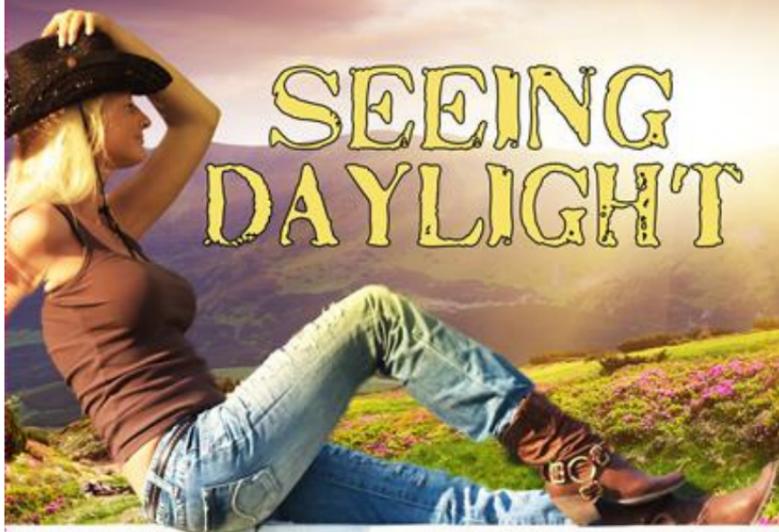


TANYA
HANSON



SEEING
DAYLIGHT



Seeing Daylight

Tanya Hanson

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Dedication

Dedicated with all my love to the California Coastal Horse Rescue, the glorious horses and amazing volunteers who so touch my life. I am so blessed to have found this beautiful place. I so feel God here.

Praise for

Sanctuary was a spellbinding story. It captivated this reader completely. Just when I thought it could not get any better, Ms. Hanson throws in a curve with the ex-wife. This remarkable read was extremely hard to put down. ~Coffee Time Romance.

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.

Heart's 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. ~ Long and Short Reviews

1

Rachel woke up just this side of a bad dream. Heart pounding, sheets strangling, she reached for something that wasn't there. Someone.

Nick. Dead sixteen months.

"I love you, Mama. Get up." Her little boy's words calmed her soul. Sunshine brushed her face and unbelievably, the usual desolation eased.

"Love you too, Matty. I think it's going to be a beautiful day." Scrambling from the blankets, she grabbed his tiny jeans and got him quickly dressed. Then he shrugged away her hug to chase tiny cars across the braided rug of her childhood bedroom.

She stretched, noticed the knots in her neck were gone, and peered out the window. Sunrise bounced from the mountain peaks to glaze the ranch below. Indeed, Hearts Crossing Ranch meant family, life, and love, but it was time. Time for her and Matty to find a place of their own. "Let's go, kiddo."

"What do we do today?" His little face bore such a resemblance to his father her heart lurched. But in a good way, finally. What a legacy Nick had left behind.

"Gramma will take care of you. I'm going on a trail ride to Fortress Creek with some ladies."

After she dressed, they met her brother Scott at the bottom of the stairs, and Matty threw himself into his uncle's arms.

"You go get some breakfast, bud. I gotta talk to

your mama." Scott tried a charming smile.

Ah, something was up. Rachel knew him well. Matty scampered off.

"Hey, Rache. Could you take my therapy riding lesson? I'll be taking the bachelorette party out on the trail instead of you."

"Sure." Rachel couldn't help a grin. "If you've a mind for flirtin', remember, you're a married man with a baby girl on the way. But what's up with the switcheroo?"

Scott twiddled his fingers. "Aw, at the line dance in town last night, the gals found out about Cheyenne Bluff. How pretty it is in the fall. So, you know."

Of course she knew. Her heart made a full stop before it hammered against her ribs. Cheyenne Bluff. Where Nick had died.

The day after Scott's wedding. Her throat tightened, and her hands knotted together. Her heart panged even though Scott's thoughtfulness touched her. She couldn't bear taking a happy bride and her entourage to the spot of the accident. Once more grief screamed.

