

*Miniature
Rose*

*Christmas in Noelle...where love and laughter
are always at the top of Santa's list!*

A Cinderella Christmas



Sweetheart Rose



Stacy Dawn

A Cinderella Christmas

by

Stacy Dawn

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Cinderella Christmas

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Stacy Dawn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First Sweetheart Rose Edition, 2008

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my fellow Princesses of the Pen....our tiaras are a little crooked, but then, so is our outlook on writing, love and life. I couldn't have done any of this without all of you.

www.princessesofthepen.blogspot.com

Kudos for the tales from the loveably eccentric town of Noelle, Alberta!

CHRISTMAS ON PAROLE: 5 HEARTS FROM THE ROMANCE STUDIO!!

This is a great fast-paced book guaranteed to be hard to put down. Ms. Stacy Dawn has written a book which absolutely mesmerized me. This story perfectly depicts small-town USA. The judge's character was detailed enough to make the reader feel sorry for her, but hope for the best. Deke was the epitome of God's gift. The other characters were wonderfully depicted—they make you feel you know them well.

I loved this book and highly recommend it to everyone. It's a great read, holiday or not.

~Reviewed by Brenda Talley,
The Romance Studio

There isn't anything about Christmas on Parole not to like. The premise is laugh-out-loud funny, the characters are endearing and the dialogue is perfect for the situation. I completely enjoyed this Stacy Dawn tale and plan to read more from this author in the future. Her sense of timing is super. Her characters seem to say the perfect thing at exactly the right moment. There were more times than I can remember when I giggled while reading this. I enjoyed wondering if Deke and Laney would get together. Nothing about Christmas on Parole disappointed me. It was entertaining all the way through.

~Reviewed by Marlene, Fallen Angel Reviews

Chapter One

"You're getting me *what* for Christmas?" A puff of flour darted from beneath the gingerbread dough when the rolling pin dropped from Angie Bellini's frozen hand. The small kitchen behind her family's bakery shop rose another few degrees as she glared at her mother.

"I know. I know." The squat woman cackled, her thick accent clipping the words as she pulled a pan of steaming gingerbread men from the oversized oven. "I should wait five more days to Christmas but you no like surprises very much. So I think"—a thin shoulder rose as if her thoughts were obvious—"why not tell little early? Give you chance to help me find you right stud midget."

"Stud muffin," Angie corrected automatically. She swiped at the painful crease in her forehead with her arm. They were not having this conversation. "But Mama, how do you just up and decide to get me *a man* for Christmas?"

Her mother pulled off the oven mitts and patted Angie's cheek. "Angelina, you turn twenty-eight next month. Way past time to find special someone." Her hand gave an affectionate slap, the creases around the dark eyes crinkling. "And get me bambinos I want many Christmases now."

Cheek stinging, Angie threw up her hands in frustration. Flour splattered over the rolled sleeves of her red shirt, the front protected by the pale blue apron boasting the Bellini's Bakery logo. "Mother—"

"What? You no think I can pick out good man for you?" Her mother harrumphed, grabbed two metal cookie cutters and started stamping out more

gingerbread men in a flurry of hands. "My mother chose you father for me—God rest his perfect soul. You can be sure I able to choose right man for my daughter."

Angie's lips twitched. Due to her mother's penchant for baking when angry, their small town of Noelle, Alberta always knew when Nicko and Vita Bellini had been arguing. The next day, the display cases in their little corner shop overflowed with sweet treats.

Exasperated, she grabbed a spatula and transferred the cut men onto a baking sheet. "I know you mean well, Mama, but I don't need you to find me a man."

Stamp-stamp. Stamp-stamp-stamp. "We see."

The bell above the shop door rang before she could deter her mother's crazy idea any further. Quickly washing her hands, Angie slid her gaze up to the clock. Nine-fifteen. She knew exactly who waited on the other side of the display counter. "Hey, Santa," she greeted, entering the main storefront.

Just like clockwork, Santa Claus Holloran munched on a sample of the double chocolate muffin she'd laid out earlier that morning. One hand rested on the round belly covered in red overalls over a thick woolen sweater while the other brushed the crumbs from his bushy-white beard. "Hello, my dear. How are you today?"

"Good..." *If you don't include my mother's insane Christmas gift.* "The usual?"

"You bet," he mumbled around another sample. "Can't get my morning started without one of your cinnamon buns and a cup of your mama's cocoa."

"You old flatterer, you," her mother cooed, bustling out of the back room.

The bells above the door rang again and Angie spied a familiar olive thermal coat back into the bakery.

A Cinderella Christmas

"Ian! Just man I want to see." Her mother's smile grew as she waved him around the display cabinets.

Setting Santa's order on the counter next to a small silver and blue Christmas tree, Angie caught the wink Mr. O'Connor sent her mother.

"Now that's what I like to hear," he said with a wide grin beneath a thick, salt-and-pepper moustache.

Mama playfully slapped the heavy-coated arm and tapped the top crate of the dolly he'd wheeled inside. "Our secret ingredients," she said, turning to nod crisply at Santa Claus. "Fresh milk, eggs."

"Well, they sure do the trick." The jolly man toasted her with his cup of cocoa.

Below Santa's raised arm, Angie caught a glimpse of a dark khaki uniform. She sidestepped to glance around the big man's red overalls. "Jimmy? That you hiding back there?"

Clumps of freckles jumped out from pink-tinged cheeks as the young Constable slid off his snow-dusted Stetson. "Yes'm. I, uh, thought I'd stop by early for, uh, coffee today."

Angie smiled at the shy man and waved him forward. "Well, come closer and I'll get you fixed up." She turned to the carafe on the back counter. "Do you need one for Lou as well?"

"Uh, yes. C-constable Dano would sure appreciate that."

At the hesitant stutter, she glanced back over her shoulder. Jimmy Green had always been a timid one but she found something odd in the way his gaze flicked from his boots to her mother and back again. "You okay there, Jimmy? You seem a little...out of sorts today."

"Um, well..." His focus slid once again to her mother.

Odd. What's going on?

“Come,” her mother said, ushering Mr. O’Connor and Santa into the back room. “We leave young alone.”

The hair on Angie’s neck jumped straight up. With everything in her screaming not to, she forced her good business sense to prevail and shifted her gaze back to her current customer.

Jimmy licked his fingers and brushed down the cowlick dead center of his hairline. “I was, uh, wondering if you’d save me a dance...at the weddin’ this weekend?”

Angie frowned at the man before her who, in the past four years since he’d joined Noelle’s small police unit, never once looked at her past a friendly greeting. Her jaw ached from a tight clench before she released it enough to ground out, “*Mother.*”

In the sudden silence of the bakery, Jimmy’s police radio at his shoulder crackled.

“Jimmy,” Constable Dano’s voice screeched over the static. “Get on over to Quickie Shots One Hour Photo...we got some mug shots to do—a trucker just decapitated Rudolph!”

Angie could relate—she wouldn’t mind doing a little decapitation herself.

Chapter Two

Where the bells above the bakery doors used to fill her with anticipation at the next friend, townsfolk or tourist to talk to, they now caused Angie's shoulders to tense something fierce. She closed up another box around an apple pie and added it to the plastic crate ready for her morning delivery.

Blowing out a heavy breath, she turned, thankful she did so or she might have missed the finest derriere she'd seen in a long time back through the door. Too bad her mother's idiotic Christmas gift—one that repeatedly entered the bakery for the last twenty-four hours in various shapes and sizes of single men—had turned her off the opposite sex.

Still, she couldn't help the tilt of her lips as she scanned the jean-clad legs curving into a tight male backside.

"Hey, there," she called out. "How can I do you today...I-I mean what can I get for you today?" She bit her lip at the unintentional slip. Obviously, her mother was bringing in the big guns.

The heavenly broad shoulders angled. A rugged chin nodded, setting a lock of jet-black hair to a lazy swing over crystal blue eyes.

"Wes?" Geez, when had he gotten so...big?

"Mornin', Angie."

Her mother flew out of the back room, arms flung out in welcome. "Just man I want to—"

The exuberant welcome froze along with her mother's step. Angie pressed her lips together to

hold in a grin as silver brows dipped low over a stern glare.

“Wesley.”

The tone held all the steel pressure of a car crusher and Angie muffled a giggle. Poor guy. Looked like her mother still hadn’t forgiven him for the Blueberry Pie Incident senior year of high school.

Angie gave him credit for not backing down from the ‘Vita glare’. Actually, she gave him credit for a lot more as amused lips smiled above a strong jaw.

Wes O’Connor had been something to look at in high school. Back then, his hair had been longer, denim jacket covered in rock band graffiti, and jeans skin-tight. Angie’s glance ran down his length as he backed the dolly the rest of the way into the store. Hmmmm, looks like some things haven’t changed. Sure, she’d seen him around town but not so...up-close and personal. Ten years of adulthood and working on the family dairy farm had made him, well, ten times better. His grin still held a mischievous sparkle as he touched the tip of his ball cap with two fingers.

“Mrs. Bellini. Nice to see you again, ma’am.”

Angie could almost see the steam rising from the silver-streaked top knot as a mumbled slew of Italian curses hovered under her mother’s breath.

“Where your papa?” she snapped.

Wes leaned a casual arm on the top crate. “He took a bit of a spill last night on some ice near the barn. Sprained his ankle. I’ll be taking over the deliveries for the next week or so.”

Her mother ran an agitated finger through her hair, and Angie could almost see the debate taking place between reluctant acceptance and kicking him out on his sexy derriere. A derisive snort and tight nod finalized the decision.

“Back,” she snapped, hiking a thumb over her

shoulder. "You unload. I get streusel take home to poor papa."

"Yes, ma'am." Though he responded to her mother, his eyes twinkled at Angie.

She chuckled aloud this time in the shared amusement. "Compliment the gingerbread men on the decorating rack," she whispered as he rounded the display cases. "Might get you a step or two out of the doghouse."

"Thanks. Something tells me I'm gonna need all the help I can get." He winked.

She heard his deep voice rumble an enthusiastic compliment just as the bells above the door rang again. Turning, she smiled. "Santa. Little late this morning, aren't you?"

The grinning man wiped his hands on a handkerchief as he entered the store. "Oh, had a little errand to do first, dear. Hope you've still got some of those cinnamon buns."

"For you...always. Gotta stay on the nice list you know."

His boisterous laughter filled the small bakery.

"Sure was a show at the high school court yesterday," she commented as she filled a cup of cocoa to go with the glazed confection. "Don't you think the judge was a little hard on that trucker, Mr. Halls?"

"Yeah, Laney was kinda rough, but I have a feeling she knows what she's doing, or is about to."

His eyes glinted with gleeful mischief as she set his cup on the counter. That Santa, always up to something.

"Better make that three cups this morning then...and three of the cinnamon buns too. Deke Halls is spending his first day on parole helping Jess unload the new batch of Christmas trees. Dirty and tiring work that is."

"Speaking of, your beard's not so fluffy white

today, Santa. Been working on the sleigh?" she teased, twisting two more cups into a cardboard carrying tray.

He held a hand beneath the white mass and frowned. "What's that?"

"There, on the ends." Angie pointed to the black mark all the more distinctive against the bright white whiskers. "Looks like you dipped it in grease."

The tips of Santa's cheeks reddened as he shoved the dirty whiskers in the bib of his forest green overalls. "Oh, uh, yes," he stuttered. "Will have to be more careful next time."

Chuckling, she pulled out a box and grabbed the tongs for the cinnamon buns. *Strange. I could have sworn...*she frowned at the last four buns, wondering where the other dozen had gone. They were sure selling out awfully fast lately. She'd have to make a note to double the batch this afternoon.

She put three of the sticky buns into the box. "And how is Jess managing? Getting nervous yet with her wedding only a few days away?"

Santa's smile returned bigger than ever. "She's doing good. As for me, I don't know if I'm ready to give away my little girl just yet?"

"I wish my mother felt that way," she muttered as another ring of the bells brought the seizing tightness to her shoulders.

In small towns, everyone had their own schedules and rarely deviated from them. Case in point, had this been three o'clock in the afternoon when the Nester Twins usually dropped in for their three-donut-two-regular-coffees each, she wouldn't have the burning twist in her gut screaming she was about to be propositioned...again. Sheesh, her mother had given her the one Christmas present that never ended.

In unison, the red handlebar-mustached men slid their striped toques from their matching heads.

Mirror-image rusty tuffs sprang out, the bashful smiles took a few moments longer.

"Hello—" Zachariah started.

"—Angie," Zeke finished.

They shuffled to the counter. The color of their cherry cheeks almost matched the ends of their bulbous noses, red from the brisk winter winds—or more apt, from the special cider they were infamous for producing.

"Hi guys," she greeted with a tight smile.

"We was wondering—"

"—if you'd save us—"

"—a dance at—"

"—the weddin' this weekend."

There it was again, almost word for word, the same question repeated by more than a dozen of the single male townsfolk...and even one not so single.

Their hats twisted in their hands as green gazes flicked in unison from the cookies and muffins in the counter's display window back up to her.

She herself flashed a glare over her shoulder at her mother whose face was conveniently turned away. "Sure, I guess." She huffed in annoyance and returned her gaze back to her customers. Their wide, hopeful eyes made her soften her words. "I mean, of course. I'd be happy to. But why just a—"

"Great!" they beamed in unison.

"We'll—"

"—see you then."

And they were out the door faster than she could ask why just a dance. What was her mother up to?

