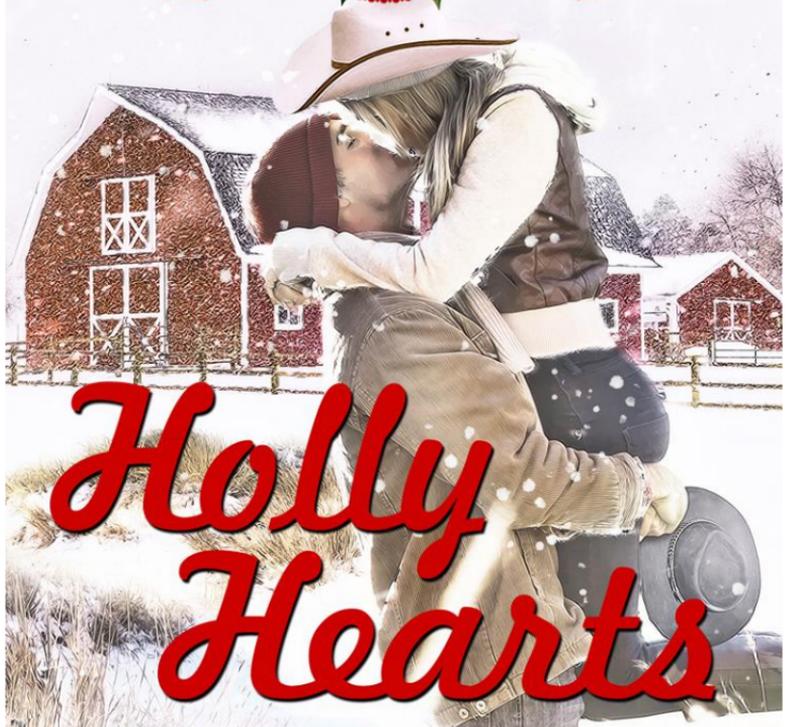




TANYA HANSON



# Holly Hearts

A HEARTS CROSSING RANCH  
*Christmas Story*

# Holly Hearts

Tanya Hanson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

**Holly Hearts**  
**COPYRIGHT 2020 by Tanya Hanson**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information:  
titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version<sup>(R)</sup>. NIV<sup>(R)</sup>. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>TM</sup> Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Watershed Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

Watershed Books praise and splash logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History  
First Watershed Edition, 2020  
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0330-5  
**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

With love to my 2020 Trio~  
my sweet mother-in-law, Dorothy, who left us for  
heaven this year; my dear mom, Ruth, who celebrated  
her 100th birthday this year and looks to make it to  
101!; and my wonderful editor-in-chief Nicola  
Martinez, whose prayer, care, and compassion helped  
me through some difficult months.

*Hearts Crossing Ranch Series*

Hearts Crossing Ranch  
Redeeming Daisy  
Sanctuary  
Right to Bragg  
Soul Food  
Angel Child  
Seeing Daylight  
Cross Your Heart

Get all eight stories in the Hearts Crossing Ranch  
Anthology.



# 1

Elli's hand stopped midair over the punchbowl. Hagg was breaking their date? To the winter formal?

"Haggai Procter, what did you just say?" Her backbone tickled with a weird cold.

He was only the coolest senior at Mountain Cove High, and for a hundred miles beyond. And right now, standing in front of her, he was *two*-hundred miles of magnificence, smelling like snow and mountain air. And clenching his teeth so hard it must hurt.

The two of them were getting egnog in the dining room of her family's huge Colorado ranch house. Every year, Hearts Crossing Ranch hosted a tree-decorating party for the entire clan. Of course, all ranch employees were considered family, too. Including Haggai. Last summer, he'd hired on to help with Hearts Crossing's city-slicker wagon trains—her summer job, too. And since then, he'd stayed on as a weekend ranch hand when he didn't have basketball games or practice.

"Haggs, please! What do you mean?" Elli asked again. She'd spent enough time with him on the wagon trains to know he wasn't a jerk.

But...nothing had prepared her for this. Her heart stopped for about three beats. Then her heart melted. Even at six-feet-four, he looked just like a lost little boy. "Haggs, is everything OK?" Had she read the sad story in his eyes correctly?

He didn't say anything for the longest while.

"It's my mom, El. She's got some stuff going on. And I gotta be there for her." Haggai turned a manly pink beneath the tan still lingering on his handsome face. "I am so, so sorry. I know you got a new dress and everything."

