

A wooden signpost made of five horizontal planks is mounted in a forest. The background shows a path covered in fallen leaves, with trees and sunlight filtering through the canopy. In the foreground, the back of a man's head and shoulders in a white t-shirt and a woman's blonde hair in a ponytail are visible, looking towards the path. The signpost has the following text:

HEARTS HAVEN

SAMPLER

MARIANNE EVANS

DELIA LATHAM

MARY MANNERS

TANYA STOWE

# Hearts Haven Sampler

Marianne Evans  
Delia Latham  
Mary Manners  
Tanya Stowe

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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, 2017

**Published in the United States of America**

# Jewels for the Kingdom

Delia Latham

# 1

Pia Peretti's scream froze in her throat but never made it past her lips.

Inside her head, however, it echoed and re-echoed as the car in front of her skidded off the road and over the edge. She had no idea as to the depth of the drop off, but it was deep enough to swallow the little sports car, which tumbled out of sight. Already praying for whoever was in the crashed vehicle, Pia veered with as much care as possible to the side of the rain-slick road.

Dialing 9-1-1 even as she leapt from the car, she reported her location while she ran the hundred yards or so to the spot where the small car had disappeared. Peering through the downpour at the wreckage, she realized the gully cut only about ten feet into the earth. Certainly no Grand Canyon, but still a dangerous fall for a speeding vehicle. She found it somehow *wrong* that the wheels on the overturned car continued to spin as if traveling some invisible, upside-down roadway.

"God, please be with whoever's inside." Pia's fervent prayer caught in her throat when the cracked passenger window bulged and fell to the ground with a thud. A pair of feet clad in what looked like spankin' new athletic shoes kicked out a few tenacious shards of glass.

Having been assured help was on the way, she

tucked her phone into a pocket and gaped as two long legs extended through the opening. A muscled torso squeezed through, and finally, a head appeared, accompanied by a loud groan, and a lean figure slid onto the slick earth beside the wreckage.

“Are you all right?” Pia started down the wet, slippery incline toward the man pulling his long length off the ground. He gazed around the area as if not quite sure how he came to be there. And no wonder—with a two-inch gash on his forehead. Blood gushed from the wound, liberally coating one cheek. The driving rain did a great job of washing it off enough to reveal that the unsightly red ooze came from the single gash and mercifully not from multiple cuts on that near-perfect face.

The injured man raised his gaze and fixed it on her but said nothing.

“Sir?” What should one say to a stranger who just survived a car accident and, even though he stood upright on wobbly long legs, looked only half conscious? “Are you OK?”

He raised both hands and ran them through golden brown hair that skimmed his collar. Rain collected in the thick strands, quickly turning them a shade darker and sending watery red streaks down his face and neck. “I, uh—yeah. I think so.”

Wishing she’d worn anything other than three-inch heels, Pia minced her way through the tall grass that blanketed the slope, breathing a silent prayer that every snake in East Texas had departed for a reunion on the west side of the state.

She loved the lush beauty of this area at the edge of the Angelina National Forest. Varying shades of green greeted her every time she stepped outside her

front door, and soothed her soul when she drove down the highway. But she had no love whatsoever for the various critters that crawled in the midst of her Eden.

"Is anyone else in the car?" She forced herself to ignore the wet grass tickling her legs like the cold, slithery skin of a serpent. "I've already called for help."

Reaching the man's side, she looked up and gasped. Even streaked with blood and wearing that heart-rending dazed-and-confused expression, his was the most unforgettable face Pia had ever seen—and only partially because his eyes didn't match.

One mimicked the blue of a clear afternoon sky. The other borrowed the deep, smoky green of the surrounding forest.

"Thanks." His voice broke through Pia's reverie, and she lowered her gaze, embarrassed that she'd stared. "No one else was in the car, and I'm fine, just a little shaken up."

Frowning, she indicated the gash on his head. "I don't think 'fine' is quite the right word. That's a pretty nasty little owie you've got there."

His eyes widened in obvious surprise, and he lifted an unsteady hand to his forehead. He pulled it back to frown at the red stickiness on his fingers. "I'm bleeding."

"Yes, you are. You need to go to the hospital."

"I'd really rather not." A shaky smile revealed a set of teeth straight out of a toothpaste commercial, except for a slight overlap of the front two. That little imperfection only enhanced the overall...well, perfection. "If I'd injured anything but my head, I'd agree, but I've got a pretty hard noggin."

She tucked her bottom lip under her teeth, considering. Finally, she lifted one shoulder. He was

very much a grown man. "I guess it's your decision."

"Thank you." He turned to assess his vehicle and shook his head. "I should have had those tires replaced, but I really thought they'd make it."

Belatedly, Pia noticed the shredded rubber on the front wheel as the spinning tires slowed to a stop. She hadn't heard the blowout—maybe because she'd been bellowing along with a favorite Southern Gospel CD.

"I don't suppose..." It was his turn to hesitate. "Could you possibly give me a ride? We're not far from my uncle's place."

She pulled in a breath and held it. She'd never picked up a hitchhiker in her life and didn't plan to start now. But this guy wasn't exactly wandering the highway with his thumb out. She could hardly drive off and leave him standing at the side of the road—in the rain, no less—after watching him sail his fancy little ride off the road.

"I—I guess I could do that. Did you need anything out of your car?"

"Yes. Just give me a minute."

He opened the rear driver's-side door and, after a few tugs and grunts, somehow managed to rescue a suitcase from the overturned vehicle. "Got it."

Beneath a dark tan, his face had gone white and his breath came in short, hard gasps, but he offered Pia his free hand. "Let me help you out of this hole. You're not exactly wearing climbing shoes."

She glanced down at her ridiculous high heels. "No, I'm not. In fact..." Resting a hand on his outstretched arm for balance, she slipped the shoes off and hooked them on one finger. "I'll just carry the silly things." She ignored his hand and slipped her arm through his. "Now I can help you up this little hill."

He hiked a heavy, dark eyebrow, but said nothing. Pia laughed. “You *are* the one with the hole in his head.”

A wry twist of well-shaped lips made her tummy tighten. She hadn’t even noticed the cleft in his chin until now—how could she have missed that? “I guess that’s true, Ms.—” As they climbed upward, he slanted a glance her way. “May I know your name?”

“It’s Pia. Pia Peretti.” She wasn’t entirely sure she should be giving that information to a total stranger, but surely a pair of peepers like those could harbor no evil.

“Well, Pia Peretti, I’m certainly glad you were here. I’m David Myers.”

Pia narrowed her eyes, her mind racing. Where had she heard that name?

They hurried through the downpour to where she’d parked. Even as David slammed the trunk on his damp luggage, loud sirens heralded the arrival of emergency vehicles. The next half hour was a flurry of questions, answers, and a stubborn refusal of medical help by the injured man, who insisted the gash on his head was nothing to worry about. The EMTs weren’t happy but grudgingly acquiesced after obtaining David’s shaky signature on a couple of forms.

Pia retreated to her vehicle after being questioned by one of the officers...and waited. It felt wrong to leave after having promised the man a ride, although the officers weren’t likely to leave him standing out here in the rain.

A tow truck pulled onto the shoulder of the road nearest the wreck, and an officer waved David towards her car. As he approached, she unlatched the passenger door.

He didn't get in immediately but bent low to speak through the window. "Still willing to take me to my uncle's place?"

"Sure, I—I guess so." But her stomach fluttered as she spoke.

His smile almost made the unpleasant tension worth it. "I promise I'm not a bad guy. But if you're uncomfortable, I'm sure one of these boys in blue will drop me somewhere...I just don't know how long I'd have to wait for them, and to be honest, I'm feeling a little shaky." He patted his shirt pocket and ran his hand over the ones on his hips. "I'm not sure where my cell phone is right now, or I'd call my uncle."

She took a deep breath and smiled. Something in the deepest part of her heart told her this man was no danger to her—at least, not physically. But that persistent little butterfly in her stomach made her wonder what other perils his presence might bring.

"It's OK. Surely you wouldn't try anything foolish after all these cops watch me drive away with you." The statement was only half jest.

He laughed and slid into the seat beside her. She buckled herself in and her passenger did the same. Then he sat back and closed his eyes.

Pia pulled onto the wet road, but cast a concerned glance at David. "Sure you don't want to visit the hospital?"

"Quite sure. Just take me to my uncle's place." He opened one eye—the green one—and lifted both brows. "Are you familiar with Heart's Haven?"

Pia gasped. "H—Heart's Haven? Who's your uncle?"

"Andrew Hart." David raised his head and eyed her curiously. "You know him?"

She laughed, and her hands tightened on the wheel as she attempted to rein in some giddy part of her that dared to be glad. "He's my landlord. I just moved into unit one a couple of weeks ago."

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David tried not to stare. Raven black hair, high cheek bones, and almond-shaped hazel eyes—slightly up tilted at the outer corners—testified to her Italian heritage. The girl's cat-like gaze appeared more green than the underlying amber at the moment. Clear, clean skin, bearing only a hint of the expected olive tone, glowed with health. David appreciated the lack of overdone makeup. Beauty like hers couldn't be improved with paint and powder.

A silver pendant hung just below her collarbone, suspended from some kind of choker. Shaped like a pair of graceful silver wings, it shimmered with a dusting of tiny stones.

Stunning. He forced his eyes from the mesmerizing vision of silver against creamy skin.

"So you live in one of my uncle's little houses."

"Yes. At the bottom point of the heart." Her low murmur of laughter shivered its way up his spine, and he forced a chuckle past his throat.

"Oh, yes, the heart. Uncle Andy is nothing if not romantic." He'd been amused at the taciturn bachelor's whimsical arrangement of the small apartments. From an aerial view, it would look like a loosely drawn heart.

"*Romantic?*" Pia's head snapped his way, making her hair swing around her face like a silky curtain in a playful breeze. She fixed him under an incredulous

stare. "Are we talking about the same Andrew Hart?"

He laughed. "Well, he's apparently doing a good job of keeping you from knowing it, but the old guy really is a softie at heart."

She arched one perfect, wing-shaped brow. "Deep at heart, perhaps. So deep it might never be seen again."

He studied her for a moment. "Did you know he sees angels...talks to them?"

Pia slanted him a doubtful look before returning her gaze to the road. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am. He speaks with his guardian angel on a regular basis. Other folks' angels, as well, from time to time."

She hesitated, and then spoke softly. "That's why I sometimes see him deep in conversation with...no one."

"It's someone. Trust me."

"You really believe that?"

He cocked his head, watching her absorb his words. "He gives His angels charge over us, to keep us in all our ways. That's biblical."

She tugged at her lip with teeth like small white pearls, and David's stomach did an unexpected cartwheel. "Oh, I absolutely believe in angels. But do you really think they can be seen?"

"I believe some people are open enough to the idea to make it possible. For instance, children see many things adults do not because we've ceased to be open to the possibility. Some people come face to face with God's messengers and never realize it. And other especially sensitive, faith-filled folks, like Uncle Andy, converse with them often."

Her head moved up and down again, but she said

nothing. David touched her arm. "Want to know something else?"

"I'm not sure. Do I?"

He twisted in his seat to give himself a better view of her profile. "Uncle Andy's house was a boarding facility, back when his grandparents were young."

"I think the newspaper mentioned that when the place was designated an official historical landmark."

"Hmm. I wonder if *this* little tidbit made the *Angel Falls Trumpet*..." He grinned. "Grandpa and Granny Hart were deeply in love. I'm sure you've noticed the words carved over the gate of every unit in Heart's Haven."

Pia nodded, smiling. "May love find all who enter here. It's quite charming."

He watched her through narrowed eyes. "Well, it's not just a pretty quote. Granny Hart prayerfully stitched those words into a large wall hanging, which still holds a place of honor in the house. Have you seen it?"

"No." She shook her head. "I haven't been inside the big house."

"Really? If you'd like a tour..."

"Maybe."

Despite the noncommittal answer, he saw a flash of interest light her eyes. "Well, let me know. Anyway, legend has it that almost everyone who stayed in the boardinghouse back in the day fell in love, usually with one of the other boarders."

She laughed. "Oh, come on! You're not serious."

"Oh, but I am." David grinned, despite the throbbing in his head. "Diehard bachelors refused to even step inside for one of Granny Hart's chicken pot pies—and they were famous around these parts. No

one made pot pie quite like Granny Hart, and a smart bachelor never turns down a good meal. But those gentlemen did, because nine out of ten of them who stepped through the Hart doorway came back out with a woman hanging on his arm."

"You're making that up." An enchanting smile teased at the corners of her lips.

"Think so?" He winked when she slid a glance his way. "The old place still has some kind of...well, I won't say 'magic,' but *something*. You know how Heart's Haven got its name, don't you?"

She gave him a sideways glance and a lopsided grin but said nothing.

"It was supposed to be Hart's *Heaven*. Using my uncle's name, you know...H-A-R-T."

"So what happened?"

He forced himself not to laugh. Her expression read like an open book. Pia was still trying to decide whether to believe him.

"Oh, he hired a local painter to make the sign, but the poor guy showed up half soused. He put the 'e' in the wrong word, and Uncle's sign wound up reading, 'Heart's Haven.'"

She giggled. "You are *so* spinning a tall one."

"Not this time." He narrowed his eyes. "You're not even a little nervous about having Granny Hart's quote up over your gate?"

Now she did laugh. "Not in the least. Even if the legend were true, it wouldn't work on me. I'm not meant to fall in love—and certainly not to marry."

Operation  
Breathless

Marianne Evans

# 1

The woman was in tears.

Curious, Gabe Peretti tugged on his dog's leash, drawing his companion to a standstill. These weren't slow building, trickle-and-roll tears. Her head bowed down, her shoulders trembled, and she kept swiping at her eyes with a mangled tissue.

What a sad picture.

The hop and charge of his German Shepherd, who suddenly wanted to spring ahead, distracted Gabe for a moment. Until now he and Axle had enjoyed a quiet, leisurely walk through Falls Park, a municipal facility located at the heart of downtown Angel Falls. A new year had just begun. In East Texas that meant cool weather, but chilly air didn't keep folks inside. The sun was out, so the park teemed with kids and parents. Verdant trees, jungle gyms, and a few swing sets dotted the facility. Gabe continued to stare, maintaining a tug-of-war that kept Axle in place. Barely. The dog wanted to beeline straight for the woman.

Weird.

She sat alone, not far away. Tucked against the far end of a green metal bench, bathed in dappled sunlight, her profile was framed by dancing leaves and tree branches that rustled and swayed around her. Gorgeous—but heart achingly sad. Dark brown hair trailed down her back in a satiny river. She was fair

skinned and slender.

*Fair skinned. Slender.* How clinical, how distant. Gabe groaned at himself. He really *had* been a cop for too long.

A yank on his arm ended his perusal and nearly dislocated Gabe's shoulder, reminding him to tend to Axle. Grumpy about being interrupted while he admired the woman, Gabe cast his dog a scowl—as if that would accomplish anything of value. "Axle, settle down."

The deep spoken, firm command worked. For two seconds. After that, Axle surged ahead all over again, straining and coughing, dancing against the confines of the leash, pulling relentlessly on Gabe's arm, which grew increasingly sore. Axle kept bouncing his attention back and forth between Gabe and the lovely lady.

Weird again.

His policeman's instinct kicked in once more—the good old *protect and defend* aspect of Gabe Peretti's persona that family and friends swore was hard-wired into his DNA. The pedestrian trail led right past her bench. He could wander by, casually. Just to be sure she was OK. Just out of courtesy. Would she be offended? Would she think him intrusive, or—

Another starburst of pain shot through his arm when Axle charged ahead—again. This time, eighty pounds of hard-muscled determination refused to be denied.

"Axle—gimme a break. C'mon!"

Gabe blustered but the next thing he noticed? A prompting. Subtle pressure moved against his shoulders—whisper soft and invisible but strong as steel.

He was drawn to the woman. Physically compelled. The realization tempted a frown, but he beat back that reaction and clung instead to the ingrained, if tattered, remains of his faith. Despite a wounded heart, Gabe's trust in God forced him to give up on the idea of trying to figure out the mysteries of the Spirit. Instead, he leaned on instinct.

Gabe let Axle lead the way—Axle and that warm, inviting push against his body.

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*Failure.*

The single, condemning word spun through Susanna Daniels's mind like an evil, goading nemesis. She began to pray with renewed earnest.

*God, I'm such a failure. In this instance, failure isn't something I can handle. I feel like I haven't done a good enough job with the task You've called me to. Am I not doing enough? I try so hard to help the kids You direct to the center, but they fail—and when they fail, I feel like I've failed, too. Is there something I'm doing wrong? Help me—please. These kids need You, and I want to be Your instrument, but I feel like I'm not. I feel completely inadequate. Maybe that's why I'm in this mess. Maybe You're trying to show me the work I do isn't what You've truly ordained, and—*

Confusion and a babbling prayer ended abruptly when an enormous, friendly looking dog bounded up to the park bench where she sat. She jumped when the eager animal settled its dirty paws straight onto her legs...legs currently clad in white denim jeans.

Vaguely she registered the sound of a male voice. "Axle, stop it. Get down."

The dog stayed put. After swiping a flattened hand against her wet cheeks, she smiled at her intruder, far more interested in him than anything else. She couldn't care less about her now soiled pants. Her new friend remained perched on Susanna's legs and sniffed at her. She began to pet him. Bonding with a dog right now felt wonderful, like the best kind of therapy, and boy, did she need the uplift. The animal sported silky fur and a smiling pant that grew when she scratched behind his ears.

"I'm so sorry."

There was that smooth male voice again, closer this time.

Susanna's gaze traveled the length of a black leather leash to spy the owner of the dog, who had stood silent while she acquainted herself with his pet.

"No problem."

"Really—I insist on paying for the cleaning. He's not usually such a fur-covered torpedo. I couldn't keep him away from you."

Susanna laughed in spite of her mood and circumstances. Heaven help her, she was so mixed up and convoluted right now. Drawing a shaky breath, she took in the man. The dog's owner was tall and very nicely built. Handsome to boot, with the olive-skinned, black-haired, could-slay-you-with-a-smile manner of those with Mediterranean ancestry.

And that smile presently focused on her then the dog. "Humph. Check him out now." Indeed, Axle had settled quite happily. For now he assumed a neat sitting position—right next to Susanna's feet. "You have a gift. Must be a miracle worker."

The words were meant to be kind, but they ran the sharp edge of a blade against her heart. A miracle

worker? No—not so much.

She fought the tears, but the tears won. Droplets formed and spilled all over again, uncontrollable because they stemmed from the deepest, most vulnerable spot in her soul. As soon as she started crying, Axle stood and parked his paws right back on her lap. Through blurred vision, she absorbed the transparent affection in the animal's soft brown eyes.