Santa's box still in hand, she turned to face her adversary in the back room. Pleased to see Wes still alive, she stepped through the doorway. "Mama, I—"

"Don't you drop milk or I box you ears!" The angry glare at Wes softened when turned on her daughter. "Oh yes, Angelina! Go, go. You be late. You need leave in hearse."

"Hurry," she corrected, peeved at her mother's over-eager attempt to avoid the subject.

"Yes, yes. Hurry, hurry," she repeated, taking the box from Angie's hands. "I take care of Santa."

"Mama," Angie hissed, unable to stop her foot from stomping at the brush off. She grabbed her ski jacket from behind the door and shoved her arms into the sleeves.

"What?"

"What?" she repeated. After a quick glance to Santa's interested smile, she lowered her voice. "You know what." Angie grabbed an order box from the pile and stuffed the last pie inside. "The Nester twins, Mama? Come on, they're ten years older than me, for goodness sakes!" At the dismissive shrug from her mother, she slapped a Bellini seal on the box and punctuated the motion with a final warning. "Just stop your games. I do not need nor want a man for Christmas."

Her mother slid her a stern glare as she stabbed the cash register buttons. "I know what my daughter needs."

The no-argument tone grated on Angie's already tight nerves. This wasn't working, she needed another approach to get through to the stubborn woman. "This conversation isn't finished," she snapped, putting the last pie atop the others and hauling the carrier into her arms.

An insolent chuckle swung her head around.

With a grin on his face, Wes maneuvered the dolly out of the back room.

His arm grazed her shoulder and, despite their heavier clothing, the shock of unexpected electrification sent her anger flying. "What are you laughing at?"

His smile grew. "Not a thing...Cinderella."

"Cinderella? *Cinderella*?"

"Sure." One big shoulder lifted in stifled

A Cinderella Christmas

laughter. “Sounds like you’ll be doing a lot of dancing at the ball this weekend...which prince will be holding the lucky slipper, do you think?”

Chapter Three

One thing Wes knew about Noelle...don't piss off Mrs. Bellini. And the theory appeared to hold true for her daughter as well. Still, he couldn't help the chuckle as he watched Angie storm out of the bakery. With the thick, dark ponytail jerking over a stiff back, she looked cuter than she had back in high school.

He nodded to Mrs. Bellini's stern glare. Was the woman ever going to forgive him for a youthful mistake? It was only one blueberry pie, for cripe's sakes!

"See ya, Santa," he called as he wheeled the empty dolly around the display case.

The door suddenly slammed open, sending bells into a frenzy as Angie stomped back into the bakery. "The wagon won't start. I don't understand, she just got an overhaul last month," she grumbled as she brushed snow from the purple shoulders of her ski jacket.

Her pert little nose crinkled in an angry fit. Probably best he couldn't understand the mumbled words sprouted by the rapidly moving, ruby-red lips.

Wes sidestepped out of the way as she pushed passed him to slap her hands on the counter in front of two more delivery crates full of Bellini Bakery boxes.

"Want me to take a look at your car?" he offered.

"No!"

"No."

Both women had shouted at the same time and his brows jumped as they turned to glare. Sheesh,

when did deliveries become life threatening?

Angie released him from the Bellini glare first and threw her hands up in the air. "Why does everyone think I need a man and/or his help?" she shrieked.

Angry fireworks lit her eyes and sparked a curve of his lips. She sure had the darkest brown eyes he'd ever seen, then and now.

Okay then. As much as he would've loved to stare some more, self-preservation took over and he collected his dolly with the intention of a hasty getaway.

"What am I gonna do? Donny's Market is expecting these pies for their 'Picnic in December' promotion."

The evident frustration in Angie's voice made him pause for half a second. *Don't do it, man. Get out while you still can.* He grabbed for the door.

"What about Wes?"

His hand froze on the handle and he gaped at Santa's suggestion.

Swiping a few crumbs from his beard, Santa nodded out the window. "Surely he can fit a few crates of pies in that big ol' truck. Don't you deliver to the market too, son?"

Blue eyes twinkled under the white bushy brows, his smile a little too nonchalant. What was the old man up to? "Yes, sir. I do," he answered hesitantly.

"No. Absolute no."

Wes shifted his gaze over his shoulder to the senior Bellini. For once he agreed with her.

Beside her mother, Angie's dark eyes contemplated his truck through the window. She glanced from his truck to the pies then up to him.

The hopeful yet concerned expression took root inside his chest, just above the burning in his gut telling him he should have stayed home today.

"I'd hate to put you out."

He glanced at the pursed lips, disapproving eyes and shining, grey-bunned head next to Angie, and a little, defiant spark of youth took over his common sense. "Wouldn't be a problem at all." Wes turned the cart around and maneuvered it back behind the counter. "Load 'er up." Now, he wasn't a stupid man so he kept the dolly between him and the stiff hands slapped to Mrs. Bellini's hips.

"No!" She waved a finger in front of him. "I no have this bad boy..."

"Mama, please." Angie lifted a crate off the back counter. "Would you rather all these pies go to waste? Or lose the business of such a good customer as Mr. Donny?"

Wes held back a chuckle as he watched the comical war on the older woman's face.

"Fine," she clipped. "But better be no problems. Or I make sure O'Connor family ends with you!" She held her hands at groin level and twisted her fists. "*Finito, capiche?*"

"Mama!"

Wes gulped at the evil eye glaring his way.

Huffing her nose in the air, Mrs. Bellini disappeared into the back room.

"Well, I think I'll get these treats home," Santa said into the silence. "You two kids have a good day."

"See ya, Santa," Angie said, setting down the crate on the dolly and waving.

Wes raised his own hand but, for some unfathomable reason, the bells tolling the jovial man's exit made an ominous sound.

Chapter Four

Snowflakes melted lickety-split on her heated cheeks as Angie climbed into Wes's truck. "I apologize for my mother. She's always had this uncanny ability to hold grudges." She snapped on her seatbelt. "But she's really harmless...I think."

"I hope you're right. My future descendants may just depend on it." Wes's chuckle filled the cab of his truck.

At the unsettling reverberation in her chest, Angie shifted in her seat.

Soft strains of Christmas carols flowed from the radio as he blew out a breath and rested a casual arm against the driver's side windowsill. "Once that lady gets something in her head, there's no getting it out, is there?"

Angie snorted. "You don't know the half of it. You already heard she's trying to find me a man for Christmas." She narrowed her eyes. "He-e-ey, being a resident male under the age of thirty-five, you probably know more about those details than me."

"Well, actually—"

She held up her hand before he could say another word. "Don't say it, please. Yes, I'll save you a dance too." She dropped her hand and fiddled with the undone zipper of her jacket. "You were right. She's set me up to be some freakin' Cinderella. At this rate, I better plan to wear running shoes to the wedding reception."

"I was just kidding. Honest, I—"

"Never mind, but tell me"—Angie turned, working her leg up to rest on the seat—"What is

with this saving a dance thing? You can tell me. I won't rat you out to my mother, promise."

Wes's brows furrowed.

The action drew her gaze to those extraordinary crystal eyes. In school, she'd thought they were sexy as hell. Truth, they still were, and staring at her expectantly. "Well?" she encouraged. "What are you waiting for?"

"To see if you've got more to say or if I can finish a sentence yet," he replied on a hardy chuckle.

"Oh." She bit her grinning lip. "Sorry."

"Now, as I was going to say," he began with a broad smile, darting his gaze from the road for a moment. "I have no idea what you're talking about. All I know is what I heard in the bakery this morning." He adjusted his hat and replaced his hand on the steering wheel. "Your mom is really trying to find you a man for Christmas?"

"Stop laughing." Angie shot her leg off the seat and twisted forward, folding her arms over her ski jacket. "It's not funny. A freakin' pain is what it is."

His laughter quieted but still rumbled in the truck.

She tightened her arms across her chest to block out the undesired effect on her upper anatomy.

"I'm sorry."

If the grin wasn't still plastered to his face, she might have believed him.

His gaze grazed up and down her length before returning to the road. "Why don't you just tell her you don't swing that way? Get it out in the open."

"What!" Angie gasped and spun to face him, finger wagging in the air between them. "I'm not...not...I don't...*that* way. I like a hot guy just fine, *thankyouverymuch*. And let me tell you something else there, bucko. I can have any man I want. I'm a damn good catch. Men beg at my feet for my cinnamon buns."

"Okay, okay." He held up a surrendering hand. "I'll take your word for that. I've always been more of a simple chocolate chip cookie kinda guy."

Her favorite kind—of cookie...and guy. The cab of the truck grew too close for comfort. "Whatever," she huffed. What was she trying to prove anyway? Her goal was to keep away from men right now, not try to impress them.

"So," he began a few minutes later as they turned off the main street. "Why don't you just tell your mother you don't need her help?"

If you had a uterus, you wouldn't be asking. Angie rolled her eyes then pinned Wes with a could-you-have-asked-a-stupider-question glare.

"Yeah, good point." He quirked a lip. "You don't just tell Vita Bellini anything."

"You got that right." She propped an elbow onto her own windowsill and dropped her head against a hand. "I don't know what she's trying to accomplish with this scheme, but it's not gonna get her the grandkids she wants. That's for sure." From the corner of her eye, she saw Wes's head pivot.

"You don't want kids?"

"Sure I want kids," she replied slowly. "But with the right guy, not just anyone off the street." Angie sat straight and tossed a hand towards the snow-lined streets and rows of family homes beyond the large windshield. "Whatever happened to waiting for the guy who makes your heart pop into your throat, that steals the air from your lungs until you can't breathe?" She sucked in a breath, her lungs tight with the fervor of her ardent plea. "The one you can't take your eyes off for fear he'll disappear or...or..."

The tips of her cheeks burned and she turned away from the growing tilt of Wes's lips.

"Why, Cinderella, I do believe you're a romantic at heart."

The wistful tone caused her mutinous eyes to

sneak a peak back—she wished she hadn't. His smile heated the cab another few degrees and Angie had to look away again for fear of combusting. *Where has a man as hot as this been hiding all this time?*

He flipped a hand off the steering wheel. "I don't see why you have such a problem with going to the ball then...all those princes and all vying for a place on your dance card. Seems like every woman's dream."

"Fat lot you know about a woman's dreams. Being paraded like a charity case in front of a reception full of men—most of whom used to watch me run around naked in the wading pool, put frogs in my boots in grade school and tried to peek up my skirt in high school—is just humiliating and definitely not any dream I want to be a part of, that's for sure." Angie put her hands to her face and groaned. "How am I gonna get out of this!"

"Well..."

Holding her breath, she peeked between her fingers, wary and hopeful at the same time. "Well what?"

Not taking his gaze off the road, Wes adjusted the brim of his cap. "Your only other choice is to find out what your mom is promising these men and then up the stakes to get them to back down. Worse case scenario, you'd at least figure out her plan and have more ammunition to stop it."

"Yeaaaaah." Angie gnawed on her lip as the sudden light of hope dawned. "Good idea...if anyone stuck around long enough for me to ask what's going on. The minute I say yes to a dance, they split like the hounds of hell are at their feet."

"Not too far off where your mother's concerned," he smirked.

Angie swatted him on the arm. "Stop, this isn't funny." Which might have been true if she could've stopped laughing.

“What I need is someone on the inside. Someone who could find out...” She grasped his arm, squeezing hard through the jacket to the solid muscle beneath. The smile on her face near pulled her cheeks apart.

Wes’s disintegrated as he flicked his wary gaze between her, the road and back again. “What?” The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. “Why are you looking at me like that?” Like he was about to be sacrificed at the altar of beautiful women...again. Last time that happened...well, this morning at the bakery proved he was still being punished for that one.

“My mother hasn’t gotten to you yet—”

“That’s because she hates me.” He looked away from deliciously gleeful chocolate eyes. “Have you forgotten the pie incident ‘cause your mom sure hasn’t.”

Angie’s hand flew up as she waved him off. Her whole body practically leapt off the seat in excitement.

To his chagrin, she rolled with the new idea.

“You have to go to her and pretend you’re interested. Tell her you’ve heard of what she’s doing and want in.” She faced forward in her seat, speaking more to herself. “Yeah, you go in and pretend you want to dance with me and—”

“No way.” For the sake of his future offspring, he had to nip this in the bud, now. Unfortunately, Angie ignored him and kept rambling a hundred miles a minute.

“You say she hates you, but think of the brownie points you could gain. Sort of like an old-fashioned, asking her for permission to date me type thing.” With a beaming smile, she clasped her hands together under her chin. “She loves that etiquette stuff.”

“But I don’t want to date you...I mean...” Wes

shifted in his seat, clenching and unclenching the steering wheel. How had everything gotten turned around? Sure, at the bakery, after seeing those beautiful brown eyes flare from friendly to frustrated to hopeful all in a span of fifteen minutes, he knew he wanted to know her a little better, again. Maybe pick up where his youthful mishap had detoured them.

But this was not how he pictured getting the date. He glanced sideways at her cute little nose scrunched in contemplation—of him. Wes gulped and darted his gaze back to the road.

The zip-zup-zip of her playing with the zipper on her jacket etched into the sudden silence.

“A-are you dating someone?” she finally ventured.

“No, but—”

“Engaged?”

“No, but—”

“Married?”

“No,” he bellowed over her rapid interrogation. *Geez, let a guy get a word in edgewise here.*

Instead, she twisted around, leg back up on the seat again as comfortable as if she’d ridden in the truck a thousand times before. “Then what is it? Is it me? You find me ugly, repulsive?”

“No, Angie, come on!”

In truth, her position grazed her knee against his hip, sending currents of awareness straight to his chest. Repulsive? Not even close.

