

HEARTS HAVEN

LOVE NOTIONS

MARY MANNERS

FIREWORKS AREN'T JUST FOR
THE 4TH OF JULY



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Mary Manners

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Nicola Martinez...thank you for believing in me.
Because of you, my lifelong dream has come true. May
God rain blessings on you and yours all the days of
your life.

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Stolen Miracles
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Brenna's Choice
Starfire
Wounded Faith
Angel Song

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 shimmied 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."

"What?" Jami raked a hand through honey-blonde 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."

2

"I'm not your baby." Jami strode behind the counter and snatched a mint of her own. She unwrapped it and tossed it into her mouth, letting red-hot peppermint burn over her. She had to chew on something and it was the mint or Riley. She turned her back to him, taking a moment to straighten a small display of inspirational notecards. "Don't call me that."

"Gets under your skin, doesn't it?"

"Not much has changed. You're still incorrigible."

"Maybe by your standards, but not by mine. But if it's a crime to have a dream—to pursue that dream—then I'm guilty as charged."

"Well, by *your* standards, Nana's Novel Notions might just be business—a *project*— but, to me, it's everything."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, I have a project, too. Did you notice the architectural firm next door?"

"Yes, of course I did. Designs by Riley..." Jami did a quick spin, turned back to face him, dropping a notecard. It fluttered to the floor and slipped beneath the checkout counter. "Oh, no. Not *that*, too."

"Yes, that, too. And I have plans to expand. This complex is perfect, and I'm going to do my best to make it happen—soon." He nodded to emphasize. "I've dreamed of building an architectural firm my

whole life. I have goals too, you know, and Angel Falls is the perfect venue to bring them to fruition.”

“You can’t. You wouldn’t. Not now.”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.”

“I can give you a million reasons.” Jami sighed and swiped hair from her brow, wishing the AC repairman would materialize and rescue her from this infernal sauna. Even the candles on display were beginning to wilt. By the grand opening, they’d be little more than a puddle. The scent of warm apple pie mingled with pine, making the shop smell more like Christmas than the dog days of June. “Look, it’s too hot in here to argue, and I don’t even know why you’re being so...unneighborly.”

“Unneighborly?” He laughed out loud. “Is that what you’d call it?”

“I would.”

“I surrender.” Riley held up both hands. “You’re right. It *is* too hot in here to continue this...discussion. Let’s take it back to the Haven. I’ll drive.”

“No, thanks.” She’d rather hitch a ride home in the jaws of an alligator. “I rode my bike.”

“Which bike?” Riley eased over to the display widow and peered into the quiet boulevard. “That cute little neon-pink retro Schwinn parked out front—the one with a basket hooked to the front handlebars and a miserably flat rear tire?”

“What!” She pushed past him to the shop door, her mood further deflating as her gaze swept the length of the bike. “Oh no! How did *that* happen?”

“Looks like you ran over a sea of glass.” He motioned to a flurry of shards scattered over the concrete, sparkling like jagged diamonds beneath the late-June sun. “Creates a little emergency, doesn’t it?”

"No, it doesn't." Jami tapped her nails on the polished window as her breath fogged the glass. "I'll just walk."

"Nine miles?" Riley's laughter echoed off the honey-tanned shop walls. "In that case, you might make it home by midnight."

"This isn't the way home." Jami leaned forward in the passenger seat of Riley's truck and pointed west into a halo of late-afternoon sun. "Heart's Haven is *that* way."

"I know how to get home." Riley adjusted the radio dial and lowered the driver's window so a breeze rushed through the cab. He loved the lush smell of Angelina Forest pine that made everything seem fresh and new. It reminded him that he was new, too. It would serve him well to remember that and rein in his emotions before he fell too far into old, destructive habits. He'd started off on the wrong foot with Jami—again—and he planned to rectify that. "I have to make a quick stop."

"Does it have anything to do with that cooler nestled beside my bike in the bed of your truck?"

"Maybe."

Her lips curved into a scowl as her nose wrinkled, making a cute smattering of freckles more prevalent. "It's not holding Bambi, is it?"

"No." Riley grinned as he changed lanes. "I gave up my hunting days after that accident and the dozen painful stitches—not to mention the tongue-lashing I got from my dad and the tears from my mother. Dad took my license, too. I have a job now—and a generous