

FA-LA-LA-LA FAKING IT by Teri Wilson

Chapter One

Adaline Bishop liked to think of herself as a good person. If Santa had been real, she was fairly certain she would've landed on his nice list this year, even as a fully grown adult in her early thirties.

She was pretty much beloved by her hometown of Bluebonnet, Texas. But that might have had less to do with her actual personality than with the pies and cakes she made and sold at Cherry on Top, the bakery Adaline owned and operated in the historic town square.

She was a supportive friend and sister, although she admittedly had a tendency to meddle from time to time. But only in a good way—a matchmaker-ish sort of way, to be specific, which everyone knew was the best variety of meddling.

Best of all, Adaline's Cavalier King Charles spaniel puppy was a therapy dog in training, and twice a week, she took him to visit the residents of the senior living center where her gram lived. Although, she supposed that said more about Fuzzy's endearing qualities than it did about her own.

Adaline glanced down at the little dog, dressed in his red Comfort Paws therapy-dog-in-training vest and a pair of wonky reindeer antlers perched on his head. As usual, Fuzzy's prominent brown eyes were trained on her in unabashed adoration. That settled it—her dog was an infinitely better person than she was.

"Stop looking at me like that," Adaline whispered as she spied a flash of judgment in the furry crease of the puppy's brow. "I'm not dragging my feet. We're just taking a little break, that's all."

Adaline was, in fact, dragging her feet.

This was her third pet therapy visit with Fuzzy at Bluebonnet Senior Living. Since Adaline's friend Maple already visited the assisted living wing of the building once a week with her golden retriever Lady Bird, the activity director had appointed Adaline and Fuzzy to the extended care unit where patients needed round-the-clock care.

Fuzzy *thrived* on these visits. He was a total love bug, and his small size meant he could sit in bed, right beside the patient's hip. From their very first visit, Adaline felt like she and her puppy had found their purpose. Every time they entered a room, they were greeted with big smiles and, on occasion, actual tears of joy...

With one notable exception.

Room 212. Adaline's stomach clenched just looking at the number on the plain, unadorned door. Every other room in the long hallway boasted a Christmas wreath or blue-and-silver Hanukkah garland dotted with tiny dreidels. Some even had twinkle lights surrounding the doorframes. Mrs. Cooper's room, where Adaline and Fuzzy had just come from, had a three-foot-tall animatronic Santa sitting outside the door, greeting passersby with a wave and a bellowing *ho, ho, ho*. Every time Santa did his thing, a loud groan emanated from room 212.

I understand some people don't like dogs, but does he have to be such an overall grinch?

Guilt pricked Adaline's consciousness. She shouldn't be thinking of Mr. Martin that way. She and Fuzzy were here to do good and spread a little doggy joy to everyone. That included grins and cranky senior citizens alike.

She pasted a smile on her face and knocked loudly on the door to 212. Fuzzy's tail wagged hard in anticipation.

"Go ahead and open it, because I'm not about to get up and do it for you," Mr. Martin bellowed from inside.

Adaline took a deep breath and reached for the doorknob as Fuzzy, undeterred, did a little dance beside her.

"Oh, it's you." The elderly man scowled at her from his bed. "Again."

"Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, just like clockwork," Adaline said in a singsong voice.

The oddest thing happened whenever she came in contact with Mr. Martin. The ruder and crankier he acted, the more cheery her response became. She had no control over it, really. It just happened. Last week, when he'd threatened to throw a plastic container of green Jell-O at her, she'd reacted with manic glee. It was as if somewhere deep down, she believed that merriment was the antidote to his grinchiness when, in reality, it only seemed to agitate him all the more.

Maybe Adaline wasn't such a good person, after all. Maybe she was a *terrible* person. Look out, naughty list.

"Would you like a visit from the therapy dog today?" she asked, knowing full well the answer would be no.

Hadn't Adaline read somewhere that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results? If so, she'd officially lost the plot.

But since she and her friends Maple, Jenna and Belle had decided to start Comfort Paws, a new pet therapy group right here in Bluebonnet, Adaline had been doing a lot of reading about visiting people in health-care settings. One thing in particular had struck a chord—when a person moves into a facility for long-term care, they're forced to give up control over almost every aspect of their lives. From something as small as what and when to eat meals, all the way to major life changes like being forced to give up a beloved pet, a patient's life can suddenly feel like it's no longer their own. Adaline had seen it happen to Gram when she moved into the senior center.

