



TANYA HANSON

*Royalty
at the
Ranch*

A HEARTS CROSSING RANCH
Christmas Story



Royalty at the Ranch

Tanya Hanson

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Dedication

With love to my Danish daughter Stine; son-in-law Alex; and grandson, Anders, indeed our little prince.

What People are Saying

Sanctuary, recipient of the Coffee Time Romance Reviews (CTRR) Recommended Read Award

(Tanya Hanson) draws you into her story so you feel you're a part of it, like you're right there with them, sharing a trail ride, looking at the beautiful scenery all around you—at God's canvas, or looking into someone's eyes, into the windows to their soul and wanting to dive in. This is what romance is all about. ~
Donna Basinow

1

Prince Anders? Here at Hearts Crossing Ranch?

If I hadn't been wearing my glasses, I think my eyeballs would have popped out of my head and rolled down the porch steps. And frozen into multi-colored cat's eye marbles. It was about thirty degrees outside.

Prince Anders, here and now. Walking past the corral toward the bunkhouse as if he knew just where to go. Snow and gravel crunched under his feet just like—regular feet.

Walking right next to him, my very own big brother Nate, punching the royal shoulder as if they'd been best friends forever.

I growled. Nate knew a gorgeous prince, and I *didn't* know he knew one? Or maybe I was hallucinating. Wouldn't Prince Anders of Dornfeld be skiing in Gstaad, like the royal family did every December?

Or, if he was in the States, he'd at least be in Nashville canoodling with that country pop star he'd taken to the CMAs. Wouldn't he?

But no. Here he was in Colorado. There was no mistake. I knew that face. I was as dedicated a royal watcher as they come. Social media, trashy tabloids, classy magazines. Every blog and Internet site. I

bought every hardback biography. Nope. I'd had a crush on him for years. Ever since he and his regal parents had attended the last televised royal wedding. At that time, he'd been too young to give the bridegroom a run for his riches.

Nobody else on the planet had those shoulders, that top layer of blond hair streaking over darker shoulder-length waves. That confident stroll made even more delicious because of how he swayed over the heels of his cowboy boots. And the winter sun reflecting from the frosty Rockies might as well be a crown bouncing against that golden hair.

And he was here. Prince Anders, here at the family ranch.

My heart beat so fast I started to sweat even in the cold afternoon. Calming my cardiac event, I headed down the tower of porch steps to check out things in person. As if sensing my staring with still-intact eyeballs, Nate turned to me with a "don't follow us" glare. I knew better than to get into a tangle with him, so I huffed cold air from my nose, headed back toward the ranch house in a big-time snit. Not my typical behavior for sure— I loved the landscape from the front porch of Hearts Crossing and could stare at it for hours...the ranch glistening with snow and wrapped in the arms of the mighty mountains. God's shoulders. Closer up, corral fences draped with pine garlands that lit up every night. Horses munched hay, a few of the older ones wearing festive plaid blankets.

But I had other stuff on my mind. Admiration of my surroundings could come later. *There was a prince*

within reach. I ran inside the house and slammed the massive front door.

“Gram-Elaine?” I shrieked, heading for the kitchen where I had left her earlier wrestling with bread dough. “Do you, I mean, are you having tourists for Christmas?”

“Addie?” she called out. “Stop slamming the door. Last one who did so knocked off one of my horse-head pine wreathes. Busted the nose. Sure hope it wasn’t you.”

Aw, it might have been me. “Sorry.”

It took me a while to storm the labyrinth of rooms leading to the industrial-strength kitchen. You see, Hearts Crossing Ranch is both a working cattle ranch, and a guest ranch for hordes of vacationers in love with the Wild West. City-slicker wagon trains, classes on campfire cooking, and rodeo skills. Scout merit badges on horsemanship. Mountain man (and woman) treks with pack mules into the wilderness. Bachelorette parties, destination weddings. We even have a certified equine therapy program for people with special needs. I had first-hand experience there. But Gram-Elaine usually shut down the business at Christmastime.

