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LOVE COMES LATELY

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Lately

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Love Comes Lately

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1

Vivian Mallory took one last look at the Country Creations catalogue, and then nodded to the sales clerk. "Those heart-shaped boxes of chocolates are perfect. They're a little expensive but this is a special occasion." She reached for her wallet and a charge card.

Andy would not be happy about the price. In fact, he was unhappy about her entire plan, but Viv had insisted. When four young couples become engaged almost at the same time, all of them tenants of the same cottage-rental complex, that's a big deal. With Valentine's Day just around the corner, Viv was determined to mark the event with a celebration...no matter how much Andy grouched and complained.

Andrew Hart owned and operated Heart's Haven—a unique complex of bungalows with a well-established reputation for making love happen. Confirmed bachelors had long steered clear of the complex because it seemed that all who entered fell in love...even those most determined to avoid it.

Viv repressed a sigh. Everyone except the owner himself. Andy seemed impervious to that emotion, even though he fostered it in everyone else.

She'd met the taciturn bachelor when she moved her husband back to his childhood home in Angel Falls after a cancer diagnosis. As Vance's oldest friend, Andy had helped Viv through the difficult months of

her husband's illness and passing. That was almost six years ago, and Andy'd been by her side ever since. Slowly but surely, friendship had turned to something more for Viv. But it seemed the man she now loved with her whole heart was immune to love.

"Mrs. Mallory..." The sales girl pulled gently on Viv's charge card, which she'd held out but forgotten to release.

"Oh! Sorry, dear." Viv offered an apologetic smile. "Too much on my mind."

Not the least of which was one still handsome but stubborn man. When Viv suggested he host a special Valentine's Day celebration for all his newly engaged tenants, Andy had vehemently objected. One would think the man was afraid of catching the Valentine's Day bug. The two of them had even argued, which they rarely did.

Viv was so shocked and hurt, she didn't speak to Andy for days. Finally, he relented and told her to make the plans. So here she was, shopping for the holiday event, but the idea had lost some of its sparkle, having come with such a steep emotional price tag. At times, she felt as if she was simply going through the motions. With almost grim determination, she signed the credit card slip and headed out the door.

Andrew Hart drove his pickup truck slowly down Main Street, looking for Vivian's car. Spotting it parked outside the little specialty shop she loved so much, he pulled in a few cars down and waited for her to come out.

As soon as she saw him, she waved. "What are

you doing here?" She peered through his open window with a questioning frown.

"Waiting for you. I was hopin' you might have dinner with me."

"Well, it's a little early..." She eyed him with blatant suspicion. "But yes, I think I'd like that."

"Hop in. I'll drive."

She slid inside the truck, settled her packages on the seat between them, and then gave him a speculative once-over. "You could have called my cell phone and I would have met you. What's this all about?"

"You're a good friend, Viv. I hurt you the other day and that's the last thing you deserve. I figure I owe you an explanation."

They'd passed through town now and headed out the country road. "Where are we going?"

"To the country club."

"Andrew Hart."

He sighed. When Viv got "that look," she'd have her say if it killed her.

"In all the years I've known you, you have never gone to the country club."

"You're right about that. I haven't set foot in the place in over fifty years."

"Andrew, you're scaring me."

"Well, maybe you should be scared. It's not a pretty story I have to tell you. Can we just talk about it when we get there?"

Viv nodded, but her eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hair. He wouldn't be allowed to change his mind now, even if he wanted to. Well, it was best he tell her everything.

He took Viv's elbow as they walked into the

restaurant. He wished they could dine outdoors, but the weather was still a bit chilly. Still, he requested a window table, so they could look out over the patio and the greens—though only bare hints of that color were beginning to show, and the trees stood stark and bare against the sky.

He steered the conversation into mundane avenues while they ate. To his surprise, Vivian allowed him to do so. But she hadn't forgotten his reference to having a story to tell. He had no illusions about being off the hook.

Only after they'd eaten and the waiter had taken their dirty plates and brought coffee for both of them did he broach the subject—and only then after sending up a silent prayer for strength.

He nodded toward a table on the edge of patio. "We sat right there."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why I didn't get caught in the Heart's Haven love net?"

"Yes, of course. Everyone wonders."

