



TANYA
HANSON

SOUL FOOD

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Tanya Hanson

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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, 2012

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-174-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

With love—

...to my grandsons Carter and Rhys, the two halves of
my heart.

...and to Lisa McCaskill, editor extraordinare, for her
patience and prayers.

Praise for Tanya Hanson

Sanctuary

Nominee Best Inspirational Romance 2011 CAPA Awards and recipient of the CTRR Award

Tanya is a wonderful storyteller, and if you haven't read any of her books, what are you waiting for? *Sanctuary* was a spell-binding story. It captivated this reader completely. ~ Coffee Time Romance

Hero Hooper will appeal to many fans of inspirational fiction. He is thoughtful, caring and devout. ~ Romantic Times:

Right to Bragg

I enjoyed this installment in the series and look forward to seeing what Ms. Hanson has planned for this series next. ~ Night Owl Romance

As usual, Tanya Hanson has surpassed expectations with her latest glimpse into the Martin family at Hearts Crossing Ranch. One day I plan to re-read the entire series from start to finish. ~ The Romance Studio

Other Titles in the Hearts Crossing Ranch Series

Hearts Crossing Ranch

Redeeming Daisy

Sanctuary

Right to Bragg

Also Available

Faithful Danger

1

“There’s a good-lookin’ cowboy out front who says he’s your ride back to the ranch. And he’s not one of your brothers.”

“What?” In her little back office, Kelley Martin looked up from the spreadsheets at Caffey, her wide-eyed waitress, and scrunched her lids shut to hold back tears. Numbers didn’t lie. Her pretty little eatery wouldn’t last the summer. Of course her ancient car had chosen this very morning to conk out. As of today, she’d have to depend on family to cart her around. But ask for money, no. That she couldn’t do.

Her chauffeur wasn’t one of her brothers? She groaned and gritted her teeth. What was that about? She sure wasn’t in any frame of mind to chat mindlessly with some ranch hand on the hour drive back to the Hearts Crossing. Was it a fix-up? That’s all she needed—some sort of quasi-blind date.

Even though the pain of her breakup with Ned was long over, she knew whoever waited for her wasn’t her ex. A rodeo star, he followed the PRCA circuit. They’d bonded during a blood donation drive five years ago, promising to save each other’s life—should need be. But that’s all they had between them. He hadn’t wanted to share her life. Now, everybody back home reckoned she was ready to rumble on the dating scene.

“Listen.” Caffey Matthews turned serious. “You

go relax and have some fun on that wagon train. Stacia and I'll hold down the fort just fine 'til you're back next weekend."

In spite of her worries, Kelley had to burst out in laughter. There was really no fort to hold down. Her job as chuck cook on the city-slicker wagon trains her family ran each summer was something she heartily enjoyed, but the duties were far from relaxation. Starting last summer, she'd begun splitting duties with her sister-in-law Daisy so she could alternate working at Vegeterra every other week. And this year, well, frankly, she needed the extra money she earned on the wagon trains. Stacia, her *sous* chef, and Caffey, not bad with pastries, had long proven their worth, although the restaurant was always on her mind. Relax?

Not.

Then she squeezed Caffey's hand. "Thanks, I know you'll be fine. Now, I better see who's out there and just what's going on." Kelley stood and forced a smile.

Caffey leaned forward in a strong hug. "Hey. It's going to work out."

"Yeah, I guess." Kelley's heart crumpled. She'd been so certain last summer that the Lord had led her here to Sunset Hills, but her personal venture as a restaurateur was failing, failing bad, and failing fast. A vegetarian restaurant and tea room in mountain country alive with hunters, fishermen, ranchers, and local law enforcement wanting doughnuts and burgers. She rolled her eyes. "What was I thinking? Too much testosterone and red meat around here for Vegeterra."

Caffey leaned back. "Now, you know God doesn't steer us wrong. And He never sends more than we can

bear.”

