

KISS MY SPARKLES

A Short Story

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Reader Note

Kiss My Sparkles is a cross over short story from two of my favorite series, The McCormicks and Ever After.

Don't worry, this cute story stands alone!

But if you've read my books before, you will recognize Scott from From This Moment and Georgia from Cherishing Happily Ever After

I hope you enjoy the sparks (and glitter) that fly between these two!

~Elena

Chapter One

SEVEN SECONDS WAS ALL it had taken to confirm that glitter, not pumpkin spice lattes, was the soul-destroying tool of Satan.

Or at the very least, would be the end of him.

Scott Harding had already had enough of the Mountain Mania summer kick-off festival that every town in the valley was participating in. Not because he didn't like fairs and festivals, he did. And it wasn't because he hated crowds or people having fun and celebrating the end of a long, snowy winter, he didn't. In fact, under normal circumstances, Scott was pretty sure he would enjoy Mountain Mania.

But these weren't normal circumstances. Not unless you counted standing behind a baking station on a stage with dozens of eyeballs pointed at you, normal.

And he didn't.

Never mind that his neighbour in this crazy competition had just arrived in what could only be described as a poof of glitter. Pink and purple sparkles spilled from a bag she'd slung over her shoulder. With two big totes in her arms, the woman

was completely oblivious as she left a glitter trail behind her, and all over Scott's station as she made her way past.

Glitter? In a baking competition?

He probably shouldn't be surprised. After all, in the little time he'd been on the fairgrounds, he'd already seen dogs dressed in head to toe plaid—matching their owners freakishly close, a poutine eating contest that involved more french fries, cheese curds and gravy than he thought possible, wood carving involving chain saws, and a boat race that as far as he could tell was just as much as decorating the boat as making sure it could actually float, let alone win a race.

In fact, the more he thought about it, a little glitter in a 'Best Buns' contest was probably pretty normal.

"I guess I missed the memo," Scott muttered under his breath with a shake of his head.

"Pardon?" The woman, totes still in her arms, blocking her view, spun around sending a cloud of glitter in Scott's direction. "Did someone say something?"

"Sorry." Scott stepped up and took one of the large tote bins from the woman's arms. "I was just commenting on the amount of glitter you—"

His words died on his lips when he saw his competition for the first time. Scott couldn't be sure what he'd been expecting from the glitter spreader, but it sure as hell wasn't the dark shiny hair with the pouty red lips and the brown eyes with flecks of gold—almost like glitter—in them.

"I what?" She tipped her head in question so that her ponytail fell over her shoulder. She looked down to her feet and immediately moved to put the other tote down. "Oh, shit. Did I...where did that come from?"

Scott watched, momentarily dumbstruck by the beauty with the massive amounts of glitter that continued to stream from a hole in her bag as she spun around searching for the cause of the explosion.

Finally, he came to his senses, reached out and grabbed her tote bag, stopping her. “Here,” he said. “It’s coming out of here.”

The woman stared at him for a minute before turning her attention to her bag. She stuck her hand inside, and a moment later, a glitter-covered finger protruded from the hole. “Shoot. How much...” her gaze travelled across Scott’s kitchen station which had its fair share of sparkly stuff, across the stage and down the stairs. “Ugh.”

She pulled a thermos out of her tote bag before tossing it down on the counter. “Will you help me?”

Scott had to assume she was talking to him since the only other people around were two other contestants on the opposite side of the stage, and a few people who’d already claimed front row seats in the audience.

Before he could ask for clarification, she had dropped to her knees and had begun scooping up the pink flakes. Scott grabbed a mixing bowl from his station and crouched next to her. She smelled sweet. Like cinnamon and...pumpkin spice.

He groaned. That pumpkin spice shit was everywhere. Wasn’t the season over yet? It didn’t seem to matter what month it was, someone was always coming into his cafe requesting pumpkin spice muffins or lattes, or something equally offensive. There was no such thing as a *pumpkin spice*. The world’s fascination with the stuff drove him crazy.

“Excuse me?” The brunette turned to him, narrowing her eyes. “Am I keeping you from something?” her sass probably should have offended him, after all, he was doing *her* a favor. Instead, it sparked something inside him. Scott liked a woman with a bit of fire.

He looked up to his workstation that he should be getting ready for the upcoming competition that he didn’t even want to take part in. It was bad enough that he was signed up, but now that he was, he refused to lose. Which meant, he should

be preparing to take down the competition. Which included her.

“Actually, I do have a contest to win in a few minutes,” he said as he held out the bowl. She rose one eyebrow and dumped in a handful of glitter.

“That’s cute.” She turned back to her task.

“What’s cute?”

“You’re not going to win.”

He sat back with a grin on his face. She was definitely sassy. “What makes you say that?”

“I always win Best Buns.” She tossed another handful into the bowl, took it from his hand and stood.

Scott stared after her and bit his tongue with all kinds of improper retorts before finally getting up off the floor. He started toward her but stopped himself. What was he going to say?

Not this time, honey.

I’ve got this in the bag.

There’s a new kid in town.

He could have laughed at himself. Hell, he probably should have. The truth was, he had absolutely no business being at the Mountain Mania Bake Off. Okay, that wasn’t entirely true. As a resident of Cedar Springs, one of the mountain towns that existed in one of the mountain valleys that made up the *Mania*, he was in fact in the right place. But he had absolutely zero business being up on the stage. He made sandwiches. Not cinnamon buns. A fact he’d pointed out more than once when Maureen McCormick, his adopted mother of sorts, informed him that she’d signed him up for the contest.

Not only did his cafe, Scott’s Stop, specialize in soups and sandwiches, but he’d also never even actually *made* a cinnamon bun before. The Cedar Springs bakery, Dream Puffs, usually entered the contest in the annual Mania Bake Off, but for a variety of reasons, Suzy, the owner, couldn’t commit this year.

So they'd given Scott their blessing along with their special no-fail recipe. No pressure.

So, there was only one thing to do.

