



*Heart of Texas*  
A ROMANTIC COMEDY

MARY ALFORD

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### **Heart of Texas**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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### Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0012-0

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

To everyone in need of a second chance.





# 1

*Ignorance is highly underrated.*

It was the picture-perfect day, except for the rain, the bumper-to-bumper traffic, and what was about to take place in just a few hours that would shift the outcome of my life forever. Little did I realize as I prepared to read aloud to the small group of fans who had braved the rain to gather at the bookstore, that come this time tomorrow I'd be rethinking my career.

But here, for a little while, my life seemed perfect. Perfect husband—even if I had only been married for less than two years. Perfect house. And my newly-released romance, *Fast-Moving Train*, was getting good reviews. I had no idea my faith would be tested in a major way. And the test would leave me bloodied, bruised, and begging God for answers that would take a whole lot of prayer to understand.

*If I could sum up what I've learned about life and love, it would be this: There are good men, there are bad men, and then there are men of the worst possible kind—the ones who steal your heart and leave you wondering—the kind who can't love.*

*But every once in a blue moon, there are men who turn out nothing like you believed. Those are the men who amaze you the most—the Tim Summers of the world. Tim was my miracle—a man who had never been taught how to love, but was capable of giving so much of it.*

*I could almost swear as, I sat listening to my best guy talk to my best friend about me, that at last I heard the freight train I'd been expecting from the beginning.*

*When I least expected it, I looked up and caught Tim's gaze as he smiled back at me across the crowds gathered at church that day—just as he had the first time we met. That crazy little lopsided grin of his sent my heart spinning out of control. I was happy. I wasn't afraid anymore. For the first time in a long time, I had faith. And just like that, just like love—bam—it hit me. That fast-moving train.*

I paused a moment for effect, then whispered quietly, "The End."

As I closed the book lovingly, I glanced around at the dozen or more people staring back at me in silence. A second later, the room erupted into applause.

At the back of the gathering, I spotted my agent, Tippy Jennings-Johnson, as she mouthed, "Brilliant."

The manager of the bookstore had been kind enough to set up a little table for me in the corner of the reading room, close to the coffee shop. While Tippy worked the room, I sat at my post and greeted the fans who stopped by. I still couldn't believe these people had actually come out to meet me—*me*. Even now, after five years in the business, I found it hard to fathom there were people out there who would actually buy what I wrote.

Two hours later, as the last of my fans thanked me for signing her book, Tippy waited patiently for the room to empty.

"Good news, Lane." Tippy loved to shorten everyone's name to three or four letters. "I got the word earlier today, but I didn't want to put any pressure on you before the reading. Your publisher called. They want *two more* Lois and Tim stories this

year. They feel there's enough material in the story for *a three-book series.*"

"Oh... my... goodness."

Tippy and I jumped up and down with our arms wrapped around each other like a couple of schoolgirls. This was huge for both of us. Tippy and I had pretty much learned the business together.

My first thought was to share the news with my husband, Tom, the man in whom all of my romance novels had found their beginning. I couldn't wait to hear his reaction to our good news.

"Tippy, would you mind terribly if I took a rain check on dinner tonight? I'm so excited I can't wait to tell Tom the news."

"Of course not," she offered with a magnanimous wave of one well-manicured, bejeweled hand. "I'll just go back to the office and bang out the details for your new deal. We'll chat more about that in a few days. Call me tomorrow, and tell me all about Tom's reaction, OK?"

Tippy made a grand exit, and I felt the first pang of guilt. Tippy didn't know the whole truth. I hadn't told anyone the other good news I'd learned that day. I was pregnant. I couldn't wait to share my happiness with my husband, Tom.

Unfortunately, Tom had not been reachable earlier. It wasn't unusual for him to be difficult to get hold of. My husband was one of the foremost attorneys in Dallas and his client list was made up of elite members of Dallas society. Tom worked terrible hours, sometimes not coming home for days at a time. A few years before we were married Tom took a small apartment close to the office for just such occasions. He kept it after we were married for when he had to work

late. Over the past weeks, I could count on one hand the number of times we'd actually shared a meal together. But even though we'd go stretches at a time without seeing each other, I could always reach him on the phone. Not today, though.

I tried his cell phone and his office several times with no success. There was no answer at either the house or the apartment. I decided to rush back home, where I'd pack an overnight bag, then head over to the apartment to prepare the perfect candlelight celebratory dinner before sharing my good news.

But throughout the long, congested, rush-hour drive home, an unfamiliar uneasiness in the pit of my stomach continued to grow. I remembered all those times recently when Tom worked late.

