

Rosette

Yellow Rose

Cheatin' Hearts



Stacy Dawn

Cheatin' Hearts

by

Stacy Dawn

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either 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.

Cheatin' Hearts

COPYRIGHT © 2006 by Stacy Holmes

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 *R.J.Morris*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First Yellow Rose Edition, November 2006

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Rhonda Penders for the challenge and George Strait
for the inspiration.

“Oookay, you weren’t wearing *that* when you went to get the drinks.”

Setting down the chilled bottles on the Dusty Cowboy’s worn tabletop, I gave my hips free reign to the little sways they insisted on doing to the George Strait classic crooning from the popular honky-tonk’s jukebox. “It was the craziest thing. I had to cut through a corner of the dance floor on my way back and next thing I knew, I was half blinded by this thing.” Using the lip of my long-neck, I tipped up the front of the newly acquired black Stetson.

My brother-in-law Ray’s thin hand reached out to grab up the other two bottles. “You mean someone just plunked it on your head?” He pushed the rounded green one in front of his wife who instantly went into gush mode.

“Like an invitation! Oh Cara, I bet he’s out there right now just waiting for you to find him.”

“What? Like a reversed Cinderella’s slipper or something?” Snorting, I swept down a quick swallow then used the burnished bottle to point at my sister Michelle’s rounding belly. “If that’s a girl in there, I hope you don’t fill her head with all this frilly nonsense.”

Pink lips twisted along with the lid off her sparkling water. “*You* used to believe in it.”

“Yeah, well. We all have to grow up sometime—most of us anyway.”

I brought my recent acquirement down from its perch. Closer up, the dark exterior seemed more a chocolate brown so dark it only appeared black. Nice. A thin strip of rawhide framed the crown and I turned it over to inspect the inside for clues to a possible owner.

“By the size of the thing, it’s probably safe to assume

his mama don't print his name in his hats anymore," Ray snickered.

"And with my luck lately, he probably still lives with his mama."

"Come on, that's exactly why we're here," Michelle chimed in. "I keep telling you, you won't find anything decent in the city. You need to get yourself a good ol' cowboy."

"Uh, excuse me." My brother-in-law peered out from under his own tan Stetson. "You found me in the city?"

"Yes, dear and I love you anyways."

I chuckled at the perplexed eye Ray kept on the back of his wife's head before I followed her gaze to the dance floor.

"So, who do you think it belongs to?"

"I have no idea."

Michelle wagged a finger towards the far corner. "He's not wearin' a hat."

"Who?"

"The hottie over there in the red and black shirt."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ray's bottle pause at his lips. "You know I'm still sitting here, right?" he said.

Michelle's hand reached back to pat her husband's but she looked at me. "Do you think it could be him?"

I stood on the stool's foot rails for a better look. "Holy cripes, I sure hope not. Can you say Mrs. Robinson? Hottie yes, finished puberty, no."

"Yeah, and you're sooo old."

Days like today I sure felt it. Especially when my *younger* sister sat married with a baby on the way and me without a prospect in sight.

My luck lately, I'd said to Ray—more like *their* lies lately. In the last two months, I'd heard enough crap to fertilize a cornfield. One discarded prospect neglected to mention he'd lied when he added the 'ex' in front of 'wife'. Another one thought sprouting vivid descriptions of a non-existent house, car, and job would impress me enough

for a booty-call, and I don't even want to think about Leonard who almost made me believe his stories of happily ever after; he forgot to add in the chapters about the three other women he'd been telling the same stories too.

Argh! I had enough smooth talking liars and I didn't want Michelle's Prince Charmings. Just one honest man would be a nice discovery. I glanced back at the hat in my hand. Correction, one honest cowboy.

Encouraged—or more aptly, in wishful hope—I plopped the Stetson back on my head and started my own search for 'hatless' cowboys near the dance floor.

I plopped back into my seat a few minutes later. "Great. The only men without hats are your young hottie, Mr. Red-Checkered-Shirt-and-Comb-Over, or gramps in the corner. You're right, the prospects here are *much* better than in the city."

