



**IT WILL TAKE TRUSTING GOD AND LOVE
TO MAKE THIS SWEET MELODY**



Designed by
Love

Mary Manners

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Dedication

To Lisa McCaskill...thanks for your wonderful guidance, patience, and kind spirit. You are a light in the darkness, and I appreciate you!

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Mended Heart
Tender Mercies
Light the Fire
Buried Treasures
Brenna's Choice
Starfire
Wounded Faith
Angel Song
Dance with me
Loves Kindled Flame
Kate's Kisses
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Wishes in Willow Lake
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Angel Song

[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.

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."