*Oh, Axle, your owner must think I'm a mess. Sadly enough, he'd be right.*

Axle cocked his head, issuing a round of low, rumbling hoots and plaintive whines while he patted her thigh and waited. She calmed and began to pet him; like a switch being clicked, he immediately settled.

"I'm so sorry that you're sad." Handsome Man spoke again.

She looked at him once more. His quiet comment brought Susanna to an inner standstill. She glanced away, not sure whether to feel embarrassed by being so exposed or grateful to be revealed. She opted for the latter. "I'm not usually a sobbing mess, but it's been a rough day."

For an instant, something indefinable clouded the stranger's eyes. "I know all about rough days. Feel like elaborating?"

He stood before her, so comfortable and composed. From the inquiring tilt of his head to the softness of his chocolate-colored eyes, the man's entire being was set to welcome.

She lifted a shoulder. "I'm depleted...and indulging in a bit of a pity party."

He shot her a boyish and completely disarming grin. "Why do I find myself thinking your mood might

run a little bit deeper than that?"

"Probably because you're perceptive." Susanna glanced at him through tear-spiked lashes.

"It's been said." He nodded at the empty spot next to her. "Do you mind if I join you? If you'd prefer, I can leave. I don't want to bother you."

Touched from the inside out, Susanna delivered a smile. "If you don't mind emotionally overwrought women, then please, be my guest. You'll get points for bravery."

He laughed and sat next to her. "I don't mind at all. Besides, I doubt I'll be able to get Axle away from you until we both know you're OK." Once his full attention rested on her, his intensity drew her in and stalled all sense of rational thought. Her heartbeat skittered.

"I think he senses you're upset." A pause ensued. "Is there anything I can do for you—other than try to keep my dog from ruining the rest of your clothes?"

Susanna couldn't quite find her way to vocalization. She much preferred just looking at him. The man wore blue jeans and an untucked, dark red polo shirt far better than any print ad for clothing she had ever seen. His eyes sparkled—not in teasing, nor in humor, but with a warmth she savored. A warmth she craved at the moment.

He bumped her shoulder with his. "Two ears. No waiting. You know, strangers can be awesome in situations like this. If you'd like reassurance, I could show you my badge. I'm a police officer, so you're in safe hands. Promise." He leaned away and started to reach for his back pocket. "Seriously. It's right here."

Susanna chuckled; her tears began to dry. "That's OK. I believe you. But I have nothing to offer in return.

That hardly seems fair.”

Her attempt at levity prompted his steady regard. Everything about him beckoned her forward...and that was unheard of for the generally shy and conservative Susanna Daniels.

“Don’t worry about that. If I see a lasting smile on your face before we part ways, that’ll be more than enough. Deal?”

*Wow. Well said. “Deal.”*

She continued to look into his eyes, unapologetic about scrutinizing. The heat of a blush worked upward against her shoulders and neck until she glanced away and took a restorative breath.

Silence trickled past.

The bench they shared was small. An intriguing scent of musk—his scent perhaps?—was accompanied by the aroma of cool earth that carried to her on a gust of air. Leaf chatter and bird-song filled the air. Beauty lived in the hearty, colorful forms of nature that filled the park following a brutal summer and a moist, vibrant fall. Comfort and peace surrounded her. That’s not exactly what she had expected from her visit to Falls Park, but she’d certainly take it. Axle flopped down into a sprawl on a patch of grass in front of the bench.

Handsome Man leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. He tilted his head and Susanna could feel him taking her in. Surprisingly, she enjoyed the sensation.

“What happened?”

“Do you want the long version?” After he nodded, she curved her lips and lifted a brow. “OK, but you’ve been warned.”

“Yep, I have.”

Susanna crossed her legs and relaxed against the back of the bench. Her movements caused Axle's ears to perk, and he lifted his head for a second or two. "My day began innocently enough, with a simple trip to the drugstore."

"Then what happened?"

"The bomb blast hit."

"Always start with the lead. What was the bomb blast?"

"I was nearly arrested a few hours ago."

Handsome Man blinked hard. His brows knit while a breeze danced through the waves of his jet hair. "OK—now for the in-depth part...ah...quickly, if you don't mind."

Susanna chuckled at his tone of mock alarm. "Don't worry. You're not consorting with a known felon. I didn't break the law, unless you consider the fact that I can't seem to do my job very well a criminal act." He didn't reply to that rejoinder, so Susanna kept talking. She was a psychologist. She knew how things worked. Venting would help her cope. "I'm the director of a counseling and rehab center for teenagers who find themselves in trouble with the law. It's called Wellsprings of Grace."

"I love the name of the center, but that can't be an easy job."

"I do, too. It's a fitting moniker. Mostly."

"Just mostly?"

Susanna lifted her face to the sun, absorbing a bit of its warmth. "Like I said, I'm in a place where I'm not feeling very good about what I'm doing with my life right now."

"Then I guess that leads us back to the bomb blast."

"Guess it does." Susanna blew out a breath through pursed, trembling lips, then decided to just let the words flow. "All I needed to do was pick up a few things at the store. I just wanted to run a few errands, so I asked one of the kids...let's call her Jane Doe...to come with me."

"OK, so what's Jane Doe's story?"

That's right—he was a stranger. He had no idea of the history, the details. Susanna forced herself away from a weird netherworld of reliving what had happened, the sadness that followed. "Jane is one of the teenagers I'm working with at the moment. She's led a horrific life, some of it through no fault of her own, but that's a story for another park bench on another day."

"I'm already looking forward to it." Handsome Man shot her a tender smile. "Go on, ma'am."

She giggled for the second time in mere minutes. That felt wonderful, too. "You *are* a cop, aren't you?"

"For real. Remember—badge and everything." Once again he reached for his back jeans pocket.

Susanna swatted playfully at his arm and came upon solid muscle and stability. *Very nice.*

"So...Jane. Tell me what happened today with Jane."

"She tried to frame me."

The humorous glint left his eyes. In a pulse beat, his features hardened to stone.

Susanna nodded in response to his unspoken reaction. "Yeah. That's right. She wanted to hijack some cosmetics. Can you believe that? Without me knowing it, she slipped a bottle of ruby red nail polish and a palate of fawn brown eye shadow into the bottomless pit of my purse." Loosely she gestured

toward the white leather bag that rested beneath the bench. "How could I have been so trusting? So naïve?"

"If she pulled a stunt like that, she needs to be in jail. She needs to learn a lesson."

"Jail isn't always the answer."

Handsome Man flexed his jaw, as though fighting the urge to argue. "What happened next?"

"I paid for my items, we walked out of the store, and alarm bells went off. I hadn't done anything wrong, so I wasn't worried. I went straight back to the counter with my bags and my receipt. At that point the store manager stepped up and asked me to empty my purse." Susanna shrugged. "I had nothing to hide. I dumped the contents of my purse across the counter and there were the stolen items."

Her companion scowled.

"My stunned expression did nothing to assure the manager; my pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears, because, of course, criminals can be great actors."

The scowl deepened. "What was Jane Doe doing during all of this?"

"Standing there—watching—embarrassed to be seen in the company of a shoplifting guardian."

"Wow."

"She didn't say a single word while I stammered and rambled and swore I'd never seen those pilfered cosmetics in my life. That's when the manager mentioned surveillance cameras."

"Oh, boy."

Susanna nodded, her lips twitching. "Yep. That piece of news caused Jane to go all fidgety. She started acting funny, staring at me, chewing on her lower lip like she does when she knows she's in trouble."

"And?"

“And the manager took us to his office to view the video tapes. Plain as day you could see her drop the items into my purse. She found herself unequivocally busted.”

“Good. I’m glad she got caught.”

“Well, I certainly don’t feel exonerated. I wanted to show her trust; I wanted to see how far she had come in her therapy. She’s been a good kid while we’ve worked through counseling. I had high hopes.”

“How did she react once she was found out?”

Susanna looked away, swallowed back tears. She needed to stop crying. Period. “She sobbed like a baby. She sank into my arms and cried. She was trembling and so scared—”

“She *should* be scared. She should also be ashamed.”

The tough tone was warranted, but that didn’t mean Susanna had to like it. She shifted uncomfortably. “You’re a policeman. You know better than anyone that situations with teenagers aren’t ever that simple and uncomplicated.”

“Fair enough, but when you’re talking about shoplifters and petty thieves, I can tell you first hand the evidence shows when you lower the hammer right away it nips bad behavior in the bud. A night in jail, a police record, and some hefty fines might have shocked her back into reality.”

“Jail isn’t always the answer,” Susanna reiterated. She spoke calmly, but with utter conviction. “I know this girl. Her pattern of behavior is to act out and push. She strikes before she can be stricken. If she ends up in jail, I doubt she’ll have a way to recover—emotionally or financially. That’s what Wellsprings of Grace is for; that kind of support is what I’m all about.” She heaved

a sigh. "With that, I'm sure you can understand why I'm feeling so defeated, and empty. Here you are, a man who helps uphold the law, and even *you* can see the futility of what I do."

Along the pedestrian path before them, a little boy blasted by at full speed, a wad of string unraveling from his hand; a bouncing, rippling kite of rainbow-colored Mylar launched into the sky behind him as he ran. Susanna watched the youngster, which brought her gaze into direct alignment with Handsome Man, who also tracked the boy's progress.

"Your work is far from futile. Don't mind me. I'm afraid I've become jaded." He looked straight ahead where Susanna could see ducks flap restless wings against the dark green waters of a small lake. "That colors my point of view. Thing is, sometimes the patterns you're describing don't change. What happens then?"

His flat delivery convicted her further. Susanna's shoulders slumped. Prickles of pain and moisture built at the corners of her eyes, the foreshadowing of more tears. She steeled herself and bit them back. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

"Here's a piece of irony for you. So am I."

"Really?" Susanna sidelined her own troubles for a moment—no small miracle—to wonder about the man seated next to her. She itched to know more about this intriguing stranger. What was his name? Where was he from?

Before she could pursue those inquiries, he nodded. "I don't want to demean you. Please, keep fighting the good fight and keep faith. Don't let circumstances defeat you. The world could use millions more just like you." Her hand rested against

the edge of the bench; he covered it with his. His callous-roughened touch was light and gentle. "I imagine you're very gifted, and believe me, I'm nobody's judge and jury."

"You quoted the first book of Timothy."

He looked at her with wide eyes and a surprised expression. "It's one of my favorite Bible verses. *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.*"

"Nicely done. From memory no less."

"Those words are inscribed on a plaque that sits on my desk at work. I see them, and they help me every day."

He didn't remove his hand. The sensation of connection played like a gentle, fluid bow against the string of her senses. "It's time for you to reciprocate. Tell me your story."

He shook his head.

The reaction prompted Susanna to do something uncharacteristic for her—she turned her hand, palm up, and took hold. "Come on. Strangers are awesome, two ears with no waiting, and all that."

His laughter sang through the air. "You're good at this. In fact, you're very good."

"Stop detracting."

"See, you're proving my point."

"Stop detracting, part two."

Axle lifted his head and let out a half-hearted whoop.

"My story." He shifted comfortably and scratched behind Axle's ears. "Well, I'll start with the fact that I haven't been in town for a while."

"Welcome to Angel Falls."

"Thanks. Welcome home would be an appropriate

greeting as well. I'm born and raised, but I moved away for a few years. Arriving in town today feels good, but that's not really the point of our discussion, is it?"

"No, exploring the irony of our life circumstances is. Tell me about yours."

He shrugged and went quiet for a time. "I'm looking for a fresh start...kind of a walking cliché, I'm sad to say."

"How so?"

The way he shrugged appeared casual—on the surface. Susanna looked deeper, though, and came upon turbulent eyes, a troubled expression he couldn't quite mask. "I'm a burned out cop looking for reclamation and a fresh start."

"What burned you out?"

"Traveling through the badlands."

The words rang with such finality Susanna thought he might stop there and divert himself. She kept quiet and waited—a counseling technique she favored when seeking information from a reluctant source.

"In my time away from Angel Falls, I've dealt with big city crime and everything that goes with it: drugs, gangs, guns. The kind of violence that turns stomachs every night on the news is what I lived and breathed for the past five years. I've reached a point where I just can't do it anymore."

Something tender ripped apart within Susanna's spirit. How could a man who struck her as so remarkable be so desolate? "What tipped the scale?"

"My bomb blast?"

Susanna nodded and encouraged him with a smile.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Positive."

He searched her eyes so intimately Susanna experienced the sensation of drifting into him, connected in a way far beyond the physical touch of their entwined fingers.

"My partner and I disrupted a battle over drugs. He took a solid hit to the shoulder. I'm alive right now only because of Kevlar."

Susanna gasped.

"I took a shot to the arm." He pushed up his right shirtsleeve, revealing a snow-white bandage.

Susanna covered her mouth with her free hand. "I'm so sorry!" She didn't even know the man, but she longed to reach out and stroke gentle fingertips against the covered wound, to assure him, somehow, of goodness and grace. Healing.

"There were four teenagers—"

"Teenagers." Susanna breathed the word.

He gave a short, solemn nod. "We received the call as they were coming to blows over a delivery of heroin. Heroin seems to have reemerged as a go-to drug these days, especially in the inner city where dealers can score the drug and sell it in the suburbs, to the so-called rich kids."

"Evil executing a win-win proposition." Susanna groaned and sighed, understanding his frustration. While Angel Falls didn't see the same level of problems as the big cities, drug use seemed to be reasserting a stranglehold across the map. She battled evidence of that truth every day at Wellsprings.

"Exactly. The kids were divided—two on each side, each affiliated with gangs that were ready and able to peddle that garbage to schools, workplaces,

even parks just like this one.” Disgust layered his tone.

Susanna didn’t fault the reaction.

“It was dark, and we moved fast, but when we secured the scene—conducting pat downs, cuffing the two leaders—chaos ensued. One of the kids grabbed the briefcase of drugs we confiscated and took off. We moved to stop him. That’s when the guy being restrained by my partner broke free. He recovered his gun and fired. He didn’t care that we were cops.”

“I can’t begin to imagine.” She shivered. “Where else did you get hit?”

“The right ribcage. Kevlar blocked it, but the bruise is big, and nasty. I just showed you the results of the second shot I took when I grabbed the guy and worked to disarm him. Fortunately it didn’t do a lot of damage. The gun went off a third time, an accidental shot that happened as we wrestled for possession. That’s when my partner got hit. He had tackled the perp who tried to run away. At that point, backup arrived.”

“You got the bad guys. You stopped them. There’s vindication there.” She offered the praise because something about the clinical way he described the shooting struck hard against her heart.

Following a gentle squeeze, he surrendered his hold; Susanna absorbed an instant chill. He folded his hands and leaned forward. He reached down after a time to stroke Axle’s neck and shoulders.

“I’m trained. Rule one of the academy: what’s history is history—over and done. I know I shouldn’t dwell on what happened. I know I shouldn’t let it keep chafing at me, but I can’t help it. I keep feeling that explosion on my right side. I still see the bruise. The gunshot wound? It’ll leave a scar on my arm. These

were kids. Products of a hopeless environment.”

“I know all about that scenario.” Susanna breathed deep while birds whisked past, their chirps and caws floating in the air. “The past molds us. It makes us into who and what we are. Moving forward afterwards is what defines us. Don’t reject it. Embrace it as part of who you are—a noble person with a warrior’s heart.”

The words settled between them. His gaze traveled to hers. “I had so many dreams when I left here. I wanted to go somewhere I could make a difference. Angel Falls felt small to me. I wanted to tackle the demons of the big city, where people seem to be in greatest need. I wanted to use my training as an officer to affect change and bring about good. Instead, I can’t seem to reconcile that idealism with the realities I butt up against every day. I didn’t do any good. I didn’t help anyone the way I wanted to.”

“A key similarity between us.”

“So it would seem.” He stretched out his endlessly long legs and leaned back against the bench. “Like you, I feel depleted...as though I need oil in my lamp.”

He let out a heavy sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face while Susanna watched, enjoying the way he nailed that piece of analysis. He had such an appealing, gentle demeanor—especially for a cop.

“Let me ask you something.”

“Go for it.”

“Did you deliberately quote the Bible just a bit ago?”

He looked down sheepishly. “Yes. Faith is what holds me together. I’m on sabbatical for the next month. During that time I need to have some serious conversations with God and figure out how to cope or how to move on to something new.”

“You’re a believer.” Sweet warmth swirled through her chest. “I am too. I can’t get by without my faith. It’ll make all the difference.” They shared a look. Susanna furrowed her brows. Why wasn’t she asking more practical questions—like his name, for example? For now, other thoughts crowded in. “Pray, search, and then let the answers come to you. God will put you where you need to be. We both need to hang on to that promise. Let your belief in God become a salve on those wounds.” She touched his arm. “Heal. From the inside out.”

Suddenly self-conscious and way too aware of how strongly this man’s presence affected her, Susanna ducked her head and rested her hands on her lap, wondering what had gotten into her today.

When she turned toward him again, she disrupted Axle’s nap, and the dog lifted lazily to a sitting position. Susanna looked at her seatmate and noticed his attention had zeroed in on a spot near her throat.

“That’s a very striking necklace. It’s beautiful.”

Susanna smiled, fingering the delicate silver chain with its small, dangling pendant crafted in the shape of angel wings set to unfold. The rhinestones had probably captured the light, flashing to life in wild colors.

“It was designed for me by a very dear friend.”

His penetrating gaze performed a caress against her throat then moved to her cheeks. Susannah’s nerve endings sparkled and hummed. In a spell-breaking instant, he reared back and checked the face of his watch.

“I really—truly—hate to say it, but I need to get going. I have so much unpacking and settling to do.”

“Oh, OK.” Disappointment lent texture to the

words. Susanna nipped the inside of her cheek, forcing herself to brave it up. "Can I ask you another question before you leave?"

"Absolutely."

"What's your name?"

He seemed to think about that for a few seconds. "God works in everything, right?"

Why did she have a sudden urge to catch her breath—to hope and anticipate? "I believe that with all my heart."

"So do I."

"Then answer the question." The words might have sounded bold and playful, but her skin tingled. Her pulse went crazy against her wrists, her throat.

"Isn't there a bit of mystery and intrigue in leaving things the way they are? Two strangers connecting on nothing more than God's good grace?"

"But..." Susanna couldn't process his reply. Walk away? Empty? No name...no chance to reconnect, or...? No way.

He stood and regarded her steadily while he pulled in the slack on Axle's leash and prompted the dog to his side. "Faith, lovely lady. Faith."

He was going to leave—anonously. For real. Susanna already felt bereft. A supernatural level of courage—an unheard of bravado—filled her spirit. She stood quickly, before he could turn away, before she could over-think what she wanted to do.