He focused his attention on the mid-morning street, counting the huge snowflakes to cool himself down. How had a simple delivery job become so complicated? He now realized why his father handled this end of the business. Ian O’Connor was a people-person while Wes preferred the uncomplicated company of the farm.

Slender hands latched onto his upper arm,

effectively melting the snowflake theory.

“Please. I need help and you’re all I’ve got at the moment.”

With tight lips, he tried to focus on the road, but his gaze kept flicking back to her hands clenching his arm.

“For old time’s sake, Wes. Please.”

He made the mistake of glimpsing the dark eyes, big and round and rivaling any kicked-puppy-dog-look he’d ever seen. His jaw ticked tight, and he felt himself caving.

Be strong this time, Wes.

The hands around his arm pulled in small, pleading tugs while her lips quirked in a mischievous tilt. “I’ll bake you a special batch of chocolate chip cookies...” she coerced. “Three batches...better, a dozen!”

No use—the minute she batted those lashes, he was a dead-man-driving. The only choice left was to chuckle and shake his head in defeat. “Dad likes them too. Make it a dozen and you got yourself a deal.”

“Oh thanks, Wes,” she squealed. “You’re a real pal.”

His smile twitched to a wince at her euphoric outburst. Being her ‘pal’ was least on his list at the moment. They’d picked up right where they left off in high school—big brown eyes messing with his good sense. And, judging by this morning’s events at the bakery, he wasn’t finished paying for the first time.

Chapter Five

What the hell am I doing?

Snow pelted Wes in the eyes as he stood before the decorative wreath hung on Bellini's Bakery's door later that afternoon. He swiped the wet flakes from his face and remembered the glow on Angie's face as they worked out a plan. He was to talk to her mother while Angie was at Lulu's Dress Shop looking for something to wear to the dreaded wedding reception. Then they'd meet at Bitty's Diner later that evening to compare notes.

Shaking his head once again at the ease to which a pair of beautiful eyes duped him into this crazy scheme, he pushed through the door. The bells tolled his downfall as Mrs. Bellini's welcoming smile evaporated. The tight silver bun on her head shifted forward as her brows tightened low on the wrinkled forehead.

With a heavy breath, Wes scraped off his ball cap and ran a hand through his hair.

"What you want, Wesley O'Connor?" Mrs. Bellini spat. "Angelina said all good with delivery. I no have to see you 'gain for two days."

"Yes, ma'am. All went fine." He glanced over the bakery, glad the two-seater tables around the perimeter were vacant. This was humiliating enough without an audience. "I actually came to speak with you."

"Me? Why I want talk with you? I no have nothing to say to you." Her thick accent drifted as she zipped into the back room, coming out a moment later with a tray of cinnamon buns.

“Well, uh...” Shit, this is ridiculous. He couldn’t even get out the words and felt like a gawky teenager under that steely gaze. Humiliation—take two. “I heard around town that you, uh, were looking for a good man for your daughter.”

Mrs. Bellini didn’t look up as, with quick, deft fingers, she transferred half a dozen cinnamon buns to a bakery box and closed the lid.

In disgust, he squeezed his eyes shut. This was so stupid. He had no problem talking to the lady this morning, even chuckling at her hostile remarks. You’d think he was asking her for her daughter’s hand in marriage, rather than a fake date. He cleared his throat for courage and stared at the brim of his cap. “I was hoping you might give me a chance...to dance with your daughter.”

Shrieky laughter filled the small storefront. He glanced up to find the squat shoulders set.

“You? No be ridiculous,” the thick accent rang with harsh humor. She set aside the box and started to fill another. “You no good enough for my daughter.”

Wes’s shoulders tensed and his gut burned. “Excuse me?”

“You hear me. Now go.”

To give himself a moment to calm down, he rubbed a hand over his clenched jaw. Her slight hit him square in the pride. Forgetting his discomfort and Angie’s plan, he stood tall and looked the woman straight in the back. “With all due respect, ma’am, as of two years ago, I am legally full partner in my family’s dairy farm. I work hard to make sure we stay updated and meet all our quotas...*yours* included. We may not be wealthy but we’re financially sound and a wife—I mean girlfriend...” He cleared his throat. “Any woman of mine would never want for anything. I look after my own, ma’am.”

She turned and glared over the display case. "Nice speech, but you kind of man no good." A furious finger pointed to her hair. "Turned me purple. You junior debutant," she spat, aiming the finger at his chest.

"Juvenile delinquent?" he muttered.

Her scowl proving they were the words she'd meant.

Wes blew out a heavy breath. The damned pie incident. "That was an accident and years ago. Some people do grow up, you know."

"Some," she agreed crisply. The look in her eye, however, clearly indicated she did not include him in her quotient. "Now, you go. I have work to do."

Wes clenched his teeth and stared at the woman who blatantly ignored him as she divvied up more sticky buns into two other boxes. Before his jaw threatened to lock, he adjusted his hat back on his head and stalked through the door.

"And leave Angelina alone!"

Chapter Six

“Not good enough? Not good enough!”

Wes downed another mouthful of coffee. He hadn't even tasted his Bitty's Burger through the bitter taste left on his tongue from the conversation with Mrs. Bellini. Angie repeating her mother's pride-stinging words didn't help.

She dunked another fry in ketchup and waved it in front of him as if about to say something and thought better. She puffed up her bangs with a heavy breath then shoved the thin spud between her lips instead.

As the dark hair settled back on her forehead, his gaze was drawn to the fired eyes heavy in thought, down the pert nose and to the sensual lips pursed as she chewed. Thinking of those particular lips handed out to 'any guy off the street' made the burger in his belly churn. He pushed away his plate and sat back in the booth.

A hard flick stung his knee and he jumped.

“Hey, Blueberry Boy. Something wrong with my burger now?”

Rubbing the bruised spot on his leg, Wes glared down at Bitty, the diner's owner. With his goatee barely clearing the table line, the short man darted a hand out to grab the half-empty plate, his other hand fisted and ready at his side—his stance like a pissed-off bulldog. The image wasn't far off.

Wes rolled his eyes. *What is up with everyone today? I can't catch a break!* Choosing to ignore the little man's first comment, he crossed his arms on the table. “Burger was fine, Bitty. Just lost my

appetite.” He ended the sentence with a pointed gaze to Angie.

The elf-sized man—not that anyone dare mention the ‘E’ word for fear of having their kneecaps rearranged—harrumphed and grabbed Angie’s plate. She frowned and snatched the last two French fries before it disappeared below the table.

“And you,” Bitty directed to her, his chin raised in a stiff jut. “Save me a dance at the wedding.” And on that snarled command, he hustled back into the kitchen. Moments later, his dark head popped up in the order window with a loud, “Deanna! Order up,” bellow and a hand slapped to the bell.

Angie slumped forward, face buried in her hands. “Geez, I can’t believe she’s doing this to me. Who does she think she is?”

Wes clenched his jaw with a side glance to the grumpy diner owner. “I don’t know. But your mother is pissing me off royally. I’ve half-a-mind to switch her whole milk to skim next order.”

Angie’s eyes popped wide over her hands. “You can’t. I need the whole milk for my cinnamon—”

Wes threw up a hand. “Geez, I’m not a teenager anymore,” he snapped. “And a damned better business man than that.” He swiped his hat off the table and stood. “Why can’t your family see that?”

Jamming his hand in his pocket, he pulled out a few bills, dropped them on the table and stormed out of the diner. He couldn’t wait for his dad to get better because he was damned tired of leaving Noelle establishments that way.

“Wes, wait!” Angie frowned, snatched her scarf and mitts from the bench seat and followed. She’d never meant for this to get so out of hand. And poor Wes, he didn’t deserve the brunt of a situation that was none of his fault.

The snow had eased, leaving the moon free reign to glow bright upon the surrounding snow banks and

broad shoulders of the man stalking down the sidewalk.

She jogged to catch up and hauled on a thick arm to stop him.

He did, but wouldn't look in her direction.

"Wes, come on. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry for my mother." She shook her head. "Worse, I'm embarrassed by her, okay?"

The muscles beneath her hands tensed along with her chest but she tugged until he looked down, catching her breath at the anger streaking silver lightning bolts in the crystal eyes. Angie held on tighter, more so due to the fact her knees had suddenly lost all bone mass.

She cleared the lump from her throat. "My mother had no right to treat *you* that way. Your father is always telling us how proud he is of you, both as a son and a damn good business partner—his exact words."

The lightning bolts softened to a grey-blue shimmer of amusement. They sparked again as he pointed a finger to her chest. "She has no right to treat you this way either. Like you're some...some heifer at an auction."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't just hear you call me a cow," Angie teased. She released his arm and stepped back, unsure if her grin came from the return of her balance or from the matching one smiling down with all the brightness of a Christmas star.

Needing to get a sudden rush of nervous energy out of her system, Angie wove her scarf around her neck, stuffed trembling hands into her mitts and jerked her head toward the sidewalk for them to continue walking.

Wes fell into an easy pace beside her. "I'm sorry too," he began after a few silent moments. "I didn't mean to get angry. It's not your fault. Just...being

told I'm basically lower than dirt kinda stung the pride, know what I mean?"

She slid a grin at the hunched shoulders. "Yeah, I can imagine."

He kept his gaze on the sidewalk ahead. "I'm also sorry I couldn't help you more with your problem."

"Hey, not your fault." She nudged him with her own shoulder and chuckled. "Just happened the one person I asked to help me is the last man on earth my mother wants to see me with."

"Shove the knife in a little deeper, why don't you?" He nudged back, his chuckle circling in wispy puffs of winter air between them.

Angie giggled, fascinated with the way the multi-colored Christmas lights danced across his eyes. Distracted, her boot slid over a patch of ice. Arms flailing, she gasped as sure, strong hands latched onto her shoulders, preventing a nasty and potentially embarrassing fall.

"Steady on those slippers there, Cinderella."

Wes's chuckle fanned her cheek. She looked up with the intention of laying into him to stop calling her that ridiculous name, but the moon positioned itself perfectly behind his head, highlighting blue streaks in the jet-black hair beneath his ball cap.

Breath whooshed from her lungs and she swore some fairytale animation flickered before her eyes. She shook her head slightly. It must have been all Wes's talk of Cinderella, slippers, and princes.

Okay, maybe he hadn't mentioned princes but he really wasn't a half-bad looking one with those sexy eyes and inviting lips gravitating towards her.

Her own body drifted up on her toes and her chin tilted up. *I wonder what it would be like to kiss a prince.*

"Wait," Angie pulled back, hands clenching his upper arms in excitement. "That's it!"

"What's it?" he whispered, lips tilting.

"You can still help me." *Brilliant! He's perfect! Why didn't I think of this before?* "Be my prince...I-I mean my boyfriend...I mean my pretend boyfriend."

Wes jumped back like a sprung Christmas tree. "What?"

"No, no, no," she giggled. He took another step back and she grabbed his arm before he could run. "Work with me here, this is perfect." His horrified expression—like she'd been infested with Mad Cow Disease—told her differently so she rushed on before he tried to escape again. "The wedding is in what...four days? Maybe if my mother sees that I've found someone, she'll leave me alone." She gave his arm a little tug. "Not to mention leave all the poor single guys in town alone too."

"You can't be serious." His hand came up to ward her off. "She hates my guts!"

"Exactly. This will teach her a lesson to boot." Angie laughed at his quirked brow and fearful eyes. "She wants me to get a man, fine, I got one. The fact that she thinks you're the wrong one is karmic."

He pulled from her grasp. "Don't you mean 'comic' as in ridiculous?"

"Come on, Wes," Angie cajoled. "It'll only be for a few days. We'll teach Mama a good lesson."

Firm jaw clenched, he stared down, eyes narrowed.

She couldn't fathom what he warred with but she wasn't ready to give up just yet. "What's wrong? You don't find me attractive? I repulse you?"

"No, Angie!" His hand rumpled thick black hair. "We've been over this...no."

She tapped down the unexpected little trill in her chest with a laugh. "Then what's the problem? We go out to dinner, maybe hit the Reindeer Games together. It's just for show, Wes." She crossed her arms over her chest. "If you do this, I may even

forgive you for calling me a cow.”

“I didn’t mean...” His defensiveness fled on a defeated chuckle. “Fine, sure, why not? I’m knee deep already.” He mumbled the last bit as he turned and continued walking down the moonlit sidewalk.

Grinning wide, Angie skipped after him. She rubbed at the sudden fullness in her throat. Hmm, hope I’m not coming down with a cold...or something worse.

Chapter Seven

"I no allow it!"

Angie hid her grin and added another sprinkle of cinnamon to the dough rolled out on the backroom table. "I'm not a kid anymore, Mama. I can date who I want."

The blast of Italian curses muttered low and angry from behind made her bite her lip against a full-blown laugh. This was working out better than she could've imagined!

Sure hands on her shoulders spun her around. "But why him?" Above the pursed frown, pleading dark eyes begged her to change her mind.

Angie wasn't about to comply and instead, extricated herself from the thin fingers. "Wes and I had a lot of time to talk and catch up yesterday during the deliveries. He's a good guy, Mama. Besides, I thought you liked Mr. O'Connor."

"Father, yes. Son, no." She waved adamant hands low in punctuation.

Angie rolled her eyes. "But the Blueberry Pie Incident was so long ago. Can't you just forgive?"

"I never forgive for purple hair. So humidifying!"

"Humiliating," Angie amended.

"Humidifying, humil-i-a-ting—no care." Her hands flew out to full wingspan. "You still make big mistake."

