



CHRISTINE DEPETRILLO

More Than Biscotti



Maple Leaf Series

Christmas Novella

Christine DePetrillo

MORE THAN BISCOTTI

A Maple Leaf Series Christmas Novella

by Christine DePetrillo

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Christine DePetrillo

Dedication

To all who love Christmas...

Chapter One

Relax. This was the right decision.

Julie Reshner scanned the crowded bar exactly one day before Christmas Eve. Black Wolf Tavern had appeared out of the darkness as she drove to Danton, Vermont like a *Seek Solace Here* blinking light. She'd been on her way to Hinsdale Inn where she'd recently secured a job as a maid. Way below her career goals, but enough to keep her afloat while she figured out the rest of her life now that Plan A had been torn to shreds.

Plan A had been so wonderful. She'd enjoyed her job as head of marketing for Belle Pets, a company devoted to getting gullible pet owners to buy crazy stuff for their Fluffies and Rovers. Designing fun ads and promotions had been what she'd been born to do. Julie had been good at her job.

No, great. I was great at my job.

She pushed more products than any other employee at Belle Pets. Whether it was a glow-in-the-dark chew toy that could be found even in the dark or a ridiculous cheerleading costume for a pug, Julie knew how to sell it all to exactly the right buyer. Working in a building almost overflowing with cats, dogs, and the occasional parakeet had been a blast too.

Coming home to her husband, Jeff, and their seven-year-old son, Nathan, had always been the icing on every day for Julie, though. Jeff, a detective with the Chicago Police Department, greeted her each night with a kiss—sometimes a real steamy one if Nathan wasn't in the immediate vicinity—and he'd have something delicious simmering in the kitchen. Nathan

was always happy to see her too, and she'd spend about half an hour with him before Jeff called them all for dinner.

The family sit-down at the dining room table had been her favorite. No matter what case Jeff was working on, he always made an effort to be home for dinner. Most times he had to scurry back out afterwards, but that precious time the three of them had spent together at the dinner table had meant so much to her.

Now the memory of it was all she had.

Nathan had been a super-smart kid. He'd gone into kindergarten able to read some books and write sentences. Julie had loved watching him suck up knowledge like a little sponge. He asked her questions about everything, and they had some amazing mother-son time going to the library or surfing the internet to find the answers. Nathan was her piece of sunshine, her shining star, and though she had never pictured herself as a mommy, she loved the role.

If only I'd had more time...

"What can I get you, sugar?"

A friendly smile and a mass of unruly blonde curls greeted Julie. The woman's pleasant face made her glad she'd decided to stop at the bar. She had two hours to kill before she was expected for an orientation at Hinsdale Inn, and going into her new career on a full stomach sounded like a good idea.

Assuming she could keep the food down. She'd pretty much lost her appetite since Anita Barnett, Chief of the Chicago Police Department, had shown up on her doorstep about a year ago on a cold December night not unlike this one.

"Julie." The chief's voice had been filled with something Julie hadn't wanted to acknowledge at the time.

"Chief Barnett. Lovely to see you. Come in." Julie had glanced at the hall clock. "Jeff is with Nathan at his indoor soccer game, but he should be back soon. Would you like a cup of tea?" She'd gestured to the living room, inviting the chief to have a seat.

More Than Biscotti

“I’m not here to talk to Jeff.” The chief had pulled off her gloves and twisted them in her hands. Her dark eyes had looked even darker, as if someone had shut off the light in them.

“What can I do for you then?” But a tiny voice inside Julie’s head had already known. Already understood the chief was there to deliver news. News Julie absolutely did not want to hear. News she’d worried about getting every time Jeff had left the house to work on a case.

News that would change her life forever.

“There was a situation at the soccer game.” Anita had rubbed her forehead, appearing to choose her words carefully.

“A situation? At the soccer game?” Julie had basically repeated Anita’s words, but coming up with her own words had been an impossible task. Her heart had slowed in her chest, as if it hadn’t had enough fuel to keep pumping.

Anita had guided Julie over to the couch and, with a gentle nudge on the shoulders, coaxed her into a seat. She’d kneeled before Julie and had taken her hands in her own. “Do you know anything about the case Jeff was working on?”

Julie had nodded. “The one with the moving company and the suspicions of armed robbery?”

“Right.” Anita had stood and paced away from Julie. When she’d turned back, tears dotted her brown eyes. “Seems the moving company has ties to the mafia. They identified Jeff and his partner snooping around. The mafia doesn’t like snooping around.”

And then, with a tight hug, Anita had said the words Julie prayed never to hear.

“I’m sorry, Julie. Jeff and Nathan are gone.”

The two loves of her life taken by mobster scumbags. They may have had a reason to target Jeff. After all, he was trying to shut down their organization and put them in jail.

But Nathan? My sweet, innocent Nathan?

Her little boy had barely begun to leave his mark on the world. Robbed. He'd been robbed of his life, and she'd been robbed of tucking him in, of reading him stories, of taking him trick-or-treating, of buying him Christmas presents and basking in his sheer delight.

Of watching him grow up to become a wonderful man... just like his father.

Julie had tried to hang on to the unraveling strings of her life—of *their* life—but she couldn't do it. Her job didn't mean squat to her anymore. The money she made couldn't buy back her husband and son. Couldn't buy her happiness. Couldn't buy her a full night's sleep.

She'd made the decision to get the hell out of Chicago when this Thanksgiving had rolled around and she'd spent the entire day bawling her eyes out. It wasn't healthy. She couldn't even think about moving on while she still lived in *their* house, still parked her car in *their* driveway, still slept in *their* bed. She needed a fresh start where no one knew her.

Where she didn't know herself.

About three days after Thanksgiving, she'd seen a help-wanted ad for a maid at Hinsdale Inn in Danton, Vermont. She'd never been to Vermont. She'd never been a maid. She made a phone call, talked to a lovely woman named Lily Stannard who owned the inn, done a Skype interview, and the next thing she knew, she was resigning from Belle Pets to clean toilets in some rustic lodge deep in the woods a month later.

It was crazy, but maybe crazy was what she needed. She had to give it a shot. She couldn't live her life in constant mourning. Jeff and Nathan wouldn't want that for her. She was only thirty-five years old. Much too young to close up shop and live like a depressed widow. Her son and husband would want her to be happy.

But being happy without them seemed damn near impossible.

“Sugar? You gonna memorize that menu or order something? I recommend the salmon chowder. Warm you up from the inside out.”

Julie closed the menu. “Okay, that sounds good.” The waitress's nametag said *Joy*.

If only Julie could order some joy from the menu.

More Than Biscotti

Marco Scampanelli navigated his rented SUV down the twisty Vermont roads. Getting away from the holiday busting in Boston, Massachusetts had seemed like a good idea, but now he wasn't so sure. Vermont was snowy and... dark. He hadn't seen another pair of headlights for miles.

Am I the only human here?

Maybe that wouldn't be the worst thing. He needed some alone time. His job as CEO of WellPharm, a giant pharmaceutical company he'd started about five years ago, was packed with people, many of them in and out of his office all day long. He never had a moment's peace there. Generally, he liked being busy, but when he'd begun snapping at some members of his team—people who had been with him from the beginning and who he considered friends—he knew it was time to take a break.

And then there was Mama. Rosa Scampanelli had decided it was her life's mission to marry Marco off to an Italian beauty. Boston was full of them, and Mama had given him the phone numbers for nearly every one. He could deal with the phone numbers. He just took them and stuffed them into the pocket of whatever he happened to be wearing at the time.

It was when women started showing up on his doorstep that he had to have a conversation with Mama.

"This has to stop." He'd been seated at his mother's small kitchen table, a huge plate of spaghetti and meatballs in front of him.

"What? Suddenly you don't like spaghetti and meatballs?" Mama had put her hands on her hips, sauce staining the front of her Uncle Mario's Pizzeria apron. Uncle Mario had given her the apron when she'd told him she could make a better pizza than he could. Truth of the matter was Mario was Mama's little brother, and she *had* been the one to teach him everything he knew about Italian cooking. She'd also taught Marco how to make the world's best biscotti, and he'd inherited the job of making them every Christmas.

“No. The spaghetti and meatballs are fine, like always,” Marco had said. “You know what has to stop.”

Mama had let her arms flap against her sides. “If you just picked one of the many, many gorgeous girls I’ve sent your way, dear son, I would stop.”

“That’s not how it’s done, Mama.” He’d twirled some spaghetti onto his fork.

“What do you know about how it’s done? You haven’t even tried. You’re nearly forty years old and still all alone.”

“I’m not all alone. I’ve got you, don’t I?” He’d given her the smile he’d been giving her since he was a small boy. The one that got him out of any kind of trouble.

Mama’s expression had softened, her brown eyes looking at him with such love. “You do have me, but I’m not going to live forever. You need a wife.”

“I need more meatballs.” He’d held up his plate, and she’d taken it to the stove to fill it.

Mama was right of course. He hadn’t had any serious relationships mainly because his heart was a cold, dead stone in his chest.

When Mama had turned back to him, she’d dropped her gaze to his plate still in her hands. “I know you miss her, but Marina would want you to live the life she didn’t get the chance to, Marco.”

Just hearing his twin sister’s name had been painful. Always was. He’d done everything he could to save her—even start a pharmaceutical company determined to find a cure for leukemia—but nothing had worked. She’d died two years ago, but it still felt as if losing her had happened only yesterday. The pain was still raw. Being twins had made them closer than most siblings, and he couldn’t get past the fact that Marina wasn’t around anymore.