Which was precisely why she kept popping by room 212 and asking Mr. Martin if he wanted a dog visit, even though the answer was obvious. In doing so, she gave him a chance to control one tiny part of his day. She liked to think that was helpful, although so far, there was no outward evidence to support this theory.

Case in point: the ever-deepening furrow in his forehead.

"Why would I want to pet that scrawny mutt?"

"Actually, Fuzzy just had his six-month checkup at the vet yesterday, and guess what!" Adaline continued, beaming at Mr. Martin from the doorway. "Dr. Leighton said Fuzzy's weight is just perfect for his age and breed. So he's technically not scrawny at all."

She didn't dignify the "mutt" comment with a response. Because honestly, that was just hurtful.

"Isn't that marvelous news?" Adaline asked, continuing to badger the poor man with her chipper babble while Fuzzy batted one of his paws at a jingle bell dangling from the felt antlers tied to his head.

Mr. Martin pointed at the puppy with a shaky hand. "Real dogs don't wear costumes."

"More great news. Fuzzy is quite real. Not at all imaginary. If you pet him even one time, you'll see just how real he is." Adaline crouched down to run her hand over Fuzzy's back. "His coat is very soft. Are you sure you don't want to give it a shot?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Okay, then.

Mr. Martin rummaged around in his bedsheets, looking for something.

"Can we help you find anything?" Adaline offered.

Please say no. There was a limit to how much time she could put on a happy face and pretend that his clear dislike for her and her dog didn't hurt her feelings, and she was quickly approaching it.

"As a matter of fact, yes." He fished the nurse call button panel from the blankets and haphazardly jabbed at it. "Which one of these blasted things makes you and Rudolph go away?"

Ouch. That was harsh, even for Mr. Martin.

"No worries, we're going." Adaline held up a hand in a jolly wave. "See you next time."

"I'll be counting the minutes," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Would you like us to close your door on the way out or leave it open?" One last opportunity for him to make a decision and establish a small bit of control. From what Adaline could tell, he really needed it. She reached for the doorknob.

"Close it," Mr. Martin said with a sigh. "I suppose I'll see you next week."

Adaline couldn't believe her ears. Had he just admitted that he looked forward to her visits? Not in so many words, but it might've been the nicest thing Mr. Martin had ever uttered to her.

Then, just when Adaline was doing backflips in her imagination, congratulating herself and Fuzzy on making a difference, he had to go and ruin it. Because of course he did.

"Don't forget to take that ugly mutt with you."

Adaline froze halfway out the door. Ugly? That was really going too far. Fuzzy was, objectively speaking, completely adorable. He was a purebred Cavalier King Charles spaniel, for goodness' sake. With their expressive eyes and beautiful coats, Cavaliers were nearly as famous for their looks as they were for their gentle, loving demeanor.

None of that mattered in this context, though. *All* dogs were cute, full stop. Insulting someone's appearance was just plain mean...and wrong. It gave Adaline flashbacks of her awkward elementary school years. Fifth grade, in particular.

Just let it go, Adaline told herself, even as her eyes filled with tears. The last thing she wanted was for Mr. Martin to see that he'd finally broken her down.

She closed the door to 212 as quickly as she could, but it was too late. In the split second before the door clicked shut, Mr. Martin's gaze fixed with hers. At the sight of her obvious hurt, his lips curved into a rare grin. Smug and self-satisfied, just like the Grinch after he'd stolen the roast beast.

Adaline's face burned with the heat of a thousand pre-lit Christmas trees. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. Maybe she should just give up on the man. Or give up on pet therapy, in general. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this at all.

"It's not you, it's him."

Adaline blinked, and a fresh wave of mortification washed over her. Someone had actually witnessed the exchange she'd just had with Mr. Martin.

Perfect. Just perfect.

She turned around and forced a smile at the man standing just behind her to the left. She'd never seen him before in her life. Adaline was sure of it. In a town as small as Bluebonnet, that chiseled face and perfectly square jaw wouldn't have escaped her notice. Then again, the stranger had the build of a lumberjack—along with the lumberjack uniform of cozy red-and-black buffalo plaid shirt, worn-in jeans and work boots—which probably meant he didn't frequent bakeries or indulge in pie on the daily, so maybe she'd simply been hanging out in the wrong part of town.

"I think Mr. Martin is just having a bad day," she said, as if today was an aberration when it most definitely was not.

