

HEARTS HAVEN

LEAP OF FAITH

TANYA STOWE



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Tanya Stowe

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Dedication

To my husband Gary, who took a leap of faith with me
and kept me on track ever after.

Praise for

White Christmas

Ms. Tanya Stowe has, once again, written a great book that grabbed my attention and refused to let go! Ms. Stowe is definitely on my 'to-be-read' list of authors. I enjoy most everything I read of hers. ~The Romance Studio

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."

2

"I don't know what to do." Zack was hardly even aware that he spoke out loud as he stared at his personal laptop. The incredible, unbelievable e-mail sat open on his screen.

Advanced Multimedia Corporation offered him great benefits, more money than he needed, and two months to resign his current position and move. They would even give him a bonus to help him find a place in Manhattan. Multimedia wanted him to design software that would network computers, phones, and calendar devices, regardless of the make or brand. It was cutting-edge technology that would place their company at the head of the game.

Their design was in the last stages. The legendary software designer who created it planned to retire in six months, and he'd handpicked Zack to complete his work. Multimedia gave him a deadline of one month to reply. It should have taken him one minute. Instead, the offer sat on his computer. Even now, his finger was poised over the key.

What was he waiting for, and why did his hand seem frozen in space?

Just as he was about to hit the key, someone knocked on his door. Zack sat back in his chair and released a pent up sigh. Probably Gabe, wanting to know why he was missing out on the free food at the gathering.

Zack hadn't told his friend about the offer. In fact, the only people he had told were his parents, his sister, and her husband. He didn't feel like talking about it. Even now.

Maybe if he just kept quiet, Gabe would think he'd gone to bed and leave him alone. Another knock on the door cancelled that thought.

Muttering under his breath, Zack grabbed his coffee mug and headed for the door. Halfway there, he remembered he still had on his glasses. He pulled them off then stooped to pick up a shoe he almost tripped over. He glanced around his normally neat-as-a-pin apartment, now littered with shoes, towels, and take-out bags...an indication of his scattered state.

The knock sounded again. "OK. I'm coming!"

With a shake of his head he threw open the door. "Give a guy a chance, will you, Gabe—" His sentence sputtered to a stop as he realized it wasn't Gabe. "Oh, hey. Sorry."

Zack's apology died on his lips. He knew Zoe Wyndham from the monthly Heart's Haven get-togethers. He'd talked to her often and thought she was pretty, in a flighty kind of way. But as she stood there on his doorstep, something happened.

A breeze blew over them. Not really blew, just...fluttered, lifting loose tendrils of Zoe's hair around her face. Her long, flowered skirt wrapped tight against her slender form and wafted forward to touch his pant legs. It also carried the soft scent of something sweet and full of spring sunshine. Suddenly, Zack wondered why he'd never noticed her beautiful eyes until today. Slightly slanted like almonds but so green they looked like pools in an emerald forest.

How had he missed that? Or how strands of white-gold hair wove through the thick braid looped over her shoulder? What would those white-gold streaks look like when her hair was flowing? If the braid almost reached her waist, how long would it be when it was loose?

Zack realized he was staring when she ducked her head, obviously embarrassed by his perusal.

"Mr. Hart said you weren't feeling well so I brought you this." She lifted the plate, but as Zack looked down, she tucked her hands under it so very little of them showed.

He had his glasses, the mug, one shoe, and a dirty pair of socks in his hands, so he couldn't take the plate.

Zoe smiled and gestured to his table. "I'll just put it over there if that's OK."

"Sure," Zack stepped out of the way.

He pushed the door shut with his foot and dropped the dirty socks and shoe in a nearby basket. As he looked around the room, he began to apologize for its condition.

"Don't," Zoe said with a shake of her head. "You shouldn't apologize for being sick." Her quick, sweeping gaze suddenly stopped on the computer. "Oh," she whispered.

"Oh, what?" Zack asked, coming up behind her.

"Nothing." With a shake of her head, she placed the plate on the table. "You should know Hart's nephew, David, and Gabe have a challenge over whose ribs are best, David's Texas barbecue or Gabe's Chicago style. We're all supposed to vote when Gabe cooks. But he says you can end it as soon as you taste David's ribs because you know Gabe's are better."

Zack shook his head. "Leave it to Gabe to get me

right in the middle of something when I'm not even there."

Zoe smiled. "Maybe you should taste David's ribs before you say that. Gabe may be right."

Zack lifted the napkin and peeked under. "I don't know. Those look mighty tasty." He looked back at Zoe but she had turned her head to study his computer again.

It gave him the chance to examine her face up close. She wasn't wearing makeup, not even on her long, dark eyelashes. She had soft-looking, creamy skin so he was glad she didn't cover it up. He wondered once again how he had missed Zoe's flawless natural beauty in all their previous meetings. He even noticed she chewed on her full bottom lip.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and turned back to him. "Look, I know this is going to sound strange."

Zack had a hard time concentrating on what she said because now that she was close, he would bet her eyes were hazel, not green, and they had picked up the forest color from her sweater. Did they take on other colors, too?

"I have a message for you," she said.

"More trouble from Gabe?" His gaze traveled over her lips.

"No, not from Gabe. I have to tell you to listen to the promptings of your heart."

Right now the promptings of his heart told him to lean over and kiss those sweet pink lips. He felt quite certain those were not the promptings Zoe meant.

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

She took another breath. "It means God is trying to tell you something, Zack. You need to listen."