He’d squeezed his mother’s hand, accepted his plate, and ate in an achy silence as Mama prattled on about a nice young woman she’d met at the supermarket last week. After he’d left his mother’s house, he’d immediately organized a getaway for Christmas. His buddy, Dax Wilder, had told him about Hinsdale Inn in Vermont, and that seemed like the perfect place to hide for a

More Than Biscotti

few days. Maybe in the quiet of the woods he could finally say goodbye to Marina and get on with his own life.

Squinting in the dark now, however, he wasn't even sure he was going in the right direction. He glanced at the dashboard clock. Five o'clock.

Should have been there by now.

His stomach let out an angry roar. "Yeah, yeah, I know. We're hungry." He'd kill for some of Mama's spaghetti and meatballs now, but knew he probably wouldn't be getting that for a while. Mama was pretty pissed he'd taken off for Christmas. She'd forgive him, of course, but she'd pile on the Italian guilt first and let him suffer. That was fine. He was a big boy.

The foggy outline of a building came into view up ahead under the dim glow of a few streetlights, and Marco pulled into a full parking lot.

"Black Wolf Tavern," he read off the sign on the building. He didn't know where else there would be to stop and get food, maybe some directions too, so he parked the SUV and got out. His left foot sunk into mud up to the ankle. "Super."

He yanked his foot out of the mud and shook it out. Good thing he'd worn his more rugged winter boots. They'd be covered in wet muck, but at least his feet would stay dry.

Marco slogged through the muddy, snow-patched parking lot and pulled open the door to the tavern. Music floated out to him, and because it didn't sound too countryish, he stepped inside, scraping his boots on the coarse bristles of the welcome mat as every patron before him tonight had no doubt done.

"Don't worry none about that gunk, sugar," a pleasant female voice said. "This floor is going to need a good hose down no matter what. C'mon in."

Marco turned his attention from his messy boots to the source of the voice. Her nametag said *Joy*, and her smiling face clearly indicated she'd been properly named.

"Only one tonight, honey?" She peered around him looking for companions.

"Only one."

Joy's mouth turned down at the corners. "Well, that's a shame. You're too handsome to be alone."

"You sound like my mother." He half wondered if Mama had called ahead and cut some kind of a deal with this Joy person.

"I get that a lot." Joy beamed another smile at him then turned to look out at the tavern. "You can see it's real busy tonight. Folks are already getting cabin fever with the winter weather, and we're the only source of entertainment in the area. Besides, my Jake has the best food and drinks around." Her smile widened. "You don't mind sitting with someone, do you?"

Yes, he did mind, but his stomach begged him to provide sustenance now. "I guess not."

"That's the spirit. Right this way." Joy wiggled a menu and led him through the crowd.

The bar's interior was decorated for Christmas with tiny white lights draped on the exposed timber beams overhead and wrapped around the posts supporting them. Oversized evergreen wreaths dotted with pinecones and cranberries hung on the walls, and an enormous Christmas tree stood sentinel by a stage area. The entire bar looked like a country Christmas card.

Marco caught a few glimpses at the dishes heaped high with food on the tables he passed. Everything looked delicious, and the entire tavern smelled like a barbecued heaven. Sitting with some stranger was going to suck, but he'd just focus on the food he ordered, shovel it down, and be on his way. Along with being hungry, he was tired. He hadn't been on a vacation in far too long, and it was going to be nice to catch up on some sleep while he was buried in the woods.

"Here we are." Joy had stopped at a booth near the back of the tavern. "I'll let you two kids get to know one another for a few, then I'll be back to take your order, sweetie." She plunked the menu down on the empty side of the booth and patted Marco on the forearm. "Play nice."

Humming, she walked away, and Marco got his first look at his unwanted tablemate. Waves of rich brown hair cascaded about her shoulders as sharp blue eyes surveyed him. She offered him a tentative smile, and something ignited inside Marco.

More Than Biscotti

Maybe he wasn't so against dining with a stranger. Not if the stranger looked like this. The fitted blue sweater she wore matched her eyes and outlined a delicate build. He couldn't see her from the waist down, but his imagination had no trouble filling in the rest of the picture.

And he liked the picture.

"Well, this isn't too weird, right?" She rolled her eyes, but motioned to his seat across from her. "I'm Julie Reshner." She stuck her hand out toward him.

He took her hand and had to squelch the desire to bring it up to his lips. *What the hell is that about?*

Food. He just wanted food.

"I'm Marco Scampanelli. Nice to meet you." *No. No, it wasn't.* He didn't want to meet anyone. He wanted to disappear on this vacation, not make friends.

"Joy recommended the salmon chowder," she gestured to the half full bowl in front of her, "and I have to say, it's amazing."

Somehow Marco managed to slide into the booth and peel his jacket off. He watched with a small amount of male satisfaction as Julie's pupils zipped open wider. Maybe all the time he spent before work each day in WellPharm's onsite gym had not gone to waste.

"Salmon chowder. Okay." He didn't care so much about the food anymore. Julie interested him more. "Do you live around here?"

She corralled that lovely shiny hair onto one shoulder. "I will be, but technically this is my first day in Vermont."

"Mine too."

They stared at one another for a few quiet moments before Julie said, "What brings you to Vermont?"

"Running from my Italian mother's matchmaking attempts." He hadn't meant to be so honest.

Christine DePetrillo

Julie laughed and the sound was musical, vibrating pleasantly between Marco's ears and turning her face into something magical.

"I've heard Italian mothers can be very determined," she said.

"They can be downright pains in the ass, but it's all powered by love, so..." He shrugged and found himself wondering what Mama would think of Julie. He was pretty sure she'd get two thumbs up.

"So you deal with it, right?" Julie picked up her drink—a hard apple cider—and took a long sip.

Marco became fascinated with the way her lips kissed the rim of the bottle.

"See something you like?" Joy had swooped in from nowhere, her finger tapping the menu in front of Marco.

He saw something he liked all right, but it wasn't on the menu.

Chapter Two

That hard apple cider was doing absolutely nothing to cool off Julie. When she'd come into the tavern, she'd taken the snowy December chill in with her. The moment she saw Joy weaving through the crowd with the most attractive man she'd ever seen in real life, however, her entire body had heated up as if someone had lit a match inside her.

It's the steamy chowder.

Yeah. Right. Though the salmon chowder was hot, it wasn't as hot as Marco Scampanelli. Shit. Even his name was hot, and she wanted to say it out loud, slowly, letting the syllables roll off her tongue.

"I'll have the salmon chowder as well," Marco said to a waiting Joy. "And a Sam Adams."

"Got it, sugar." Joy winked at him then turned to Julie. "Another cider, honey?"

"Okay." Julie had demolished the first one and was no closer to extinguishing the fire inside her. "Could I get a glass with some ice too?"

Joy grinned. "Definitely."

As the waitress walked away, Julie stole a quick peek back to Marco. He was scanning his surroundings as he pulled up the sleeves of his green thermal T-shirt—a T-shirt that showcased an athletic build with some amazing biceps straining beneath the fabric. His black hair was cut short and a trim beard encircled his mouth as if outlining a target. Julie wouldn't mind arrowing a kiss there, given the chance.

What?

She never thought about kissing another man. Jeff was the last man she'd been intimate with, and whenever she pictured herself with someone else, she cried. It felt like betrayal. How would she ever love someone the way she'd loved Jeff? It didn't seem possible.

But this guy sitting across from her now? Hell, he made a woman get ideas. Naughty ones.

His gaze landed on her, and the bar lighting made his eyes a peculiar green-gold. A nice blush colored his cheeks, and Julie was sure hers were the same shade. She wiped her sweaty palms on her thighs under the table, not able to regulate her temperature with this male model sitting across from her.

Marco cleared his throat. "So what made you decide to live in Vermont?"

"Needed a change, I guess." Julie picked up her spoon and moved a potato around in her bowl. Best not to look at Marco too much. He wasn't a dessert she could devour.

"You don't sound so sure." He leaned his elbows on the table. The movement made his biceps bunch, and Julie scanned the tavern for Joy and that glass of ice.

"Well, I won't know if I've made the right decision until I've tried this place out for a few weeks."

"I see. It's like an experiment."

"Yeah."

Joy swooped in and dropped off Marco's beer and Julie's cider with the glass of ice. In a blink, she was buzzing over to another table.

"I hope it all works out." Marco leaned back and took a long drink of his beer.

"Thanks." Julie watched his throat work as he swallowed, and somehow, even his Adam's apple was damn sexy.

More Than Biscotti

Another waitress came over with Marco's chowder, steam curling up from its surface, and after pouring cider into the ice-filled glass, Julie shoveled in a mouthful of her own lukewarm chowder. They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes until Julie's spoon scraped against the bottom of her bowl.

Now what?

Marco was still eating, his head bent over his bowl, and Julie noticed a thin line that zigzagged through his hair at the crown of his head. That small imperfection made him more real somehow.

Because men as perfect as him didn't exist in real life. Right?

He brought his napkin up to his lips and wiped. Once again, his movements mesmerized Julie, and she was dumbfounded by her reaction to him.

She gulped some cider and studied the patrons around them. A table diagonal to theirs was full of women probably in their late twenties. They were all looking in Marco's direction with lustful eyes. One of them, however, gave Julie a thumbs up, and for the first time, she realized that people probably thought she and Marco were... together.

