

Now he's found her, will she let him protect her
before *they* find her too?

Tanya Hanson

FAITHFUL
DANGER



Faithful Danger

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Dedication

With gratitude to the bikers and hikers of Santa Ynez
for your generous fundraising to fight cancer. Live
strong! God bless you, T.L.

Praise for Tanya Hanson

[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

Hanson has a talent for telling of God's love and compassion without being overbearing—The Romance Studio

Like a deep down prayer, Hearts Crossing Ranch comes alive. Through Hanson's vivid, skilled story telling 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."

~Award-winning Author, Marianne Evans

1

Caffey smiled at her reflection as she smeared on lip gloss. Pretty pink to match her dress. But the matchy-matchy wasn't what made her smile. Hair now straight and dark had disguised her successfully for more than a year. She looked nothing like the blonde, perfectly-permed socialite she'd been in Manhattan.

Hide in plain sight. Satisfaction and gratitude for God's protection rolled over her. She'd found Him again just in time. Central California ranch country intermingled with vineyards was nothing like her girlhood stomping grounds in Montana, but at least she had a horse again, and wide open skies over her head.

Not to mention three thousand miles separating her from New York and the mafia-esque kin who had paid her a not-very-condolence call after Everett's funeral.

As she reached for the polka dotted stiletto pumps, she shuddered, and the bride noticed. Nikki's forehead crumpled behind the veil. "Oh, Caff, I know how much you like your boots. I hope those heels don't kill your feet. And I know they're frivolous. But..." Nikki wrapped her fingers around a ruffle and said, dreamily. "I just couldn't resist."

"No, no, they're perfect," Caffey insisted, meaning it, sorry Nikki had seen her displeasure but grateful

she didn't have to explain it. The shoes were a good excuse. The shoes that reminded her too much of the ridiculously expensive footwear required in the Big Apple. She gave Nikki a quick hug, careful of veil and flowers. "No, sweetie. They're just right. Really."

And they were. Back in the day, her stylist would have approved mightily of the whole bridesmaid get-up. The nutty shoes. Slim pink one-shoulder silken sheath with a bouquet of black orchids. Her heart pounded, hating that Nikki's big day reminded her of so much trauma.

Of the day she'd married Everett nine years ago in an elaborate shindig at the Plaza Hotel.

Nothing at all like Nikki's simple plans at this quiet bed and breakfast inn with a loving minister instead of Everett's cynical brother and his faux Internet ordination.

Slipping on the shoes, Caffey shoved away bad memories and let joy wash over her. This was Nikki's day. Zak was a good guy. Even though she and Nikki had only known each other a year—they'd met teaching Sunday School, Caffey felt blessed Nikki considered her a friend close enough to be her maid of honor. Yes, indeed. New York was another lifetime ago.

Nikki took a deep breath and tightened her fingers around her cascade of white orchids. "So...you'll take care of my babies, right?" Then she blushed. "Oh, I know you will. Dandy and Darlin' love you. I'm leaving them in good hands, I know. It's just...I'm...just so nervous. I can't believe it's here already."

Caffey gently touched Nikki's bare shoulder. "Don't worry about a thing, sweetie. The pups and I

get along great." And they did. The four-month old Golden retrievers were the bride and groom's gifts to each other. "And you relax," Caffey comforted. "You look beautiful, and everything is picture perfect down below."

Caffey pointed out the window of the pretty guest room to the flower-bedecked scene outside. In rhythm with the string quartet, ushers gently shoved guests into the rows of white chairs, and they moved agreeably. All but one.

Her gaze stuck on something—someone—that stole her breath. Tall, lean. Dark and handsome as the devil, all in black. Not moving despite the gesturing groomsmen. It was the cowboy hat that did it for her. You just never saw such a thing in Manhattan, and these days, she couldn't get enough. Of course, he wasn't the only one wearing such a hat in this little Western town today. But he was the only one standing there, deliberate. Taller than most, and mouthwateringly delicious.

"Whoa. Who's the guy in that Stetson?" She mouthed the word almost reverently although the Western hat might easily be a Larry Mahan or a Resistol.

Nikki waved her bouquet distractedly as she peeked. "Which cowboy? Every guy is wearing his dress Western duds today."

"That one." Caffey pointed.

The bride shrugged. "Must be Zak's side." As if listening raptly to the string quartet, she tensed, and the innkeeper burst into the room. Nikki's limited budget couldn't handle a full-on wedding coordinator and Mrs. Porcelain Pillars Inn was doing her best.