A chill descended through him, as if cold water had been poured over his head. He blinked then took a step backward.

“God is trying to tell me something,” he said each word carefully, disbelief heavy in his tone.

Zoe nodded. “You have a decision to make. It’s important that you trust your instincts.”

His gaze darted to the computer. “Wait a minute, how do you know about the job offer?”

“You have a job offer?”

“Just about the best offer a guy could get.”

“Then why haven’t you accepted it?” She spoke in a soft and quiet tone.

“How do you—” He cut off abruptly and stepped back again. “This is getting way too weird.”

He remembered then that Zoe had always seemed a little too “other-worldly” for him. Maybe that’s how she’d slipped past his babe-detection radar. His weirdo-detection radar had been blipping too loudly. “Look, I appreciate your concern.”

She shook her head. “It’s OK, Zack. You don’t have to believe me. I just had to tell you.” She pointed to the ribs.

“Don’t forget Gabe’s waiting for your vote. Goodbye.”

She let herself out the door. It all happened so fast. Zack blinked twice before he realized she was actually gone. Unfortunately, her sweet scent lingered in the air.

3

Zoe leaned her back against the door and took a deep breath. "That went well."

She closed her eyes as disappointment washed through her. Too bad. For a moment there, she actually felt something...a connection. Or maybe just attraction.

Zack had picture-perfect good looks. Straight, brown hair. Amazing brown eyes. Chiseled straight nose. Lips not too full and not too thin. He was magazine material all the way. Definitely not the type to be attracted to Zoe, let alone someone with "weird" ways like her.

She wasn't sure which was more disappointing. The fact that he wasn't really interested in her or that he had the usual negative response to her gift. What had started out to be a pleasant encounter ended not so pleasant. As usual.

"Just remember, Lord, I'm faithful and follow your orders, no matter how difficult," she muttered as she headed back to the gathering.

Determined to put the incident behind her, she perked up when she saw Pia leaving her apartment. Zoe rushed across the lawn and relieved her of the casserole dish as Pia stepped outside her gate.

"Here, let me take that." Zoe carried the hot dish to a table already groaning beneath an array of various dishes. She added it to the collection and inhaled deeply. "Smells luscious, Pia. What is it?"

“Baked beans.” Pia lowered her voice and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “It’s the only thing I make well enough to offer innocent diners.”

“Grab a drink and come on over!” A smiling woman with dark brown hair beckoned from a nearby table.

“Be right there, Susanna!” Zoe called. She fished a cold soft drink out of a washtub filled with ice and beverages, handed one to Pia, and popped the top on another.

She listened to them talk about how Pia had chased Susanna down to give her an angel’s wings necklace even though they had never met. Susanna called it a “God thing” but all the while, Zoe thought it sounded like something *she* would do.

Zoe touched the graceful cross, resting against her own chest. When Pia had given her the necklace, it had totally confirmed the path she thought God wanted her to take. Nervously, she glanced toward Zack’s door. At least she felt pretty sure it confirmed the path He wanted her to take.

4

Zack stood in front of Zoe's door and shuffled his feet. He didn't want to spend his Saturday morning this way. He'd tried various times and ways to put the kooky, petite woman out of his mind. But she refused to go. He couldn't forget her eyes, her skin as smooth as cream, or the look of hurt in her eyes when he'd called their encounter weird.

So, after days of wrangling with his conscience and his vivid imagination, he'd decided to find out if she was just as fascinating as he remembered.

Resolved, he knocked on the door. No answer filled him with disappointment, so he knocked again.

"Hang on!" A voice called. Relief flooded Zack as he heard something shift and footsteps hurry toward the door. Zoe wore a pair of jeans and a white top with a round neck and puffy sleeves. Covering it was a long heavy, leather-looking apron...and she looked as fresh and lovely as Zack remembered. She opened the door with a flourish and a smile, until she saw it was him.

"Oh, hello." Her smile faded as she brought the door close to her body.

"Hi. I assumed this plate's yours."

"Yes. Usually, I bring my own. Salads tend to make the paper plates soggy." She took the plate from his hand, still hugging the door.

"Thanks for bringing me dinner...and letting me use your plate. I really appreciated it."

"You're welcome."

"I couldn't pick a winner, by the way."

"A winner?"

"Yeah, for the rib challenge. Gabe's going to be disappointed, but I think David's ribs are as good as his." He paused and stuck his hands in his back pockets. "Everything, OK? You seem a little down." Cautious or defensive was closer to the truth but he didn't say it.

"I'm fine," she said and lifted the plate. "Thanks for bringing this back, but I've got to get back to work."

She didn't sound fine, and he wasn't ready to leave. Not yet. "Do you mind if I come in for a little while. I'd like to talk to you."

She hesitated then shrugged. "I guess so. But I have to finish something."

"Sure, sure. Go ahead."

She opened the door wide, and Zack followed her in. Zoe headed for a table in the center of the room, but Zack froze just inside. Positioned on easels in front of every window were large stained glass pictures. Bright sunlight struck the artwork and sent shards of color everywhere.

Zack whistled in appreciation. "It's like walking into a kaleidoscope."

Zoe laughed. "Well, I've never heard it described quite that way." She slid onto a stool behind the desk and lifted a soldering iron. In seconds, a thin trail of smoke wafted upwards.

Zack walked to the first piece, a wide garden scene with a waterfall, a lion, and a lamb beside a pool. He didn't know glass came in so many shades of green.

The next piece was a beautiful rendering of Jesus