Finding my breath, I paused against the doorframe. Admired in the meantime how even the kitchen wore as many Christmas decorations as a shopping mall. Gram-Elaine adored pinecones, and you could tell. “Well, are you?”

“Am I what?” She paused over a wad of swollen grey-ish dough. Gold pinecones dangled from her ear lobes. Hard to imagine the iffy, puffy lump would

eventually make your mouth water. "By the way..." Her gaze bore true affection despite the slammed door. "It's good to have you home from college and staying with us in the big house."

I nodded. "It's good to be here. I love Mom's old room." I was so excited I gasped, but it had nothing to do with Mom's wagon wheel headboard and red calico quilt.

Actually, my folks have a nice cabin my dad designed right here on the ranch, but a bunch of my dad's kinfolk were on their way from Idaho for Christmas. Nate and I had given up our rooms for the holidays. He'd moved into the bunkhouse. Apparently, with a prince.

"Catch your breath, girl."

Anyway, there's a bit of a story here. One of Gram-Elaine's eight kids, my mom Rachel, is actually my stepmom. (Such an awful term. Thank you, fairytales.) So I guess that means Gram-Elaine's my step-Gram-Elaine. But none of the steps matter. My dad calls them "stepping stones of life." Widowed, he had married Rachel, who was also widowed, when I was twelve, which gave me and Nate a mom and a little brother Matty at the same time. As well as a joyous family life we'd never imagined growing up in Los Angeles. I mean, we love L.A., but Hearts Crossing Ranch is beyond special. A year after the wedding, we got a new baby brother named Alexander.

Had I hoped for a sister? Of course. Talk about being outnumbered by brothers, full, step, and half. I rolled my eyes just at the thought.

Well, my breathing had returned to normal during my reminiscence. So back to the business at hand. "I saw Nate heading to the bunkhouse with some guy. I just thought..."

"Nope, honey. No business or paying guests at Christmas." She dusted the bowl with flour, gently, like a loving grandmother would sprinkle a baby's bottom with powder. And actually, I think Gram-Elaine does love cooking nearly as much as her grandkids. Then she looked over at me. "Just family and friends for the holidays. That guy is one of Nate's fraternity brothers."

"But Nate graduated five years ago." I persisted, distraught. I doubted Prince Anders was a frat dude. Although, truth to tell, despite my rapture of royalty, I had no idea where he'd gone to college or if at all. Did one need a bachelor's degree to be a prince? But I was pretty sure I'd have known before now if Nate had lived on fraternity row with a prince. I'd gone to a bunch of family events there. Disappointment clawed at me.

Gram-Elaine smashed her hands into the dough. "Well, graduation doesn't end things. Nate was Brodie's big brother or some such at their fraternity. I guess they've stayed close. Brodie Anderson. You'll meet him at supper. His folks are away on necessary business and won't be back home until Christmas Day—" She threw me a glance while she breathed a tuft of hair out of her face— "so Nate invited him here with us."

Her wrestling match with the bread dough started

up again.

"Oh." My heart fell along with my voice. So the guy really *was* just some regular frat dude. How could I have been so wrong? I guess Prince Anders had a doppelganger who was right here at the ranch. They say all of us have one somewhere. Although I frowned. There were certainly people I wondered by God made doubles of.

"Well, OK then." I breathed in defeat but had to be polite. "Hey, Grams, need some help there?"

Gram-Elaine smiled at me, warmed me through. "Thanks, honey. But kneading is a good part of my exercise plan."

She laughed at herself, being a substantial woman, and I rejoiced. Yeast products terrified me. The first time our housekeeper in L.A. had helped me make cinnamon rolls for my dad, I'd been about nine, and they'd been successful. But next time I'd tried all on my own, I killed the yeast. Poor Daddy's teeth, chewing on those hard horrible nuggets, still haunts me.

