



TANYA
HANSON



ANGEL CHILD

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Tanya Hanson

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Dedication

To my best friend forever, Tina, and our own precious
angel child, Wes...her son, my godson.

Also Available by Tanya Hanson

Faithful Danger

Hearts Crossing Ranch Series

Hearts Crossing Ranch

Redeeming Daisy

Right to Bragg

Sanctuary

Soul Food

Praise for Tanya Hanson

Hearts Crossing Ranch ~ Ms. Hanson's writing is delightful. It brought me right into the story from sentence one. She's quite a storyteller as she weaves her tale and draws you into it. From the hurt and the heartbreak of these two main characters to the joy and boundless love which comes from God's grace by story's end. There was a beauty to the story of these characters as the plot unfolds and these two fall in love in a believable and sweet way."

Redeeming Daisy ~Bravo, Tanya Hanson for a wonderful new installment in the Hearts Crossing Ranch series! With God's grace and mercy—by embracing His will—we can ALL move past flaws, move past pain, and embrace redemption. I eagerly await more from Ms. Hanson! ~Award-winning author, Marianne Evans

Sanctuary was a spellbinding story. It captivated this reader completely. The refreshing characters of Mallie and Hooper are unforgettable, as well as the secondary players in this marvelous story. It felt like being surrounded by a huge loving family. This extraordinary read is one that I truly recommend to everyone.

Right to Bragg 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 books are definitely worth a second glance. ~ The Romance Studio

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October held enough leftover summer for sweat to bead on Scott Martin's brow. But take his hand off the reins to wipe his face, nope. Not with Heather atop Peachy. Even though his ma's cremello mare was the gentlest of all the Hearts Crossing horses, the disabled fourteen-year-old girl had never sat a horse before. She couldn't speak, but from her mumbles and chuckles, he saw clearly she was enjoying her ride as he led the horse in a slow lap around the corral.

Her ma stood outside the fence, afternoon sun showing the sparkle of tears in her eyes at her daughter's wish coming true. Space Cowboy, Scott's dog, rested his head on Mrs. Clark's feet like he did it every day. Scott's spirit soared at the sights around him.

"You are, Miss Heather, the prettiest cowgirl I ever did see." Scott nodded at the mother and winked at the girl.

Mrs. Clark smiled at his words. "I just know she'd rather wear a cowboy hat on her head than that helmet."

"Safety reasons, ma'am. But I'll see what I can do." He doffed his wide-brimmed hat and plunked it atop the helmet. As Heather's face split into a bright smile, her ma snapped a picture with her smartphone.

One more lap, slow and easy, and Scott reined in Peachy, started unhooking the safety belt he'd jury-

rigged, and waited for Mrs. Clark before lifting Heather down. He wasn't quite sure the nature of the girl's disabilities, which were both physical and intellectual, but she couldn't walk unaided. Her ma helped her every step of the way, so for a flash, he reckoned her riding the horse—even if he'd walked at her side just six inches from her knees—had been a true mark of independence.

Leaning against her mother, Heather groaned a sound that Scott was sure meant thank you. He squeezed the girl's hand and reclaimed his hat. Next time, if there was one, he'd be sure to have on hand a Stetson big enough to tie around Heather's helmet. Seeing Space Cowboy, Heather let out a sound of glee, and her ma helped her bend down to give the mutt a hug.

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Martin, for today. It's a dream come true for my daughter. Horses and dogs—just about her two favorite things. How about another 'lesson' next Saturday?"

Scott had to hesitate. He sure wasn't a certified therapy instructor. True, Hearts Crossing Ranch was no stranger at giving riding lessons, did so both privately and in groups to folks of all ages and experience levels, but today marked the ranch's first time with someone of special needs.

"I looked up some stuff on the internet, but I'm not exactly certified, you know," he said. Sure he'd enjoyed Heather's excursion, and Mrs. Clark had signed all the necessary waivers, but he had to be honest.