Michelle gave me a shrewd eye, grabbed my hand and held tight. "Maybe he's not on the dance-floor anymore. Maybe he's sitting waiting for you to bring him the hat back like I said. We just gotta keep lookin'."

For half a scary second, I thought she was going to leap up and shout, "North sisters never give up!" like we did when we were kids.

"What about him?"

Michelle and I both turned to Ray in unison. "Him who?"

He lifted his chin in a direction somewhere over my left shoulder. "The one in the blue shirt three tables over. He sat down a couple minutes after you returned." He swigged his beer and winked. "Been watching you ever since."

"And you just thought to mention it now," Michelle scolded.

I shifted in my seat and caught a quick glimpse of broad blue shoulders before my sister's chestnut curls at the end of a craning neck blocked my view. I grabbed her arm and forced her back onto her stool. "Why don't you

just hang a big 'DESPERATE SISTER HERE' sign on your head?"

As usual, she ignored my mortification and barreled on in her own gleeful world. "Did you see him?" At least the squeal came out at a more sedate level this time. She leaned on the table and all but sighed, "Oh my but he's a big one and I do like'em big."

"Uh, hello, husband still sitting right next to you."

Michelle didn't appear to hear the grumbled comment as she added, "With that dark hair, I wonder if he has blue eyes. Blue eyes are sooo sexy on dark haired men."

"My eyes are hazel."

I caught poor Ray rolling those eyes towards the ceiling in exasperation before I twisted around for another look at the dark haired cowboy.

Wow. The shoulders alone caused heart palpitations and the jeans were definitely not relax-fit. I followed one muscled thigh down to his polished boot, which sat casually up on the foot rail of his chair. If the rest of him looked as good up-close as he did far away, I didn't think I'd survive giving the hat back.

The cowboy's head began to turn our way again and I rounded back in time to rasp out a quick, "Michelle, stop staring!"

"But he's so gorgeous; how can you look away?"

"That's okay; pretend like I'm not here," Ray muttered before throwing back another drink from his bottle.

"It has to be him, Cara. No one else is looking at you."

I choked on my own sip. "He's looking at me again?"

Michelle gleefully bobbed her head then winked. "Oh I sure do hope it's him. It'll give me an excuse to meet him up close and personal."

A loud slap on the table snapped both our heads around to find my brother-in-law gaping at his wife. "Well, why the hell did you marry me if I'm nothin' like

what you wanted?"

Michelle patted his knee as if pacifying a small child. "You're my soul-mate sweetheart; I didn't have a choice."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

She leaned in and cupped a hand over her husband's ear. His face immediately lost the frown and even in the dimmer lights of the honky-tonk, I could see the tips of his ears turning red. By the time Michelle kissed his cheek and straightened up, he had one reedy arm casually thrown over the back of the chair and a smug expression on his face. "Yes, well, okay. Look all you want ladies. I'm comfortable with my manhood."

Michelle's eyes glowed at Ray. "So am I."

"Oh, that is more than enough information for me." I pushed my butt off the seat. "I'm gonna go see if I can find the owner."

"Start with the cowboy in blue." Michelle wove her arms around her husband and this time it was my turn to roll my eyes as she added, "And give me the signal if it's him," as a loud aside.

"Okay hat, take me to your cowboy," I murmured, beginning my quest. Might as well start with the big one, he's definitely heads above the rest not only in height but in hunk factor too.

Almost as if he read my mind, the cowboy's eyes locked onto mine. I might have thought it cocky if the arousing sensation left me any coherent thought. Even from ten feet away I knew his eyes weren't Michelle's hoped for blue. On the contrary, they were the same colour as my favorite Cadbury chocolate. All creamy brown and meltingly inviting, I couldn't look away.

"Nice hat." The rich timbre of the cowboy's voice only made my craving for chocolate stronger.

"Wouldn't by any chance be yours, would it?"

His smile teased with a hint of two dimples. "Looks just like it."

My lips curled in a smug smile of my own. Maybe my luck was changing after all. I held a thumbs up behind

my back for Michelle. The concurrent high-octave squeal of excitement changed my smugness to humiliation.

"They with you?"

"Not any more."

