but I can’t place you. I’m sorry. I wish I could.”

“It’s no big deal.” So then why did it feel important to him? “We were just kids.”

She gave him a funny look. “I can’t believe I would forget you.”

“I didn’t forget you.” Now why had he gone and said that?

Color filled her cheeks. “I don’t even want to know what you thought of me back then. I was shy and scared of life without my parents.”

“I thought you were wonderful.” He smiled shyly. “In fact, to be totally honest, I had a crush on you.”

Her mouth gaped. “You did?”

The room grew uncomfortably warm. Why did he keep admitting these things to her? She didn’t even remember him, and yet he remembered everything about her, including the small, unsteady smile she’d given him when they bumped into each other, quite

literally, after math class. Her pen had fallen to the floor and he'd picked it up for her. It had happened right before his father uprooted them once again and moved them to Atlanta.

His gaze met and held hers. His heart was pounding. "I did."

"I feel really bad I can't remember you. There was just so much going on back then."

"I understand." He really did, now that he knew her past. "It's no big deal."

The next thing he knew, she was reaching out to him. He froze, not sure what to do. He didn't want to do anything to scare her off. It took all his self-restraint not to pull her into his arms.

But then she was there, next to him. Her arms reaching out and wrapping around him. That contact knocked down his wall of restraint. He couldn't resist her any more than he could resist drawing in his next breath.

He opened his arms to her, drawing her close. She fit into them as if she was always meant to be there. His heart pounded against his ribs. He inhaled the delicate lavender scent of her perfume. He'd never smelled anything quite so enticing. He could stay like this forever—

She pulled back. The hug was much too brief, but it was a hug all the same.

He swallowed hard, hoping his voice sounded normal. "What was that for?"

"Just because." And then she turned back to unpacking her Christmas ornaments as though nothing had happened.

He wasn't able to act as though nothing had hap-

pened, though. He stood there trying to make sense of it as his heart slowed its pace. Should he say something? Should he do something? Or should he act like it was no big deal?

“Could you take these?” She held out three jingle bell ornaments with snowmen attached.

She acted as though it hadn’t meant anything to her. His heart rate slowed. Had he read the signals all wrong? Obviously that was the case, but he wasn’t about to let his disappointment show.

Totally deflated, he forced himself to act normal. “Where do they go?”

“You can put them near the top of the tree, since they’re small.”

He did as she asked, looping the hooks over the prickly limbs. “Done. Do you have more?”

“Hang on.” She opened another box. “I have some really old decorations around here somewhere.” She opened box after box.

“Can I help you?” He wasn’t quite sure what to do.

The more boxes she opened, the more of a mess she made. He started to wonder if perhaps he should close up the boxes behind her. He looked around for the packing tape and scissors.

“Here they are.” She straightened, holding a star covered in silver glitter. “When I was a kid, I loved this ornament. I have no idea where it came from, but I loved the way the Christmas lights made it twinkle.”

He glanced at the ornament. It was nice, though not anything special, but he knew it was the memories tied up with the ornament that made it special for her.

And then she frowned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s just that I usually do a theme with each tree.”

“And?”

“And the ornaments that are already on the tree won’t go with these.”

“Well, if that’s all, it’s easily remedied.” He moved to the tree and carefully removed the ornaments. They hadn’t put many on, so it wasn’t hard to take them off. The hard part was remembering which box they went in, but with Kate’s help, he got them all put away.

And then Kate started to unwrap each old ornament. They all looked delicate, and he knew how much they meant to Kate, so he was hesitant to touch them. Each one was adorned in memories.

“It’s okay.” She stood and held out a blown glass ornament. “You can take it.”

“But if I drop it—” He didn’t want to be responsible for stealing away a piece of her past.

“You won’t.”

“But if I do—”

“Then we’ll clean it up and move on.”

His gaze met hers. “You’ll never speak to me again.”

She burst out laughing. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll have to do a lot worse than that.”

Like recommending the candle company be closed? He slammed the door on that thought. He refused to let the possible scenario ruin the wonderful here and now.

“Okay.” He took the ornament from her. “Just remember you said that.” He hung it on the tree, taking time to make sure it was secure.

“See? You’re doing fine.”

One by one, she unwrapped the ornaments and guided him as he hung them on the tree. There was something special about these ornaments. They had a lot of character. Some of them were even hand-painted. And there were so many that the tree was becoming quite crowded.

“Kate, I don’t know if we need any more.” When she didn’t respond, he turned to her. “Kate?”

She had unwrapped another ornament and paused to stare at it. It was a little angel with a gold pipe cleaner halo. Wes had forgotten all about it until that moment.

Kate’s gaze met his, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “It was you.”