



TANYA  
HANSON

SANCTUARY

# Sanctuary

Tanya Hanson

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## **Sanctuary**

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Other Titles by Tanya Hanson

Hearts Crossing Ranch  
Redeeming Daisy



## Dedication

To Jackie Oswald of the dazzling smile, endless courage, tremendous faith, and rollicking sense of humor. And to T.L., my very own survivor who makes every day a gift.

I love you both so, so much.



## Praise for Tanya Hanson

### *Redeeming Daisy—*

I was impressed with how Ms. Hanson dealt with both the emotional and spiritual issues in Daisy and Pike's lives. This is the second book in the Heart's Crossing Ranch series and I look forward to the next installment from this author. ~ Four Stars, Night Owl Romance

[Ms. Hanson] creates a delightful community with depth and history, as well as people both kind and cruel. And when Daisy is redeemed, it's clear that there will be more stories to come in the world of Mountain Cove. ~ Nights And Weekends

This sequel gripped my interest from the start until the end. Hanson has a talent for telling of God's love and compassion without being overbearing. ~ Five Heart Review, The Romance Studio

### *Heart's Crossing Ranch—*

"Like a deep-down prayer, *Hearts Crossing Ranch* comes alive. Through Hanson's vivid, skilled storytelling one takes a journey of affirmation forgiveness, redemption, and discovers the power of love between a man and a woman who are destined to be together, the love of family, and above all, the love of God." Author Marianne Evans

"*Hearts Crossing Ranch* is Ms. Hanson's first attempt at a contemporary inspirational story and I must say she did a jam-up job!" Pamela S Thibodeaux, Author of *Winter Madness*





# 1

As he dried off his peach-fuzz head, Hooper Martin caught sight of his brothers down below at the corral and clenched his teeth. He should be outside helping them mount up the visitors who wanted a trail ride. The last few months he'd missed out on so much. Hearts Crossing's city-slicker wagon train rides. Bringing the herd in from summer pasture. The October market. Well, just about every aspect of everyday life including his little girl's first day of school.

Jaw tight, he leaned on the sill of the window of the workout room that had once been his childhood bedroom. A gander at the mountains and hills wrapping around Hearts Crossing Ranch soothed him, and like a swooping hawk, his favorite psalm flew into his mind. *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.* In spite of everything, he had so much to be thankful for. His Wranglers hung better on his bones than just last week, and his hair had grown out just enough to look cool. He had to grin, but another unhappy thought swamped him. What woman would want him now?

Determined not to be a grump, he wiped off the exercise bike, pulled on his boots, and clomped downstairs to the large dining room and its tantalizing buffet. Ma was changing out late breakfast dishes for barbeque. This way guests could eat lunch and go as

they pleased. Sit-down meals were rare at Hearts Crossing.

Delicious aromas started his mouth watering. Something he was getting used to after those weeks of raw throat and tongue. Chemo didn't differentiate between healthy and malignant when it set out to kill quick-growing cancer cells. Those days of feeling as though he'd swallowed razor blades still had the power to take his breath away. For a second, those memories killed his appetite. He tried to shake them off as Ma looked up from pouring sweet tea into Mason jars.

"Morning, son. Workout go OK?"

He'd finished forty-five minutes on the bike, but flatland only, level four. Not the level ten hills-and-valleys setting he used to be able to tackle. At least the cycle was kind to feet racked with peripheral neuropathy. He blew out a harsh breath, not accustomed to the hills and valleys of his mood since his diagnosis. "Yep." He bent to smooch her cheek. "Getting better every day. Might just be time to saddle up Alamo. I can get a ride in before I get Ella at kindergarten."

As she stiffened, he held up a warning hand. No need to let her start nagging that he wasn't ready to ride yet. "I got to at least try, Ma."

"All righty. I suppose you must." She frowned as though he was going against her sound advice. "Thanks for getting that lug of potatoes this morning."

He shrugged. "No problem. Had to get Ella to school anyway."

"Well, you have to eat." His mother stood firm. "Right now you got a choice of breakfast or dinner."

"Ummm. Breakfast." He gave her an

enthusiastic grin.

Like he was a helpless child, she dished up two plates, one for each of them and shoved at his shoulder until he sat down. After dumping on a half-cup of salsa, she lifted up a forkful for herself.

