

*A Cowboy Charming Christmas: A Rough Creek  
Christmas Novel*

by Mina Beckett

Chapter One

“Ah-ah-choo!” Sage Parsons sneezed and blew her nose on the tattered Kleenex in her hand. Feeling weak and whipped, she let out a long sigh before taking a seat at the small table beside the window in her aunt’s tea shop.

The cold she had been battling for the last three days showed no signs of loosening its hold anytime soon.

“Oh, you poor dear,” her Aunt Matilda crooned and slid a cup of tea in front of her. “Here, drink this.”

To Esmerelda and Matilda Winters, tea was the cure for everything.

She tried a weak smile of appreciation as she closed her eyes and leaned back against her seat. “Thanks.”

Her aunts’ tea shop — started in the back room of their family’s Victorian home — had grown into a very profitable business.

Teaspoon Magic now occupied a corner piece of Main Street, and people came from all over Texas to sample the ladies unique and holistic tea blends.

Yawning so wide that her ears popped, Sage ventured one watery eye open. Congestion and fever had made it impossible to sleep last night.

She was exhausted, but she tried focusing as she stirred the tea. Steam from the cerise-colored brew swirled up from the cup, clearing her stuffy nose and blasting her with the fragrance of roses, apples, and an ingredient she couldn’t quickly identify.

It was that unknown component that made her leery about lifting the cup to her lips.

Over the years, Sage had consumed more than her share of her aunts' unique blends and had become quite good at sniffing out what was in them. But this was something...odd. "What's in it?"

"Magic," Matilda whispered with a childish giggle that jingled the golden bells sewn across her festive colored Christmas sweater.

Esmeralda, the older of the two sisters, emerged from behind the purple curtain that separated the storefront from the storeroom. "You know we never reveal the ingredients of our special blends to anyone."

"Special?" Sage leaned down to inhale another whiff. This time she caught the often unnoticeable lemony scent of vervain, a key ingredient in a blend they had branded a love potion.

They wouldn't.

Would they?

Sage often hand-delivered her aunts' "special blends" to couples they thought needed help in the romance department.

She hadn't seen the harm in being a co-conspirator to their herbal matchmaking then. But now? She wasn't so sure it was something she wanted to do again.

She never once thought they might try using their potion on her. They knew she was a level-headed and logical person who didn't believe elixirs could influence the heart. But more importantly, they knew how much Allen's affair had crushed her. And how hesitant she was about letting herself get close to love again.

But an embarrassing run-in with the town handyman had left Sage frazzled. With her eyes glued to her last-minute

Thanksgiving list, she'd rushed around a corner and plowed face-first into Carter McDermott's broad chest.

She'd made the mistake of blurting that out at dinner one night. Since then, the two aunts had been tossing around hints about Carter whenever they could.

The impact of his hard body hitting hers had flattened her dinner rolls and taken her breath. Even now, the color of his walnut brown hair and green eyes made her heart do a little stop, drop, and roll.

Her heart hadn't lost its rhythm over a man in ages.

Sage tore her thoughts away from that image of Carter in aisle sixteen long enough to ask, "Why is this tea special?"

"Special circumstances call for special ingredients," Esmerelda explained.

When Sage was a little girl, Esmerelda's copper-colored hair – always styled in a wispy bob – and cagy expression had reminded her of a clever fox.

Wise and mystical.

The silver strands that had appeared in her aunt's early sixties intensified that image. But fox or not, that vague explanation wouldn't pacify Sage. "I have a simple cold. Special doesn't apply, so I'm not drinking the tea until I know what's in it."

"Why are the ingredients important?" Matilda asked.

"Because you two know I'm meeting Carter McDermott this morning," she said, searching her coat pockets for another Kleenex. If this was an attempt at finding her a man...

"Is that today?" Matilda asked, innocently fluffing the back of her plum-dyed brown hair.

"Nice try." Sage pushed the cup back across the table.

"Oh, come on," Esmerelda taunted. "It's a simple cup of tea."

"For. Get. It. I smell vervain."

“I didn’t think you could smell anything,” Matilda said, giving her sister a quick look of surprise.

“Ah-ha!” Sage pointed the finger at her aunt. “So you admit that this is one of your love potions?”

