

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT LOVIN' ON RED

When you open a Mary Pat Johns' novel, you can expect great dialogue, pacing, well-developed characters with flaws—everything that makes for a fantastic reading experience. This one does delve into sensitive topics, so be aware, but the author handles these with tact and skill. I would recommend *Lovin' On Red* to readers who like their Christian Romance with some meat on it (food for thought, heavier emotion) and to animal lovers who enjoy novels featuring wounded heroes, pets, and house projects.

GWENDOLYN GAGE, REVIEWER

The author dealt with painful issues in a sensitive manner, using love and redemption as a theme in *Lovin' on Red* as she did in her previous novel, *Countin' on Jesse*. Loved the author's descriptions of South Texas and coastal areas, making me want to go see. Vi and Rory had much to overcome, and their approach to their undeniable attraction to each other had me laughing and crying intermittently! Good story! Well worth the read.

VELLUM REVIEWS

I really enjoyed this book from the very first chapter. Rory and Vi both have some baggage from their past. I loved reading how they both grew closer to one another during the remodeling process. They sure had some struggles to deal with, like squatters, fire, and more, but they really came together to get through those times. I also LOVED that they sought God through the trials of both the remodel and the "baggage" of their past. I HIGHLY recommend this book to anyone who enjoys the Christian Romance genre! I am very much looking forward to future books in this series! WONDERFUL BOOK!

KENDRA NEAL, REVIEWER

Don't let the cover fool you into thinking that this is going to be just a lighthearted romance ... because this story truly is so much more than that. Both Rory and Vi are characters who have had difficult pasts that they are still healing from in many ways. I appreciate that the author isn't afraid to take on difficult topics, but does so with grace and sensitivity, keeping it realistic, but also not too heavy. If you are looking for a beautifully written Christian romance with genuine and imperfect characters, this is absolutely one you won't want to miss.

RANDI SAMPSON, REVIEWER

ROMANCE IN VALIANT BOOK THREE

GLITTER AND THE GROUCH

MARY PAT JOHNS



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*This book is dedicated to the many competitors and organizers who
have helped make the Texas Water Safari what it is.
If we don't have goals that stretch beyond our self-imposed limits,
how will we ever know what we're capable of?*

CHAPTER ONE



“**E**asy now, Mrs. Metzler. This isn’t a race.” Natalie Jacobs kept a watchful eye on the small, frail woman as she sat on a workout bench, hefting a five-pound disc back and forth against her chest. “Keep the pace slow and even. Building strength doesn’t happen fast. It happens with consistency.”

“Call me Tillie. I’m going to be late for my hair appointment. Besides, my *physical therapist*”—she stressed the term as if Nat wouldn’t know anything about it— “said arm exercises aren’t important. *He* said they’re boring and unnecessary.” She looked into the wall mirror. Frowning, she patted at her snowy white hair.

Nat snugged the clipboard under her arm, stifling a grin. Tillie’s PT had said no such thing. Silas Tarkington had told Nat to make sure the woman didn’t shirk or miscount on the more challenging exercises.

“Slow and even.” She kept her voice upbeat. “If you wear yourself out, you won’t want to come back. And I would miss you terribly.” A corner of Nat’s mouth tugged upward, though she found it increasingly hard to stay on task.

Tillie snorted as she started up again, slowing her movements a nano-fraction.

Glancing around the large workout area, Nat's mind absently registered a barrel-chested man with tattoo sleeves on both arms, heaving dumbbells in a biceps exercise. Peeps' Gym pumped with the energy of people working out. Athletes ran on treadmills. Other members walked with buddies on the circular track. The muffled noise of weights clanking and the ever-present scent of antiseptic completed the active environment.

Nat couldn't imagine working anywhere else. In the short time she'd been employed here, Peeps had become the premier exercise facility in Valiant, Texas. No other gym matched its offerings or popularity.

"Did you count the reps?" Nat's attention traveled back to her client, who had stopped her slight movement to stare at Tattoo Guy. Tillie gave a noncommittal shrug. Nat pressed, "Close to fifteen?"