Brodie Anderson. You'll meet him at supper. Hmm. Then something huge snapped in my brain. Thundered to the soles of my feet.

"Nice try, Grams." Defeated? Not me.

She stared at me, startled.

"*Brodie Anderson?*" I scoffed. "You mean Prince *Anders*, of the Dornfelder Royal House of *Broders*. Right?" I jammed my hands against my hipbones and accused her. Triumph filled me. I'd been right all along. "I'm right, right?"

Her cheeks turned as round and red as apples.

“Sorry, honey, for keeping secrets. I was asked to. Yes. You are correct. We’re protecting the prince’s identity. Brodie Anderson’s the name he used for privacy at the university. We don’t want the ranch overrun with paparazzi. Please, keep things hush-hush..” She turned knowing eyes to me. “Now, I know you’ve had a crush on him since I watched that royal wedding with you.”

I turned hotter even than the hot kitchen. “What? What are you talking about?”

She grinned. “I know the signs. I had a crush on Prince Charles my whole girlhood. Broke my heart, him marrying during the first all-night wedding I ever watched. But wow, Diana’s gown...”

I had to change the subject, and fast. “Of course I’ll keep the secret.” I rolled my eyes. “But it’s not like he isn’t recognizable. I saw right away. I’m just the first of many who’ll figure it out.”

Gram-Elaine copied my hands-on-hips thing. Dough streaked across her pine-tree (with pinecones) apron. “Look, Addie. Brodie isn’t marching in the Christmas parade or anything. Or singing in a choir. Or putting himself out there. He’s not a prince while he’s here. He’s a guest. Not a tourist-guest. A simple, private family guest. Just keep still about it.” She clamped her jaw hard. “Don’t go announcing it from the rooftops. You’ll be meeting him at suppertime so be yourself.” She winked big-time. “Try to act normal.”

Then she narrowed her gaze at me, tight with warning. Did she actually think I—*me!* Would put a move on him? To avoid a lecture, I turned and ran back to the big living room.

Head-on into my brother, who'd just barged through the front door.

"I already know," I said as he opened his mouth to give me more talking-to. "And I'll keep things on the down-low. But how could you?"

"How could I what?" Nate honestly looked confused.

I jammed my index finger into his shearling jacket. "How could you go to college and hang out with a prince for four years and never *let me know*?"

Nate knocked my hand away. "First off, I'd never have told you at all. Second, I was a senior when I met Brodie. He was a freshman. We 'hung out' for one academic year. All the brothers respected his privacy. He wanted an American college as different as could be from Dornfeld." He shook his finger as if I were a naughty dog. "Just be a good girl. No gossiping about him to any of your friends. No photos sneaked into your social media."

I huffed and *grrrrd*. Would he ever stop treating me like his baby sister? "Stop insulting me. I told you I won't. And how could I anyway? You've got him hidden away in the bunkhouse." I couldn't even imagine. It was a foreign land of masculine sounds and scents. My nose crinkled.

Nate grinned. "He's a good guy, Adds, a good friend. I can trust you, right?"

"Yeah. I got it."

I moved from him, slunk down onto the enormous sofa in front of the fireplace, wishing to be left alone. I could dream, couldn't I? I mean, there was a prince

about fifty yards from me. Nate shrugged and left me to it, so I pondered the massive river-rock fireplace without really seeing it. The giant Christmas tree, worthy of Rockefeller Center, winked at me with ten thousand lights. Hearts Crossing never did anything small-scale. And now, a real prince was living proof.

But...nerves jiggled. Did I *really* want to meet a prince? He might be in disguise, but even in cowboy boots, he was so way out of my league. He must have high-caliber gorgeous women chasing him all around the world. No matter fairytales always made a princess out of the unlikeliest female. I snorted. Truth was, Prince Anders had a fancy pedigree, lived in a palace, hung out with famous people. Had a king and queen for parents, and was one of the world's most eligible bachelors. Me, I was a dork.

