

THE ROMANCE OF THE CENTURY
MIGHT JUST CRASH AND BURN

MARS...

WITH

*Venus
Rising*

Hope Toler Dougherty

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Mars...with Venus Rising

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2015

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-498-5

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-497-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For my parents, Bobby and Auline Toler, who always
believed.

Acknowledgments

Kevin—Thank you for your constant love, support, and encouragement. I almost always dig in my heels and kick and cry when you push me out of my safe, cozy box, but it usually results in a good thing—like this writing journey.

Anna, Hattie, Lane, and Quinn—I am blessed beyond measure to be your mother. Thank you for all your prayers for “Mom’s book.” Don’t forget to dream big.

Lisa Carter—Thank you for your friendship, advice, encouragement, and prayers. I’m so glad I get to be your roomie at writing conferences and chat over lunch once a month. This ride is wild and way more fun with you.

Rachel Stone, Suzanne Mitchell, Emily Willard—Thank you for your faithful prayers and for not laughing when I finally admitted, “I’m writing a book.”

Bible Study Fellowship ladies—You prayed for me every time I submitted an A.S.K. for my writing journey. You asked enthusiastic questions about my writing even when I wasn’t forthcoming. You are always a blessing to me. Thank you.

Ken Starling—Thank you for answering all my flying questions and for mentioning Cirrus Aircraft, the plane with a parachute.

Marilyn Harding—Thank you for answering all my questions about professional counseling. Your input helped me understand Penn better and fleshed out Abby's character, too.

Ann Weaver—Thank you for sharing the story of the buried heavy equipment. Truth is, indeed, stranger than fiction.

The BRMCWC and ACFW writing fellowship—Thank you for offering the tools and friendships to make this writing dream possible.

Jim Hart—Thank you for believing in me and representing me. Thank you for believing in this story and for placing it.

Nicola Martinez and everyone at Pelican Book Group—Thank you for taking a chance on a new author.

Finally, God, thank You for giving me this desire of my heart.

1

“Come on, Peri. You’re making me late. Again.”

Penn Davenport wiggled the carrot in front of the escape artist horse and squeezed the halter she’d hidden behind her back.

The gray roan stretched his long neck toward the orange prize and sniffed. As tame as an old lap dog, Peri had a mind of his own. When he decided to visit the neighboring houses, he worried the lock on his corral gate until it popped and he trotted into freedom.

Fortunately, most of her neighbors on Oakland Street loved Peri, welcomed his visits and his nosey poking under their shelters or garages. Unfortunately, they encouraged his visits with sugar cubes and hugs.

If he didn’t want to return home yet, she’d never be able to slide the halter over his head. She glanced at her watch. Twelve minutes until the planning meeting for the Mars Area Apple Fest began. If this crazy horse cooperated, she might have a chance to settle into a chair before the minutes were read.

“Here we go, darling. Take a bite of this delicious carrot. Come on. I know you want it.” *Please, God, help me slip this halter on and get Peri back home. You know how I hate walking in late to meetings.*

Peri backed up a step, and Penn’s hope for an easy capture melted like chocolate on the floor board of a locked up car in mid-July. She gritted her teeth.

Instead of retreating farther away from her,

however, the horse shook its head and stepped toward her again. His lips reached for the carrot and grabbed the orange tip. Success.

Maybe.

Peri opened his mouth, nibbled, and then crunched half the carrot with his teeth.

Penn slipped the halter over his head and captured her sociable, lovable, independent horse. She closed her eyes and nuzzled his warm neck, breathing in his musky smell. A familiar peace settled over her. Scenes from her childhood when she sought solace from this sweet creature flooded her mind. *Thank you, God. For today and for all those other times, too.*

She straightened and glided her hand down his velvety nose. "Here we go, silly boy. Time to get home." She tied the lead line to the bumper of her vintage Volkswagen and crept back to her house with Peri clomping behind her.

~*~

Careening into the Town Hall parking lot, Penn shifted down to second gear and slid to a stop beside a shiny, black motorcycle. Who in the world drove that thing? Nobody on the Apple Fest committee, for sure, but the Town Hall closed for business at five o'clock.

She gathered her Apple Fest folders from the passenger seat, slung her purse over her shoulder, and nudged the car door closed with her hip. Hugging the files to her chest, she raced up the sidewalk, grabbed the door handle, and stopped. She drew in a calming breath and said a quick prayer to find a seat without calling attention to her lateness.