She took hold of his forearm. "Wait...before you go..." Her gaze never left his. "Thank you."

She slid her hand up his chest, quick and light, curving shaky fingertips around his neck to draw him down. He didn't blink or flinch, but the way his mouth relaxed, the way he focused on her lips, stirred an

explosion of heat. She came aware of only one fact. He knew what was coming, and he welcomed it.

The instant his mouth touched hers, Susanna's lashes fluttered closed. She melted and trembled. That was OK, though. His uninjured arm slid fast against her waist, anchoring her against him while a kiss dawned and blossomed into life.

In that instant, her heart slid away and landed neatly in his hands.

His lips moved against hers, softly seeking, but not greedy. Susanna accepted, and trusted, for no sense of entitlement or disrespect clouded his actions—despite the spontaneous and overt way she had initiated the kiss. His sigh filled her—the breath of his spirit. She moved outside of herself, mysteriously propelled. Fleeting she wondered how any other man would ever begin to compare.

*Don't leave, she wanted to scream. Don't walk away from a connection that feels so natural, and so wonderful, don't...don't...*

Her legs wobbled; a dizzy mind grappled for solid purchase while his mouth skimmed slowly to the corners of hers, then her cheeks, then the sensitive underside of her jaw. Susanna gasped for air.

She moved away, shaken and flushed. "I hope...I want...to see you again someday, Handsome Man."

He touched her cheek reverently, looking her deep in the eyes. "Handsome Man?"

"What else can I call you?"

"Grateful. For now, Lovely Lady, you can well and truly call me Grateful."

After a final lingering kiss to her cheek, he gave Axle's leash a gentle tug. He turned and walked away.

# Leap of Faith

Tanya Stowe

# 1

Bright, blue skies. A warm, January sun. Temperature hovering at about sixty-two. Perfect weather. Just right for the Heart's Haven get-together and the exact reason Zoe Wyndham had decided to stay in Angel Falls after she completed her last stained glass repair job. The small town on the edge of the Angelina Forest offered great year-round weather, lots of trees, green plants, and wonderful people.

Of course, the angels had something to do with it, too.

Zoe smiled as she filled her plate with fresh fruit and salad. The Lord's heavenly guardians surrounded this country. Zoe could sense them and feel their presence. She didn't know what made this particular area so special, why so many remained in this location. But she was certain years ago, when the first pioneers came, they saw the angels, too. That's why they named the nearby forest Angelina.

Not many people understood Zoe's affinity and affection for angels. In fact, there weren't many people she even discussed it with. But Mr. Hart, her landlord, understood. In fact, Zoe believed he could see the angels. He wouldn't admit it out loud but he knew things...even more things than Zoe. Sometimes he'd cock his head a certain way, as if listening to someone not there. Other times he'd look at an empty spot and smile and nod, agreeing with some unseen presence.

Like right now.

He nodded to the air beside him then fixed his piercing gaze on Zoe. He made her feel as if he knew everything about her and could see right through to her soul. Flustered, she looked away.

It was downright disconcerting...even for someone like Zoe. Years ago, when she first became a Christian, her pastor told her she had the gift of discernment. He'd assured her that her sense of knowing was a true gift from God and nothing to fear. For an insecure fifteen-year-old who had spent her life traveling from commune to commune with her parents, his words were a blessing.

Zoe never seemed to fit in. She thought she'd found a home when she found Jesus but even then, she seemed a little "off"—at least that's what people had said. A little too wise for her tender age. She knew things without being told and even Jesus's children shied away from her. But when her pastor put a name to her "knowing" and said it was a blessing, she actually started to believe. For the first time, she felt unique, special in His eyes. After that, what other people thought about her didn't seem to matter as much.

These days, Zoe was very comfortable doing the unexpected. Just a few days ago, she offered to help her procrastinating neighbor unpack. Pia Peretti was tall, confident, and gorgeous...everything Zoe was not. Instead of being intimidated, Zoe had helped her and now, she was certain they were going to be good friends.

Thoughtfully, Zoe fingered the beautiful cross necklace Pia had given her. In fact, she was sure Pia would be a very important part of her life from now on

out.

Pia hadn't arrived yet, but her brother Gabe stood at the grill next to Mr. Hart and Hart's nephew, David, who had moved in a few days before and offered to barbecue the ribs Texas style for today's get-together.

Zoe tried to ignore the very pointed look Mr. Hart sent her way and stepped closer to Pia's brother Gabe. He stood beside David, a messy rib gripped in his fingers and barbecue sauce smeared over them.

"I have to admit," Gabe said. "These are pretty good. But I'm still not sure they'll measure up to my Chicago style ribs."

"You're on," David said. "Next time, it's your turn to cook, and the neighbors will vote."

A grin lit Gabe's face. "That's a deal, but I think you're gonna regret it."

"Think so?" David replied.

Gabe nodded. "When my buddy Zack gets here, he'll set you straight."

"Zack's not coming," Mr. Hart said, not taking his gaze off Zoe. "He says he's sick."

"What?" Gabe said. "Zack's never been sick a day in his life."

"All the same, he's not coming. If he's gonna taste those ribs, someone will have to take him a plate."

Gabe tossed his rib bone to a nearby trash can. "I'll do it."

"That's all right," Mr. Hart pointed to Zoe. "She's got it all ready."

David and Gabe spun and Zoe's gaze dropped to the plate in her hands. All of a sudden she knew why Mr. Hart and the angel had discussed her. They had a job for her to do.

She took a deep breath and held out the plate. "I

just need a couple of those ribs, please. Nice, big, meaty ones.”

A half smile tilted one corner of Mr. Hart’s mouth.

“Easy for you to smile,” Zoe murmured as she passed him. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Pray, gal,” Mr. Hart replied. “Just pray.”

Placing a paper napkin over the top of the plate, she headed across the compound to Zack Manning’s place.

“Please, Lord, tell me what to do.”

# Dance with Me

Mary Manners

# 1

*You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.*

~Psalm 30:11

Kaci James blew a wisp of strawberry-blond hair from her eyes and reached for her coffee mug, sipping as she puzzled over one of the letters she'd received for the "Love's Lessons" column at the *Angel Falls Trumpet*. She frowned as the bitter brew nipped her throat then sighed and tossed the letter onto the table. What was she doing giving love-life advice to strangers when her own engagement had ended in such shambles less than a year ago? The very idea painted an irony of the worst sort.

A sharp rap at the front door startled her, and a bit of coffee splashed over the mug's rim to dampen her cream-colored peasant blouse. She frowned and glanced at her watch as she swiped at the coffee stain. Ugh...she'd worked right through dinner again!

Another round of knocking. Quickly, Kaci gathered the letter and stuffed it into her tote bag. The note could only lead to trouble if others found out she moonlighted as the advice columnist. What would her neighbors here at Heart's Haven—and the students she taught English to at Angel Falls High, for that matter—think of her if they knew what she did on the side? "Love's Lessons" was one of the most popular advice

columns in the greater East Texas area, and she'd like to keep it that way. That meant keeping her role anonymous. She nudged her reading glasses up the bridge of her nose and vaulted over Patches—her feisty calico cat—careful not to step on his tail as she rushed to the door.

“Coming.” Kaci scrambled toward the entrance, tripping over a pile of essays waiting to be graded. She grabbed the corner of the coffee table to regain her balance and frowned at the papers, ruing the long hours of critiquing that lay ahead. Oh, the day never seemed to be long enough to get everything done! “Just a minute.”

She peeked through the spy-hole and her heart lurched. Ryne Calvert waited on the porch, his close-cropped dark hair crowning captivating blue eyes. A pair of wide shoulders and a set of washboard abs tucked into faded Levis set Kaci's heart skittering. Since she'd moved in to Heart's Haven last August, he'd been coming over to check on her with greater and greater frequency. And Kaci had to admit, with his generous muscles and lopsided, mischievous grin he was easy on the eyes. Now, he held a casserole dish in one hand, neatly covered with foil. Kaci's belly let loose the most unladylike growl, reminding her she'd skipped dinner, and she was thankful the door remained closed so Ryne wouldn't hear.

“Kaci?” His voice, deep and smooth as a bass guitar, drifted through the door.

She brushed a hand over the cotton fabric of her blouse, frowning at the hideous brown coffee-splotch seeping across the front seam like the worst sort of modern art, and drew a quick breath before tugging the door wide. She plastered on a cheerful smile. “Hey,

Ryne."

"Hey, yourself." He leaned against the doorjamb, his height nearly filling the doorway. A cool breeze ushered the crisp scent of winter as it scattered dried leaves across the small front yard. "I missed you at the cookout yesterday."

"Oh, that, yeah..." Kaci nudged her glasses as they slipped down her nose again then gave up and took them off, tucking them into the pocket of her floral-print rayon skirt. "I guess I lost track of time. I have a mountain of work to catch up on."

"Can you use a little help?" He eyed the stack of essays, now listing to the left like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and Kaci did a little sidestep to block his view as his gaze hovered and then zeroed in on her tote. The "Love's Lessons" letter peeked at them, the crumpled stationery an alluring shade of neon pink. Kaci figured the writer was young...possibly one of her students? She'd have to take extra care when answering it. Teens were so impressionable. Ryne's voice drew her back. "I'm pretty good at English. I speak it...um...every day."

Kaci laughed and ushered Ryne in. "What do you have there?" The aroma of tuna—her favorite—and vegetables wafted from the baking dish. "Smells yummy."

Ryne waited patiently while Patches made a series of figure-eight's around his ankles, and then he tossed Kaci a glance. "You skipped dinner again, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh." Kaci caught her lower lip between her teeth and nodded. "Guilty as charged."

"Guilty..." Ryne shook his head. "No need for that. I'm off duty." He brushed past her to set the casserole dish on the kitchen counter, and Kaci caught

a whiff of his aftershave...crisp pine like the lush Angelina Forest that gathered beyond the Heart's Haven complex. Though Ryne looked handsome in the regulation Angel Falls Police Department dress blues he wore to work each day, he was even more-so in a gray T-shirt and faded jeans that seemed to hug every inch of his well-defined muscles and brought out the color of his eyes. "And it's tuna casserole—my specialty."

"You cook?"

"How else am I going to survive?"

She lifted the corner of the foil and gave the casserole a quick peek as steam wafted to tickle her nose. "No girlfriend to bake for you?"

"You know the answer to that." He winked, and the scar above his left eye danced, making her wonder once again just how he'd acquired it. She knew he had a second scar across the length of his left forearm and figured he'd suffered them at the same time—but how? Thus far, she hadn't gathered the nerve to ask. "Not yet, but I hope to...soon. Except I think I'll bake for her, instead. I don't mind cooking."

"You don't?" Kaci was tongue-tied by his admission. He hoped to have a girlfriend soon? Did he have someone in mind? Her heart sank just a bit. She was in no way ready to plunge into the dating world again, yet the thought of Ryne sharing a meal—and possibly more—with another woman gave her belly an odd little tug. She reminded herself Ryne was her friend...nothing more. How could he respect a woman who was so unlovable, who'd failed at romance so miserably that her fiancé left her stranded at the altar?

She took her time uncovering the creamy concoction, still bubbling from the heat of the oven, as

Ryne propped a hip against the counter. One look—at Ryne, and then the casserole—and Kaci’s mouth watered. Again her belly grumbled, this time well within Ryne’s earshot. He burst into laughter.

“Sounds like you need a hit of that casserole—and quick.”

Kaci clasped a hand tight over her belly as heat seeped across her cheeks. “Only if you’ll join me.”

He nodded and reached into the cabinet above the sink where he knew she stored the dinner plates. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

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Ryne was helpless to draw his gaze from Kaci as she gathered silverware from the drawer and poured two glasses of sweet Texas tea. Her movements were as graceful as a ballerina, her demeanor as pleasant as sparkling sunlight. She was petite—merely five-four or so, but he’d seen her in action with her students at the high school. She had a touch of spittfire, and nothing got by her as she demanded the best from each one. He respected that, and it was one of the reasons he’d decided to make a change in his own life—a change that would give him the opportunity to impact teens just as Kaci did. He only hoped and prayed he had an ounce of the gift for it that she seemed to possess.

Strawberry-blonde hair swept over her shoulders in a generous wave of curls, framing eyes the shade of rich chocolate fudge. He loved her wire-framed lenses, too—the ones she’d tucked into the pocket of the flowing skirt that whispered around every curve of her legs—especially when those glasses slipped down the bridge of her nose to kiss freckle-dusted cheeks.

"Is this new?" He reached out to gather her necklace between his fingers. It was the shape of a cross with one delicate heart at each edge, silver studded with dark gemstones and shimmery diamond-like adornments.

"Yes. It's called Hearts at the Cross. Pia gave it to me this morning."

"Pia...from next door?"

"Uh-huh. She said it has my name on it."

Ryne chuckled softly as he turned the cross gently in his fingers. He knew all about the way Pia prayed over each piece of jewelry she received for her business, Jewels for the Kingdom. He had also received a piece of jewelry from her—a beautiful brass key with three emerald gemstones she'd named the Friendship Key. He let go of Kaci's cross and took his glass of tea from her. One sip told him she'd made it just the way he liked—extra sweet. "That was nice of Pia. It's very pretty." *Like you*, he wanted to add but bit his tongue instead and nodded. "It suits you perfectly."

"Thank you." She handed him a plate heaped with tuna casserole. "Have a seat and dig in. I know you can use a hearty portion...I saw you running along the greenway trail again this morning."

"Keeps me in shape." *And keeps the demons away...the memories of my failure that always seem to nip and tug.* He slipped into a chair at her dinette. "Want me to say grace?"

"Please." Kaci took the seat across from him, fluttered her napkin to spread it across her lap then bowed her head. "I'm not sure what to say tonight. My brain hurts from reading countless essays."

"And you're nutrient-deprived, as well, Kace." He frowned at her. "You can't skip dinner anymore. It's

not good for you."

"I know, but I just get so caught-up." Her lips curled into a sheepish grin and her eyebrows disappeared beneath wisps of hair that swept across her forehead. "Thanks for rescuing me."

"My pleasure." Ryne slipped his hand across the table and clasped hers, reveling in the feel of her long, slender fingers as they twined with his. Dancer's body...pianist's hands. His gut floundered as he drew a breath and gathered words. "Dear Lord, thank you for this food and for a friend with whom to share it. Guide us and keep us safe during the changes ahead. Help us to make good choices. Amen."

Kaci's head snapped up and her eyes flew wide as they zeroed in on him. "What changes?" she asked, reaching for her fork. "What choices, Ryne?"

Ryne lifted his glass, his gaze locking with hers over the rim. The light above the table turned her eyes to creamy chocolate. He called her by her nickname as he explained, "We're going to be working together, Kace."

She dropped her fork, and it clattered against her dinner plate, startling Patches, who'd curled beneath the table at Ryne's feet. "At the paper?"

"The paper?" He shoveled a forkful of noodles as Patches scampered to the opposite corner of the room, meowing his displeasure. "What paper?"

"Oh!" Kaci gasped and shook her head quickly. Her gaze slipped to the food on her plate. She reached for the salt shaker and toppled it then knocked over the pepper in her attempt to right it and gather her fork again.

Ryne sighed and set down his fork. He placed a hand gently over hers. "What's going on, Kace? You're

more nervous than a kitten in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“Nothing. I just meant...” The clock above the sink seemed to thunder with each flick of the second hand as Ryne waited for her to finish. “You’re coming to work at school?”

“Yes, at school.” Her reaction startled him. *What paper...what’s that supposed to mean? And why’s she so jittery all of a sudden?*

His police training launched into red alert as Kaci slipped a finger into her mouth and nibbled her nail.

“I just found out today that my transfer request has been approved. I’m the new resource officer for Angel Falls High School...starting Monday.”

# Lexi's Heart

Delia Latham

# 1

*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. ~ Proverbs 3:5-6*

*Heart's Haven.*

The wooden sign overhead stretched clear across the double gates fronting Andrew Hart's property. Huge. And quite an attention-grabber, with its none-too-perfectly hand-carved message. Rumor had it the two boldly scrawled words had been etched by an inebriated man who'd misspelled both of them and given the quaint little apartment complex a brand new name.

Lexi's vehicle passed under the sign, and despite the tinge of bitterness that soured her stomach, she managed a half-grin.

Who would have thought, even as recently as a few months ago, that Alexa Martin Carlisle would move into the complex of rental cottages behind Hart's big manor? Her little dwelling in the heart-shaped circle of eight identical ones was a far cry from the mini-mansion where she'd lived in another life. Yet giving up that pretentious showcase hadn't given her a moment's hesitation—the place held mostly awful memories anyway.

Her twenty-three year marriage had fallen apart at the ever-weakening seams three years ago. She kept

the house as long as she could, but when her business partner at the salon pulled up stakes to move out of town, Lexi knew she couldn't afford the mortgage on both places. A cottage had become available at Heart's Haven the day her cavernous house sold. Decision made.

Nice to know something could still go right for her....

*Go see Mama.*

The thought sliced through her mind out of nowhere, just as she turned the wheel toward Angel Falls and touched her foot to the accelerator. She frowned, gave her head a slight shake, and ignored it. She visited Mama on Monday, not Friday.

Again, decision made. Lexi rarely wasted time on mental hashing and rehashing. She floored the gas pedal and sent her car flying into town.

Owner and operator of Angel Hair—the sweetest little beauty salon in East Texas, in Lexi's biased opinion—she spent each Monday cleaning the shop. Every barber-type facility in the mid-sized town closed its doors on the first day of the work week, making it the ideal time to give the place a decent once-over. Lexi still tried to keep Sundays free of extensive labor, even though she hadn't attended a church service in too long to remember. She recognized the contrasting behaviors but couldn't seem to change the pattern. Old habits did, indeed, die hard.

Decision made.

On Friday afternoons, she always drove into Lufkin to visit her mother at Rosewood Senior Care. The facility was the only place within driving distance that boasted the excellent reputation and caring staff Lexi required for the most important person in her life.

The thirty-minute drive wasn't convenient, but it could have been worse. She might have had to drive all the way to Dallas.

She shuddered at the thought. Although she wasn't a church goer, she did thank God for Rosewood! Having Mama half an hour away was difficult enough. Two hours would be unthinkable.

What gift would she take with her this week? She'd have to fit in some shopping time before Friday. On every visit, Lexi presented her mother with some small item...something meaningful, that she hoped would trigger a spark in Mama's sadly short-circuited memory. She loved the hunt for the perfect gift, loved her recollections of fun shopping excursions the two of them had enjoyed in better times.

