



# **Oh, Baby**

**Delia Latham**

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com)

PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2016

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-987-4

Published in the United States of America

# 1

*Psalm :—O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.*

Soggy. That described the world as far as Dawni Manors could see at the moment.

She peered through the steadily increasing rainfall, straining to make out the cottages lining the graveled path. Rain pelted the roof of her car, its thunderous uproar all but drowning out the frantic slip-slap of the windshield wipers. At least she'd been able to see the big, hand-carved Heart's Haven sign that marked the complex entrance.

A vivid lightning flash revealed the number nine on a plain silver mailbox, and she blew out a breath. As if in response, her car gave an unexpected sputter, jerked once, and then died—right beside the front gate.

An arched trellis over the white picket entrance supported thick green foliage loaded with vivid red roses. Most days, Dawni made a point of enjoying the simple beauty of that gate. But not on this wet, dreary day.

She gave the ignition a single turn, hoping the shuddering dance the engine had delivered a moment ago had been no more than a warning...like a physical "check engine" light. But her effort was rewarded by no more than an empty click.

With a huff, she tucked the keys into her coat pocket. Where were the so-called Heart's Haven angels when she needed them?

Another burst of lightning zipped across the sky, and she cringed. *OK, OK, angelic realm. I guess I should be grateful I got home before the whole sky opened up.*

She grabbed an umbrella from the back seat and hooked her arm through the handle of her purse. Hesitant to get out of the car, she squinted through the windshield once more, hoping for a reprieve, but the rain showed no sign of letting up any time soon. With a frustrated sigh, she stepped out into the downpour, umbrella first.

Despite her hurry to get inside, she cast a quick glance overhead, to a beautifully carved wooden sign hanging on a chain across the top of the arch: **May love find all who enter here.** A smile teased at her lips as it did every time she passed beneath that optimistic quote. Corny or not, the place oozed charm.

She couldn't say she hadn't been warned beforehand.

The day she arrived in Angel Falls, three weeks ago, she'd stopped at the Law Firm of Hilliard and Beckett to clear up some legal questions about running a business from her home. The nice paralegal—Layne Beckett, obviously related in some way to one of the partners—seemed almost overly excited when Dawni

told her she'd found a place at Heart's Haven. Layne described the popular complex of cottage rentals as over-the-top homey.

The woman had lived there herself until a few months back, when she married a local horseman and moved to his family's ranch. Then again, Layne had also mentioned some weird legend about folks who lived in these cottages falling helplessly in love—just as the wooden sign over the gate indicated. Well, love would not “find” Dawni...she had no intention of letting a thing like sappy emotion get in the way of all her plans. She'd worked too hard to make them happen.

The wet chill sent a shiver up her spine, and she hurried up the walk. This was not the time to be basking in Heart's Haven's atmosphere. Between a brisk wind and the driving rain, the air held a nippy little bite.

She rushed to the door and tugged the key from her pocket. A grin played at her lips as she inserted it into the lock. Even now, all settled in and unpacked, she found it hard to believe the adorable little cabin “belonged” to her. This place represented not only the home of her own that she'd longed for, but a whole new life.

The key refused to turn. Frowning, she pulled it out, turned it over, and tried it the other way, but then it wouldn't even slide in. Dawni reversed it and gave the stubborn thing a firm jiggle. Not happening. Just her luck.

“Grrr!” She pounded a frustrated fist on the door and turned to face the wet world...again. She'd have to drive back to the big house up front—if her car would start, that is—and see if Miss Viv had another key. Or maybe a whole new lock, whatever worked.

Behind her, the door swung open. She swung back and her startled gaze landed on a taut midriff, all hard planes and muscular ripples. A simple white t-shirt revealed biceps that...oh, dear. She forced her fascinated gaze ever upward, denying herself the right to linger on broad shoulders and going past a strong, clefted chin to a set of full lips that twitched into a playful smile.

No way! She recognized this man. He'd walked past Layne Beckett's office that day when she'd first arrived in Angel Falls. Layne had waved and smiled as he passed by.

And—with typical bad timing—Dawni's tongue won the race against her normal reserve. “Now that's one handsome Texas cowboy.”

A few steps past Layne's door, he'd stopped, turned, and tipped his hat. “Why, thank you, ma'am.” He gave her a slow wink and then he was gone, while heat crawled up Dawni's neck and into her face.

Layne laughed softly. “Gavin works for my husband, and yes, he's very handsome—and he knows it, but I'm sure you picked up on that.” She shook her head and gave an expressive eye roll. “Still, the guy's a sweetheart. Dex considers him a brother, and my daughter, Chloe, is absolutely crazy about him.”

