



HEARTS HAVEN

LOVE IN THE WINGS

DELIA LATHAM

SOME BATTLES CAN ONLY
BE WON IN A PRAYER ROOM.
CAN LOVE BE WON THERE TOO?

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WINGS

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Dedication

In memory of Brenda Talley. Dear friend and sister in Christ. Champion of inspirational romance authors.

Encourager extraordinaire. I miss you...but I know you're at peace with Jesus, held in the wings of the One who IS Love.

Save me a place at the table, dear friend!

Prologue

Something dark and unspeakable crept and coiled its way toward Angel Falls, Texas. Invisible to the human eye, it spread itself over the area, twined oily arms around the small town and wrapped it in a suffocating, unholy embrace.

The quaint location looked the same as always. Clean streets fronted well-maintained homes and businesses. In the town square, brightly colored flowers exploded from large planters hanging on each of at least a dozen old-fashioned street lamps. People went about their lives as if nothing had changed. They opened their shops and offices, greeted friends and customers, played their games and made their deals.

Above their heads, the brooding presence hung like a pregnant cloud, from which an occasional tentacle of darkness spiraled downward into specific groups of people.

Near its center, the darkness whirled and pulsed with chaotic energy. This portion of the town's unknown visitor hung directly over a large building topped by a tall steeple. A gold cross towered at the apex of the steeple's point, and the angry cloud seemed unable to hold its shape and density over that gleaming symbol. It tried. Tendrils of darkness twined toward each other, reaching, straining for a grip. But a constant flow of pure, white, bright power foiled every attempt to mend that one weak spot in the roiling

entity.

A large sign at the intersection of Halo Street and Harp Avenue identified the steepled building as The Falls Tabernacle. On a large marquee at the front of the property, scrolling letters spelled out a verse of Scripture: *Psalm 91:11 – For He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.*

If any seed of truth lies within those words, there might yet be hope for Angel Falls....

1

Aria Robbins stepped outside the door of her little cottage in the popular Heart's Haven rental complex, and immediately gasped for breath. The air felt weighty, pushing against her with an almost palpable force as she plodded through it to the cheery red pony car waiting in the driveway. She paused, one hand on top of the classic vehicle she babied with quiet pride, the other shading her eyes as she ran a quick visual scan of the complex.

Nothing looked out of place. Hers was the only cottage with a car out front, so the other tenants had gone off to work or play...whatever they did while she worked her two part-time jobs every day. Across the lot, her landlord, eccentric octogenarian Andrew Hart, knelt in one of his treasured flowerbeds, a trowel in one hand. But he wasn't working. Head cocked to the side in a curious, attentive posture, he gazed up into the sky as if studying something in the clouds—except that there were no clouds.

Aria shrugged and climbed behind the wheel. Who knew what Hart was thinking?

Rumor had it the old guy carried on conversations with angels—who actually made themselves visible to him. Well, why not? Angels were real. She couldn't claim to believe the Bible and not believe in God's special messengers. She'd never seen one, but that

didn't mean they weren't out there.

As for Hart...well, the old fellow kept mostly to himself, didn't have a lot to say to anyone other than his wife Viv—an outgoing, friendly, utterly sweet woman about as unlike her husband as a wife could possibly be. But they seemed happy, and Aria loved seeing them together. Strange he might be, but old Hart had made Heart's Haven one of the most sought-after rental-cottage complexes in the state. Aria had considered herself blessed when her application was accepted, and she'd moved into the friendly community last month.

She flipped on the air conditioning and turned the dial to high. Little trickles of perspiration slid down the back of her neck, and she shook her head. May was brand new. Her dad would say spring had barely sprung, and yet this heavy heat felt more like late July. Something seemed...*off*. The unseasonal humidity was unlike any she'd ever felt—and Aria was East Texas born and bred. She knew humidity.

Well, heat or not, humidity or whatever, she had a job to get to. Two of them. She loved the work she did at both places of employment, but it had been a tough week, and Aria was firmly on board with the whole TGIF thing today.

Arriving at The Falls Tabernacle, she entered the church office, tossed her purse under the desk and switched on the computer before she even sat down. When her screen opened up, the weird weather and the day of the week became the furthest things from her mind. All she could see, hear, feel or think was focused on the e-mail message plastered in easy-to-read, eighteen-point Helvetica font all the way across the twenty-inch monitor she'd absolutely love-love-

loved...until this very moment.

Good morning, Aria! I heard this amazing song yesterday. It's phenomenal! Went ahead and picked up the sheet music...which you've already seen right there on your desk, right?