His smile freed the dimples from their hiding place as his chuckle belled out quick and all encompassing. It reverberated through my chest in a domino effect knocking each muscle weak on its sensual path down my body and I barely managed to dump myself into the chair before it hit my knees.

"Ben Jacobs."

I studied his outstretched hand a moment, concerned that if the sound of his laughter took my legs out so easily, then his actual touch might threaten heart failure.

Sometimes the risk was worth it.

"Cara North." The breathiness of my reply only validated my concern and I drew my hand back as quickly and unobtrusively as possible from the quick little dancing pulses where skin touched skin.

This is so right—no, I mean wrong!

What was I thinking? Cinderella smiles and mooning breathlessness were Michelle's game, not mine.

I took a moment to readjust my thinking along with the hat on my head. Fine, obviously Ben could play my sister's game but I needed to know if he could play in the real world. And in the real world, people didn't just pick a man and say he's the one. There had to be more.

Okay, cowboy, time for the showdown.

I forced myself to look into his eyes without melting on the spot. "Look, about the hat. It was a neat trick, but I'll be honest. I'm not much for wine and roses and smooth talking. I like to know the deal up front, all the cards on the table if you pardon the cliché."

Ben relaxed his forearms on said table, his folded hands so close to my arm the heat of his skin seeped through my shirtsleeves. "Sounds like a woman who knows what she wants."

"And doesn't want," I added pointedly.

A golden glint sparkled in his honey-brown eyes. "Fair enough. Where should we start?"

I liked the way he didn't hesitate, but jumped in with both boots on. "Job?"

"Foreman at the Triple E cattle ranch. You?"

"Freelance photographer."

"Favorite color?"

"Lime green. Same topic."

"Blue."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I was. I thought you'd say pink." He nodded towards my shirt.

I hiked a thumb over my shoulder. "Birthday gift from my sister. Good point though. Siblings?"

"Two brothers." Ben inched his chair closer, his chin tilted up and eyes narrowed in all seriousness. "Ford or Chevy?"

Such a man. I rested my arms on the table next to his. "GMC Sierra Z71 Extended-cab. Easiest to store and remove my equipment."

"My kinda lady."

My chair scuffed closer to his. "Texas Rangers or Houston Astros?"

He nodded his approval of my topic. "Astros."

"Getting the pennant this year?"

"Middle-relief pitching isn't strong enough." The shake of his head along with an expression of minor disgust when he said it proved he was a true fan and not just feeding me a line. Good, I couldn't handle a Ranger's fan let alone another liar.

Around us, the honky-tonk exploded along with the jukebox in a popular number and Ben chose his next volley on the heightened atmosphere with, "Garth Brooks or Chris LeDoux?"

"Garth Brooks *singing* Chris LeDoux."

"Very nice." His hand tapped mine for emphasis then remained. Of its own accord, my gaze roamed over the dark hair sprinkled along the back, across the solid

forearm and up the blue stretched over a wonderfully firm bicep.

"Tattoos?" I ventured, figuring if Ben couldn't live up to one of my particular fantasies then I'd have an excuse to breathe again.

"One. Eagle left shoulder."

Damn. Whether it was a good damn or a bad damn was still up for grabs.

The slight raise of one dark brow told me he knew of my indecision. "Same topic."

"Two. Butterfly right back shoulder and a dragonfly. *If* you make it to a third date you might get a chance to find out where."

Ben's elbow touched mine when his other hand rose to support his firm jaw as it leaned in conspiratorially. "Can we pretend it's our third date?"

"No. Since we're on the topic though, boxers of briefs?"

Two dimples winked over a mischievous smile. "You'll find out *on* our third date."

"You're positive there'll be a third date already?"

"I was sure at lime green but the Astros clinched it."

"Hmm, I don't know if I'm so sure." More like too scared to admit just how convinced I was in such a short time; scared enough to cheat and toss out a reliable scare-him-off-first tactic. "Kids?"

"Four. Same topic."

"T-two," I stuttered when Ben showed no hesitation and instead moved closer.

"Is that negotiable?"

I simply nodded my head. Can you say backfire?