"Whatever you say, sweet cheeks." The elderly woman set the disc on the end of the workout bench. "What I want to know is if you have a boyfriend." Her made-up eyes had a decidedly wicked gleam.

The polite smile Nat pasted on warred with the answer that popped into her mind. "How about doing another set?"

Tillie cackled but didn't pick up the disc. "Seems to me a pretty girl like you, what with the wavy hair, flashy eyes, and your slim figure, would have them comin' around all the time."

The sigh Nat had been holding in escaped like a convict on the lam. Getting any actual work out of the woman was akin to pushing an elephant up a flight of stairs. Mr. Every-Single-Rep-Counts Tarkington, Peeps' in-house physical therapist, knew it too, or else he wouldn't have stressed the whole keep-an-eye-on-her bit. Yet, if Nat told him the truth, since he

would inevitably ask, he'd act as if it was her fault Tillie wasn't more motivated.

Good thing Nat had a plan to distract him.

"C'mon, Tillie." Nat's pleasant façade slipped as an edge of steel entered her tone. "Show me what those arms can do."

"Bout time you kicked in. Girl, you got a feisty tiger locked up inside." Tillie winked at her, then picked up the disc and energetically pumped.

Nat's lips twitched into a smile. All Tillie had wanted was a genuine reaction. To be seen instead of simply being handled. Nat could relate.

THE ABSOLUTE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY. Silas's Army-issue gym bag rested on the bench next to the wall. Nat cupped a hand over her mouth to keep from crowing. Noise drifted from Peeps' physical therapy room. She peeked through the large see-through window, momentarily mesmerized by the sight of Silas working with a toddler. He kneeled with his arms out, his lips stretched into a gentle smile.

Does it hurt?

"Walk to me, Emily. Walk." His words carried a sing-song inflection, another first to Nat's ears. Silas came across as a man of few words. To her, anyway. Which only made Nat more determined to garner a reaction. The silken-haired little blonde took another unsteady step toward him on the pseudo-wood floor. He widened his eyes, intentionally dropping his mouth open. "See what you did, Em? Come to me." Leaning forward, he beckoned her with his hands.

Spellbound, Nat gazed at the two, then she remembered why she came.

Emily took one more step, pulling her hands out of her

mom's, and fell into Silas's embrace. The baby laid her head on his shoulder as he massaged her back. Snuggling her close, he murmured something in her ear. Nat's arms tingled. She stepped back, shifting away from the sweet scene. The tender display nettled her. Silas had always acted cool, even aloof, to her. During their paddling runs, and more lately, the pranks, he kept his distance. Similar to dealing with a taciturn lump of ... whatever. Nope. Not going there. She wasn't a toddler or a client in need of anything the man offered.

"Aww. Look at her, Silas. She feels safe with you," Emily's mom cooed.

Despite the note to self, Nat blinked the moisture from her eyes. She peeked inside the PT room. Silas was still holding Emily, engrossed in a conversation with the baby's mom. She looked at her phone, then they peered at his laptop.

Nat dug into her carryall and pulled out a small container. She unzipped Silas's bag, carefully opened the container, then poured the contents inside. She shook the bag with vigor and zipped it shut. There. That ought to keep him occupied for a while. Too busy to get on her case about Tillie. Quickly, she stuffed the container back in her tote. Silas's voice swept closer.

"Walk Emily everywhere, Mrs. Klimas. The more you require her to walk, the faster she'll do it on her own."

They paused in the doorway. "I do, but everything takes twice as long," the young mother said, on the verge of a whine. "She's good about walking for you. With me, she scoots around on her bottom because it's faster."

Nat stole back the way she came, certain Silas hadn't seen her.

SILAS CHUCKLED as Emily sucked her thumb in contentment. Kids understood far more than adults thought they did. This little one had already figured out Mom would capitulate. “Sounds entirely normal for any kid, especially one with low muscle tone. It takes patience, for sure. If you want results ...”