"Or I'm right, and he's just a bit of a jerk." The man squatted down to properly greet Fuzzy, who'd begun dancing a full-blown cha-cha at his feet in a flagrant bid for attention. "Aren't you a cutie? What's your name?"

"Adaline."

The man grinned up at her, displaying the most beguiling set of dimples she'd ever seen on a man in real life. No wonder she couldn't think straight.

She swallowed. "You meant the dog, didn't you?"

He laughed and the low timbre of his voice rumbled through her. "An honest mistake."

Was it, though? Her day was getting more humiliating by the second.

"His name is Fuzz." She gestured toward the little spaniel, now splayed belly up with his head resting on the man's work boots. "But I usually just call him Fuzzy."

"Cute." He obediently gave Fuzzy's soft pink belly a good scratch. "You're a good boy, aren't you, Fuzzy?"

Fuzzy's feathery tail swished back and forth on the smooth tile floor. His felt antlers went lopsided, and he pawed at them until they were slung over his face, perfectly positioned for the puppy to bite at them like they were one of his plushy holiday-themed dog toys.

Adaline squatted down to fasten the antlers back in place. Fuzzy writhed around on his back for a few seconds before popping into a sit position liked they'd been practicing with the other Comfort Paws dogs. He remained still until the antlers were positioned just so, save for a few giddy glances at the lumberjack.

"I knew it. Definitely a good boy." The lumberjack nodded.

Such a charm offensive right on the heels of her encounter with Mr. Martin had Adaline's emotions pinging all over the place. She took a steadying inhale, and suddenly her senses were filled with warm cedar, crisp pine needles and fresh country air.

She blinked, head spinning with nostalgia.

"You okay there, Adaline?" The lumberjack tilted his head. There were those dimples again. And this time, there was something oddly familiar about them.

"You smell like a Christmas tree farm," she blurted. "Is that a weird thing to say? It is, isn't it?"

"Not as weird as you'd think." A grin cracked his scruffy jaw. "Would it be out of line if I told you that you smell like sugar and frosting?"

“Cherry on Top.”

His dark eyes met hers. “Pardon?”

“It’s my bakery.” She gestured in the general direction of downtown Bluebonnet. “Located right on the historic town square.”

He nodded. “I think I spotted it earlier this morning. Maybe I’ll stop by sometime.”

“I’d like that.” Adaline gathered Fuzzy in her arms and stood. As she did, her gaze snagged on the numbers of room 212 and her eyes rolled of their own accord. Oops.

“Don’t let him get you down.” The lumberjack’s gaze flitted toward the door and then back at her, flush with warmth. Adaline almost felt like a kid on Christmas morning. What was it about this guy? “Like I said, it’s not you, it’s him.”

Adaline scrunched her face and whispered, “You might be right. Mr. Martin is very much a grinch.”

She really hoped this man wasn’t on staff at the senior center or worse, a relative of the Grinch in question.

“As I recall, the Grinch liked dogs, though. So that’s kind of an insult to grinchies everywhere if you really think about it.” He regarded her thoughtfully, and again, a sense of nostalgia tugged at her heart. Her legs went wobbly, like she’d stepped inside a snow globe and someone had given it a good, hard shake.

Then, all at once, everything clicked. Those dimples. That effortless charm. The last name *Martin*.

No wonder he’d popped up right outside room 212.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked, heart pounding, because she already knew.

“I didn’t, actually,” he said, and the kindness in his gaze was suddenly too much, because she knew it wasn’t real. It never had been—not even all those years ago when she’d still believed in things like Santa Claus and schoolgirl crushes. “But it’s—”

She held up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t say it.” She held Fuzzy more tightly to her chest as if he were a living, breathing security blanket. Which was sort of true, since he was a therapy dog.

The puppy whined in solidarity. A very good boy, indeed.

Adaline glared at the lumberjack, whose name she couldn’t have forgotten if she’d tried. Oh, how she’d tried!

Jace Martin.

Her stomach tumbled into freefall. What was happening? Was this some sort of cosmic joke, a real life version of *It’s a Wonderful Life* or something?

She glared at Jace, and it all came rushing back—the tears, the humiliation, the heartbreak. “It’s you.”

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“It’s me,” Jace said. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t have any idea what he was apologizing for, but judging by the way the woman was glaring at him, an apology was definitely in order.

Her pretty blue eyes narrowed. “Sorry for what?”

Jace scrubbed the back of his neck. *Busted*. He flashed a sheepish grin. “I’m not sure, exactly. It just seemed like the right thing to say at the time.”