Without thinking, she laid her hand on his forearm. Her fingers sparked, and she pulled away. Although her summertime crush on him hadn't eased all through fall and now winter, they'd made these plans only as friends. After all, it might get awkward dating the boss's daughter.

"It's fine, Hags. Honest." Elli did mean it, now daring her hand to land on his arm again. Just in a friendly way, of course. "Family always comes first. You've been around Hearts Crossing Ranch long enough to know that." She attempted a chuckle when she meant a sob. "But I hope everything's OK. With, with your mom."

He opened his mouth for a flash, then glanced through the archway into the living room. Her big, noisy blended family clumped with ranch staff around the gigantic Christmas tree, busy groups handling specific tasks. Twin cousins battled over red or green ornaments. A ranch hand gobbled more popcorn than he strung for garlands. And Elli fully expected her grandma to turn nosy any second and charge on over.

With nothing else to do or say, Elli filled a moose head-shaped mug with eggnog and handed it to Haggai. "Rum free. You know, if you want to talk, it's quieter in my dad's study." He nodded while she slopped eggnog into another antlered mug, dumping nutmeg on both. "Come on."

Down a small hall, her dad's office invited them

in. Hooper Martin conducted all ranch business inside the four walls, but the room served as a cozy den as well. A regular-sized Christmas tree blinked in a corner. Warmth steamed from the lit fireplace; the mantel displayed a cute collection of stockings.

Haggs actually grinned. "This is so cool. These are stockings for all the horses and mules, right? Peachy. Winchester. Tatanka, Joe Montana. Apache. Jasper. Curiosity..." He went on to recite each and every one. Including the paired draft horses and mules that helped pull the rigs, always named in twos. Jack and Jill. Gun and Smoke. Aces and Eights. George and Gracie...

"Yep. Each of the 'kids' gets one Christmas morning. Stuffed with carrots, apples, and starlight peppermints." Elli smiled back, but kept her gaze turned away from the white garment bag hanging in a corner. Her beautiful gown. She just might cry.

But of course, he noticed the garment bag right off. "Your formal inside there?"

"Yeah." She didn't dare look at him, tried to keep things light. "I haven't decided yet, whether to wear boots or stilettos. So my grandma still has to hem it. My birth mother designed it and sent it to me. But don't give it another thought. I'll still get to wear it." She stared at the frothy eggnog for a second. "I'll just hang with the cheer squad. They're going together in a group. No plus ones." She made herself chuckle, as if all of it was no big thing. After setting her mug on a barrel-shaped end table, Elli sat down on the old, brown plaid couch and tapped the space next to her. "Come on. Take a load off."

In case Haggai said no, she grabbed the mug and slurped down a big mouthful of Uncle Albert's Killer

Eggnog, a yummy Hearts Crossing tradition with the original recipe kept top secret.

But Haggai didn't slide down all the way, instead kind of hunched next to her. "I am so sorry, Elli. That dress must be some special gift from 'Melinda Mountaineer.'"

"How do you know that? Melinda Mountaineer, I mean?" Elli couldn't help a puzzled giggle. Her complicated childhood history was not a secret around Mountain Cove, Colorado, but she wasn't sure how much Haggai knew about it. About her. They hadn't had much time last summer for heart-to-hearts. They'd been so busy with suburban greenhorns all day long and well into the night.

"My mom." Haggai tensed next to her, blushed again, handsome as ever. "We weren't gossiping, I promise."

"It's all right. It's my grandma who is Mountain Cove's resident meddler." She giggled and relaxed, would let him talk more when he was ready. The ancient indentations in the old sofa cushions slid her closer to his side. But she stopped herself in time, before they touched. "'Melinda Mountaineer' is her moniker for the Wild West re-enactors she designs costumes for."

Haggai relaxed. "Yep. Mom remembered seeing them perform at the county fair a while back."

"Her name's actually *Lynn*. And that's what I call her," Elli said. Hard to confess how difficult it was to call Mom the woman who had left her behind long ago.

He didn't seem shocked or nosy, and she sighed. His long legs stretched across the rug for what seemed about five yards. Rugged yet nicely polished cowboy

boots on his feet. Jeans and a thick, plain gray sweater.

White reindeer dashed across Elli's own red sweater topping a long black pencil skirt, and pinecone earrings danced at her ears.

"You two get along OK?" he asked, careful.

"Yeah. We do. We honestly do." Elli nodded, turned to see her gold earrings reflect in his blue-sky eyes. "She gets it. She wasn't around when I was little."

He cleared his throat. "Will you see her for Christmas?"

"Nope. Saw her at fall break. Right now, she's busy outfitting a Western version of *The Nutcracker*."