Rachel hoped this woman's marriage would be happy, yet she knew well how life could turn against you. How God could, too. Unwinding her fingers, she touched his shoulder. "Thanks, Scott. I'll be right there."

"No hurry. Get a cup of coffee. Everybody's still eating."

At the big kitchen breakfast table, she found Matty snuggling deep into Ma's neck. The bachelorettes, at the ranch for the weekend, smiled and greeted her over their blueberry muffins. Rachel's gaze paused on the bride. Under the brim of her straw western hat peeked

a tuft of veil. Her face glowed like a bride's should, and Rachel's heart tore in half at memories of her own wedding day. Last thing she wanted was food. She pulled her hand back from the tray of muffins.

"Get some coffee at least, Rachel," her mother ordered, sensing her pain.

"Morning, everybody." Rachel grabbed a cup and her control and tried a drawl. "I'll be taking my brother Scott's riding lesson this morning. Looks like he's the cowpoke going to ride the trail with you this morning." She smiled at their happy faces. "Bear in mind, he's way off the table."

"So are we," a bridesmaid wearing a fringed jacket tossed back. "Charlene, our lovely bride, is the last of us to get hitched."

"Um, leave me out of it. I've got no engagement ring on my ringer yet." Another woman chimed in. "And unless Travis takes off his jerk-jacket soon, I just might, you know..." Her voice trailed off into a giggle.

"Ah, Cricket." The group groaned as one.

Still, the last of us? Rachel swallowed. At one time, she had been the first—the first of the eight siblings to get hitched. Then came the long wait before the miracle of conception. Nick's reserve unit left to serve weeks before Matty's birth. More than breath itself, she'd wanted him at her side when their baby arrived. She still recalled her panic, her tears, but God had been there *then*. Promising never to send more than she could bear.

Well, maybe He'd been wrong.

"Rachel, you hurry on to your lesson now," Ma announced. "I can babysit this sugarplum all day and all night and then some." Ma's voice turned tender but it wasn't toward her grandson. Her mother didn't miss

a thing—knew exactly what she was feeling. Rachel had to get out. Out of the kitchen now. Out of the house.

Her heart hammered with nerves. She'd spun her wheels all these months in the comfort of childhood, but the time had come to be on her own again. Get her own place. But for now, she kissed Ma's cheek then the top of Matty's head and poured herself that cup of coffee. With mumbled goodbyes, the bridal gaggle looked up when Scott poked his head back in.

"Rachel, Tiffany's got Peachy all ready for Adelaide," he said. "Ladies, we'll be on our way soon."

"I'll be right there." Rachel set down her cup on a side table in the foyer and quickly grabbed her warm jacket and Stetson from the hall tree. Helping Scott always warmed her heart. He'd done such a great thing, bringing a therapy riding program to Hearts Crossing to assist children with disabilities. Ma's gentle Cremello mare, Peach Cobbler, had taken to her new role right away. And as for Rachel, concentrating on her certification for equine therapy had gotten her through some terrible times. So far, only she and Scott had gone through the training.

"Tell me about my student." The steam from her cup all but crackled into the cold morning air as she and Scott walked to the training arena.

"Adelaide Metcalf. You might have heard of her dad. Brayton Metcalf? Big California businessman." Scott's words turned white on the air. "He bought the saddlery business in River Ridge a summer ago. Folks got their jobs back. Saved the town."

"Yeah." She'd had too much of her own life to deal with that summer. "Saving the saddlery was a good thing."

“Well, the business is thriving. Brayton decided to move here from Los Angeles. In July, he bought a thirty-acre ranchette in the canyon and some good horseflesh.”

“Quite a change.” She’d heard some gossip about him being the most eligible bachelor for fifty miles, but nothing about a special needs child. Eligible bachelors were of no interest to her. However, children were. “I didn’t know he has a disabled child.”