"We'll have a full house tonight," she said with a change of subject. Some thirty or more folks had settled in at Hearts Crossing for his brother Kenn's wedding. "Rehearsal dinner tonight's almost as many guests as the wedding. Did I tell you? The guest bunkhouse is full. The Ricochet Motel in town is sold out, as is the Gingham Grove Bed and Breakfast Inn. Wedding guests all. Mountain Cove hasn't had this much business in years." She raised her eyebrows. "Bet they wish all my sons were getting married."

Heat rising, he ignored her. After all, he'd done it once. Lynn hadn't wanted to stick around when he was a healthy man. And she'd never been there for Ella. A pain he didn't like to feel rumbled through him. What would happen to his little girl if the chemo didn't take?

"Bragg and Scott are moving into the bunkhouse with the hands for a few days," Ma shoved away worries about the future, "so our west wing is free."

Sounded so presidential Hoop's mood lifted, and he burst out laughing. "The Prez and First Lady?" he asked.

At first, her face crumpled. Then she caught his joke. "No. I've got a Mr. and Mrs. Cameron in the Belle's Starry Night Suite. Brian and Malia. Two of Christy's sorority sisters have the Huckleberry Holliday room."

"Otherwise known as Pike's room." Hoop snorted. Pike had recently set up his own house on twenty acres Pa had left him. With him and Daisy getting ready to

marry in December, Ma—and the local innkeepers—must be mighty glad about the next batch of guests and plans. Hooper felt a little twist of envy, but Ma smiled so bright he couldn't help a warm swoosh of affection. Her recent redecorating project had helped him get through a particularly noxious bout of chemo when she'd made him brainstorm names for rooms with her, even pick paint swatches. He grinned back.

However, Belle's Starry Night wasn't exactly a suite. His shoulders shook now. Pa had plumbed a toilet and miniature sink inside a coffin-sized closet for his sister Rachel when she turned thirteen to give her five brothers a break and Rachel her own privacy. No grown man could even shut the door of the fool thing over his knees if he was, well, sitting down.

Ma's voice turned serious, too serious. "Sorority sisters just stopped by for lunch before their ride. Those bridesmaids' gowns I made 'em fit like dreams. Awful pretty girls."

Sensing matchmaking was afoot, Hooper ground his teeth. Even his brothers had yapped about beautiful bridesmaids. But when Ma put her large, warm hand on his arm, his heart melted. She'd been his rock many times, and in spite of her meddling, he knew she meant well. Still...

"Ma, this is Kenn and Christy's wedding," he warned. "Not some romance movie."

"Hooper, you said it yourself, before you got sick. Lynn's out of the picture. You're ready to date again."

Heat scorched his cheeks. He might have mentioned such to his sisters and brothers, but he'd never gossiped about it to his ma. Which of those turncoats had ratted him out? He wrapped his fingers tight around a cup of coffee. Deadened finger tips

could hardly feel the warmth. Maybe someday the numbness would wear off. Maybe not. "That was before."

"Before what?" For a second, her plump face wrinkled like a dried apple.

He huffed. "Ma, don't you get it? No girl would want me now."

"What are you saying?" Her fork stopped in mid-air. "You're handsome as ever."

"That's not what I mean."

She stared at him. "Aha. I see. You lost one testicle, but the other one is fine. Lance Armstrong and Scott Hamilton, why, they're healthy and fathers. The doctor says..."

"He doesn't know for certain," Hooper hissed, hating the sound. "What if things *don't* work right?" His heart panged. Most of the guys on his online support group didn't seem to have problems, but Hoop wouldn't know for sure until his wedding night. And that wasn't the kind of worry a guy confessed to his *mother*. "I just don't think I could let a girl I care about take a chance with me."

Ma nodded, firm. "If she loves you, it won't matter."

"Well, it matters to me." He ground out the words.

"You need to put all this in the Lord's hands."

"That's always your answer, Ma."

"As it should be."

Hooper sniffed. Of course it should. He was a man of faith himself, and a real good father, but wouldn't the Lord rather Ella have a mother in her life? Especially if, well, if she did end up losing her daddy? Because she might. For years yet, he'd require regularly-scheduled CT scans and blood work. So why

make marriage impossible?