At this point in the unwelcome message, one of those ridiculous, animated smiley faces—moronicons, in Aria-speak—grinned at her like some kind of evil joker.

Her gaze swung from the computer screen to the sheet music centered squarely on her desk blotter. Without meaning to, she took in the song's title: "He is Risen! Risen Indeed."

She clamped her lip between her teeth and returned her attention to the message.

"So—now that you've checked out the sheet music (because of course that's what you did the moment I mentioned it), have you heard the song? Let me know what you think. Can't wait to hear what the Praise Team does with this one. CB"

Aria snorted. "You have got some nerve, Corbin Bishop!"

Acidity soured her voice, and she cast a quick glance around the office, relieved to find herself still alone. She hadn't meant to say anything out loud, and wished she'd kept her lip zipped. The snarky words had dripped outrage, resulting in an unpleasant sibilance that seemed to echo in the large room. She shuddered as an unwelcome thought made her cringe. Had the serpent sounded something like that when he spat his disastrous lies at Eve in the Garden of Eden?

With a frustrated sigh, she sat and lowered her head into her hands. "God, I don't want to have this kind of attitude. I've always welcomed input about the

music ministry. So why do my hackles rise every time *he* gets within a hundred yards of me?" She sighed. "I'm going to need a little help here, Lord."

She waited, hoping...what? That the Almighty would respond to her petty whining in an audible voice?

"Aria? Is that you?" From the pastor's office, a deep male baritone broke the silence.

Aria bounced two inches off her chair, and then dropped back down, one hand over her pounding heart. Not the voice of God, but it delivered one message quite well: She was not alone in the office, as she'd thought.

"Yes, Pastor David." Her voice cracked, and she rolled her eyes. "Sorry I'm late."

The office door swung open and David Myers stepped out of what Aria referred to as the "inner sanctum."

"No problem. I came in for an early counseling session. You'll be happy to know I've already made coffee." He grinned. "Sounds like you could use some."

While Aria silently wished for a hole to drop into and a handy pile of earth to pull over her mortified body, the pastor stepped into a small alcove where all things coffee-related had their home within this office. He took her favorite mug from a cabinet, filled it with the hot brew and carried it to her desk.

"Starting the day off with prayer is a commendable practice. I'm impressed."

Aria's cheeks warmed under his knowing grin. Pastor David never missed a trick. She nodded miserably. "I need a little spiritual attitude adjustment."

He dipped his head toward the offensive sheet music still acting as centerpiece for her blotter. "Wouldn't have anything to do with that, would it?"

With a wry twist of her lips, she gave him a sideways roll of the eyes. "Why ask, when you already know the answer?"

Sipping at the hot coffee, she fixed her gaze on a bookshelf across the room, waiting for the quiet censure that would surely come. But the pastor just stood there leaning against an ancient metal file cabinet. Arms crossed, a little shadow-smile dancing on his lips, he watched her through eyes she had long since deemed "all seeing."

Finally, she set her cup on a cloth coaster—or "mug rug," as her landlord's wife, Vivian Hart, called the brightly colored, handmade creations she was fond of gifting to anyone and everyone for any good reason...or no reason at all. With the hot liquid safely settled, Aria forced herself to make eye contact.

The minister had a green eye and a blue one. Aria had never seen that type of optical anomaly until she met David, and it looked great on him. His wife thought so too...Aria knew, because she spent half of every work day as Pia Myers's assistant—either in her jewelry design studio, or with the thousand and one other things that fell to a pastor's wife to handle. Married only a couple of years, Pia and the pastor still existed under a bit of a newlywed glow. So David's eyes had been the subject of more than one conversation between Aria and his pretty, vivacious bride.

But she was putting off the inevitable. David's eyes had nothing to do with her snippy attitude—or Corbin Bishop's arrogant one, for that matter.

“Does he think I don’t know what I’m doing with the praise team?” Why not just lay it out there and be honest about what was bothering her? The pastor would try to help, even if her attitude disappointed him. But even the charismatic David Myers would never be able to make her actually like the new youth minister.

Corbin had swept into Angel Falls a month ago, fresh out of a big, fancy church in Austin and full of big, fancy ideas to improve this one. Aria suspected he’d like nothing better than to make The Falls Tabernacle a miniature duplicate of the famous super church he’d left behind.