“Her back was injured in an accident when she was two,” Scott said. “She’s had some surgeries, and she’s doing great. Just needs to work on her balance, strengthen her spine. Mostly build her confidence.”

“OK. I can handle that.” Rachel stood on tiptoe to give her brother a hug. “That’s them?” She nodded toward a car that had just pulled in the parking area.

“Yep.”

As Rachel set her mug on the top of a fence post, she watched the Metcalfs emerge from a deep gray BMW twenty yards away, twenty minutes early. A tall cowboy-hatted man waved eagerly before turning to help his daughter, who looked about twelve. She pulled away from him. Aw, girls. Rachel remembered pre-teen moodiness. Her own and her sisters’. And if the girl had health issues as well...

“He’s a real good man, Rachel. A widower.” Scott’s eyebrows rose.

Anger mixed with annoyance, and Rachel turned her back to the newcomers. “If you’re on about what I think you’re on about, Scotman, no thanks. I’m off the table, too.” She ground her teeth. “I need another husband like I need...like I need a rash on my backside during a trail ride.”

“Aw, Rache. I’m not saying get married again.” He

scooped carrot stubs from a Styrofoam cooler into a blue plastic bucket. "But it couldn't hurt to keep company with a nice guy once in a while."

Rachel swallowed hard. She hadn't been on a date for a decade or more.

"No." She said, heart tweaking. "Matty's the only man in my life. The only one I need." Affection transposed irritation, and she tussled Scott's unruly hair. "You're a good guy. Mary Grace is lucky to have you. But I'm OK. I really am."

Scott frowned, but didn't say anything else. Rachel understood. Her seven siblings wanted her safe and secure with somebody nice. All but she and baby sister, Chelsea, were married and settled. But...

"Come on." She took Scott's hand and led him to the Metcalfs, the girl stiff and sullen at her dad's side. "Introduce me before you go off with the bachelorettes."

With Brayton close up, Rachel admitted the gossip about his looks were true. She had to hang on to her breath as well as Scott's arm. If she'd been in a better place in life and time, her heart would have trilled at such a handsome man. Beneath the brim of a well-worn Stetson, his gray eyes sparkled like sunshine on a rain puddle. Jeans hugged his long legs just right to show off well-shaped thighs. Face still tan from summer, shoulders wide enough to make a woman feel safe. And that dark hair brushing his shoulders. A normal widow would have ached to drag her fingers through it.

"Howdy, Brayton. Meet my sister Rachel... Martin." Scott hesitated over her name. She understood why. Professionally, she'd been Rachel Martin, Esquire, since starting her law practice and

Mrs. Vasquez in her private life. Now without Nick, without the man who had promised a lifetime with her, she felt little need to include his name.

"Pleased to meet you, that's for sure. Brayton Metcalf." With a wide grin, he held out a hand, strong and callused, what she expected from a rancher and not from a city man.

"Happy to meet you. And this, of course, is Adelaide. Howdy." Rachel addressed the grumpy girl. "I'm Rachel."

"How do you do," the girl replied in a fairly polite way before sniping. "I hate that name. It's old fashioned. He"—she threw her dad a dirty look—"named me for his *grandmother*."

Brayton shrugged, sun-browned cheekbones turning copper in embarrassment. "Gram Adelaide raised me." Then he glared at his daughter. "Mind your manners, young lady."

Rachel felt for him, keen to soothe the moment. "It's a nice name. My Grim-Gram was named Frieda Louise." She grinned.

For a second, the girl's lips twitched. "Well, I like Addie better."

"I like it, too. You have a choice then, classic or modern."

Scott handed Adelaide the blue bucket of carrots. "Peachy's waiting for a snack. I'll see y'all later."

With a two-finger tip of his hat, Scott left for the bridesmaids, and Addie took off to the corral, crooning to Peachy and holding out a flat palm studded with carrots. Rachel couldn't help noticing that Addie's posture appeared perfect, her gait secure, her back strong, and her feet sure as she scrambled away from her dad.

