



TANYA HANSON KNOWS HOW TO TELL A
STORY...I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS BOOK...

THE ROMANCE STUDIO ON
HEARTS CROSSING RANCH

TANYA HANSON

RIGHT TO BRAGG

Right to Bragg

Tanya Hanson

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Right to Bragg

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

www.whiterosepublishing.com

PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2011

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-131-1

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

With love to Teagan Marie from your Auntie Tanya.
You babies are so wonderful!

Praise for Tanya Hanson

Redeeming Daisy

This quick paced book was compelling, and I didn't want it to end. Hanson has a talent for telling of God's love and compassion without being overbearing.

~ The Romance Studio

Hearts Crossing Ranch

The story has all the ingredients of a true romance." ~ Pamela S Thibodeaux

Sanctuary

For anyone who's ever questioned why God might allow sickness and pain in His world, it's an evocative, clear-sighted, and uplifting tale. ~ Nights and Weekends Reviews

1

A storm might be brewing, but all Bragg Martin had left to do on this Friday afternoon was chuck off his boots and settle in for a long winter's nap. Horses ridden, cattle tended, chores done and year-end accounts worked on, and he'd even gotten the dreaded Christmas shopping over and done with.

After he threw on a load of logs, he sprawled happily on the couch in the ranch house's big front room. The phone rang. Not a muscle moved. With the giant family he had, there was always somebody else to do things he didn't really want to.

Like get up and answer it.

But the ugly thing didn't shut up, and with a groan, he hauled his bones to the land line in Pa's office. Well, it was his big brother's office now, but Hooper and his new fiancée Mallie were off decorating her aunt and uncle's Christmas tree. He sprawled all over this couch and mumbled into the receiver.

"Hearts Crossing."

"Who is this? Bragg?" His sister Rachel came over the line, amped up, which wasn't one whit like her. Her mannerisms were always cool, logical attorney.

"Yep. You OK?" For a flash, some alarm tweaked him.

"Yeah, I just need a favor."

"All righty." It was the season of giving, after all.

Relief rattled her voice. "Thank God. Ma and Mrs. Densmore are off on that one-horse-open-sleigh caroling thing with Ella's kindergarten class."

Bragg smiled at mention of his little niece.

"And I can't find Scott."

"Off shopping." Bragg sniffed at the poor sap.

"Then it's you. I need you to go babysit Matty."

"What?" Babysit Matty? His five-month old nephew? Sure Bragg had been raised by equal-opportunity parents, but babysitting an infant wasn't exactly stuff for a single guy.

"I'm stuck in Rustic Canyon at a deposition. We're running late. Chelsea's with him now, but she's got a date."

Their other sister Kelley wasn't due back in town until Christmas Eve, but he had one more brother to ramrod into the task since the newlywed Pike was still on his honeymoon.

"You got the wrong dude, sis. Get Kenn. He and Christy'll be having kids of their own someday."

"No. They've got Kenn's faculty Christmas party. It's you. You're the only one left. Please? It's just until Tiffany gets back."

He grunted. Last week Rachel's new paralegal slash au-pair had flirted with him with great enthusiasm at Pike and Daisy's wedding reception, but downright snubbed him when he asked her out. Not number one on his favorite person list, because things like that just didn't happen to Bragg Martin.

"So where's she now?"

"Tiffany asked for a personal day."

A personal day already? What, after two weeks? He tried hard to wiggle out. "Can't you find somebody from church? I don't know how to change a diaper."

Rachel laughed, so he reckoned she believed he'd caved, and she started her closing arguments. "Now, now. You put the little cloth tee-pee over his you-know-what so he doesn't shower you. If it's the other, there's plenty of wet wipes. Then you tape up the sides of the dy-dee. It's not rocket science."

"Aw..."

"And there's plenty of breast milk in little bottles in the fridge..."

That did it. "Raaaaaache..." he wailed.

Rachel ignored him "...to put in the microwave for thirty seconds."

He groaned. Nothing against nature, but...

His big sister went all attorney, now. "Grow up, Bragg. It looks and works like any other milk. Now, hurry. Chelsea can show you where everything is before she leaves. And sweetie, thanks. I owe you."

"That you do." Then he recalled where she was. The icy road from Rustic Canyon could be a hard one in rough weather. "Rache, be careful out there. I think we've got a storm coming in."

He could hear her smile over the line. All his brothers protected their womenfolk no matter how loud the gals roared. "I will, little brother. Nick's got me the best snow tires there are. And I've driven in these parts longer than you. Now, Tiffany should be there by six. You can handle it."

Or not. Hanging up, spirits dark, he climbed back into his boots. Not that he didn't just love the little guy to death. But what a time for all his siblings to have their own agendas.