"You girls better get downstairs. Nikki, your

mom's getting ready to walk up the aisle."

The aisle. Caffey couldn't help a sigh. A pretty pathway lined with pink rose petals to match the flowers the gazebo wore. Oh, it was a beautiful day. She tossed the dark-haired, dark-hatted stranger from her mind and stopped her shaking knees and pounding heart.

Would weddings always do this to her? God willing, Zak and Nikki would fare far better than she and Everett. At least *their* relationship was grounded on faith in God. She shuddered, recalling how she'd succumbed to Everett's scoffs and ridicule against her childhood belief. Yet the first few years he'd seemed besotted with her and her ways, been her tender lover. Her best friend. Protector and champion. She'd gone years thinking she could lead him to God.

Wrong.

At least Caffey had found her way. Even though she wasn't Caffey at all. And no matter Everett's misdeeds and sacrilege, she didn't wish suicide or drowning on anybody.

Careful of the slick-bottomed soles and six-inch heels, she ventured down the stairs ahead of the bride. A camera flashed. This was Nikki's day, and Caffey rejoiced in it. She refused to let her own misguided life intrude on her friend's joy.

But as she followed the little pink petals to the gazebo positioned in the shade of a live oak tree, she almost tripped because of the shoes. Or not. *The Cowboy* stared at her from a seat midway on the groom's side, so tall he could peer over everybody else around him, gaze unobstructed by a brim as his hat had been gentlemanly removed. His eyes, hot and potent, followed her every step of the way, head

swiveling as she passed him so his gaze could burn holes in her back.

She grabbed hold of her composure as something wracked her spine. Something she'd never allowed herself to feel even when her marriage turned hopeless and unhappy. Not once during the days of proper widowhood. But something she could feel now. *Attraction.*

He nodded at her as she slunk up the aisle, totally composed like one would expect from Mrs. Everett Bedford Bradford, trophy wife. Sneaky little vixen. For more than a year, he'd hunted her down, a timetable longer than his usual, and he wasn't about to forget her wasting his time. Although, he mused, New York's rich and famous were paying him handsomely to track Bradford's widow.

Maybe folks hereabouts had accepted her as a good neighbor, a harmless barista at the coffeehouse who taught kids on Sundays, but he knew better. The straight black hair was a good disguise, especially now with her suntanned skin, but he knew full well Caffey Matthews was nobody less than Katherine Morton Bradford, blonde bombshell widow of the chicken-livered genius financier turned arrogant embezzler who had dared anybody to catch him. Well, they dared now, no matter he was dead, and she was all that was left. The rich and famous wanted their money back. Too pathetic to face the music, Bradford had drowned himself fifteen months ago, leaving his pretty little widow behind to hide his ill-gotten gains.

Of course she knew where he'd kept it. Offshore.

Caymans no doubt. Maybe Zurich. Why else would she have gone incognito? He guffawed, then turned it into a sneeze as the well-dressed woman next to him glanced in surprise.

"Excuse me," he muttered, faking it.

"God bless you," the woman said, likely not meaning it. Didn't matter. God didn't have much to do with him on a good day.

He sniffed. *Tried* to go incognito, he meant. Like anybody could hide from Rhee Ryland. A headache tweaked for a split second, and he rubbed it away, longing for his hat to hold off the sun.

As she walked up the aisle, her eyes misting and blinking rapidly, he relaxed against his chair. Piece of cake. He'd been under far deeper cover than a wedding crasher. All he had to do was avoid a reception line and mutter "groom's guest" when he caught up with her.

Then he stiffened with a hiss. *Blast it*. This time the woman next to him shifted sharply away as if she'd had enough. In the last six weddings he'd attended—his pals were dropping like flies into the marriage morass—the girls in lookalike dresses had worn pearl earrings. Classy, simple. It hadn't taken much to load one with a GPS tracking device, reckoning he'd enact a bait-and-switch some time during the reception. Even if "Caffey" took it off later, she'd be taking a jewelry box along with her wherever she planned to go next. The Caymans. Her folks' ranch in Montana. New York? Wherever. You might pretend to be somebody else for a while, but you never stayed in the same place forever. Couldn't. Boredom got to you, loneliness, too, and suspicion, three. Or somebody like him, and he didn't have another year to waste when she upped and

tried her game somewhere else.

