



Babycakes

Mary Manners

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Dedication

To my office friends at Seymour Intermediate School:

Donna Wilson for making me laugh, Miranda Householder for keeping me straight, Melinda Sutton for teaching me to love with a heart deeper than the Grand Canyon, and Peggy Oakes for your fearless and joyful leadership...may God richly bless each of you!

What People are Saying

"As always from this author, expect great writing and the sweetest of romances..." ~ Delia Latham

"Mary Manners...has become a favorite author."
~TWJ Magazine's Deena Peterson

"*Love Notions* brought fireworks throughout every chapter. I laughed, I cried. Friends, you will enjoy this read so much...the joy it'll bring your heart, you will forever touched!" ~Sharon Dean

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

~ Joshua 1:9 ~

1

Cade Magnuson dumped a pair of duffel bags on the sofa and rounded the coffee table. Thank God the cottage here at Heart’s Haven had come furnished. The fact took a bit of the sting out of the whole cross-country move he and Gracie had just endured. It wasn’t as if he’d amassed a ton of furniture over the past few years of living alone in his bachelor loft in downtown Manhattan. The only pieces he’d had shipped from there were Gracie’s twin bed and matching dresser. He figured his niece would fare better if she had at least a handful of things that stood familiar.

The bed and dresser must have been delivered to the cottage earlier in the day because a quick stroll through the modest rooms proved Gracie would have a soft and, at least, somewhat familiar place to sleep tonight. Vivian Hart had even taken the time to cover the twin mattress set in the castle-themed bedframe with pink sheets and had added a matching comforter. The kindhearted matron of the Heart’s Haven complex had proven herself an angel; Gracie’s squeals of delight

at her first glimpse of the bed told the story. It may very well take Cade's eardrums the better part of the next decade to recover.

The rest of Gracie's stuff—picture books and toys and a few boxes of clothing—stood stacked along the wall of the living room along with several crates of Cade's books and essentials. He'd tackle the task of unpacking and organizing it all tomorrow. This evening, he desired only to coax the ache from his back, compliments of hours plastered to the driver's seat of his SUV while he battled interstate traffic, and drink in all the life-changing events of the past several months.

He was a "dad" now, if not in name, then certainly by a matter of recent circumstances. Gracie had become his sole responsibility, like it or not. The fact that he'd adapted so well to the sudden realization that he'd received full guardianship of his niece proved a blessing. The added fact that Gracie also seemed to have adjusted to the new living arrangement went far beyond that...to a true-and-true miracle.

Cade had no doubt that God was at work in their lives. What—or Who—else could account for this crazy leap of faith as he dragged Gracie clear across the country from the concrete jungle of New York City to lush, open landscapes skirting the Angelina Forest of Texas? The unexpected yet welcomed call from his long-time friend, Dylan Jones, about a job opening here in Angel Falls had set things into motion and now, like a Concorde jet boosted through take-off, the rest quickly shifted into play.

Cade would officially step into his new position at the *Angel Falls Trumpet* in only a matter of days, and Gracie was already pre-enrolled at a part-time

Mother's Day Out program at Angel Falls Community Church that Dylan's wife, Traci, suggested with a huge stamp of approval.

"Gracie will love it there, Cade," she'd gushed. "Kaci Calvert volunteers there during her summer vacation from teaching English at Angel Falls High School, which is only a month or so away, and she takes all three of her kids along with her. Gracie will have plenty of new playmates. It's a winner."

Cade sure hoped Traci was right. He felt a slight stab of guilt at the thought of leaving Gracie in the hands of virtual strangers after all the recent changes in her young life. He eased his conscience by reminding himself that they still had nearly a week of explore-time here in Angel Falls until she'd begin the program, and then she'd attend merely three days a week and for only a handful of hours each day while he scouted stories for the "Community Events" column of the *Trumpet*. The bulk of his work could be completed at home on his laptop, and, if all went as planned, Gracie would have at least a few new friends before she began kindergarten here in the fall.

The scent of lemon drifted as Cade turned his attention to the next room of the cozy yet spacious cottage. Someone—most likely Vivian Hart herself—had taken care to make the place shine. The polished wood floor whispered beneath Cade's tennis shoes as he moved toward the kitchen. The space was light and inviting with its polished stainless steel appliances and warm-oak cabinets. He tugged on the door of a cabinet to the right of the sink and groaned as an empty, cavernous mouth gaped back at him. A peek into the fridge proved it to be much the same—empty save for a carton of stick butter, a package of American cheese

slices, and a half-gallon of milk. The items had most likely been left by the former occupant. Odd that Miss Vivian would have overlooked them. Cade snatched up the milk carton and checked the date. No, the contents were fresh—and unopened. So were the cheese and the butter. Someone had taken the time to stock a few groceries for him and Gracie, but who was the kind-hearted soul?