Haggs hooted with honest humor. "What? They doing line dancing instead of ballet?"

"I have no idea." Elli laughed with him. "All I know for sure is the Mouse King is now a giant armadillo."

But curiosity lined his face. So she might as well go on with it. "Haggs, me and her, it's nothing I blab about, but I don't mind talking about it. Her."

"Hey, El, I didn't mean..."

Elli stretched her legs next to his, reckoned he wanted to learn her stuff rather than reveal his own. In the firelight, her black patent leather ballet slippers gleamed. "No, it's OK. Lynn, uh, abandoned my dad and me when I was a baby. He got full custody in the divorce." She sighed deep, then fingered the moose mug's antlers. "Lynn didn't show up again until I was in kindergarten. About the same time my dad met Mallie, my stepmom. Which is a term I seriously loathe. It was easy to call *her* Mommy until..." The words still ripped away pieces of Elli's heart. "...until she passed away."

"Sorry."

"I know." Elli spent a full minute draining the mug, so her voice didn't crack. The eggnog had turned thick, sticky. "Anyway, Dad forgave Lynn, and they worked out a visitation agreement. I forgave her long ago, too—it's the Lord's command, you know." She looked into the dancing flames, away from his eyes. It was too easy to remember last summer, riding next to him under skies of endless blue.

He touched her hand for a split second.

"She came back to make amends. She'd spent time in jail and rehab." The words were still hard to say, even though Lynn had turned her life around. "Lynn and I do get along in our way," Elli went on. "And I don't want you to think bad of her. Nobody knew at the time she was suffering from severe post-partum depression. One day while Daddy was out on the range, she honestly felt she would do me harm. So she took off." Her throat felt thick.

"Wow."

"I know," Elli said. "I can't deny it was hard for everybody to take in when she first came back. But after, she came to Hearts Crossing for Christmas sometimes. The door here is always open. Now she's remarried. I spend a few weeks with her and Tony every summer in Arizona. They're in the process of adopting a little girl from China. They're naming her Lorelei. So someday I'll have a little sister."

"That's way cool." Haggai nodded, and his eyebrows rose to his blond hairline. "Moms are complex creatures for sure, and you've had two of 'em." He tried to smile, then turned serious fast. His forehead looked like a road map of twisty paths. "The problem is, I don't *know* if mine's all right. She doesn't ever take sick days at work. But she's taken a lot lately.

For doctor's appointments, I mean. That's weird for her. Such a busy season."

Elli felt a niggle of nerves. Mrs. Procter was regional director for The Cozy Creek, a small chain of country-style housewares and clothing boutiques, famed statewide and beyond for their handmade "Homestead Christmas" collection.

Haggai tensed so hard she felt it across the sofa cushion.

"El, I thought it was just her foot. She's had a bit of a limp for some time now. Needed to see a podiatrist."

"Well, maybe that's what it is."

"Nope." He shook his head. "I downright asked her. She said it wasn't. Podiatry, I mean. She had X-rays. And since then, I know she's been having MRI's and CT scans. Serious stuff, sounds like to me." Worry shook Haggai's voice. "It's like she can't wait until after the holidays."

Elli's heart quivered a little bit. MRIs. Scans. Tests. *Mallie*. Probably not the time to mention it. "Well, what does she say?" Nerves flicked across her again.

Haggs clenched his fists. "Like I said. Pretty much nothing. My sister's home for Christmas, and they get real quiet when I'm around."

"Look, Haggs. Your sis is getting her nursing degree soon. That's probably why they talk. Maggie gets the medical part of it. They don't want to bother you, you know? What with final exams next week, and extra practice for the playoffs. College applications, and—and school stuff." She didn't dare say winter formal. It would hurt them both too much. And she knew the pain would come crashing back tonight when she tried to go to sleep "You have a lot of serious stuff going on, too."

Haggai shook his head, cheekbones flushed purple in the firelight. "I mean, she's not exactly lame or anything. Or in pain. Why couldn't it wait? Until January second or something."

Elli snapped her fingers. "Sports injury! There you go. Mystery solved. Doesn't she run the Steamboat Springs Marathon?"

"She did, hasn't for the last couple summers." Haggai's forehead wrinkled up again. "Said training wears her out, made her hot and exhausted. But I guess it could be an injury catching up with her."

Elli waved her hand almost in dismissal. "All righty, then, MRIs investigate soft tissues. It's probably her Achilles or something." She blinked her eyes at him, trying to get him to relax. "I wouldn't worry."