My great-aunt Norma had made it clear my whole life that guys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses. And so far, she'd been right. Add in my freckles and my scars...

Ugh.

2

Prince Anders made my heart sing and my hands shake when he held out my chair at suppertime. Like a real knight in shining armor. I mean Brodie. We were eating in the kitchen for once. Not the gigantic dining room table sized for Buckingham Palace.

"I've always wanted to meet a real cowgirl," Brodie said softly, taking the chair on my right after he slid me in. My heart shouted. And my nerves eased a little. Not only was I left-handed and we wouldn't bang elbows, but Gram-Elaine hadn't placed him across from me to get stared at while I gnawed and chewed. And spilled. "We have no such women in Dornfeld. We have mostly sheep."

So he knew I knew who he really was. His mention of Dornfeld had been deliberate. I glanced sideways at him, gorgeous in a creamy sweater that made his champagne-colored eyes seem dark.

"I guess I'm more of a wrangler," I said, inane. "I work more with horses than cattle."

Gram-Elaine lugged a huge tray of lasagna to the center of the table, and Grampa-Doyle all but licked his lips. The scent was magnificent, but real terror chugged through my veins. Lasagna. Spillage of bright red sauce in front of a real prince was a real threat.

Why had I worn my lovely white holiday sweater sprinkled with pearly snowflakes?

Well, because it was my lovely white holiday sweater sprinkled with pearly snowflakes, and they matched my earrings, is why.

Gram-Elaine smashed her frame into a kitchen chair, but somehow delicately. "Brodie, would you do the honors and say grace?"

"What?" His chivalry seemed to vanish. "Beg pardon, what?"

With a surge of confidence more than compassion, I helped him out. "The blessing. The table prayer." My voice didn't even shake.

"Oh, yeah." His eyes widened as though he'd been asked for the nuclear codes. "Sure. Our governess used to pray one with us. Let me see what I remember..." He closed his wonderful eyes for a long moment while the rest of us grabbed hands around the table. I took his, held back a sacrilegious gasp, felt his warmth cover my fingers. He mumbled in another language.

His cheekbones colored themselves into a handsome burgundy. "I don't know if I remembered it the right way. It's been so long. But in English, it means eating and drinking in Jesus's name and giving God the honor for our gain."

I did wonder why he couldn't remember a childhood prayer. Or why he didn't know a grown-up grace. Maybe saying a blessing wasn't a thing back at the palace, and he truly had forgotten. Sadness rustled through me. Faith was as much a part of Hearts Crossing as food.

"It's a lovely prayer," Gram-Elaine murmured, not at all perturbed. We all squeezed hands and said Amen. "So that is your native tongue?"

He nodded. "Yes, Dornish, which is closely related to Danish."

Gram-Elaine heaved a big knife through the lasagna, cutting perfect pieces. "So you are near Denmark then? Geography in school was not my best subject. Since then, I've barely left Colorado."

With great elegance, Brodie dug out a big piece of lasagna with a spatula and smiled at her. "This looks and smells delicious."

Gram-Elaine beamed.

"Thank you." Then she pretended to act shy, lowering her chin and eyelids. But I knew better. Her confidence rivaled any queen's. "It's long been a family favorite. And I don't make it for just anybody. So, go on," she ordered.

Brodie grinned. "Don't expect a thrill a minute," he warned. Shrugged. "Dornfeld is an island in the North Sea. Past the Faroe Islands and closer to Iceland, but has maintained close ties to Denmark. Danish is our second official language."

"What's the story there?" Grampa-Doyle's interest was real. Unlike Gram-Elaine, he was well-travelled.

Brodie laid a black-checkered napkin over his knees. "Dornfeld had been a Danish colony since Viking raiders settled there in the 900's. They named it 'field of thorns.' In the 1500's, a Danish soldier was rewarded the island for his loyalty to the king. And elevated to high nobility. But rather than appreciate his

sudden status, Amaker moved to Dornfeld and declared himself king instead of count. And the rest as they say, is history.”