But Mother's Day was coming up in a few weeks, and Lexi wished she could find a way to just skip to the week afterward—why on earth hadn't scientists found a way to do that by now? Getting through this first year on her own would be hard. Beyond hard. As far back as she could remember, Mother's Day had been a treasured time of togetherness—church first, then a special lunch, just her and Mama, usually at some fancy little tea room they'd scouted out earlier.

*Go see her.*

The words thundered through her mind with the force of a bellowing megaphone. Lexi's foot slammed down on the brake, and she sucked in a sharp breath that hung in her frozen throat. She eased onto the shoulder and forced herself to breathe. A glance at her dash verified the radio's continuing state of non-operation. It hadn't worked in over a year.

She *had* heard something. But now she decided it hadn't been an actual voice—not an audible one that

required ears to hear. Yet the directive rang too clearly to be denied.

*Go! Now!*

Without further hesitation, she checked for traffic, made a sharp U-turn, and headed for Lufkin. The salon would have to get by on last week's efforts.

Decision made.

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By the time she walked through the doors at Rosewood just over half an hour later, Lexi's heart pounded in her chest hard enough to hurt. That pressing need to see her mother had not lifted throughout the entire drive from Angel Falls, during which her imagination ran wild.

What would she find in room seven? Maybe Mama would be lucid, for the first time in many months. Lexi longed for that improbable occurrence. She wanted one last opportunity to tell her mother how much she loved and appreciated her.

Mother. Best friend. Same sweet woman.

Mama had been Lexi's source of strength through the good and bad of a life that weighed heavily toward the latter. Her support during the years Lexi had tried to salvage a farcical marriage was all that kept her from falling apart...or running away...or simply giving in to depression and melancholy.

Surely Mama had known, before Alzheimer's stole her ability to hold a memory inside her deteriorating mind, that Lexi adored her. Hadn't she?

But if Lexi had ever said the words out loud, she couldn't recall the moment. And she wanted to say them, wanted her mother to know she loved her.

Because a mother like Claudette Martin deserved to know she was adored by her only child.

On the other hand, Mama's condition might have worsened. What if the staff had been forced to physically restrain her? *Oh, God, please...not that!* She couldn't stand the thought of seeing her gentle mother bound to her bed, struggling against restraints, begging to be released...

She approached the familiar room with a dry mouth, pounding heart, and trembling hands. Just outside the open door, she stopped, startled to hear the steady cadence of a deep, pleasant male voice from inside. Lexi required only a few seconds to understand that someone was reading aloud to her mother. Curious, she slipped into the room.

Facing away from the door and toward his audience, a large man kicked back in a chair too small for his frame. Long legs were stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankle. Clad in blue jeans, black cowboy boots, and a matching Stetson, the stranger sat near a small elderly woman whose empty eyes were focused on something only she could see.

Though Lexi said nothing, the rumbling voice stopped within seconds of her entrance. Relaxed shoulders stiffened, and the stranger closed a paperback novel and stood to his feet. Only then did he turn to face her.

"Hi!" A curious, silver-gray gaze met hers. "Can I help you?"

She stared, too bewildered to say anything. She knew this man! Well, she knew *of* him. But why would Angel Falls' famous resident novelist be reading to her mother...in Lufkin?

And it hadn't sounded as though he was reading

one of his own much-lauded Christian Westerns.

She opened her mouth, but couldn't force a single word past her lips.

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The woman standing just inside the door seemed poised to fly away at the slightest provocation. Mitch Gaynor recognized Alexa Carlisle. He'd been trying to keep his eyes off this woman every time he got his hair cut in Angel Falls for several years.

"Help me?" When she finally responded to his question, her voice wasn't quite icy, but it sure as shootin' wasn't warm. "Yes. You can tell me who gave you permission to be in my mother's room."

Her mother? *Oh, boy.* Mitch heaved a hefty mental sigh. *Not getting off to a good start, are you, cowboy?*

Lexi wasn't his stylist. He'd always gone to her partner, Malinda Carroll—not because Malinda was better at her job, but because he'd known her since they were children. Over the course of time, he'd learned far more about Lexi than he ought to know, and only partly because Malinda talked too much.

He knew that God had given her a mega-dose of beauty she wasn't even aware she possessed, but any fool with decent eyesight could see that. He knew her husband deserved to be lassoed to the meanest bull in Texas and dragged clear across the state. Mitch had no use for a man who would mistreat a woman—especially one like Lexi. Even Malinda had only good things to say about her, and for Malinda, that was a big thing.

He also knew that Lexi's no-good excuse of a husband had divorced her three years ago, in favor of

some young thing he'd no doubt treat exactly as he'd treated Lexi.

And with Todd Carlisle out of the picture and already married to someone else, Mitch was acutely aware that he was free to act on his attraction for the lovely woman who now stood in Mrs. Martin's doorway, staring at him as if he'd grown another head right before her big green eyes.

In fact, he couldn't think of one good reason he hadn't done that already. Except...well, doggone it, the woman all but *radiated* a "no trespassing" policy.

A panoply of expressions chased one another across Lexi's face. Curiosity battled with concern...and something else. Mitch considered himself a more-than-passable reader of people, and unless he'd lost his touch, he was looking at a whole heckuva lot of distrust.

Lexi didn't quite like him, and certainly didn't trust him.

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*He's way too handsome.* Lexi raked the man's chiseled features with a sharp gaze. *Men are either nice or handsome. Rarely both. And it's easy to see which category Mitch Gaynor falls into.*

Her acid tone seemed to have no effect on him. He stood at ease, one finger marking his place in the novel. His eyes tracked her like a hunter might watch a particularly skittish prey—not quite ready to put a bullet in the poor animal, but determined not to let it escape.

Well, she was nobody's prey. Not anymore.

"I asked what you're doing here with my mother,

Mr. Gaynor.”

His lips twitched annoyingly, and she realized her slip of the tongue. Now he knew that she knew who he was. Oh, well. She hiked both brows in what she hoped was a suitably challenging expression.

He held up the book. “I’m reading to her, Ms. Carlisle.”

So he recognized her, as well. From Angel Hair, of course, since—unlike him—she wasn’t famous for anything at all.

“I was actually able to figure that out on my own. *Why* are you reading to her?”

To her irritation, a teasing grin appeared on that movie-cowboy face.

“Well...why not?”

Oh, yes, this guy was far too handsome, with a body to match—not that Lexi noticed—and downright cocky to boot!

# Love Notions

Mary Manners

*I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you.*

*~2 Timothy 1:6, (NIV)~*

# 1

Jami Mitchell dusted the last empty shelf in Nana's Novel Notions and placed a set of devotionals on display. She stepped back to swipe beads of perspiration from her brow as she surveyed the bright and cheery shop. Books that were large, small and everything in between stood like diligent soldiers on gleaming shelves while glossy magazines splashed along a good part of the back wall. Large-paneled mirrors strategically placed behind the checkout counter and around one corner toward the information desk, added the illusion that the shop was double in size. If she ignored a small mountain of empty boxes that littered the floor of the cramped stock room—and air conditioning that was on the fritz—the bookstore was ready for opening day. Blue ink smeared across her left palm—letters scribbled in quick block print—reminded her to check on the local company that had promised to service the compressor ASAP. They'd better—the opening loomed less than a week away.

Jami glanced toward the sparkling front display window as a gust of air carried the fresh scent of pine through the propped entrance door. Beyond, the majestic Angelina Forest rose like a puckered green

quilt to kiss a sky so clear and blue that it made Jami's heart sing. She thought of Nana and the gift she'd left—enough cash for Jami to quit her day job as a marketing consultant in Dallas and return to Angel Falls to rent this perfect space and open the bookstore she'd always dreamed of. Though Jami missed Nana deeply, the generous inheritance allowed her memory to live on through Nana's Novel Notions, just as she'd promised. Nana had loved books, and she'd passed her deep appreciation on to Jami. Now, Jami just had to grow the bookstore into a huge success. She refused to disgrace Nana's memory with failure. The very thought turned her belly to a tangle of rubber bands.

Jami glanced up, squinting into the glare of overhead lights. Was that a cobweb dangling from the fixture above the paperback turn style? She frowned, grabbed a wad of paper towels from a shelf beneath the checkout counter, and launched herself toward the ceiling, hoping to reach the eight-legged menacing interloper while cringing at the thought of a fat, hairy spider raining down on her.

One giant leap, two, but it was no use. She needed a good two feet in height, and she'd left the broom in the stockroom. Groaning, Jami stepped back a moment to survey the situation. Without further hesitation she wiggled one sandal-clad foot onto the lowest shelf and shimmed her way along the books and toward the ceiling, wishing for a little—no, a lot—more height. Standing merely a hair's breadth over five feet tall had been perfect for her cheerleading days, but as far as life after high school, being vertically challenged was a huge disadvantage.

"Jami?" The slow southern drawl startled her as she scaled the third shelf, hanging on by one clammy

hand as the other attempted to pluck the web from the ceiling. She stumbled, slipped, and with a shriek toppled toward the floor.

Into strong, secure arms.

The scent of spearmint and pine swirled like a halo, and Jami felt the tickle of hair along her cheeks as the solid arms enfolded her. Shivers rippled, despite the oppressive heat.

"You OK?" That voice again...so familiar.

"Oh—my—goodness!" It took a moment for her heart to downshift from Mach speed to cruise. "You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry, but you were scaling those shelves like a reckless spider monkey—"

"Reckless—a monkey!" It was more a shock than a question as her voice squeaked. She was, as sure as she breathed, *never* reckless. And a monkey...ugh!

"That's right. And I was afraid you might fall..."

"I was managing just fine until you sneaked up on me." She pressed a hand to his chest, attempting to wiggle from his grasp as optic stars danced, blurring her vision. The heat wreaked havoc with her senses. Was she hallucinating, or did he sound just like—

"I didn't sneak." He shifted her weight, but still hung on. "The door was wide open. I—"

"Riley?" The name came as her vision cleared and a pair of eyes, dark and smoldering, stared down at her. No one could deny the deep dimple on his chin or the slight arch of a smile that was a male counterpart of the Mona Lisa. Jami's jaw pumped, but it took a moment for the words to form. "Riley Hunter?"

"That's right." He shook midnight-black hair from his forehead, revealing a faded scar along his hairline—the gift of a barbed-wire fence during a high

school hunting accident. "In the flesh."

"Put me down." She thumped a hand against his brawny shoulder as a flood of sizzling emotions coursed through her. The nape of her neck burned against a sweep of hair. "Now."

"Whatever you say." In one easy motion, he spun her vertical and placed her not-so-gently on her feet, making her stomach lurch. One hand lingered at her waist as she stumble-stepped forward. His voice was warm caramel and carried the full measure of mischief she remembered. "Whoa...find your land legs yet?"

"I'm fine." She leaned against the counter while smoothing her rumpled T-shirt. What was Riley doing here? He'd left for San Diego half-a-decade ago—right after ruining her life.

"It's been a while since your fly-girl days, hasn't it?"

"You know I never liked when you called me that." She frowned at the nickname he'd branded her with their freshman year of high school. "And at least I had some talent to fall back on."

"If you call getting tossed from the top of a cheerleading pyramid while chanting incessant rhymes talent." He shrugged so the dimple along his chin deepened. "Me, I prefer to pursue something with a little more substance."

"Like ramming your head through a barbed-wire fence while chasing a helpless deer?"

"I had a hunting permit, and it was in season." He took a paperback from the turn style, scanned the back cover blurb before nodding slightly and putting it back. "And there's nothing wrong with venison. Makes great chili. But I do still owe you and your grandmother for the ride to the hospital."

"It's too late to thank Nana." Jami's throat tightened with grief. "She passed away last August."

"Oh, I had no idea." Riley's voice softened as he captured a lock of her hair and tucked it behind one ear before giving her silver teardrop earring a gentle flick. "I'm so sorry. I know you two were close as Velcro."

"Yes, we were." His touch loosened the tightness in Jami's chest and caused a burst of heat to spike up the length of her spine. "You bled all over Nana's car seats. We never could get the stains out."

"I'm sorry for that, too." He rubbed his head, as if remembering the pain. "Is it too late to make it up to you?"

"Yes. Way too late. After you stumbled into the car, you blabbed the entire way to the hospital...told Nana terrible lies about Jacob Fortner."

"Oh, yeah. That." He shrugged. "I was out of my head with a concussion."

"That's no excuse. You ruined everything...all of my meticulously-laid plans."

"Well, I hate to say it, but your guy-radar was seriously messed up, because the things I told your grandmother weren't lies. Fortner meant to hurt you, Jami."

"My guy radar is just fine, thank you very much." Jami crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "It's warning lights are flashing off the charts now, with you here."

"I see, then, that your progress in that department has been minimal."

"Say what you want, but I know what I feel."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do." For some unfathomable reason, the question stole her equilibrium. Jami pressed a hip

against the checkout counter to steady herself. "Thanks to your motor mouth, Nana wouldn't let me go with Jacob to homecoming. Doubly painful, since I'd just bought my dress. It was beautiful, by the way. When we found you bleeding on the side of the road we were on our way home from the boutique." She shook her head, remembering the pain of humiliation, of how the dress had hung in the closet for weeks, mocking her, until Nana finally donated it to charity just before graduation. "I sat at home, watching Nana knit caps for the homeless shelter while everyone else went to have fun."

"Not everyone. I didn't go," Riley admitted quietly. "I worked bagging groceries down at Bryer's that night, instead."

"No way. Angel Fall High's star quarterback bagging groceries on prom night?" She shook her head. "I don't believe it."

"Why does that surprise you?"

"I suppose it doesn't. Not really. Nothing about you surprises me...except seeing you standing here in my shop." Jami blew out a breath of frustration. "Serves you right, missing the biggest dance of our high school days. Jacob never asked me out again after that. We were finished."

"You were finished way before that. You just didn't know it yet." Riley wagged a finger at her. "If you'd overheard him showboating about you in the locker room after football practice, you wouldn't have wanted anything to do with him. It was disgusting, even by guy standards."

"He wouldn't do that."

"He would and he did."

"Well, at least breaking it off would have been my

decision.”

“He was a jerk. You should have gone to homecoming with *me*.”

“You didn’t ask.” Jami’s heart skittered as she straightened the book he’d just replaced. The thought of Riley and the dance...well, she attributed the flutter in her belly to the fact that she’d skipped lunch and was on her way to working right through dinner, as well. The two of them had always been like oil and water, tofu and Big Macs. While she attended church and Sunday school with Nana, he rolled houses in town and wandered the woods looking for trouble. They would never work together. It was a train wreck straight out of the station. That’s why she’d avoided him all those years, why she’d accepted Jacob’s first request for a date. She shifted gears, and fast. “What are you doing here, Riley? What do you want? I thought you left for San Diego.”

“I’ve been back nearly two years, building my architectural business. I like it here. How about you?”

“I like it here, too, and I’ve come home to stay.” She turned from him as her cheeks flamed and swept a hand over the small display of brochures that highlighted the book discussion group she planned to host. Holding her voice steady was a struggle. He turned her insides to a gloppy mess of gelatin. “Hence this shop...it’s always been my dream.”

“Pretty lofty dream.” His lips pursed into the “come at me” grin that had earned him a month’s worth of days in detention. “Have any others tucked up your sleeve?”

“Maybe...do you really care?” For a distraction, she did a quick sweep of the floor, searching for the spider. Nowhere in sight...must have managed a clean

getaway. She prayed they didn't meet up later in a dark corner of the stockroom.

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't." Riley stepped over to the magazines, plucked one full of cabin designs, and thumbed through it. "I thought I saw you moving into Heart's Haven yesterday—cottage seven."

"That's right, but how did you know?"

"I'm in cottage eight—right next door."

"No way."

"Yes, way." He folded the magazine and slipped it into his back pocket. "Put it on my tab. Nice digs here at this shop, by the way. Too bad you've poured so much time into a project that's most likely not going to last."

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"What?" Jami raked a hand through honey-blond hair that kissed her shoulders. Eyes, blue as sapphires, widened as if they'd devour him in one easy gulp. She was like a sleek panther—small, compact, and deadly. Her glossed lips pursed into a neat little bow as her chin dipped in a defiant pout. "Of course Nana's Novel Notions is going to last. I've spent nearly a year conducting research, and I've crunched numbers a hundred times."

"Cute name. Very...original." He dismissed her latter comments as he took the wadded paper towels from her hand and, without so much as easing up on his toes, swiped the offensive spider web from the ceiling. "Is this what you were after?"

"Thanks." She watched as he tossed the towels into a nearby trashcan. "But I don't understand what you're getting at. Why won't my shop succeed?"

"It's simple." He tucked his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and tried his best to deny the fact that standing so close to her, inhaling the subtle scent of her floral perfume, turned his pulse to a ticking metronome. "How carefully did you read your lease before signing on the dotted line?"

"Carefully enough."

"So, you're familiar with the clause about a buyout?"

"Of course, but that will never..."

Riley sensed the exact moment realization dawned. Her chin shifted up and her gaze narrowed dangerously. He backpedaled to lean against the wall, grinning. "Light bulb moment, huh?"

"Don't tell me." Jami blanched, sputtered as she lunged toward him, and jabbed an accusing finger at his chest. "Not *you*."

"Yeah, me." He snatched a mint from the ceramic bowl on the checkout counter to his right. Yeah, he'd toyed with the thought of asking her to the prom after the Jacob debacle, but she was so perfect and polished—so completely out of his league at the time—that he hadn't bothered to chance the humiliation of being turned down. She avoided trouble while he was the very definition. Plus, his parents had fallen on hard times, both laid off from their respective jobs within two weeks of one another. The only tux he could afford back then was borrowed from his dad. Upon inspection, the suit was a little too long in the legs, a little too short in the arms, and about two sizes too small.

But he still remembered the shimmer of blue draped over the back seat of Jami's car when she and her grandmother found him stumbling along the side

of the road, the gash in his head pouring blood. As her grandmother sped the length of the boulevard to Angel Fall's Hospital while Jami pressed wadded tissues to his forehead to staunch the flow, Riley imagined the fabric caressing her curves and skimming her calves as she spun to music. What he wouldn't have given for the chance to wrap his arms around Jami's waist as they glided together across the dance floor. Yeah, the battle with the barbed wire had launched him a bit out of his head.

"Are you OK?" Jami's voice drew him back to the present. Her blue eyes searched his.

"I'm fine." But he wasn't...not really. She'd loosed something that had been lodged inside him, and he didn't like the wash of emotions the memories elicited, not at all. Because he definitely wasn't a misguided kid anymore. He'd worked too hard to shed the confining skin, to leave the past behind and dive into the future. He cleared his throat and held steady to Jami's gaze as he stiffened his resolve. "But don't get all worked up about the prospect of a buyout. It's just business, baby."