Staring at the man now—standing in her doorway as if he belonged there—Dawni steeled her expression. Sweetheart or not, what was this over-confident cowboy doing in her cottage? She ignored those perfect lips and an impossibly

straight nose as her gaze traveled to a pair of eyes that sparkled like rich emeralds under slightly longish hair the exact shade of his thick, black eyebrows.

Before she could speak, he did—in a deep, slow Texas drawl. “Well. Hello. Look what the storm brought me!”

She gasped, but since she couldn’t think of an appropriate comeback, Dawni ignored his cheeky statement.

“Who are you?” She peered around him into an inviting, but overtly masculine living room. Leather furniture, a very large rack of deer antlers—ugh—and plants in pots shaped like boots and cowboy hats.

Confusion rippled through her mind and body and brought on a violent shudder. “This—this is my—” She broke off as the truth slammed her full force.

“Hey, come on in.” He interrupted before she could stake a claim to the cottage. “It’s cold out there.” Taking a gentle hold on her elbow, he drew her inside and shut the door before she had a chance to object. “Not that I’m complainin’, but what delightful wind blew you to my door?” He eyed her dripping handbag, hiked one thick eyebrow. “Wait right there. I’ll get a towel.” He disappeared through a doorway.

Dawni shook her head as her stomach took a dive right into the tips of her toes. She’d messed up, and she already knew how. When would she learn to double-check herself before plowing headfirst into situations like this? She’d spent her whole life dealing with mild dyslexia, and still managed to put herself on the spot far more often than she should.

The cowboy reappeared, handed her a towel and relieved her of umbrella and purse in the same motion. “Your hair doesn’t look too wet, thanks to your umbrella, but your purse and arms might need a bit of a rub down.”

Dawni started patting the moisture away, if only to keep from dripping on his floor. “I think I’m, uh—” She swallowed hard. “I’m at the wrong cottage. I thought—” She closed her eyes, despising the hateful wave of heat in her cheeks. “Oh, dear. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, take it easy.” His voice was soft. Dawni opened her eyes and looked at him when he touched her shoulder. “You’re not the first person to ever show up at the wrong waterin’ hole. Which cabin you lookin’ for?”

“Nine.” Mortified, she managed a mere whisper, and he leaned closer, tilting his head in an obvious effort to hear her. “This is six, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Yep. Nine is three cottages further up the road.”

“OK.” She turned and grabbed the doorknob, eager to get out and away from that bright green gaze. “I’m sorry to have barged in on you.”

“Hey, wait!” He laughed. “Don’t be in such a rush. It’s rainin’ buckets out there...listen!”

He wasn’t kidding. The downpour she’d dashed through to reach his door had turned into a deluge that pounded the roof with impressive force. “Why don’t you just wait it out here?” He jerked his head toward the sofa. “Let me get you a cup of coffee...or tea? What would you like?”

“Oh, no!” Panic thundered in her ears. “I couldn’t possibly—”

“Sure you could.” He grinned and stuck out a hand. “Gavin Sampson, at your service, ma’am. And you are...?”

She hesitated. He seemed OK, but in San Antonio, where she’d lived all her life until she moved here, a girl couldn’t be too careful around strangers. But then, he wasn’t exactly a stranger, was he? Layne had spoken well of him. And the guy seemed nice enough—welcoming, and helpful. His looks could probably get him into movies if he were so inclined. He was, indeed—as she had already stated, to her eternal humiliation—a “handsome Texas cowboy.”

She fought the urge to hide her face in her hands, remembering how mortified she’d been when he overheard that too-quick remark. She should just go right out there into the storm and make her way to her own cottage—number nine—even if she had to swim.

Once again, a gentle touch to her shoulder brought her up short. “Hey, you can trust me. I promise. I wouldn’t send a skunk out in that downpour, much less a new neighbor with a face like an angel. Come on...relax for a few minutes?”

She pulled in a deep breath. Something told her Gavin Sampson could be trusted, and she’d always possessed a mostly true radar for people. Also, Layne had pretty much awarded him the lopsided halo award.

“OK. Thank you.” She managed a smile as he placed her umbrella and purse on a table near the door. “I’m Dawni Manors.”

“There. See? Now we know each other.” Gavin moved across the pleasant living room into a small kitchen. “What’ll it be, Dawni Manors? Coffee? Hot tea? Cocoa?”

She settled onto a tall stool on the living room side of the kitchen bar. “Are you saying you can handle all those things?”

“Hey, lady. Trust me. Gavin Sampson is far more than a doggone handsome face.”