Scott scooped up a handful of the glitter, that still didn't make sense in a baking competition, and strode over to what appeared to be his strongest competitor, if not the prettiest, who was unpacking her supplies. After all, If you can't bake it. Fake it.

Glitter. *Glitter.*

To say that it was everywhere would be a gross understatement. It was beyond everywhere. Georgia Murphy tried—and failed—to wipe the pink and purple flakes from her fingers before she began unpacking her supplies.

It was a lost cause. The glitter stuck to her like glue.

There was only one place it could have come from. Lindsay. Or more specifically, Lindsay's four-year-old daughter, Ava. The little girl was really sweet, and on the rare occasion that Lindsay had to bring her to work at Sweetie Pies because her child care fell through, Georgia didn't mind. Not really. Especially because Lindsay was her best employee and without her, Georgia had no idea what she would do.

Just like she currently had no idea what she was going to do about the crazy amount of glitter that Ava had no doubt put in her tote bag for good luck. The pre-schooler loved glitter—as most did—and she'd just finished a very serious conversation with Georgia about how she should have something sparkly if she wanted to win the competition.

She thought she'd appeased Ava by packing a bedazzled apron to wear on stage. The very one, she pulled out of her tote and proceeded to tie around her waist. Georgia finished

with the knot and looked up, right into the eyes of her handsome stage neighbour.

He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. A move that probably lost some of its impact due to the sheer amount of purple and pink on the man's arms and face.

"Is everything you have sparkly?"

Georgia looked down at her chest, where the man was very clearly looking, at the name of her bakery, Sweetie Pies. It *was* glittery.

"What can I say?" She shrugged. "I like to shine."

I like to shine?

What kind of stupid thing was that to say?

She shook her head and went back to unpacking her supplies. If the sexy stranger who had just been staring at her boobs thought she was a little weird, well, who really cared? Not her.

Nope.

She had only one thing to worry about and that was winning. For Grammie. She'd exaggerated just a little when she told the man she won every year. It wasn't so much *her* that won. But Grammie. Every. Single. Year.

Except for last year when Grammie had been too sick to compete, and Georgia was too busy trying to take care of her and learn the bakery business at the same time. Bruno, the head chef at Castle Mountain Lodge had won. But not this year. Georgia had promised Grammie she'd bring the trophy home again, where it belonged. Never mind the fact that she wasn't even remotely as skilled a baker as her grandmother, despite her best efforts. And now...there was the glitter issue.

Georgia glanced at the stage in the direction she'd come. More glitter. A lot of it. All over her neighbouring competitor's work station.

At least she wasn't alone in the sparkly category.

The giggle came up so quickly, she didn't have a chance to

stifle it. The thought of the man, with the mop of sandy blond hair that fell just a little bit over his eyes—not that she’d noticed—baking glittery cinnamon buns struck her as instantly hilarious.

“And what’s so funny over there, Sparkles?”

Sparkles?

He’d given her a nickname, that was new.

“I was just trying to picture you presenting the judges with pink and purple flaked cinnamon rolls.” She tried her best to keep a straight face, but she couldn’t stop the laughter that burst out at the image.

“Oh,” he said confidently. “You mean, just like yours?”

Her laughter died on her lips.

“You’re covered in it, too, Sparkles. In case you hadn’t noticed.” He crossed the distance between their stations and before Georgia realized what he was doing, he’d cupped her cheek gently and was using his thumb to wipe her skin.

It was the last thing she wanted to do, but she couldn’t help but close her eyes at his touch. And Lord help her, did she just *moan*? It had been a long time since a man had touched her—but not that long. And there was no way she was so hard up for some affection that this perfect stranger could make her *moan*. She snapped her eyes open and took a step back away from his touch.

If he noticed the effect he’d just had on her, he didn’t show it.

Good. Because that was—

“See?” he held out his thumb. “You’re covered in it.” He reached for his bowl that was still on her workstation, and still, full of the glitter she’d foolishly tried to pick up. “And I’m going to need my bowl back.”

He moved to tip it out onto her workstation, “No!” She stopped him with a hand around his wrist. And dammit, there was that same electric spark racing through her. She dropped

his wrist as if it burnt her and reached instead for the bowl. "Don't dump it. I'll just give you one of mine. Hold on."

For a moment, she wasn't sure he would, but he slowly put the bowl down while she rummaged in her bins for one of hers. "Here. Use this one. No sparkles. Guaranteed."

His fingers brushed hers as he took the bowl from her and he looked straight into her eyes when he said, "Too bad. I'm growing quite fond of sparkles."

Georgia was *never* at a loss for words. Especially around men. Hell, she not only held her own with the men of Glacier Falls, her hometown, but she also had a bit of a reputation of being *tough* on them. Not that she was. Not really. She'd just always made it clear that no matter what they said or did, she didn't want anything more than a casual relationship. Some men thought that was a little harsh. She thought it was realistic. Either way, her *keep it casual* policy had not only served her well her whole life, and it had also put her very firmly in the driver's seat when it came to dealing with men.

But this guy...everything about him felt different. Maybe if she had time to stop and think about what that meant, she would. But she didn't.

There was a baking competition to win.

Chapter Two

"YOU'LL HAVE TWO HOURS. Only the equipment and supplies that you brought with you, nothing will be provided." Scott nodded as Denise, the competition coordinator went over the rules but he wasn't really listening.

He kept sneaking glances at the brunette next to him who appeared to be listening intently.

"Of course, you're welcome to interact with the other contestants," Denise was saying. "The crowd usually likes a little showmanship and friendly competition. It keeps things exciting."

Exciting? In a baking competition? For the life of him, Scott could not figure out why anyone, let alone the dozens of people who were starting to fill the seats, would have any interest in sitting in the hot tent watching people bake. But then again, there were a lot of things he didn't understand.

Including why he was so drawn to the woman in the obnoxiously sparkly Sweetie Pies apron. Besides the fact that the apron, sparkly or not, was hugging her curves in a way that was practically sinful. Was it even legal for a woman to look that damn sexy in an apron of all things?