As I pulled into our driveway off Strait Lane, I noticed Tom's prized black luxury sedan sitting there as well. Not in the garage or even in the driveway, but next to the curb, as if he'd arrived in a hurry. Oddly enough, it didn't occur to me until much later that there was another car parked behind Tom's. I slipped the key into the door, hoping to surprise him.

The house was unbelievably quiet, but strange and confusing signs of life littered the foyer and the hallway leading to the living room. A purse. A jacket. Red stiletto heels. I grew more suspicious with each step.

I quickly opened the door only to see my forty-year-old perfect husband embracing his secretary.

*His secretary? How cliché.*

"What are *you* doing here, Miss Manning?" No doubt this was the most ridiculous question ever asked, since it was painfully obvious what she was doing here.

The next few minutes passed in a blur.

Miss Manning promptly rushed into my recently-remodeled, Italian marble guest bathroom, leaving Tom alone to face his angry wife.

"Laney, I wasn't expecting you home so soon. Didn't you have dinner plans with Tippy?"

"You weren't expecting me home so soon? That's all you can say? How long has this been going on, and *why is she hiding in my bathroom?*" This part I yelled so Miss Manning could hear me clearly.

"Laney, I'm sorry you had to find out like this, but you're not really surprised, are you? We've been drifting apart for a long time."

*Drifting apart?* We were still newlyweds in my book.

I thought we were the perfect couple. All our friends said so. Perfect marriage. Perfect house. Perfect life. So what if our romantic life had been experiencing some dry spells over the course of the past few weeks. There was more to life—right? Besides, how dry could it be? I was standing here, pregnant!

"What are you saying?" I asked in shock as I followed Tom to the foyer of said perfect house. I heard the sound of Miss Manning moving around in my bathroom, and with super-human strength, I managed to resist the urge to drag her bodily out of my perfect house.

"Laney, I'm sorry. I know how hard this must be for you. Believe me, I didn't mean for it to happen. But Suzanne and I love each other. I've never felt so alive before. She makes me want to do crazy things--"

"Like bringing your girlfriend into *our* house?" I blurted out, dumbfounded. "You couldn't just keep her at your apartment?"

Tom at least had the good grace to look embarrassed. "Laney, we've had a good run, but things have not been good between us for a while now. You know that."

*I do? Funny, wasn't I the one who just a few hours ago couldn't wait to share my good news with my husband?*

"How would I know this? Is there some time limit on marriage in your book? One year, you're fine. Pushing two—oops, time's up. How would I know this, Tom?"

*Wait. Did he just say he loved Miss Manning?*

"You love her? How can you love her, she's only worked for you for a month? Besides you love me, remember? Isn't that what you told me on my birthday? You can't love two women at the same time."

At this point, Miss Manning rushed past us on her way out the door, and Tom went after her like a puppy dog.

I followed them out the door just in time to see Miss Manning speed away in her bright red compact car, presumably to go wreck someone else's life.

Tom spotted me and hurried to start the car, but I managed to catch up before he could get away.

I stepped in front of his vehicle with my arms crossed.

Reluctantly Tom cracked the window. He didn't get out. "Laney, what are you doing?" He did a quick sweep of the area, no doubt to be sure none of our neighbors were watching.

"You are not just walking out on me without hearing what I have to say."

"Laney, I wanted us to do this like two civilized human beings, but I see there's no reasoning with you.

I want a divorce. I'm engaged to Suzanne now. It's time to move on."

"You're engaged? Tom, you're still married to me."

"Not for long. I've had the divorce papers drawn up for several weeks now. I was waiting for the right moment, and I guess this is it. How soon can you be out of the house? Suzanne has some decorating ideas she'd like to get started on."

*Dear Lord, please give me strength...*

"Suzanne has decorating ideas for *my* house?"

"The house is mine to do with what I want."

Suddenly, I remembered Aunt Selma's warning the day I'd married Tom.

*"Laney, any man who wants you to sign a prenuptial agreement isn't a Christian, and he's clearly planning on divorce. You mark my words. You'll live to regret marrying that man."*

"Well, I don't want a divorce and I'm not moving anywhere. I'm pregnant." I announced it to Tom and the rest of the neighborhood, and then watched as he slumped back against the car seat in shock.

"If this is a ploy to keep me with you, Laney, I have to tell you it won't work. I won't stay. I'm not the fatherly type."

"What do you mean you're not the fatherly type? You'd make a wonderful father." OK, given the present circumstances, this probably didn't come anywhere near the truth, but still, I had to try. This was the man I loved. The father of my child. I couldn't just let him go, could I?

"Laney, I don't want children. I thought I made that perfectly clear to you. I've never wanted them. We discussed this in the beginning, remember?"