“I do know, deep down, but it’s hard to believe in the day-to-day.” She didn’t say it out loud, but Kelley hated going home feeling like a failure.

“Unfortunately, it’s easy to do sometimes.” Caffey’s rueful tone turned into a laugh. “But God’s right there. Don’t you forget it. Now get going. I want to know who’s out there waiting for you.”

After Kelley headed into the dining room, she stopped so sudden in her tracks ropes might as well have been tied to her ankles. *Good-lookin’ cowboy* was an understatement. The guy was smokin’ hot. Had she combed her hair lately? She’d chewed off lip gloss hours ago. Holding a cup of steaming Joe, he leaned against the counter, taller than any human had a right to be. The whiteness of a long-sleeved shirt contrasted great with his tanned face, and the black Stetson riding his skull belonged there sure as dawn came every morning. Since the day of her birth, she’d been around handsome cowpokes and every version of Western man God had ever put on earth, and she never tired of looking, never at all.

“Hey.” She grabbed for words, for composure, sadly aware on another level that he was the only customer since lunch. Even then, the crowd had been far too thin for comfort. “I’m Kelley. I guess you’re my ride?” She grabbed for confidence, too. That she could always fake. Did it every day, trying to convince passersby to come in and order something.

He touched the brim in an old-fashioned, endearing way, then a split second later, removed the thing revealing harvest-colored hair worn just a touch too long, and eyes brown as nuts. “Jason. Jason Easterday.”

“Oh, of course. The geneticist.” And artificial insemination guy standing in for her brother-in-law Nick during his deployment. How on earth could she possibly have missed meeting Jason at her visits back home? “I can’t believe we haven’t met yet. You’ve been here a few months now.”

His carved cheekbones shadowed a luscious grin. “Aw, my main gig’s Hearts Crossing, but I do consulting for BeauVine Genetics at other ranches. Likely I was away on business during your times home.”

“Well, it’s good to meet you now.” Understatement again. Was that really her voice? She sounded like a sixth grader talking to her first crush.

“Same here. Your mom described you to a tee. I’d know ya anywhere.”

The way his eyes danced from her head to boots and his grin tweaked between lean, carved cheeks had her tingling. Sparks flared. Confidence, composure, she reminded herself. Ma hadn’t been nearly as thorough with her description of Jason in return.

He put down the mug and held out his hand, a strong callused one. Obviously a worker and a rider. When he closed his fingers around hers, warmth from the cup started to melt her bones. She straightened her knees and hung on tight for a long, delicious second.

“Anyway,” he said, pulling his hand away, “when somebody said you needed to hitch a ride back home, I offered. Your chariot awaits, milady.” He swooped his hat close to the floor like a great lord might have done for some medieval princess.

Her heart did a silly thump. “Well, thanks. I guess. I hope I’m not keeping you from anything. Or taking you out of your way.”

"Nope. Fact is, I had an appointment along the way at the 3M. It's all good." His grin squinted his eyes like sunlight, and summer-streaked hair brushed his shoulders. She reckoned she glowed.

Caffey sauntered in, not flirty, just in love and oozing it. "How'd you like a plate of Sloppy Josephines before you head out?" she asked.

"Um. That anything like Sloppy Joes?" Jason's grin grew.

"A tad yes and a tad no. Same sauce fixin's but eggplant and Portabella instead of meat."

"Thanks. Some other time." He glanced at his watch. "I, well, we better make tracks. I've got a date tonight and want to get in a trail ride first."

Kelley's spirits, already damp, sagged painfully. No, this wasn't a set-up then. He was attached, and she admitted she was crushed. The tingle he gave off, well, it had to be nothing more than the aura of a charming, handsome guy. "Let me get my bag," she managed, then turned the table on Caffey. "Jason, this is Caffey Matthews. Soon to be Mrs. Rhee Ryland if you know the local ranchers." *Local* meant anybody for fifty miles.