“I admit nothing,” Esmerelda said, laughing. “But even if there were vervain in the tea, its scent is almost unnoticeable.”

After another hard sneeze wracked her body, Sage blew her nose and tried combing back the strands of her hair that had blasted loose from the not-so-neat bun she’d tried styling it into this morning. “Maybe to the untrained nose, but I know my herbs, and I know you two.” Having four marriages and three deceased husbands between them, they continued to believe in a magic Sage had long since given up on ever finding for herself. “You’re both hopeless romantics.”

Matilda’s hand shot up, and she let out an insatiable giggle. “Guilty.”

“Why can’t you simply trust that the cure for what ails you is in the tea?” Esmerelda asked.

Because what ailed Sage was more than sneezes and sniffles, and a handsome handyman roll-smashing incident.

She was a divorced mom with a daughter whose only wish was to see her father on Christmas morning. “This will be Chloe’s third Christmas without Allen. So unless there’s something in this tea that will magically give her a daddy for Christmas, I can’t believe there’s anything in this cup but herbs and honey.”

“He hasn’t answered you back?” Matilda asked, the light in her sharp blue eyes dimming with sadness.

“No.” She’d called and left several messages on Allen’s phone, and three days ago, she’d texted him. “And he won’t. I don’t know why I try; every Christmas is the same. He makes promises that he never intends to keep, and I have to see her little heart broken year after year.”

In May, Allen had sent Chloe a birthday card with a large number seven on it and a beautiful snow globe with a promise that this year, they would spend Christmas together. That promise was as unlikely as the snow inside the globe.

Esmerelda laid a hand over Sage's arm. "This Christmas will be different."

Sage wanted to believe that somehow Allen might have changed from the self-centered man she'd married to a caring father who would put his daughter's needs and feelings before his own.

But she knew that wasn't going to happen. Allen Parsons was a jerk.

"This problem with Allen will work itself out." Matilda pushed the cup closer to Sage. "Right now, you need a cup of Christmas magic."

"I don't need magic." Her head hurt, her throat burned, and she felt like crying. "Just a cure for the common cold. I have a potential buyer for the Johnson ranch scheduled in less than an hour."

"I hope it's a family with lots of children," Matilda said, sighing wistfully as her smile returned. "It would be lovely to see the warm glow of Christmas lights in the dark, dreary windows of the Twisted J."

"Sorry. Brody Vance is single," Sage said, even though she was keeping her fingers crossed that her friend Louisa would change that.

"Well, that can be remedied," Matilda said, trying hard to hold back a smile. "Hurry up and drink your tea. It's getting cold."

"Oh, well." Sage let her shoulders drop, feeling her resistance draining. "I'm too weak to run." The honey would soothe her throat, and the vervain would help fight the fever.

“What’s the worst that can happen? I fall in love with Santa, and we live happily ever after at the North Pole?”

At least then, Chloe would have the snow she wanted for Christmas.

“That’s the spirit.” Esmerelda winked. “Give it another stir and drink.”

Sage swirled the teaspoon around and around, letting her heart be tempted with the fairytale of love. Not with Santa, of course. But with a real man. One who loved children and dogs. A man who wouldn’t mind her eccentric aunts. A man with green eyes and dark walnut hair. A rugged cowboy. A hardworking, down-to-earth handyman.

That did sound magical.

She lifted the cup, embossed with amethyst lettering of the tea shop, closed her eyes, and sipped. As the sweet and tangy taste of wild berries hit her tongue, she relaxed and settled back against the chair.

“There,” Esmerelda said. “Now, go back to bed and let the magic work.”

She had employees that counted on her and bills that needed to be paid. The Johnson ranch was a substantial sell for her little realty company. Sage downed a few more sips of tea and wiped her mouth. “I can’t go back to —” Her voice trailed off when she felt a silky tail wrap around her calf.

She took two steps back and looked down at the floor. A pair of arctic blue eyes gleamed back at her. The cat let out a soft meow and wound its body against her other leg.

Shaking her leg gently to unwrap the feline, Sage glared at her aunt. “Tilde, how many times do I have to tell you? You can’t let Jasper in the store. The health inspector warned you the last time he did an inspection. Keep him at home, please.”