# Haunted Hearts

Tanya Stowe

# 1

*One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three.*

Suzy Bennett stopped counting her steps for a moment and glanced up at the Angelina Forest on each side of the trail. Signs of fall exploded from the dark green of the forest in bursts of yellow, burnt orange, and gold. The crisp air, scented with the musk of falling leaves, was perfect for a brisk walk. Suzy needed a fast pace to work off the tension of the day.

The quarterly financials were due and landing on her desk for approval with depressing speed. No time for a break today, she'd barely had time to breathe. Accounts and numbers still danced through her head...along with the changing count of her steps.

*One thousand ten. One thousand eleven.*

This trail, skirting the forest near Suzy's Heart's Haven bungalow, was a lifesaver. She walked this path almost every day, to enjoy Angel Falls' wonderful, temperate weather, to watch the forest change, and to burn off steam...even on days like today when she'd left work late. The sunny blue sky was already sliding into lavender and shadows hung at the edges of the trees. What would she do when winter came and she couldn't get out and clear some of the numbers from her head? These walks kept her going. Well, the walks and the hope that she might see her Rochester.

*He was Suzy's deep, dark secret.*

If her sisters ever found out that she walked miles every day just for a glimpse of a handsome, dark stranger, she'd never hear the end of it. They'd laugh themselves silly over the notion that Little Miss Suzy had romantic ideas about anyone.

All three of her sisters had inherited their mother's dark-haired beauty while Suzy ended up with their dad's mousy brown hair, fussy ways, and head for numbers. Growing up, they'd had a storybook about a little brown mouse that constantly cleaned her house and fretted. *Little Miss Suzy*.

In spite of her best efforts, Suzy could not rid herself of the nickname her sisters still used to irritate her. Never mind that she had starry-eyed yearnings and read every classic romance ever written over and over again. No one believed she had wild romance in her heart...not Little Miss Suzy. The fussy, brown mouse image actually began to fit when she was promoted to head accountant at her firm, and her life settled into a never-ending pattern of work, home, and more work.

Then one day she saw *him*, walking across the clearing. Rounding a bend where this portion of the trail was elevated over a ravine, Suzy could see all around her. In the distance, *he* had left the edge of the forest to cross the small open meadow, moving toward the trees on the other side. His jean-clad legs cut the distance with such purpose as his brown, wavy hair blew away from his face. He swayed slightly as he walked, confident, sure. With his short-sleeved, white T-shirt tucked in and clinging to his muscular shape, his arms swung naturally. He worked out. Definitely.

From a distance, Suzy noted balanced, appealing features. So many attractive qualities, but the thing that

most captured her attention was his purposeful stride. He was so determined, so certain, as he cut across the open meadow, like a hero from a romance. She could easily envision a long dark coat, flapping at his legs as he moved toward his lady love.

From there, Suzy's long-suppressed imagination had taken flight.

He became Heathcliff, hurrying across the moor. She was Cathy, who gingerly picked her way down the incline of the trail...it seemed her clumsiness wouldn't leave her even in her daydreams...and then ran across to leap into his arms. But frankly, she couldn't quite see herself making the leap either without some sort of mishap.

Better yet, he was Rochester to her mousy Jane Eyre.

Rochester. She wondered where he came from, how he made his living. How did he get that taut waist and those muscular arms? In a gym or training for a joust? Did he move with such purpose because he was meeting someone, a woman forbidden to him because of a family feud? Did he walk every day to escape the oppressive responsibilities of a multi-national corporation? Could he leap tall buildings in a single bound?

After seeing him that first time, Suzy kept her routine the same, and every day she caught a glimpse of her Rochester coming or going, crossing the clearing, fueling new stories in her head. Stories that drove the numbers away.

*One thousand fifty-one. One thousand fifty-two. One thousand fifty-three.*

Suzy sighed. Well, the stories drove most of the numbers away. She couldn't stop counting her steps,

even when she tried.

The breeze lifted her running jacket with a cold touch, piercing all the way through her light T-shirt. Autumn had well and truly arrived at Angel Falls. They'd had a late summer but now, daylight grew short, and fall was just around the corner. Suzy could feel it in the air and see it in the dark of the forest. Shadows that had clung to corners now ate up great spaces, like dark ooze creeping over the land.

Suzy shivered and zipped up her short jacket. Her imagination was getting the best of her. She should head back...but no, not before she reached the clearing. Would her Rochester be there? She'd missed seeing him the last two days and wondered if it would be the same today. Picking up her speed, Suzy turned the corner.

*One thousand sixty-three...*

The next number died on her lips. Suzy came to a grinding halt. In the center of the clearing, her Rochester stood stock-still, hands fisted at his sides, his gaze uplifted.

Suzy took two steps forward, closer to the edge of the trail. She squinted into the twilight, not believing what she saw. A dark cloud floated over him. As she watched, it shifted, crystallizing into the shape of a woman with flowing hair, stretched out...right above Suzy's Rochester.

She gasped, stepped back, and tripped over her own feet. Then she tumbled down the side of the trail and screamed all the way to the bottom.

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Scott Lunsford watched the image shift and

shimmer into the shape of Julie's face. The dark mist wavered in a perfect imitation of her long hair.

The misty image mocked him. He wanted to punch it away, but it would do no good. He had tried before. The mist would scatter and soon reshape itself into Julie's image. It disturbed him, frightened him, and made him feel powerless.

Almost as if it read his mind, the ghostly lips smiled in response, pleased at his frustration. Now Scott couldn't resist. He swung at the image, dissipating its unholy pleasure.

Suddenly, a scream carried across the clearing. Scott spun just in time to see a young woman in a blue running suit rolling down the side of the Angelina Forest Trail. When the scream stopped, Scott was already running to help her.

He reached her side just as the young woman raised off her stomach. A long twig protruded from the brown strands of her short, slightly upturned hair. She sat on her bottom, batted away the twig, and then winced, and turned up her palms to examine multiple cuts.

"Are you all right?"

She jumped. Scraped palms forgotten, she quickly looked up and all around. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Scott sunk to his haunches beside her, his EMT training kicking into gear as he examined her for more injuries.

"That thing, floating over your head. Where did it go?"

Scott froze. "You saw it?"

"Her," she said with a nod of her head. "Most definitely a her."

As the words penetrated, Scott felt the fear and

tension drain out of him, right through the soles of his feet into the ground. He sagged, his relief was so great.

"Do you have some kind of light machine? Is that how you made it?"

Scott gave a shake to his head and looped one arm over his upraised knee. "I don't even know what 'it' is, so I'm pretty sure I didn't make it."

He looked up into the prettiest bright green eyes he'd ever seen, fringed with dark lashes and widened in shock.

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that." Her tone dropped to a near whisper. "But...but you did see it, right?"

"Yes, I saw it."

Now it was the woman's turn to sag in relief, giving Scott the chance to study her. For the first time he noticed a red overtone burnishing those upswept strands of brown hair and a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose. A bright pink abrasion on her right cheek needed to be cleaned. She also had a nasty cut on one knee where her running suit had snagged and torn open.

Apparently noticing the direction of his gaze, she reached for the tear in her pants but immediately winced in pain.

"Ouch!"

Scott took both her palms in his hands and turned them up, revealing a number of angry, rock-and-dirt-embedded gashes. "That was a pretty nasty tumble you took. We need to get you checked out."

Rising to his feet, he gripped her elbows and lifted her.

"Wait—we can't go. We have to look for that...that—"

“Ghost?”

She stiffened and looked up, once again rendering him a little stunned by the full power of those wide, green eyes.

“It’s not a ghost.” She gave her head a firm shake. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Scott gave a short laugh. “I hope you’re right. Ghost or not, we need to get you home. Where do you live?”

“At Heart’s Haven.”

“That’s a good two miles back down the trail. It’s a little late to be out that far.”

She shifted and looked away. Her uninjured cheek took on a pink tone bright enough to rival the other one. Why was she embarrassed?

“Well, my place is closer,” Scott said when she didn’t offer an explanation. “Let’s go there, and then I’ll drive you home.” He gestured in the right direction.

She tried to take a step, but her knee buckled.

“I was afraid of that,” Scott said. “You came down hard on that side. Probably bruised it pretty badly.”

In one sweeping movement, he scooped her up.

“You can’t carry me all the way back.”

Getting a close look at the perky hairstyle, those wide eyes and freckles, Scott said the first thing that came to his mind. “You don’t weigh more than a pixie. We’ll make it OK.”

He walked toward the forest, and she peered back over his shoulder at the clearing. “Are you sure we shouldn’t investigate this a little bit more? Maybe just look around.”

“No need,” he said with a shake of his head. “We’ll investigate next time.”

“How do you know there’ll be a next time?”

Scott sighed. "Because your 'not a ghost' has been haunting me every night for the last month."

# Maria's Angel

Marianne Evans

*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* ~ Hebrews 4:16

# 1

An ominous thump and flap stirred a shimmy that cut straight through the steering column of Maria Wilde's old model minivan. She sucked in a breath and clutched the wheel tight when her tires bumped over something unexpected. A fast check of the rearview mirror revealed the mangled remains of a thick, black band of rubber. All at once, the steering wheel seized tight, making even the slightest navigational adjustments next to impossible to execute. She couldn't steer.

Didn't that just figure?

Angling her vehicle slowly out of traffic and onto the right shoulder of the road became the equivalent of single-handedly dragging a stubborn elephant because the vehicle didn't want to cooperate whatsoever from a steering perspective. The process of stopping and throwing the car into park took a wrecking ball to the already weak walls of her composure. Maria crumbled against the steering wheel, resting her head against her tightly clenched hands. Tears stung, and her breath hitched.

*God—really—how much more can I possibly take? Please...please give me the strength to survive this.*

The cobalt bowl of a sky above her didn't part. The huge, puffy white clouds that stretched and moved didn't dissolve to reveal the instantaneous miracle for which she physically ached. Nope. Life was a lot tougher than that; a lot more complicated. What she needed to do, what she *had* to do, was find the way to keep marching on.

Maria steeled her spine and blinked tears into remission. What was the use of crying? Crying wouldn't solve the problems she faced nor would it help her move forward. Through the somewhat grimy windshield, she surveyed her surroundings. A flat, ambling stretch of brick buildings, canopied awnings, and quaint shops dotted each side of the two-lane road. Occasional passersby wandered in and out of view, wrapped up in conversations, or strolling with kids. Where was she, anyway? Mere hours ago she had left Dallas, headed due south. She had passed through Lufkin a few minutes ago. Shortly after that, she recalled passing a wooden sign laden by civic insignia that welcomed her to Angel Falls, Texas. Evidently she had hit the mechanical crisis point at the start of the town's peaceful little main street.

Great. Where was she going to find help in the middle of nowhere? Additionally, if she didn't find a gas station soon—the blasted low fuel light had been on for at least twenty miles—she was going to be planted here for a good long while regardless of mechanical issues. She had ignored the indicator for as long as possible, hoping to coast to her destination on fumes if possible.

A glance into the rearview mirror stilled Maria's spirit at once and reinforced the steel of her determination.

In the rear passenger seat, Lilly slumbered. Precious, beautiful Lilly. A powerful sweep of warmth cascaded through Maria's chest. Her six-month-old baby girl was tucked safe and tight into a car seat, further insulated by a snuggly soft blanket of pale green. Surrounding the innocent babe was every last possession Maria owned. The material items didn't amount to much, yet they managed to fill the van in its entirety.

Maria forced herself free of oppressive anxiety, reverting instead to survival mode. She began to coach herself.

*C'mon, Maria—don't surrender, solve the problem. You have to keep moving. You need to make it to Mom and Dad's new place in Huntington before Lilly wakes up wanting a lunch you can't afford to buy.*

Expelling a breath, Maria drummed fingertips against the narrow circle of leather. Not far away she spied a sign. *Lang's Gas & Collision*. At least the van was still running. She could probably gimp her way to the facility and see if there was anyone on duty who might be able to lend an assist. Angel Falls was picturesque, small-town personified; Lang's seemed to be her only option.

Fighting her steering wheel every bit of the way, inching into a turn that made her muscles scream, Maria made it to a gas pump and pulled to a stop. She sifted through the depths of her purse, grabbing her wallet. She already knew what she would find inside: a five dollar bill, a handful of change, and not much else. There were no credit cards that would be accepted and no checks she could write. Her bank account back in Fort Worth was closed.

She clenched the simple cloth case, squeezing

tight. Lilly would need formula soon, along with a serving of jarred baby food. Maria had nothing with her in the way of grocery items; she hadn't planned on an automotive breakdown that would keep her from arriving at her parents' new house before lunch. A five-spot and a few spare coins would have to see her through, and first things first, she needed to get some gas in the tank. Five bucks would get her just over a gallon of fuel. That allotment would get her to her folks' house, but what would she do about repairs? Her car was far from drivable.

A laden sigh rose from the depths of her body; her empty heart ached. For now, the only thing she could do was dash inside, find the attendant for some repair advice, and then call her folks to see if they could help with a repair loan.

Plans in place, she left a slumbering Lilly secure in the car seat. After locking the car, she trotted toward the convenience area of the gas station, taking note of the three service bays attached to the store. Two of the available spots were filled, and one of the cars under repair was hoisted on a hydraulic lift, but no one seemed to be nearby. Not a good sign. She frowned and walked inside, weaving through a narrow food aisle, trying to ignore the instant gnaw of hunger that prickled through her belly. Who knew how long she'd be stranded, and she certainly needed an energy boost. Heaving a reluctant sigh, she grabbed a couple packets of crackers and cheese and silently kissed her last remaining funds goodbye.

At the cashier's space, an attendant tracked her approach, offering a warm, welcoming smile. He was about her age, sporting wavy brown hair. Judging by the uniform shirt and faded jeans he wore, he seemed

to be the on-duty mechanic as well. While she drew near, he used an oil-spotted rag to mop his hands. Maria studied him for a moment. So, that's why the service area was empty. Apparently, the mechanic who stood before her ran the shop as well. He was tall and lean, tan. The name *Brody* was stitched above the breast pocket of his *Lang's* emblazoned shirt.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Smooth and silky, the cadence of his voice was soothing and appealingly musical.

"I...I..." She cleared her throat and stood straighter, depositing her meager purchase on the counter between them. "I need these, please, along with the name of a good mechanic, if possible."

Brown eyes touched by hints of amber tracked to her car for an instant. Maria slid the cash across the counter. He captured the bill and gave her a nod. "My name's Brody Lang. You might call me the Jack-of-all-trades for this place. Is there a problem with your vehicle?"

Maria nodded then looked over her shoulder. "The steering went out, and I can hardly make a turn or navigate. I think I dropped a rubber belt of some sort, because I drove over it and it's not much more than a tangled mess on the road at the edge of town. Would you mind taking a look and letting me know what's wrong? Maybe you could give me a price quote."

Brody Lang stepped from behind the black-topped, scarred service counter of his shop. "I'd be happy to. Let's check it out."

A tight squeeze of pressure eased away from Maria's heart, and she breathed out, giving him a large, grateful smile. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

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The woman's relief was palpable. Odd, Brody thought. Something about her spoke of uncertainty—or displacement. He followed his customer outside, evening his typically long-legged stride to her smaller steps. She wore blue jeans like a dream and a simple layered t-shirt combo that provided some nice pops of red and blue color. Her unbound hair bounced as she walked. Soft curls of red caught the late morning sun. A crisp autumn breeze flavored by the smoke from a leaf fire lifted the waves, tossing them against her neck and shoulders. He looked forward to helping her. She struck him as a sweet thing, and beautiful in an innocent, pure way that he found instantly attractive.

Once he got a close look at the inside of her vehicle, his instincts about some form of displacement were confirmed. It looked like she hauled everything she owned. Was there even an inch of room left for air, or...

His brief survey of the van came to an abrupt stop when his gaze came to rest on a baby's car seat, complete with a baby. Ah. So, she was married probably stranded between cities as she travelled.

"Are you moving?" he asked.

She nodded. "To Huntington. According to the map it's not too far from here."

"It's just a few miles away. I have friends there. It's a nice town."

"That's where my parents live."

Brody was intrigued. Parents. A baby. A solitary lady who hadn't yet mentioned a husband. The numbers didn't quite jive. There wasn't a wedding ring

on her finger, either.

“There are two things I’ve found I hate dealing with as a woman alone. The first thing would be home repairs and maintenance. The second would be automotive issues.”

The admission caused Brody’s protective instincts to kick into high gear. “Well I promise to take good care of you, ma’am. No worries. Let’s see what’s going on.”

Her features went soft and shy. “You don’t have to call me ma’am. My name is Maria. Maria Wilde.”

She extended her hand, and he took hold in a firm, but gentle way. “It’s nice to meet you, Maria Wilde. Let’s see if we can’t get you back on the road.”

“I’d appreciate your help. Lilly is going to wake up pretty soon, and once she does, she’s going to be hungry.”

Brody tried without success to tune out the way a look into her faultless, deep green eyes slipped straight into the cushion of his heart. She was a stranger in need of help, so he focused instead on the job at hand. She had mentioned a piece of rubber—a belt of some sort that had ended up on Main Street. Likely the vehicle had thrown a serpentine belt, causing the steering to lock.

Maria leaned against the side of the van and then seemed to think the better of that option, which made him grin as she swiped dust from her hip. “How old is your daughter?”

“Lilly’s six months and feisty as can be.”

Brody grinned at that. “Can you pop the hood for me?” While she complied, he retrieved a rolling back board and parked it at the front end of the vehicle. He stretched out and then slid beneath to conduct a brief

diagnosis. Yep, his initial assumption was correct. He slipped from beneath the van and lifted smoothly to a stand. "It looks like the belt slipped off the tension pulleys that drive your power steering. Did your air conditioning go out, too?"

She lowered her lashes. "Yeah."

Brody nodded, beginning a cross-check of the top of the engine. He didn't want to add to the burdens she seemed to carry. "The belt you lost drives the water pump and compressor as well, so when it slipped out of commission, it affected a few other mechanisms. In a way, you can be glad you lost it here and now. I'll get it repaired and the vehicle will run just fine."

An uncomfortable silence stretched. She shuffled from foot to foot. "The belt thing I need. Umm...will it take long to fix? Is it expensive?"

Brody studied her. Fair skin was sprinkled by a handful of subtle freckles. She was so earnest; tiny lines marked a furrow of concern between her brows. He longed to take away whatever weight pressed down on her slender shoulders.

He shook his head and blinked, stunned once more by the lightning-strike pattern of his thoughts. "Let me check my stock and make sure I have one on hand for your model." He moved toward the service bay, and she followed.

"How much do you think this will cost?"

"The belt itself is around fifty bucks." He didn't need to open the part drawer to know the price.

She winced.