"That I do. Ma'am." He bowed, polite. "Done some testing for beef tenderness at the Bar R. Nice man you snagged."

"Fate. And Faith," Caffey said

After a reassuring hug from Caffey, Kelley put little Vegeterra in the waitress's hands. She wasn't going to pray any more. God had let her down when all she'd done was trust His guidance. But that annoying little voice echoed in her head. *Had she trusted Him? Truly? Had her desires and wants to have this restaurant made her ignore God's ultimate will?* She shook her head a little. This was all something to think about

some other time.

"Stacia and I will handle afternoon tea just fine, Kel. You know that. I know a thing or two about pastries." Caffey winked. "You go now. See you next week."

With a quick longing, Kelley paused at the threshold and peeked back inside. She'd tried hard to design an eatery that was trendy but rustic enough to fit Sunset Hills. Burgundy and gray, exposed rough brick. Vegeterra mightn't be magazine-worthy but it did her proud. For a little while yet. Her heart sagged

"Nice place," Jason said as he picked up her duffel. Just three months ago she'd splurged on her neon sign, and again her heart panged, almost with grief. What an unsellable waste.

"Thanks." She followed him down the street to a big white Ford 150. Pick-up trucks and all-wheel-drive vehicles crowding the street meant a normal busy Saturday afternoon...for the tack shop, the feed store, the boot repair. Betty's Dry Goods and Gifts. Every business but hers.

"I have to ask, why vegetarian?" Jason asked. "Here in cowboyland, I mean."

With a sigh, Kelley decided to explain. The June sun warmed her skin but not her spirits. "It used to be a regular little diner, but I had the notion I'd expose vegetarianism to cattle country." Even she heard the bitter twist to her words. "The old owner died, and his daughter didn't want the business, so I leased the building cheap. I need to replace the stove,"—the words hurt because while true, it wasn't going to happen—"but most everything else was in decent shape. I felt the call to be a chef with my own place...God knows why." She muttered that last part

to herself.

Jason held the door open for her, and she waited until he'd settled under his seatbelt behind the wheel to see if he was interested enough to want her to continue.

"So how's the vegetarian deal doing? Those Josephines didn't sound half bad. Smelled good in there. Although I am a meat-eater through and through."

She reckoned he was just being polite. After all, he'd refused the meatless meal.

"Well, I am not judgmental against carnivores." She had to laugh, for it was true. "I mean, I'm the daughter of a cattle rancher. But it all started when my favorite steer got auctioned off at the county fair for my college fund. Grand Market Champion." She blinked back tears. "Broke my heart right in two, and ever after, I never ate anything with eyes. I was nine, I think."

"Didn't think to start up a tavern? A bar and grill, maybe?"

"Nope. I didn't want to have to be a 'policeman' on top of everything else." She stretched her legs and tried to do the same with her spine, where tension had set up permanent residence. "Even though business isn't brisk. Make that business is downright terrible, I'd never forgive myself, you know, if somebody had too much to drink at my place, then went out and hurt themselves, or worse, somebody else."

"Hmm..." Jason glanced at her with a quick nod, then maneuvered his truck through the tiny but bustling town toward the highway.

Just glimpsing the pine-lined foothills sheltered by the towering Rockies wrapped the familiar sense of

peace around Kelley's shoulders, and she calmed a little. A breath of springtime still lingered in the June air, but the green hills had already started their summer tan. Or maybe it was just leaving the little town of Sunset Hills behind, even temporarily, that loosened her shoulders.

"Well, maybe you could start adding some burgers and hot links to your menu," Jason went on, eyes careful on the road winding through the hills. "You cook that kind of stuff on your wagon trains, don't you?"

"Sure." Of course she did, but she doubted the question had come from him. Ma with her amazing instincts had put him up to it, for sure. Although Ma had always hoped to keep her clutch of hatchlings close to the ranch, she wouldn't want her daughter to fail. Kelley knew that for sure.