He could stay on her tail around here for a couple of days, but any longer would likely arouse suspicion in a little town where everybody knew everybody else and their business. But his plan was falling to bits. Right now Caffey wore earrings as big as fans that hung to her shoulders. Riled, he smashed the toes of his Lucchese Mad Dog boots against the rung of the chair ahead of him. They were nicely polished as befitting the occasion, but he'd irritated that guest, too.

He hated the waiting. Hated the inaction as the main players slowly performed under the gazebo. His fingers clamped into tight balls, he forced the restlessness of his legs away by compressing his jaw like a vise. Would the preacher-man never shut up?

Well, the reverend didn't stop until he uttered those magic words, and Rhee clapped like everybody else at the "new Mr. and Mrs. Zak Pender" part. But his gaze was on Caffey, not the happy couple who marched down first to a pretty violin riff. She was sobbing—hard, not the wispy tears unmarried girls did at weddings.

Unmarried? Yeah, right. She'd been married to the best of them. Make that the worst. Still, something in his heart of stone lurched, and after she passed the congregants, she ran into the inn, Rhee Ryland fast on her heels.

In the foyer, face buried in her hands, she leaned against a big round table that held a vase, big as a volcano, with a giant arrangement erupting from the top. The bundle of dark, make that *black*, orchids she'd carried sat next to it.

"Hey, you all right?" He asked using a soft voice that brought most women to their knees. He held off

the darlin', though. "Can I help?"

He wasn't being fake. Sure, he needed to get close to Katherine Morton Bradford, but right now, she was a weeping mess called Caffey Matthews, and his heartstrings pulled. So did his arms as he gathered her close.

"It'll be all right. Shhhh. It will, I promise." Right then he meant the words, for right then she was Caffey Matthews. He'd take them back when she turned into Katherine Morton again. But at this time, she smelled so good he couldn't fill his nose fast enough. Her body, regular size and height with curves in all the right places, fit against his like she belonged there.

Well, she didn't, and he shoved that thought away.

"No, I'm fine. Really." She nestled in his arms just for one more second before she tried to shuffle out of them. He held tight, though, wanting to ease her shudders before he let go.

"Come on. Maybe a glass of wine will calm you down." He steered her outside with his right arm while the left one retrieved her flowers. "You sitting at a head table or something."

She cleared her throat, staying put in his arms. And he liked it. "No. Nikki and Zak have a sweetheart table. I'm sitting with her parents and the best man."

Best man? He didn't quite like the sound of that, wishing he had an old-fashioned handkerchief for those tears. But he might use the moment to find out more of her story. Disappointment swelled like a golf ball in his throat. He might as well stop liking her. What if she'd been weeping over Everett? Besides, she was a criminal, after all. Well, not exactly. But not long off. Nobody could stay with Everett Bedford Bradford

for a decade and stay innocent. "Your own folks here?" Let's see what she said.

They stepped outside into the hustle bustle. The violins were still playing.

"No. My folks live...out of state. But I know they'd love to be here." She stumbled over the words, and he got it. They hadn't made it to her own wedding for whatever reason. "No wine, thanks, but a glass of something cold would be nice. But I should freshen up a bit for the pictures." She stepped away from him then, breathing hard from her crying jag.

"All righty then. I'll meet you right here. I'm Rhee Ryland." He held out his hand, taking hers. The warm softness almost had him stumble.

"All right, Mr. Rhee Ryland. I'm Caffey Matthews." The name came easy off her tongue, and her smile almost blinded him. Her eyes weren't red, and her makeup hadn't smeared. She deserved an Oscar or something. "I'll catch up with you in a bit."

They shared a nod, and she turned to walk back into the inn. Like he had when she walked up the aisle, he watched her moving like music, liking too much what he saw.

His vision blurred for just a flash, making her look like a drawing getting erased. Maybe he ought to start wearing sunglasses.

2

Thank you, Lord.

Caffey sighed with relief over her dinner, for she hadn't caught up with Rhee Ryland again. Not with the endless round of pictures. Not with the bride herself consoling Caffey in the powder room, Nikki's mom fussing over hair and makeup after the crying jag that had set everybody to worrying. Without exactly lying, she'd mumbled some faked reason that hadn't made much sense at all. She'd almost lost it again, worse than in the gazebo, when the bridal couple entered the big white tent. And when Nikki and her dad danced together. Her own dad hadn't made it to her wedding at the Plaza.

Thankfully, this time she held it all together.