Dawni’s nervous grin turned into a soft chuckle. She agreed, but she wasn’t about to say so—again. This guy clearly needed no encouragement. “Well, OK...then I’ll have hot chocolate.” She hiked a brow. “Got marshmallows?”

“Do I...got...marshmallows?” Her cowboy host snatched a bag from a nearby cabinet and tossed it in her direction—completely without warning, but she managed an awkward catch. He winked. “Nicely done. Now give me three minutes and you can drop those babies into the best cup o’ cocoa in Texas.”

Dawni relaxed onto the comfortable barstool while her host pattered around his kitchen as if he knew what he was doing. Three minutes, he’d said? Sitting right here in this spot for at least that many hours wouldn’t be a problem. She couldn’t ask for a better view.

He delivered the drink in short order, just as he’d promised, and Dawni made a mocking ceremony of dumping a handful of miniature marshmallows into her steaming mug. “There. Now it’s perfect.”

“How do you know? You haven’t even tasted it.”

“Well, it smells amazing, but you’re right.” She picked up her mug. One sip of the hot liquid wiped the teasing grin off her face. “Wow! This really might be the best cup of cocoa in Texas.”

“Told ja so.” Mr. Cocky kissed his right index finger and hissed through his teeth.

Dawni laughed. He was pretty hot all right, but she refused to go there. “So Mr. Sampson. What else can you cook up on the fly?”

He hiked a dark brow as he poured chocolate into his own mug. “First of all, it’s not Mr. Sampson. Just Gavin.” He rounded the bar and slid onto the stool next to her. “You’d be surprised what this ol’ cowpoke can cook up—uh, ‘on the fly.’”

“Hmm. Well, I guess I’ll take your word for that, since your cocoa’s definitely the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“Oh, no, don’t take my word for it.” Gavin shook his head. “I’m a complete stranger, you know. I could be lyin’.” He grinned when Dawni’s burst of laughter had her wiping up a spew of liquid chocolate. “I’m thinkin’ you’ll just have to come to dinner and let me show you what I can do.”

She froze, her laughter hanging in the air like an echo. How could she have gotten herself into a situation like this? Good heavens, she hadn’t been in town a full month yet, and here she was thinking up a way to say no to a charming cowboy. She had no intention of getting involved with anyone, no matter how outrageously handsome or fun.

Or how delicious his hot chocolate.

She sipped at the steaming liquid, hoping he’d allow her to just ignore his invitation. He did—so apparently Gavin Sampson knew how to be a gentleman. She commented on his western décor, and her host launched into a quick explanation of his job at a local ranch for special needs children.

Dawni listened while downing the contents of her mug far too fast to properly appreciate the outstanding flavor, and then slid off her stool and walked to the window. “Looks like the rain’s eased up a bit. I’d best take myself on to my own place.”

Gavin said nothing for a moment, but she felt his gaze on her. Whatever the reason for his brief silence, he shook it off, falling into his previous light-hearted, teasing manner. “Well, I guess if you must, you must. But there’s no hurry on my part. You’re welcome to stay longer, but I reckon you won’t melt if you get wet.” He tugged on her low ponytail. When had he stepped up beside her? The man moved like a wraith. “Or will you?”

She laughed and raised her gaze to his. Despite the spark of mischief that seemed to be a permanent part of their twinkling depths, Gavin’s eyes were kind. Gentle. Eyes she could get lost in...if she let herself, which she had absolutely no intention of doing.

Not today. And not any day soon.

“I guess you’ll just have to watch and see.” She firmed her shoulders and gave him a smile. “Thank you for that killer cup of cocoa, Gavin. And for the shelter

and the laughter. I'm glad it was your cottage I tried to claim. Some people would have been far less understanding."

He tipped an invisible hat in true cowboy fashion. "No problem a'tall. You can get lost in my cottage any time...seein' as how we're neighbors and all."

She smiled and gathered her purse and umbrella. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other around. And I guess I do owe you one." She opened the door, poked her umbrella out and unfurled it before stepping onto the porch.

That's when she remembered her car wasn't being cooperative. "Oh! My car died right outside your gate. Will it be OK here until morning?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "I'll take a look at it before I go to work, if you'd like."

"Thank you, but I couldn't possibly expect you to do that. I'll call someone first thing tomorrow."

"OK, but I'm tellin' ya, I've got the touch. Maybe I could save you a buck or two."

Dawni gave a wry smile and hiked one eyebrow. He probably did have 'the touch,' but she wasn't going there either. "Bye, cowboy. Thanks again."

Then she hurried off toward her own place, not waiting for a response.