How would they know Joy had seated them in the same booth due to limited seating? It was logical to think they were a couple, sharing a meal in a cozy tavern on a frosty December evening. Julie's mind kept wandering to what else they could share in the interest of warming up tonight.

Get your mind out of the gutter, girl.

Sure, it'd been a year since she'd been properly laid, but she wasn't the type to pick a dude out of a bar and get naked with him. Even if the dude, in this case, no doubt looked amazing naked.

"So what do you do for work, Marco?" Because talking about work would keep her from fantasizing about Marco's hands all over her.

“I work for a pharmaceutical company.” Marco pushed his bowl to the end of the table, and a waitress picked it up.

“Do you like that line of work?” Nothing sexy about pharmaceutical companies. A nice, safe topic.

Marco folded his arms across his chest and shrugged. “It pays the bills.”

“It saves lives.” Her little Nathan had been asthmatic, and the right drugs meant the difference between him breathing or not. In the end, it hadn’t mattered though. Some asshole took her boy from her anyway. No drugs could stop a bullet.

“It does save lives. Just not the one life I wanted it to.” Marco’s broad shoulders sagged a bit.

“You lost someone important.” His pain stabbed at her heart—a heart with too many scars already.

Marco’s green-gold eyes squeezed shut for a moment. When he opened them, he grabbed his beer bottle and picked at the label. “My sister. Twin actually. Her name was Marina.” He fingered the scar on his head with his other hand. “She whipped me with her jump rope when we were ten. I needed stitches.” A sad smile turned up one corner of his mouth. “We had our moments as every brother and sister do, but I miss her.”

Julie’s eyes stung. She wanted to say something comforting, but her throat was tight. Impossibly tight. She tried to get a handle on her emotions, but all she could think about was how much losing the people you loved hurt. Nothing hurt like that. Nothing.

When the first tear rolled down her cheek, she grabbed her coat and stood. She dug in her purse and threw money onto the table. No doubt she left more than was needed for her bill, but she had to get out of there. More tears followed the first, and she had to leave before she created a scene.

“Hey,” Marco said, standing too. “Are you okay?”

More Than Biscotti

“Yeah. I’m just... I’ve got... I’ve got to go.” She swiped at the stupid tears and shouldered her purse. “Enjoy Vermont.”

She booked it out of there, ignoring Marco calling her name. She had exactly thirty minutes to get to Hinsdale Inn for orientation.

Exactly thirty minutes to patch up the holes in her heart.

Again.

Marco pulled the SUV into a parking space in front of a gorgeous—and enormous—log house. In the glow of floodlights, the front steps were a masterpiece with an artistic combination of wood, iron, and stone. With several inches of snow blanketing the area, tall evergreens surrounding the house sagged their white-and-green boughs. Smoke puffed out of the massive stone chimney, a clear indication a roaring fire waited within to warm him.

Just what I need.

After Julie had made her hasty retreat from the tavern, Marco couldn’t shake a cold, lonely feeling that slithered around his spine and took hold. Though they were complete strangers, he’d enjoyed her quiet company while he’d been eating. Even when the topic of Marina had come up, he hadn’t minded, and the clenching-fist feeling around his heart when he thought about his twin sister wasn’t as bad as it usually was.

What had made Julie bolt? She hadn’t known Marina. Why would learning he’d lost his sister be so upsetting to her?

Unless she’s lost someone too...

That had been the only reason he could come up with on the drive from Black Wolf Tavern to Hinsdale Inn, but he guessed he’d never know for sure. He had no idea where the brown-haired beauty had run off to, but he wasn’t in Vermont to seek out a woman anyway. Just the opposite in fact.

Though Julie had been the first woman to catch his interest in a long time.

Shrugging, he got out of the SUV and pulled his suitcase out of the back. He hadn't packed much, figuring he'd only stay a few days. Enough to call it a vacation. Enough to avoid Christmas and his mother's mistletoed attempts to drive him crazy.

The waitress at Black Wolf Tavern had been as disappointed about her failed match-making attempt as his mother had been.

"Where'd the lovely lady go?" Joy had asked, turning in a full circle and surveying the bar.

"She left." Marco had pulled out his wallet, preparing to pay the bill.

Joy's brows had lowered as her hands went to her hips. "What did you do?"

Marco had laughed as he'd angled his hands at himself. "Me? I didn't do anything. Maybe she had somewhere to be."

"Sugar, if I was sitting across from someone who looked like you, there'd be nowhere else I had to be." She'd paused when a gray-haired man with a bushy beard came up behind her and slipped an arm around her waist.

"Is this guy trying to steal you from me, Joy?" The man had given Marco a squinty look.

"Don't I wish." Joy had nudged the man with her hip then dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Fortunately for you, Jake, I like grizzly types." She'd looked back to Marco. "I thought for sure you'd be leaving this bar with that nice young lady. I must be losing my touch."

"Oh, I wasn't looking to... I mean, I just came here for..."

Jake had held his hands up. "Maybe you weren't coming here for a woman, but if the opportunity presents itself, kid, don't toss it aside so readily."

Toss it aside? Marco hadn't tossed anything aside. Julie was the one who had left so abruptly. He'd been about to state that point then wondered why the hell he cared. He was in Vermont for some time off, not to explain himself to the locals. Rest and relaxation were the only things on his agenda. He'd like to keep it that way.

More Than Biscotti

Joy had brought him the bill, he'd paid, and after asking for directions, he'd made his way to Hinsdale Inn which stood before him now.

"Time to unwind." Not think about beautiful strangers who cried in his presence.

Sighing, he climbed the steps and opened the front door. The inside of the log house was even more breathtaking than the outside. It managed to be both rustic and fancy at the same time. The hardwood flooring beneath him shone with a glossy finish, and some elaborate lights hung overhead, but the décor in general reminded him of being outside still. Twig and pinecone wreaths adorned the walls, rusty sleigh bells jingled from the doorknob of the front door, and a humungous tree encircled by cranberry strings, wood ornaments, and tiny white lights announced the holiday season, Vermont-style.

Marco immediately liked the place and made a mental note to thank Dax for suggesting it. A guy could forget the real world here and get back in touch with what mattered in life.

He drew in a deep breath, enjoying the apple-cinnamon scent that filled the foyer. As he set his suitcase down, a woman with strawberry-blonde hair emerged from the long hallway in front of him.

"Good evening," she said with a big smile. "You must be Mr. Scampanelli."

He extended his hand. "Marco, please."

"Welcome, Marco." She shook his hand. "I'm Lily. We spoke on the phone. You're a friend of Dax's, right?"

"Yes." And for some reason, he felt as if he was already a friend of hers too. She gave off this nice energy.

"I do love it when customers refer their friends. Good business." She consulted a clipboard she carried. "I put you in the Deer Room. Nice view of the sunset over the mountains in the morning." She motioned to his bag. "My husband, Rick, will be along to grab that for you."

"No need." Marco picked it up. "I'm not a spoiled brat."

“Good to know.” She waved him to the hallway. “Right this way then.”

He followed her up a set of stairs to a door with an iron silhouette of a deer head on it. Inside, the walls were painted hunter green. A large painting of two deer in the snowy woods hung on the wall behind the king-sized bed and hickory nightstands. In one corner, a ladderback rocking chair sat with a green crocheted afghan thrown over one arm. A hickory dresser and a mirror outlined in deer antlers lined the wall opposite the bed.

“Does this room agree with you?” Lily asked.

“Perfectly.” Marco slid his suitcase onto the bed. “It’s a great room.”

“Thanks. My husband made the bed frame, nightstands, and dresser. He’s handy with a saw and hammer. It’s why I keep him around.”

“Liar.” A blond-haired man in a red-and-black flannel shirt and a pair of faded jeans leaned against the doorframe. “She keeps me around because I’m sexy.”

Lily laughed. “Marco, meet my delusional husband, Rick.”

The two men shook hands, then Rick said, “The other guests are about to come on a tour of my maple syrup operation over at the sugar house. You interested, Marco?”

“Sure. No time like the present to jump into a Vermont state of mind.” Marco pulled a hat and gloves from his suitcase. This was why he came here. To leave the city behind and get rural.

“That’s the spirit.” Rick turned to lead Marco out of the room but glanced back at Lily. “The new maid has a question about how you would like the towels folded in the linen closet.”

Lily clapped her hands together. “Oh, I do like her. Attention to detail makes me happy.”

Marco followed Rick outside where a small group waited with flashlights. After brief introductions, Rick started his tour, and Marco lost himself in the world of maple trees, sap, and syrup grades. It was all so fascinating, and he would have liked to say he’d forgotten about the woman who’d left him in Black Wolf Tavern.

But that’d be a big, fat lie.

Chapter Three

Julie's first evening at Hinsdale Inn had gone well. She hadn't spilled anything, been yelled at, or set anything on fire. Lily and Rick were fabulous, taking the time to show her around and explaining exactly how they liked things. Though being a maid wasn't anything Julie ever pictured herself doing, something about the position felt right to her. She didn't have to move at breakneck speed. No one was looking for her counsel. She didn't have any paperwork to wade through. All she had to do was keep the inn clean.

Easy peasy.

This morning—Christmas Eve morning—Lily had asked her to go to the small storefront on Rick's maple sugaring property next door to the inn and pick up some breakfast pastries Rick's cousins and aunt had made for the guests. She'd driven over so she had a way to carry the confections back in one trip without freezing her nipples off. Apparently, she'd already lost a glove and would definitely need to rectify that situation if she were to survive a Vermont December.