"Well, the truth is, I did. Her name was Grace and she lived in one of the mansions down the road. Her dad owned the lumber mill and the hardware store. They were well-to-do and—well, as you know, my parent's ran a boarding house."

"A very special one." Defensive. Even mad at him, Viv was loyal.

"Not special enough. At least not for Grace's dad. He didn't approve but that didn't stop Grace. We fell in love and spent the summer together...biking, swimming at the quarry pond when I could get free. I worked at Heart's Haven on weekdays and as a caddy here at the course on the weekends. I was doing good.

I'd just bought my truck and put some money away. They were the happiest days of my life."

He paused to sip at his cooling coffee, and to Viv's credit, she remained silent. He was having a hard enough time talking about this without having to answer questions right now. "There was a big dance here at the country club. The whole town was invited, not just the members. Tickets weren't cheap but I managed to wrangle a couple. That dance was a special occasion, and I meant to ask Grace to marry me. I think she expected it—and I think her dad knew it too. He paid some of the boys, the valets and the waiters, to give us a hard time."

"A hard time?"

"They made fun of me, a caddy at the fancy dinner. Teased Gracie 'bout slummin'. By the time we finally made it to our table, I'd figured out what was goin' on." He drew a deep breath and let it out again. "I was angry and said some things I shouldn't have. I told her I'd never marry into a family like hers. Grace started to cry and ran off. Her parents were here too, and by the time I calmed down and went after her, they'd left. All of 'em."

Viv laid a hand over his. "We all make mistakes, Andrew. Surely once you apologized..."

"I never got the chance. Gracie and her folks were killed in a head-on collision on their way home."

Viv blanched, and seemed to stop breathing for a moment. "Oh Andrew, how awful. I never knew...Vance never said."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he? He'd already gone off to college. He knew I was sweet on Gracie, had been since we were kids. But he didn't know about our summer. He knew she'd been killed, but not—" He

paused to clear his throat. "Not that she died with a broken heart."

"Andrew Hart, do you mean to tell me that you've been punishing yourself all these years?"

"Viv...my pride and anger broke her in two. I had my chance at love and destroyed it. I don't deserve another chance."

"Deserve? None of us deserve anything our Lord gives us. It's through His grace that we are saved, not anything we do. But some of us deny ourselves that opportunity. Some of us like to pretend that we know better than Him and ignore the blessings He sends our way."

"I'm not worthy of His blessings."

Viv's cheeks pinked. Oh, boy. Now he'd made her angry — again.

"Obviously He disagrees, since he brought us together. I've always considered you a blessing, Andy. Apparently, you don't think the same of me." She stood to her feet and yanked the strap of her purse up over her shoulder.

"Viv...wait...I'll take you home."

"Don't bother, Andrew, I'll take a taxi. I'd rather hitchhike than ride with you right now!"

Too stunned to move, Andrew watched her stalk away. Somehow, almost fifty years later, in the same spot, he'd managed to break another woman's heart.

He couldn't even find the oomph to rise out of his seat.

2

The lights of Andrew's pickup truck flashed around the empty parking lot of the Falls Tabernacle as he parked and climbed out. High in the sky, the moon cast a silvery glow over the white chapel. The shadows wavered and Andrew paused. He supposed some folks might find the sight spooky. But to him, it was home. He often helped with maintenance of the church and the grounds. Working in God's house pleased him and he spent many hours, morning and night, on his knees before the altar. Tonight he needed that familiar comfort more than ever.

He slid his key into the lock on the large sanctuary doors, stepped inside, and let the cool, dark silence settle over him. Like a soft blanket, peace enveloped him, and he sighed. The past week had been awful, a constant rehashing of his conversation with Viv, wishing he'd said it differently, handled it differently. He'd phoned her to apologize, and she'd accepted...and said goodbye. The damage was done. He'd hurt her in ways he didn't understand and couldn't explain.

No matter how he twisted and turned it, the outcome was the same. He'd repeated his sin. Broken another woman's heart.

He got the message. Love was for others, not for him. He'd accepted that a long time ago. What he couldn't accept was the loss of his friendship with Viv.

She'd become an important part of Heart's Haven, an integral thread in the fabric of all their lives. The place wasn't the same without her.