So yes, she was smokin' hot, but beyond that, she was not Scott's type.

This woman was sarcastic and she clearly had an attitude. Never mind some sort of glitter addiction that couldn't possibly be healthy. After all, who really needed *that* much glitter as a grown woman? And at a baking competition?

Scott liked his women a little less...well... he didn't really know how he liked his women. The last woman he thought he might actually be able to build something with, turned out to be in love with another man. A man who was the exact opposite of him. He'd been so sure Chelsea McCormick wanted the same things he did. To settle down and start a family. To build a life in a small town that had a sense of community about it. Where they could put down roots and...well, it didn't matter because Chelsea had chosen Lucas Lee and a life of travel and *excitement*.

It wasn't something he could compete with. Nor did he want to.

It hadn't taken him that long to get over losing Chelsea, which probably told Scott all he needed to know about how he'd really felt about her. She was a great woman. But she wasn't *his* woman. It was a realization he was completely okay with. Even if it did make him question his judgement, which is also why he'd decided to focus on his business. No time for women.

His gaze drifted to the sparkly baker again as Denise finished up her spiel about the rules. "You have about five minutes," she said. "And then we'll get started. I'll introduce each of you and where you're from. If you haven't had a chance to meet the other bakers, now would be a good time to say hi."

Scott didn't waste any time.

"Hi." He turned to his right and held out his hand. "I'm Scott Harding. I own Scott's Stop in Cedar Springs, and—"

“I know who you are.” She winked at him and gave him a sassy smile before taking his hand in hers.

“You do?” Scott didn’t know if he should be more surprised by that admission or the way her soft hand felt in his and how much he did not want to release it.

“Of course.” She tossed her ponytail back off her shoulder. “After all, you can’t go into battle without knowing one or two things about your competition, right?” She turned her back to him without giving him her name as an older woman approached them. “Nice to see you, Margie.”

“Georgia. How are you?”

Georgia. Now he knew.

“Margie, this is Scott,” Georgia said. “From Cedar Springs.”

“Cedar Springs? Is that right?” the older woman examined him. “Isn’t Susy representing Dream Puffs this year? Don’t tell me something has—“

“Oh no,” Scott interrupted quickly. “Nothing has happened. I assure you, Dream Puffs is thriving and is definitely the best and only bakery in town. I run a small cafe and I’m just filling in this year.”

Georgia looked surprised, a fact that was interesting if she had in fact, done her research the way she said she had. But he didn’t have a chance to call her on it, because Margie was talking to him. “I own the bakery in Aspen Valley,” she told him. “We make the best blueberry muffins around.”

“But not cinnamon buns,” Georgia teased.

“We’ll see, dear.” Margie smiled and pressed her hand to her chest before holding an arm out to the fourth and final competitor. “Bruno, it’s good to see you again, dear. Nice of them to let you out of the Lodge long enough to bake with us.”

It was clear they all knew each other, which made sense if they competed against each other every year. Never mind the fact that although all of their small towns were a few hours

apart, it was still an overall tight mountain community. Everyone supported each other. Except it seemed when it came to the cinnamon bun competition. It was all in good fun, but the smack talk was clearly starting to heat up.

“You may be known for honey buns, honey,” Bruno said to Georgia. “But the cinnamon bun trophy is mine again this year.”

She grinned and with confidence that was beyond sexy, Georgia crossed her arms over her chest and with a sassy smile said, “Last year was a gift, Bruno. And only because Sweetie Pies didn’t represent. But we’re back and the trophy will be coming home with me this year.”

Scott watched the back and forth with growing interest. When Maureen had all but forced him into the contest, he had no illusions of actually winning. But the more he stood and listened to these people, the more he found himself drawn into the excitement of it all.

“What if we made it interesting with a little bet?” he suggested.

The conversation stopped and three sets of eyes fell on him.

It was Margie who spoke first. “I’m far too old for gambling,” she said with a shake of her head.

The chef from Castle Mountain Lodge agreed with her. “Count me out,” he said. “It wouldn’t be fair to take all your money.”

It was only Scott and Georgia left standing in front of their workstations and she hadn’t said no.

“So?” he prodded. “What do you say? Care to make this interesting?”

There was no way she was going to lose. Sweetie Pies had *never* lost.

But that had been with Grammie doing the baking.

Still.

She looked into the man's eyes. She'd lied earlier when she said she'd done her research on him. It had been a while since she'd been to Cedar Springs, she'd been completely preoccupied with Grammie and taking over the bakery that she didn't have a whole lot of free time and she certainly didn't have the time to get out of town much. Still, word travelled fast in the valley and she vaguely remembered hearing about a new cafe and a young man who'd moved to town to open it.

She hadn't heard anything about how good-looking he was though. And he was. There was something about him. A boy next door, casually sexy and oh so cute something. And it *had* been a while since her friends with benefits arrangement with Travis Bishop had fizzled out. What could it hurt? And really, what better way to celebrate her win?

"What did you have in mind?"

His slow smile lit up his eyes and sent a flutter low in Georgia's belly.

"When I win—"

"You mean when *I* win," she corrected him.

He chuckled and ran a hand through his mop of hair. "Okay, let's try this." He crossed his arms over his chest. "The loser buys the winner dinner."

"Dinner? At a fair?"

"I didn't say it had to be tonight." He winked. "But sure, why not. I've had worse dinners than corn dogs and funnel cakes. Plus, I'm pretty sure I saw some sort of deep-fried chocolate bar on my way in."

Georgia groaned. "Really?"

"Absolutely." He wiggled his eyebrows. "What do you say, Sparkles."

Oh yes, her stomach definitely flipped when he called her that. She inhaled a deep breath and exhaled slowly before answering even though she already knew what the answer would be.

“You’re on.” She extended her hand. “But dinner has to be tonight. I just want to say upfront that I’m not interested in dating anyone right now and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

To his credit, Scott didn’t say anything right away. He raised his eyebrows and nodded as if he was thinking about it. “One date.”

“Not a date.”