When she walked into the shop, she immediately fell in love with the way it smelled. With Christmas only one day away, the place was cookie central. Julie longed for a big mug of hot cocoa, a comfy chair, and at least one of each type of cookie.

Well, maybe two.

Rick's cousin, Sage Finley, slid the last tray of pastries over to Julie, but Julie's gaze was fixated on some mint chocolate cookies in the shop's display case.

"Some tasty stuff in there," she said to Sage.

“You betcha. When we open in an hour or so, this shop will be crazy. Everyone wants my cookies.” Sage patted herself on the back as her sister, Hope Rouse, came out of the kitchen.

“Except your biscotti,” Hope said. “You ruin those every time.”

Sage threw a towel at her sister. “Shut it. I don’t need to be reminded of my failures.” She dodged the towel Hope threw back then surveyed the display case with a frown. “She’s right though. This case will never have a decent biscotti in it.”

“That’s too bad,” Julie said. “Biscotti are my favorite. They are just so pretty.”

“Speaking of pretty...” Hope had gone over to the shop’s front window. “Did you guys see Lily’s latest guest at the inn? Come see. He’s beautiful.”

“Don’t let our husbands hear you say that.” Sage jogged around the display case and nudged her sister out of the way.

Julie laughed at the two of them huddling by the window, fogging up the glass, just to get a glimpse of a guest. Silly.

Still...

Maybe ogling a beautiful man would help her forget how she’d left another beautiful man standing at the table in the tavern last night. Poor Marco probably thought she was a nutcase, crying like that. She hadn’t been able to stop the flow once it started though. Learning he’d lost a twin sister—who he’d started an entire company for in an attempt to save—had cut out what remained of her heart. Would that tender organ ever be whole again?

No. Impossible. Losing Jeff and Nathan had done fatal damage to her heart. Nothing could heal that.

“Get your butt over here, Julie.” Sage waved her over without turning around from the view outside. “You’re missing an excellent show.”

“He can’t be *that* gorgeous.” She squeezed between Sage and Hope and wiped the condensation off the window to look outside.

More Than Biscotti

A man stood next to Rick. Tall. Black hair. A green ski jacket. Long, muscular legs encased in denim. Rugged, black winter boots.

“Oh my God.” Julie turned around and slunk to the floor in an attempt to hide below the window.

“Right?” Hope nudged her with her knee. “Told you he was beautiful.”

“Oh my God,” Julie said again, unable to believe what she had seen. *Who* she had seen.

“You said that already.” Sage took a step back to look down at Julie.

“I know him.” Julie got to her knees and peeked out the window, her nose level with the sill. “I met him last night at Black Wolf Tavern.”

“Reeally.” Sage folded her arms across her chest and grinned. “And?”

Julie blinked up at her. “And?”

“Give us the details.” Hope dragged her over to one of the small tables in the shop and pushed her into a seat. The two sisters, who resembled twins, but Lily had said were not, stared at her, waiting and smiling and expecting.

Expecting what? Some hot and steamy tale of lust? That was a good one. Julie didn't have any tales like that. Thinking of Marco and his green-gold eyes, however, made her want to create some tales like that.

“There aren't any details,” she said. “We had to share a table because the bar was super crowded.”

Hope and Sage looked at each other. “Mom,” they said in unison.

“Was your waitress a curly-haired bucket o' sunshine?” Sage asked.

Hope sat across from Julie at the table. “Did she make you order the salmon chowder?”

“Yes. Her name was Joy.” Come to think of it, Sage and Hope had hair the same color as Joy's.

“That’s Mom all right,” Hope said. “And you and Marco didn’t hit it off?”

“We got along fine for two complete strangers forced to sit together.” Julie thought of the way Marco’s thermal T-shirt had stretched across his broad shoulders, and that weird heat from last night came flooding over her again.

“Together in a cozy booth at a cozy tavern.” Sage looked back outside. “So how did your dining experience with Mr. Sexy end?”

With me being a total fool.

“We finished eating and I had to get to the inn for orientation. Lily was expecting me.” Close enough to the truth. Not as embarrassing.

“No phone numbers exchanged?” Hope asked.

Julie shook her head. What guy would exchange numbers with a woman who cried during their first meeting?

“Well, looks like you’re getting another chance, Julie.” Sage turned from the window again. “He’s coming inside.”

Shit. Julie scanned the small shop. She could hide in the kitchen. As soon as she stood to run for it though, Hope put a hand on her shoulder.

“You’re going to run into him eventually. You work at the inn. He’s staying at the inn,” she said.

“He may need *room service* at some point during his stay.” Sage winked at her as she walked back to the display case and began rearranging pastries.

“I should get back to the inn right now,” Julie said. “Lily wants those pastries for breakfast.” She didn’t want to be remiss in her duties on her first official full day on the job.

She didn’t want to run into Marco either.

More Than Biscotti

The knob on the shop door turned, and before Julie could hide, Rick stepped into the shop with Marco right on his heels. Rick's coyote, Poe, that Julie had met last night, trotted in behind Marco and sat on a braided rug in front of the shop's woodstove.

"Well, this is a lot of alpha male," Sage said. "Who's your new boyfriend, Ricky?"

"Sage." Rick's voice was low and stern, as if he were scolding an unruly child.

"Ricky," Sage said, a broad smile on her face.

"Ignore her," Rick said.

"Do not ignore me." Sage looked at Marco. "I'm Sage. That's my sister, Hope. Nice to meet you—?"

"Marco Scampanelli." His voice made Julie's insides flutter, but she couldn't completely enjoy it. She was too busy waiting for him to look her way.

When he did, those marvelous eyes widened then blinked slowly, and she felt thoroughly undressed just by his look.

"Julie." Her name sounded poetic from his lips. Or maybe his lips were poetic.

Yikes. Julie gripped the edge of the table behind her to keep from floating over to stand next to him. What was that magnetic pull?

"Nice to see you again, Marco." She barely managed to get the words out.

He pulled his gloves off and shoved them into the pockets of his coat. "Is it?"

Just her luck. Marco Scampanelli was a man who required explanations.

Damn.

Marco truly hadn't expected to see Julie again, but here she was. Standing stiffly in front of a table in this quaint little shop. Surrounded by confections and looking exceptionally hot in

jeans and a green fleece sweatshirt with the Hinsdale Inn logo on it. No one should look that gorgeous in denim and fleece, but holy shit, Julie did.

“You work here?” Stupid question, but he was fresh out of charming things to say at the moment. The shock of seeing her again was still too fresh in the air between them. Why did he not want there to be *any* air between them?

Julie hesitated before answering him. “I work here. Yeah.”

Okay. So she wasn’t completely on her game either. Had seeing him knocked her for a loop too?

“Are those the breakfast pastries Lily wanted?” Rick gestured to trays on a display case heaped with Danish and cinnamon buns that smelled like something Marco wanted to attack.

“Yeah,” Julie said again then rolled her eyes.

Marco grinned. She was definitely in the same shock zone as he was. Good to know. He liked being on equal footing. Actually, he liked having the upper hand better. How could he get it here?

“Rick, you can take these trays back to the inn, can’t you?” Sage asked from behind the display case. She picked up one of them and wiggled it in Rick’s direction. She flicked her gaze to Marco, then to Julie, and finally back to Rick.

After a moment, Rick said, “Oh. Yeah. Gotcha. Definitely.” He clapped Marco on the back. “Good hike. If you want to go on another one during your stay, let me know. I’m around.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

The two men shook hands, then Rick picked up one of the trays and eyed the second one. The other blonde woman, Hope, grabbed the second tray and scooted out from behind the display case.

“I got this one, Rick. Let’s go.”

“Don’t drop any,” Sage called.

More Than Biscotti

Rick offered her a growl that made Marco laugh. When he glanced at Julie, she was chuckling too. Her face had a rather angelic smile on it. He much preferred that face over the teary-eyed one he'd seen last night in the tavern. She'd looked so lost.

As Rick and Hope made their way to the shop's door, Rick's coyote popped up on all fours and raced to beat them. Julie took a step away from the table and started to say something, but the trio was already outside in the chilly morning. She turned back toward the display case, again her mouth open as if ready to speak, but Sage was gone too. A door to what Marco assumed was a kitchen was still swinging.

Marco waited for Julie to look at him. When she did, she offered him a shy smile that made his jeans tighten.

"They sure know how to disappear, don't they?" She motioned to the shop they had all to themselves now.

"It appears Vermont is filled with matchmakers." He took his jacket off and hung it on the back of a nearby chair.

"And weren't you trying to get away from matchmaking by coming here?" She fiddled with the zipper on her sweatshirt.

"I was." He wandered over to the display case and perused the cookies. Each one looked more delicious than the next. His mouth watered, but he didn't spot any biscotti.

Too bad.

"The waitress last night... Joy?" Julie came over to the case and stood beside him. "She is Sage and Hope's mother."

"I noticed the resemblance."

"Yeah. Joy is Rick's aunt. Sage and Hope, his cousins."

"So matchmaking is genetic around here." Marco drummed his fingers on the top of the display case to keep from doing something stupid like reaching for Julie. He kept his eyes focused on the cookies.

“Guess so.” Julie was quiet for a few moments, but she kept rubbing her hands together as if to warm them.

“Hands cold?” he asked.

“Yeah, and I lost one of my gloves already.”

“No, you didn’t.” Marco went to his jacket, pulled out a purple, fuzzy glove, and waved it at her. “Here you go, Cinderella.”

Julie took the glove, a lovely grin on her lips. “You found it.”