As Cade turned, his gaze shifted to an oblong, wooden dining table tucked to one side of the room, complete with four high-backed chairs. A jumbo-sized wicker basket adorned with a cheerful summer-green bow sat like a smile at its center. A small card dangled from the bow by a slight length of string. Cade snatched up the card and read the inscription, written in a series of flowery, blue-inked strokes.

Dearest Cade and Gracie,

Welcome to Heart's Haven. Here, may you both find a measure of happiness along with a generous sprinkle of love. Enjoy these goodies until you make your way to the grocery store to properly stock the cabinets. I'll be out of town for the next week or so, but if you need anything, Emmy Lassiter is one of your closest neighbors at cabin four just across the way. You can see her front porch from yours. She put this basket together for you since I have been called away unexpectedly, and I'm certain she'd be happy to answer any questions you or Gracie may have. So don't hesitate to call on her. I've left her number tacked to the bulletin board beside the phone...just in case.

Blessings,

Vivian Hart

Cade's throat tightened with gratefulness as he scanned the heartwarming words a second time. What a sweet, thoughtful gesture to help make the cottage

feel like home. Mrs. Hart's kindness seemed to have no bounds, and who, exactly, was this Emmy Lassiter she spoke of? Cade crossed to the cordless wall phone mounted near the doorway, and sure enough, the mysterious woman's number stared back at him.

Don't hesitate to call on her.

A voice whispered over Cade's shoulder, echoing the warm sentiment in Miss Vivian's note. He turned, but found no one beside him. Cade ran a hand through disheveled hair and then shook his head to silence the murmur as he crossed back to the table and tore through summer-yellow plastic wrapping that covered the basket. Without further hesitation, he riffled through the contents.

How did Vivian Hart, the matriarch of Heart's Haven complex, know just what snacks he and Gracie liked the most? Or was it the elusive Emmy who had chosen such a kid-friendly array of goodies? There were fruit punch-flavored juice boxes, animal crackers, a cluster of bananas, and a family-sized can of vegetable soup. Small boxes of raisins and suckers in cherry and green-apple flavors nestled alongside jars of chunky peanut butter and grape jelly. Someone—either Miss Vivian or Emmy—had even included a few make-your-own-pizza boxed snacks, which happened to be Gracie's favorite and could—if Cade stretched the definition just far enough—serve as a lunch or dinner.

And the box of mac and cheese with pasta stamped into alphabet shapes, well...that proved to be the kicker. And it explained the butter and milk that had been furtively stocked in the fridge. He'd like to meet this Emmy Lassiter and give her a big kiss for her kindness; he and Gracie wouldn't starve tonight.

Because when it came to groceries...Cade hadn't

even considered stopping to shop on the drive in. Good grief, how could he miss *that* boat? What kind of uncle *was* he? What sort of father-figure could he ever hope to be? He'd have to step up his game and hop on the grocery-shopping bandwagon first thing in the morning.

Emmy Lassiter is one of your closest neighbors at cabin four just across the way. You can see her front porch from yours.

Again, the words came on the slightest murmur as Cade tore open a packet of the cheese crackers. The breeze rustling through the trees and swirling around the cabin must be playing tricks with his hearing, or that shrilling squeal of Gracie's really did a number on his ears. He poked a finger into one canal and wiggled.

Don't hesitate to call on her.

Cade's gaze drifted through the living room window and across the way. Which cabin was number four? He wasn't sure of the exact layout of the Heart's Haven complex, but cabin four couldn't be far since his was number seven. There was no sign of human movement along the grounds; the air was the only thing that danced, causing the forest beyond to sway in a languid ballet. He'd take the time to investigate the design of the cabins and locate number four in the morning, since a proper thank you to Emmy Lassiter seemed in order.

Cade's belly growled in protest due to its utter lack of attention, and he tossed a handful of the snacks into his mouth as he continued his inspection of the kitchen. Marble counters gleamed in warm hues of gray and tan, and through the oversized, arched window above the sink, he glimpsed a canvas of lush Angelina forest in the distance. Waning sunlight

shimmered from a lazy stream that flanked a winding running trail along the length of the property. Cade polished off the crackers and sighed. Dylan was right—this place seemed a sort of calm paradise where troubles melted away.

Cade prayed those troubles would dissolve at supersonic speed as he crumpled the wrapper and tossed it into a trashcan that Miss Vivian—or had that been a kindness of Emmy Lassiter as well—had thought to line for him. He pushed open a pair of French doors that led to a modest, oak-stained deck complete with a generous-sized gas grill. The crisp scent of pine that mingled with freshly mown grass washed over him. He inhaled deeply, forcing away stress as a notch of trepidation eased. He knew by the second deep, cleansing breath that he and Gracie were finally home.