“Sorry about that.” Brayton’s color had returned to normal, but his jaw tensed. “She and I don’t get along very well. And it’s been worse lately. We moved here last summer, and she wasn’t crazy about leaving California.”

“It’s OK.” Rachel laid a hand on his arm. “My mother raised three girls and five boys. Says if you don’t get a girl at some point, you really haven’t experienced parenthood.”

Brayton barked out a short laugh.

“And pre-teenage angst can be pretty bad. I dished out plenty in my day. Just ask Ma.” Rachel wanted to ease Brayton’s embarrassment, but he raised bleak eyes to her. The toes of his boots rustled up some dust as his feet moved restlessly.

His jaw clenched. “It’s more than that. She misses having a mother, and she blames me for the loss.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Her mother died in a plane crash. I was the pilot.”

2

What a *great* first impression. Brayton's jaw tightened harder. First time he'd seen Rachel from afar, a couple of lessons ago, he'd ached to meet her. After a decade mourning Marianne and eating guilt every day for breakfast, he was ready to move on. Finding out Rachel was single had been great inducement, and today's switching places with her brother had to be proof of God's providence.

Gram Adelaide had raised him in faith. Raised him that you might lose sight. And indeed he had, the ship of his faith having sailed off with Marianne's death. But as Gram said, you only stayed blind if you kept your heart shut. And he'd been swimming toward the heavenly high ground for some time now. The mixed metaphors didn't faze him.

"It was an accident," he said.

"Well, I'm sure it wasn't your fault." Rachel ended the weird moment as she shrugged, and shook her head. Gold-streaked brownish hair bounced on her shoulders from underneath a wide western brim. "Scott...mentioned you were a widower. Bad things happen to good people."

Wasn't your fault. He closed his eyes, heart halting. "Thanks kindly, but, well, ground inspection ten minutes earlier was spot on. Pilot error, had to be." He opened his eyes to gauge her reaction. His nature was upfront, honest, take-no-prisoners. Characteristics that

had helped him develop some of the most successful residential communities in the west. Might as well let the dirty secrets out. Other than treetops way too close, he didn't remember much else, probably a blessing, but what a dismal first conversation with a woman he was interested in. Dismay tightened his throat.

"I know all about errors and accidents," Rachel said, sounding bitter for a quick second.

It struck him; he didn't know how she'd lost her husband. Divorce? Death? Seemed rude to question.

Then she tossed him a dazzling smile. "What a sorry discussion this is. It's a beautiful day. Let's get that girl of yours on a horse. Riding has a way of making things better."

Brayton nodded. "It sure does. You two go enjoy yourself."

"Come on, Addie." Rachel called out and jogged from his side.

Tossing Rachel a smile he coveted, Addie joined Rachel in the training ring.

His daughter ignored him, but she walked straight, firm, and his heart gladdened anyway. With her growing like a weed, he was always on the prowl for scoliosis, her doctors for spinal tethering or anything else that might suggest more surgery. As a toddler, being flat-on-her back had been miserable. The thought of a bedridden preteen was nightmarish.

Rachel strapped a helmet over his daughter's long sandy hair, and guilt smacked him again when Addie gave Rachel another brilliant smile. Marianne's smile. Once in a while, Adelaide looked so like her mother everything came thudding back.

Brayton brushed away the past and slowed his pounding heart. Loud and hearty, he clapped his

hands as Adelaide landed properly in her saddle from the mounting block. She tossed him something like a smile, and his spirit brightened for a smidge. Rachel led Peachy to the training ring, and he marveled at how well Adelaide sat a horse.

Addie. He corrected himself. He laughed out loud. In March, she'd called herself *Apple*. Summer had seen *Angie*. Or maybe it had been *Allie*. Maybe both. Her brother had tried out "Laidie" to Adelaide's pout that she wasn't a collie dog. Maybe if Brayton started using her current chosen moniker, a little of the ice would melt. Up to now, he couldn't keep up.