“You left it behind at the tavern last night. I didn’t think I’d see you again, but something told me to take it.” When he’d stood to leave the booth at the tavern, he’d noticed the stray glove in the seat Julie had so hastily vacated. He wasn’t sure what taking it with him would accomplish, but something about leaving it behind made him feel hollow.

She put the glove in the pocket of her fleece sweatshirt. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Marco scrambled around in his brain for something else to say.

She beat him to it. “Listen. I’m sorry about last night.”

Marco shook his head. “No, I’m sorry I upset you.”

“It wasn’t you. It was me. Hearing you lost your sister made my chest hurt.” She rubbed a spot above her breasts.

“Still makes my chest hurt too.” Marco’s throat grew tight. He sincerely hoped it wasn’t his turn to cry.

He felt her hand on his forearm, and his gaze shot to her long fingers curling around his wrist.

“I’m here because I lost my husband and son and couldn’t take living where I’d built a life with them anymore.”

More Than Biscotti

Marco rested his hand atop hers. "Because it's so easy to see them around every corner, isn't it?"

"Hell, yeah. That's both wonderful and sucky." She slid her hand free from under his and turned her attention to the cookies. "Some of these might make us feel better. Too bad there isn't any biscotti though."

Marco's mouth dropped open. "Is biscotti your favorite?"

"King of the cookies in my opinion."

"Agreed. Let's make some." He suddenly had this urgent need to bake with her.

"I don't know how to make them. I just know how to eat them." She smiled. "I'm an expert at eating them."

"Lucky for you," Marco said, "I'm an expert at baking biscotti. It's my specialty."

Julie blinked at him, her brows slightly furrowed. "You bake?"

"Is that so difficult to believe?" Her disbelief was adorable. "I'm Italian. Italians make food. Usually lots of it." He dug out his cell phone and in a few seconds, Lily picked up the phone at the inn.

"Hinsdale Inn. Good morning. This is Lily."

"Hi, Lily. It's Marco. Do you think it would be a problem if I wanted to bake biscotti in the shop's kitchen?"

"Hang on, Sage just came in. She's the resident Jedi Master of the Kitchen."

Marco heard Lily relay the question to Sage. Laughter followed then Lily said, "Sage said to go for it, but if you leave a mess, she'll cut your hands off with a light saber."

"I won't leave a mess," he promised.

"You've got a maid with you to clean up," Julie said.

So that was the new job. Maid. He made a mental note to not be a slob in his room at the inn.

Or to leave out his boxer shorts with the holes in them.

“Hope wants to know if Julie is going to help you,” Lily asked.

“Yes.”

After a hearty shout of female cheering, Marco held the phone away from his ear.

“Great!” Lily continued. “Tell her not to worry about rushing back to the inn. Our other guests checked out about ten minutes ago, mouths full of Danish and cinnamon buns. You’re our only guest through the holiday.”

“Thanks.” Marco hung up and clapped his hands together. “Green light, so let’s get to it.”

“I’ve got to get back to work, Marco.” Julie tapped the Hinsdale Inn logo on her sweatshirt. “I’m not on vacation like you.”

“Lily gave it the okay. Besides, you’ll be working. I’m the only guest at the inn. Your job as maid shifted to guest entertainer.” Oh, he liked the sound of that. It had... possibilities.

“Guest entertainer?”

“You must provide me with recreational activities, such as baking.”

“I don’t remember seeing that in my job description.” She put her hands on her hips, but a smile turned up the corners of her lips.

“Just added today.” He took her hand and tugged her around the display case.

Julie stopped before they entered the kitchen and raised an eyebrow at him. “You really want to bake cookies?”

“Not just any cookie,” Marco said. “Delicious biscotti.”

Though he definitely wanted to taste her instead.

Chapter Four

A man who looked like a Mediterranean wet dream was leading her into the kitchen. If that wasn't enough of a fantasy already, the guy wanted to bake biscotti with her.

I'm going to wake up any minute now.

Julie paused, waiting for that gasp and full body jolt that usually came with the abrupt ending of a sweet dream. When it didn't come, she pulled off her sweatshirt and attempted to cool herself off, because she'd been all fired up since the moment she'd seen Marco outside the shop with Rick. The fact that he'd rescued her runaway glove only added fuel to the blaze.

"Any particular flavor you like best?" He surveyed the ingredients stashed in the shop's kitchen.

"Haven't met one I didn't like yet. Do you have a kind you prefer to make?" After all, he was the guest, supposed to be on vacation, and hiding from matchmaking. The least she could do was let the guy choose the flavor of cookie he wanted to bake.

"My cranberry-white chocolate biscotti are always a big hit." He set flour and sugar out on the worktable.

A big hit with whom? Had he baked cookies with hundreds of women back home? Was this how he lured women into his bed? Certainly a man who looked like he did—and could bake cookies—had lured many women into his bed. He probably didn't even need the biscotti-baking ruse to get them there either.

As he moved about the kitchen with comfortable ease, Julie changed her mind. This guy wasn't a player. Players didn't bake. Players didn't have that speck of vulnerability in their green-gold eyes either.

Players didn't pull an apron with dancing gingerbread men on it down from a peg on the wall and put it on.

Laughing, she neared the table and searched beneath it until she found dried cranberries and white baking chocolate. Plunking them down on the table, she said, "What can I do, Chef Scampanelli?"

"Ah, someone willing to take direction. That's hot." He offered her a grin full of heat. If he kept that up, those biscotti would cook themselves right on the worktable.

"Are your regular biscotti-baking assistants not as compliant?"

He grabbed two glass bowls and situated one in front of each of them. "I've never had an assistant. I don't bake around much."

Julie laughed again. A real laugh. One that came from some place deep inside her. "I'll try not to disappoint then."

"I have high hopes." He nudged the bowl in front of her. "Cut up the white chocolate and mix it with cranberries in this bowl."

"How much chocolate and cranberries?" She opened the white chocolate and set it on a cutting board.

"Have you never cooked with an Italian before?"

Julie shook her head.

"We don't use exact measurements, my lady. Go with your gut." He dumped flour and sugar into a bowl without using measuring cups.

More Than Biscotti

“What if my gut is wrong?” Her gut had always told her she’d be happy forever with Jeff and Nathan. That hadn’t been true. Sure, this was just baking biscotti, but she didn’t want that to get screwed up too.

Marco reached over and put his hand atop hers on the worktable. “We’ll just start again.”

Is he still talking about cookies?

Julie inspected his big hand covering hers and felt something she hadn’t felt since losing Jeff and Nathan.

Hope.

“Cranberries and chocolate. Go.” Marco tapped the bowl then went back to mixing his own ingredients.

She carried out his instructions, stealing glances at him as he mixed flour and sugar, cracked eggs, and melted butter. Even in that ridiculous apron, he was the sexiest thing she’d seen in a long time. The muscles in his arms bunched as he kneaded the dough, adding in her cranberries and chocolate as he worked.

“Find a baking sheet.”

Julie snapped out of her study of him and scrounged around the kitchen until she found a baking sheet. She set it on the worktable and went back to paying attention to his baking skills.

Yeah, right.

His baking skills weren’t what had her drooling already.

“Now we divide this dough in half and roll them into two long logs. Here. You do this one.” He plopped one ball of dough onto her cutting board and began rolling his own.

She followed his movements, and soon they had two identical logs on the baking sheet.

“How long will they take to bake?” Julie asked as she followed Marco to one of the ovens.

“Well, biscotti means twice-cooked, so we have to bake them once in log form, cut them into slices, then bake them again until they get nicely toasted on all sides.” Marco slid the baking sheet into the oven and set the timer.

“So you’re saying I have to be patient?”

Marco scratched his cheek, leaving behind a streak of flour. “Afraid so.”

“Damn.” She reached back to the worktable, grabbed a towel, and handed it to him. “You have a little flour right here.” She pointed to her own cheek.

“I usually end up wearing my work.” He wiped at his cheek. “Did I get it?”

Julie shook her head. “It’s a little higher.” She held her hand out for the towel. “May I?”

He gave her the towel and nodded.

Moving closer, Julie wrapped a corner of the towel around one finger and slowly raised her hand. Marco’s gaze never left hers as she wiped the white smear.

When she took a step back, he grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her closer again. “We have some time to kill.”

“Whatever shall we do?” Her voice was shaky, but she’d never been surer she wanted a man to kiss her than right-freaking-now.

“I have a suggestion.”

He backed her up against the worktable and leaned in.

This is it. My first kiss since Jeff. Her heart slammed against her ribs while the rest of her body buzzed with anticipation.

A puff of flour landed on her shirt instead. Marco’s deep laughter followed, but he didn’t get to revel in his shenanigans for long. A handful of flour got him square in the chest, leaving a white cloud between them.

More Than Biscotti

“Look what you’ve done to my stylish apron.” He angled his hands to the dusty gingerbread men.

“They’re dancing in the snow now.” Julie laughed when Marco brushed a hand over the flour and succeeded in only spreading the white over a larger area.

“Sage said not to make a mess,” he warned.

“You started it.” Julie stuck her tongue out at him and ran when he picked up another handful of flour.

“Get over here or Santa’s going to put you on the Not-So-Nice list.” He stalked over to her.

She ended up in a corner with nowhere to hide. “You probably know something about the Not-So-Nice list, don’t you?” She’d forgotten how much fun flirting was. She hadn’t done it in a year.

Marco gave her a wounded face that was more adorable than a basketful of German Shepherd puppies. “I can assure you I’ve been on the Extra-Nice list for decades now.”