The cat jumped to the seat and slinked its way across the table to where Tilde was sitting, then pushed into the old woman's ample bosom and began purring.

"But your uncle gets lonesome at home in that big old house all by himself," she said, smiling as she nuzzled the cat.

Sage rolled her eyes. "Don't call him my uncle. Just because you named him after Uncle Jasper doesn't mean that he's actually Uncle Jasper. What time does your flight leave?"

"Five-fifteen this afternoon," Esmerelda said, picking up Sage's cup from the table so she could discard it into the sink behind the counter.

"I'm so excited!" Matilda giggled. "My thermal underwear has been packed for two weeks. You and Chloe should come with us next year. Christmas in Alaska. She'd love it. All that snow and the Arora lights are enchanting."

"Maybe one day." She slid off the stool and smoothed the wrinkles of her gray skirt, then removed her compact from her purse, and looked in the mirror.

Under her eyes hung puffy dark circles, and her nose looked like Santa's lead reindeer. She would have to face Carter looking like she did: red, swollen, and disheveled. "I need to check in with the office before I meet Carter, so I probably won't see you before you leave." She gave her aunts big hugs, then picked up her purse and walked to the door. "I'll see you when you get back."

"Bye, dear."

Sage wrapped her scarf around her neck and tried inhaling the rainy scent of the December morning. But nothing got past the congestion in her head.

She shoved her hands inside her coat pockets, keeping them away from the chilly morning. Santa Camino rarely saw snow. But it was almost cold enough for a freeze after the

sunset. The hint of frost on the pretty, green garland decorating the ornate streetlights would look so lovely at daybreak.

Workers had blocked off the lower section of Main Street in preparation for the Annual Christmas Carnival. The Ferris wheel rose high above the two-story buildings. In the night, its lights would shine for miles.

Sage blew out a long breath just to see the white, billowy cloud. Despite her cold and Allen woes, she felt the childlike anticipation of Christmas leap to life inside her.

She couldn't deliver snow or a daddy, but she could make this a Christmas Chloe would never forget.

She turned and walked towards the Parsons Real Estate Office at the end of the block, then made a quick side-step to avoid the icy splash of a heavy-duty diesel truck rolling through a large pothole near the edge of the sidewalk. Bathing her modest black heels in dirty, ice-cold street scum wasn't the way she wanted to start the morning.

She knew Brody wouldn't mind mud on her shoes. He rescued and trained horses for a living. But Sage wanted to make a professional impression.

When she reached the office, she opened the heavy walnut door and stepped inside. "Morning, ladies."

"Holy Moses! Look at this one!" Tiffany squealed and held the magazine up for Nancy to see.

"Hubba. Hubba." Nancy pulled her cat bifocals down to the end of her nose for a more unobstructed view of the sexy male movie star plastered across the tabloid magazine. "If I were only twenty years younger."

Tiffany giggled and twirled a strand of her blonde hair around her forefinger. "Morgan Prescott is the sexiest man alive." She rested her chin in her palm, her face dreamy with romance. "Why can't I find a man that perfect?"



“Perfection is in the eye of the beholder,” Nancy said, whirling her office chair around so she could scoot to the file cabinet in the corner.

“And I don’t think that one is too perfect,” Sage said, uninterested in the centerfold of the up and coming cowboy movie star. “Wasn’t he in the news a few months ago for a wreck and a DUI?”

“I forgot about that.” Nancy pulled a file out and tossed it onto Tiffany’s desk. “On second thought, you better steer clear of those Hollywood cowboys.”

Tiffany gave her co-worker an eye roll. “Like I’d ever get a chance at Morgan Prescott.”

“There are plenty of good men right here in Santa Camino,” Sage told her. “You’ll find your Prince Charming soon enough.

“I suppose.” Tiffany let out a long huff. “But the selection in this town is so...limited.”

“You can say that again.” Nancy laughed and turned her attention to Sage. “How’s the cold?”

She picked up the morning mail. “I’ll live. I just endured a double dose of magic that may or may not have been a love potion.”

Nancy chuckled. “Your aunts are sweethearts.”

“Yes, they are.” She slid her desk drawer out and picked up a letter opener. “And I don’t know what Chloe and I would do without them.”