"I know but..." Mrs. Clark kissed the top of Heather's head and looked down at her feet. "The closest therapy riding center for disabled children is in

Broken Bow. Hearts Crossing is on the way to my folks. I know Heather would love it, wouldn't you, sweetheart?" She kissed her daughter's cheek with such true adoration Scott's heart tugged. "It was Mrs. Martin's idea, and a wonderful one," she continued before he could think to respond. "Coming here and trying Heather on a gentle horse. There are so few options for special needs children in Rustic Canyon..."

Of all the Mrs. Martins in his world, Scott knew she referred to his sister-in-law Daisy, who taught at a Christian school about an hour away. Heather and a trained teacher's aide mainstreamed into Daisy's seventh grade class a couple hours a day. When Daisy had suggested a therapy ride for Heather, the family had embraced the idea with enthusiasm.

But should there be next times? He knew CPR and first aid, of course, but as yet hadn't taken any specialized training. In the meantime, Heather's bright face convinced him.

"Next Saturday should be OK," he said and meant it, planned to do more research during the week. "We're glad y'all could make it today."

"Thanks so much, Mr. Martin."

"Call me Scott, ma'am. Mr. Martin's one of my brothers." He grinned.

Heather smiled again. Scott was unsure whether she understood or not since her lips twisted oddly from her condition. But in her way, she was a beautiful, intriguing child. Pity rose in his gut, as well as affection. What kind of life would she have later on? What kind of life did her mother have now with a child of such punishing dependence and no possibility of growing up and being on her own?

"OK, then. Be seeing you. Um..." Scott hesitated.

Mrs. Clark seemed so capable, so in tune with her child, but he felt the need to ask. "Can I help you, you know, back to your van?"

Mrs. Clark smiled. "No. We've got our little routine. Heather and I have been on our own since she was knee high. But thanks. For everything."

For a moment, Scott watched them walk away to a pale blue minivan, escorted by Space Cowboy, and wondered. *On our own?* Did that mean no husband and father in the picture? Couldn't be an easy life, not at all. Alone yet.

Definitely time for a cold cola, he hustled up the porch steps into the big ranch house. Hearing voices, Scott wondered if he should intrude. Strong opinions surged from the big front room where most activities originated both family and tourist, ranging from city-slicker wagon trains to destination weddings.

But the strong words now were definitely about his brother Kenn's day job. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Scott didn't want to eavesdrop, but he didn't dare interrupt the eruption either. He hunkered just outside the doorway but with a partial view.

"I can't miss a week of teaching," The mild-mannered Kenn all but hollered. "I've got kids to tutor before quarter exams. Coursework to review with my classes. Not to mention report cards getting done. Ma, it's not gonna happen." Kenn's good arm pounded the side of an armchair, his bandaged leg stretched on an ottoman. "And get that out of here." He pointed at the wheelchair in front of the fireplace, and Scott's heart panged. Before pancreatic cancer had claimed Pa's life, he'd spent many hours in the thing. "I don't need a wheelchair."

"It's a 'transport' chair," Ma sniffed. "You need to

keep your leg elevated. It'll ease you getting around the house. But school? Not on my watch, not with all those pain meds gurgling through your blood. You got no ramps to your classroom. Besides, you need the ice machine and electrodes for your shoulder and all the other gizmos to get you better." Ma harrumphed in her own special way. "And with Christy not here, she's left me in charge."

At the mention of his wife's name, Kenn's face darkened. It had torn them apart, Christy leaving so soon after Kenn's tumble from a rescued mustang, but she was a keynote speaker at the Landscape Architects National Association's annual convocation in southern California. In addition, she was the scheduled recipient of the prestigious Tomorrowscape Award for one of her Los Angeles area sustainable landscaping projects. Even with her protests, Kenn had insisted he was in good enough hands for a few days. He'd even encouraged her not to cancel plans to visit relatives and friends before coming home.

Out-patient arthroscopic surgery had fixed up Kenn just fine. And without a doubt, Ma's promise to hover over his brother had helped convince Christy not to cancel her plans.

"The discussion is over," Ma declared. "You couldn't even use crutches with that shoulder. So stop squawking and start healing. And you, Scott."

His skin crawled. How had she sensed him? He knew well he hadn't made one single sound as he leaned against the doorway wall. "Scotty? Please tuck that chair away in the study." She tended to the wires attached to Kenn's bandages.