Frustrated, Angie threw her own hands up. "I don't get it! You wanted to see me with a man. Now I am—and you're still not happy." And she didn't get why the conversation was making her angry when her mother's ire was the target. Wes sure didn't

deserve the bull's eye she'd stamped on his forehead.

The telephone's shrill rang through the small room. Angie slapped the flour dust from her hands and stalked to the small desk in the corner. "Bellini's Bakery." She cringed. The words came out a little harsher than she meant.

"Angie?"

At the sound of Wes's voice, her angry pout flipped upside down, pulling the corners of her lips into her cheekbones...and setting her heart beat on high blender speed. "Wes!" She pulled the one syllable out into a long, sing-song note and twisted to her mother. She was rewarded with a sneer and prompt view of her mother's stiff back. "So good to hear from you, Wes. Looking forward to our date tonight," she said loud enough to make sure her mother heard every schmoozing word.

"Uh, yeah, about that..."

Angie smirked at the hand her mother threw back in annoyance. "Hmmm, sorry, Wes. You were saying?"

"I've been having some problems with the truck and am still working on it. I'm sorry, but I'm gonna have to cancel tonight."

Angie spun back to the desk. The blender in her chest hiccupped and died. She white-knuckled the phone as Wes continued.

"Santa Holloran came to pick up Dad for their weekly Euchre tournament and I gotta get this fixed for the deliveries tomorrow."

"Oh." The disappointed word popped out before she could check herself. Angie rubbed at a sudden heavy spot in her chest before a snicker from the other side of the room brought her back to herself. "Oh, sure, Wes," she sang, pulling off the best acting job she could for her audience of two. "I understand. You get the truck fixed and I'll see you tomorrow then."

With a glimpse sideways, she couldn't help but notice the smile on her mother's face—in direct contrast to the hesitant, low tone speaking in her ear.

"Yeah, sure. Tomorrow." A long pause preceded a muttered, "Nite, Angie."

The phone clicked off in her ear but she held the cold enamel receiver close to her mouth. "Can't wait to see you too, honey," she drawled then cradled the receiver back in its home on the desk.

The heavy feeling had gone from her chest but she preferred it much more to the remaining hollow disappointment. Until this moment, she hadn't realized how much she was looking forward to seeing him again.

"Soooo, he cancel on you already." Her mother snorted and waggled a finger. "Nice try, Angelina. I know you try trick me. He no someone you really date. That boy no good." Overconfidence radiated from her mother's face as she flipped a shoulder and went back to cleaning up for the night, humming off key to the radio's Christmas music.

Furious at her mother's constant attacks on poor Wes, Angie clung to the ruse like a weapon against her mother's challenge. "You're wrong, Mama. We are dating whether you like it or not. And Wes is a good man. Right now he's taking care of his business." She slammed her fist on the desk. "And all by himself while his father is laid up, I might add," she defended, stuttering in her anger and rush to get the words out. "That is something you should have respect for. He's kind and decent and funny, and handsome...and...and..."

One of her mother's brows dropped, the doubt evident on her pursed lips. Lips that slowly grew into an evil grin rivaling Cinderella's step-mother any day. "Fine. You like him and he so busy no have dinner—you take to him," she challenged, slapping

hands on stout hips.

“What?”

“A good girl take her man dinner.”

Angie’s stomach dropped with fear she’d be caught in their lie for good. “But I...I don’t have a car,” she finished on a relieved breath. “It’s still at the garage, remember?”

Her mother buzzed over to the coat rack, dug into the pockets of her pillow-coat and promptly folded her keys into Angie’s palm. “Then you take mine.” The finger popped up to point in her direction again. “But no be surprised if he with other floozy.”

“Great, thanks,” she replied distractedly as her insides shook.

Could she just show up with dinner? What if Wes really was with another woman? They weren’t really dating, though the thought of another woman hanging all over him made her nauseous...and popped violent Italian curses in her head. She remembered the hesitant look on Wes’s face just before they parted last night. The curses turned to self-doubt.

“Unless you no really dating,” her mother goaded, her thick voice sickly sweet.

“Of course we are,” Angie replied with more adamancy than she felt. “I was just thinking of what to pick up at Bitty’s on the way over.” The lie was the best she could think up on the spot—then she realized she’d just hung herself. She wouldn’t put it past her mother to check with Bitty if she really did get takeout—enough for two.

“Take cinnamon buns. Make man do anything you want.”

“He prefers chocolate chip cookies,” Angie stated with a raise of her chin. Right now, that knowledge was about the only confident thread she had. After reaching under the counter for a bag, she walked over to the cooling racks and swept a half dozen

A Cinderella Christmas

cookies into the sack—then added another dozen just for safety's sake. If she was wrong, and Wes did have another date, at least she'd be able to wallow away her pathetic embarrassment in the commiserating arms of chocolate.

Chapter Eight

“Piece of shit,” Wes ground out, but he wasn’t sure if he was pissed off at the spark plug that wouldn’t budge or himself.

Technically, he did need the truck tomorrow but the repairs weren’t as urgent as he’d made them sound. Heck, he’d been finished less than a half hour after the call to Angie. The tune-up he performed now was simply to squelch his own guilt.

He tried the bolt again, putting all his frustrations into tugging the wrench. The bolt wouldn’t budge, just like his thoughts. They hadn’t budged from the beautiful brunette baker since last night.

The stupid truck hood kept slipping and he once again shoved up the junk pile rod that kept the top from landing on his head.

Guilt ate at him for canceling but the truth was, he didn’t want to date Angie Bellini for show. He’d been two seconds away from asking her for a real date when she came up with the ridiculous idea. He refused to admit he’d wimped out of the fake date—he just needed time to figure out how to tell her proper. He grimaced, shrugging thoughts of her out of his head as he reached to the tool kit balanced on the corner of the engine.

Wes froze, shaking his head at the vision before him. As if conjured from thin air, the face of a brunette angel leaned on arms propped upon the side of his truck. Luxurious hair fanning over a thick white sweater and down vest only enhanced the heavenly image.

“How’s it going?”

The incredulous vision spoke and he jumped, banging his head against the underside of the hood. Through the stars popping in front of his eyes, he saw the rod clang into the engine milliseconds before the full weight of the hood dropped on his head.

He stumbled backwards, a yip squealing from the double-visioned angel as she leapt away from the slamming hood. Sparks, disturbingly similar to little, white animated birds, popped in front of his eyes as he lifted a hand to cover the painful bump on his head.

“Oh my God, Wes!”

Slender hands clamped on his arm and he followed their direction, slumping onto a hard surface when urged to do so.

“Wes? Wes, are you okay?”

Wide chocolate eyes dropped into view, their dark depths searching his whole face.

“Yeah,” he wheezed around the throbbing in his head.

The gaze rose and was replaced by the swell of white vested breasts. For once today, he really wished he was dreaming—cause this one was the best he’d had in a very long time.

Reality descended when probing fingers pressed against the tender spot. “Ouch!”

“Sorry.” She stepped back and held up a finger. “Wait, don’t move.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, every nerve ending focused on his head and a headache forming above his left eye.

Cold—like a glacier of ice—landed atop his head and stole the breath from his lungs. Not ice, he amended as flakes chilled below the neck of his jacket—snow.

Wes sprang off the stool, snow flying out like a storm around him. “What are you doing?” He

squinted one eye down at Angie who stood nearby with more snow melting in one hand and a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“For the swelling.”

“We have ice packs for that,” he yelled, brushing the dripping snow from the back of his neck. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I thought you might want din—” Her smile dropped with her gaze towards the truck.

He followed her hand to see the white bag crumbled on the floor, some kind of dark liquid seeping through the paper and ripped sides.

“Oh, no,” she exclaimed as she bent above the mess. “It was Bitty’s Beef Stew.” She shrugged and frowned up at him. “Now it’s just glop.”

Wes glanced to the trickle of stew dribbling down the headlights. She must have set it beside her on the engine just before the hood fell. *Then you go and yell at her. Jerk.*

“At least the cookies got saved.” With a heavy sigh, she picked up a smaller brown paper bag that had fallen next to their dinner. “Chocolate chip, just like you said.”

I did say that, didn’t I? Wes couldn’t stop the small tug at his lips as she quirked a shoulder then came to stand before him. The grip firmed up again on his bicep. Like a slobbering puppy, he followed the gentle tug she gave him towards the house.

“Since there’s no use crying over spilt stew, let’s get you one of those icepacks.”

“Bossy, aren’t you?” he mumbled, tempering it with a grin.

“I learned from the best.”

The wink and smile she sent him lit up the night brighter than the holiday moon, and his heart stumbled along with his feet.

Chapter Nine

Angie led Wes to the oversized couch then ran back into the kitchen they'd just crossed for the icepacks. She returned to find him wincing as he shrugged out of his jacket.

"Here, let me help you." She reached up and pulled the old fleece coat from his shoulders. "Sit and hold this to your head," she ordered.

With a quick shrug, she shed her own ski jacket and laid it over his on the matching recliner. A large fireplace centered the room and she grinned at the small Christmas tree set atop a side table, its pathetically thin branches drooping with a short set of lights and a few old ornaments. She had to give the two bachelors credit for effort.

Angie returned focus to her patient. A navy sweater clung to his chest. Each muscle group stood out, distinct and strong. Added to the wisps of dark hair peeking below the pushed-up sleeves and above the V-neck and all hail the Prince of Masculinity. *Yowza!*

She choked back the saliva gathering in her mouth and forced her attention on a less sexual and more medical assessment. Other than the slight stumble outside, Wes didn't appear dizzy and his eyes were bright and clear—the pale blue orbs in striking contrast to the thick black-Irish waves no longer hidden beneath a baseball cap.

Her fingers brushed the wisps from his forehead. "I'll be gentle." She had to touch him to check his head. At least, that's what she told herself as her fingers caressed across a pain-filled frown line

and wove through the thick strands towards the wound.

At his hissed intake of breath, she slowed her movements, lifted the icepack and probed the area with gentle movements. "I don't see a cut, but there's gonna be one hell of a goose egg." She replaced the ice pack and sat on the couch beside him.

His jaw tightened as he leaned back.

"I'm sorry. This is all my fault." Angie frowned. "Stupid idea. I should have called first."

His hand clasped her arm, the squeeze both urgent and gentle. "No. I'm glad you came."

Her heart stopped then surged on at warp speed. "Really?"

A grin quirked his lips on one side. "Yeah, really."

Angie didn't know how long she held the stupid grin. "Uh, well," she choked when she was finally able to get past the lump in her throat. She pushed up from the couch, cheeks hot enough to melt icing on a sticky bun. A sudden restlessness took over and she walked to the mantle.

"I remember your mom," she said, taking down a family portrait. With close-cropped hair and missing front teeth, Wes couldn't have been more than eight. Behind him, his father had an arm around a short, plump woman with rosy-round cheeks grinning in delight. "She always smelled like peaches and cream even after a full day's work on the farm."

"Her shampoo. Always the same, never changed, just like her."

His whimsical, yet sad, smile tugged at her heart. He'd been sixteen when his mother died...just over a year later, her father was gone.

Good Ange, way to perk up a moment.

She set her mouth into a more upbeat smile and placed the picture back on the mantle. "How about I see what I can find for dinner? It's the least I owe

you for the bump on your head and the meal I obliterated.”

Before she could make it out of the room, a hand snaked around her wrist, preventing her escape. The long arm attached pulled her back closer to the couch...and Wes.

“I appreciate the thought, Cinderella,” he teased. “But I don’t expect you to wait on me hand and foot.”

The thumb tracing warm circles on her skin sent unexpected tingles of arousal straight to her core. She regained her appendage and stepped back, not because she didn’t like the sensation—totally the opposite in fact—given her true mind, she would have made a fool of herself and stayed in that exact spot all night.

“M-make you a deal,” she suggested, regaining her equilibrium. “Let me fix supper and I’ll leave the dishes for you to do. Will that make you feel better?”

His smile grew as he held her in his crystal stare. “Deal.”

Angie escaped into the kitchen faster than you could say ‘pumpkin to coach’. After grinning over the simple fare in the fridge of a bachelor household, she put on a pot of tomato soup, and set out the fixings for ham sandwiches. While the soup heated, she nipped back out to the garage and cleaned up the mangled beef stew from the dirt floor. Remembering how anal her father had been about his truck, she wiped down the grill of Wes’s with care.

Fifteen minutes later, she poured the soup into bowls beside the sandwiches set out on a tray. Hands full, she returned to the living room to find Wes knelt next to a fresh blazing fire and the sweet chords of a Christmas carol gently filled the room.

“What are you doing?” she scolded. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

He chuckled and stood. “I take worse hits than

that from Greta once a week.”

The tray froze above the coffee table. Greta? She forced herself to move through the sudden tenseness in her shoulders and set the tray on the low table. “Oh.” *I thought he said he wasn’t dating anyone.* The thought that he was lay like a heavy rock in her gut, no matter how many times she told herself it was none of her business.

Besides, what kind of man would take getting hit by a woman every week? She must be a brute, she thought but muttered, “She sounds like a tough one.” When she set her bowl on the table a little harder than she’d meant to, a bit of soup spilled over the side.

The low chuckle close to her ear startled her and she lifted her chin to find Wes grinning from the couch. When had he sat again?

“She is.” He wiped up the spill with a napkin. “Some cows like to be milked. Others fight you every day even though it’s for their own good.”

“Greta is...a cow?” Her cheeks seared to life again. At this rate, she feared the burn would be permanent.

“Yeah.” His brow quirked. “One of our oldest and orneriest. Who did you think—”

“Oh never mind,” she said quickly, waving off the embarrassing question. “Eat before it gets cold.” She set the plates of sandwiches next to their bowls and then the tray to the side.