Which it was, in his mind, after a diagnosis of testicular cancer. What woman would take a chance on things that might not work right? On the possibility of caretaking an invalid down the road? No matter he'd gotten a hopeful prognosis and potential cure. Once the ugly thing comes to live with you, cancer never truly ever leaves your head.

"Ella's a beautiful little girl, Hooper. Any woman would be proud to be her mother."

"I don't doubt you for a second, Ma. It's just that women don't marry little girls." He heard the darkness in his own voice and rushed on, so Ma couldn't stick her nose in further. It was time to rally up some faith. Fresh air always helped. "Now, this all tastes mighty fine, but I need time to get a ride in before I pick up Ella at school."

He didn't know how well he'd do in the saddle yet. It wasn't so much leftover surgical discomfort, but the weakness that still hung on and on. Still, the feel of Alamo under him always had helped things along before he'd gotten sick. He waited for Ma to chide him for being reckless. Instead, she just pulled a list from her pocket and began checking it twice. He couldn't help smiling at her. What was it with women and weddings? Planning the wedding along with Christy's mother had formed a strong friendship between the two women and had given Ma both something to look forward to as well as another shoulder to lean on during her role as Hoop's caretaker.

All this...his heart ached for a sec...after her being Pa's rock during the pancreatic cancer some years back that had taken his earthly life.

After a loud sigh, he chugged the coffee, kissed

Ma's cheek, and headed out, reminding himself of the chant that had gotten him through. *Each day is a gift from God.*

"That's why they call it the 'present.'" He said out loud and then hurried out of the room so Ma didn't think he was starting up a new conversation, grabbing his gray beanie and gloves on the way. 'Course he'd rather wear his Stetson, but the temperature had been chilly of late, and wool felt better against that peachy-keen head of his when breezes blew off the mountains. As he heaved himself out the big front door, Hooper stumbled against a suitcase on the porch and smacked forward into the arms of a female so tall his chin brushed her nose. He was tall himself, so that didn't happen too often. Besides, she was holding him up.

"So sorry, ma'am," he muttered, heat rising. "Please excuse me."

"It's all right. I like a man with a mission."

Righting himself, he looked at her, breath tightening in his throat. Beautiful was the only word he needed. Short blond curls tight against her skull, raspberry lipstick he had a sudden ache to taste, dark blue eyes bright with life. For a second, he couldn't talk. A citrusy scent tickled his nose.

Still holding him, she leaned back and peered as if she saw something he didn't know about. "Hooper?"

The fact this gorgeous woman remembered him from somewhere couldn't help but flatter him. His belly fluttered. "Yep. How, who?"

"I'd know you anywhere."

He narrowed his eyes which only brought her into clearer focus as she continued. "A bit of a haunted look. Like your eyes are too bright, too hot. Tight somehow."

“What do you mean?” Without any effort at all, he found himself visualizing her words as she stepped back. He saw it every time he looked in the mirror.

“What do you mean?” He repeated, a funny trill skimming his spine.

“Kenn told me. You’re a survivor.”

Shock all but swamped him. “Kenn?” He ground out the name while doing his best to hold on to his manners. His brother had betrayed him? Eyes troubled, the woman extended her hand as if she wanted to shake his, and out of habit, he clasped her fingers to be polite. But anger pounded through his veins, and he pulled away quick. What on earth was Kenn doing, babbling his condition to, well, to *anybody*?

Worse, this woman didn’t know him at all. They hadn’t met before. He hadn’t left an impression. As for her eyes, well, he’d seen *that* look before. She felt sorry for him. That was all. Nothing but sympathy from this beautiful, perfect stranger, for a guy who’d lost half of the family jewels. Without another word, he lifted her bag and nodded at the big front door. After he handed her over to his ma, he’d take off to find his brother and have it out. Today Kenn would be happily looking forward to his wedding day, his beautiful bride, and a future full of kids and marital love. Likely a bit of jealousy mixed in with Hooper’s anger, but whatever it was, Kenn had no right to spill Hooper’s personal beans.