Her cheeks went cherry red, either from fury or embarrassment. Jace’s money was on some dangerous combination of both. Then his mind snagged on a detail from just moments before.

“Cherry on Top,” he said as visions of tiny cakes iced with buttercream frosting danced in his head...the tap-tap-tap of sticks of white chalk against a smooth classroom blackboard...a cool spring breeze in his face as he swung upside-down from the monkey bars at recess. Bluebonnets as far as his eyes could see.

No. Memories fought their way to the surface of Jace’s consciousness. *It can’t be her. What are the odds?*

In a town this small, the odds weren’t too bad.

“Cherry on Top,” Adaline echoed. It was definitely her: Adaline Bishop. Jace could see it now—same pert nose, same bow-shaped lips, same buttery blond hair. Only now, instead of her hair being scraped back from her face and gathered in a high ponytail, a thick fringe of bangs skimmed her eyelashes—all the better to highlight the flash of indignation in her sapphire eyes. “That’s the name of my bakery. I just said so.”

Jace couldn’t help but smile.

Her cheeks darkened to a deeper shade of crimson. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He tilted his head. "How am I looking at you, Adaline?"

Her lips parted ever so slowly at the sound of her name before rearranging themselves into a straight, flat line. "So you *do* remember."

In truth, Jace didn't remember a whole lot about the time he'd spent in Bluebonnet. Like everything else about that painful year, he'd done his best to push the memories of his time here to the farthest recesses of his mind. Over time, they'd taken on a soft, hazy quality—almost like one of those Impressionist paintings that were meant to be viewed from afar instead of at close range.

But the memory of Adaline stubbornly refused to fade into the background. Everything about her was still awash in crisp, vivid color.

"Yup," he said, reaching to pet her dog, still nestled in her arms. Fuzzy wrapped his tiny paws around Jace's pointer finger. "You always said you were going to own your own bakery someday. You talked about it all the time."

Adaline's forehead crinkled, and he had the wholly inappropriate urge to smooth it with the pad of his thumb. "That's what you remember?"

Jace nodded, drew his hand back and tucked it safely away into the pocket of his jeans. Fuzzy immediately cocked his head as if to ask why he was no longer being petted. "I do, so I guess if I'm looking at you any certain way, it's the look I give a person when she makes her childhood dreams come true."

This time, when Adaline's lips parted, they stayed that way, as if the very thought of him saying something nice to her prompted her jaw to drop in disbelief.

"Not many people do, you know." He shrugged one shoulder. "It's impressive."

She smiled at him for a beat, and then her head gave a disapproving gesture. "No."

Jace wasn't following. "No?"

Fuzzy's ears swiveled back on his head at the sound of every dog's least favorite word.

"No, as in, you need to stop doing..." She waved at hand him, clearly meant to encompass his entire presence. "...whatever it is you're doing right now."

They were talking in circles. It should've been frustrating, but the electricity skittering over Jace's skin told him he was having a good time. It certainly beat sitting at his uncle Gus's bedside.

His gaze darted to room 212. His uncle wasn't really a bad guy. On the contrary, he'd all but saved Jace's life back when he'd been a fifth grader at Bluebonnet Elementary School. Jace had been lost, and Uncle Gus had given him a soft place to land when he'd needed it most. All to say, the older man's bark was a whole lot worse than his bite.

Still, listening to that bark all afternoon could wear anyone down. Even Jace, who'd just packed up his entire life to move back to Bluebonnet to oversee his uncle's care. He tried not to think about the thousands of seedlings he'd left behind or the farmhouse he'd painstakingly restored with his own two hands. His life was here now, like it or not. He wasn't sure when he'd be able to go back to the farm or what he might find when he eventually returned.

He directed his attention back to Adaline, who clearly fell into the *not* category. "What is it, exactly, that you think I'm doing?"

"You're trying to charm me." She bit down hard on her bottom lip. "And it's not going to work."

Then why is your peaches-and-cream complexion currently a brighter shade of red than a certain reindeer's nose on Christmas Eve?

Jace swallowed a smile. "Duly noted."

She adjusted her grip on her dog, whose big, soft eyes were once again glued to Jace in silent adoration. At least someone around here liked him. "We're leaving now."

"Be my guest." He stepped aside, did a little bow and waved her on her way.