Nobody locked doors around here, but he did switch on the Christmas lights, even though it wasn't exactly dark yet. Just to welcome everybody when they

finally made their way back. Plus, Hearts Crossing looked pretty, all lit up. Climbing into a thick wool jacket with fleece lining, he tossed on his Stetson and set off for Mountain Cove, about eight miles away. Driving his big truck under the post gate hung with its brand –two interlocking hearts with intersecting cross— always calmed him down. Today was even better, all strung with lights. This ranch was home, and he was blessed to live here.

No snow yet. Even with the deep gray sky, the ride to town pleased him like it always did. Mountains already wore snow, and foothills with white-tipped pine, spruce, and winter-brown aspen branches reached high toward God. Every half mile or so, wind grabbed the truck. Still, nowhere on earth was there a better place to live than smack dab right here, at Hearts Crossing Ranch.

He had time to think. His brother-in-law Nick had deployed to the Middle East just weeks before his son's birth, and even a single guy saw how circumstances grated on Rachel. But she met every day with smiles and prayers. She and Nick had a fine, newish condo on the east side of town in a small group of about twelve townhomes built to match the western flavor of their historic ranching town.

Although his brother Kenn and new wife Christy lived on the ranch, Kenn spent time in town as a teacher at Mountain Cove High School. But this afternoon, he wasn't here.

The irony didn't escape Bragg, and he burst out laughing. *Irony*. He'd been in Kenn's English classes long ago and obviously remembered at least one literary term.

His teeth clenched. Those years had seen him do

some bad things, and these days, he tried hard to make up for everything. With God's guidance, he was making headway.

Even if he had lost two clients who had trusted him completely. With a sigh, he knew he had miles to go. Figuratively.

Another literary term. Wow, was he back in high school? Well, there was Tiffany.

Sorry. I can't go out with you. Pretty, but prissy, little mouth.

Got a boyfriend? She hadn't acted attached. No ring. No nun's habit. Flirted bigtime until he popped the go-out-with-me question.

No, but I don't date. Anyone.

At least she'd looked a bit abashed. His teeth clenched again. In a couple hours, she'd be showing her face. Whew. His truck snarled into town, wrapped up tight against the chill. Strings of Christmas bells arched from one side of the street to the other, thrashing in the wind. Hopefully Ma had brought that sleighful of kindergartners in from the cold.

Hopefully Rachel would get home OK.

He parked the truck in her driveway and ran to the front door with stomping feet.

"Brrrrrrrr." Chelsea let him in, and he grumped right away. "It's only four. What are you in such a rush for about a date *tonight?*"

"Shhhhhh. Matty's asleep." She was already twisting a long scarf around her neck. "John's getting me at seven. Everybody's home from college. We have our first mini-reunion out at the Double D..."

Mini-reunion? What was that about? She'd been out of high school, what, six months?

"...and I'm heading toward the Bumble Bee for a

manicure and highlights in my hair.”

“What’s wrong with your hair the way it is?” Bragg asked, frowning at her long curls wound tight like a scrub pad. Of all the kids, only she had gotten Grim-Gram’s dark red hair.

A big-time eye roll. “I gotta go. Matty’s been a real good boy. He won’t be a bit of trouble.”

“I hope not.” He noticed Rachel’s unlit fireplace. “I was all set for a long winter’s nap.”

“Then get back to it.” She grabbed her purse. “Get some shut eye in while he naps.”

“What?” News to him. Didn’t a babysitter watch out every second?

Chelsea shrugged. “It’s what mommies do. Catch some Z’s while the baby sleeps. You’ll hear him on the baby monitor.” She hugged him quick and pointed toward something he vaguely recognized from her babyhood. Ma and Pa’s little afterthought, there were sixteen years between her and their oldest brother Hooper, and seven between him, second youngest, and her.

“All righty. You take care out there. I think something wicked this way comes.”

Her eyes grew big. “Sounds like a horror movie.”

“Blizzard. Feel it in my bones.” He kissed her cheek and she left. After hanging his thick jacket and hat on a rack, then set to building a fire.

Snow started to fall. Well, Chelsea was no slouch driving in it. Tricks of the trade when you lived in these parts. The fire took hold quick after he lit the piped-in gas, and he guffawed, recalling campfires he started from scratch on the family’s city-slicker wagon train tours. Rachel had one of those silly blankets with arms hanging off the back of the couch, and he climbed

in it and curled up. Ah, kinda cozy. Maybe it wasn't such a silly thing at all. His eyes closed.

Suddenly he was jerked back into real life when freezing air blasted his face and a baby's howls smacked his ears. But the fuzz of sleep still clogged him. Who was the dream angel bending over him?

Tiffany Vickers. His heart hammered—both from being startled and because of how pretty she looked. Brown hair paintbrushed by the sun, gray eyes flecked with gold like the dark of dawn giving way to sunrise.