From day one, most of the unattached females in the congregation made utter fools of themselves every time the much-too-handsome youth minister walked into a room. Aria would never be one of those pathetic giggle-boxes. Fall all over herself to ensure she caught the eye of the self-assured newcomer? Yeah, sure—on the first frigid day in an East Texas July.

Besides, shouldn’t there be some kind of rule about people in the ministry not being overtly attractive? Who needed that type of distraction when a poor, single soul might already be floundering?

Maybe Pastor David could, at the very least, help her find a way to tolerate this newcomer from the big city. The good Lord knew she could use a little help...she wasn’t exactly feeling the love, so far.

If only he’d stayed in Austin. We were doing just fine without him. Lord, can’t You just send him back where he came from?

“Aria.”

She jumped, and raised her guilty gaze to the minister’s mischievous one. How long had she been

staring into space?

“Sorry...did you say something?”

“Sure did, but you probably didn’t want to hear it anyway.” The twinkle in his eyes became a sober, questioning gleam. “I asked if you’ve tried praying for Corbin?”

Corbin Bishop stopped, frozen, in the hallway outside the church office. One hand gripped the handle of the door he’d been about to push open.

“I asked if you’ve tried praying for Corbin.” Pastor David’s voice carried through the closed door, plenty loud enough for him to hear every word. What was it with anointed preachers? He’d never heard a one of them who had a hard time being heard.

He couldn’t make out the reply, but he knew the voice. Always soft-spoken, Aria Robbins’s soft, husky tones sounded downright subdued today.

What was going on in there? And why was he a part of the conversation?

He scowled. *Oh, come on. Do you really have to ask?*

From the day he’d arrived in Angel Falls, the minister’s secretary made it ab-so-lutely clear that she had no desire to know the new youth pastor.

Despite his curiosity and concern about the conversation on the other side of the door, Corbin smiled a little. He couldn’t help it. The prim, auburn-haired secretary—who also possessed an impressive anointing and incredible talent for leading the praise team—had that effect on his lips. Aria Robbins made him smile, but God only knew why, since she’d probably throw something right smack at his head if

she figured it out.

And the really weird thing was, he didn't particularly like her either. Why would he, given the slightly cooler-than-frigid welcome she'd extended toward him? Maybe God tossed the two of them in the pot together so Aria could be the thorn in Corbin's side to keep him humble. He'd certainly dealt out a double scoop of possibility, since they not only had to work together here at the church, but lived in neighboring cottages at Heart's Haven.

He loved Angel Falls. The church was amazing—yeah, it could use a bit of modernization, a little nudge into the twenty-first century, but he liked the people. Pastor David and his wife were the salt of the earth. And his little cottage next door to Aria's had become the closest thing to a home he'd ever known.

Now if he could only find something to like about his neighbor. He'd have to add that to his prayer list.

But all that aside, the truth might as well be faced. "Pretty" didn't even begin to define the songbird secretary with a mass of curls the color of deep mahogany under a particularly vivid sunset. She wasn't big as a minute, but that little gal packed enough gorgeous in her little finger to make a man's head spin. Not that it mattered. Even if he'd had any interest—which he did not—Pastor David's brown-eyed Girl Friday made it clear without saying a word that she'd be perfectly happy if Corbin Bishop turned right around and hauled his lanky frame back home. And that was before he even had time to do anything wrong.

Her prickly attitude effectively punched a hole in his overblown one. Corbin had come to the small town full of plans and ideas, never doubting that he'd be

well-liked and respected, just as he had been in Austin. He'd help make the small-town church a nationally known powerhouse, like the one he'd attended in the big city.

Aria had managed to undermine his self-confidence within thirty seconds of raising her humongous chocolate-brown gaze up and away from whatever task she'd been attending to when Pastor David led Corbin into the office that first day. No bright, welcoming smile. No rush to stand up and shake his hand. Just a cool nod that set silky strands of that deep reddish brown hair swinging around her chin. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Bishop."

Corbin managed something that was meant to be a light laugh, even though he suddenly felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Corbin. Please."

She shrugged. "Sure."

Then she returned her attention to her work.

Thank God the minister had been with him; otherwise, Corbin might have stood rooted to the spot for the rest of the day. But David slapped a heavy hand onto his shoulder and guided him across the public office space and into his own private domain.

With the door closed between them and the secretary, the minister grinned and pounded him on the back again. "Well, you survived Aria. You're off to a great start."

And now the pastor stood on the other side of this door asking that little spitfire whether she'd prayed for Corbin. Prayed for *him*? What was the man thinking? If Aria prayed for him at all, she'd ask the Almighty to dump a bucket of something nasty over his head.