"OK, Ma." He kissed her cheek. Ma was a powerful force of nature in the best of times, but when

one of her clutch was in need, her authority never stopped. Thing was, she was usually right.

"And Kenn, even talented as you are, nobody's indispensable," Ma said. "This morning Principal Scovell hired somebody who taught for him a while back. Your substitute will be here in a little while to get some lessons plans done. You recall me telling you that, don't you?"

Kenn nodded, but his tensed jaw let Scott know he was still resisting like crazy.

"Now, you be polite."

With a groan, Kenn used his good arm to toss a throw pillow across the room. Then Scott moved the "transport chair" out of sight.

"How'd it go with the little girl?" Kenn asked, eyelids moving slow, when Scott returned. The pain meds were apparently working.

"Not so little. Fourteen." Scott perched on a chair next to his brother. Ma sat silently, but bright eyes full of interest. "She enjoyed it. Tragic girl. Crippled and all but mute. Her ma tries to keep her gussied up cute, though."

Ma harrumphed again. "Of course her ma does. That girl is the beautiful child of her heart, no matter what. And ever a child of God."

"Her ma wants her back next Saturday. I said OK although I think we better find out some more about therapy riding."

"Let Kenn research it while he's housebound." Ma ordered. "You've got to get the holiday inventory catalogued for the gift shop, and get the Christmas collection up on the online store."

"All right." Scott shrugged, a tad offended. He knew well what all his duties were, never shirked them

to begin with. With the October cattle market now over and Hearts Crossing's summer activities quiet until next year, he had time to catch up and even expand his own web-design business. In addition, a local romance writer had hired him to design promotional book trailers for her upcoming releases. He stood up, recalling his need for a soda.

"Get you anything, Kenn?" He headed toward the kitchen just as the doorbell rang. During the busy tourist months, the front door was never locked and guests went in and out at will, but off season, the ranch house had returned to a private home again. "I'll get it."

He opened the door, and his breath stopped. Heart pounded against his ribs before falling to his feet. *Mary Grace Wesley*? Well, *Mary Grace Gibson* now. Her big blue eyes widened like moons.

Grabbing tight to his self control, Scott's brain insisted she'd grown more beautiful since the Fourth of July. After running into each other at the reunion picnic, they'd spent the whole day together. She'd even looped her arm through his when he took her around to chat with people she hadn't seen in years.

"Hi, Scott." As she moved her head, the sides of her blonde bob swung against the high bones of her cheeks and hid the rising blush.

Words strangled in his throat as mortification rose one more time. After that wonderful summer day, she'd refused his request for a date. A simple hamburger at the Butterbean Café. Nothing serious. Definitely nothing matrimonial considering Miss Wesley had been his art teacher in high school. That was a long time ago, what? Ten, eleven years? Him twenty-seven, her about thirty-three or four, they were

contemporaries now.

Here she was, a laptop in one hand, a briefcase in another.

Kenn's substitute. Getting ready to go back to Mountain Cove High School.

Mary Grace's nightmare had come true. Of all the many Martin siblings who could have answered the door, it had to be Scott Martin, the one she never wanted to see again.

Mostly because she *wanted* to see him again. The lean kid she'd vaguely remembered from her art class long ago had grown up and filled out into one handsome cowboy. Meeting him again at the All-American Reunion Picnic had stolen her breath. Stirred her interest in him both as a graphic artist and as a man. Caused her four months of dreams that could never come true. Let him think the age difference was the reason. But the real reason was Creighton.

"How've you been?" The best deal was acting casual, normal. So she'd refused his date. Age difference worked. Or the weird little fact she'd once been his teacher.

Whatever. She just couldn't risk losing her heart. "I'm here to talk with Kenn," she went on. Despite her goal to sound casual, her voice shook. "I'll be taking over his classes while he recovers. How's he doing?"

"So you're his sub." Scott didn't sound rude, just shocked. Then, as if he suddenly remembered his manners, he ushered her into the rustic, rambling ranch house.