"What...what's going on?" He pushed her away and struggled to get up, all tied up in the yards of fleece.

"Just a sec." She left in a whiff of perfume. "I'll get Matt."

Finally on his feet, Bragg started after her. The baby was his responsibility, after all.

"You know each other, don't you?" She called out.

Then somebody shut the front door, and Bragg turned to see who. Whom. The man facing him had Bragg's heart drumming now in beats of rage.

Tony O'Neal. The swim coach who had led him down the road of steroid temptation. Oh yeah. Bragg knew him. Tony O'Neal had also brought Daisy, Pike's new bride, to heartbreak and ridicule.

What was Tiffany Vickers, who didn't date anybody, doing with the worst thing ever to happen to Mountain Cove?

Comforting the precious-smelling bundle against her shoulder, Tiffany breathed deep of the warm air inside the house and hurried back to the living room.

Sure beat the raging weather outside. When she beheld Bragg Martin, sleep-rumpled and drowsy-eyed, her heart tumbled to her toes for its second time in as many minutes. He might as well hire out as a cover model.

But he was way off limits. She'd only been in Mountain Cove a short time, but she already understood how highly-regarded his family was, how strong in faith and conviction. They sure didn't need somebody like her to drag them down.

Now her heart thudded with pangs of grief and lost cause. Back in Lakewood, Paul hadn't even answered the door. She'd dumped the presents on the porch and headed straight back to Mountain Cove in a torrent of sobs.

Three hundred miles round trip. Ah well. Tonight in her pillow she could continue to cry after Matty slept tight. Right now, she had a job to do.

Here inside the tidy, warm townhouse, the men were doing some kind of macho showdown, she could tell. Well, her years as a paralegal had taught her how to diffuse angry people. And tending childlike males such as her brother was something she'd gotten very good at.

Well, other than today. Likely the snowstorm would hit the Denver area with this same amount of muscle and smother the presents with a dozen icy inches. Eyelashes fluttered away her tears.

Enough of that. She had a baby to tend.

"What's he doing here?" Bragg's tight tone and shoulders grabbed her attention.

Tony headed toward a big lounge chair like nothing weird was going on. "Didn't expect to find you here, either." Tony shrugged. His face was a tad

red. Maybe embarrassment, although it could be leftover warmth from the blazing heater in his truck.

"It is my *sister's* house." Bragg said, flat. "I do have things to say, O'Neal, but this isn't the place." Then he turned back to Tiffany, hands raised in the time-honored "what's going on?" gesture.

She couldn't help noticing Tony's smirk.

Ah, well, not my problem. She swayed back and forth with the baby. How she missed little Connor. Deep down, she admitted baby Matthew was a big reason she'd answered Rachel's want ad for nanny/part-time paralegal. She hugged him close, and he cooed, already accustomed to her voice.

"It's blowing snow hard out there," she told Bragg. "I lost my way, and got stuck in a drift when I tried to pull off. Thankfully his giant all-weather truck pulled up." She sent Tony a smile of gratitude. Although she read people well and recognized a tad of oiliness mixed in with his confident good looks, she was grateful for the rescue.

"Lucky for you both then," Bragg said. "I knew we'd get hit, but reckoned it'd be later tonight."

"Glad to be home safe, but it's chilly in here." She shivered as the men faced off.

Tony and Bragg Martin clearly had issues. What were the odds?

Bragg's eyebrows rose in a frown as Tony busied himself with a new log. "Hey, I'll get the fire." Bragg's voice was loud.

Tony refused to budge and gave Bragg a glare. "I'm on it." Little puddles from various boots streaked Rachel's wood floors.

"Somebody wipe the floor, OK?" Tiffany said, more an order than a request. *Men.* Matty stared to

whimper. Too bad he had to become one someday. "I'll get some coffee on. And I've got to heat up a bottle."

"No, no. I'll go do it. Rachel told me how."

Tiffany hid a smile at Bragg's eagerness to get away from Tony. Well, she'd invited Tony in for a polite hot drink before he headed to the Ricochet Motel. She better hurry while he could still find his way in that behemoth of a truck.

"Reckon you ought to head where you're bound, O'Neal, before you get your truck stranded." Bragg seemed to read her mind.

"In a bit. Tiff promised me some coffee first."

Tiffany started. She hoped Bragg noticed her discomfort. Lately, Bragg had gotten her to dream about things she didn't dare dream, and she didn't want him to misinterpret Tony's shortening her name. It seemed to imply acquaintance—maybe even intimacy—and she'd only known him an hour, at best. Was he intending to put the move on? "I think maybe *both* of you better head out before you get stuck."