Fuzzy peered at Jace over her shoulder with the corners of his mouth turned up in a sweet doggy grin as she stalked toward the lobby. For reasons he couldn't begin to fathom, Jace stood with arms crossed and watched until she rounded a corner, out of sight. Even then, it took him a few seconds before he managed to drag himself away to tap his knuckles lightly on the door to room 212.

"I told you to go away," Uncle Gus hollered.

Jace pushed the door open and strode inside. "That wasn't me."

His uncle looked him up and down and huffed. "I thought you were the woman who comes round here twice a week with her skinny mongrel."

"Pretty sure that dog was a purebred Cavalier King Charles spaniel," Jace said as he refilled the cup on his uncle's bedside table with fresh water from a pink plastic hospital pitcher.

Uncle Gus scowled. "Your point?"

"Fuzzy is hardly a mongrel." Jace handed him the cup of water. "And you should be nicer to Adaline. She's a volunteer, and her puppy is training to be a therapy dog. It's nice that they come here."

Gus frowned into the cup. "Would it kill you to sneak me some beer?"

"No." Jace took in his uncle's brittle form, so slight beneath the pile of blankets on the adjustable hospital bed. It was hard seeing him like this. There was a time when Gus had seemed larger than life. "But it might kill *you*."

Finally, a smile. Gallows humor never failed to get a laugh out of him these days.

"Seriously, Uncle Gus. The next time Adaline and Fuzzy come here for a visit, I want you to be on your best behavior. Capeesh?"

Jace couldn't remember the last time he'd used that word. It was a Gus-ism he'd learned back in fifth grade. When his parents had been ready for him to come home after that strange, disorienting year, Jace had still used it for a time. Eventually, it fell away from his vocabulary. Funny how being back in Bluebonnet was making him feel like that awkward eleven-year-old kid again.

Uncle Gus waved a bony, dismissive hand without bothering to tear his gaze from the grainy re-run of *Columbo* playing on the television mounted on the wall opposite the bed.

"I'm serious." Jace moved to block Gus's view of the TV and planted his hands on hips. "Do it for me, okay?"

Uncle Gus's red-rimmed eyes shifted to meet his. Jace could see the fight as it drained out of him. The nurse on duty had mentioned he'd had a rough night, and it showed. Soon, he'd be too tired to cause any more trouble.

"Fine," he mumbled.

"Thank you." Jace grinned at him. "Now how about you let me beat you in a game of chess?"

"In your dreams, kid. I'm not dead yet, you know." Gus pushed himself up further against his pillows and pointed a shaky finger at the over-bed table anchored to the bedrails. "Go ahead, then. Get the board set up."

Jace grabbed the checkered board from the narrow bookcase on the side wall and went to work lining up the pieces just like Gus had taught him on his first day in Bluebonnet as a boy. First the pawns, then the rooks and so on. Some things never changed.

"Why is it so important for me to be nice to the dog woman?" Gus moved the king's pawn forward two spaces, his typical opening move. "Do you two know each other or something?"

Jace started to nod, but then thought better of it. He didn't really know Adaline Bishop anymore. If he did, maybe he'd have some idea why she seemed so angry at him.

He pushed his chess piece in place, the wooden figure smooth beneath his fingertips, worn by years and years of handling. Things were so different here in Bluebonnet. It was like stepping into yesterday, and Jace had yet to get his footing.

It's only been a day, he told himself. *Give it time.*

But the luxury of time was the very thing his uncle no longer had. It was the whole reason Jace was here. No one deserved to die alone. *Nobody.*

The knot of grief that had settled in Jace's chest a few days ago when Gus had finally told him about his condition burrowed further behind his sternum. He pushed it down and concentrated on the neat squares of the chessboard.

"Just be nice to Adaline, okay?" he said quietly.

But Gus's only answer was the deep rattle of his breathing as his head slumped against his pillows. One move in, and he'd already fallen asleep, leaving Jace to contemplate his new reality. This was home now, a new beginning wrapped up in a certain ending—like an unopened gift tucked so far beneath the Christmas tree that it seemed foreign and out of place when it was finally found long after the holidays had ended.

Jace didn't want to open it. He didn't want to know what came next. He just wanted to hold the gift in his hands for a while, and stay stuck in the in-between.

But the end was coming, and no one could stop it. He just needed to get through this one last Christmas with his uncle, and he could figure the rest out later. Like how to celebrate a family holiday with Gus stuck here in a hospital bed...and what he was going to do about the farm...

And why the first girl he'd ever fallen head over heels for seemed to hate the very sight of him.