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees while she knelt down on the floor across the table from him. The heat from the fire warmed her back, which was understandable. The cozy warmth expanding her chest was what she couldn’t quite explain.

They ate in companionable silence, broken only by the crackle of the burning wood.

“That was delicious.” Wes finished off the last

cookie. "Maybe you should think about giving up a life of servitude there, Cindy, and be a baker or something."

"Hardy har har." Angie giggled as she stacked the empty dishes back on the tray then stood. "And what? You'll be my fairy-godfather and get me a ride to the ball in a carriage—pulled by cows?" she teased back.

His laughter filled the room and shook her right down to her toes as he rose, looming a good foot above her. He took the tray from her hands.

She posed no argument—especially with the weak tremors coursing through her body at that moment.

After a pause, he headed for the kitchen.

Before following, she blew out a long breath. "Here, let me do that, you go back and take it easy." She nudged him away from the counter but there was no moving Mount Wesley.

He removed the dishes from the tray, stacking them next to the sink. "The deal was I did dishes."

"I was just kidding."

He winked over his shoulder. "Nice try."

She was thankful he immediately turned back to the sink and missed the waved slouch she couldn't help when her knees gave out for half a second.

The navy sweater stretched taut across broad shoulders. Beneath pushed up sleeves were bronzed forearms with strong muscles outlined by short wisps of dark hair. Who would've thought he'd still have a tan this far into winter but there he stood, a sun-god begging to be...

The sound of rushing water mirrored the torrent in her head. She grasped the counter, biting the Formica corner into her hand to regain her sanity and pull her back to reality.

Unlike her mother, she was all for equality in the kitchen but her guilty conscience wouldn't let an

injured man do the chore alone. She swiped a tea towel from the front handle of the stove and waited for the first plate.

Two clean bowls later, she'd convinced herself jealousy of bubbles was beyond the ridiculous. Yet there she stood, green at their ability to cling freely to those forearms, to caress down the tanned skin and kiss every inch. The contrast between white foam and dark hair almost made her groan in need.

After the second plate, his arm brushed hers and her indrawn breath at the shocks rocketing from the spot further overloaded her senses. His fresh cologne—both breezy and rich—stole around her, quivering her nostrils and sending tingles of heated delight straight to her pleasure centre. She took another deep breath, closing her eyes to let the full scent wash over her. Her lips tilted up at the blissful intoxication.

At a clank of cutlery, she blinked her eyes open and distractedly accepted the spoons offered. Except, they didn't release into her hand.

Angie raised her gaze to smiling lips and higher to eyes twinkling like the ends of two magical wands.

"What were you just smiling at?" The words came out soft and low.

Spoons still held between both their hands, she stuttered, "I...uh...just that I'm glad I came over tonight."

"Me, too."

Drawn forward by a tug on the spoons, she couldn't take her gaze off his as they dipped down closer still.

He was going to kiss her.

Her breath hitched. She was going to let him.

The silly thoughts ran rampant through her mind until his lips touched hers. Then all thoughts, feelings, and nerve endings centered on the warm,

gentle pressure.

Angie delved into the moment, moving only her lips against his, yearning for more but afraid to move, afraid he would disappear in a puff of sweet dreams. Nothing existed but that connection, the soft exchange of breath, the tender teasing, the want for it never to end.

A damp trail across her cheek startled Angie. She jerked away slightly, to find his hand, fingers kissed with suds, hanging empty in the air where her cheek had been. With a slow move, she reached up a hand to feel the matching suds on her cheek.

A grin touched his lips. "Sorry."

"Don't be." The words came out on a breathy sigh.

He caressed the sudsy finger down her cheek again, trailing the digit under her chin.

Breath caught in her throat, she gave in to the slight pressure, letting him tilt her chin up as his drew down for another kiss.

With the tentative, initial one out of the way, Wes claimed her lips with more determination.

She matched his ardor and rose on tiptoes to get even closer. Vaguely, she heard the clang of the spoons on the floor as her fingers released them to weave around his neck for stability. She was no virgin to kissing but boy, not like this! The kiss inflamed her whole being. Their lips no longer held the only connection as his hands grazed down her back, holding her tighter. Everywhere their bodies connected, hers flared to life.

With a slow expulsion of breath, he finally pulled away. A smile touched his panting lips. "I just might've been waiting to do that since senior year."

"What?" She lowered herself from her toes, although she couldn't be sure her feet even touched the floor, so light and giddy she felt.

His chin dropped and he chuckled at the floor

for a moment before capturing her gaze once again. "You know the Blueberry Pie Incident your mother hates me for?"

Glad for the chance to catch her breath, she quirked a brow, unsure where this was headed. "Y-yes."

"Technically, that was sort of your fault."

"Oh, really?"

He traced her face with one finger, taking deep interest in the shape of her chin.

There was something she was forgetting to do...oh right, breath.

"I was trying to show off...for you." He shrugged, the boyish movement endearing on his masculine form.

"Those wheelies I was popping on my bike at the fair that day? They were performed to get your attention. Show you how cool I was."

Biting her lips against a laugh, she brushed a hand over the top of his red-tinged cheeks.

"Then I got a little too close to your parent's pie booth," he continued, wrinkling his nose. "The wheel tipped the table. The pies went flying—"

"And the rest is history," she finished for him, unable to stop the laughter this time. "Mama was beside herself when that blueberry pie landed on her head." She waited until they both caught their breath from the merry memory before asking, "If you liked me, then why didn't you come up to me after? You barely looked my way the rest of that summer."

With a chuckle, he stood straight. "By then your mother practically called a vendetta against me for turning her hair purple—and your father still had his shotgun. Between the two of them, I figured I didn't stand a chance at that point." He brushed a hair behind her ear. "Then I left for business college and..." His words trailed off with a shrug.

His touches excited her and she followed the

temptation, placing her hand on his chest, solid and strong beneath her palm. "And now?"

His hand covered hers. "Now—"

A blinding light flashed through the window over the sink. Angie pulled away, squinting against the glare.

When the lights flicked out, Wes leaned over the sink towards the darkened pane.

Angie couldn't see anything from her angle towards the night-blackened glass but obviously Wes could.

"That's Santa bringing Dad home."

"Oh, right." The cozy, lingering warmth depleted. She'd forgotten about the real world...where other people existed. Quickly, Angie dried her hands and her sudsy cheek with the tea towel. "I, uh, should probably be going now," she said, folding the cloth back over the stove handle.

"You have to leave?"

The disappointment in his voice expanded her chest in a puff of pure giddiness. With the inevitable company arriving any moment, now wasn't the right time to explore the sensation.

"Yeah." She pointed to his head. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

With a wink, he lifted his chin and quirked a grin. "I'm tough. Not much gets to me."

His head bent down again and, like second nature, she automatically lifted hers for the kiss but the grind of an old knob swiveled their attention to the kitchen door.

Mr. O'Connor hefted a single crutch up the small step and hopped into the kitchen on his left foot. Behind him, Santa Claus Holloran's joyful grin widened as he spied her. "Angie! How're you doing, dear?"

"Good, Santa." She turned her focus on Wes's father, hoping the others would follow suit. "How are

you feeling, Mr. O'Connor?"

"Oh good, good." He tapped the crutch. "Doc said I can get rid of this by the end of the week. Hey!" His smile widened. "Just in time for you to save me a dance at the wedding."

"Dad."

Angie's tight smile at the dreaded words loosened with Wes's groaned one. She giggled and collected her coat from the living room chair. With one arm barely through the sleeve, Angie turned to glance over her shoulder when the rest of her jacket suddenly rose to an easier access. She smiled at Wes who held the purple material. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

His eyes softened to a silvery blue, so shimmery warm she couldn't help but smile back. A stuttered cough tore her out of the crystal euphoria. The two older men wore matching grins when she blinked back to them.

"Uh, right. I have to get going." She zipped up her coat to hide the fire in her cheeks. "Early morning at the bakery, you know. Gotta get those cinnamon buns fresh for you, Santa."

Wes had one arm in his jacket. "I'll walk you out."

"No, you don't have to." She put a hand on his chest to halt his movements, unable to resist a small caress. "You should rest. You know, your head and all."

"What happened to your head?"

His father's genuine concern had Angie smiling and also slightly guilty for provoking the alarm as a distraction, leaving Wes to tell them the farcical tale of the truck hood while she high-tailed it out of there.

A minute later, she slid behind the wheel of her mother's car and stared out the windshield. The blinds in the living room window moved and she

A Cinderella Christmas

spotted Wes's tall form silhouetted by the light of the fireplace.

Shivers stole up her spine and zeroed in on her chest.

Not much gets to me, he'd said. *Lucky him, because I know one hunky dairy farmer that is sure getting to me.*

Chapter Ten

"...Walking in a winter wonderland."

"What you mumbling in there," her mother called from the storefront.

In too good a mood to keep the grin from her face, Angie brought another tray of warm cinnamon buns to the counter. "What? I'm not allowed to date who I want and now I'm not allowed to sing while I bake?"

"No be rude, little girl."

Angie laughed and squeezed her mother's shoulder. "That's your problem, Mama. I'm not little anymore."

A soft pat landed on her cheek and the corner of the older eyes crinkled. "Maybe no. But you always be my little Angelina." With another pat, her mother took the tray from her hands. "Now go back. Bake more. Cinnamon buns very good seller this week."

"I was meaning to talk to you about that." Angie leaned an elbow on the display case. "I've been making cinnamon buns until my hands ache, but I haven't seen the results on the end-of-day till counts?"

Her mother froze then buzzed like a queen bee around a fountain of honey. "Y-you count wrong," she stuttered. Hands flew around the air, a stout shoulder shrugged and a frown pouted out on the stern face. And she wouldn't look at Angie.

"Mama?" Just then the bells above the door jingled. "Hiya, Santa," Angie greeted.

At the rush of air, she turned her head, only to find her mother had escaped into the back room.

Fine, I'll deal with her later. Right now, her mood was bright and she refused to think of anything that would spoil it. Instead, she smiled at Noelle's jolliest townsfolk. "How does a little extra icing on your cinnamon bun today sound, Santa?"

He wove his thumbs through the straps of his red overalls. "Sounds mighty good, dear."

She turned to the back counter to get his cocoa started and, humming, grabbed the tongs for the buns.

"You're in a right chipper mood this morning." Santa's chuckle filled the store like a favorite Christmas carol.

Angie smiled over her shoulder. "Yeah, I guess I am." An evening kiss and wonderfully whimsical dreams of a certain sexy, former classmate could do that. Not that anyone needed to know.

She put his bag up on the counter just as the bells rang out again. Angie gave a brief wave to Rev but her gaze zeroed in on the broad shoulders encased in a heavy, green utility coat backing in behind him. No matter what she did to tame it, she couldn't keep her grin from growing. The moment Wes's sexy eyes caught her gaze, the air stole from her lungs and she was scared to blink for fear he'd disappear.

"Hey, Angie."

"Hey." Was that her sighing? She checked herself with a quick shake. "I mean, hi," she repeated to Rev when she realized he had spoken and not Wes.

She flicked her gaze covertly from the local mechanic to the handsome farmer. His wink just about took her out at the knees.

And breathing?

Impossible.

"How are you doing today, boys?" Santa sprang boisterously into the lax conversation.

“Good”—Wes nodded his greeting but didn’t take his gaze off her—“now.”

“Doin’ great, Santa,” Rev said. “Here you go, Angie.”

Hearing her name shook her attention off the black hair with wishes of her fingers embedded in it, to grubby ones with a keychain hanging off a grimy digit. She accepted the keys and the invoice Rev passed along in his other hand.

“I parked the wagon back beside the bakery.”

“Thanks, Rev,” she said absently as she glanced down at the paper. “A new distributor cap? Didn’t we just replace that last summer?” She frowned and looked back up. “I don’t get it. Was it cracked or damaged already?”

His grease-smeared face took on a perplexed look. “Well, now. That’s the strangest thing. It wasn’t exactly cracked—”

“Oh, dear. Look at the time,” Santa stuttered into the conversation. “I gotta get going, to check on the, uh, toys and stuff,” he finished with a tentative chuckle.

He ducked out so fast, Angie barely had time to say goodbye. The window revealed him speeding down the sidewalk. *Never seen the old man move so quickly.* Lowering her brows, she turned back to the blue coverall-clad mechanic. “Sorry, Rev. You were saying?”

“The thing wasn’t cracked. The distributor cap, well, just wasn’t there.”

What? Her brows were getting their workout today as they dipped low in a frown. “Excuse me?”

Rev shrugged. “The cap wasn’t there. None, nada, gone, vanished. Odd, but no problem. I ordered in one and now she’s all fixed up.”

As she processed the strange information, he pulled his cap off as if a last minute thought and stared up at her with bright green eyes. They darted

to the open door behind her and back. "Hey, Ange. I was wondering if you'd save me a dance at the wedding?"

She rolled her eyes and blew out a breath. At least, he was closer to her age and not a bad-looking guy. "Sure, R—"

"Actually, Angie's dance card is full."

The deep voice with the gentle warning tone widened her eyes and tremors of instant awareness burst beneath the warm hand on her shoulder.

Wes glanced down with a narrowed gaze.

His eyes were darker than she'd ever seen them and he had the most unusual expression on his face. If she didn't know better, she'd say he almost looked...jealous. Her chest ballooned almost to bursting when those lips, that kissed her so thoroughly last night, tipped up into a confident grin.

"Wesley O'Connor."

