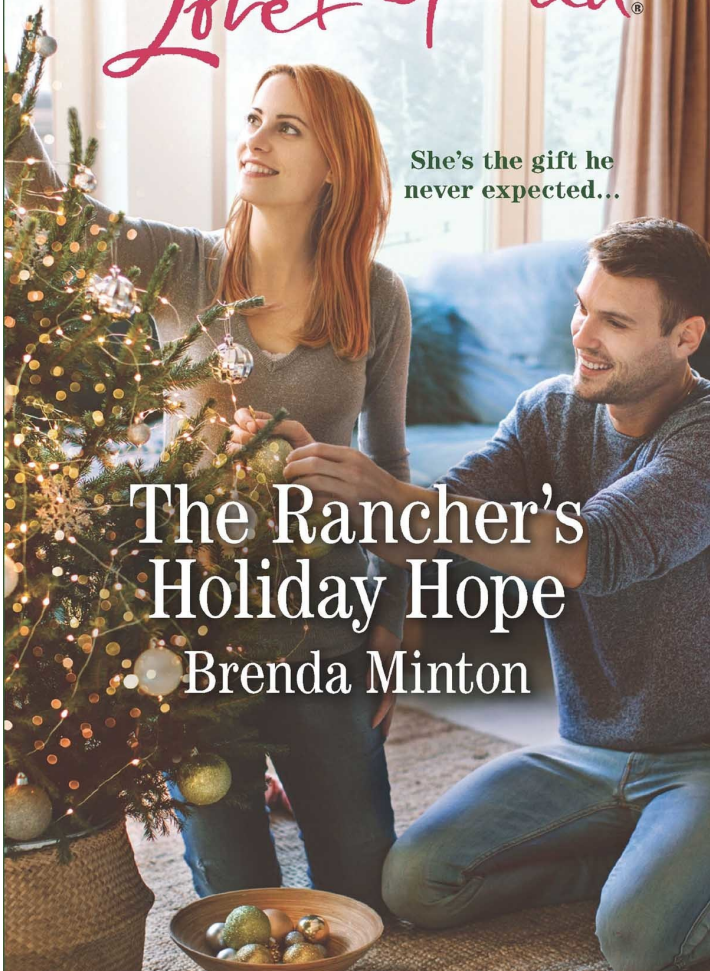


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**She's the gift he  
never expected...**

**The Rancher's  
Holiday Hope**  
Brenda Minton



# **Brenda Minton**

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### **Аннотация**

He returned for his sister's wedding...Not a romance of his own. Back in his hometown to help his family, rancher-turned-businessman Max St. James has no intention of staying beyond the holidays. But the more time he spends with his sister's wedding planner, Sierra Lawson, the more the small town he left behind feels like home again. Falling for Sierra wasn't part of his plan, but he's never wanted anything more for Christmas.

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She's the gift he never expected...

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Back in his hometown to help his family, rancher-turned-businessman Max St. James has no intention of staying beyond the holidays. But the more time he spends with his sister's wedding planner, Sierra Lawson, the more the small town he left behind feels like home again. Falling for Sierra wasn't part of his plan, but he's never wanted anything more for Christmas.

### **Mercy Ranch**

**BRENDA MINTON** lives in the Ozarks with her husband, children, cats, dogs and strays. She is a pastor's wife, Sunday-school teacher, coffee addict and sleep deprived. Not in that order. Her dream to be an author for Harlequin started somewhere in the pages of a romance novel about a young American woman stranded in a Spanish castle. Her dreams came true, and twenty-plus books later, she is an author hoping to inspire young girls to dream.

[Also By Brenda Minton](#)

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The Rancher's Holiday Hope

Brenda Minton

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- Change of font size and line height
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- Change of font
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“We have a wedding this weekend and today the caterer almost quit.”

“But you brought them back on board,” Max said.

Sierra nodded. “Yes, I did. I didn’t want this job. I’m not a romantic. I am the last person who should be planning other people’s happy-ever-afters.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

She shrugged, unsure of how to answer him. She’d never been coveted, guarded, cherished.

“Until I came to Mercy Ranch, I didn’t know any happy marriages or couples who cherished each other. You have this lovely, kind and supportive family. You have the dream.”

“I do,” he admitted, looking somewhat shy. “I almost threw it all away. But about you. Now that you have the job and since you’ve been here, in Hope?” he asked. “Now do you believe in

happy-ever-after?”

“Sometimes.”

She had never really thought about it, but deep down inside, she wanted to believe it existed.

It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

—Lamentations 3:22–23

[Dear Reader](#),

Sierra Lawson has been a favorite character of mine from the conception of the Mercy Ranch series. I loved her dry sense of humor, her angst, her heart that she kept safely hidden. While writing the previous books, it only made sense to make the less-than-romantic veteran a wedding planner.

As she continued to evolve, I knew she needed a hero to show her that she is both strong *and* that she can trust and find love. The perfect hero came along unexpectedly in Max St. James. Gradually love came to Mercy Ranch’s wedding planner. In the end she trusts that this man is hers, forever.

