

The Sheriff's Mistletoe Law

By Nita Wick

“You’re standing under the mistletoe.”

Rebekah jerked her gaze to the tall stranger. Eyes the color of polished silver stared down at her. Wavy, coal black hair framed his face and curled at the collar of his dark shirt. A tin star on his chest glinted in the light from the dozens of lanterns hanging from the barn’s rafters. “I beg your pardon?”

He pointed above her. A sprig of mistletoe tied with a bright red ribbon dangled from the thick wooden beam. A sly grin curved his lips.

“Oh, my. I didn’t realize.” Her cheeks heated. “I should move.” She stepped forward to do just that.

The man she assumed was the new sheriff of Crosby, Texas, moved to block her escape. Behind him, dancers spun and clapped their hands to the lively tunes provided by the fiddlers. Dozens crowded the Wilson’s barn, but at the moment, Becky felt uncomfortably alone with the intimidating man. She stared up at him.

He shook his head. “You’re not really going to break the law with the sheriff standing right here. Are you?”

Confused, she scanned the small space, an empty corner she’d found to rest and watch the merriment. Nothing appeared out of place. Did he think she’d taken something? “What law?”

He smiled. “The law of the mistletoe, Miss...?”

“Simmons. Rebekah Simmons.” She held out her hand. “And you must be Mr. West.”

He slid his rough palm beneath hers and clasped her hand with a gentle but firm grip. Warmth spread up Becky’s arm. His smile widened. “Colton West at your service, Miss Simmons.”

With a start, Becky realized he’d held her hand a tad too long. She pulled it from his grasp. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. West.”

He stepped closer. “You don’t look like a criminal, Miss Simmons.”

Becky sucked in a startled breath. The aromas of pine boughs, apple pie, and gingerbread filling the room melted away, replaced by leather, soap, and the musky scent of the handsome man before her.

"I... I'm not a criminal."

"I'm pretty sure you owe me a kiss, Miss Simmons. You wouldn't leave without paying your debt, would you? That would be a crime."

Surprise held her immobilized. "We only just met. You don't really expect me to kiss you."

The sheriff nodded. "I reckon even strangers have to follow the law."

A bubble of laughter escaped her. "It's not a law. It's just a..." She searched for the right word. "A tradition. That's all."

"Some traditions should be laws." He leaned toward her. "Don't you think? Maybe I should arrest you and ask the judge."

She tried, but she couldn't stop the smile he elicited. The man seemed determined to get a kiss from her. "I don't think your case would hold up in a court of law, Sheriff."

Without warning, she found herself surrounded by men. Her two older brothers stood on each side of her and faced the lawman. Jacob, the oldest of her brothers spoke first. "Evenin', Sheriff."

Mr. West smiled and nodded a greeting. "Merry Christmas. And now, Miss Simmons, I believe my case has strengthened since we have witnesses."

"Witnesses to what?" Jonah, the younger of her brothers questioned.

The sheriff pointed at the decoration above her head. "I've caught Miss Simmons under the mistletoe. She owes me a kiss. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Now wait just a minute. Becky don't have to kiss you if she don't want to," Jacob grumbled.

A deep chuckle rumbled through Mr. West. He met Becky's gaze. "Your brothers?"

She knew how easy it was for the sheriff to deduce that these were her relations. Both brothers had the same chestnut hair and dark brown eyes she had. The resemblance could not be denied. "Mr.

West, this is Jacob.” She gestured to her left, and then turned toward her right. “And Jonah. Boys, I’m sure you know our new sheriff, Colton West.”

The men shook hands, but her brothers’ expressions remained grim.

The sheriff, by contrast, appeared completely at ease. “I’m hopin’ that your sister will show me a bit of the Christmas spirit. I can’t recollect when I’ve wanted a kiss more.”

Becky gasped. Had she ever met a man so bold? Glancing at her brothers, she found her own shock reflected in their faces.

Her parents chose that moment to join them. Jacob made the introductions.

Mr. West smiled at both of them. “It’s a pleasure to meet you and your family, Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. You have a lovely daughter. I found her under the mistletoe here.” He pointed again to the holiday adornment. “But I’m having a bit of trouble convincin’ her to give me the required kiss.”

Her mother laughed, but her father’s eyes widened.

Becky wanted to crawl under a rock. “You can’t possibly expect me to kiss you with everyone watching.”

He nodded. “I hope every man, woman, and child in this town witnesses this kiss, Miss Simmons.”

Becky’s jaw dropped.

“Now hold on, Sheriff. Lawman or no, I won’t have you takin’ advantage of my daughter,” her father blustered. His outburst drew the attention of the rest of the crowd. The music died, and a silence hung heavy in the air.