As she pulled on the handle, a bell sounded,

usually announcing Town Hall customers. Today, it announced her as a late-comer to the meeting. Great. So much for arriving unnoticed. Another unanswered prayer.

Every head turned toward her as she entered the conference room and spied an empty swivel chair. Having spent her entire life in Mars, she knew all the eyes staring at her. All of them, except two black-as-night ones fringed with long, black eyelashes. Black eyes, black hair, black t-shirt. Safe bet he was the owner of the black motorcycle. Safe bet he was wearing black jeans and black shoes—or wait. Black boots, too. How original.

She slunk into the open seat. Whoa. Where did this foul mood come from? From chasing that crazy horse and walking in here late, that's where.

She laid the files on the table, willing those eyes to let her settle in peace.

Be positive. Try for a better attitude. Be glad that someone new is willing to participate. "Sorry I'm late." She mumbled her lame apology to no one in particular.

What is a guy dressed like that doing on a committee meeting for an apple festival anyway? Who strong-armed him into joining this group of retirees and stay-at-home moms?

Three years ago when she'd graduated from Duquesne University with a brand new accounting degree, her aunts had cajoled, wheedled, pleaded, and produced shimmering teardrops until she'd capitulated and signed on as the festival's treasurer.

She knew something about being strong-armed...or maybe guilted into serving described her situation better. She loved her aunts so much, she'd agreed, and would have without all the drama, even

though the thought of planning Apple Fest made her eyelids droop.

“Yoo-hoo? Penny?” Clara Hough rapped her knuckles on the rectangular conference table.

Penn pulled herself back to the meeting and the interested stares from the committee members. She focused on the celery-colored wall behind Clara’s head, and for the second time in thirty minutes she ground her molars. “It’s Penn.” She twisted the lapis ring on the third finger of her right hand.

Jacob Doran, a Korean War veteran slid his blue pen toward the stack of folders. She smiled at him, shook her head, and slid it back to his notepad.

“Hon, I thought you’d be able to be on time now softball season’s over.” Clara pursed her lips. “We’ve just finished introducing ourselves while we waited for the treasurer’s report. You can chat with John Townsend,” she waved a hand toward the black t-shirt and beamed, “our newest member, after the meeting. Now we need that report, Penny.”

“Penn,” she insisted again.

Clara ignored her again.

After dropping the Y from her name during her senior year of high school, she was Penn, not Penny. Most people abided by the change, but her aunts slipped up occasionally. She didn’t mind her aunts calling her by that nickname, but she suspected that Clara used “Penny” today just to irritate her.

Once more, the pen rolled over to her place. Before she pushed it back, she caught sight of a twitch on Mr. Dressed-in-black’s mouth. His eyes flickered away from her, but he was laughing. At her.

Her humiliation was complete. Chastised for being late, called by her childhood name, not once but twice,

and laughed at and dismissed by the new guy. She'd been dismissed by cute guys ever since high school. Ten years ago, she'd nurse her hurt by riding Peri or retreating into books.

Instead of wallowing in her discomfort today, she straightened her spine and leaned over the cherry veneer table with her hand extended toward Mr. All-black. "I'm Penn Davenport." She willed him to look at her.

He shifted his gaze to her and waited a couple of beats before grabbing her hand. One corner of his mouth tipped up. "John Townsend. Pleased to meet you." He inclined his head, released his hold, and turned his attention back to Clara.

Another dismissal. Fine.

Clara rapped her knuckles on the table again. "Penny. The treasurer's report, please."

~*~

John grabbed his helmet and made his way toward the parking lot. A few steps ahead of him, the prickly young lady with the funny name headed in the same direction, grumbling under her breath. He felt bad for enjoying her discomfort when she'd come in late. He lengthened his stride to catch up with her.

She tugged on the door latch to a vintage Volkswagen, but it refused to move. She jiggled the handle and tapped the door with the butt of her hand. "Come on, Gretchen. Let me in."

He rubbed his jaw to cover up another smile. "Need a hand?"

Jumping, she frowned at him.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." He nodded to

the car. "Interesting ride."

Penn nodded to the motorcycle. "Safer than yours."

He grinned. "Depends on who's driving, don't you think?" He kicked the tire. "What year is it?"

"1977."

"Cool." He trailed a finger along the curved back. "Nice color."

"It's original. Called Barrier Blue."