Thanks for reading *The Rancher’s Holiday Hope*. For more information on me and the Mercy Ranch series, find me on Facebook at Brenda Minton Author, or on Twitter at [@brendaminton](#).

Happy Holidays!

*Brenda*

This book is dedicated to those looking

for love, for forgiveness, for healing.  
I pray you find peace, forgiveness,  
healing and a love that is enduring.

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# Chapter One

Standing in the middle of the Mercy Ranch Wedding Chapel, Sierra Lawson felt almost at peace, as if God was present and this was a real chapel, not just a wedding venue. The building looked more like a stable than a church, but there was something about the sun filtering through the stained-glass windows that touched her soul.

She'd never expected this to be her healing place. One year ago she would have denied she needed healing of any kind. Now she felt as if she was one step closer to being the person she'd always wanted to be. A person who didn't allow others to control her happiness.

She moved to the row of windows that faced east and thought about those horrible days that had changed her life forever just four years earlier. For two weeks she had waited each morning for the sliver of sunlight to appear in her cell. Each of those precious sunrises had marked one more day, one more chance to be rescued, one more day of hoping God heard her feeble prayers as she huddled in an enemy prison in Afghanistan.

Nothing had been the same for her since. It would never be the same. During her weeks of captivity she'd known fear, pain and helplessness. But she'd also known an unexplainable calm and a hope that didn't make sense.

It was because of that experience that she had found her way

to Mercy Ranch, a home for wounded veterans just outside of Hope, Oklahoma. And it was due to the ranch owner, Jack West, that she found herself in the position of wedding planner.

Wedding planner? She still couldn't believe she'd agreed to take this on. This was the absolute worst job for a woman like Sierra. She was responsible for selling the dream of fairy-tale weddings and happily-ever-afters. Neither of which was something she believed in. She'd seen too much, been through too much, to allow herself to get caught up in those dreams.

The stillness of the November morning and her quiet reflection was shattered by the steady thump of rotors beating against the air. Sierra backed away from the window and the all too familiar vibration. She waited for the sound of metal and glass hitting hard-packed earth. She tried to convince herself that it had to be a dream. She wasn't in Afghanistan. The helicopter couldn't be real. She was not in danger.

It was the wind beating against something outside. It was late November in Oklahoma and the wind blew on a daily basis.

Somewhere in the building a door banged shut. Glory, her young assistant, must have arrived early to help with the latest community project. Jack West wanted to bring all of the churches in the area together in a massive Christmas event that would include music, a dinner and gifts for children in the community. It was a big project that made Sierra shudder.

Cautious, she stepped into the entry and looked around. When she saw nothing suspicious, she moved to close the doors but

before she could reach them a sound behind her had her spinning to meet whoever had entered the building.

Overhead the helicopter still hovered. She caught sight of it out of the corner of her eye. And standing in front of her, a very real little girl.

The girl couldn't have been more than eight. The dog next to her was older. The shepherd had grayed the way an old man would and the look in his expressive brown eyes said he knew he had to protect the small person at his side.

"Hello. Can I help you?" Sierra asked as her heart thudded in time with the beat of the rotors.

She sounded calm. She took some pride in that. She focused on breathing and what she knew to be reality. The helicopter wasn't an enemy attacking. Her brain was telling her to flee, to grab the child and run. That was the wrong response. But knowing didn't stop the panic, the urge toward fight or flight.

If she did what her brain wanted, everyone would think she had finally lost it.

She somehow managed a smile for the child who continued to stare at her, blond hair a tangled mess around a rosy-cheeked face.

"Do you have a name?" The words came out hoarse, not soft and soothing. Her friend Kylie West often used those words on frightened children but somehow Kylie always seemed to calm.

With the question, the child backed away, proving that Sierra didn't have the touch when it came to children.

She tried again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The little girl didn't seem convinced, even with a softened tone of voice.

"My name is Sierra. I work here. How did you get here?"

The child looked down at her dog.

"Did he bring you?"

No response. Sierra closed her eyes just briefly. When she opened them, the child had started to inch along the wall. Sierra squatted, putting herself at the little girl's eye level. The helicopter had landed. She could see it in the open lawn. Her heart rate slowly returned to normal, as if catching the rhythm of the slowing rotors.

"I'm not going to hurt you or let anyone else hurt you." Sierra hoped the promise made sense.

The little girl ran to her, wrapping thin arms around her neck as the doors to the chapel opened. A less than clean face snuggled against Sierra's shoulder. The child smelled of the outdoors, as if the wind, soil and dog had invaded every pore. Why did children have to smell so bad?

Another wrong thought. The child needed protection. From the man walking through the door? He was tall, dark and not smiling. Handsome. Mind-bogglingly handsome. He had lean features with dark eyes that set her nerves on edge. Definitely not her type. It was more comfortable to think of him as the angry stranger. And his anger seemed to be directed at the child. The dog at her side growled.

The man stopped, removed his cowboy hat and proceeded forward with a calm demeanor. Calm on the surface but with power radiating beneath that outward facade. Sierra didn't know who he was but she found herself wishing she'd taken the child and hidden from him.