"Yes, I am." She pretended great interest in the

invalid waving from a big leather chair. "Hello, Kenn? I'm Mary Grace Gibson. I'll be helping you out for a week or two."

"Howdy." His smile was less grumpy than she would have thought. "I know you were on the faculty there, but just before my time, I guess. This is my mother, Elaine Martin."

Mrs. Martin held out a hand for Mary Grace to shake.

"Happy to meet you. Yes, it's been a while since my days at Mountain Cove High." She had to flash Scott a smile. "I even remember teaching art to your kid brother. But no worries. I minored in English and American studies. I'll be fine." She hurried to Kenn and gently took his left hand, careful of the injured right shoulder. Indeed, Mountain Cove High had been another lifetime ago. Before pro football star Grant Gibson had promised her the world, married her, and took her far away. Then left her in the lurch when things got tough.

Make that...when Creighton had been born with a rare, incurable syndrome called Angelman. So much for better, worse. sickness, health. No matter. Her boy was her life.

"I recall you left us to get married. Football player, right?" Kenn asked.

When Mary Grace didn't say anything, Scott spoke. "Yep. Grant Gibson."

"Wow. Hall of Famer? What on earth brings you back here?"

After settling in the chair across from Kenn, she laid her laptop and briefcase on the floor, and considered what to say. Bad memories washed over her, but no reason to bare her soul. She'd only taught at

Mountain Cove High one year, and although her marriage had seemed quite a coup at the time, she wondered if the locals even remembered. As for Creighton, well. She was proud as punch about him, but her private nature didn't permit her go into detail about her son's disabilities. Mostly to hold off the sympathy, well-meaning or not. She didn't explain that Creighton was in the process of assimilating into a group home for full-time care. The separation stabbed her heart at times, but in the long run, she and his doctors had determined this was best.

"Ah well. Some fairytales don't come true." She had to keep things light. "Grant and I aren't together anymore. But we have a son who's almost ten. My dad's not in good health, so last summer, we moved back from Michigan. When I heard about the reunion picnic, well, I couldn't resist."

There. That was true and informative and noncommittal. She'd watched Scott's fingers clench when she talked about the reunion, though. That day at the picnic, she had told him she was single, had quietly mentioned Grant and having a son. Scott's asking her out after learning about such baggage had more than flattered her. It had thrilled her. But it didn't matter, not then. Not now. Her own husband hadn't wanted an imperfect son. Why would any other man?

"Oh," Kenn offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry to bring that up. I didn't think before I spoke."

Let him think it was the divorce that made her sad and not worry about her son. Over the years, she'd "dated" two men quite seriously, and each had quickly said *adios* upon meeting Creighton for the first time. Never would she bring a man into her son's life again. Because none of them ever stuck around.

It was simply better this way.

"I'll make y'all some coffee." Kenn's mother stood. "Then you and Kenn can get to work. And Scott can get to his computer. Your pa live around here, Mary Grace? I don't recall him."

At mention of Scott, Mary Grace's skin grew warm, and she hoped her cheeks didn't flame. Oh, it would have been nice. Just a simple burger with a hunky cowboy. But... "No. My folks live in Lost Canyon."

"Lost Canyon?" Elaine Martin halted mid-stride, hands on ample hips. "You intend making that drive back and forth every day, for a week or more? We're due for an early snow."

Both Scott and Kenn wore worried foreheads. "That is one monster drive, Mary Grace." Kenn used a stern schoolteacher tone.

"It's not so bad." She steeled herself. Like a treacherous drive would keep her from the job. She needed the job.

Mrs. Martin wasn't going to let it go, however. Her lips pursed tight, and her fingers fiddling with the zipper of the turquoise jacket that matched her pants. "That pass at Eagle Ridge isn't a good place even in the best of times."

Mary Grace held off a shiver. She knew all this; her folks did, too. But God had sent her this job. About that she had no doubts or qualms at all. She'd prayed and this was the answer.

"I need the job," she said simply. Not just for money. She also needed to build up her résumé. She hadn't taught one single day since leaving Mountain Cove to marry Grant. After he left, well, the pre-nup hadn't been generous, especially when Creighton's