“One date sounds perfect,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “I’m not looking for much more than that right now anyway.”

She nodded and despite the fact that it was her that set the ground rules, she couldn’t help but be a little disappointed in his response.

“One more thing.”

She tilted her head.

“Winner gets a kiss.”

She dropped her hand. “A kiss? That’s bold. You’re assuming I would want a kiss.”

“You’re assuming you’re going to win.” Again with the eyebrow wiggle.

“We both know I am.” She extended her hand again. “So I guess I’ll make up my mind on that kiss after you buy me a fancy fair dinner.”

He grinned and they shook on it. “It’s a deal, Sparkles.”

“It’s Georgia.”

“I know.” For the second time since they’d met, Scott reached out and touched her face. This time, her nose. An innocent touch, but it did all kinds of not so innocent things to

her thoughts. He held up his pink and purple coated finger. “I think Sparkles suits you.”

As if there were some kind of magnetic force pulling them together, Georgia found herself leaning in toward him, completely oblivious to the crowd that was gathering just beyond the stage or the fact that they were about to go head to head in a competition that meant far too much to her grandmother for her to lose.

“Thirty seconds!” Denise’s voice broke whatever spell Georgia had been about to fall under. She shook her head and quickly moved around behind her workstation. She did one last scrub of the countertop in an effort to eliminate as much of the glitter as she possibly could while Denise began to address the crowd.

Georgia was introduced second. She waved at the audience while they cheered for Sweetie Pies before blowing a kiss. It was only after Denise moved on to Margie’s introduction that she dared look over at Scott. He was watching her intently, a small smile on his face.

Men never frazzled her, and if that’s what Scott was trying to do to throw her off the competition, he was in for a surprise. It was going to take a whole lot more than a sexy smile, and some strong arms to get her off her game. She was more determined than ever to bring the trophy back home for Sweetie Pies and Grammie. But she’d be lying if she said there wasn’t more to it than that.

Never had the prospect of a corn dog and a snow cone for dinner sounded more delicious.

Not to mention the kiss she’d get for dessert.

Chapter Three

BAKING WAS HARD ENOUGH. The precise measuring and mixing wasn't at all like the intuitive way he was used to cooking. It was way too much like science class as far as Scott was concerned. Not creative and fun like pulling ingredients together to make a delicious soup or stew.

And *stressful*.

Knead the dough.

Not too much.

Don't over mix. Get the ratios of nuts and raisins just right.

Bake till golden brown.

No. Not dark brown.

Not light brown.

Golden brown.

It was crazy-making in the best of times let alone when dozens of people were staring at you watching your every move. Both cheering and taunting your every move. Who knew cinnamon bun baking was so bloody competitive? It was all a little too much and if it hadn't been for his promise to Maureen McCormick, and the fact that he was representing

his entire town, he would have packed it in after the first ten minutes.

Who was he kidding?

There was no way that Scott would have quit. He was definitely not a quitter. Especially not with Georgia only a few feet away looking hotter by the moment. There was a whole lot more riding on these buns than a simple trophy or town pride.

A lot more.

The only thing he could think of as he rolled out the dough and sprinkled it with the exact amount of sugar before rolling it *just right* was how sweet Georgia's kiss was going to be.

"How's it going over there, Sparkles?" Scott glanced over his shoulder to Georgia's station half expecting to see her covered in flour and sugar the way she had been with glitter earlier. What he hadn't expected was to see her so composed, sliding her tray of buns into the oven.

The oven?

How was she so far ahead? And she didn't even look like she'd broken a sweat.

She closed the oven door before looking at him with a sly smile. "I just put the winning buns in the oven. How are *you* doing, Scottie?"

Scottie?

He hated it when people used his childhood nickname. But for some reason, it sounded both sinful and sweet coming out of her pink lips.

"Don't you worry about me, sweetheart. There's a new winner in town." Scott hoped like hell he sounded more confident than he felt and no doubt than he looked.

The crowd cheered reminding Scott they weren't alone.

"They love your banter," Denise, the announcer muttered to him as she walked by. "Keep it up."

He wasn't sure he'd ever seen someone more invested in making a small town bake-off such an *event*. But he had to

admire the woman's dedication. "No problem." But first, he had to focus on the task at hand. All the other bakers had their buns in the oven. He was behind.

Scott rushed through the slicing of his dough and pressed them all into the pan before quickly sliding it into the oven. He glanced at the time on the clock and said a silent prayer. It was going to be tight, but there should be enough time for the buns to bake properly. He set a timer on his phone and set to work cleaning up his station enough to make space to mix up the cream cheese icing topping.

Cognizant that he was running out of time, Scott all but ran to the back of the stage where Sparkles had her head deep into the fridge he needed to get into. "Are you almost done?"

Georgia spun around so quickly that Scott didn't have a chance to react, let alone avoid the glass jug of milk Georgia was holding.

"What the...oh my...Oh!"

Georgia watched with a mixture of horror and disbelief as the milk she was holding splashed in a giant white wave up and out of the glass jug and directly into Scott's face. She'd been digging in the back of the fridge for the special butter she'd stashed there for the icing and was deep in concentration running through the recipe in her head that she hadn't heard him come up behind her and then...

"I'm so sorry," she said as Scott slowly opened his eyes. Two bright spots in an otherwise creamy face. The effect was so hilarious, Georgia couldn't help herself, she doubled over and started to laugh.

"I suppose this is part of your master plan," he said slowly, his voice laced with humor. "Blind the competition with fresh milk."

She tried and failed to control her laughter. They'd drawn the attention of Margie and Bruno who both glanced behind them and shook their heads at the sight.

Georgia forced herself to swallow her laughter and focus on Scott. She pulled the cloth out of her apron string at her waist and started dabbing at his cheek. "I really am..." *Nope*. She still couldn't talk without laughing.

"You think this is pretty funny, don't you?"

Scott's lips curled up into a smile and Georgia nodded. At least he wasn't upset with her or worse, actually thought she'd done it on purpose. "I can't help it," she said. "You look really cute with milk all—"

"What?"