"I can replace it for you in about an hour. It shouldn't be more than a hundred bucks all together." Registering her reaction to the price tag on the replacement piece, Brody had shaved his labor fees by

a solid thirty-percent. Now, he wished he had reduced the charge even more. There was no mistaking the panic that lit her features.

He caught a glimpse of the moisture that sheened those luminous eyes. Although she braced hard, she stilled a quavering chin by pressing her lips together, Maria Wilde couldn't disguise being overwrought. She executed a hasty spin, stalking straight to her van.

There, with her back to the shop, she crumpled against the side of the vehicle and wept.

\*\*\*\*

She couldn't take anymore. Not for one second longer could she hold her head up, take the punches, and keep struggling forward. Sure, it was only money. Sure, it was only a stinking van, but both were necessities. She needed money in order to maintain her vehicle, but she had nothing left—materially or emotionally.

Forlorn, she swept tears away, and her gaze happened to take in the remnants of her life, tucked inside a busted down vehicle. What would Jacob think of the mess she had made of her life without him? What had his sacrifice been for, really?

Inside the van, Lilly began to squiggle and kick...and coo.

Maria had two to three minutes, tops, before that coo of rousing would escalate into a full-blown hunger cry. She didn't mind. In that instant of her daughter's movement, she received the clearly defined answer to her question. Lilly. Their precious baby girl. Lilly was the reason for his sacrifice. Lilly and the love they had shared.

Trouble was a future without Jacob held nothing for Maria except soul-draining circumstances and a level of mourning that ebbed and flowed, but never relinquished its hold.

Opening the sliding door of the van, she unfastened the restraints of the car seat, scooping Lilly into her arms. Focused exclusively on her daughter, she swayed and whispered soothingly against a silky soft neck perfumed by baby powder. She'd been forced to skimp on a lot lately, but she refused to compromise on anything having to do with Lilly's well-being.

How was she going to get out of this jam? Go running to Mom and Dad? Again? She needed to handle this situation without their help. She was intelligent, capable. Crippling grief or not, she needed to reassert her self-sufficiency.

"Excuse me, Maria?"

The tender summons made her jump, which caused Lilly to squawk and squirm. Oh, fabulous. She was having a meltdown in front of the man who was trying to help her. Talk about displaying a lack of grace under fire.

He touched her arm, offering stillness, and a brief swell of comfort. "I'm sorry for upsetting you."

"You didn't. I'm just...I'm...I'm a mess right now. This has nothing to do with you."

"Are you OK?"

Why lie? Why hide? What did she have to lose, really? "No. No, I'm not."

Brody Lang didn't flinch. He didn't shrink away. "May I offer a prayer? For you and your daughter?"

An emotional dam burst all over again. This time she swallowed back the cry of sorrow that pushed through her spirit. Still, tears tracked down her cheeks.

Maria squeezed her eyes closed and nodded, her knees weak to a degree that she sank against the side of the van.

He took hold of her free hand and rested a large, work-roughened palm lightly against Lilly's back. "Lord, please make Yourself known in this moment. Grant Your comfort, protection, peace, and provision upon Maria and Lilly. Bless and guide them on the road You mean for them to travel. Hold them close. In Your holy name we pray. Amen."

The words didn't dissipate into silence. Instead, they formed a shield Maria could feel, a Godly presence she had always embraced until...well...until.

For Brody Lang spoke just the kind of prayer Jacob would have offered.

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Brody crossed to the side of his shop where a line of metal cabinets was topped by a wall-mounted peg board from which hung a number of tools. He opened a deep storage drawer that held a batch of well-organized belts grouped by size and model type. In a matter of seconds, he extracted the replacement he would need for Maria's van. From the corner of his eye he saw her dip her fingertips into the front pockets of her jeans and rock back on her heels. Her eyes were downcast.

"I, ah...I need to set up some form of payment plan."

No way would he further wound her pride. He hefted a shoulder into a casual shrug. "If money is an issue, don't let that worry you. You can get it to me when you have a chance. Huntington's not far away.

Pay me back when you can." He paused long enough to draw her gaze. "I trust you, Maria. For now, let's get you home."

She chewed lightly on the corner of her lip, her brows furrowing once again over those large, deep brown eyes. Her somber expression piqued Brody's alert system all over again. Man, was she hurting. Why?

Brody didn't waste time speculating. Instead, he opted to problem solve. "I'm going to get to work on your car. Feel free to grab some more food from inside. There's also a fresh pot of coffee if you're interested."

"Mr. Lang—"

"Brody."

"Brody. I'm...I'm completely broke right now. I had just enough food and gas to make it to my parents' place, and obviously that plan went haywire. I can't pay for anything else beyond the couple of snacks I just bought. It might be a while for the money and payback. I don't imagine I'll be settled for a bit."

Desperation shimmered through her eyes, making them sparkle, but beneath that reaction, he sensed resolve—a mother's resolve—coupled with tender heartedness.

"Take care of Lilly, and yourself. Make a list of whatever you need to take, and I'll set up a bill that you can pay when you're able. I've got a few jars of baby food on the shelves. There's powdered formula nearby, too. Pick up some food for you, too."

"I can't."

"I insist." He stepped close. "What better way to celebrate the Thanksgiving season? Please. Let me help."

"No...really...that's OK. I don't want to take

advantage of your kindness.”

“It’s not taking advantage of my kindness if I offer, right?” He smiled.

“Wish I could argue the point.”

“You can’t, so go inside and stock up.”

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With Lilly tucked in her arms, Maria plopped her rainbow hued diaper bag on the cashier’s counter. Brody had said to make herself at home, and really, she had no choice but to follow his instructions. Lilly’s fussing intensified, so Maria pulled a can of powdered formula from the grocery shelf. Next, she searched for a sink where she could scour and clean a used bottle then mix Lilly’s food.

“What’s our best option, baby girl?” Maria scanned the shop while she murmured to her daughter. A directional sign pointed toward the restrooms, so she pushed her way inside the women’s stall, grateful to find a baby-care station where she could settle Lilly. Following a diaper change full of kicks and urgent squawks from her daughter, Maria prepped a fresh bottle of formula. She returned to the shop, wandering slowly and humming while Lilly happily—and greedily—ate.

It occurred to Maria that she needed to make a list of the goods she used. She could easily wait to eat; Huntington wasn’t far away. But if she was going to be here for an hour or so, maybe one of those apples stacked near the coffee and tea display would tide her over. And the coffee did smell awfully good. That wouldn’t cost much, right?

A receipt pad and a batch of pens rested at a tilt

near the cash register. Maria did a one-handed job of tearing off the top sheet and scribbling a tally of her items.

Only then did she allow herself to grab a granola bar, bite into a red delicious and fill a small foam cup with the fragrant brew she intended to enjoy once Lilly was fed. Between that and the baby food, she figured she was out about eights bucks in groceries.

At loose ends, not quite knowing what to do while Lilly relaxed in her arms and continued to eat, Maria began to automatically sway a bit and then wander. The shop was sparkling clean. The building was older, a two-story brick number that had most likely graced Main Street for a good long while, but the facility was well cared for, and she could tell at a sweeping glance that close attention had been paid to details.

Her visual inspection came to a stop when she spied a number of wall-mounted plaques behind the main counter. She stepped forward to investigate and inspected an honorarium from the Better Business Bureau—no surprise there, considering Brody Lang's genial manner of service. And evidently, Lang's Gas and Collision had sponsored an under-eight Little League team that earned second place honors this past summer. She studied that award, considering the idea of a guy as kind spirited as Brody heading up a youth squad, and Maria smiled.

Her brows puckered when her curious gaze came to rest on a framed citation from the Angel Falls Chamber of Commerce recognizing the efforts of one Brody T. Lang with respect to a charity called Car Angels. What was that about?

Maria shifted Lilly against her shoulder. A few gentle back pats and a none-too-delicate burp soothed

her gradually dozing baby. Nuzzling Lilly's cheek, Maria wandered to the side of the store that adjoined the service area. She continued to hum a rendition of Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star and peered into the repair stall where Brody worked.

Folded over the open hood of her vehicle, his tall, muscular frame drew Maria's focus and tempered her anxieties. She was in good hands. She had no idea what he was doing, really, but deft, confident motions held her attention while he worked a slip of black rubber into place and executed whatever magic mechanics possessed to resuscitate her vehicle.

All at once, Maria realized she was staring.

Her heart rate jumped, and the soft tingles that danced against her arms and legs prompted her to turn her back and make fast tracks to Lilly's car seat where she promptly secured her sleeping daughter. Guilt and shame transformed into dual shadows.

Really. Attraction? Here? Now? What was she thinking? She rustled unnecessarily with food supplies. Nervous tingles worked against her fingertips. Her reaction stemmed from simple gratitude. The sensory awakening centered on her appreciation of Brody's kindness and skill.

That's all there was to it.

Period.

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Repairs completed, Brody stood behind the cashier's station, initiating a brief explanation of the work he had done. Maria listened while he used words like coolant pumps, tensioners, pulleys, and dust debris that had accumulated in the metal ridges of

some mechanical component or another. She did her best to follow but came away fairly certain he spoke a foreign language.

That's when it happened.

Brody Lang picked up the list of goods she had carefully scribed. He studied the page for a second or two and nodded. Then, he looked straight into her eyes. "Paid in full."

He ripped the paper into tiny shreds, which he tossed into the trash.

Maria tried to spear him with a firm glare but was so grateful for his generosity that her heart didn't reside in the attempt. So, she decided to strike a deal. "Fine—but I'm paying you the fair price for fixing my van. No negotiating, either. I want the bill, and I'll pay you back just as soon as I'm able. Deal?"

She extended her hand for a let's-make-it-official seal of the agreement. When he took hold, she was struck once more by the appealing, protective strength of his touch. A sensation of wistfulness sang through her tired, aching spirit.

"Deal, but I'm on to you, Maria Wilde."

"What do you mean by that?" He didn't release his hold right away, and Maria found she didn't mind. There was nothing awkward or untoward about the connection. It simply was, so she allowed herself to enjoy...but only for a moment.

"You're letting me win a battle so you can win the war."

Laughter bubbled through her chest and released in a carbonated sound of delight. Brody Lang really was a terrific man.

"There's the happy spark I was hoping to see before you leave."

Spark. There was no way whatsoever this compelling stranger would know what that single, innocuous word would do to her heart. There was no way for him to realize what a chain reaction of love, loss, and heartache the word *spark* would trigger. She choked back a sharp gasp, captivated, staring into his crystalline eyes. Yep. She was attracted, to be sure, but her heart longed for one man only—the one who had nicknamed her Sparks because of the effervescent, enthusiastic view she used to hold of life.

That was her late husband; her one-and-only love since high school, Jacob Wilde.

# Jodie's Song

Marianne Evans

# Prologue

*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.~1 Tim. 6:12*

Jodie Cunningham navigated her car into a corner turn, clutching the steering wheel. The final bit of roadway that led to The Falls Tabernacle stretched before her. Angel Falls, Texas. Home. Despite anxiety and the somber mood that rode shotgun, her lips twitched upward. Nothing in the rural flatlands of southeast Texas seemed to change. That was a good thing. Assuring somehow.

Except for today.

She gathered her breath into a bone-deep sigh. Today—over the past several weeks actually—everything seemed to be changing and draining her spirit rather than soothing her soul. She shook off a black cloud of dread and blinked to clear her mind. Brow furrowed, she peered through the windshield at a site as familiar to her as daybreak, the stone edifice and soaring cross spire of Falls Tabernacle. This was where she had been baptized. This was where she had dedicated herself to Christ and met her Savior heart-to-heart.

Unfolding from her low-slung sedan, Jodie stared and absorbed for a moment then pushed ahead. She focused on the click of her heels against smooth, even

cement as she made her way to the doorway of the church, longing for anything that would distract from the heart-wrenching family drama set to unfold.

At that point, shiver-inducing feather strokes danced against her skin, followed promptly by a spine tingle. Angel wings seemed to beat against an ominous threat that brewed into an unseen tempest.

She slowed. Why did *everything* feel so *wrong* lately?

Squaring her shoulders, adjusting the strap of her black leather purse, Jodie stilled her nerves. Her outlook settled once she crossed the threshold of the church. Leaving behind the outside world felt akin to releasing a live wire. Sizzles of something indefinable—but potent—instantly left her senses. Thankful for that, she automatically scanned faces until she found the ones she sought.

First, she spotted her older sister. As always, Tracee and her husband and two kids—Alex and Melissa—occupied the third pew to the right. Head high, attention riveted, Tracee focused on the pastor, who was just beginning ten o'clock services. Jodie ignored the initial Scripture reading. Instead, different words crashed through her mind—the memory of her most recent telephone conversation with Tracee.

*"Jodie, you have got to get down here and help me! Move away from that precious, ultra-glam career of yours just long enough to realize you have obligations outside of a pack of nameless radio fans! Step into the breach and help! Help Dad! He's fading fast, and I can't handle this anymore! He needs you. I need you."*

Echoes from that unusually scalding reprimand left Jodie to hang her head. Heat, a mercury marker of shame and regret, inched up her body. She eyed an

empty space in the rear-most pew, but for the moment remained tucked in the corner—far from her sister.

Next, rather than pay attention to the start of the sermon, Jodie took in the rest of the parish members, her gaze settling at last upon her father, ensconced as always in his assigned spot as an usher. He stood straight and strong, a brass nameplate pinned just below the line of a deep blue kerchief that matched his perfectly knotted tie and lent a pop of color to an impeccable black suit. The vision of him was so timeless, so precious, it took her breath away.

Mom would have been so proud...so smitten.

Jodie's hand flew to her throat where a lump built fast and thick. Their love had been so beautiful. Maybe that's why she found it difficult to find her way to commitment. The bar had been set very high indeed.

Her father had always possessed such dignity and honor, especially when it came to matters of reverence toward Christ and the church. Without a doubt, his example gave birth to Jodie's passion for serving...and ministering. The thick tuft of gray hair, mustache, and gently weathered face were familiar, but she noticed something different in his shoulders. His posture struck her as newly frail, somewhat weaker than she recalled from her most recent visit home a month or so ago. Looking deeper, she saw strain in the lines around his eyes—strain and a layer of pain time would never erase. Not this side of Heaven, anyway.

Two years without his other half, Elizabeth, had done more than age Grayson Cunningham. They had ravaged him and drained him dry. Tracee was right. The effects showed. Jodie's gaze darted to her sister. Still, Tracee could've been a bit more gentle-spirited and tactful about the declaration. Her sister wasn't

generally one to snap.

Fighting tears, Jodie finally tucked into the back pew, smoothing the lines of her slim, black skirt. Humidity built fast as spring came calling. Judging by the way her pink silk blouse already tacked to her warming skin, today promised to give folks an early taste of summer.

Crossing her legs, she settled and continued to watch her father. Something about his demeanor puzzled her. Dignified and respectful, he manned his usher station like always, but he didn't seem to be focused on the preacher. Instead, he stared ahead blankly, lips moving in silence while he clutched his hands into fists at his sides. Suddenly, the most awful, painful expression swept across his features.

"Daddy..." The word, the endearment, spilled forth on a whisper full of aching and sadness. "Daddy, what's *wrong*?"

In that instant, he swayed. His chest rose and fell in a shallow, unsteady way. Just as he blinked free of whatever trance-like moment held his mind, he lifted a trembling hand to his chest—right above his tender and massive heart.

Jodie let out a cry and lunged from her seat as her father collapsed.

# 1

A moving van ambled along the street not far from the spot where Kevin Mitchell knelt, cutting his spade into freshly cleared flower beds and tilling the soil. Rich black earth. Nothing felt like it, nothing smelled like it, and the arrival of spring only heightened his pleasure at being able to sculpt and tend the grounds of his uncle's apartment complex and the spot he called home as well, Heart's Haven.

When the vehicle neared the rental unit, Kevin paused from his outdoor preparations for its new occupant. He peeled off a pair of heavy duty work gloves and swiped residual dampness against his jean-clad thighs. Sure enough, the van slowed, brakes squealing a bit and disrupting a nest of hatchlings and their mama who swept briefly through the sky—then angled straight back home to the nest.

"Unit Fourteen. This is the spot."

Those words drifted from the open window of the van, issued by the driver who soon hopped from the parked vehicle and rounded to the rear, releasing a hooked latch.

Kevin watched while the guy who rode shotgun disembarked as well and hoisted a dolly from inside the truck. The second mover propped his equipment against the back tire and helped extend a worn but sturdy looking steel ramp. *All systems go*, Kevin thought.

He was about to join them and initiate a get acquainted conversation, but his footsteps stalled when the soft purr of a car engine and the arrival of another vehicle claimed his attention. A white convertible glided to a neat stop behind the van. The pilot was a woman with peaches and cream skin and long waves of chestnut hair. Her eyes were hidden by a pair of oversized sunglasses, which only served to intrigue him all the more.

Was this the new tenant? Uncle Andy had told Kevin a woman 'of about your age,' was arriving today. Kevin hadn't expected her to show up until later in the afternoon.

He switched direction and headed for her car instead of the moving van. Meanwhile, she bent to retrieve something from the floor of the passenger seat, giving him just enough time to be a southern gentleman and open the door for her.

She looked up as soon as the door came open, startled by his arrival no doubt, though the sunglasses provided a bit of a mask. She lifted them slowly away, and Kevin blinked when he absorbed the impact of luminous deep brown eyes that held a hint of surprise and what appeared to be a touch of shy pleasure at his gesture. Taking a woman by happy surprise made him feel good.

"Morning," he greeted straight off, wanting to set her at ease. "I'm Kevin Mitchell. I work here at the Haven. I'm freshening the landscaping for you. You're Jodie Cunningham, right?"

"Yes. Thank you." She lifted from the vehicle and when she stood, he realized the top of her head came right to his chin. What was it Uncle Andy and Aunt Vivian always said about a perfect man-to-woman fit?

Kevin sensed it right now—but the stray thought made him want to laugh. Seriously. He had gone too long without female companionship if instant and unreasoned attraction spawned thoughts like this.

The new tenant dipped her head and cleared her throat, moving away and toward the entrance of unit fourteen. Tentative steps led her beneath an arched trellis currently covered by green vines. Freshly pruned, the climber would soon bloom with hundreds of deep pink bougainvillea.

Kevin puzzled briefly over her hesitance and the shell-shocked vibration of emotion he sensed from her, but he knew better than to push and rush. Years spent coaxing life from the depths of the earth had taught him patience and the reward to be found in careful tending. If his instincts were on target, Jodie Cunningham just might require both.

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Kevin finished the landscaping detail in front of Jodie's unit. He planted phlox of snowy white and deep purple, and then dug holes for hyacinth in shades of pink and lavender and white. The sweet aroma enticed him away from drudgery as he worked the soil and carefully placed the flowers.