“Charlene Centers said your aunts brewed her up something that helped her to conceive,” Tiffany said, grinning in a wicked way. “I wonder if they could brew me up a love potion?”

Nancy let out a hoop. “Girl, I’ll have an order of that love juice.”

“I don’t think my aunt’s tea had anything to do with Charlene getting pregnant.” Sage ripped the letter open. “Every time she ovulated, the hardware store shut down for an hour or two.”

“It sure did,” Nancy confirmed and pointed towards the front window. “We used to watch her run up the street.”

Sage skimmed the second notice on her overdue car payment. Allen was late on his child support again this month. If she didn’t make this sale, she’d have to call Mr. Haverty at the bank and ask for an extension.

“Bad news?” Nancy questioned.

She smiled, folded the notice, and slipped it inside her purse. “No.” She glanced at the clock on the wall beside the door. “I have to meet Carter McDermott in twenty minutes.”

“Why are you meeting with that surly old handyman?” Tiffany asked, crunching her face.

“Carter isn’t old,” Nancy replied. “He’s only in his mid to late thirties.”

“Like I said.” Tiffany pretended to gag. “Old.”

He had lines at the corner of his eyes that deepened when he smiled, with long eyelashes that were the color of chimney soot. Sweeping gray just above his ears and a mouth that was so, so interesting.

It was that mouth, and the near spontaneous combustion of her underwear, that made Sage wish she hadn’t volunteered to help out Violet today.

Carter McDermott made her anxious and reminded her that she was a woman with needs. Needs that weren’t all necessarily geared towards sex.

She’d been alone for most of her marriage. That was nearly ten years of staring at the walls while eating dinner alone, sleeping alone, watching Chloe take her first steps without him there to witness it.

She was tired of being alone, and when Carter passed her in the bread aisle, she felt a little less lonely. And a little closer to something real.

“Most of my encounters with Carter have been pleasant.”

“Mine too,” Nancy agreed. “Everyone around town likes him, and have you seen what the man can do with a chisel? It’s nothing short of a miracle.”

Nancy wasn’t exaggerating. The delicate carvings he’d done throughout the Coldiron cabin were a work of art.

“And as for why I’m meeting him?” Ripping into another bill, Sage explained, “I’m doing a favor for a friend.”

“Gross,” Tiffany said.

“It’s not that kind of favor,” she said, dryly. “Violet wants to remodel the lake house her mother left her so she can rent it out in the summers. She asked Carter to come by and give her an estimate on what needs to be done.”

“That place has been sitting vacant for years,” Nancy said.

“Yes, which is why Carter is dropping by, but she can’t be there this morning to show him in, so I said I would go.”

“Meeting an old guy at a lake house.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes at Sage. “Sounds creepy.”

The youngest of the fraternal Davis twins, Tiffany, wasn’t as grounded as her older sister, Kara. But she was a hard worker and a quick learner. She split her workdays between the realty office and the tea shop.

The sisters had taken on a portion of their family’s financial responsibilities after their mother had fallen ill with a heart condition a few months ago. So Sage had felt obligated to give her a chance at a part-time receptionist position.

“How’s Letty?”

Tiffany added the magazine to the stack of paperwork on her desk. “She has an appointment next month with a heart specialist in Dallas.”

“Oh, child, you and your mother are in my prayers,” Nancy said, clutching a file to her chest.

Sage reached over the desk and squeezed Tiffany’s arm. “I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Tiffany nodded, her smile faint and uncertain.

“Okay.” Sage straightened the lapels of her coat. “So, after I take care of the surly handyman, I’m showing the Johnson ranch. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Maybe,” Nancy said, winking at Sage. “You should get Tilde and Essie to whip you up something that magically transforms surly handymen into rich cowboys.”

“But instead of a potion, it can be dust.” The worry in Tiffany’s eyes eased. “And when Carter isn’t looking, you can throw it on him.”

“Poof!” Nancy cackled and clapped her hands. “A real-life Cowboy Charming! I know where I’m going on my lunch break.”

Sage knew Nancy was doing her best to keep Tiffany distracted, and she didn’t mind being the target of their teasing. “Magical Love Dust could be a new line for them. I’ll pass that idea along.”

Another round of laughter followed Sage out the door.