He grinned, tracing a finger around Emily’s earlobe. Her rosebud lips erupted into joyful baby giggles.

Giving her one last squeeze, he held her high, then flew her squishy little body like an airplane into her mother’s arms. “Here you go.”

If only the rest of his clients were as engaging as this little sweetheart. The way her lower lip stuck out when she didn’t want to cooperate lightened his day. He stifled a sigh. Three more weeks with her, then they’d move on.

Once they’d left, he made notes about the appointment on his laptop, then glanced at the clock. Enough time between clients to squeeze in a workout if he hurried. His gym bag stayed on the outside bench for quick getaways. The relentless ringing of the office phone posed another problem. He’d had no choice except to depend on voicemail, though it ranked low on his list of options. Hopefully, the issue would be resolved soon enough. The new position Silas had applied for came with a receptionist.

Grabbing his bag off the bench, he strode into the Peeps’ lobby. Briefly, he wondered what Nat wanted. He’d spied her ponytail through the picture window. She’d disappeared by the time he looked again.

The change from active military duty to civilian life had been tough. Working at this first-class gym complex had eased the transition. It had given him something to do while he decided on his next step. As he’d prayed about it over the months, the answer had been deceptively simple—a career at

Peeps would fill his cup to the brim. Peeps had become the place where he helped people. A stable environment, compared to his early childhood and sniper missions. The idea of starting over somewhere else had no appeal. He wanted what he'd achieved here. No other gym in Valiant supplied the elements he needed. Peace. Order. An obsessive bent toward cleanliness. Even if his brain insisted he'd overlooked something equally essential.

Extra sets on the resistance machines would decimate his gnawing need for more. He refused to give a shred of mind space to what exactly "more" meant.

The whirl of a vacuum greeted him in the men's dressing room. Silas stepped over the snaky cord, plunked his bag on a bench next to a row of lockers, and unzipped it. He stared uncomprehendingly into his gym bag as silver bits flurried into the air. All over the clean clothes in his bag, all over the floor, all over him. He reached a hand into the shimmery dust to pull out his T-shirt. Glitter cascaded everywhere. Fierce knowledge split through his bedazzled mind.

Nat!

Now he knew why his infuriating co-worker had been lurking outside the physical therapy room. He sifted through the bag, hoping the omnipresent silver hadn't penetrated to the bottom. It had. He raked a hand through his hair, realizing too late he'd streaked glitter through it. Silas hated a mess. His skin prickled with the stuff. He impatiently swiped at the streak on his arm. The glitter multiplied beyond dirt or sand. It blew past his ability to deal with it rationally. He took a deep breath, exhaling in a slow stream, willing himself to calm down.

Yeah, Nat was easy on the eyes. Yeah, he might have pranked her once or twice. This time, however, she'd gone too far. A small inner voice reminded him she couldn't have known

about his aversion to messes—even shiny silvery ones. A confetti shower wouldn't bother her one whit. Frivolous. Unencumbered with consequences. She'd pay for this devilry.

He breathed words long stashed away as unfitting to his renewed commitment to Christ. He yanked the glittery shirt from his gym bag. Jamming his service cap on his head, he marched out of the Peeps' dressing room.

His mission in life boiled down to one slender thread. Find the woman who'd invaded his space.

NAT STOOD AT THE PEEPS' deli counter, allowing a large swallow of green smoothie to slide down her parched throat. Mm. She tasted more peanut butter than anything else, but the green color gave evidence to the yummy kale nutrients. She held the slender plastic cup toward the deli server with a nod. Perfect. She rubbed her aching neck. Past time for a massage. Her early workout had been vicious.

Coasting on physical activity for the rest of the day suited her fine. That left two clients, then paperwork from the self-defense seminar she'd conducted over the weekend. Once she ticked those items off her to-do list, she'd pester Jesse for a peek at the blueprints for the upcoming rehab facility. So far, his only concession had been to call her Nosy. Oh, well. She'd gleaned her prying techniques from Rory, his best friend. Jesse would relent, eventually. All the years she'd tagged after them were paying off. Mellow chatter from workout members filled the air. A contented sigh slipped before she drank more smoothie.