While he groomed bushes and raked up debris, he took in the activity going on around him—the transport of a person's life from one spot to the next. A wide dresser passed by on a dolly managed by one of the movers. After that came the large pieces of a dark wood sleigh bed. By the time he laid soil for a batch of snapdragons, a flat screen TV, an oak entertainment unit, a dinette and a set of comfy looking leather

furniture had been toted inside by the moving crew.

He didn't see much of Jodie Cunningham, but that stood to reason. Judging by the series of neatly labeled boxes he watched the crew unload and cart inside, she was most likely keeping busy unpacking kitchen items, den items, and if the box markings were any indication, a sizeable selection of CDs and DVDs. The lady liked creature comforts and entertainment but seemed to indulge her passion while at home rather than at theaters, clubs, or concert halls. And he didn't notice any evidence of a 'significant other' as his Uncle Andy might be inclined to say. That recognition initiated a pleasant prickle along his nerve endings.

*The lady is alone.* He chided himself. *Most likely she wouldn't appreciate the idea of a stranger being struck down by some sappy form of hopeful expectation. Are you this lonely? Really?*

Scooping a rake full of dry leaves, he dumped the remnants into a tall paper refuse bag, re-centering in a hurry.

But soon Jodie exited her new space and trotted along the pathway that led right by him. Unbound hair bounced against her shoulders. She slipped her sunglasses from the top of her head but didn't put them on quite yet. Their gazes tagged—and she smiled. “The landscaping looks great, Kevin. I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. I'm glad you like the results.” She turned toward her car, and he found he hated to see her leave. “I'm looking forward to getting to know you.”

She cast him a quick look that shot a ripple of shyness and uncertainty into the laden air. “Likewise. See you.”

# Wounded Grace

Tanya Stowe

# 1

Madison Harper paused in her digging, slid the gloves off her hands and placed her palms flat on the warm, moist earth. The soil's rich scent floated up to her. She closed her eyes, turned her face up to the warm, early spring sun and whispered, "Thank you."

She didn't miss too many opportunities these days to praise the Lord. After two years of hospitals and rehabilitation, she was extremely grateful to be outside, beneath the golden sun, working the soil and basking in the glory of God's creation. She was glad just to be alive...gardening was a special bonus. She never thought she'd have full use of her leg again, let alone bend it beneath her like it was right now. She rubbed her thigh absently, as the memory of careening down the snowy hillside and slamming into the tree flashed through her mind.

Her fingers clenched into the soil. Not so long ago, that image would have sent her into a panic attack. She was in coma for two weeks after the accident. When she woke, her leg was pinned and immovable, and her mind was just as weak and frightened. Two operations later, doctors were convinced she'd never walk on it. Madison had almost started to believe them when her friend and mentor, Vivian Mallory, intervened.

"Our God is bigger than the doctors, Maddie. They don't get to have the last word. He does and I believe He wants you to walk again."

Vivian was right. God did want Madison to walk again, and run, and even to move to this little bungalow complex in the corner of southeast Texas where she could discover how much she liked to dig in the earth.

“Those flowers aren’t going to plant themselves, gal.”

Madison looked up. Andrew Hart, Vivian’s husband and owner of Heart’s Haven stood above her, leaning on a shovel. As she looked straight up, sun flashed all around him, so bright she could barely see the smile, hovering over his lips. His tone might have been grumpy but Andrew knew better than anyone what this activity meant to Madison.

Raising her arm to shield her eyes she said, “You just keep digging those holes, I’ll catch up.”

“You’ve got two rows to fill with flowers now. I reckon I’ll just rest here a bit till you’re done.”

Even with her arm shading her eyes, the sun was so bright around Andrew she could barely see him. He shimmered with a golden aura. But she could hear the weariness in his tone. Andrew was almost eighty but still as active as a fifty-year-old.

“Maybe you should go sit for a spell on the porch of the big house.”

If Madison could have seen his face, she was sure she’d see one eyebrow raised, but he never said a word. He didn’t have to. Madison knew what he thought of her suggestion. Smiling, she went back to work.

A wedding was coming to Heart’s Haven. Kaci James and Ryne Calvert, two residents, were getting married in the Heart’s Haven central court. Kaci had asked Vivian for her expertise as an interior decorator

to help plan the wedding, and Mr. Hart was determined to make the complex postcard perfect. He'd hired painters to white-coat the big house and the bungalows and even enlisted his nephew Kevin to design and color coordinate all the grounds.

Madison slid a delicate paperwhite plant out of its plastic container, placed it in the ground and carefully filled soil around it. The flower was barely blooming but it already carried a sweet scent that drifted gently upwards. Behind the two rows of paperwhites was a bank of yellow daffodils. Next, Madison would plant a full tray of purple grape hyacinth and finally another tray of purple crocuses with yellow and white centers. Purple, white and yellow would be in full bloom everywhere on the grounds.

They didn't know about the wedding in time to plant bulbs. Kevin had to special order all these early spring plants from a nursery. It had cost a small fortune for plants so close to blooming, but Mr. Hart had declared it "worth every penny." As Madison looked around at the sweet-scented, colorful flowerbeds taking shape, she had to agree.

A trickle of sweat worked its way down Madison's spine and eased beneath the band of her pants, tickling all the way. She was hot and starting to get itchy, but her discomfort only made her smile again. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you for the opportunity," she whispered.

She slid the first of the tiny grape hyacinths out of its plastic container and dropped it in a hole. Without warning, a shadow covered the ground where she worked. Madison leaned back on her legs. Moments ago the sky had been clear.

She looked up. There wasn't a cloud anywhere to be seen. The sky was as clear blue as it had been

moments before.

Madison's gaze jerked back down to the ground. All of her plants were still cast in a large, undefined, dark shadow. Where in the world was it coming from?

Suddenly, the shovel Mr. Hart had been holding fell in front of Madison, crushing the tiny hyacinths and paperwhites she'd just planted.

Madison gasped as Mr. Hart grabbed his chest, fell to his knees, and rolled over in the dark, warm earth. Madison ripped off her gloves and crawled to his side. He was curled in pain, clutching his chest.

"Mr. Hart!" Shock swept through Madison.

Heart attack. He was having a heart attack. What should she do?

*Call 911.*

"Help," she murmured barely able to get the words past her frozen lips.

Mr. Hart convulsed again and that spurred her into action.

"Help!" She turned and shouted across the complex yard where Kevin and his crew were forming another flowerbed.

"Call 911! He's having a heart attack!"

She turned back to Mr. Hart. Her mind scrambled to find a way to help. An infomercial flashed through her thoughts. "Cough, Mr. Hart. Try to cough. I think it helps."

But the pain was too great, too sudden. All he could do was clutch his chest.

Madison reached for him, wishing she could do something. He grasped her hand and tried to turn his head to see her. She lifted him gently onto her lap. He wanted to speak, but couldn't.

*Tell Vivian he loves her.*

“Oh, no Andrew,” she whispered as hot tears flowed down her cheeks and onto their muddy, clasped hands. “Please, no. Not yet.”

*Tell her.*

The finality of the words surrounded her, filled her with certainty. His death would not be stopped. She felt it, knew it. A small sob escaped her, and she nodded. “I’ll tell her. I promise, I’ll tell her.”

Her words eased his pain. He released his chest, looked at a spot just above her shoulder and smiled. Then his eyes closed.

Designed by  
Love

Mary Manners

*[God] gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. ~ Isaiah 40:29-31*

# 1

The mellow blend of Vivaldi's violin concerto flowed from an under-the-cabinet radio to soothe Traci Stanton's senses. Through the cottage's open patio doors a gentle breeze carried the scent of pine from the majestic Angelina Forest while birds chattered beneath a golden halo of evening sun. The Easter holiday was behind her and summer closed in with its promise to bloom to full glory. Grape hyacinth drifted from the grounds along Heart's Haven where it had been planted in preparation for Kaci and Ryne's wedding, scheduled to take place on the lawn of the Big House in only a few weeks.

But, for now, Traci was elbow deep in preparations for more imminent nuptials—a wedding scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. And the cake she'd promised the lovely couple could be no less than perfect. Her reputation depended on the creation of an amazing confection. She eased into the table ledge, gnawing her lower lip with concentration as she began to slice the final curve of a rose petal from gold-dusted

fondant. Humming along to the music, she took great care in this final step, already imagining the beauty of the finished product.

And not just a product that stood perfect in appearance, but in flavor, as well. The rich, sweet aroma of buttercream mingled with nature scents from the rain-kissed forest beyond the Heart's Haven complex, causing her belly to rumble with need. Once again she'd worked straight through dinner, but the one-of-a-kind creation on the table was worth it. The wedding cake was breathtaking as it rose toward the ceiling in three generous tiers.

Traci had a good idea now of how she'd tackle a cake for Ryne and Kaci. The flavor they'd selected was different from the cake here, but the design Kaci had requested was quite similar. As soon as she finished, Traci planned to snap a few photos to share with Kaci the next time she saw her. The cake, in all its glory, was a perfect example of the work for which Traci had a passion. Her most elaborate creation to date, the masterful confection was sure to be the hit of the sweets table at tomorrow's wedding reception, as well as its twin at Ryne and Kaci's in just a few weeks.

If only she could complete the finishing touches, box the cake, and stand ready to deliver the goods first thing in the morning. One final petal waited to be placed along the whipped buttercream frosting and then she'd take photos and package the cake. She was almost there, almost...

A screech shattered the calm like a freight train bearing down on the cottage. The walls of the modest structure shook and seemed to close in on Traci as the tile beneath her feet shuddered. She released a squeal of surprise and leaped back from the chaos, raising

both hands to shield herself from an impending impact as the sound intensified.

One second...two...three...

No crash came as the roar continued to rush over her in a cacophonous tsunami of waves. She clapped her hands over her ears to muffle the sound and doubled over, trying to make sense of the noise as her heart pounded its way back into her chest.

Then a sickening sense of dread swept through. *The cake. Oh, no...the cake.*

Her hands were empty, save for the ear each clasped. Which meant the fondant tool was now...

Skewered in the cake's second tier like a launched harpoon. But, peering through pried-open eyes, Traci saw that wasn't the worst of it. Oh, no siree.

The once-beautiful cake had shifted from the center of the table. It listed like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, while a hideous, dart-shaped appendage gaped from the middle tier. Spring foam seemed to pulsate in time to the roar that she now recognized as the distorted thumping of music with way too much base overflowing from the cottage next door. She sucked in a breath and rushed through the back doors and onto the patio, gaping at the cottage as the rush of music grew like an angry tempest.

Traci stifled a screech of fury while the offensive downbeat continued its assault on her senses, crushing the mellow strains of Vivaldi. She gaped through the living room window at the dark-haired guy whose head bobbed in time to the backbeat as music raged from doors along his patio thrown wide open to the evening. His hair cascaded across piercing blue eyes as he glanced up through the window, noticed her watching, and flashed a smile as if all was just perfect

with the world.

He obviously didn't have a clue as to the havoc he wreaked. Traci started to shout, but her voice was drowned by the shattering base. She fisted her hands as her blood pressure took on the qualities of a sputtering pressure cooker. Marching back to her kitchen, she surveyed the impaled tool, the ruined fondant leaf, and the leaning tower of buttercream. Her vision fogged as her temper exploded to a flash fire, and for the slightest moment, she understood the term *temporary insanity*.

The cake was beyond ruined. It was...an eruption of sugar and fondant. She'd have to start from scratch, and it was already closing in on six-thirty. Tears of fury burned Traci's eyes as a profound sense of defeat set in. She began to calculate the cost of new supplies, to take a mental inventory of what she had on hand and what she'd need to run out and purchase.

Tears spilled over. The cost would set her back in the red tonight; she wouldn't make a penny on this project. And she'd been counting on the money to add to her buy-a-shop coffers. Every little bit helped as she inched closer to the goal line of owning her own cake and pastry shop.

Add to that the cost of headache-relief medication, and she was completely done in.

A rose leaf crafted of summer-green fondant slipped from the cake to plop onto the flour-dusted table. Others followed, one after the other, like a slow-moving rain shower...*plop, plop, plop*.

Then, as Traci gaped in horror, the cake's top tier slipped and splatted along the floor as if it waved a final white flag of surrender.

Her internal pressure cooker exploded. *Now, look*

*what that idiot has done.*

The outrageous downbeat mocked her, punctuating each heated thought.

*Every evening, like clockwork, it's the same thing...an excuse for music played way too loud. It was just a matter of time until that goon plowed head-on into a disaster. Someone's got to put a stop to it. If only Mr. Hart was still here. If only the heart attack hadn't claimed him...*

Traci's heart ached with the loss of crusty but loveable Andrew Hart, adding to her angst. The heart attack that had claimed him was sudden and unexpected and had left everyone in the complex reeling. The mood had been somber along the cottages until a week ago.

A week ago to the day—she'd noted it in her journal—was when Mr. Ear-splitter-Dylan Jones had shattered Heart's Haven's peace and quiet with his infernal hip-hop jams. Traci wondered that no one seemed to mind his music besides her. Had they all gone deaf? Of course, she lived closest—right next door. Ugh, at least Dylan could blast some decent tunes like the strains of her Vivaldi or Beethoven—something not quite so offensive to the ears even when it *was* played at maximum volume. She'd tried to be patient but enough was enough!

Traci swiped her hands on the bib of her apron and blew a strand of blonde hair from her smoldering eyes. She slammed the patio doors to garner some relief from the discordant pandemonium but the kitchen yawned with unbearable heat from an oven that had worked overtime through the day.

She'd worked overtime, as well. The cake business that she'd embarked on as a little on-the-side venture had quickly exploded into something way beyond her

wildest imagination. People who tasted her wares insisted she had the golden touch when it came to designing, baking, and decorating cakes, and customers traveled from all points in and around the greater Angel Falls area to place their orders. If business kept pace, Traci would soon have enough money saved to open a real, bona fide bake shop, making the work from her severely undersized kitchen in the modest Heart's Haven cottage—and the infernal cacophony of sounds that blasted from next door—a thing of the past. But, until that day arrived, Dylan Jones would just have to tone it down to a low roar. Traci refused to work under such conditions and this was, after all, the quiet little community of Heart's Haven.

Correction—it *used* to be a quiet little community until Blast-it Jones arrived.

It was about time she put a stop to the insanity. Yes, her new yahoo of a neighbor had earned a piece of her mind and if no one else would take the bull by the horns then she'd personally deliver it up on a platter with all the trimmings.

She'd make Dylan Jones see things her way, like it or not. This was the last time he'd infringe on her peace and quiet, not to mention destroy more of her painstakingly constructed cakes. The music—if it could even be called that—freight train was about to be derailed.

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Dylan Jones grimaced as violin music drifted through the open door of his cottage. It wasn't the tune that bothered him as much as the accompanying

melodic hum of an angel.

That's how he thought of Traci Stanton since he'd met her coming up the walk last week while moving his stuff into the cottage next to hers—a snooty angel.

And darned cute...way too cute for his own good. Which he supposed was sort of a paradox, to be so beautifully angelic in appearance yet harbor a vicious bite of attitude that seemed to be directed, for no reason he could fathom, at Dylan himself.

He'd wanted to get away from people...from memories that seemed to haunt him since he'd returned from his tour overseas. No longer on active duty, he wanted nothing more than to drown out the destruction he'd witnessed, including the death of his best friend, Joe, who'd gone on tour alongside him. Thoughts tumbled over each other as he forced memories from the forefront of his mind. He didn't want to think, didn't want to feel.

Hard to manage when the alluring woman next store, with the voice of an angel, nudged something awake inside of him. Only the music could take him away, make him mindless.

Dylan switched on his laptop, launched the sound mixer and cranked up the speaker volume to drown out the angel's voice as, despite his best efforts, his first prickly encounter with Traci Stanton came rushing back to fill his mind.

"Hi there, neighbor," he'd called, figuring it was as good an ice-breaker as anything.

Traci turned from where she was busy watering a flurry of potted wave petunias near the walk. Her eyes, an alluring shade of blue-green ocean water, were a welcome distraction from moving day as she rose to step in front of Dylan, blocking his path up the walk.

“What’s that?”

“Nice to meet you, too.” He jostled the sound equipment on his shoulder, shifting to distribute the heavy weight. “I’m Dylan Jones and let me guess; you are...the welcoming committee?”

“Traci...Traci Stanton. And again I’ll ask, what’s that?” She jabbed a finger at the thin, rectangular box on his shoulder as the blonde hair she’d fashioned into a ponytail bobbed to sweep over her shoulders.

“This is one of my speakers.”

“It looks, well...” Her pert little nose scrunched with dissatisfaction, accentuating a light smatter of freckles along the bridge. “I hope you’re not planning on blasting your music. I like things quiet around here while I’m working.”

“I guess I’d need to know your definition of blasting to answer that. But it’s accurate to say that I like a little company in the form of tunes while *I’m* working.”

“Then I have just one word for you...headphones.”

“That’s two words.”

“One—it’s compound. Look it up.” Traci had stepped aside then, revealing the sign over the entrance to his cottage. Emblazoned in the wood was the message, *May love find all who enter here*. The same sign and message, he noticed, adorned the entrance to Traci’s cottage, as well. He’d heard through the grapevine that she’d lived here at Heart’s Haven going on a year and had yet to find her Romeo. With such a charming attitude—not—it was no wonder the guys hadn’t come flocking.

Not that Dylan believed in any of the legends or stories about love that seemed to flit around the Angel

Falls area about this particular rental complex. If he had, he would have never put his John Hancock on a lease. There was no room in his life for a serious relationship—or any kind of relationship, for that matter. And even if there was, he understood that for those who were fortunate enough to find romantic love, hanging onto that love happened merely half of the time—if one was remotely lucky. And if not, well...

Crash and burn...heartache and broken dreams. In the military, he'd seen it time and time again. Deployment, months away from a wife and kids, took its toll on a marriage. Some survived intact; many didn't. Daunting statistics, to say the least.

Similar to the statistics for coming home in one piece following a pair of tours deployed as a Navy SEAL. Not good either. But Dylan had been fortunate enough to beat the odds there. So maybe there was hope for the other, as well...

Nope. Not here, with this uptight blonde dynamo for a neighbor. She was well on her way to crushing the Heart's Haven batting average, and he was sure to follow in her footsteps to trounce the legend.

But the memory of that moving day encounter on the walk still brought a tingle of a smile to Dylan's lips. If Traci had continued her tirade, he might have had no choice but to quiet her scathing mouth with a kiss. And then—

A sharp rap on the front door followed by a heated shout drew Dylan back to the present. His right hand went to his hip while his senses launched into full alert as a shadow crossed the window.