Oh no, Gracie...

A fist of nerves grabbed Cade's spine as he realized the cottage had fallen into silence. And silence, when it came to keeping tabs on Gracie, usually spelled trouble. He cupped his hands around his mouth as a sudden, gusty breeze sang through the trees and swirled into the kitchen. "Gracie!"

One heartbeat, two...and a whispering wind was the only response. A shiver of fear iced the length of Cade's spine. Again, he bellowed, "Gracie!"

"I'm right here, Uncle Cade." The sweet voice came from behind as she tugged at his shirt hem. "See?"

Cade swung back and glanced down to find his niece right there near his side, her laughing blue eyes framed by a halo of tousled blonde curls. A dark ring of chocolate graced her lips, reminding him that her

last meal had been a small package of cookies from the vending machine at a rest stop more than two-hundred miles away. He blew out a breath of relief as his heart galloped off to join the breeze. Every nerve fiber strummed like over-wrought guitar strings.

Get a grip, Cade. You can do this...

"Oh, Gracie...I thought I'd lost you." His words rushed out as he knelt to wrap his arms around the child. "I thought..."

"Nope. I'm right here." Her smile proved a magnet. Cade melted as he brushed the hair back from her laughing eyes and then dusted crumbs from her lips with the callused pad of his thumb. "And that tickles."

Her giggles bubbled up and spilled over. She was generally happy, which proved to be a bonus, and Cade wondered how she, at four-going-on-five, could carry on so bravely following the disaster they'd both endured when he felt as if his entire world had, without warning, collapsed around him.

"Oh...but I didn't see you for a minute there."

Her laughter brought a wave of relief that swept through as Cade patted her ringlets, matted and slightly damp from her recent nap in the car. It had taken them two full days—with an overnight hotel rest in between—to drive from the outskirts of Manhattan to their Heart's Haven cottage driveway. Frequent potty breaks were a must with a preschooler, as were snack breaks and drink breaks (which quickly circled 'round, once again, to potty breaks).

Cade tweaked Gracie's nose. "Stay close now, OK?"

"Can we go outside to investigate?" Gracie cruised through the multi-syllable word as she gazed up at

him with Polly, her favorite doll, tucked beneath the crook of one arm. "Before it gets too dark?"

"Investigate? Where did you come up with *that* word?"

"From you." She lifted a finger to scratch her freckle-dusted nose. She was so much Amy in miniature that Cade's heart wept just a bit. He missed his sister...and Scott, too. Had it really been five months—nearly half-a-year—since the accident that had stolen the lives of both Amy and her husband? Cade could barely believe it was true as Gracie's voice wove into his thoughts. "Isn't that what you do...investigate bad people for your books?"

"Not anymore." Cade shook his head, brushing away the thought. The painful aftermath of the accident had cured him of any desire to pursue such negative events any longer. "I've turned over a new leaf. From this point on, I'm planning to write only happy stories for the *Angel Falls Trumpet* readers."

"Like in my library books...with princesses and fairy godmothers and lots of animals that talk to each other?"

"Well...I wouldn't go to *that* extreme." He gave Polly's head a pat, chuckling at the thought. "Besides, you're the only princess I know."

"Daddy used to call me his little princess."

Cade froze, his hand poised in midair. "You remember that?"

"Uh huh." Gracie frowned as she pressed a finger to her pursed lips and tilted her head just so. Her pretty blue eyes spoke volumes. "Mommy and Daddy aren't coming back, are they, Uncle Cade?"

"No honey." The rift in Cade's heart widened, bringing with it a nearly impossible ache. He smoothed

the crown of her head with his palm. "We've talked about this."

"I know." Her lips puckered as her voice faltered. "It's...it's 'cause they're in Heaven now, right?"

"That's right."

"It's not fair. I miss them." Gracie hugged Polly tight to her chest as her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Why can't they come back?"

"They just can't, honey." Cade's voice caught. How might he manage to explain the finality of life on this earth to such a young child when he didn't quite understand it all himself? In theory—on paper and in thought—death was simply the culmination of life. It proved an inevitable truth for all who breathed. But in matters of the heart, there was no wrapping his brain around the fact that he'd live out the rest of his days here on earth without so much as one more phone call from Amy...one more hug or encouraging word...one more laugh over something silly...one more precious holiday meal together. It just seemed every bit impossible that his baby sister—Amy had been a solid three years younger than him—would be taken so tragically ahead of him. He smoothed the unruly curls that spilled over Gracie's forehead as he murmured, "And it's OK to miss them, honey. I miss your mama and daddy, too—every day."