“I doubt that.” She skirted around him, but he caught her around the waist and corralled her against another worktable.

He opened his mouth to say something, but moved his hand up to her cheek instead. His skin was warm against hers, and she literally trembled with a need to kiss him.

“I’ll show you exactly how extra nice I can be.”

Marco leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. With the scent of biscotti in the air, he kissed her until Julie nearly forgot her own name.

Julie’s lips were warm and supple and tasted like... like candy canes? Marco pulled back for a minute—no easy task, by the way—and looked down into her big, blue eyes. Her pupils

were huge, black pools, and her tongue mesmerized him as she ran it along her bottom lip, savoring his taste perhaps.

“Do I taste candy cane?” he asked.

She nodded. “My lip balm. Too minty?” She raised a hand as if to wipe the flavor off her lips, but Marco took her hand in his to stop her.

“Not at all. Just an unexpected bonus. Very festive.” He fiddled with the end of her hair, tugging lightly so she had to come closer. “More.”

Julie put her hands on his shoulders then snaked them to the back of his neck. Her fingertips scraped along the back of his head, and the sensations that caused raced right to his dick. A low growl rumbled from his throat as he dove back into kissing her.

They barely knew each other, but Marco found something so familiar in the way her lips melded with his, the way her body fit against his, the way his insides turned to hot lava as the kiss deepened. He hadn't felt like this with anyone.

Of course, since Marina died, he hadn't given anyone a chance either. He'd been wrapped up in losing his twin sister and not able to give himself permission to live his own life. Thinking about how Marina had been cheated out of her life had consumed him. He'd buried himself in work, ignored Mama's concerns and her attempts to find him a woman, and run off to hide in the woods for the holidays.

Where I've ended up kissing an amazing woman.

Maybe some Christmas magic was at work here. Giving him the push he needed. Letting him jumpstart his life with this beautiful stranger currently in his arms.

Who was he to argue with Christmas magic?

Plunging his hands into her hair and loving the small hum that vibrated from her, Marco slid his tongue along Julie's and wanted to cheer when she ground her hips against his. A tiny piece of his brain said they couldn't do what he wanted to do in the middle of the shop's kitchen. He ignored that piece for a few more minutes of steamy kissing.

More Than Biscotti

Julie was the first to break away, her breathing labored and her lips puffy. “I didn’t read the fine print, but it’s possible I could get fired for kissing a guest in the kitchen.”

“I won’t tell anyone, though your shirt might give you away.” Marco pointed and Julie followed his finger to the splotches of flour that covered her shirt front. He had matching splotches on his apron. There may have been a little flour in her hair now too.

“I better clean this up. I am the maid after all.” She reached up and pulled the loop of the apron off Marco’s neck as he untied it from the back of his waist. Julie balled up the apron and set it on the worktable. She edged around him and grabbed her sweatshirt, putting it on and zipping it up. “There. No one will know.”

“I’ll know.”

The oven timer dinged before Julie could respond, but the pink on her cheeks said enough to Marco.

He pulled the baking sheet out of the oven. “Let’s finish the biscotti, then I know you have work to do, so I’ll let you do it, but please tell me you can have dinner with me tonight.”

Julie appeared to consider her answer carefully as he cut the logs into slices and placed the slices back on the baking sheet. He didn’t want to scare her away, but he was desperate to spend more time with her. He figured he was the first person she’d kissed since her departed husband, but that kiss had told him she was ready to hop back into the game, just as he was.

And he wanted to play the game. With Julie. Tonight.

“I suppose we should have dinner first if we plan to binge on biscotti as well.” She snuck her hand in and picked up a large cookie crumb. Popping it into her mouth, she closed her eyes, an expression of bliss spreading across her flawless face. “Oh, yummm.”

Yummm indeed. He wanted to hear a purr of satisfaction like that from her again, but for very different reasons.

“Great. Where do you want to meet?” He slid the baking sheet back into the oven and set the timer again.

“I’ve been on the bench for a while,” she started, looking down at her shoes. “I’m not sure what is and isn’t appropriate on a first date these days, but I have a cabin on the edge of the inn’s property. Came with the job. You’re welcome to come there. I can cook dinner and you can bring the biscotti.”

“That sounds nice.” It sounded perfect.

“Okay. How about six o’clock?” She grabbed the floured apron and stuffed it under her arm.

“See you then.”

She gave him a wave then scanned the kitchen, which was still a mess.

“I’ve got this,” he said. “It’ll be spotless by the time I leave.”

“Better be. I don’t think Sage was kidding about de-handing you with a light saber.” She turned to leave, her hand on the door, then took a step back into the kitchen.

Marco raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to say something. Instead she walked over to him and planted a sweet kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, Marco.” Her eyes were a little glossy.

“For what?”

“For giving me the nudge—the kiss—I needed to get things going again in here.” She patted her chest where her heart would be.

“Don’t thank me,” Marco said. “Thank the biscotti.”

She shook her head as she pushed open the door. “You taste better than biscotti, Chef Scampanelli.”

The door swung closed and Julie was gone, leaving Marco alone in the messy kitchen. When the timer dinged, he pulled the biscotti out of the oven and transferred the golden slices to a cooling rack. He melted some white chocolate and drizzled that over the cookies, giving them a more sophisticated look.

More Than Biscotti

After cleaning up the kitchen—and thinking about seeing Julie later—he picked up one of the cooled biscotti to do some quality control tasting. The biscotti crunched perfectly, as usual. The cranberries and chocolate paired beautifully, as usual. The taste filled his mouth wonderfully, as usual.

But Julie was right. The flavor didn't come close to the taste of their kiss.

Chapter Five

“You work fast.” Lily stood next to Julie as she stowed the mop and bucket in the supply closet at Hinsdale Inn.

“I was trying to make up for the time I spent... baking this morning.” She didn’t make eye contact with Lily because she knew her face was three shades redder than normal. Just thinking about kissing Marco in the kitchen had her entire body vibrating with need.

“Baking.” Lily smirked. “I’ll bet Marco’s *baking* is exceptional.”

“It is.” Julie released a sigh. “It really is.” The memory of the way his lips had felt against hers, the way his body had pressed against hers, the way she felt more alive than she’d felt in a long time told her that she definitely wanted to *bake* more with Marco.

“I may have heard that you have dinner plans with Mr. Scampanelli this evening. Is that right?” Lily tugged Julie over to one of the couches in the great room and sat in the oversized chair across from it.

“He said he wanted to see me tonight.” Julie shrugged. She had no idea what Marco saw in her. He was gorgeous enough to have any woman he wanted, but for some reason, he wanted her tonight.

A tiny piece of her brain went back to wondering if Marco was a player. He did say he owned a pharmaceutical company. He probably had enough money to travel across the globe on a whim if he wanted to. What was to stop him from hooking up at every destination?

Again, she dismissed this line of thinking. That kiss had felt one hundred percent genuine. And even if it wasn’t, who cared? Marco was a guest at the inn. When his vacation was

More Than Biscotti

over, he'd go back to... to... shit, she didn't even know where he was from. Further proof that she should just have fun with him and not get too heavy too fast. One genuine kiss did not a lifelong commitment make.

Besides, lifelong commitments could be taken away easily.

"Well, have fun. I promise you after the holidays business at the inn will pick up, and you'll be much busier." Lily stood, gave Julie's shoulder a little squeeze, and left the great room.

Two seconds later, Sage, Hope, and Joy came in giggling about something. The sound made Julie want to join in, though she had no idea what was so funny.

"And then he took a step and ended up in mud up to the knee," Hope said.

Sage and Joy doubled over in laughter.

"I can picture it!" Sage grabbed her stomach. "Oh, no more. I can't take it."

Joy wiped her eyes and smiled at Julie. "Hi, sugar. You'll excuse us. Hope was telling us about her husband, Adam, and his attempt to take their dog, Olive, to the vet."

"She's a Dalmatian and..." Hope glanced up to the great room ceiling, puckering her lips out.

"A pill. That dog's a pill." Sage flopped onto the couch. "Not like my Ranger. He's a gentleman."

"That you had absolutely no hand in raising," Hope said. "That good behavior is all Orion's doing."

Sage shrugged. "This is true. My husband trained that pooch to perfection."

"He's almost got you trained too." Hope caught the pillow Sage threw at her head from the couch.

"So..." Sage angled herself toward Julie. "How was baking with Chef Hottie?"

“Must have been good,” Hope said before Julie could answer. “Word on the street is that she and the chef are having dinner together tonight.”

Did someone shout her evening’s plans from the rooftop for all to hear?

“See?” Joy pointed an index finger at her. “I have not lost my touch. I knew you two were kindred spirits. Knew it the moment Marco walked into Black Wolf Tavern.”

“How?” Julie really wanted an answer to that question. She felt this unexplainable connection to Marco. Maybe Joy could tell her why she felt that way.

“Honey, when you’ve been around as long as I have, you get a sense about these things.”

Well, that wasn’t helpful.

“That’s all she’s going to tell you,” Sage said. “She doesn’t give away her secrets, do you, Mom?”

“Nope.” Joy gave Julie a wink.

“So what are you going to wear tonight?” Sage asked.

All Julie’s excitement over seeing Marco again turned instantly to panic. “Wear?”

“Uh-oh.” Hope grabbed Julie’s hand and pulled her to her feet. “Sage, we have some work to do here.”

“Clearly.” Sage got up. “Let’s go.”