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As Hooper Martin’s face tensed, and his eyebrows raised, Mallie Cameron all but bit off her tongue. She’d

done it again, flapped her lips without thinking. Despite the morning chill, heat glazed her skin, both from her abashment and also his devastating good looks. David Beckham handsome with his shorn hair, he was still lean from his ordeal, his eyes shadowed, but in her mind, he was definitely no invalid, tall and broad shouldered enough to stir up her heart. Jeans that fit all the right places just right, boots that shouted out cowboy. All he needed was a Stetson, but no, he didn't. Her pulse jumped. He was perfect the way he was.

Moving back from him a little, she planted her boots firmly on the sturdy wooden porch, and tried to settle herself. The brand-spanking new pink-spattered brown Ariats weren't broken in yet and pinched her feet a tad, but no way would she come to Colorado without boots.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be so...abrupt." She held back the powerful urge to bend down, to fuss with the luggage rather than face him, but she forced herself to look straight and deep into his auburn-brown eyes. Her brother Brian's college roommate, Kenn Martin, had told her of his brother's cancer struggle last summer, but certainly it wasn't something Hooper would broadcast to strangers.

"It's all right." He opened the big front door of the ranch house. "Come on in. My mother will show you to your room."

His body language screamed loud and clear. He wanted to get away from her.

Fast.

Her heart sank. What a first impression she'd made! For sixteen months, she'd promised not to allow herself to fall for anybody, ever. Certainly not a tall,

broad-shouldered cowboy. However, there wasn't any reason she couldn't have had a casual wedding flirtation with a good-looking man. Except she'd blown that possibility from the get-go.

Or had she? As soon as an imposing but attractive older woman swooped upon them, Hooper muttered, "I'll get the bag later, Ma," and dashed out the door. Then and there Mallie decided to follow him.

"I'm Elaine Martin." Her big hand landed on Mallie's shoulder. "Welcome. Now let's..."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Martin, but I have something else to say to...your son. Could I catch you in a few minutes?"

Elaine Martin's eyes brightened, and in a better mood, Mallie might have smiled at the glint of matchmaking she saw. If Mrs. Martin only knew.

"All righty then. Better hurry. Hoop'll be saddling up for a trail ride in a heartbeat."

Outside, the fresh, cold air eased the heat of her embarrassment. Somehow she had to find Hooper and make things right. Kenn wasn't a tattle-tale if that's what Hooper was thinking. The remark had slipped out when, well, when her brother had mentioned her own struggle upon introducing her. Shaking her head, Mallie remembered she wasn't even supposed to be here. She'd come as her brother's plus one after his girlfriend dumped him.

Could that mean...hmmm. That meeting Hooper Martin was meant to be? Two survivors. Her spirits lightened. Or not. She remembered her promise to herself. Then again, a little temporary flirting with a handsome guy never hurt a girl's ego. She knew he was single, too. When she caught sight of Hooper hustling toward the barn, she stepped up her pace, but

the hammering of her heart had nothing to do with the speed of her boots on the hard-packed ground.

And had everything to do with Hooper Martin.

“Hooper!” Ahead under the gate, she caught sight of her brother laughing and gesturing wildly as he and Kenn rode off on two good-looking horses. Because the college roommates hadn’t seen each other in years and Brian wasn’t much for texting or Facebook, she figured they had a lot of catch-up to do. But she needed to waylay Hooper before he rode off to take his brother to task.

“Hooper?”

When he turned, her pulse raced. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, please. I need to tell you something.” At least he met her halfway at a hitching post, his strikingly shadowed face now set with interest rather than anger. “I didn’t mean to...I mean, Kenn wasn’t gossiping about you. If that’s what you’re thinking. And...” She peeked up at him through her lashes. “And if that’s where you’re going.”

His cheekbones turned a dark red. “Well, I don’t much like him letting loose stuff he has no business letting loose.”

“I completely understand. Brian’s the same.”

“Brian? Sorry, but who are you?”

“Oh, Malia Cameron. Call me Mallie.”

Something like unhappiness rolled across his face. Manners dictated a real handshake about now, but his expression confused her, so she kept her fingers firmly in her pocket. She rushed on. “Brian thought Kenn needed to know. The only reason Kenn told him about you was, well, because of me.”

“Because of you? I sure don’t understand. And I