"So teens still get to drive these old cars, huh?"

Her mouth dropped open, and she blinked. "I don't know. I'll poll my students and get back with you on that."

John winced. "Ooh, sorry." *Nice. Way to win friends and influence committee members. Open mouth. Insert boot.* "I thought when Clara mentioned something about softball being over she meant...never mind. Anyway, of course, now that I look at you, you look much older than a teenager. I mean..." *Wonderful. Where's a muzzle when I need one?*

Loose brown curls framed a heart-shaped face and emphasized big, brown eyes. She did look young and a little vulnerable and a tad frustrated right now. She bumped the door with her hip and jiggled the handle again. She sagged against the stubborn door and closed her eyes. Her jaw worked.

Was she gritting her teeth?

Resignation flooded her face. She blew a loose curl away from her eyes and stuck out her hand. "I have to get going. It's good to have you on the committee. We need some fresh ideas." Walking around the car, she waved a half-hearted goodbye, then opened the passenger side door, and crawled over the gear shift to the driver's seat.

~*~

Penn steeled herself for the inevitable. Sure enough, before she turned the key, rich deep laughter spilled through the rolled-up windows. His laughs said, "Life is fun. Enjoy it." Any other time she could have appreciated the sound. It brought back rusty images of her first childhood.

Yes, any other time she might have lingered in that warm sound, but his laughter added one more cringe-worthy moment to today's list of embarrassments. She backed out of the parking space.

"Come on, Gretchen," she squeezed the steering wheel, refusing to glance in John's direction again. "Let's go home."

~*~

John watched her break lights blink off as she merged into the street and wanted to kick himself for laughing at her. He'd make it up to her somehow. This Penn person intrigued him. Interesting name. Interesting car. Cute face. Maybe volunteering with the apple festival would garner more than good feelings about helping his new community. A new friend would be a positive, but he'd have to overcome her initial impression of him first.

Did he actually tell her she looked old? He shook his head. *Way to be suave and debonair, man.* Not that he ever felt smooth around the opposite sex. Especially when innocent gestures could be misinterpreted for more than he intended. He shuddered and pushed an awkward memory out of his mind.

He slung his leg over the bike and tugged on his helmet. Yeah, he'd work on an apology, and maybe next time he'd speak without maneuvering words around a boot in his mouth.

2

The homey smells of cinnamon and chocolate wafted from the kitchen as Penn entered the family room. "Hello," she called out over the twangy sounds of blue grass music playing on the stereo. "I'm home." She dropped her purse and folders onto the couch and reached her hands above her head. Leaning to the left, then to the right, she threw herself into a full-body stretch.

Giggles sounded through the hallway. "So, how was the meeting?" Two silver heads popped, one on top of the other, beside the door jam.

"Did you meet the new member?"

"Is he handsome?"

"Is he tall?"

"Did you have a chance to talk with him?"

Their questions tumbled together and mingled with giggles. She watched her aunts sashay into the room with clasped hands and grins stretched as wide as their cheeks allowed.

Realization tiptoed across her brain and narrowed her eyes. "No wonder you were so anxious for me to get to that meeting." Penn rolled her eyes at her aunts' wide-eyed, couldn't-be-me-you're-talking-about stares. "Don't act like you two don't know what I mean. You met me at the end of the driveway, untied Peri from the bumper, and shooed me off so I wouldn't be late—which I was, by the way."

Jancie ignored Penn's chastising. "Periwinkle's such a good horse."

"Yes, he is. Yes, he is." Winnie normally agreed with her older sister except when they discussed books.

The afternoon's stress crept up her spine and clinched her shoulders. She rolled her neck. "For you, maybe. You don't have to traipse all over creation to round him up."

"You don't have to either. He always comes home when he's finished visiting." Jancie moved behind Penn and massaged her shoulders.

"He certainly does." Winnie stepped closer and stroked Penn's arm.

"The town lets us keep him because we promised to keep him corralled. Thank goodness, the mayor is sweet on you and gives us some slack." She closed her eyes and concentrated on Jancie's fingers kneading a path up her neck.

"Charles is a good man, and we're good friends." Penn heard the smile in her aunt's voice. "But that's enough about me." Jancie patted Penn's back and faced her again. "Why are you in such a bad mood? Didn't you get to meet our newest Martian?" Jancie wiggled her eyebrows.

