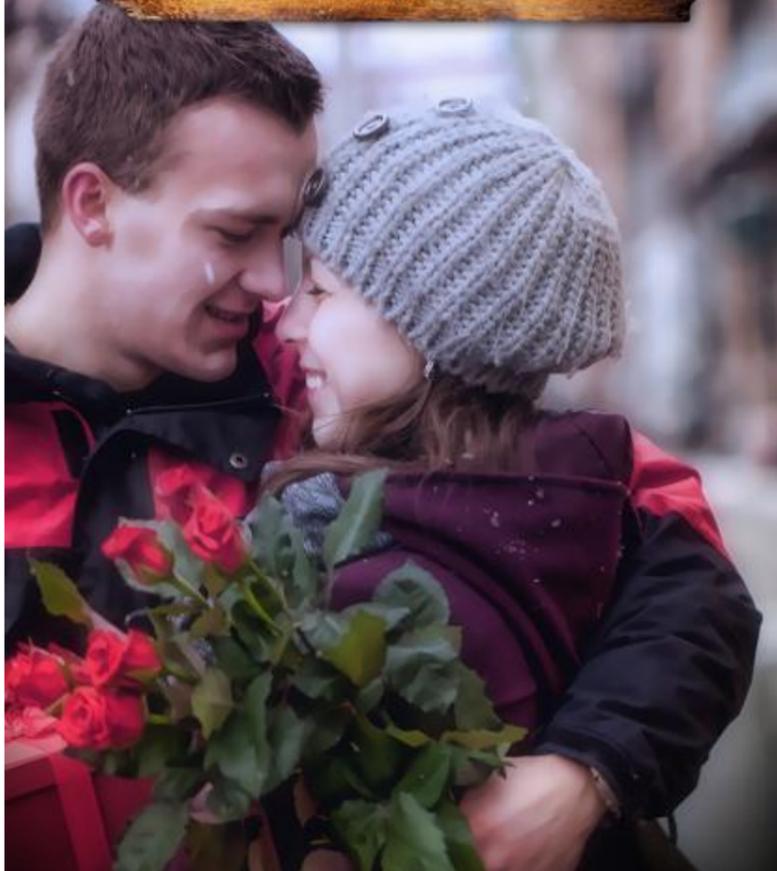


HEARTS HAVEN

JEWELS FOR THE KINGDOM

DELIA LATHAM



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Kingdom

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Dedication

To the real-life Pia and inspiration for this story.

Other Titles by Delia Latham

Destiny's Dream (Solomon's Gate, Book 1)

Kylie's Kiss (Solomon's Gate, Book 2)

Gypsy's Game (Solomon's Gate, Book 3)

Yesterday's Promise

Treehouse

Praise for Delia Latham

Jewels for the Kingdom is a beautifully tender story of two people's search for forgiveness and lasting love. Delia Latham readers will not be disappointed by this delightful read. ~ Sally Laity, Co-author of *Rose's Pledge* and *Mariah's Quest*

Delia Latham has written another great story about forgiveness, faith and love. It grabs and keeps your attention from the very first page. ~ Jeanie Smith Cash, Author

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 gulley 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."

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."