Before Julie could protest, Hope and Sage were saying goodbye to Joy and ushering her into Sage’s SUV. After about an hour of extreme makeover craziness, Julie returned to her cabin wearing a pair of black leggings, a black tank top with a blue sweater draped over that and black, knee-high boots. Sage had let her borrow the ensemble, and Julie had to admit she looked better than she had in a long time. Hope had straightened her brown hair and applied some fancy-schmancy oil that made the tresses all shiny and silky. Very touchable.

And she planned on being touched.

More Than Biscotti

The sisters had helped Julie do her makeup and loaned her a peppermint-scented body lotion since she'd mentioned Marco had liked the candy cane lip balm. They'd even pushed some brand new lingerie on her, but Julie had drawn the line there. She wasn't one for lacey and uncomfortable. Jeff had always told her that she did naked better than anyone, and he'd never lied to her about anything.

Am I really going to get naked with Marco?

The thought made her heart race... and her stomach pitch. She was equal parts aroused and scared to death. What if Marco didn't like what he saw when she undressed? What if he did? Her head was a jumbled mess.

"Just have fun," she reminded herself as she bustled around the cabin's small kitchen now, preparing a chicken parm and pasta dinner. She'd built a fire in the woodstove, and the cabin was toasty. Of course, as soon as Marco arrived, the temperature would soar even more.

A soft knock sounded on the front door.

Julie took a moment at the kitchen sink. She gripped the countertop, inhaled, exhaled, and looked at the photo of Jeff and Nathan she had on the refrigerator. Most of her stuff was still in boxes, but she'd fished that photo out last night. She'd moved to leave her old life with Jeff and Nathan in the past, but they were her family and always would be. She needed them in this space too.

She stood in front of the photo and traced the edges of Jeff's jaw. "No one can ever replace you, baby, but it's time for me to explore a bit. I love you." She pressed a kiss to her finger and touched Jeff's and Nathan's images.

Another knock sounded at the door, and she made her way to the living room, stopping to flick on the lights on an evergreen tree Lily and Rick had set up in the cabin before she'd arrived. The white lights made the glittery pinecones sparkle, and another deep breath filled Julie's lungs with festive pine air.

She opened the door. Her eyes zoomed in on the plate of biscotti first, but her gaze quickly went to the snow-dusted man carrying the plate.

“Hi.” Marco handed her the biscotti, brushed snowflakes off his shoulders, and stepped inside when she made room for him to do so. “Smells wonderful in here.”

He slid his jacket off to reveal a green flannel shirt over a gray thermal T-shirt. Julie instantly wanted to snuggle up to the flannel... and Marco.

“It’s just chicken parm and pasta. I didn’t get to make appetizers or anything.” She contained her drool, hung Marco’s coat, and led him into the kitchen. Putting the biscotti on the counter, she turned to find him looking down at her ass.

Thanks, Sage. Her new friend knew how to put together an outfit to catch a guy’s attention.

“Nothing wrong with chicken parm and pasta. Italian food is always a winner.” Marco took a step closer. “In fact, that’s my second favorite thing to eat.” He put his arms on either side of Julie, fencing her in against the counter.

“Yeah? What’s your first favorite thing?” His eyes were so green, so gold, she got lost in them and the heat of his body so close to hers.

“This.” He leaned down and captured her mouth.

Who needed appetizers?

Marco didn’t think he’d ever get to this portion of the day. After finishing the biscotti, he’d gone snowmobiling with Rick, had lunch at Black Wolf Tavern where’d he’d wasted time debating the best way to serve whiskey with the owner Jake, and then he’d toured the small town of Danton. When he’d returned to his room at Hinsdale Inn, it was only three o’clock, and he wasn’t sure how to kill the hours before heading—running—over to Julie’s cabin.

So he’d called Mama.

“Ready to come home for Christmas?” she’d asked upon answering.

“Not this time, Mama. I’m serious about this vacation.”

More Than Biscotti

“No one is saying you shouldn’t have a vacation, but on Christmas, Marco? Christmas is for families.” The waver in her voice almost had him agreeing to return to Boston. Almost.

“I’ll be home for New Year’s. Besides, we’re together a great deal. I visit you often.”

“Maybe too often.”

“Wait, what?” Marco had stopped his pacing in his room.

“If you had a woman in your life, you wouldn’t be with me so much.”

Ouch. “You don’t like when I visit you?” All this time he’d been checking in on Mama, knowing she felt Marina’s death just as much as he did. Perhaps more. Losing a child hurt. He wanted to make sure she was okay, and now she was telling him to scram. Unbelievable.

“Marco Julius Scampanelli, you know I love when you visit me. You’re my son and mean more to me than words can describe.”

“But?”

“But I wanted you to be all married off by this Christmas. I wanted to buy gifts for a grandchild. I wanted to utter the words, ‘My son and his family are coming for Christmas dinner.’ Instead, I’m spending Christmas with Cousin Bertha and her cats.”

That one had arrowed into Marco’s chest. Cousin Bertha’s cats were a mangy bunch—all twelve of them.

Italian guilt got the best of him, and he tossed his mother a morsel. “I met someone here.”

Mama had let out a squeal scientists on the International Space Station probably heard. “Who is she? How did you meet her? Are you going to invite her home with you? Can I meet her? Oh, Marco, this is wonderful news!”

Holy shit. “Calm down, Mama. So far we have only baked biscotti together.” *And kissed like a couple of horny teenagers.*

“Smart move. Hook her with our biscotti recipe.”

“Not my winning personality or good looks?”

“Women are sensible, dear. Good biscotti is higher on the priority scale than personality and looks. What is she like?”

Marco launched into a description of Julie which was heavy on the surface stuff because he didn't know that much about her. That hadn't bothered Mama in the least. She was just so overjoyed he was spending time with a woman in his age group.

“Have fun, Marco. You're allowed to do that, you know.”

“I know, and I will.”

“Good. I'll throw away the... let's see...” Paper rustled on Mama's end. “Twenty-four phone numbers I collected today at the church's holiday bazaar then.”

Oh, God. “Yes, please do. I told you I could handle this on my own. No matchmaking needed.”

Though hadn't Joy done some matchmaking? He wouldn't have met Julie if Joy hadn't seated them together at Black Wolf Tavern. He definitely wouldn't have ended up kissing her if Sage and Hope and Rick hadn't high-tailed it out of the shop today.

“Call me tomorrow with all the details of your dinner.”

“Will do.” *Well, maybe not all the details.* If he had his way, some of those details would be X-rated and not for Mama's ears.

He'd hung up with her and spent the remainder of his time before dinner reading, catching up on a few work emails that needed attention, and generally anticipating kissing Julie again.

Having her in his arms now in her cabin, his lips pressed to hers, felt like sweet victory. How did one woman taste so freaking good? And it was more than candy cane lip balm.

Julie let out a little moan, and Marco nearly came apart at the seams. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back.

More Than Biscotti

“Sorry,” she said. “Have to catch my breath.”

“I came on too strong.” He took a step back. Why the hell was he acting like a sex-starved ball of hormones? Probably because that was exactly what he was.

Julie shook her head. “No, not too strong. I just want my head to catch up to my body, you know?”

“Because your body was okay with being kissed like that?”

“Hell, my body wanted to cheer your name.” She waved her hands in the air like pom-poms. “M-a-r-c-o, Marco!”

He laughed. “Hey, I’m not necessarily against that.”

She pushed her fist into his stomach. “Didn’t think you would be.” She turned to a bottle of wine on the counter and picked it up. “A drink?”

“Sure.” Though he’d rather get back to kissing.

Julie poured two hefty glasses of cabernet and handed one to him. “A little time in front of the fire before dinner?”

“Lead the way.” He allowed her to go first, loving the view of her black pants from behind. And oh, what a behind.

The living room was cozy with the fire crackling, the Christmas tree twinkling, and the woman patting the couch cushion beside her in invitation. With snow falling outside, this was shaping up to be the best Christmas Eve Marco had ever had.

“It occurred to me today I don’t even know where you’re from.” Julie sipped her wine, but her gaze remained locked on him.

“So you were thinking about me today then?”

She opened and closed her mouth several times without any words coming out then dropped her chin to her chest. “I should deny thinking about you, but that’d be lying. Big time.”

Marco loved it when her cheeks got all pink. She was even more beautiful when she blushed. “Boston, and I thought about you all day too.”

Julie grinned. “Chicago, and I never said I thought about you *all* day.”

“You didn’t have to say it. That kiss said it.” He sipped his wine and peered at her over the rim of the glass.

“Think you’re so smart, don’t you?”

“Generally speaking, yes.” He set his wineglass down on the coffee table. “Did you like it in Chicago?”

“I grew up in Hawaii actually, so nowhere compares to that.”

“Hawaii? Wow. What made you leave a tropical paradise?”

“College. The need to spread my wings. A sense of adventure. Take your pick.” She put her wineglass on the coffee table too then crossed her legs. Uncrossed them. Crossed them again.

Am I making her nervous? That was the last thing he wanted to do.

“How long have you lived in Boston?” she asked.

“Since day one. I’ve traveled around the globe for work, but I always like coming back to Boston.”

“And your mom lives there too?”

“A few streets over.”

“Must be nice to be that close to her.”

“It is, phone numbers of random women stuffed in my pockets aside.” Marco rolled his eyes.

“She means well.”

More Than Biscotti

“That’s the only thing that saves her.” Marco recalled Mama’s happiness over him meeting someone. Looking at Julie now, he knew Mama would love her. Exactly the type she’d pick out for him. “What about your parents?”