But then and there, he promised to try.

The beautiful fall weather sent him a strange, bittersweet peace. It had been summertime when Marianne died, and he was usually glad when the season ended. This autumn, though, Nate had left for college, leaving him and Addie alone together. Ah, life.

Brayton scooted close to lean against the post. Admiration filled him. Rachel sure knew what she was doing. She easily coached Addie into good posture. The rhythmic movement of the horse helped enhance his daughter's coordination and balance and strengthened motor development, all things her past medical history required.

Her laughter at Rachel's instructions to change positions on the slow-moving horse thrilled his ears. Addie sat to the side, and then went prone across the horse, even prone lengthwise, knees bent. She was having the time of her life, but more than anything, he longed to be the source of her joy. He wanted her to find comfort in the daddy who loved her, not some gentle mare who performed the same for any kid.

He'd take the small miracles for now. To stretch

his legs, he grabbed the blue bucket and headed to the corral where other horses hung their heads over the rail, waiting for carrots. He muttered to them as he fed them and knew they liked the sound.

He looked around at the well-tended barn and outbuildings. His small ranch, Red Hill, was nothing like the awesome, sprawling Hearts Crossing, unless you counted the rocky peaks and grassy hills surrounding his place. And of course, this was a working ranch. His, as he was teased, was a rich man's hobby. Nonetheless, leaving L.A. to start over in Colorado had worked wonders on him, brought back memories of his boyhood in southeast Idaho. But the onset of adolescence had stuck Addie in a bad place. She'd resisted the move and railed about not having a mom to confide in. Soon blame against him had set in, and his sweet little girl had cast him aside. Her brother-confidante departing for college had iced the unhappy little cake.

As for himself and Addie, well, her neurologist, her physical therapist, and her psychologist had all three suggested a mutual interest to help heal their rift. Horses. With her spinal history, hippotherapy had been a good choice. Her taking a few therapy lessons would build confidence and balance before standard riding instruction. Addie had taken to the idea without much argument. She'd even laughed, asking if she was expected to ride a hippopotamus. *Nope*, Brayton had explained. *Hippotherapy means therapeutic horseback riding, or simply horse therapy.* In the long run, however, she'd resisted his company. Now with her brother, her usual chauffeur, off at school, she had no choice.

The half hour passed quickly. Too quickly if one considered his daughter's grim face when the lesson

ended. Not quickly enough if one considered his racing heart. He felt like a teenager as the beautiful Rachel walked toward him, leading Peachy with Addie still astride. She wasn't tall, just tall enough, lithe with long denim-clad legs. Scuffed boots tossed up corral dust as she strode her native stomping grounds with confidence and poise. Like a woman who could take on the world and then some.

"Show your dad how well you dismount," Rachel encouraged, and without meeting his eye, Addie did just that. She swung her right leg toward the ground then removed her left from the stirrup and hopped down. Of course Rachel was only inches away during the whole procedure.

"Good job. One of these days, you'll likely be ready for a horse all your own," he told Addie, rewarded by the quick but real dash of approval in her eyes.

"Good lesson, Addie," Rachel said, bringing to his side her scent of outdoors and...cinnamon. Nutmeg maybe. Autumn scents. "But if that's the case," Rachel went on, "there's more to horseflesh than exercise. Let's see who needs grooming. Peachy has another lesson now. Tiffany?" She called out.

Another young woman, obviously pregnant, came from the barn. She tossed Brayton a perky grin. "Howdy. I'm Rachel's sister-in-law. Tiffany. Bragg's wife."

Brayton nodded, having met the youngest Martin brother. But Addie surprised him.

"Hi Tiffany," his daughter said, completely at home. "Need any help grooming Curiosity? I need to learn."

"I was just about to ask. Come on." Tiffany gave