For a flash, he grinned over at her, and her heart pumped quick at the warmth of his gaze.

"Yeah, I cook those things," she admitted. "Truth is, I don't know what the future holds. Coming home to Hearts Crossing always helps me sort things out, and I'm looking forward to the first wagon train of the season. Watching those tourists' faces when they see the wagons, the mountains, a fish in a stream, well, I'm hoping it all might remind me how downright lucky I am."

Just to be polite, Jason clucked his tongue in response but mostly yelled at himself inside his head. He slowed down as he crossed the bridge over Longshadow Creek. Of course it had been his idea to

volunteer to pick up Kelley. It wasn't her Ma describing her to a tee at all. Well, not all of it. The picture of her in that silver frame on the mantle in the big living room at the ranch had made him crazy from the first time he'd seen it in March. Those freckles, those sun-bleached, brown braids, loose now in long curls across her back and shoulders. And it seemed she was tons prettier than any old photograph. He gripped the steering wheel tight so he couldn't reach out to wind his fingers in her hair.

And whenever she'd been back at the ranch for weddings or holidays, he'd either been exploring the Colorado outback in his free time or consulting for his parent company to earn money to pay for his jaunts. So first chance he got, here he'd blown it, mentioning a date with a woman who was nothing but a friend. Well, from his perspective. Just a Saturday night friends-with-burger-benefits if nothing better came up. Still...why hadn't he just said he was getting a tooth drilled or something? Just because it was a Saturday?

Or was it a subconscious preventative strike? He tensed as he sped up. After all, he was a man filled with wanderlust. Deep inside, he didn't really want a woman to tie him down. But a casual fling, now, nothing against that. He'd done it before aplenty. He relaxed against the driver's seat. Something laid-back, uncomplicated before he took off again could work just fine. Even if she was his boss's sister. A tad of unease tumbled down his spine, though, at the dangerous thought.

So he said another stupid thing, instead of charming her and letting things blossom. Aw, he'd seen her interested look when she came through the office door. It wasn't arrogance or any such thing, but

he'd seen the same in other female eyes since about the age of sixteen. "So business isn't brisk, then." He bit his tongue after the words shot out.

She settled against the seat, eyes closed, so he couldn't read any messages in them.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be nosy." He unclamped his teeth from his tongue long enough to apologize.

"No, it's all right. I know restaurants take a while to take root. I guess I'm just impatient. But I thought I'd done all the right research." She opened her eyes now but kept them glued to the window, and he understood her need for silence. Along the road, the range teemed with cows, but he shifted his thoughts for a minute. Youthful stints in Sweden and Indonesia, Thailand and Russia, Argentina and the Aussie outback, while interesting, had assured him there was no place like the wide skies, rolling ranchland, and broad-shouldered mountains of the American West. Just days ago, he'd felt right at home helping the Martin brothers drive a hefty number of cattle up the hills into summer pasture.

Kelley's feet shuffled as she sighed and tossed him a quick glance. He gave her a smile. At least he'd cleaned up. "With Main Street reinventing itself, I thought I'd picked the perfect town" — she went on — "a trendy coffee house, wine bar, Tex-Max Cantina...they're all doing well. Lots of summer nature-lovers pass through, then snowmobilers and snowshoe-ers and skiers on their way to the mountains. But Vegeterra's the other side of the junction, and they seem to bypass it, little did I know or suspect. And I learned soon enough the locals miss their meat and potatoes diner. Emphasis on *meat*."

Something like regret, maybe even pain, rippled in

her voice, and he longed to grab her hand. *Just comfort. That's all.* If anything developed between them, he'd have her big brother—his boss—to deal with. Best take things slow.

"Aw, it'll work out," he said. "You got that great family behind you. A great place to come home to."

She smiled then, bright and honest. "I know. Hearts Crossing does manage to make things better. But enough about me. You from these parts?"