“They’ve both passed. Dad about six years ago. Mom a year after that. Heart attacks, both of them.”

So she’d lost both of her parents before her husband and son. It made Marco’s heart ache to know she was alone during such a difficult time. At least he’d had Mama when Marina died.

“I’m sorry to hear about your parents.” What else could he say?

Julie pulled at the end of her sweater sleeve then appeared to realize she was fiddling and put both her hands in her lap. “Thanks. I wish I had visited them more often in Hawaii, but once I met Jeff and had Nathan, life got... busy.”

“And we think we have all the time in the world.” He knew the feeling, unfortunately.

She met his gaze. “Exactly.” She scooted closer so her thigh pressed against his. “But we don’t. We have no clue how long we have.”

He slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in closer so she rested her head on his chest. “That’s why we have to make every moment count.” Something he was coming to understand since meeting Julie. He’d been living in a dark place since Marina died. Julie was a ray of sunshine, and he wanted to bathe in that light.

He might get burned, but life was about taking risks. Life was about living.

Chapter Six

Though the conversation with Marco consisted of your normal getting-to-know-you topics, Julie felt they... understood each other. Not on a level that could be explained or deepened by words, but on a soul-to-soul level. They'd both lost important people, and the hurt was still fresh. Something about that bonded them. They both realized the need to get on with their own lives too. At some point, mourning had to turn back into living.

This seemed like that point.

She snuggled up closer to Marco, his body doing more to warm her than the fire in the woodstove. "This is nice."

"Very nice." He leaned his head against the top of hers. "I didn't expect to have such wonderful company on Christmas Eve."

Julie shifted so she could look up at him. "No. You wanted to be alone." What if he still did? Was she being selfish? She couldn't deny she needed him right now, but what did he need?

"Umm, yeah. That was a stupid plan. This is a much better one." He smiled and gave her a squeeze.

"Are you sure? I mean, I'd understand if you still wanted to be al—"

Marco put a finger to her lips to silence her. "There is nowhere—and I mean *nowhere*—I'd rather be, Julie. I like you. I want that dinner you've prepared. I want to dunk biscotti in hot tea with you. I want to do more of this." He captured her mouth in a panty-melting kiss which left her breathless. "I want to spend the holiday with you."

More Than Biscotti

“I want all that too, Marco.” She really did.

“Good.” He angled his head back toward the kitchen. “Let’s get started on that chicken parm and pasta then. I’m starving.” He stood and offered her his hand. After tugging her to her feet, he stepped in closer, cupping her cheek in the palm of his hand. He brought his lips to her ear and whispered, “I also want to unwrap you like a present later if that’s okay with you.”

“I suppose it is warm enough in here to be unwrapped.” She grinned. “And I’ve got plenty of wood to keep it warm all night.”

“All night? Ambitious. I like that.”

They ate dinner and enjoyed more conversation. Julie had grown accustomed to eating in the silence of her house in Chicago. Having Marco fill the quiet patched those gaping holes in her heart. Maybe quitting her career at Belle Pets, selling her house in Chicago, and moving to the Vermont woods to be a maid wasn’t such a crazy plan after all. If doing all that meant meeting Marco Scampanelli and moving on with her life, then it had totally been the right thing to do.

After cleaning up the dinner dishes, they’d brought the biscotti and two mugs of tea to the living room. Julie had turned on the TV to find *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* was on. She and Marco exchanged lines from the movie, cracking each other up with how many they knew by heart.

“Best Christmas movie ever,” Julie said, warming her hands on her mug of tea.

“Without question. People will argue that *A Christmas Story* is, but I disagree.”

“Wholeheartedly. It’s a close second for sure, but not number one.”

Marco toed off his black work boots, grabbed his mug, and settled a little deeper into the couch cushions. “I’m glad we agree on this.”

“Otherwise this thing would be over before it started.” Though the way he looked so comfortable on her couch probably would have made her forgive his stance on Christmas movies.

“Good taste in holiday films is essential.” He sipped his tea then leaned forward to snag two cookies off the tray on the coffee table. “Speaking of good taste, let’s get going on these.”

He offered one biscotti to Julie and they both plunged them into their teas.

“Don’t overdunk,” Julie warned.

Marco gave her a raised eyebrow. “Do I look like an amateur?”

“Not at all, but maybe your mind is not completely on biscotti right now. I know mine isn’t.”

“Really?” He bit into his biscotti and closed his eyes. “It’s pretty damn good. What else could be on your mind besides my exceptional baking prowess?” He finished his cookie and motioned to hers.

Julie ate her tea-soaked biscotti, a low hum of bliss escaping from her throat. “Shit, that is amazing, Marco. Forget what I said.” She reached for two more biscotti and handed him one. “Our minds should be totally on devouring these.”

He shook his head. “Nope. Too late.” After inhaling his cookie, he set his tea on the coffee table and took her mug too. “You’ve got me thinking about the unwrapping I wanted to do.”

She held out her arms, swallowing a nervous flutter and deciding it was time to let another man remind her that she was a woman. “Go for it.”

Marco’s eyes darkened at the invitation, and he reached down to grab her feet. Setting them in his lap, he slowly unzipped her boots. “These are hot.”

“Sage let me borrow this entire ensemble.” She gestured to the boxes around the living room. “Most of my junk is still packed.”

“I’ll write Sage a thank-you note tomorrow.” He slid off the boots and set them on the floor.

More Than Biscotti

Marco's hands massaged their way around her feet, up her legs, and all the way to her hips. He kept going so his hands burrowed under her sweater, taking it up and off as he moved farther north.

Despite the warmth in the room, Julie shivered, goosebumps blooming all over her body.

"Are you cold?" Marco dropped her sweater on the couch behind him.

She shook her head. "Not a cold shivering."

He grinned, looking pleased with himself. "A turned-on shivering?"

In response, she grabbed a fistful of his flannel shirt and pulled him down so his body draped over hers. "A very turned-on shivering."

While kissing that beautiful mouth of his, she slid her hands under the flannel and peeled the shirt off his shoulders. After adding that to her sweater, she pulled his thermal T-shirt out of his jeans and pressed her palm to his stomach.

Holy muscles, Batman! Her hands were extremely pleased with what they found under that T-shirt.

Marco backed off her a bit and yanked the T-shirt over his head, tossing it into the growing pile of discarded clothing.

Wow. Her eyes were now pleased too. The man had six-pack abs and pectorals she wanted to trace with her tongue. *Thanks, Santa.*

"God, Marco..." Her voice was raspy and full of need. "You are beautiful." Her gaze traveled from his waist up to that delicious beard up to his eyes where the white lights on the tree reflected.

"Not compared to you, Julie."

The rest of their clothes came off within seconds, and Marco kissed every inch of her, his beard scraping delightfully along her flesh. Julie's senses were on overload. She hadn't been touched like this in so long, and everything Marco did made her want more.

He coasted his lips along her hip and up her side, tickling her slightly, before closing his mouth over her breast and budding her nipple with his tongue almost immediately. She should have been embarrassed by how easy it was for him to get her going, but she wasn't. When she wrapped her hand around his arousal and felt his entire body quiver, she knew she wasn't alone in her need. He was right there with her.

When Marco finally entered her, after rolling on a condom, they both let out a sigh as if they'd finally found peace.

Peace. Yes, that was it exactly. Julie felt peace.

Marco thrust in and out, gently at first, until their desire built up to such a level neither of them could be gentle anymore. He drove into her, and she rocked her hips against him, her heart beating wildly in her chest and her entire body wanting more.

They climbed higher until there was nowhere else to go. When Julie came, she clung to Marco as if he were a life ring. He followed her a moment later, their bodies clenching, releasing, clenching, releasing until they were both spent.

Marco collapsed between her and the back of the couch, a possessive arm slung over her waist. "Santa would not have given me a gift like you if I wasn't on the Extra-Nice list."

Julie pushed her backside into Marco's front, loving the feel of his big, strong body wrapped around her. "Santa's an old guy. Sometimes he makes mistakes."

"Hey." He poked a finger into her side and she wiggled against him until he moaned. "Want to see how many mistakes he can make?"

She laughed. "I'd love to." Swiveling to face him, she pressed her lips to his in a quick, sweet kiss. "Thank you, Marco. I thought you were just going to be a way to get biscotti for Christmas, but you turned out to more than biscotti." She kissed him again. "You taste pretty damn good too."

"Likewise."

More Than Biscotti

He moved her hair off her shoulder and nibbled his way up to her ear. “Merry Christmas, Julie,” he whispered, “and here’s to the start of a wonderful new year for us both.”

Merry Christmas, friends!

Wishing you a wonderful new year filled with peace, love, and great books!

If you have a book group, I’d love to interact with you!

Email me at cdepetrillo@yahoo.com or message me through Facebook for options.

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About the Author

Christine DePetrillo tried not being a writer. She attempted to ignore the voices in her head, but they would not stop. The only way she could achieve peace and quiet was to write the stories the voices demanded. Today, she writes tales meant to make you laugh, maybe make you sweat, and definitely make you believe in the power of love.

She lives in Rhode Island and occasionally Vermont with her husband, two cats, and a big, black German Shepherd who defends her fiercely from all evils.

Find Christine's other titles at www.christinedepetrillo.weebly.com. Connect on Facebook at www.facebook.com/christinedepetrilloauthor, on Twitter at @cdepetrillo, and at The Roses of Prose group blog on the 4th and 14th of every month at www.rosesofprose.blogspot.com.