I racked my brain, trying to remember that discussion, but I came up blank. "We never talked about children, Tom. Not at all."

"That's it, then. Didn't you get the message? Laney, I can't be anyone's father. You'll have to do whatever you think is best. I won't be part of it."

*Well, there you have it. Couldn't be any clearer than that.*

"Now, how soon can you be out of the house?"

## 2

*Divorce—the final frontier.*

After two weeks of hiding out, licking my wounds, and feeling sorry for myself, I was finally able to leave the house to take care of such basic things as buying food and gas. But in those weeks since Tom had announced he would be replacing me, I'd yet to write a single productive phrase.

Through my budding friendship with Tom's former wife, Elise, I'd learned the truth. I'd been one of many women. It was a difficult truth to hear, but one I felt confident the soon-to-be-next Mrs. Winters would have to hear herself someday. Me, well, I was trusting the God of my youth to help me move on with my life. With the comfort of prayer and with encouragement from my new friend, Elise, I'd begun to make progress. After all, I'd managed to leave the house. In my book, that was major.

Unfortunately, I still hadn't found the courage to tell my only living relatives, my aunts, Selma and Thelma, about my upcoming single status in life. It was mostly because those two would have a field day with this news. They'd been suspicious of Tom Winters from the first moment I'd introduced them to him. Selma had been quick to point out his "Slickerdy Sam" traits.

I'd ignored the voice in my head that told me it

was strange that someone who'd claimed to adore me would insist on a pre-nup.

This brought me to my current state of affairs. Two days earlier, I'd received a registered letter informing me I needed to vacate Tom's home immediately.

At least a dozen times during my last week in Dallas, I considered calling the aunts and pouring out my problems, but some things were just hard to admit. That was probably the reason I'd decided to simply show up in person a full month before their eighty-third birthday party.

*Surprise!*

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but then I was mostly reacting to my frustration at the thought of spending even a single moment more in the same town with the next Mrs. Winters. In my haste to get out of Dallas, moving back home to live with my two old-maid twin aunts seemed to be the perfect solution to my soon-to-be-homeless state.

Three days later, as I passed the city limit sign for Down, Texas, I wasn't quite so sure. Down was a small logging town in East Texas where my family had owned and operated The Pine Street Diner for more than a hundred years. The house I grew up in was located two miles outside of town. It had been in my family since the first McClanahan arrived in 1910 and opened the diner near what later became I-10. In the past few years, I could barely stand to be here more than a few days. Now I was actually considering living here permanently. When had I become this desperate?

My black SUV held all my worldly possessions. The car was one of the few things the pre-nup allowed me to keep, along with my clothing, a few pieces of jewelry, and my laptop.

*I had almost nothing when I left this town, and I'm coming back with not much more.*

I didn't bother with going to the house. The aunts wouldn't be there. The diner stayed open until ten seven days a week without fail. I pulled off the interstate and around to the side of the diner. After praying and asking God for strength, I managed to come up with a smile. I forced myself out of the vehicle. The scent of pine trees was overwhelming, bringing back lots of old memories. I'd almost forgotten how much I loved that smell.

*Lord, please don't let the aunts see my desperation.*

Aunt Selma could smell fear a mile away. She'd be on it like white on rice, reminding me of all the times she'd warned me this day would come. After I went against her wishes and had the nerve to marry Tom anyway, she had told me this would happen.

The diner resembled one of those fifties-style places you see in the movies, right down to the black-and-white-checkered tile floor, the lunch counter that displayed Thelma's best homemade pies, and those little individual jukeboxes at each table. A colorful neon sign announced "Ice cold Coca-Cola sold here." A few years back, the aunts had added a wraparound deck to the place and put up some outdoor tables with umbrellas because someone had told them live music would bring in the crowds. That didn't last long, and now the outdoor patrons heard only the traffic on I-10.

I stepped onto the deck and looked through the window, past the flashing soda sign, and instantly I was catapulted back to the past. I'd worked in this diner doing various jobs since I was eight years old. First with my dad, who had inherited part of the place from his dad; then after Dad's death, I worked with my

aunts. Anxious to leave town, I'd saved enough money for college, left, and at the time, thought Down, Texas was behind me for good.

*But you can't run away from yourself.*

With difficulty, I shoved the past back where it belonged. It was too painful to deal with now, while I was in the middle of my own private mini-meltdown.

I spotted Thelma first. She was standing behind the counter, talking to a customer. She and my Aunt Selma might be twins, but they were nothing alike in looks or personality.

Selma had always been the alpha twin. Thelma had to "go along to get along." But those two had been best friends for going on eighty-three years. They'd survived wars, lean times, boyfriends, and deaths.