With a heavy sigh, he flipped the light switch, and then blinked as his eyes adjusted and shadowy figures became clear.

The angels. They were always there. Tall and majestic, Andy's guardian angel, Resolve, stood close by. When had his close-cropped hair become silver? Had it always been that way? Andrew couldn't recall. Resolve's presence reached too far back in his memory.

Two other angels stood just inside the small foyer. He recognized them. They were guardians of the sanctuary, protectors of God's house and all who entered.

Close by, a lovely, young angel kept to the shadows. Petite and fragile, her gossamer wings reflected the light in a thousand sparkling colors. Ever calm, her delicate features made earthly beauty seem pale. A simple gold band held shiny, hip-length sable hair in place. She'd been with Andrew many years, always hovering on the edges of his vision. In all the years he'd seen her, she'd never spoken a word. Not once. But she was always there.

They were all, always there. Andrew never had a moment to himself. Never a time when he didn't see figures all around him, waiting, listening to his most private moments, witnessing his mistakes. Just once he'd like to feel as if he was not on stage. Just once he'd like to feel as if a room wasn't crowded.

But that was not to be...like so many other things in his life.

He started down the aisle toward the altar. The angels moved with him, just like always, but in that

moment it suddenly it seemed too much. He spun around.

“I’d like to be alone. Can’t you leave me alone for just *one moment*?”

Resolve gave a regal nod of his head in acquiescence. Andrew continued his journey to the altar, and the other angels fell behind him. He dropped onto the carpeted steps and clasped his hands. He still felt the angels’ presence but he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to tune them out.

Lord, please take away Vivvie’s pain. I never meant to hurt her. She doesn’t deserve this. She’s too good and kind. Too wonderful. Please don’t let my foolishness hurt her anymore.

Andrew paused, waiting, listening. Usually, Resolve or some other angel would say something at this point. Give him advice or answer him. But this time all was quiet.

Lord, You know she’s an important part of everyone’s lives at Heart’s Haven. Please don’t punish them for my foolishness. Please...show me the way to make it better.

Silence again. Andrew was used to answers—advice, and sometimes even criticism from the heavenly creatures that always surrounded him. This strange quiet was not at all comfortable, and yet...this was what other people experienced when they prayed. Were they *always* expected to take the answers to their prayers on faith alone? What a difficult task.

Or...maybe the silence was meant for him alone, to force him to admit the truth, to be honest.

Andrew’s pride crumbled with the admission.

You’re right, Lord. I will miss Viv. I don’t know how to go on, how to live without her. She spoke the truth when she said she was a blessing in my life—and my stubbornness

drove her away, just as I tried to drive my friends here away. You've blessed my life in so many ways, and I don't appreciate it enough. I'm a foolish, foolish man. Please forgive me, Lord.

More awkward, uncomfortable silence.

I know. I know. You've forgiven me. I don't deserve it. None of us deserve it but You forgive us anyway, and all You ask in return is love and honesty. He paused. Honesty. So I'll ask what's really in my heart.

Still he hesitated another moment, unable to form the words he wanted to say in his mind.

Lord, did Gracie know how much I loved her? In the end, did...did she forgive me?

Silence.

After a long while, Andrew felt a presence. He opened his eyes. The silent angel from the shadows knelt beside him, her expression tender and kind. Her eyes were so gentle...and almost familiar.

"Who are you?" Andrew whispered.

"My name is Grace."

The air caught in his chest. Blood raced and pounded through his body like a violent, rushing river.

"You were her angel." His words were a ragged whisper. "How...how long have you been with me?"

"Since the day Grace asked me to watch over you."

Pain and relief seared its way through Andrew. "Aww, Gracie...Gracie."

Hot tears poured down his cheeks and his body sagged. Gracie's angel held him in her arms while he wept.

3

Viv touched her wrist for the fifth time in less than fifteen minutes. Her silver charm bracelet should be there, tinkling as she moved. But sometime during the day's busy preparations for the party this evening, it had slipped off her wrist. She'd searched for it as she worked, with no luck. But really, all that touching of her wrist and looking for the bracelet had been an excuse for avoiding Andy.