None of them knew, and *could* never know, the pain that had assaulted her senses, wracked her heart during the ceremony. Oh, she had loved Everett once and gone into her marriage with high hopes and endless dreams. She'd been so young, so idealistic at twenty, a college girl who hadn't stood a chance against the dashing, daring, *über-sophisticated* man of thirty-seven. Everett had wooed her relentlessly after catching her eye at an art gallery opening—a requirement for one of her classes. Today's joyful vows and blessed wishes had only reminded her of what she'd lost.

How much she'd messed up.

Make that how much *Everett* had messed up.

She'd held on to her loyalty until his shakedown, his treachery. His arrest. His suicide after skipping out on a bail bigger than the income of most Third-World countries.

No, she didn't dare let herself drown in Rhee Ryland's deep black eyes again, or get entwined in those arms again, arms strong enough to protect her from all she feared. She didn't dare drink in Rhee's scents of sunshine and outdoors and leather. All things that reminded her of the home in Montana she'd left so willingly for the city. Reminded her how much she missed the parents she'd let down. Reminded her how much she missed a man's company. A man's touch.

Her tablemate, Zak's cousin and best man, did his best to flirt over dinner, but he'd never do. Nothing against him, but he was a college kid, and with Rhee Ryland in the vicinity, he didn't stand a chance despite being tall, dark, and handsome in his own right. Try as she might, she couldn't completely keep her eye from Rhee. From time to time, she caught him at the bar, although she never did find his table.

The DJ started up a slow waltz.

"Dance with me." The outdoor scent of him and his voice entered her realm at the same second. Cousin Dale looked up, surprised and proprietary as if somehow his position as best man laid claim to her.

It was dangerous, Caffey knew better, but couldn't resist. After all, Rhee was a wedding guest who'd be leaving town soon enough. How much trouble could he cause in one night? Besides, he was Zak's friend. Mild-mannered computer geek Zak who held a pet adoption once a month at the feed store, who taught

Sunday school and despite his paunch, rode a horse like the wind. Dear gentle Zak wouldn't have anybody scary for a chum.

"Sure." Her heart thumped, but he didn't grapple her close like guys did when they didn't know how to dance. He had style on the dance floor and obviously knew how to lead. Into his rhythm, she ached to relax. As for her, Caffey knew what to do, too. Her years of country line dancing and high school thrashing hadn't impressed Everett one single bit, and he'd marched her off to private lessons long before their wedding day— Which of course, had made the society pages, the local news channels. Even supermarket tabloids.

"You feeling better?" He muttered close to her ear.

"Yes. Thanks. Sorry we didn't connect for that cold drink."

"It's all right. This makes up for it."

His voice lulled, and she almost longed to lean in against his shoulder, rest her head, let the dusk flow around her. As the music slowed to its finale, she forced herself to retain her upright position. Rhee Ryland was way too tempting.

Her senses returned. It was far wiser to get away. "I—I best keep Dale company." She took her left hand from Rhee's right and tipped a little wave to her tablemate who had slinked into a full-on pout as he glared at her.

Somehow triumphant, she almost grinned as Rhee grimaced. "Your date?"

"No. Zak's cousin. But I somehow feel responsible."

"Don't." He scowled at Dale who pulled a paper from inside his tux jacket and raised his brow at Caffey.

"I mean, he wants to practice our toasts *again*." She shook her head.

"Later then. I intend to claim another dance."

At that second, the DJ started up a song by her favorite duo, Brooks and Dunn. *Tell her the lights are on for her*. A rather heart-rending song for a wedding and probably not the best one for someone like her with desperate memories of home. Her left hand reached for her neck, bare this day as per Nikki's dictum, but where she always wore the cross Daddy had given her for high school graduation. But once again, she couldn't resist Rhee. "Claim it now," she insisted boldly. "I love this song."

"You like cowboy music?" His forehead rose up into a half-dozen manly wrinkles. Wrinkles her female Big Apple chums would have surgically removed tomorrow. Some of the guys as well.

"Me? I love anything cowboy." *I forgot how much*, she finished to herself, aching at the pain she'd caused her parents. *I forgot how much they'd done for me. Thank you, God, for Zak's alias that lets me touch base with them now and again. Most of all...her breath caught. Thank you for letting them forgive me.*

She wanted to love every single minute, but the song only reminded her of what else she'd lost. She might have found it again but couldn't shout her joy out in the open. Her renewed faith had reminded her that in Proverbs God is a shield to those who put their trust in Him and she tried, honestly she did. But sometimes she couldn't help it. There were bad people out there, and she truly didn't know what they believed she had done. Her shoulder muscles tensed beneath Rhee's fingers.