

HEARTS HAVEN

DANCE WITH ME

MARY MANNERS



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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2013

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-222-6

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Mom...you taught me how to dance.

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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-blonde 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.”

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 spitfire, 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.”

2

“Doesn’t look like much in here,” Ryne said as he tossed a file onto the battered wooden desk of his new office at Angel Falls High. The halls were quiet, the students enjoying their weekend. “But it’s going to be home, at least for a while.”

“You’re doing the right thing, you know—taking on this job.” Gabe unloaded a second box of files and set them on Ryne’s desk. Ryne was glad for his friend’s company, and the help getting his office ready. “I know it’s a big change, but you’ve got a special way with kids.”

“You, too.” Ryne stacked a set of file bins on a shelf behind his desk and began to sort the files. “I’ve seen you in action at Wellsprings of Grace, working hand in hand with Susanna. The kids flock to you.”

“And they will to you, too, my friend.” Gabe’s smile told the story as he set a stapler and a three-hole-punch on the desk. He was clearly in love with Susanna, and Ryne truly believed it was a God thing. The way they’d met...their first kiss. Ryne wished for a moment like that with Kaci. He was happy for Gabe, and Susanna, too. Both had been through heartbreaking times before they’d come into each others’ lives. “I know you’ve prayed about this move, and I’ve prayed right along with you, Ryne. It’s a good thing...the right thing.”

“I know how tough the high school years can be.

It's such a tumultuous ride full of peer pressure and changes." Ryne pressed a finger to the scar above his left eye, and then dropped his hand to massage the ridge of tissue that snaked the length of his right forearm. "If I can just keep one kid from going down the wrong road...from making a fatal choice...I'll feel I did the right thing."

"Still thinking about Rafael?"

"Yeah." Ryne turned to unload another stack of files. "I can't seem to get him out of my head."

"You have to let it go." Gabe took the files and sorted them by grade into labeled bins. "There's nothing that can be done now...at least for him."

"Even so...it eats away at me, Gabe." Ryne sighed and raked a hand through his hair. He felt bad for dumping this angst in Gabe's lap. Surely his friend had seen so much more violence and death during his tenure on the streets of Detroit. "What if there was something—"

"There was nothing else. You did all you could, my friend. Now, let it go and focus on the future—on the students here at Angel Falls High. God has called you here for a reason, Ryne. Focus on that and let the past go." Gabe glanced around the office as he moved toward the corner. He smoothed a hand down one bare wall. "This fresh coat of paint really spruces things up in here. The earth tone soothes...just the effect you were hoping for, right?"

"Yeah. That was Kaci's idea. She helped me choose the color, and I think she was dead-on." Ryne's gaze swept the creamy yellow-beige...Sunrise Glow, the paint card had read. And the tone *did* echo the first hues of a sunrise. He should know—he'd taken enough pre-dawn runs along the greenway that bordered the

Angelina Forest. "She's got a knack for that kind of thing."

"Oh?" Gabe's eyebrows hitched together beneath short-cropped black hair. His deep brown eyes, full of gentle concern, were offset by olive skin. "And what else does Kaci have a knack for?"

"Plenty." Ryne shrugged. "You name it."

"Does that plenty include you?"

"We're friends...becoming better friends." Ryne sighed and reached for the picture-hanging kit he'd brought along. Hooks and nails clattered as he shook a handful from the small plastic box and sorted them on the desktop. Now that the walls had dried, he planned to fill the bare space with some eye-catching posters tagged with motivational messages meant to inspire the students who came through his door. "I just wish it could be...more."

"Then do something about it, my friend. I've never known you to hold back about anything."

"This is different...Kaci's different." Ryne surveyed his surroundings, drawing a mental picture of where he wanted to place each item in the room. File cabinet here...computer table there...a little electronic aquarium on the side table. He knelt to sort through a pile of framed posters and began to set each one along the base of the walls where he meant to hang them. "She's fine as long as we keep it easy and light, but anything more than that and she closes right up like a vault with no combination."

Gabe laughed. "Every vault has a combination. You just need to figure it out."

"Well, I'm at a loss, Gabe. I feel like the star quarterback who can't find a winning play." Ryne shook his head. "Forget that...I can't even complete a