“Was Denmark mad?” I asked.

Gold and brown hair swished together as Brodie shook his head. “No. Not worried either. Amaker was loyal. And Dornfeld is a good position for defense and shipping. Maintaining a friendly relationship was and is important.”

“How thrilling. And your ancestors were a part of it all.” Gram-Elaine handed Brodie a mountain of green salad in a wooden bowl. “I always liked my family history, settling this ranch almost two hundred years ago, but you beat all. We are fortunate to get to know you.”

I couldn’t find my tongue to agree with Gram. Brodie had just hammered it all home harder—he could have been a mere count. But thanks to Amaker and his ambitions, he was the son of a king. He handed the wooden bowl to me.

My fingers trembled, and I dumped more dressing on my portion of salad than I needed. Nate watched me so carefully I wanted to scratch out his eyes. I might think Brodie was handsome and I might, well, crush on him, but fact was this. I was barely twenty years old and not in any mood to end up with anybody just yet. It was just being fifteen inches from a prince that got my heart beating up my ribs. Unsettling for anybody.

“What do you eat in Dornfeld,” I asked for lack of anything else. Since we were actually eating, it didn’t

seem that ridiculous of conversation piece.

Nate rolled his eyes, and Brodie laughed. "Fish, and more fish. Herring, cod. Mackerel. And yoghurt similar to Icelandic skyr. Rye bread. Greenhouse herbs and vegetables. A lot of cheese similar to Danish danbo. And definitely nothing like this."

We all laughed, and everybody but me dug into the food on our plates. My white sweater screamed out warnings. Then Nate grunted across from Brodie as though he meant to tease me in some way. Six years older but the sixth-grade part of him never stopped.

So I spoke up first. "Well, I like fish. Especially fresh-caught trout. And I'm no cowgirl, but I know horses and ride pretty well."

Brodie nodded in approval.

"But, but mostly," I said, "I've worked with horses at the rescue we run a few miles from here."

Right now, I didn't feel the need to explain that my horseback riding origins had to do with equine therapy years ago to help my damaged spine. Once, I'd been one of the kids enrolled in Hearts Crossing's well-known hippotherapy program. These days, I can hold my own on horseback, but even more, I love helping beautiful rescued horses that have been abused and abandoned. That have special needs, like me, and need tender loving care.

"Nate's mentioned the Red Hill Rescue." Brodie blinked eyes that were outlined in gorgeous black lashes. "I'd like to see the place."

Because my mouth seemed very far away, I carefully held a dangerous forkful close to my plate.

"It's not a bad drive. If the weather holds, maybe Nate can take you."

"Or you can." My brother took a big bite of lasagna but managed to talk without seeming as if his mouth were messy and full. "I'm only here for the weekend. I fly back to the office on Monday." Nate was executive project manager for our dad's successful real estate development empire back in L.A. Since our move to Colorado, Dad did everything remotely and Nate, now with his MBA in urban planning, did the footwork.

I was both delighted and shocked. "You're leaving Brodie alone here?"

Nate shrugged. "Dad just texted. I gotta go."

Brodie laughed out loud, both manly and elegant. The same way he ate. "I'm going to be fine. Not my first rodeo meeting people and making new friends."

I loved his western lingo. His lips speaking it. Gram-Elaine winked at Brodie but looked over at Nate.

My brother yammered on. "I'll be back for Christmas, Adds, Grams. No worries. And y'all know that nobody is ever alone at Hearts Crossing."

I couldn't have agreed more. Except for tonight. I think I mentioned that Gram-Elaine had eight kids, and each has a spouse and offspring. All the families live on or close to the ranch, in cabins or cottages or nearby condos. And to add to the fun, Gram-Elaine had married another successful rancher a few years back. Grampa-Doyle Calhoun. He came with a mega-family and an historic spread of his own, so they split time between their ranches and alternated Christmas