She'd phoned yesterday to tell him when she would arrive and what she planned to do. Then she hung up, not giving him an opportunity to say a word. Why talk? She'd heard enough. Andy had been her friend and companion for years. She loved him and he would always hold a special place in her heart. Knowing he didn't feel the same way hurt more than she could express. Words at this point were useless.

In fact, now that she knew the truth, a lot of things in her life appeared useless. She needed to make some serious changes, starting with her activities at Heart's Haven. The people here were like family, but that family included Andy and she couldn't stand to be here day after day, loving him and knowing he didn't love her in the same way.

He had hovered around her all day, trying to help, but mostly getting in her way. She'd managed to avoid too much talk, but right now he was weaving his way through the guests who had already arrived, headed

toward her. As soon as he met her gaze, she said, "I think I may have dropped my bracelet in my car. I'm going to go look for it while we wait for Pia and David."

She ducked right around him, ignoring the scowl he sent her way.

The crisp February air shivered her skin into goosebumps as she dashed to her car. She really did remember catching the bracelet on the corner of the seat as she lifted packages out of the front. Sliding into the vehicle, she pulled the door almost closed against the chill, but didn't latch it. She'd need the light to search for her bracelet.

Emotionally drained and physically exhausted, she leaned back for a moment and closed her eyes. This was going to be a long evening. Sighing, she bent over and examined the passenger side floorboard. Sure enough, her bracelet, with its faulty clasp, lay just beneath the seat, close to the door. She had to all but lie down across the seat to retrieve the item. Once the silver chain lay nestled in her hand, she slipped it on her wrist and struggled with the fastener.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Andy's nephew, David, walking beside his lovely fiancé, Pia Peretti, toward the big house. The couple didn't see her, bent over in the seat as she was...not to mention the fact that they had eyes only for each other. With her car door cracked open, Viv couldn't help overhearing their conversation.

"This is going to be fun. I'm so excited!" Pia grasped David's arm.

David moved his gaze slowly over the length of her swiny white skirt and the red, beaded top that accentuated her curves. "So am I."

The tall, Italian beauty swatted his arm, and tried to hide her smile. “Hey! I’m talking about the party.”

Viv bit back a giggle. Silly kids.

David hiked the dark brow over his blue eye. The young minister’s dual-colored eyes always fascinated Viv.

“Me too.” The new assistant pastor at The Falls Tabernacle, David managed to sound shocked. “What did you *think* I meant?”

Their laughter eased—and teased—the ached in Viv’s heart. She had witnessed such scenes over and over again at Heart’s Haven. She adored watching love awaken, and would miss this type of scenario so very much.

David’s voice took on a note of seriousness. “I’m glad you wore the crown tonight.”

Pia reached up to touch something pinned to her red top. “Me too. Zoe will be happy to see that I’m finally willing to wear the Crown of Purity.” She laughed softly. “She told me it was meant for me all along.”

Viv had heard bits and pieces about Pia’s life prior to finding Christ. The poor girl hadn’t had an easy time of it, and it wasn’t hard to figure out why wearing something called a “Crown of Purity” would be difficult for her, but Viv was thrilled that she seemed to have overcome her reservations and accepted God’s forgiveness.

But Pia quite obviously had Valentine’s Day on her mind right now. “I can’t wait to see inside the place,” she said, abruptly changing the subject. “Mr. Hart and Viv have been tyrannical about keeping us all out of the big house. They must have something incredible going on in there.”

Viv froze at the mention of her name.

"Yeah." David grinned. "Or maybe they just wanted a little privacy. Have you noticed those two?"

"Are you kidding?" Pia giggled. "They're dancing all around their feelings for each other, and still pretending they don't exist."

"Well, all I can say is, only a powerful attraction would have Uncle Andy wandering around grouching to his angel about 'that impossible woman.'"

Pia burst out laughing. "You've heard him too?"

"I think everyone in the complex has heard him at least once. Apparently Viv insists on doing things her way—meaning, of course, the *right* way."

Pia laughed softly as David opened his uncle's gate.

Viv felt tears burn her eyes. Sweet children. If only they knew the truth.

Andy wasn't dancing around his feelings anymore. They were right out in the open and Viv couldn't bear the pain of it.