Wes rolled his eyes and his fingers tightened.

Angie bit her lip. *Give it a break, Mama.*

"Get in here before milk spoils!"

"Yes, ma'am." He winked down at Angie then rolled the dolly into the back room. "And how are you this fine morning, Mrs. Bellini?"

Angie covered a spurt of laughter with her hand at his over-cordial greeting.

"No give me backtalk, boy. I no naïve as Angelina."

"Mama," she warned. She spun to find the elder Bellini running an agitated hand through her hair and ignoring her as usual.

"You finish and get out of bakery," her mother snarled at Wes. "You no welcome here."

"Mother!" She took a step in.

Wes shifted a hand towards her. His gaze said everything was fine, but she didn't like it, not one bit. And she planned to have a good word with her

mother about unfairness when they were alone.

Setting her teeth, she turned back to the counter and started filling Rev's order for five coffees to take back to the garage.

Wes ran a hand through his hair and grinned at Angie's stiff back. So ready to come to his defense. He didn't know what to think except that it was damn cute.

With a chuckle, he turned back towards the dragon's den and unloaded the dolly, setting the plastic cartons of milk in the industrial sized, stainless steel fridge.

"I make perfectly clear I no want you dating my daughter."

The words were seethed so quiet in her thick accent, he wondered if Mrs. Bellini was making sure Angie didn't hear her.

"With all due respect, ma'am," he replied just as quietly. "She's a big girl and can make that decision for herself."

The older woman attacked a brown lump of dough, the rich tang of nutmeg flouring up into the air with each kneaded punch. Grey wisps of hair flew from the tight back-knot with her irritated efforts.

"She only do this to disobey me." She thumped, slapped, and turned the dough. "No think for one moment, I no know what you two up to." Thump-slap-turn. "Angelina needs settle with good man. I no want you interfornicating and make harder to find him."

Interfornicating? His eyes widened until he realized her mispronunciation. Interfering. *Geez, look who's talking, lady!* Wes felt the tick in his jaw where it ached from clenching so tight. He wasn't a young kid anymore, and knew better than to take the bait. Man, moments like this made his guilt over her purpled hair vanish completely. He tipped his

baseball cap. "Have a good day, ma'am." Tight lipped, he rolled the dolly out of the back room.

Angie met him at the door.

He mustered all his reserve to give her a smile.

"Wes..." Her dark eyes flashed to her mother then pleaded up to him. "I'm sorry. I—"

He put a finger to her lips and turned slightly to block her mother's view. Angie didn't need the hassle any more than he did. "It's okay." He ran the finger over her cheek, memorizing every millimeter of skin beneath his touch until he'd get the chance to see her again. "It's not your fault."

Her lips parted as his finger reached her chin and, unable to stop himself, he dipped in for a quick kiss.

"You finished here, mister! Go, before I blueberry you head!"

The stern tone from behind made Angie jump.

Wes didn't move. He winked down at the cute little nose crinkled in embarrassment. "We still on for the Reindeer Games?"

A smile crept back onto the beautiful face and the dark eyes sparkled with honey diamonds. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Uh, Angie? You gonna take the money for the coffees?"

Rev's interruption didn't even faze him as he let his hand drop to her shoulder and slide down to tangle with her fingers. "I'll see you tomorrow then, Cinderella."

"Yep," she said, giving his fingers a squeeze. "And don't worry. I'll take care of the wicked step-mother." She winked before turning to accept the bills from Rev.

Wes grinned, and figured he'd better get out of there before he did something corny and stupid like take the band from her dark ponytail swaying enticingly in front of him and bury his face in the

thick hair. Wouldn't that give Mrs. Bellini a show.

Whistling in time to the Christmas tune humming from somewhere in the bakery, he turned and wheeled the dolly around the display cases. He held the door for Rev, hands occupied with a full tray of coffee plus one.

"Thank, man," the mechanic said. He slipped through then headed down the street.

"Hey, Rev," Wes called as a thought hit him. He left the dolly by the truck and jogged up to his old basketball teammate. "About this dancing with Angie thing? What's up with that?" Maybe a little more info would help him against the Big Bad Bakery Queen.

The mechanic's expression soured. "Maybe nothin' now, thanks to you. I better get those cinnamon buns anyhow 'cause I still asked her to dance." His chin jutted out. "If I don't, then you owe me yours."

Wes jerked back. "Cinnamon buns? That's it?" He shook his head and frowned in disbelief. "All this over a couple cinnamon buns?"

"Not a couple...a dozen!" Rev narrowed his eyes. "You've never tasted them, have you? 'Cause you sure wouldn't be asking such a stupid question if you had."

"No, obviously I haven't," he murmured to himself, remembering Angie's little tirade in the truck the other day. By the way the male population were acting, men really did crawl at her feet for those things. Still, could this whole thing be that ridiculous? "So that's it? You just ask Angie to save you a dance and Mrs. Bellini hands you over a dozen buns?"

"Man, they are liquid gold in town. You should get out of the barn more often...oh crap!" Rev's eyes widened, his gaze darting around the street. "Hey, man. Don't tell her I told you! That was the only

rule. Mrs. Bellini will curse me like she did you! You can't tell anyone I said anything." He leaned in, putting a hand to the side of his mouth and whispered, "You can have three—no, sorry, two—of my cinnamon buns in return for your silence."

Wes chuckled at the man's efforts. "Keep your buns, Rev. This one's on me."

Rev's grin just about took out his ears. "Thanks, man. And Merry Christmas!"

"You too, Rev."

Hands on hips, Wes watched the mechanic hurry down the slush-filled street to the garage. This just didn't make sense. No, he hadn't had a Bellini cinnamon bun but he didn't see that a bit of dough and icing could be that big a deal. And then there was Mrs. Bellini's little declaration—did she really know Angie's plan? And if she did, did she know it had changed, that they weren't just playing at dating anymore?

Wes frowned. They weren't just playing anymore, right? The kiss last night sure didn't feel like play-acting. Then again, Angie did give him a big wink at the store, right before saying she'd take care of her mother.

He spun back towards his truck, not liking the matching turn his thoughts had taken. The important question was no longer if Mrs. Bellini knew the game had changed, but did Angie?

Chapter Eleven

“And that would be one hot chocolate you owe me, Cinderella.”

The amused words, spoken close to her ear sent giddy thrills ricocheting around her chest. Slowly, she turned to find the smile in Wes’s eyes sparkling like crystal snowflakes in the bright afternoon sky. Angie barely heard the crowd’s thunderous claps echoing around them as her heartbeat thudded a rapid beat in her ears. “B-Brent cheated,” she stuttered, and not from the cold. In a black, winter-leather jacket and matching Stetson, Wes kept her pulse running so hard and hot she didn’t even feel the wind’s bitter chill.

He laughed and pointed down to where Brent Nickles and Santa’s daughter, Jess Holloran, led their reindeer off the field. “He didn’t do a thing! It was Jess’s reindeer who tossed the snowball at him.”

Angie chuckled. These two families always gave a good show for the fans and tourists, training the reindeer all year long to make the Reindeer Games a crowd pleaser. Only Jess was surprised when Brent finally took their family’s long-time friendship one-step further and proposed marriage. With the Christmas Eve ceremony only two days away, their wedding cake tiers currently sat ready to be decorated back at the shop.

The weight of Wes’s hands fell on her shoulders, and she happily let him steer her carefully through the crowd. When they were free from the stands full of people, he brushed his gloved hand down her arm to fold over her multi-colored mitten. Oh how she

wished the day was warmer and they could hold hands, skin to skin.

A swirl of laughing, frosted breath danced from his smiling lips as they reached the Hot Chocolate Shack.

“Hi, Mrs. Nickles. How’s the mother-of-the-groom doing today?” Angie greeted. She held up two fingers for the heated treat and snuggled into Wes’s side as the tall woman readied their order.

“Good, good, Angie.” She passed over two thermal cups. “I’m sure being on this side is easier than on the bride’s. Thank God, it will be a few years before I have to think about that with my own daughters.”

Angie grinned as Wes scooped up both hot chocolates and raised a cocky brow in her direction. She made a production of pulling change from her pocket to pay. “Gee, you’re a real prince,” she grumbled, but her smile wouldn’t co-operate. He had paid for lunch after all. Truth be told, she was having more fun than she’d had in years.

Her fingers curled around a steaming drink, freeing up Wes’s arm to settle back over her shoulders. Comfy, warm, and content, Angie let him lead again to the fence where the obstacle course had started beyond.

They settled in to watch the next event when a light throat clearing echoed from above. She put her hand to her forehead to block the bright sun as she glanced up at Wes, but he wasn’t looking at her, rather up and over her. She swiveled beneath his arm and grinned...way up. “Oh, hey, Lou. Great day for the games today, huh?”

The gentle-giant police constable shuffled his feet. Even though his skin had the toasted-almond shade of Native ancestry, she could see the tips of his cheeks turn pink. Not again, not now...please let the color be windburn, please let his cheeks be wind

burnt...

"Yeah," he replied, kicking up a bit of snow with a polished boot. "I was, uh, wondering if you'd save me a dance...at the wedding?"

The bashful expression on his blocky face tempered the annoyance at the reminder of her mother's interference on such a great day. She couldn't help but smile up at Lou, a big kid in cop's clothing. "Sure, Lou. Be happy to."

His face broke into a giddy grin. "Great!" He tipped the brim of his beige Stetson in deference to Wes, waved and was halfway to the Hot Chocolate Shack before she could blink.

She turned back to the game and shivered. This was getting ridiculous.

"Are you cold?" Wes asked, nestling her closer into his side.

Not anymore. His head bent down and she felt the warm whisper of his breath next to her ear. This time, the ensuing shivers definitely weren't from annoyance.

"I know something you don't know."

Chuckling at his teasing tone, she raised her chin along with a curious brow. "And what would that be?"

His arm around her shoulders shifted in a slight shrug and he dipped in for a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "I might've found out what your mother is offering the men to fill up your dance card."

She spun within his arm and clenched the front of his jacket with one hand while hot chocolate sloshed in the other. "You did! How'd you find out! No, never mind. Just tell me what she's done."

His laughter rumbled through her, heightening her excitement. When he just stood there, eyes shining down in unreleased amusement, she jerked on the black leather. "Come on, Wes," she whined with a giggle. "You can't keep this from me. Part of

the deal, remember?”

His smile faded and the fun, crisp air they'd been cocooned in flattened.

“Wes?”

He folded his arms over the fence and smiled back, but the sparkle was gone. This time, she did shiver from the cold of his absent arms.

“Cinnamon buns.”

The two words didn't help her confusion. “Cinnamon buns?”

“Yep. Your mother promises them each a dozen cinnamon buns.”

Eyes wide and mouth hanging open, she draped her arms over the fence. “Did not see that one coming.” Flabbergasted. She'd always liked the sound of that word and suddenly knew exactly what it meant to be...flabbergasted. “Well, that does explain the disappearing batches for the last week. I knew they were good, but...”

“Apparently, they're worth *dancing* for.”

Encouraged by his chuckle, she groaned. “I can't believe you just said that.”

He leaned on one elbow and grinned, eyes darker under the shade of his Stetson. “Will I have to wait for a batch of cinnamon buns before I get my name on your dance card, Cinderella?”

He'd leaned in so close his words whispered over her lips. Then he followed through, claiming her in a kiss that tingled all the way down to her toes.

When released, she bit the trembling grin on her lip and fought for enough air to speak. “You deserve a freebie for all you've put up with already.”

His gloved hand rested over hers on the fence but his serious expression caught her attention.

“Ange, I don't want this just about my helping you out. I'd hoped—”

Oomph! A jar to her shoulder shoved her into Wes and her hot chocolate all over their jackets

during the collision.

“Geez, I’m sorry, Angie, Wes.”

His arms righted her as she looked over her shoulder at Laney McGovern. “No problem. Wait,” she added, grabbing the young judge’s arm as the woman rushed to pass them. “Is everything okay?”

Pursed lips and sad eyes, Laney looked like she’d just been through the wringer. The judge glanced over her shoulder at the barn then back, shifting her gaze quickly away as she said, “Fine. Just stupid, that’s all.”

The concerned questions teetered off Angie’s lips as Laney flew away towards the parking lot.

“What was all that about?”

“I’d venture nothing to do with the law of the courts, and a whole lot to do with the laws of attraction.” Wes nodded towards the barn.

In the stable doorway, Deke Halls, the trucker on parole for decapitating the town’s Rudolph monument, stood with hands on his hips, his expression matching Laney’s to a tee.

Angie twirled a hand in the air between the barn and parking lot. “You don’t think those two...”

“Wouldn’t surprised me.” Wes brushed the hot chocolate from his jacket but his smile was all for her. “Seems to be something in the air this Christmas.”

Chapter Twelve

Angie swirled another red-icing rose onto the wedding cake. A few more and the only thing left would be placing the gingerbread men around the sides of the white, triple-tiered cake. Being as Santa Claus was the father-of-the-bride, the colorful gingerbread elves weren't the oddest thing she'd ever put on a wedding cake—the wrestling ring with plastic, spandexed bride and groom hovering above took that honor.

Her mother bustled in from the front of the bakery. "Need more cinnamon buns."

"You know, I've been thinking, Mama. I'm gonna hold off on cinnamon buns for a while. I'm tired of making them." Angie fought to keep her face neutral through the evil grin that wanted to take over. "I need a new challenge. What do you think about featuring a blackberry streusel or caramel-dipped coffee cake? I've wanted to try that recipe for awhile now."