She knew he wasn't, else she'd know him by now. But he'd been all over the West, all over the world truth to tell, and northern Colorado with the Rockies' Front Range was among his favorite places. Cities and flatland weren't in his blood. Nor was sticking around. Fortunately, his parent company needed consultants wherever cattle grew.

"California, I guess." He shrugged. Best he could do. "Born in San Francisco, but my folks are real free spirits. Never stayed put for long. Still don't. College hippie throwbacks, you know. Berkeley. But they did hang on to get their degrees and made me get mine. Scholarship to Boulder. I find I like my ranch-hopping life."

"Ranch-hopping?"

He chewed his cheek for a second, not sure how specific to get. Not sure what her family had said about him. The Martins were a tight clan with roots deep into their land going back a hundred and fifty years. Kelley had grown up with traditional values. Including regular church. Her mother was a woman of big shoulders ready to embrace any and all who crossed her path, and an even bigger heart, and he admired Elaine Martin.

But come Sundays, when he declined heading to

Mountain Cove Community Church with the other hands, he could read the disappointment on her face. He shrugged. No need to be anybody but who he was. A man who could fill his heart peering over a mountain valley instead of pouring over a hymn book. "I seem to find myself moving on. This job had my name all over it. Just a temp until Nick gets back. And I'm building clientele for my parent company."

Her forehead furrowed just a tad, and he wondered if it meant she wished he was one to stay longer, put down roots. Nope. Not his way. No matter how pretty her green-flecked eyes were.

"Then where will you go?"

Jason shrugged. "Wherever I'm needed. A lot of ranchers don't hire a full-time geneticist, so I arrange DNA testing."

"DNA testing?"

"Yep. BeauVine's tests are a real accurate way to identify the genetic potential of a herd's tenderness and marbling." He shook his head, aware he sounded just like a brochure. "And artificial insemination and a herd's estrus cycles keep me a busy guy no matter what. And I help at as many round-ups as I can."

Her laughter warmed him so much he adjusted the AC vents to point at him. What a beautiful sound it was. "You should hear my sister Rachel—Nick's wife—describe her first 'field trip' with Nick," she said.

Jason howled now as he braked at La Luna Crossroads. "Matter of fact, I have. Talk about an icebreaker, first time we met. She's quite a gal, handling a baby and that law office, Nick so far away."

"That she is." Kelley's voice grew somber, and he recognized the cloak of worry most folks wore when a loved-one was deployed half a world off, no matter as

Elaine Martin often preached that God was a refuge and strength in any kind of trouble. "But he should be home later this summer." Kelley's fists clenched before she gave him a smile. "Seems you know a lot about us Martins. A tad weird you and I have never met."

He shrugged. "Not my intention. Our paths haven't crossed 'til now, that's all. I trek out into the wilderness every chance I get." When she didn't say anything, he filled the silence even though he wasn't much for chitchat. "Your big brother Hooper's a great boss, a good foreman. I can't believe the guy's energy."

She perked up. "He's a cancer survivor, did you know? Making up for time lost to chemo."

"I do know." He gave up a silent marvel at Hooper Martin's vitality. "That little girl of his sure is a cutie." Jason's voice thickened with guilt. He'd intentionally missed single dad Hooper's wedding last month because marriage was the last thing he believed in. His folks had taught him well.

"That she is. Ella's stolen every heart in Colorado. You know, right? Hooper's new wife is also a cancer survivor." Her words came slow.

"I do know," Jason repeated, but neither spoke for a long minute. Wishful thinking to use the term for one with glioma.

At a second four-way stop, Jason observed full well there wasn't another vehicle in sight, but he was slow to pull ahead, eager to take full advantage of the beautiful sight. Rippling like a staircase down the hillcrests was Lomita Creek where he'd taken a trail ride along the arroyo not long ago. Fine-looking place. If he believed in God, or any god, this might be just the sort of place He'd likely choose to live.

With some forty-five minutes left together before