The other subject of Pia and David's conversation answered the door. "'Bout time! You two are the last to arrive. I was gettin' ready to send out a search party." Andy looked toward Viv's car, his sharp gaze seeming to cut through the early evening dusk and see right into her soul. Quickly, she blinked away the mist in her eyes, fiddled with her bracelet and got out.

He waited for her on the front porch, along with David and Pia. Viv forced a bright smile as she joined them and tugged on Andy's elbow. "Leave those kids alone, Andy Hart! They're not even late." She led them inside and pointed at the grandfather clock at one end of the long corridor. "It's two minutes 'til."

Making shooing motions at Andy, she ushered

David and Pia into the 'cozy room,' where their neighbors waited.

"Doesn't the place look fabulous?" Zoe Wyndham—a tiny, sprite of a woman with an easy, natural beauty—released Zack Manning's hand, spread her arms wide and spun in a circle to indicate the lavish decorations in the room. "Viv turned this place into a Valentine's Day dream."

Gathered every few feet and topped with elaborate, alternating white and gold bows, lengths of red satin draped the lower half of the walls. Half the light bulbs had been traded out for colored ones that cast a dim red glow over the room. Every straight-backed chair sported a bright red or white cover, pulled to the back and secured with yards of contrasting silk ribbon. Against one wall, an antique buffet groaned beneath a display of red and white sugar cookies, a variety of sandwiches cut into heart shapes, and a selection of other delectable items in bright red bowls and platters. A stack of red and gold heart-shaped boxes waited on a nearby table, gift tags hanging off the sides.

Pia turned to smile at Viv, who beamed at all the oohs and ahhs Zoe's comment had brought about. "Viv, this is stunning!"

"Well...it is pretty, isn't it?" She smiled, warmed to the core to know her last event at Heart's Haven pleased everyone as much as she had hoped. "I'm so glad you like it. I wanted this holiday to be perfect for all you lovebirds. Happy Valentine's Day, everyone!"

After a rush of hugs and well wishes, Viv clapped her hands and gestured toward the sideboard.

"Let's fix our plates and sit down. I want to hear what's going on with all of you."

A small blaze crackled in the center fireplace. As if drawn by a magnet, everyone migrated to the seating area around the dancing flames after filling their plates.

“Let’s take a moment to ask God’s blessing on this little feast.” Andy was all spiffed up for the occasion. Without so much as one stray hair out of place, he looked more than handsome as he held a plate piled high with mostly sweet treats, and nodded toward David, who launched immediately into prayer.

“Father, we’re grateful for this good food, and for the opportunity to enjoy it in sweet fellowship with the wonderful friends you’ve brought together here at Heart’s Haven. Please bless Uncle Andy and Viv for their hard work in making this holiday special for all of us. Your blessings never cease, and we are thankful. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Viv wasted no time. She had little of it left here in this place she loved so well. With everyone seated and enjoying the festive repast, she offered a bright smile meant to encompass the entire group. “I’ve had such a good time watching all of you find each other! Now, I know David and Pia are planning to take one of the bigger units as soon as they’re finished. How about the rest of you?”

Gabe Peretti winked at his new fiancée, Susanna Daniels. “We’ve claimed one of them, as well. I can’t wait to make this lovely lady my wife.”

Susanna blushed, even as she turned adoring eyes on Gabe.

Looking over the group, Viv noted the happy shine in Pia’s eyes. She’d told Viv earlier in the week that she couldn’t have chosen a better sister-in-law if her brother had allowed her to pick a wife for him.

Kaci James, a pretty, quiet school teacher, rested her head briefly on Ryne Calvert's shoulder, then raised it to look around the group. "We're hoping for one, as well, but probably not as quickly as the rest of you." She smiled at Ryne, who had barely taken his eyes off her since they arrived. "Ryne and I want to take time to enjoy our engagement...and enjoy our friendship as well as—well, you know."

"I think that's admirable, dear." Viv spoke over the teasing snickers and chuckles from the other guests, hoping to save Kaci a bit of embarrassment. "Friendship is so important in a marriage." Her gaze flicked to Andy, but quickly shied away to focus on Zoe and Zack. She'd have to choose her words more carefully. "And the two of you are headed for Haiti?"