He lifted his chin and straightened his shoulders. He'd been taught to confront any sticky issue head-on.

That kind of approach put the brakes on a whole lot of unpleasant possibilities by hauling them out into the open and dealing with them right up front.

So.

He turned the knob and shoved the door open. “Did I hear something about somebody praying for me?”

Behind him, the quiet click of the closing door boomed like a gunshot in the answering silence. Corbin took in David’s amused grin and Aria’s horrified grimace and realized he had no idea what to say next.

2

Aria mulled over the events of the morning as she drove from the church to Jewels for the Kingdom, where Pia would keep her busy the rest of the day.

Her cheeks burned with a flush of hot embarrassment even now, recalling the youth minister's deliberate crash of her supposedly private conversation with Pastor David. Of the three of them, only Pastor had seemed unaffected by Corbin's sudden appearance. After his initial, over-bright outburst upon entering the room, even the interloper himself seemed lost as to what should happen next.

Pastor grabbed an extra chair, planted it as close to Aria's as it would fit, and pointed Corbin into it. "Sit."

Only after the younger man hesitantly obeyed did the pastor roll another chair into the three-way circle for himself.

"What am I going to do with the two of you?" He wagged his head back and forth, but couldn't quite hide the twinkle of humor in his eyes. "You're my strongest ministers for the youth in this church, but this animosity between you has got to stop. It's not the kind of example the young people need."

Aria lowered her gaze, shamed by the truth in that remark. Beside her, Corbin squirmed in his chair. Apparently, Pastor David's straightforward approach pierced through even the oversized, big-city ego the youth minister had brought all the way to Angel Falls.

“Look, kids, I don’t have a clue what’s up with y’all, and to be honest, I don’t care. I just want it to stop.”

“Pastor—” Aria tried to speak up, stung by his inability to see in Corbin what she saw so clearly.

He held up one hand and shook his head. “Not now, Aria. If you still feel the need to discuss it a week from today, we’ll get together again. For now, however, here’s what I want to see happen.” He leaned forward, propped his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands together. Then he pointed both index fingers at Aria and Corbin. “The two of you are going to spend thirty minutes of your prayer time every day this week focusing entirely on praying for each other.”

Corbin’s head snapped up right along with Aria’s. “*What?*” They spoke in complete unison—probably the one and only time they’d ever be in agreement.

The pastor’s smile encompassed them both. “It’s hard not to care about someone you’re praying for. I don’t mean just saying words; I think you both know that. Sincerely, from the depths of your souls, you are to pray for each other. Every day. Starting today.”

He stood. “In the meantime, try not to step on each other’s toes, if you can help it. I have better things to do than play referee.” He rolled the chair he’d borrowed back to where it belonged and disappeared into his office, leaving Aria and Corbin alone.

When she finally found the courage to look up, she found his translucent blue gaze fixed on her in what appeared to be genuine confusion. Seeing he had her attention, he lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. “I’m in the dark right now. I don’t have a clue why you dislike me so much. But I’ve been taught to obey those who have the rule over me, and while I’m attending this

church, that means Pastor David.” He stood and rolled his chair back to its place. “So I guess I’ll be praying for you this week, Aria.”

And he walked out of the office.

Aria had sat with her head bowed, feeling about half an inch tall.

By the time she pulled her Mustang into a parking slot next to the dilapidated blue sedan Pia Myers stubbornly refused to replace with something more eye-appealing, she’d worked herself into a nervous tizzy. She pushed through the door, eager to absorb the serene peace she always experienced in the large, neo-modern room that displayed Pia’s jewelry designs in minimalistic, innovative settings.

Instead, she was greeted by Pia’s disembodied voice, which sliced through the silence of the shop with uncharacteristic sharpness. “Aria, I hope that’s you. You are late!”

Aria froze. “Pia?” Her voice sounded half-frightened—which she kind of was. Pia had never snipped at her before. The whole world seemed off its center beam today.

“Well, who else?” Pia’s head poked up from behind a nearby counter, where she’d obviously been rooting through a cabinet full of tiny gold boxes. Her tousled hair bespoke the mad effort she’d made to find whatever it was she sought. A pair of almond-shaped eyes sparked with green fire as she glared across the room. “Are you going to stand there all day, or come help me—” She broke off and confusion clouded her stormy eyes. “Help me...find...that thing?”

“Just a sec.” Aria hurried into a smaller storage area, where she stashed her purse and pulled in a deep breath before returning to kneel next to her pastor’s