"Open up, you moron."

One heartbeat, two, while he gathered his wits. His pulse pounded like a string of gunshots.

*It's OK...holster the weapon, Dylan. You're back on American soil, and it's not the enemy. It's just...*

Strike that. A closer look through the window glass told Dylan maybe it *was* the enemy...clad in faded jeans and a flour-dusted T-shirt with a mass of blonde hair gathered atop her head. He strode to the door, switched on the porch light against the waning sun and there she stood—Traci Stanton.

He willed his pulse down a notch as he yanked open the door. He shouted to be heard over the music. "I hope it's not me you're referring to as a moron."

"It's exactly you." Traci's words struck like bullets as she marched over the threshold, crossed the living room, and with one swift motion yanked the sound-mixer's power cord from the outlet. The room plunged into stark quiet. "There, that's better."

Dylan swore he could hear his heart thumping. Or, was that Traci's heart galloping across the room? He gaped at the power cord as she tossed it on the floor and gave it a single swift kick with the toe of her pink tennis shoe.

His voice sounded far away as his ears began to roar from a heightened blood pressure. "What do you think you're doing?"

Traci turned to face him, her cheeks flushed with fury. "I'm restoring sanity to the complex." Both hands fisted along her sides, she reminded him of a tea kettle about to shriek...a very lovely tea kettle.

"Sanity?" It was hard to take her seriously with the white smudge painted across one cheek, a mass of blonde hair twisted into a bird's nest atop her head, and an apron emblazoned with a huge, delectable chocolate kiss along the front. Dylan stifled a laugh as his gaze captured hers. "You might want to take a look

in the mirror first. I think you're molding."

"What?"

"Your jaw here..." He ran a finger along the line of soft porcelain skin. "It's speckled with green."

Traci's cheeks flamed as she nudged his hand aside. "That's fondant, for your information."

Dylan tried not to think about the smooth, creamy texture of her skin, but she had him tongue-tied. "Fon-what?"

"Fondant. It's used for decorating cakes. Which I was in the process of—nearly finished with, I might add—when your music—and I use that term loosely—shocked the breath right out of me. The kitchen convulsed, and the fondant tool flew from my hand like a launched missile. It plunged through the cake's buttercream icing and impaled itself in a fondant rose. And then—"

"Whoa there. Take a breath." Dylan placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "It can't be that bad."

"Then," she shrugged his hand away, "the middle tier listed, and the top slid, and then *plop, plop, plop*." She paced a tight circle, slapping her hands against the thighs of her jeans. "Now the work of art I so painstakingly created is sitting like a beautiful building that's been heartlessly bulldozed—completely and utterly ruined."

Dylan jammed his hands in his pockets and wished for the music again. The rhythm had a way of drowning out the chaos...restored sanity. But Traci stood between him and the power cord. So he went to plan B...humor. "Completely...utterly?"

"That's right, mister." Traci stood like a concrete pillar, impossible to crack. She deflected his humor as she turned back to jab a finger into his chest,

punctuating each of her words. "And-I-want-to-know-just-what-you-are-planning-to-do-about-it."

"Me?" Dylan stepped back and splayed his hands in the universal sign of surrender. "Well, if you're asking my opinion, then I vote we eat the cake."

"What?" The flames in her cheeks ignited to an inferno. She sputtered and grabbed her throat as if his suggestion had choked her. "Seriously, that's—good grief, that's all you have to say?"

"Well, by your account the cake might not look so great anymore, but I'm sure it still tastes incredible." Dylan started toward the door. If he couldn't enjoy his music, he'd at least garner some pleasure from her cake. "Everyone says your cakes are the best in all of Texas. So I say we eat it."

"You've heard people say that...*all* of Texas?" Her tone mellowed just a bit. "It's a big state."

"That's right." Dylan shrugged as he ambled toward the front door.

Traci grabbed his wrist, held tight. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"To your place." Dylan glanced down at her whitened knuckles nestled along his wrist. She had no idea he could pin her in less than a second flat if he wanted to. Military training came in handy. Instead, he played along, moving toward the door as she clung to him. "You've tortured me all afternoon with that sweet, delectable aroma, not to mention your angelic humming. So the least you can do is let me have a sample of your wares."

"The least I can do is...*what*?" She followed after him, her tennis shoes slapping the hardwood. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." He flashed a grin as he

wondered how long she planned to keep hold of his wrist and figured he didn't much mind the touch. "Today it was just the humming. Yesterday torture came in the form of your full-blown singing of a melody to Garth Brooks' throaty sound, no less."

"You were eavesdropping on me?"

"Not any more than you were me."

"I wasn't eavesdropping tonight. Who could miss your infernal cacophony of sound? I'll bet people heard your—that junk you call *music*—two counties away."

"Do you make it a habit to over-exaggerate?"

"That's not exaggeration. I'm simply stating the obvious. And, for the record, I don't think the client who ordered the cake I was working on will share your sentiment about looks not mattering. Looks are everything when it comes to cakes—especially wedding cakes. Well, looks and flavor. And the cake's due to be delivered in..." she glanced at her flour-dusted wristwatch. "Exactly nineteen hours."

"Then I suppose you'd better let go of my hand and get started on the reconstruction project." Dylan glanced down to where their hands were now joined, and winked. "I'm willing to help with this adventure in exchange for a slice of your so-called demolished masterpiece *and* only if I can play *my* choice of music while we tackle the re-creation. You *do* own a radio with more than one station, don't you?"

"You...you..." Traci dropped his hand as if she'd been burned and swiped her palm along the front of her apron.

Dylan laughed. "It appears I've left you speechless. Good. Rebuilding this grand confection of yours ought to go faster that way."

Love in the  
WINGS

Delia Latham

# Prologue

Something dark and unspeakable crept and coiled its way toward Angel Falls, Texas. Invisible to the human eye, it spread itself over the area, twined oily arms around the small town and wrapped it in a suffocating, unholy embrace.

The quaint location looked the same as always. Clean streets fronted well-maintained homes and businesses. In the town square, brightly colored flowers exploded from large planters hanging on each of at least a dozen old-fashioned street lamps. People went about their lives as if nothing had changed. They opened their shops and offices, greeted friends and customers, played their games and made their deals.

Above their heads, the brooding presence hung like a pregnant cloud, from which an occasional tentacle of darkness spiraled downward into specific groups of people.

Near its center, the darkness whirled and pulsed with chaotic energy. This portion of the town's unknown visitor hung directly over a large building topped by a tall steeple. A gold cross towered at the apex of the steeple's point, and the angry cloud seemed unable to hold its shape and density over that gleaming symbol. It tried. Tendrils of darkness twined toward each other, reaching, straining for a grip. But a constant flow of pure, white, bright power foiled every attempt to mend that one weak spot in the roiling

entity.

A large sign at the intersection of Halo Street and Harp Avenue identified the steepled building as The Falls Tabernacle. On a large marquee at the front of the property, scrolling letters spelled out a verse of Scripture: *Psalm 91:11—For He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.*

If any seed of truth lies within those words, there might yet be hope for Angel Falls....

# 1

Aria Robbins stepped outside the door of her little cottage in the popular Heart's Haven rental complex, and immediately gasped for breath. The air felt weighty, pushing against her with an almost palpable force as she plodded through it to the cheery red pony car waiting in the driveway. She paused, one hand on top of the classic vehicle she babied with quiet pride, the other shading her eyes as she ran a quick visual scan of the complex.

Nothing looked out of place. Hers was the only cottage with a car out front, so the other tenants had gone off to work or play...whatever they did while she worked her two part-time jobs every day. Across the lot, her landlord, eccentric octogenarian Andrew Hart, knelt in one of his treasured flowerbeds, a trowel in one hand. But he wasn't working. Head cocked to the side in a curious, attentive posture, he gazed up into the sky as if studying something in the clouds—except that there were no clouds.

Aria shrugged and climbed behind the wheel. Who knew what Hart was thinking?

Rumor had it the old guy carried on conversations with angels—who actually made themselves visible to him. Well, why not? Angels were real. She couldn't claim to believe the Bible and not believe in God's special messengers. She'd never seen one, but that

didn't mean they weren't out there.

As for Hart...well, the old fellow kept mostly to himself, didn't have a lot to say to anyone other than his wife Viv—an outgoing, friendly, utterly sweet woman about as unlike her husband as a wife could possibly be. But they seemed happy, and Aria loved seeing them together. Strange he might be, but old Hart had made Heart's Haven one of the most sought-after rental-cottage complexes in the state. Aria had considered herself blessed when her application was accepted, and she'd moved into the friendly community last month.

She flipped on the air conditioning and turned the dial to high. Little trickles of perspiration slid down the back of her neck, and she shook her head. May was brand new. Her dad would say spring had barely sprung, and yet this heavy heat felt more like late July. Something seemed...*off*. The unseasonal humidity was unlike any she'd ever felt—and Aria was East Texas born and bred. She knew humidity.

Well, heat or not, humidity or whatever, she had a job to get to. Two of them. She loved the work she did at both places of employment, but it had been a tough week, and Aria was firmly on board with the whole TGIF thing today.

Arriving at The Falls Tabernacle, she entered the church office, tossed her purse under the desk and switched on the computer before she even sat down. When her screen opened up, the weird weather and the day of the week became the furthest things from her mind. All she could see, hear, feel or think was focused on the e-mail message plastered in easy-to-read, eighteen-point Helvetica font all the way across the twenty-inch monitor she'd absolutely love-love-

*loved...until this very moment.*

*Good morning, Aria! I heard this amazing song yesterday. It's phenomenal! Went ahead and picked up the sheet music...which you've already seen right there on your desk, right?*

At this point in the unwelcome message, one of those ridiculous, animated smiley faces—moronicons, in Aria-speak—grinned at her like some kind of evil joker.

Her gaze swung from the computer screen to the sheet music centered squarely on her desk blotter. Without meaning to, she took in the song's title: "He is Risen! Risen Indeed."

She clamped her lip between her teeth and returned her attention to the message.

*"So—now that you've checked out the sheet music (because of course that's what you did the moment I mentioned it), have you heard the song? Let me know what you think. Can't wait to hear what the Praise Team does with this one. CB"*

Aria snorted. "You have got some nerve, Corbin Bishop!"

Acidity soured her voice, and she cast a quick glance around the office, relieved to find herself still alone. She hadn't meant to say anything out loud, and wished she'd kept her lip zipped. The snarky words had dripped outrage, resulting in an unpleasant sibilance that seemed to echo in the large room. She shuddered as an unwelcome thought made her cringe. Had the serpent sounded something like that when he spat his disastrous lies at Eve in the Garden of Eden?

With a frustrated sigh, she sat and lowered her head into her hands. "God, I don't want to have this kind of attitude. I've always welcomed input about the

music ministry. So why do my hackles rise every time *he* gets within a hundred yards of me?" She sighed. "I'm going to need a little help here, Lord."

She waited, hoping...what? That the Almighty would respond to her petty whining in an audible voice?

"Aria? Is that you?" From the pastor's office, a deep male baritone broke the silence.

Aria bounced two inches off her chair, and then dropped back down, one hand over her pounding heart. Not the voice of God, but it delivered one message quite well: She was not alone in the office, as she'd thought.

"Yes, Pastor David." Her voice cracked, and she rolled her eyes. "Sorry I'm late."

The office door swung open and David Myers stepped out of what Aria referred to as the "inner sanctum."

"No problem. I came in for an early counseling session. You'll be happy to know I've already made coffee." He grinned. "Sounds like you could use some."

While Aria silently wished for a hole to drop into and a handy pile of earth to pull over her mortified body, the pastor stepped into a small alcove where all things coffee-related had their home within this office. He took her favorite mug from a cabinet, filled it with the hot brew and carried it to her desk.

"Starting the day off with prayer is a commendable practice. I'm impressed."

Aria's cheeks warmed under his knowing grin. Pastor David never missed a trick. She nodded miserably. "I need a little spiritual attitude adjustment."

He dipped his head toward the offensive sheet music still acting as centerpiece for her blotter. "Wouldn't have anything to do with that, would it?"

With a wry twist of her lips, she gave him a sideways roll of the eyes. "Why ask, when you already know the answer?"

Sipping at the hot coffee, she fixed her gaze on a bookshelf across the room, waiting for the quiet censure that would surely come. But the pastor just stood there leaning against an ancient metal file cabinet. Arms crossed, a little shadow-smile dancing on his lips, he watched her through eyes she had long since deemed "all seeing."

Finally, she set her cup on a cloth coaster—or "mug rug," as her landlord's wife, Vivian Hart, called the brightly colored, handmade creations she was fond of gifting to anyone and everyone for any good reason...or no reason at all. With the hot liquid safely settled, Aria forced herself to make eye contact.

The minister had a green eye and a blue one. Aria had never seen that type of optical anomaly until she met David, and it looked great on him. His wife thought so too...Aria knew, because she spent half of every work day as Pia Myers's assistant—either in her jewelry design studio, or with the thousand and one other things that fell to a pastor's wife to handle. Married only a couple of years, Pia and the pastor still existed under a bit of a newlywed glow. So David's eyes had been the subject of more than one conversation between Aria and his pretty, vivacious bride.

But she was putting off the inevitable. David's eyes had nothing to do with her snippy attitude—or Corbin Bishop's arrogant one, for that matter.

“Does he think I don’t know what I’m doing with the praise team?” Why not just lay it out there and be honest about what was bothering her? The pastor would try to help, even if her attitude disappointed him. But even the charismatic David Myers would never be able to make her actually like the new youth minister.

Corbin had swept into Angel Falls a month ago, fresh out of a big, fancy church in Austin and full of big, fancy ideas to improve this one. Aria suspected he’d like nothing better than to make The Falls Tabernacle a miniature duplicate of the famous super church he’d left behind.

From day one, most of the unattached females in the congregation made utter fools of themselves every time the much-too-handsome youth minister walked into a room. Aria would never be one of those pathetic giggle-boxes. Fall all over herself to ensure she caught the eye of the self-assured newcomer? Yeah, sure—on the first frigid day in an East Texas July.

Besides, shouldn’t there be some kind of rule about people in the ministry not being overtly attractive? Who needed that type of distraction when a poor, single soul might already be floundering?

Maybe Pastor David could, at the very least, help her find a way to tolerate this newcomer from the big city. The good Lord knew she could use a little help...she wasn’t exactly feeling the love, so far.

*If only he’d stayed in Austin. We were doing just fine without him. Lord, can’t You just send him back where he came from?*

“Aria.”

She jumped, and raised her guilty gaze to the minister’s mischievous one. How long had she been

staring into space?

“Sorry...did you say something?”

“Sure did, but you probably didn’t want to hear it anyway.” The twinkle in his eyes became a sober, questioning gleam. “I asked if you’ve tried praying for Corbin?”

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Corbin Bishop stopped, frozen, in the hallway outside the church office. One hand gripped the handle of the door he’d been about to push open.

“I asked if you’ve tried praying for Corbin.” Pastor David’s voice carried through the closed door, plenty loud enough for him to hear every word. What was it with anointed preachers? He’d never heard a one of them who had a hard time being heard.

He couldn’t make out the reply, but he knew the voice. Always soft-spoken, Aria Robbins’s soft, husky tones sounded downright subdued today.

What was going on in there? And why was he a part of the conversation?

He scowled. *Oh, come on. Do you really have to ask?*

From the day he’d arrived in Angel Falls, the minister’s secretary made it ab-so-lutely clear that she had no desire to know the new youth pastor.

Despite his curiosity and concern about the conversation on the other side of the door, Corbin smiled a little. He couldn’t help it. The prim, auburn-haired secretary—who also possessed an impressive anointing and incredible talent for leading the praise team—had that effect on his lips. Aria Robbins made him smile, but God only knew why, since she’d probably throw something right smack at his head if

she figured it out.

And the really weird thing was, he didn't particularly like her either. Why would he, given the slightly cooler-than-frigid welcome she'd extended toward him? Maybe God tossed the two of them in the pot together so Aria could be the thorn in Corbin's side to keep him humble. He'd certainly dealt out a double scoop of possibility, since they not only had to work together here at the church, but lived in neighboring cottages at Heart's Haven.

He loved Angel Falls. The church was amazing—yeah, it could use a bit of modernization, a little nudge into the twenty-first century, but he liked the people. Pastor David and his wife were the salt of the earth. And his little cottage next door to Aria's had become the closest thing to a home he'd ever known.

Now if he could only find something to like about his neighbor. He'd have to add that to his prayer list.

But all that aside, the truth might as well be faced. "Pretty" didn't even begin to define the songbird secretary with a mass of curls the color of deep mahogany under a particularly vivid sunset. She wasn't big as a minute, but that little gal packed enough gorgeous in her little finger to make a man's head spin. Not that it mattered. Even if he'd had any interest—which he did not—Pastor David's brown-eyed Girl Friday made it clear without saying a word that she'd be perfectly happy if Corbin Bishop turned right around and hauled his lanky frame back home. And that was before he even had time to do anything wrong.

Her prickly attitude effectively punched a hole in his overblown one. Corbin had come to the small town full of plans and ideas, never doubting that he'd be

well-liked and respected, just as he had been in Austin. He'd help make the small-town church a nationally known powerhouse, like the one he'd attended in the big city.

Aria had managed to undermine his self-confidence within thirty seconds of raising her humongous chocolate-brown gaze up and away from whatever task she'd been attending to when Pastor David led Corbin into the office that first day. No bright, welcoming smile. No rush to stand up and shake his hand. Just a cool nod that set silky strands of that deep reddish brown hair swinging around her chin. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Bishop."

Corbin managed something that was meant to be a light laugh, even though he suddenly felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Corbin. Please."

She shrugged. "Sure."

Then she returned her attention to her work.

Thank God the minister had been with him; otherwise, Corbin might have stood rooted to the spot for the rest of the day. But David slapped a heavy hand onto his shoulder and guided him across the public office space and into his own private domain.

With the door closed between them and the secretary, the minister grinned and pounded him on the back again. "Well, you survived Aria. You're off to a great start."

And now the pastor stood on the other side of this door asking that little spitfire whether she'd prayed for Corbin. Prayed for *him*? What was the man thinking? If Aria prayed for him at all, she'd ask the Almighty to dump a bucket of something nasty over his head.

He lifted his chin and straightened his shoulders. He'd been taught to confront any sticky issue head-on.

That kind of approach put the brakes on a whole lot of unpleasant possibilities by hauling them out into the open and dealing with them right up front.

So.

He turned the knob and shoved the door open. “Did I hear something about somebody praying for me?”

Behind him, the quiet click of the closing door boomed like a gunshot in the answering silence. Corbin took in David’s amused grin and Aria’s horrified grimace and realized he had no idea what to say next.

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