She set the icing tube next to the cake and turned as nonchalantly as possible. The innocent smile almost exploded off her face at her mother's panicked expression.

"Y-you can't." She swept a quivering hand through her hair. "I-I mean they best seller. You need make more."

Angie flung a dismissive hand over her shoulder and leaned a hip against the counter. "Nah. Maybe I'll make them again in a few months but for now, let's try something new. Even Santa won't mind as long as he has something sweet to go with his cocoa."

Unable to watch her mother's panic without laughing, she stepped over to the sink to wash her hands. Behind, a string of muttered Italian floated to her ears. A bubble of giggles escaped and she covered them with a cough and a turn of the faucets, full blast.

"No. No," her mother stated in no uncertain terms. "Orders to fill. Need three more batches. You make now, before wedding tonight."

"Orders? Oh, I didn't know. How did I miss the slips?" Drying her hands, she walked over to the desk. "Maybe if I call them, they'd understand—I could give them a free streusel for canceling."

Her mother rushed over and blocked her way. Flying hands shuffled papers and shifted bankbooks as the weathered face frowned in an ashen pallor. "We no disappoint customers. You go make cinnamon buns, now! Streusels in new year."

With a dramatic sigh, Angie returned to the baking table. "Oh, all right." Only the slight, amusing fear her mother was about to faint made her ease up.

Fanning herself with a notepad, her mother returned to the front room. An act that allowed Angie to release the laughter she'd been fighting. *Damn, getting the upper hand for a change felt good.*

Angie added the gold hoops to her ears then stood back to assess the results. Was the satiny red, cocktail dress too much? Maybe she should have put up her hair?

She grabbed the mass and twisted it behind her head, securing it with a gold clip and pulling a thin piece down on one side. The strand curled gently around her chin and she turned a profile in the mirror, her mouth twisted in indecision. Her mother did always say she looked better with her hair up, to show off her slender neck. Then again, this was the

same mother who was pretty much auctioning her off tonight at Jess and Brent's wedding reception.

Angie frowned in the mirror. Why did she care if she looked good, then? If anything, she should be downplaying her attributes, to ward off the legion of would-be-suitors. Then why did she keep turning this way and that to make sure the clinging dress didn't make her butt look big or her breasts too small?

She bit her lip and let go immediately for fear of ruining the lip liner and shiny ruby color.

Wes O'Connor.

That's why this mattered so much. Just the thought of him brought a yearning tingle to her lips and a euphoric burst within her chest. The mirror sparkled with the glow in her eyes and the goofy smile spreading her lips. She stared down at the hand pressed against her pounding heart and her smile stuttered. Goofy smile, pounding heart, hard to breath, can't wait to see him... almost as if she was in lo—

Angie spun from the revealing mirror. It couldn't be...could it? With Wes? Just his name brought the smile back to her lips. But this was too soon. Wasn't it? So many questions spun in her head and the only answer she had was a wide, goofy smile and a hopeful possibility. One thing for sure, she definitely liked him, a lot.

The telephone's ring startled into her musing and she ran to pick it up. "Hello," she answered breathlessly.

"Angelina, where you? I waiting at church already."

"Hi, Mama," she said, slightly guilty for the disappointment she felt at not hearing Wes's voice instead. She puffed out a tolerant breath, the service didn't start for another half hour at least.

"I come get you?"

“No. Wes is coming to—”

A harrumphed sniff echoed in her ear. “You call cell when he no show and I come get you.”

“Mama, behave,” she warned. “We’ll meet you at the church.”

The phone clicked off in her ear.

One thing she wasn’t looking forward to was sitting between her mother and Wes during the service. Having two important people in her world hate each other wasn’t the best way to start a relationship.

Is that what this is with Wes? Yes—not even a moment’s pause there. But what about her mother? Could their new-found intimacy survive her mother’s constant barrage of abuse?

Angie tapped a finger on her chin and hung up the phone, pursing her lips at her mother’s ridiculous vendetta against Wes. All over a silly accident—*while he was trying to impress me.*

A wistful smile relaxed her lips and she absently clasped a hand over the tug to her heart. What would have happened if her mother never got doused in blueberry pie? Would he have eventually asked her out way back when? He’d been cute and funny then too. No doubt, she would have said yes to a date—and who knew how far that would have led them, maybe even married with kids by now. Her fanciful fantasies wandered to that end and she quickly shook off the might-have-been blues. *No what ifs, Ange.* She needed to focus on the here and now and a possible second chance.

Maybe this was real love and maybe it wasn’t but she’d never get the chance to find out if her mother got between them again.

Hmmm. As a new plan evolved, she grinned. Perhaps the reverse psychology needed to be reversed again in order to give them a chance to explore this new relationship.

The doorbell rang and her pulse instantly sped up as she hurried to open the apartment door.

Wes slid off his black Stetson. A matching black wool overcoat, dress pants and cowboy boots finished the sexy sight and whooshed the remaining air from her lungs.

With a slow move, he reached out and fingered the strand of hair around her chin. "You look incredible."

His reverent touch whispered up her cheek. That was it, she was never going to breath again...and she didn't mind one little bit.

"Ready for the ball, Cinderella."

The teasing glint in his eyes, the dark outfit making them all the more bright—like a laughing, winter crystal-clear stream—took away her voice but curved up her lips as she nodded.

No easy feat, she forced away her gaze and slipped her strappy heels off to put in a fabric sack until the reception. Reluctantly, she stepped into warm winter boots, not fashionable but a Noelle winter didn't lend well to strappy high heels.

She reached in and pulled her coat from the closet.

"Allow me." Wes instantly took the heavy green wool from her hands.

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

A finger grazed her neck as he set the coat on her shoulders and she shuddered, reveling in the intimate touch.

"Your fairy-godfather has been hard at work," he said, entwining their fingers and leading her out onto the small veranda to motion towards the road with his arm. "Your carriage awaits."

"Ohmygo—" The rest of her exclamation obliterated on a laugh of utter delight—or was that udder delight as she stared at a sleigh pulled by two

beautifully garlanded bovine. She grinned up at Wes. "You are seriously crazy."

His grin widened and he dipped down his head to skim her lips. "Seriously crazy about you."

Like the exact moment a child touches Santa's gift under the tree Christmas morning, her heart tore off the last wrappings of doubts. She rose on tiptoes and kissed him soundly, cherishing such a blessed gift.

Chapter Thirteen

“Hey, watch the toes!”

Angie shortened her steps, matching them to Bitty’s smaller legs. The diner owner settled his cheek on her stomach, the top of his head brushing her breasts as he continued their slow dance. She rolled her eyes then narrowed them at her mother who sat at a table off the dance floor. Mr. O’Connor sat beside her, his foot propped up on a chair.

Her own feet were sore, her face hurt from the pasted-on smile and the only man she wanted to dance with was dealing with his own issues across the dance floor. Millie Gillespie, owner of the local sweetshop, was indeed a sweet old lady—except for her fancy for the younger man and her penchant to wear revealing clothes deemed for a generation far younger than her seventy-three years. For the fifth time, Angie snickered as Wes pulled the older woman’s hand from his backside and kept his gaze firmly above the revealing, age-drooping cleavage.

The music drifted to its last note. *Finally! That had to be the longest song on the DJ’s playlist.* The moment the song ended, she thanked Bitty, ducked behind Santa Holloran to avoid a searching Rev and moved to stand next to Wes draped in Millie. “Hey, Millie,” she cooed. “Rev sure cleans up nice. Look at him in that handsome suit.”

As she looked across the room, the woman’s grin widened.

From the corner of her eye, Angie watched Wes move Millie’s hand from the edge of his waistband. She suppressed a giggle and leaned in closer to the

sweetshop owner. "I heard Rev *really* likes to dance and there he is, the poor thing. Young, handsome and all alone."

Millie patted Wes's pectorals. "Sorry, *loverboy*, you're gonna have to share the sweets tonight."

With a wink and a puckered air-kiss from her wrinkled, hot pink lips, the elderly woman sashayed her skinny body across the dance floor.

"You're going to owe Rev another box of cinnamon buns for that little stunt."

Angie swirled a finger in his tie and smiled up at Wes. "And here I thought I was doing you a favor. Oh well, I could go dance with another on my list." With a dramatic sigh, she turned to walk away. A firm grip clasped over her arm and spun her back against a solid chest. She grinned wickedly, heated by the low territorial growl reverberating against her breasts.

"Minx," he whispered in her ear as he held her closer and started them swaying to the next song. "I've been more than patient."

Her cheek against his shoulder, she was finally where she wanted to be. The wedding had been beautiful but long, sitting as a blockade between her mother and Wes. Then the reception turned into non-stop dancing from the moment the music began.

Wes's hand on her lower back pulled her closer still.

She sighed into the forest green dress shirt, then breathed in his fresh, breezy cologne with a contentment that ran deeper than this simple moment.

Her head nestled against his shoulder and her gaze caught Brent swinging his new bride around the dance floor. Jess's white, faux fur trimmed bridal gown glided like she was on air and, by her smile, Angie figured she probably was. She could relate. Right now, happiness buoyed her movements and

she was sure her feet didn't touch the shiny floor.

As they turned in time to the music, she spotted Laney and Deke talking intimately in the corner. The judge and the trucker, who would've thought? *Guess the rumors are true*, she smiled to herself.

Seemed everyone in this town was falling in love.

Angie leaned back, raising her gaze to find crystal blue ones shining down. Were they mirroring her own happiness, or was that just a mirage heightened by the atmosphere of a romantic wedding?

Unable to voice her swirling emotions, she dropped her gaze to the deep red tie with tiny holly leaves the same dark shade of his shirt. "You clean up pretty good, too...for a farm boy," she teased, fingering the tie.

Wes covered her fingers, bringing their entwined hands up to tip up her chin. "And with—or without—flour soot on your cheeks, you are hands down the most beautiful woman here tonight."

All the breath left her lungs, which was odd because she could have sworn her chest ballooned full to bursting. When he brought her fingers up to brush his lips over her knuckles, tremors shook from the point of intimate impact to every nerve ending in her body. All she wanted was to drag him into the darkest corner and kiss him senseless...forever.

He leaned his chin on their clasped hands, a small, questioning frown bent his lips. "I need to know something."

The subtle insecurity of a dark brow over pale eyes on such a big man was endearing, and she wove the hand on his shoulder up into the soft black curls at the nape of his neck. "And what would that be?"

"Are we still playing a game here or are you feeling the same thi—"

"I hear you are the girl to dance with tonight!"

Perturbed at the interference, Angie glanced up at Santa Claus Holloran's boisterous question. Nevertheless, she couldn't hold the frown against the cherry-red hue to his cheeks, the twinkle in his eye and friendly hand on Wes's shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in and have a spin with her, son?"

Wes's grin reflected her thoughts exactly—no one said no to Santa Claus, especially on Christmas Eve.

"I'd love to." She hid her little white lie behind a bright smile.

"Cinderella looks a little parched from all her dancing at the ball," Wes whispered in her ear. "I'll go get us some drinks."

His promising wink was all she saw before Santa scooped her into a fropping two-step.

The fur-trimmed, rich, red-velvet material of her current partner's traditional suit shone in the fairy lights glittering from the roof of the school's gymnasium—the only place big enough to hold all the guests. The pom-pom on his matching hat bounced a frolic jig of its own, making Noelle's very own St. Nick a picture worthy of any storybook.

"It was a beautiful ceremony, Santa. Jess looks like a princess...and very happy."

She got the profile of his rosy-round nose as he turned to stare at his daughter. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened and a whimsical smile stole over his lips. "Yes, she does."

A stab of sadness choked Angie as she thought of her father, who wouldn't be there to give her away on her own wedding day. She had no doubt *he'd* approve of Wes. A warm contentment pushed away the sadness, allowing her to enjoy a dance with her surrogate father.

When the dance was over, Santa guided her to her mother's table.

"Care to take a stroll along the desert table

there, Ian,” he asked, handing Mr. O’Connor the crutch next to the dairy farmer’s chair.

“Sounds good. I’ve been eyeing the cookies and cake for a good bit now.” He hobbled off behind Santa, their heads together in conversation.

Angie took a seat, arching her aching feet.

“You do good. Dance with many men, no just that one,” her mother said over the rim of her coffee cup.

Too happy, Angie refused to get into another argument about Wes. Time to put her reversed-reverse psychology into play.

She leaned back in her chair and nodded, a purposefully weak smile on her lips. “Okay, Mama, game over. You were right. I wasn’t really dating Wes. We planned the ruse to get you off my back.”

Silver brows rose almost to her hairline. “Really?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Angie replied with a short nod.

A strange look stole over her mother’s face. “But I thought...”

Angie waved her off, forcing a light tone through the guilt of another white lie. No other way existed to get her mother to leave Wes alone until she was more sure of their relationship.

“No, no. Our dating was never serious.” She added a ‘you-got-me tone,’ laughed, and casually leaned on the table. “I’m sorry for lying to you, Mama. Wes was good enough to play along and I figured if you thought I was dating, you’d lay off your ridiculous ‘Christmas present’. Can you blame me? You were getting a little carried away.” She kicked off a shoe and rubbed her cramped toes. “My feet are killing me, but I am having fun dancing with so many eligible men.”

At the unusually long silence, she looked across the table. With a hand covering her rounded mouth, her mother stared wide-eyed at something behind

Angie.

Dread clutched at her chest and she spun in her seat to find Wes, stiff and unmoving, two drinks in his hand, and crystal eyes darkened to cold steel.

Chapter Fourteen

“Wes?”