She realized her slip a little too late. She froze, the towel she was using to wipe his face, still in her hand.

"So you think I'm cute, do you?"

For a moment she considered denying it. But she'd never been shy before. Why start now?

Georgia shrugged and resumed wiping her mess, but Scott's hand on her wrist stopped her short. "I think I have it figured out now," he said slowly. "It's all part of your plan to win so I'll take you out on that date." His eyes flashed with humor and challenge.

He wasn't entirely wrong.

At least about the date part.

It wasn't a great idea. After all, he lived in a whole different town, over an hour away from her and she had her hands full with the bakery and Grammie's health. The last thing she needed was to get involved with a man. But she'd been clear that it would be nothing more than that. He'd agreed.

It was just dinner. And maybe a kiss. And maybe...

That's how Georgia had preferred her relationships with men for the last few years. Casual and no strings. No pressures and no expectations. And maybe a man in a different town

altogether was exactly what she needed. Because when you were trying for *casual* dating there was no place smaller than a small town where everyone knew you and your business.

And she no longer had the time or patience for that.

She narrowed her eyes and fluttered her lashes a little. “You caught me.” She gave the cloth one final wipe across Scott’s nose before tossing it at him. He caught it against his chest as she started to turn away. “Oh, and you’re right. I do think you’re cute.” She winked as he shook his head, a grin on his milk-covered face.

“You know what, Georgia? I think you might just be trouble.”

She stopped and looked back at him. “You *think*? Sweet-heart, I *am* trouble.” This time she blew him a kiss before she started walking away. “And one other thing,” she said when she got back to her station as the buzzer on her timer rang out. “I’m also about to win this competition.”

Chapter Four

"IT WAS A TOUGH COMPETITION THIS YEAR," Denise spoke into the microphone, her voice booming over the small crowd. "Wasn't it judges?"

The judges turned out to be randomly selected people from the audience. Scott had held himself back from asking which town they all hailed from. It seemed clear by the hooting and hollering that the crowd was fairly partial toward Georgia. Not that he could blame them, she was gorgeous with that apron hugging all her curves, and that smile...yup. He was pretty partial toward her himself.

Even if he did have the crowd on his side, it's not like it would help him win anyway. That much was clear by simply looking at the platters of cinnamon buns on the table at the front of the stage. His buns were woefully inadequate compared to what the other competitors had turned out. He was confident they were delicious, but they looked like a half-assed attempt from a middle schooler in a home economics class compared to the professional products that sat next to his on the judging table.

If he hadn't been confident in his other cooking skills, and

the fact that his consolation prize was almost for sure going to be taking the very sexy and increasingly flirty, Sparkles on a date, Scott might actually even care that he was about to lose.

“It’s always nice to see new faces at Mountain Mania,” Denise was still talking into the microphone. “And of course, our fan favourites as well.” The half-hearted applause turned into a roar as the other three bakers bowed dramatically. Scott couldn’t help it, he shook his head and chuckled. Maybe he should be used to it by now, but the enthusiasm the residents of small towns had for such minor events would rival that of a professional hockey game or rock concert. It was crazy, and also, awesome. He would take the energy of a small town over the relative indifference of the big city residents any day.

“And that brings me to this year’s results...”

Scott refocused on the moment as Denise began drumming on a table. Soon, the crowd picked up on the drum roll. He glanced over at Sparkles who winked and blew him a kiss.

Oh yes.

No matter what the results were, as far as he was concerned, there would be no losing for him tonight. He wiggled his eyebrows in return and she laughed before looking away.

“In fourth place..”

Scott braced himself to hear his name. He dropped his head and stepped forward on the stage.

“Aspen Valley!”

Scott raised his arm in a wave and froze. Had she said *Aspen Valley*? Stunned, he turned to look as Margie took her place next to Denise. The announcer gave him a look and gestured with her head for him to get back in line.

A little stunned, he stepped back to stand next to Georgia who’d moved closer to him along with the baker from Castle Mountain Lodge on his other side.

“What just happened?”

Georgia laughed. "I should have told you, Margie always throws the competition."

"What?"

"It's true," Bruno said with a nod. "Every year. But it's always different."

"Keeps us guessing," Georgia said. "That's for sure."

"Last year it was salt instead of sugar."

"Seriously?"

Georgia nodded. "That was an obvious one. I wonder what—"

"Allspice instead of cinnamon," Margie herself answered with a grin when she rejoined them in line, proudly holding her fourth-place ribbon.

"Oh, good one." Bruno laughed.

Margie's smug smile had Scott shaking his head. "This is getting better and better."

He was prepared this time when Denise announced third place and he accepted his ribbon with a dramatic bow. Someone in the crowd yelled out, "Cedar Springs rocks!" Scott waved his ribbon in the air and rejoined the others for the awarding of the grand prize winner.

Next to him, Georgia looked visibly nervous. Her fingers played with the hem of her apron and her eyes darted around the stage, unfocusing.

Without thinking, Scott reached over and threaded his fingers through hers. He squeezed gently until she looked at him. "You got this," he whispered.

"Thank you." She gave him a small smile and closed her eyes as Denise started her monologue to announce the winner. Scott wasn't listening, not really. He was watching Gregoria intently as she was declared the winner of the Annual Best Buns Mountain Mania Bake Off. She released his hand and raised her arms in a little cheer as she walked to the front of the stage leaving him with nothing but a few flakes of the ever-

persistent glitter on his skin and the bone-deep desire to touch her again.

It wasn't until Georgia had finished packing up her supplies and pulled her still glitter-covered apron off—how *did* that stuff stick to *everything*?—that she called her Grandmother to tell her the news.

It was a short conversation, that was all Grammie could handle without becoming too exhausted and no doubt she'd be wound up enough from the news that the trophy was coming home again, but Georgia was smiling when she ended the call and slid her phone into her back pocket.

“So?”