Mr. West’s silver gaze warmed Becky. “Mr. Simmons, I came to Crosby to settle down. Maybe start a family. I’ve been watchin’ Rebekah all night. I noticed her the moment I entered. I haven’t been able to take my eyes off her.” He looked at Jonah and Jacob in turn, and then he grinned at her mother. “We wouldn’t need the lanterns in here if we could just get her to smile. She lights up the whole place.

She has a kind word for everyone. She's happy and friendly." His gaze drifted to her father. "And she's just the sort of woman I had hoped to meet. I couldn't believe my good fortune when she came over here and stood under the mistletoe."

He returned his attention to Becky and reached for her hand. "I want that kiss, Miss Simmons."

Becky's cheeks burned. "Everyone is watching."

"I know." He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to it, sending a tingle up her arm. "When they see you kiss me, the whole town will know I'm courtin' you." Without waiting for her response, he turned to her father again. "I hope you'll allow me to court your daughter, Mr. Simmons."

Her father stared at the man, apparently speechless. Her mother's elbow spurred him to respond. "Er, I suppose that would be fine." He gave a curt nod. "As long as your intentions are honest," he added.

Becky scanned the room. As the sheriff had noted, virtually every citizen of Crosby stood watching, waiting. She looked into the face of her audacious, persistent suitor. His eyes challenged her and coaxed her at the same time. Her gaze slipped to her mother.

Mrs. Simmons offered a slight nod and wink. Her brown eyes twinkled with unspoken cheer. Becky heard the woman's silent advice as if she whispered it in her ear.

Rebekah Ruth Simmons was about to receive her first kiss. The entire town would witness it. And it would no doubt be the subject of conversation for weeks. Furthermore, the event would likely be recounted at every Christmas celebration for years to come.

She straightened and returned her gaze to the handsome sheriff. "Very well, Mr. West. You may claim your kiss."

His triumphant smile sent flutters through her stomach. He leaned down.

Her hand came up between them, her index finger pointed in warning. "You will behave yourself, Mr. West. I'll not tolerate anything more than a chaste peck."

His hand closed around her finger and pulled it down. He leaned close and whispered so that only she could hear his words of limited compliance. "I will. This time."

Her heart skipped a beat with thoughts of heated kisses in the arms of Crosby's new sheriff. His closeness sent shivers down her spine, but Becky was determined to remain unmoved by his kiss. Well, she would at least *appear* to be unmoved. The crowd would not see her swoon or make a silly fool of herself. She lifted her chin and watched his lips move closer.

Time slowed, and her breath hitched. He paused just before their lips met, and he gazed into her eyes. The look he gave her set her pulse racing, her heart hammering an unsteady rhythm. He dipped his head and pressed his lips to hers.

The world fell away. No one existed but Colton West, the tall, strong, charmingly frank lawman who had captured her attention and touched her heart within minutes of their meeting. Becky's eyelids drifted closed, and her lips softened against his warm, tender kiss. Bells rang in her ears, and her bones felt as if they melted like the rare snowflakes she'd seen earlier on this special Christmas Eve. The room spun, and she leaned into him to keep her balance.

Too soon, his lips left hers, and the world rushed back to greet her. The crowd cheered their approval. The sheriff smiled and offered his arm. Becky took it, and he led her over to the makeshift dance floor.

Waving to the fiddlers, he requested a song. "I need a merry Christmas tune, boys! I want to dance with my lady!"

The music started, and he swept her into a lively jig, spinning her around, grasping her waist and lifting her from the floor. With each touch, every brush of his hand, he marked her, claimed her. They danced until she was breathless and heated. The music continued, and Colton spun her again, this time away from the crowd and toward the open doors of the barn. Chill night air cooled her skin as he led out of the revelry and into the shadows at the edge of the building.

He stopped and trapped her against the wall with his arms on either side of her, his palms pressed against the wood. "I'm going to kiss you, Rebekah."

She stared up at him. "There's no mistletoe."

He grinned. "This will not be a mistletoe kind of kiss."

He allowed her no time to protest. His mouth captured hers in a searing, soul-stealing kiss. Lips and tongue teased and tempted until her own lips parted and allowed him access. His arms encompassed her, drawing her close and pressing her tender breasts against the hard wall of his chest. He kissed her until she could no longer stand, her strength and will sapped and spent in the fevered onslaught of need and desire he awakened in her.

When finally he lifted his head, Becky sagged against him. Once she caught her breath, she laughed. "I have a new appreciation for mistletoe."

He chuckled and held her close. "It really should be a law."