As much as she enjoyed the interaction with her clients, her satisfaction as a personal trainer had waned. Nat could pinpoint the exact moment her attention had shifted. It

happened when her brother Jesse, Director of Operations for Peeps, mentioned the position of business CEO had opened for the rehab wing.

Since her official graduation last spring with a degree in business administration, her new goal was to prove she could manage Peeps' new facility. She'd been over the moon when Jesse suggested she fill out an application. As much as she hated to admit it, she was counting on him to teach her how to be a top-notch business administrator. She'd checked around town. No other gym director possessed a fraction of his management skill.

After a glance at her fitness watch, she peered into the lobby. She'd best scoot before Silas showed up. Her nose wrinkled with pleasure when she remembered his gym bag. Best prank ever.

Not that she paid much attention to Silas, aside from a growing curiosity about what made him tick. He'd salted her egg whites the day before, knowing full well she never used salt. So, maybe she'd been too outspoken about her nutritional habits. Or because she'd put sugar in his coffee last week. The man defied uptight. She'd thoroughly enjoyed the way his normally unreadable eyes had glowed.

Inhaling the sweet smell of banana, she picked up her pace, only to find her forward motion halted by iron band biceps wrapping around her, holding her in place.

Silas. His fresh soap scent wafted into her senses. Much too close to her ear, he whispered, "Gotcha, Pranky."

Only then did she realize he was swishing the sabotaged T-shirt across her back with one hand. She squeezed around to face him. The uncomfortable feeling of glitter scratched her arms. As the T-shirt moved toward her hair, she struggled, losing her smoothie. The cup's hard plastic snapped, causing icy liquid to saturate her shirt. Satisfaction registered in a

small part of her brain at Silas's wrinkled brow as her smoothie drenched the front of his T-shirt. The rest of the ill-fated drink spread with the speed of a fast-flowing river on the white tile.

A momentary hush fell as onlookers stared, then laughter erupted. Until an itty-bitty guy toddled over, lost his balance, and fell in the green goo. Nat thrust her arms out, attempting to intercept him before he hit the floor. Too late. His backside smacked the tile with a thud. She winced as he caught his breath. The ensuing squall proved more suitable to a barnyard than the Peeps' deli.

Nat kneeled next to him, wiping his arm with her used napkin. He only howled louder and jerked away. His mother pushed her aside to console him.

The laughter had changed to looks of disapproval as people cut a wide swathe around the mess. She rose shakily to her feet. Silas was sludging smoothie with his bare hands from the tile into a cup. Glitter trailed down his cheeks and into a corner of his lip. The T-shirt lay on the floor, an unrecognizable blob. She grabbed it to soak the liquid dripping off the counter. Each swipe left a silver streak. Her hands sparkled. She could only imagine what her face and hair looked like.

Emilio, the maintenance man, headed her direction with a mop and bucket. The child's cries had softened into muffled sobs. A familiar-looking man in a business suit talked to the toddler's mother. After a terse conversation, he handed her a business card, then pointed to the main reception desk. Nat stood rooted to the spot. She should know him, but names often eluded her.

The child's mother favored her with a scowl as she made her way out of the deli. Even the toddler cast her an accusing look.

Before she could move, Suit Guy stood in front of her. Silas

quickly rose from where he kneeled on the floor. Nat couldn't shake the notion they had both crossed an irretrievable line.

Eyebrows arching into the heavens, the silver-haired man glowered as he gazed at their lanyards. His air of authority clobbered her with recognition.

Oh, no.

Jesse called this man Big Gun, but never to his face. As in head honcho. The alpha and omega of all things Peeps-related.

Breaking the awkward silence, Silas spoke grimly. "I apologize, sir. This was my fault."

Mr. Spence's eyes narrowed as he observed the patch on Silas's cap. "Of all people, *vet*, you should know better than to pull a stunt like this."