The word came out barely a whisper. *Probably because she didn't expect to get caught.* Wes's jaw clenched. When was she planning to tell him—after she'd picked another jester to take his place in her royal court?

Damn. He'd let himself believe. He knew he should've been wary, should have made sure, but holding her in his arms, he could have sworn she felt the same way...obviously not. His chest burned with his own stupidity as he set the glasses on the table.

“Well, I guess you two can drink a toast to your cleverness.” He'd been teasing her all week about being Cinderella, but it was *his* night that turned into a smashed pumpkin. “God help the next man who falls under your spell,” he murmured, ignoring the confusion in the dark eyes. He stalked out of the reception, scoffing at the way he'd acted this week—like a ridiculous love sick fool.

“Wes, please. I didn't mean what you—”

He heard the awkward clip-thud run like she was missing a shoe but he didn't bother to turn around. “No problem, Angie,” he hissed. “You had your mom off your back for a couple days and got your time at the ball...you got it all, Cinderella.” Even his heart, but hell if he was gonna tell her that. A man could only stand so much humiliation in one lifetime, and he'd already hit it twice where Angelina Bellini was concerned.

He swiped his coat from the hangers in the hallway and threw it on before jerking open the

school doors. A brisk wind slapped him in the face as desperate hands yanked his arm back. He spun to find Angie, face flushed and eyes searching.

Goosebumps marred her slim arms and snow already covered her one red shoe. One? *Now doesn't that just make the evening damn perfect.* "Get back inside," he scolded. "You'll catch your death."

Her hands quavered but held on tighter. "Not until I explain."

Stubborn woman. He shook out of her hold and tore off his overcoat. Throwing it over her shoulders, he snapped, "Go inside, Angie. I get it okay—I heard your explanation. Your mother knows, game over, done deal."

He tightened the jacket under her chin, avoiding her haunted eyes. He wasn't totally stupid. He knew what they did to him and he couldn't bear falling again only to be tossed away like crumpled Christmas wrapping. Worse, even knowing the truth he still wanted to kiss the crease from her brow.

Abruptly, Wes pushed her away and back into the school, keeping his hands on her only long enough to make sure she didn't fall over. He slammed the door shut and stomped towards the parking lot—and the damned cow-sleigh.

Grumbling, he climbed up into the seat and gave the heifers a quick snap of the reins. What the hell had he been thinking with this ride? What had gotten into him?

The cold barely registered on his awareness as he rubbed at a raw spot in his chest.

And how the hell am I supposed to get her out?

Beneath the coat, Angie's body shook. The drifting scent of Wes's cologne attacked her from all sides, making her shiver more than the weather. She held the thick wool tighter around her as if it were Wes's arms and the nightmare of the last few

moments never happened. Her stomach pitched and heaved and she swallowed hard to keep the reception dinner down.

What have I done? She never meant for him to overhear her, never meant those words as true. In her attempt to give them a chance, she'd killed it instead.

Her mother's short form waited at the door of the gymnasium. Hands fluttered at warp speed and she looked about to cry herself. Angie closed her eyes, tight. She didn't have the energy to deal with her mother right now and couldn't go back inside. Not without Wes.

Just the thought brought stinging tears to her eyes.

"Oh no, no, no, Angelina!" Her mother's voice thickened as she wailed, "This all wrong."

"You don't know the half of it," Angie mumbled, tears shaking her words as she opened her eyes.

"Yes, dear. We do." Santa Claus Holloran, along with Mr. O'Connor, came to stand behind her mother.

Angie swiped at some of the tears with the back of her hand. Three worried faces stared but there was something more, something else that matched on all three faces—guilt.

"Mama?" Dread engulfed her as she slowed her gaze to each face and back again. "What's going on? What have you done?"

With trembling hands, her mother nudged her across the corridor to the main office and settled her into a chair next to the secretary's desk. "I only want you have good man, good Christmas, Angelina."

Her mother fell into the adjacent chair and nodded to Mr. O'Connor. "I talk to Ian. He explain blueberry hair and say Wes really like you then. He no Italian but he hard worker, good to family—and hottie to boot." Her mom winked and smiled.

Angie's mouth fell open, unable to form words.

"I talk Ian and Santa and I decide—"

"We," Santa Holloran and Mr. O'Connor corrected in unison.

Her mother gave them a crisp nod. "We decide, you two good couple. Make good family, pretty *bambinos*."

Angie stared back, her brows so tight her ears hurt. "But you said you hated Wes. You'd never forgive him."

Weathered cheeks pinkened and the stout shoulders shrugged. "Maybe I go little too far, too much fun—I good accountant, yes?"

Actress? Angie's muddled mind automatically worked through the translation.

Her mother tapped her temple. "I use reverse size-collagey—what I no like, you like more...love more."

Reverse psychology? "Mama." The shocked words were all she could get out for long moments. "You mean you never hated Wes?"

Biting a narrow lip, her mother shook her head.

Angie turned to Mr. O'Connor. Sizing him up, her brain skipped two minutes back in time and her eyes narrowed. "Wait, where's your crutch? You're not limping?" The guilt on his face answered her question so she continued her inquisition with Santa, narrowing her eyes at the clean white beard. "That morning," she accused. "Your beard had grease." She gasped and clutched the coat tighter against the dawning deception. "Santa! You stole my distributor cap?"

"Guilty as charged." He nodded, the truth of his words evident in the pale blue gaze. "By the way, I explained things to Rev. Don't worry about the bill."

"The bill?" That's the least of my worries. You all played us like we were some puppets in a fairytale play." She shot to her feet, unable to control the

shaking anger. “Do you know what you’ve done! Wes won’t even talk to me now. And you know the worse part?” The back of her eyes burned and she waved her hands in the air, the wool coat falling to the ground. “We *were* perfect for each other.”

Angie stormed to the office door. Tears streaming down hot enough to melt a glacier, she spun back. “You’re our parents, our loved ones,” she rasped through a thick throat. “You’re supposed to protect us, not break our hearts.”

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, Wes winced and rubbed his throbbing temples as he stumbled down the stairs. He felt as if he'd been run over by a semi similar to the town's Rudolph monument. Worse though, because no one could repair what'd been broken in him.

The old clock in the living room chimed seven and he swore. What happened to his alarm? He hadn't slept this late in years. He was farm born and bred, and the animals always came first.

Rushing into the kitchen, Wes came up short as the smell of coffee hit him strong and hard. *Dad made coffee?*

Next to the full pot lay a note in black marker and his father's scrawl. *I've got the cows this morning, son. Merry Christmas.*

Oh yeah, it was Christmas morning. "Well, this year goes down in the book as the suckiest Christmas ever." He grabbed a mug off the rack. After last night, he definitely needed the caffeine fix.

At the first sip, he forced himself to choke down the bitter brew. *Right, that's why Dad doesn't make the coffee.* He allowed a small smile for his father.

He forced down another sip and stared out the window. The snowflakes on the red tractor sparkled like sequins in the bright sun. Dumb to compare a tractor to a dress, but Angie's had sparkled like that too—almost as bright as her smile when he picked her up last night.

Spinning away from the reminder, he paced the kitchen in an attempt to outrun the memories that

held his mind—and his heart—in their relentless grip. Wes chucked the bad coffee into the sink and grabbed up the half-full decanter from the hotplate. He dumped the rest, hoping the simple actions of brewing a new pot would dispel the memories, but the dark droplets only reminded him of the tears filling Angie's pain-filled brown eyes seconds before he left the auditorium.

What a fool I am!

He squeezed his eyes shut and pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose as her memories washed over him. Her body pressed against his, her lips in a laughing smile, dark eyes holding all his dreams...

The images were so hauntingly real he could almost smell Angie's soft, sweet scent.

Wes sniffed again, frowning. He opened his eyes and scanned the kitchen, almost expecting her to be there. Another sniff of cinnamon-sugar drew him towards the kitchen table and a white box with a red bow sitting upon the scratched oak surface.

His gut clenched. With a shaky hand, he slowly turned the box around to reveal a Bellini Bakery sticker.

What's going on?

The kitchen door flew open and his father stomped in, snow scattering out over the welcome mat. "Merry Christmas!"

"You too, Dad. What is this?" He pointed to the box but refused to touch it again for fear it was just his imagination. Then the few sips of coffee finally took effect and his brain kicked in, whipping his head back to the chunky boots on the welcome mat. "Your ankle?"

His father took a deep breath then released the air in a reluctant whoosh. "You better sit down for this one, son."

Staring at the fresh falling snow through the bakery's storefront, Angie bit into the head of her third gingerbread man. Three dozen more lay on the cooling racks in the back along with five batches of cinnamon buns, three blackberry streusels and two caramel-dipped coffee cakes. Obviously, she was more like her mother than she cared to admit, especially at the moment.

When numerous calls to Wes's house last night produced no answers, tortured dreams left her sleepless, and the quiet apartment threatened to drive her crazy, she'd ventured onto the solitary pre-dawn Christmas streets of Noelle and through the bakery's back door. She'd needed to keep busy and nothing like pounding on a pile of dough to get out your frustrations.

Angie bit the head right off and munched soberly. She had to face her mother tonight whether she liked it or not. Today was Christmas after all, good will to man and all that crap. About an hour ago, she'd calmed enough to realize her mother did have her best intensions at heart—even if her execution lacked any logic whatsoever. For now, though, she just wanted to wallow in her own misery.

"If I come in, are you gonna bite off my head, too?"

Startled at the quiet voice in the quieter bakery, she spun and jumped to her feet, sending the decorative café chair clanging to the floor.

"Wes?" The words came out slow and breathy, like the awe of a kid getting exactly what they wanted for Christmas. If she wasn't dreaming, then she'd just gotten one better. Her breath caught in her throat.

Dressed again in his regular work coat and baseball cap, he leaned against the doorframe of the back room. And Angie had never seen anything look

more inviting in her life.

A lock of black hair fell over his forehead as he pushed off and stepped around the display cases.

"Where did you...how did you get in?" she stuttered, afraid if she blinked he would disappear. She leaned a hand on the table.

"When you didn't answer your apartment door, I went to your mother's. She figured you'd be here and gave me her key." His steps were slow but solid.

She hastened to meet him in the middle of the floor. "Wes, I didn't mean anything you heard, I swear! I was only—"

Cool fingers pressed against her lips stopped her pleas.

God, he smells good. If I can just get him to believe me...

"I know. Dad told me everything this morning."

Air whooshed from her lungs. Her shoulders sagged beneath the relief and her knees buckled beneath his understanding smile.

Large hands framed her face and his intense gaze held hers for half a second before he bent to claim her lips.

Curving her hands around his neck, she fought him for control, pouring her whole heart into one, long, feverish kiss.

He drew back a bit, ragged breaths fanning her face. Brushing her hair with strong fingers, Wes's sexy smile nearly took her out at the knees.

"Merry Christmas, Cinderella," he murmured against her lips.

Dreamily, she gazed up at the cherished face. "Merry Christmas."

Wes's gaze darkened as his fingers slid down to caress her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I should have stayed and listened to you," he began, voice low and hoarse. "I just couldn't stand the thought that you didn't..."

This time she raised her hand, stopping his words. "Don't. I just want to put the whole thing behind us."

His brow quirked. "All of it?"

Gaze searching his, she caressed her fingers down his chin. "Well, maybe not all of it."

He kissed her soundly again and, when they came up for air, held her hands together, entwining their fingers over his chest. "If there's a chance you care for me even half as much as I do for you—"

"Mmm-mmm, sorry," she interrupted, a mischievous thrill overtaking her thoughts. "I'm afraid there isn't."

His fingers loosened around hers as his smile faded.

She chuckled, held on tighter and let all the love she held pull her lips into a wide smile. "There's not a chance, because I am wa-a-ay past half way and right on over to full into a prince who has my heart popping into my throat, who steals the air from my lungs until I can't breathe and who I'm afraid to take my eyes off of for fear he'll disape—"

Scooped up into a spinning hug, he ended her confession with a tongue-tangling kiss.

"A prince, huh," he teased after she'd been kissed to within an inch of her life. "That's good, because I happen to be looking for the girl who might fit this." He released her and dug into his pocket.

Angie stepped back, her hands pressed together under her chin.

When his hand returned, a miniature glass slipper filled his palm.

Her heart skipped a beat. "Oh, Wes! It's beautiful." She bit her grinning lip. "But I'm pretty sure my size eight foot won't fit."

"Then how about this." His eyes shown down in all their crystal brilliance as he reach into his other

pocket and produced a red strappy high heel.

“My shoe!” She couldn’t keep the smile from encompassing her face.

Eyebrow quirked, he grinned. “So, what do you say, willing to see how far this fairy tale can go?”

She walked her fingers up his chest and then tapped one to her own lips. “Will it involve snuggling under a blanket during another ride in the cow carriage?” she asked with a teasing grin.

His laughter filled her heart as he held her tight, lips buried in her hair. “Anything for you, Cinderella.”

Other Wild Rose Press titles by Stacy Dawn

Luck Be a Cowboy

*Christmas on Parole**

Wanna Make a Bet?

Standoff at the Waterin' Horse Saloon

Disco Angel

Love Floats: Rose Petals Volume 1

*Reindeer Games**

Cheatin' Hearts

Sold!

A Matching Fancy

Shadows of Moonlight

The Theory of Love

*More romances from the eccentric town of
Noelle, Alberta

Thank you for purchasing this Wild Rose Press publication. For other wonderful stories of romance, please visit our on-line bookstore at www.thewildrosepress.com.

For questions or more information contact us at info@thewildrosepress.com.

The Wild Rose Press
www.TheWildRosePress.com