Bragg followed her into the kitchen. "I'd like to stay until Rachel gets here. Just in case she needs anything."

Tiffany bristled. "She doesn't. And she has me now, anyway." She plunked Matt in a baby carrier and set to heating up a bottle.

"I think my sister would want me to stay." Bragg seemed to stand taller yet, and she almost heard his knees lock in determination.

He might be right, and she shrugged. "OK, then. You feed Matty, and I'll make that coffee."

"What? Me?"

In better days, she recalled Paul doing the same big-eyed, helpless deal when he didn't want to change

a diaper.

“This is the easy part.” She wanted to laugh, but was out of patience. The drive to and from Lakewood had been long and difficult, but here at her new “home” with a wakeful baby, she had no chance to kick her feet up. Not that she wanted to. She took her duties as nanny seriously. But Bragg was here. Rachel must trust him. “Now, man up. You sister wouldn’t have asked you here if she couldn’t depend on you.”

Bragg’s cheekbones reddened, but attractively, not the overheat from Tony’s comment just minutes before. “Aw, I was her last chance. Everybody else was gone.”

Obediently he sat in a kitchen chair, held the baby not as awkwardly as she would have predicted, and the room filled with Matty’s soft, gobbly sounds.

“It’s just a thank-you cup of coffee,” she said softly, needing Bragg to know. The sounds of perking and hissing filled the room.

Bragg nodded, busy with baby and bottle, but didn’t meet her eyes. Then she realized why. It might have something to do with Tony, sure, but most of it was her refusing his date the other night. Well, in her fallen state of grace, the smarmy Tony was a better match for her. He’d mentioned on the drive to town he’d just left a job in the “gaming” business. Everybody knew gaming meant gambling. What kind of man considered that a career?

Well, what kind of woman broke up her family and left without facing the music?

Digging in the cupboard, she grabbed three mugs, and then fished in the fridge for cream. One thing she knew. She sure didn’t deserve a man of faith and truth, like Bragg, who helped run his family’s ranching enterprises in addition to a successful accounting

business of his own.

Suddenly the kitchen grew too small, too warm, and too uncomfortable. Pouring three cups, she set one on the table. Bragg stared down at his nephew.

She went into the living room to find Tony O'Neal slouched fast asleep in a big chair. Aw, no. She shook him, much the same as she'd touched Bragg just minutes ago, but no tingle. Just annoyance. He needed to get to the motel fast to settle in.

But he didn't move a muscle, just groaned in sleepy satisfaction. Hadn't he said he'd driven in from Reno practically nonstop? If so, he was no doubt exhausted.

Bragg's manly scent of nature and downright snow wiggled up her nose as he came up behind her; she hadn't even heard his stockinged feet.

"Doesn't he get a burp done now, or something," he said softly, holding Matty out to her.

She had to smile. "He's not going to explode. And it isn't rocket science."

His head cocked, and his eyes squinted like he'd heard it before.

"Here, let me show you." She maneuvered the baby against Bragg's shoulder and within a second, heard the requisite sound. "There you go."

Bragg grinned at her in a triumph that turned to dismay right away when he noticed Tony. "Wha-a-a-at? Wake him up and get him gone."

"I tried. I think he's bone tired after the drive from Nevada. He can rest for a little while."

"Guess that's why he wanted coffee," Bragg grumbled.

"You don't like him much." She stated it plain and simple, but not because she was nosing for an answer.

Goodness, she had enough people who didn't like her, and it was usually for a good reason.

Bragg moved into the living room, baby in one arm, infant seat in another. Tiffany made Matty comfy while Bragg talked softly, perched on the arm of the couch.

"It's no secret around Mountain Cove, especially if he's back in town. By the way, did he say why he's back? I mean, there's nobody here for him. I mean..." His face colored again, but he looked right at her. "Pike's wife, Daisy, well. She and Tony had a, well, their marriage didn't work out. He all but ruined her faith until she found her way back."

Ruined faith? Well, that was a concept that had turned into reality for her.

"I didn't know." Tiffany said quietly, sensing Bragg needed something gentle right now. "But I'd say Daisy sure got lucky. She and Pike had such a beautiful wedding, and they look so happy." She almost gasped at the words. Talking without thinking had just brought the elephant back into the room. She'd allowed herself one evening of indulgence and engaged in a minor flirtation with Bragg that night. That's all it had been. Hadn't it? By now of course, Bragg must have realized the same thing. Hadn't he? She'd done the right thing, refusing the date he asked for later.

Hadn't she?

"Well, Tony and I go back farther than that." He glanced at the supine form. "And not in a good way. But I am trying to make things right. Getting it out in the open with him is something I gotta do. I just didn't expect to do it quite yet." Suddenly the awkwardness dispelled, and he grinned like a kid. "The Lord sure