For a long while, Haggai worked on his eggnog, and she didn't say anything to wreck the soft, comfortable silence. Only the flickering fire behind the screen whispered at them.

Finally he tensed, set his mug down. "I hope you're right. But I gotta help out."

"I know. It's all right." Elli tapped his shoulder. His sweater's wool blend felt soft and warm against her fingertips.

"Thing is, El." He slowed way down and stared into the fire. The flames danced in his eyes like orange flower petals. "Thing is, El, I asked her if she could float me gas money until your dad pays me. She said help myself to her gas card. So when I got into her purse, I saw an appointment card for another MRI. Wednesday at five in the afternoon. Same time as our dinner reservations at the Cattlemen's Club before the formal. El, I need to be there." Haggai's eyes watered, making them bluer than ever. "With her. Gotta cowboy

up. I'm the man of the house. I'm so sorry." He grabbed her hands.

Elli held on. Tight. No sparkling fingertips. A friend comforting a friend is all. "Of course, you have to be with her, Hagg. Honest. I completely understand." And she did. At least he'd cancelled in person. She had to give him credit. Cowards texted or unfollowed your social media. He'd looked her straight in the eye. "You do need to talk to her, but don't imagine the worst, OK?"

"All right. You're right. I sure will." He let go of Elli's hands and surged to his feet. "I gotta go now, El. And I am so, so sorry."

Elli stood up next to him, knees weak. She didn't want to keep him here, but she didn't want him to leave. "It's fine, everything will be fine. But please, stay a while. There's my Aunt Kelley's chili and cornbread on the sideboard. Same recipes she makes for the wagon trains, and I remember you liking it a lot. It's a long, cold drive to the Copper Top. Besides...that's a mighty big tree out there. We need somebody tall to reach the top branches." She forced out a little laugh.

His all-of-a-sudden grin heated her toes. "OK. I got time for you now."

She gulped at his words and the look in his eyes.

After taking her hand inside his warm fingers—this time she tingled for sure, Haggai moved toward the office door but stopped as though his boots had suddenly glued themselves to the rag rug.

She knew why.

Grim-Gram's portrait of the Lord and Savior. Jesus dressed in buckskin, holding close a baby bighorn lamb, with the glorious snowy Rockies behind them. So stuck on the horses' Christmas stockings, Haggai

hadn't noticed the oil painting hanging over the fireplace.

"Wow."

"My great-grandmother painted it," Elli said softly. "Late in her life, she gained quite a reputation as a primitive artist. She had a way of showing Jesus' life as if He was right with us, right next to us. In the here and now. No matter where we are in the world."

"I like it." Haggai said simply, but she heard his awe. He reached toward the oil painting as if in supplication but didn't touch. Finally, he nodded. "Let's go."

Most of the Martin herd yelled from the massive tree as Elli and Haggai walked into the big living room.

He waved but stopped at the huge river rock fireplace, mantel full of family pictures, sprays of cedar, and pinecones. When her grandma had married a fine widower with his own horde a while back, the frames had all but doubled.

"Hey, that's you." He reached for the photo when her dad married Mallie. "You were so little."

"I was in kindergarten." Her breath caught as it always did. Even beautiful memories hurt to recall. "Remember that little lake on the wagon trains? Old Joe's Hole? Mommy...Mallie was an event planner. She's the one who started Hearts Crossing Destination Weddings. They're really popular now. Their wedding was the first held outdoors there."

"You must miss her." He took her hand, mostly sympathy, she reckoned.

Elli coughed off a sob. "I do. Even though I know she's healthy in heaven. But hey, it's Christmas. Let's get some chili first, then fix up that tree." She lightened up and waved across the mantel. "And you've got

## Holly Hearts

about seven thousand of my relatives to meet.”

## 2

An hour later, Elli led him into the mudroom for his jacket and held out a big basket. "Don't forget your phone."

Haggai dug round through about a hundred phones and laughed out loud. Elli's grandma had a rule about hijacking folks' phones and devices during family gatherings. Annoying, but her ways were well-known all around Mountain Cove.

Outside in the deep December night, a million white Christmas lights outlined every square inch of Hearts Crossing Ranch, each window, each eave, each fence post, each outbuilding. Even the chain link of the round training pen. Every roofline, every shed...every tree lining the long driveway. Really truly awesome. Best of all, Elli's sweet perfume ran across him on the wind.

"You up for meeting me at Mountainview Church in the morning?" she asked.