She spun around at the voice. *Scott*. He was leaning against his own, now clean, baking stand and she couldn't help but notice just how handsome he was when his sandy brown hair flopped down over his forehead.

“I'm not one to renege on a bet,” he said. “And you won fair and square.” He stood up and walked toward her. “I still think glitter might have been your secret weapon. That one judge was dressed in head-to-toe pink. She was clearly swayed by your sparkle.”

Georgia's mouth fell open in protest. “I had no idea who the judges would—” the argument died on her lips as she realized Scott was just teasing her. “You did pretty well yourself,” she said instead. “Third place is nothing to sneeze at.”

They both laughed knowing just how badly he would have had to screw up to come in fourth with Margie's expert self-sabotage.

“So?” He asked again. “How about that date? After all, you *are* the winner.”

“We didn't say it was a date.”

Undeterred, Scott grinned. “Well, we did say dinner and there was a promise of a kiss. I’d say that’s a date.”

His confidence was sexy but Georgia was conflicted. She should get home to Grammie and make sure she was okay. Although, her neighbour and friend, Avery had just texted her telling her that everything was fine and to stay at the festival as long as she wanted. And she *was* overdue for a little fun. When was the last time she’d been able to get away and let loose without worrying about Grammie and her medicine, or if she was sleeping enough, or not leaving the stove on, or... “Okay,” she said before she could change her mind. “But I turn into a pumpkin at midnight. Deal?”

He nodded solemnly. “I promise to let you go back to the veggie patch at midnight.”

She laughed. “Okay. Why not?”

“Why not indeed? Maybe I’ll even win you a teddy bear to go with your trophy?”

Georgia laughed. “Oh, that definitely makes it a date if you’re going to win me large stuffed toys.”

“I said, *toy*.” He held up one finger as they started walking together toward the door of the tent and the fun that lay beyond. At least, Georgia assumed it was fun. She’d never been a big fan of the festival, even as a teenager when groups of kids from each town would meet up and turn it into a big party.

Okay, *especially* as a teenager.

Besides her next-door neighbour, Avery, Georgia didn’t have a big group of friends. Unless you could count the boys that only wanted to use her for one thing, *friends*. And she didn’t.

She’d made her share of bad decisions when she was younger, but those days were long gone. She was a grown woman who owned her actions. Now it was *her* choice to keep people at arm’s length.

Georgia risked a glance at Scott who was looking around at

the lights and carnival games as if he were a little boy who'd never seen such attractions before. She couldn't help but smile at his open joy. It was refreshing to be with someone who wasn't trying to be someone they weren't. Even better that he didn't know a thing about her or her past.

He caught her looking. "What? Do I have something stuck in my teeth?" His hand flew to his mouth. "It's glitter, isn't it?"

She laughed and shook her head. "It's not glitter."

Scott glanced behind him at the dart-throwing game they'd stopped in front of. Giant stuffed sloths hung from the frame of the booth. "It's the sloth, right?" He pointed to the pink and purple furry creatures. "You want me to win you one." He nodded his head so seriously, Georgia couldn't help but laugh and agree.

"For the champion baker," he said as he pulled out his wallet. "Anything." He winked at her, and despite every reason in the world that she knew she shouldn't get attached to this man, a thrill raced through her.

It's just one night of fun. That's it.

Scott handed over a twenty and the teenage attendant gave him three darts with instructions that he had to pop at least one balloon to win a prize of his choice. "No problem," Scott said and turned to Georgia. "Kiss for good luck?"

She laughed in response, but instead of being deterred, Scott shrugged and gave her a wink. "You're right, I don't need luck. I'm a much better shot than I am cinnamon bun baker."

Georgia shook her head and stepped back to give him room as he aimed, threw and...the dart bounced off the balloon. "It's like that is it?"

"Maybe try harder," the kid suggested with a shrug. Georgia bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing out loud. Her face was starting to hurt from all the smiling she'd done with Scott but she didn't care.

Scott shook his head. “Solid advice.” He took aim, threw the dart and...it too bounced off the balloon.

He looked at her, but Georgia had no advice to give. “How about that good luck kiss?” He grinned hopefully.

“Hmm...” she pretended to think about it. “I don’t know, I mean first it was the cinnamon buns and now the balloons...”

Scott chuckled. “Fair enough. It’s only winners for you, Sparkles.” He winked dramatically, kissed the dart and turned back to the board. The dart sailed through the air and *pop*.

Chapter Five

JUST LIKE HE knew it would, Scott's third and final dart found its mark and burst the balloon sending red bits of latex flying. He turned a grin splitting his face. "Your sloth, my lady." He waved dramatically toward the brightly colored stuffed toys.

"I'll take a pink one."

"I'd expect nothing less."

The kid handed Scott the giant sloth and he had the pleasure of awarding it to Georgia. "It's huge!"

"That's what she said."

He wiggled his eyebrows and Georgia burst out laughing. "Is that right?"

"Maybe one day you'll be lucky enough to find out." He was teasing, but her laughter faded and the smile he was very quickly starting to fall for, slipped from her face.

"Cocky, aren't you?" She finally said as they walked away from the game. Her voice was playful, but the smile still hadn't returned.

"I was just kidding, Georgia." He reached for her arm and pulled her to a stop next to a cotton candy booth. The giant pink sloth was between them, but it didn't stop him from trying

to get closer to her. "I didn't mean anything by that comment." It was important for her to know that. "That's not the kind of guy I am."

She tilted her head, taking in the information. "And what kind of guy are you?"

More than anything he wanted to be the kind of guy that moved that blasted stuffed animal out of the way, pulled her tightly to him and kissed her senseless. And maybe with a different woman, at a different time, he might be that guy. But not with Georgia. He got the sense that she was a bit like a wild rabbit that would be startled by quick movements. Fine with him, he was content to move slowly if that was what it took to get to know her better because he couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed himself so much as he had at the Mountain Mania festival and Scott was smart enough to realize that enjoyment was directly connected to one person in particular. Besides, he'd lied earlier and agreed to nothing serious, just one date. One night. If he moved too quickly now, their night might end prematurely. He might be a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them.