Before I could shake off my memories, Thelma glanced up and spotted me. It was almost like instinct. She'd know, even before I said a word, that something was wrong. I put on a fake smile and gave her a little wave. I barely registered the sound of the jingling bell above the door as Thelma enveloped me in her loving arms.

Just for a moment, before she would look into my eyes and see the truth, I allowed myself to be her little girl again. Little Laney McClanahan, who'd scraped her knee and needed comforting from her motherly aunt. My life in Dallas slowly evaporated, along with my meager, arena-league writing successes, my fancy house, the extravagant lifestyle, and one two-timing husband. I'd returned to my middle-class roots.

Thelma pulled me in, forcing me to meet her gaze. For the first time, I realized we were standing in the middle of the diner. She studied me with her all-seeing eyes before nodding as if she'd come to some decision

about me. "Oh, my dear. Selma, come quick. Our baby's home, and she's having a baby."

*How did she do that?* I wondered while I looked around the diner. Even though I was at the end of my first trimester, I'd done my best to conceal my baby bump from the aunts.

Most of the patrons had stopped eating. All eyes were focused on Thelma and me. The room suddenly became too hot, and I was in desperate need of air. I rushed outside to the deck and began my fight to contain my dignity. *Must not be sick in front of all of Down.*

Even though the air was thick with humidity, the fresh scent of pine trees cleared away the nausea.

Slowly the world around me stopped spinning, and I realized I wasn't alone. Standing with me, as always, were the rocks of my youth.

As I faced them again, I was amazed as always to find two very distinct reactions, as individual as my aunts themselves. Aunt Thelma, always the more positive one of the two, was beaming at the prospect of another baby in the house, while Aunt Selma squinted at me through the smoke drifting from her cigar. She had picked up the nasty habit from her third serious boyfriend, circa 1955, and she didn't intend to quit, no matter how much Thelma and I nagged.

"When's the baby due, Laney?" Thelma asked as she wiped her teary eyes with her apron.

"More importantly, where's that loser husband of yours?" Selma bellowed.

As I stared from one to the other, I considered how much to divulge right away.

"In December, seven months from now," I said to Thelma, who had now begun weeping dramatically.

"He's in Dallas," I answered Selma, not quite making eye contact. "He couldn't come this time, but he really wanted to."

"Pig's eye," Selma squinted even more. She wasn't buying my story for a minute.

Not that I really expected to put anything over on her. Selma always could see through my lies, no matter how much I sugar-coated them.

"Did you finally wise up and dump him?"

"Selma." Thelma had been trying to clean up her sister's act for years. "Laney's just arrived, and you're already giving her the third degree." Thelma squeezed my arm. "Come inside, baby doll. Have something to eat." She took me by the hand and led me back inside the now-noisy diner, while Selma stamped her cigar out with a vengeance.

Selma left us alone and went to attend to the grill. She'd been the cook for the diner since she was fourteen.

I slipped into a booth and waited for the inevitable questions from Aunt Thelma. She knew something wasn't right, but she'd give me all the time in the world to tell her.

"How are the two of you doing?" I asked, starting out slowly, mostly because I really didn't know how to tell her the truth.

"Oh, honey, we're doing great. We added a few new tables to the place, and Selma's been trying out some different recipes. We're fine." She gave me a pointed look as if to say, *'The same can't be said about you.'*

"That's great," I managed to get out before Thelma retrieved a pitcher of her famous lemonade, poured two glasses, and sat back down.

Selma rushed off to shoo one of the high school girls waiting tables away from a group of boys. The place was hopping with teenagers.

I stifled a yawn and realized it was almost ten at night, well past my bedtime.

She'd caught me eyeing the kids. "They start arriving a little before ten. So sometimes we stay open a little longer on the weekends. We like having the young'uns around."

I was amazed at my aunts' vitality. I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Honey, let me have Selma make you one of her burgers." Thelma got to her feet, and added, "You just rest up a bit. I'll be right back."

By twelve thirty, the crowd of teenagers had begun to thin a little.

The double-meat cheeseburger and fries, Selma's specialty, had hit the spot and put me in a mellowed-out beef stupor. I told myself I'd only close my eyes for a moment. I awakened to Selma nudging my shoulder. "What?" I wiped my eyes and managed to focus on her.

"Time to go home, Laney. You're bushed."

The clock on the wall said I'd been napping for almost two hours. "Sorry, I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Uh-huh." Then she pinned me with those piercing brown eyes.

It was only a matter of time before I confessed everything, right down to the fact that I could no longer find it in my heart to write romance novels.

"Thelma, you ride with Laney to make sure she doesn't fall asleep at the wheel. I'll take the truck home."