Haggai's heart beat fast. It wasn't a date or anything, but at last he knew she wanted to see him again. She wasn't holding the broken date against him. "Yeah. You bet. That'd be great. I'll come by for you."

She laughed soft, but he heard it more than the big group in the other room. "It's way out of your way from the Copper Top. I'll meet you there. Unless you

take up Grandma's offer about staying over in the bunkhouse with all my boy cousins." She peered up at him with what was obviously hope that he would. "The weather's tuning up to awful."

"Thanks but...I better get home." Find his mom, settle things.

Elli's smile was sad, maybe regretful, but at least she nodded. "I know. But drive safe. I'll see you at church then."

Haggai didn't know what exactly to do, so he tipped his Stetson, then touched her mouth, and his fingers stayed there a while. It was definitely not the gesture of just a friend. Her face twinkled pink in the lights, and he reckoned his did, too.

"Bye, Elli. I had a good time tonight. And sorry about the formal. I'll—uh, let me take you to breakfast after church. Your Aunt Kelley's café."

Her eyes gleamed. "Sounds like a date. I mean, a plan. Nighty night then, Hags. And don't forget to say your prayers."

He felt as if she'd been gone forever when she went back in and closed the door behind her. Best he could hope for was her moving quick to the giant front porch picture windows so he could see her standing there, maybe waving a sad good-bye. Even better yet, blowing him a kiss. But all he saw were horseshoe shaped doorknobs, and horse head wreathes of pine and red ribbon.

And an empty window frame.

Then he heated in the cold, wondered if he'd messed up bad by touching her mouth. Silly it might be, but it had seemed the thing to do. She was so beautiful, but really? He'd just broken their date to Mountain Cove's most important social event between

Homecoming and the Junior-Senior Prom. She had to be mad at him, at least a little bit.

But she had asked him to church and accepted his invite to breakfast. That had to mean something, didn't it?

Ah, women.

But it was all him. His knees shook so hard he had to grab the porch rail to stay standing. Had nothing to do with iced up steps. He didn't deserve her. She advised him to pray, something that didn't come easy. Not since Uncle Mort had suffered and died without Haggai's prayers for health and healing being answered for even one minute. Mostly Haggai only went to church to appease his mom.

But even more, he didn't deserve Elli because he had lied to her.

Lied to *Elli*. He'd been right to tell her he needed to cowboy-up, but he hadn't told the complete truth. Sure he wanted to be there for his mom. Of course. His mom was the best, all he and Mags had. But medical tests were expensive, and he had to do his share. No way could he spend most of his savings hiring a tuxedo and a classy limo from old Ernie Murietta's collection of antique cars. Not to mention paying for a fancy dinner at the snooty Cattlemen's Club. Then there was money for gas, haircut. Corsage.

All of that cash needed to be for Mom. She'd need every cent he could scrounge. No matter if cancelling with Elli had broken his heart. No way could his family lose more of the Copper Top Ranch to medical bills. His Great-Uncle Mort had taught him that. Uncle Mort...the one who'd come up with Haggai and Mags...

The miles and miles of white Christmas lights

draped around Hearts Crossing Ranch winked at Haggai, but the bulbs hung like frozen tears. As he headed to the old truck Uncle Mort had left behind, he noticed a square of yellow light in a barn window. Somebody besides him had left the tree-decorating party. Maybe... An idea flared. Maybe he'd run into one of Elli's many uncles and ask for extra hours of work. Deep down, he couldn't face her dad just yet.

For good reasons.

Haggai headed toward the light just as a man's shadow extinguished it, and the figure shut the barn door and stepped into the night. He held his breath...

"Howdy, bud! Leaving already?" called out Elli's Uncle Pike, his boots crunching along the iced-up graveled path.

"Everything OK with the horses, Doc Martin?"

In the blaze of lights, Pike Martin stopped at Haggai's side with a big grin. "Hey, it's Pike. You know better. No fancy titles around here," explained the large animal vet with a light punch at Haggai's shoulder. Snow speckled both of their dark hats and jackets. "You more than earned first-name basis helping with the wagon train adventures last summer. Your skill with horses and fraidy-cat tourists made everything easier." Pike tiptoed over his boot heels, probably trying to feel frozen toes—the barn wasn't heated.

For a long second, Haggai's feet felt cold, too.

"But to answer your question, Haggs. Had to leave the party for a while, checking on Peach Cobbler's laminitis. She's an old gal, but she's my ma's favorite. It won't be a good Christmas if she worsens, but God bless, I'm feeling good she's gonna be just fine. But I won't be if I don't hurry back inside and help out