"I'm the kind of guy who will win you a ridiculously large pink stuffed sloth and then carry it around on my back for you all night while I buy you that dinner I promised you." He reached for the stuffed toy which Georgia gave up willingly. It really was absurdly large.

Fortunately, the toy had velcro on its paw so Scott could link it around his neck like a backpack.

"You look ridiculous."

"I think you meant, ridiculously cute."

She laughed. But didn't disagree.

Georgia looked over his shoulder. "What do you think of cotton candy for that dinner?"

Without missing a beat, Scott said, "I think cotton candy makes the perfect side dish for corn dogs and slushies."

A few minutes later, with their feast in hand, Georgia found them two empty seats on the bleachers where the lumberjack competition was about to take place.

"This is very *mountain town*," Scott said, using his corn dog to point toward the competitors who had assembled on the stage, axes in hand, in front of large logs. "I mean, if I were to guess an event at a mountain mania, this would totally be it."

"Not cinnamon bun baking?"

"Well...I would have said no way, but now, I see just how serious you all take your cinnamon buns."

"Right?" She laughed. "I have to admit. I've lived in these mountains my whole life and I don't even understand why some of these traditions exist. But this one," she gestured to the log chopping competition about to take place in front of them. "It is one of the cooler things about this festival."

"It's not even close to the coolest thing I've seen."

"You haven't even—" her words dried up when she turned back to see him watching her intently. Georgia swallowed hard. "Oh."

She recognized the look in his eyes. If she were being honest, it probably reflected her own.

Still. No matter how she might be feeling at this exact moment, it would change.

Scott just wasn't her type. She knew that without even *knowing* it. He might have agreed to her *just one night terms* but she wasn't blind.

Scott had *settle down and fall in love* written *all* over him.

The exact opposite of what she needed. Georgia's type was casual. No strings. No commitment. Then no one—especially her—could get hurt. She'd spent her whole life being used by men, it wasn't until she flipped the narrative, that things had

changed. She'd been in control when she was the one making the rules.

And it had worked, too.

Until lately.

Still, even if things were changing for her and she might be starting to think that she could have something different. Something more. It wasn't enough. She didn't all of a sudden miraculously have time for a man in her life. Especially a man who lived in a different town. It wouldn't do any good to lead him on when there could never be anything more than this one date with them. No matter how many butterflies he was giving her.

Scott leaned toward her, closing the gap between them until they were only inches apart. Conflicted, her body yearned for the kiss her brain was trying to talk her out of.

"Georgia, I—"

"You have a little ketchup there." She moved quickly and swiped her finger along his bottom lip at the imaginary mark before sitting back and taking an obnoxiously large bite of her corn dog.

Scott sat back, disappointment lined his face, but there was a flicker of something else there, too.

Not that she was looking.

She wasn't.

Shit. She was.

Fortunately for her, a moment later, the horn blasted and they were swept up in the competition as the four men and two women on the stage started wildly swinging axes sending wood chips flying.

Chapter Six

"CAN you believe how fast they did that?" Thirty minutes later, Scott, still amazed after witnessing the first two events in the lumberjack competition was suitably impressed. "I mean, the axe was one thing," he continued. "But the saw? Have you ever tried it? It's not as easy as it looks. I mean, not that they made it look easy. Okay, yes. Yes, they made it look *very* easy."

"They are pretty incredible," she agreed with a laugh.

He half-turned as they walked, to look at her, the sloth swung on his back and almost took out a man with a small child on his shoulders. "Sorry," he mumbled and offered a wave before turning back to Georgia.

"We can go back," she offered. "I mean, there were still two more events and—"

"No!" He answered without hesitation. "I mean, as much as I was enjoying it, I don't want to spend the whole night there."

What he didn't say was that as fun as the competition was to watch, there wasn't much of an opportunity to talk to Georgia while they were cheering, and definitely, there were no

opportunities to kiss her. And he very much wanted to try that again.

They were having such a fun time together. Their banter was easy and not forced at all. There was mutual flirting and he was almost positive he hadn't misread any of the signs. At least he was pretty sure he hadn't. If he was being honest with himself, going in for a kiss in the middle of a corn dog dinner was probably not his smoothest move. She was right to put him off. He could do better. She *deserved* better.

Maybe he was a sucker for punishment, but Scott was an eternal optimist.

"Besides," he said. "This is my very first Mountain Mania and not only that, it's my very first date with you." He wiggled his eyebrow at her, and she laughed.

"I keep telling you, it's not—"

"Oh you know it is." She gave him a look so he quickly added, "You won the bet after all. I owe you a date."

"You owed me din—uh oh!"

The sloth slipped off one shoulder and he jostled to lift it higher while she reached out to grab it. Georgia's hand ended up brushing his arm as he repositioned the large toy. Without missing a beat, Scott flipped his hand over and captured hers in his. His fingers twisted through hers until they were holding hands. She didn't try to pull away.

He'd take that as a win. Just as he'd take her little smile when she didn't think he was looking as a win, too.

At first, he thought she might be playing hard to get, but it wasn't that. And unless his radar was completely off—and he didn't think it was—she was enjoying her time with him, too. He'd bide his time a little longer.

"So what else is a can't miss when it comes to Mountain Mania?" He squeezed her hand, but just a little.

"Well, we've already done the important things," she said. "The cinnamon buns obviously."

“Obviously.”

“And dinner was delicious.”

“Sure was.”

“The lumberjack competition is pretty spectacular.”

He nodded and didn’t take his eyes off her. “We’ve established that.”

She gave him a sidelong look and before he could react, with his hand still in hers, she pulled him to the side, away from the crowd and the bright lights of the midway, to stand in the shadows of the funhouse. It was just dark enough that they wouldn’t be spotted if anyone they knew happened to walk by, which was a very real possibility since both of them had already waved and greeted half a dozen people each. But there was still enough light that Scott could see her beautiful eyes as they stood close together, it was an exercise in patience not to try and kiss her again.