"So we have to stick together, right—like peanut butter and jelly?" She swiped the tears that spilled over as she mimicked the words Cade had often used to comfort her. Sniffles followed as she gazed up at him, squeezing Polly tight. "And like vanilla ice cream with hot fudge?"

Cade plastered on a smile, knowing from experience that she'd follow his lead if he coaxed her.

He swallowed hard and struggled to hold a steady tone, though his own tears threatened to render him mute. "That's right. You've got it, kiddo."

One moment passed...two as Cade waited for the storm to either unleash or subside. It could go either way.

"Can we have ice cream for dinner?" Gracie drew a long sigh and patted Polly's belly, seemingly content, for the moment at least, with their impromptu heart-to-heart. "Polly's tummy's growlin' and so is mine. We're both lots and lots *hungry*."

Cade tossed up a quick prayer of thanks for Gracie's quick recovery. They'd passed by an ice cream shop on the way into town. The massive signage of a waffle cone overflowing with a double-scoop of vanilla sprinkled with colorful candy pieces stood as a clear indication of the sweets to be found inside. Through the glass, he'd noticed the place was hopping with business as a petite blonde in a pink apron filled orders from behind the counter. As he'd paused at the traffic light, her gaze had drifted for the slightest moment to capture his. For a few breaths in time, they seemed connected as her wisp of a smile spoke to him. Then, just as quickly, the traffic light changed. The blare of a horn from the car behind him shocked him from his stupor and, like a puff of smoke in a wind storm, the moment lifted. But the memory of her smile had followed him as Cade had plunged the SUV into motion and continued on toward the cottage once again.

Cade turned his thoughts back to Gracie. "Ice cream for dinner?" He wrinkled his nose. "I don't know about that. You've had more than your fair share of sweets today...yesterday, too. We've sort of worked

our way through a vending-machine buffet this entire trip."

"Please, Uncle Cade." Gracie batted those pretty blue eyes that had a tendency to melt his heart—and his resolve—into oblivion. "*Please!*"

"Twist my arm." He crouched lower and extended his right limb for her. A visit to the ice cream shop might prove adventuresome, though he had no desire to head out again tonight. Traci had mentioned something about a story hour there on Saturday mornings, though, that Gracie might enjoy, and he'd found a flyer to that effect placed in the paper holder beneath his mailbox. Who could pass up the combination of rich ice cream and picture books? For a four-year-old, what's not to love about that? Besides, the blonde wearing the pink apron at the serving counter had intrigued him...left him wondering what he might find should he step inside. Cade nodded to Gracie as he shook his arm. "Go ahead. Climb on."

Gracie grabbed onto his forearm and held tight as Cade swung her in to the air in moving-crane fashion. Her grunts of effort morphed to squeals of delight followed by giggles as he gathered her in close for a bear hug.

"Please, Uncle Cade," she murmured against his chest as the sweet scent of chocolate drifted. "I want an ice cream mountain—two big scoops—with rainbow sprinkles and whipped cream on top."

"But you just had cookies for a snack. You're sure to hang from the chandelier with that much sugar in your system."

Gracie glanced up toward the ceiling. "What chandelier?"

"The proverbial chandelier, sweetie." Cade stifled

a smattering of laughter. "It's figurative language."

"I don't get it." It was a phrase Gracie often used, prompting Cade to explain his play on words. "But I love ice cream."

"I know you do. But..." Cade's gaze shifted to the basket on the table and its contents that overflowed like a well-stocked shopping cart. Outside the French doors, the evening sun dipped along the forest canopy, stroking the sky with swirls of color. Muscles along his spine screamed, and his fingers protested at the thought of gripping the steering wheel for the ride back into town just now, despite his interest in the pink-sheathed blonde. Who *was* she, and why did she have his curiosity so fired up? It was as if an outside force tugged at him, nudging his mind and his heart. Cade's investigative senses tingled...there was more to the story there. He just *knew* it. But that was a scavenger hunt best left for tomorrow.

Like a gentle breath of air, Amy's words drifted back to him from a day not so long ago when Gracie wailed through the throes of a tantrum over a piece of candy she'd been denied while waiting alongside them in the grocery store check-out aisle.

"Don't be afraid to say no, Cade. Sometimes saying no really means yes...yes, I love you enough to set boundaries. Yes, I love you enough to stand firm. Be firm where Gracie is involved, Cade...always be loving but firm." It was as if she had known...as if she'd sensed the inevitable, impending loss that lay ahead and used the time she had left to impart her wisdom to him. Now, whenever things got kind of crazy, and he wasn't sure which way to turn, Cade heard her gentle voice and remembered those words.

"Can we have ice cream, Uncle Cade?" Gracie