"Good. Dancing: slow or fast?" he lobbed out of turn.

With those chocolate eyes all-melting sexy in his handsome face, he wasn't playing fair. "Slow. Definitely slow." My brain continued on its sensually overloaded path of thought. "Hershey or Cadbury chocolate?"

"Hershey."

"Ooh, so close but that's a deal breaker." I sat back a

bit for some much-needed breathing room. No doubt, if Ben had said Cadbury, I would have thrown in the towel, admitted defeat and pretended this was the third date.

The lights glinted off the pearl buttons of his shirt as he reclined in the chair. His gaze, all dark and sensuously delicious, caught mine. "Well, I guess that's it. Too bad. Here I thought we could have been so good together too." He didn't break contact as he bent back closer than ever and whispered, "What if I said I like a good Caramilk every now and then?"

That easily, I was drawn back into the game and closer still to Ben. "It might get you a second chance."

Warm fingers rubbed lazy circles over my hand. "Good. A dance?"

"We've already covered that topic."

"Maybe we should go into more detail on it."

"I think I agree..." *...that if you keep looking at me this way, chances are good we'll go right from the dance floor to that third date.*

"Shall we?"

We stood at the same time, my head barely reaching his shoulder. Ben's musky cologne drew me closer towards his broad chest as the curve of his arm brought the warmth of his hand against my back.

"Wait," he said. His eyes laughed down into mine. "One more first. Liars or cheaters?"

I smiled up into his face. "Cheaters. You can have honest cheaters but you can't have honest liars."

"I'm glad you said that because..."

"Hey! That's my husband's hat."

My head whipped around at the snippy southern drawl and forceful poke on my arm. The secure weight of Ben's hands on my shoulders gave me the oddest sense of unity changing my hostile retort to a polite, "Excuse me?"

The face beneath a wealth of platinum blond hair pinched in irritation. "I said, what are y'all doin' with my husband's hat?"

"But I thought..." *Whoa. Guess I should've asked one*

more question too.

I suddenly felt very much alone again.

"I don't much care. The fool says his glasses fog up on the dance floor and refuses to wear them even though he's dang near blind as a bat without 'em."

Ben didn't seem like he needed glasses but then again, maybe all this time his intense gazes were only an effort to focus. I shifted out from under his hands, which only brought me closer to the long fuchsia fingernail waving up and down in front of me.

"He put the dang hat on the first pink shirt he saw walkin' by."

Ben's chuckle rippled against my back and I yanked the Stetson from my head, stuffing it onto his wife's outstretched hand.

My sudden anger dissolved into confusion when the woman stormed off in the opposite direction. The skin between my eyes squeezed tight as I lifted my head to Ben. "Where's she going?"

One shoulder shifted up. "Back to her husband I'd say."

I turned back in time to see the woman's pinched lips schmoozing up to Mr. Red-Checkered-Shirt-and-Comb-Over. I pivoted on one heel feeling every bit like one myself. "She's not...you're not...it wasn't your hat after all, was it?"

A lock of dark hair fell over Ben's forehead as he gave an innocent shake of his head.

Not that I was thinking of a relationship or anything...well, not much but...*damn*. All that potential washed away on a lie.

"Ready for that dance?"

Maybe it was a rather high moral ladder to be on. Michelle would probably say I was too picky but you had to draw the line somewhere. "No, I don't think so. No honest liars remember? And that *is* a deal breaker."

I turned to walk away but warm fingers curled around my arm, sliding down to capture my hand.

"Now hold on there."

"What? You said it was your hat. You obviously lied." I snapped, hating the way his brown eyes laughed at me and hating the way my body responded even more.

"As I recall, I said, '*looks* just like my hat.'" Ben reached over to the seat on the other side of the table. His hand returned with a Stetson so dark a chocolate brown it looked almost black and with a thin strip of rawhide circling the crown. He set it on his head and tipped down the front to look at me seriously below the rim. "I may have cheated a little but I *never* lie."

Whoa.

The cowboy beat me at my own game and I only had one coherent thought in my head as Ben's dimpled smile chuckled down at me.

What a way to lose!