“You really want the full festival experience?”

“You know I do.”

Especially if it involves you and me and a cheeky kiss. He refrained from telling her about the experience he really wanted.

She pressed her lips together in a little smirk and shrugged one shoulder. “Okay,” she said slowly. “But you have to be ready.”

He was more than ready. But, in the interest of playing it cool, Scott laughed and said, “What’s next, Sparkles?”

She glanced around but no one was watching them, which was some sort of a miracle in a small town, let alone a *gathering* of small towns. She let go of his hand to unzip her purse and lift out a small hot pink flask.

“Seriously?” Scott looked from the flask up to her, his eyes wide in shock. “You want to get drunk?”

“What?” She smacked his chest playfully. “No! I’m not seventeen anymore.”

That earned her another strange look but she had no intention of explaining how the festivals of her youth had ended. Usually with her drinking a bit too much and making out—or more—with a cute boy from a neighbouring town. One who’d never call her or come to visit the way he’d promised he would and leaving her feeling used and foolish for weeks afterward.

There were a few memories from Mountain Mania she’d rather not relive.

“It’s just enough for a few sips,” she said with a shrug. “And...it might have been my secret weapon earlier.”

He eyed her suspiciously and took the flask from her hands. Slowly, he unscrewed the top and smelled the liquid inside before bursting out laughing. “Fireball? No way?”

Georgia batted her eyelashes and shrugged casually. “I said it *might* have been my secret weapon. Not that it *was*. I can’t go revealing all of my secrets to my competition now can I?”

She took the flask back, took a small sip of the cinnamon-flavoured liquor and passed it to Scott, who still laughing, also took a nip.

“Come on,” she said. “I really do have something else to show you.”

Together, they slipped away from the noise and crowds to the grassy hills just behind. There were a few clusters of teenagers dotted here and there, but mostly they had the hill to themselves. She reached again for his hand because, despite herself and every reason why she shouldn’t lead him on in any way, it had felt nice earlier. And Georgia could use more *nice* in her life.

They got to the top of the hill, and just as she’d hoped, they had it to themselves. She turned, her hand still in his and together they looked out over the bright lights of the festival below. “What do you think? Isn’t it beautiful?”

There was something about the juxtaposition of the lights and sounds of the festival and the stillness of the mountains and the stars that were just starting to appear overhead that had always mesmerized Georgia.

“Yes,” Scott said softly. “Very beautiful.”

When she looked at him again, her suspicions were confirmed. Scott wasn’t looking at the view at all but was staring directly at her. Her stomach flipped when he squeezed her hand. “Is this the part where you tell me what a great time you’ve had with me today?”

“I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun losing.” He slipped her silly pink sloth off his shoulders and sat it on the ground at their feet before moving closer today. “I mean it, Georgia.” His hand cupped her cheek in such a gentle and unexpected touch, her eyes closed. There were dozens of reasons why kissing Scott was a bad idea, but then again, why did it have to be anything more than a kiss? She leaned in as his thumb started stroking small circles on her skin. “Today,” he continued. “Has probably been the—“

A loud pop and bang overhead jarred them from their moment, each of them jumping backward as the firework show started right on time.

“Whoa!” Scott laughed. “I was not expecting that.”

Georgia took his hand and together they laid side by side in the grass for a better view of the bursts of colour exploding overhead.

“This is what you wanted to show me?”

She nodded. “It’s my favourite part.”

“Mine too.” Scott watched her. His face lit glowing orange and blue with the explosions of color. “I’m starting to have a serious thing for glitter,” he said as a shower of pink fell through the sky all around them. It really *did* look like glitter.

She smiled and watched him, watching her as the fireworks filled the sky all around them with bright bursts of colours.

“You know what?” She propped herself up on one elbow so she could look down on him a little. “I had a great day, too. I mean, I did win the trophy,” she added quickly and he laughed. “And the bet,” Georgia continued. “That was the best celebration dinner I’ve ever had. But I seem to remember there being one other prize that I haven’t claimed yet.”

“Oh yeah?” He rubbed his lips together, moistening them in a way that made the butterflies in her stomach start-up their dance. Again.

She nodded and before she could remind herself why it wasn’t a good idea, she leaned over him until her lips met his and let herself have this one moment.

She tasted of cinnamon hearts, spicy and sweet. The kiss started soft and sweet, but when he reached up and threaded his fingers through her hair and pulled her down closer to him, she moaned, just a little, and they deepened their connection.

It was the perfect end to their perfect day, not that Scott wanted it to end. Not even a little. Not when they’d both agreed to disappear into the night at the stroke of midnight.

But it wasn’t midnight yet.

When she pulled away, there was a soft smile on her face. Scott glowed with the knowledge that he’d put it there. Making this woman smile had very quickly become one of his favourite things to do.

“You taste like cinnamon buns.”

Georgia’s laugh filled the night air and Scott mentally corrected himself. Making her *laugh* had become one of his favourite things to do.

“I taste like fireball,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Either way.” Scott reached for her and pulled her back to him. “You’re delicious.”

His lips were about to greedily go back for seconds, but she slipped her hand between them, over his mouth.

"It was just one kiss." She smiled but wouldn't meet his eyes. "That was the prize, right?"

"I think we've moved beyond that." He once more tried to pull her close, but still, she held him off.

"I really like you, Scott."

"I really like you—"

"And today has been—"

"Fantastic."

"It has." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "But we agreed. This is all it can be."

He hated that he'd agreed to that. If he could only go back in time...they never would have had the night they had. He knew that in his heart. She never would have agreed and they wouldn't be here right now.

"Georgia, I know." She let him pull her up against him then until every inch of their bodies were pressed tightly together. "But judging by my watch, there are still twenty minutes until it's officially midnight and I plan to use all of them to my full advantage."

"Mmm..." Her eyes twinkled in the last of the fireworks. "I think I'd like that."

"Me too, Sparkles." Scott traced his finger over her lips.

Twenty minutes. He'd let her go then. It would be the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he would, for her.

For now.

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