Penn groaned. Why couldn't they live in Pittsburgh and be Pittsburghers or Philadelphia and be Philadelphians? Philadelphers? Philadelphi-ites? No matter. They lived in Mars, so they were called Martians.

"Tell us, Penny. Did you meet him? Is he handsome? Is he tall?" Excitement twinkled in Winnie's blue eyes.

Penn grimaced. She hated to extinguish that light.

"We've been down this road before."

Jancie crossed her arms and slanted her head. "We started down it, but we didn't finish our trip."

"Hilarious, Aunt Jancie." Penn combed her fingers through her hair and massaged the back of her neck. "The trip isn't very interesting."

"We'll be the judge. Spill, Penny. Oops. I mean Penn."

Penn sighed. She'd have to discuss her meeting with the new Martian. Her aunts' determination and the cinnamon-chocolaty scent had loosened her resolve to keep the meeting to herself. Surrender waited around the corner.

"First, tell me what smells so good?" As if she didn't know.

Both aunts cried in unison, "Celebration cookies!" Flanking her like armed guards, they led her toward the kitchen.

~*~

Penn dunked her warm cookie into the milk. Celebration cookies, designated for Christmas, first hyacinth of spring, last day of school, signaled high hopes for her love life.

Too bad they'd be disappointed, just like all the other times since prom when they'd raised their hopes for a beau.

Jancie dragged the blue willow ware plate toward Winnie and folded her hands on the table. "We've waited long enough, sweetie pie. Swallow that cookie and tell us the news."

Penn sipped the milk. "There is no news. Yes, John Townsend attended the meeting. Yes, I met him, but

don't get any ideas about a courtship. He's not my type, and I'm certainly not his." She reached for another cookie and tried to delete the image of herself crawling over the stick shift from her mind.

"What do you mean 'you're not his type'? Anybody would be lucky to have you on his arm." Winnie patted the top of her hand. "You're beautiful, kind, smart, funny—"

"Thank you for those endorsements, but I can name just as many reasons he isn't interested." She popped up her index finger. "One, he thought I was a teenager." She added her middle finger. "Two, he thought I looked too old to be a teenager."

Winnie, ever the compassionate one, tsked tsked Penn's stubbornness. "Maybe you flustered him."

Janice frowned. "Maybe you caught him off guard or intimidated him."

"Tall, dark, and dangerous men don't get intimidated by short, goofy women."

"Oooh, sounds interesting." Winnie grinned and clapped. "I knew it. Marge Baumgartner said he was a looker. She saw him coming out of the real estate office down town a few weeks ago. She said she heard he bought that brown house over on Clay Avenue. She said—"

"Winnie, hush. Take a breath. That's gossip." Jancie turned her attention back to Penn. "What do you mean 'dangerous'?"

"He rides a motorcycle."

Jancie lowered her chin. "That doesn't necessarily mean..." She shook her head. "Honey, don't talk down about yourself. You have a fine career; you help out with the youth group at church; you're involved with your community—"

She rolled her eyes. "Mmm, thanks. I'm a great person. Hey, why am I the only one eating cookies?" Penn pushed the plate away from her.

"I'm watching my girlish figure." Winnie lifted her chin and pushed back her shoulders. Though she carried about thirty pounds over her ideal weight, she gave good, soft hugs.

"What she means is, we ate our share while we baked. Now, back to the story." Jancie never watched what she ate, but her tall frame remained as slim as it had been during her college days.

"Uh huh. Anyway, here's reason three he's not interested in me. He laughed at me." Penn pushed cookie crumbs into a pile in the middle of her napkin.

"He laughed at you? Well, personally, I think humor is the grease that keeps a marriage well-oiled. Laughter is a good thing, Penn." Jancie should know. She'd married—for the first time—at forty, a man fifteen years her senior and three inches shorter.

From the stories Penn had heard at family reunions, the two had made a striking couple for five years hosting great themed parties until he dropped dead of a stroke. The funeral had been a mix of testimonials about strong faith in God and his over-the-top pranks on loved ones.

Winnie's eyebrows shot toward her gray bangs. "Maybe you misconstrued the situation, dear. Maybe he was laughing *with* you not *at* you."

"Um. No. We finished our conversation. I grabbed the handle. The door jammed. Phooey on Gretchen, by the way, and I had to crawl in from the passenger side." Penn grimaced remembering the less-than-graceful moment.

"She wouldn't let you in?" Winnie's eyes shined