"Linnie, we've been looking for you." He spoke with a quiet voice, one that he probably thought would calm the child.

The child—Linnie—shook her head and didn't look up. Her face stayed buried in Sierra's shoulder.

"Your mom is worried sick," he continued.

Sierra felt little arms tighten around her neck. She tried to extricate herself from the vise grip but Linnie wouldn't let go.

"Linnie, your mom called for us to help find you."

The child's body went limp and she curled against Sierra. "Mommy," she whimpered.

"Maybe I should ask who *you* are?" Sierra said, lifting the child as she stood up. The dog stayed close, his growl keeping the cowboy with the chocolate-brown curls at a distance.

Sierra fought the urge to fall apart. He was too dark, too imposing, and the helicopter had already started unraveling her emotions. She backed toward her office door.

"You're not going to take that child," he warned. His voice was low, authoritative. He wasn't used to being questioned.

"I'm not taking her. I'm keeping her safe."

"From me?" He laughed. "I'm the person searching for her. We spotted her from the air as she headed this way."

“And I’m her new best friend.”

“The police are helping us search.” His voice remained quiet, soothing, but she heard the edge of impatience. “I’ll call the sheriff and he can explain the situation to you.”

“You go ahead. I’m not giving her up until I know she’s safe.”

“Suit yourself. But if you have a blanket, she’s probably cold. And hungry. She wandered off yesterday evening. She’d been playing in her backyard with the dog and must have decided to go exploring. Her name is Linnie.”

Sierra glanced down at the child in her arms. “I’ll take her to my office.”

“Do I look like someone who would kidnap a child? Whisk her away in my helicopter?” the stranger said.

“It’s a crazy world,” Sierra responded as she moved away with Linnie clinging to her neck.

“Yes, it is.” He followed her into her office.

Sierra held the little girl in one arm while she poured hot water into a cup that she’d prepared with her favorite herbal tea. The aroma filled the air, fruity and light.

“This will warm you up. And I have donuts.” She handed one to the girl clinging to her for all she was worth. A dirty hand released its hold on Sierra’s neck and grabbed the powdered-sugar-covered donut.

Sierra heard the crunch of tires on gravel and moved to the window as Linnie made short work of her breakfast. A county deputy had pulled up out front. She ignored the man still standing

at the door to her office, watching her.

The officer got out of his car, spoke into his radio and then headed for the front door of the building. Sierra made quick eye contact with the cowboy who'd invaded her space. He gave her an "I told you so" look before stepping into the entryway to greet the deputy.

"We've found her. If you could convince the woman inside to hand her over to us," he said as he led the officer through the door of her office.

"Sierra, looks like you found our missing child." Deputy Coleson smiled first at Sierra and then at the child in her arms. "Linnie, your momma is worried sick."

Silent tears began to slide down Linnie's cheeks.

"Do you want me to take you to her?" Deputy Coleson offered. "She's waiting at the police station in Hope."

Linnie nodded but she gave a quick look at Sierra, as if asking permission.

"You go with him and he'll take you to your mommy."

The child sniffled and held her hand out. Sierra gave her two more donuts and then escorted her to the officer's side.

"I'm sorry, Jeff, I just didn't know what to do." Sierra didn't know how to explain. "Better cautious now than regretful later."

"You're fine, Sierra. I doubt there's a woman alive who would turn her over without asking questions first. Linnie's mom will be thankful that you found her and kept her safe."

"Who is her mom?" Sierra asked as they headed for the front

doors of the chapel.

“Patsy Jay. She lives at the Cardinal Roost mobile home park, just down the road. Unfortunately the place is in the middle of a field with no fences and just a short distance from a heavily wooded area. Her mom was outside with Linnie but she stepped inside to turn off the stove. Didn’t take Linnie but a few minutes to disappear into the woods.”

Sierra nodded. “Thank you. I’d like to check on her later, to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she’d like that.” Jeff carried the child to his car.

The other man had left, also. She watched as his long-legged stride ate up the ground. He walked with confidence. He owned his world. He didn’t suffer from fear as he stepped up into the helicopter.

Before she could turn away, his gaze caught and held hers. She shivered and backed away from the door. She didn’t want to be standing there when the helicopter lifted from the ground. She didn’t want to hear the rotors beating the air.

She retreated to her office to wait out the fear and the memories.



“Ready, boss?” Hank, Max’s pilot of three years, asked as Max climbed aboard the Airbus.

Max shook his head as he reached for the headset. He sat there for a full minute contemplating the stable that he knew to be

a wedding venue. He couldn't walk away. As much as she had irritated him with her unwillingness to hand over the child, he couldn't leave.

He'd known when he returned to Hope, Oklahoma, that there would be people questioning his motives each and every time he tried to do something for the people and the town he cared about. But this woman at the wedding venue had given him a whole different vibe. She feared him for a completely different reason and, if he had to guess, he would say he looked too much like his Assyrian grandparents.

He'd seen the look before. The one of suspicion. But there had been more in her expression. Terror, carefully held in check, contained.

"I'll be right back," he said as he climbed down from the helicopter.

"Need me?" Hank asked.

"No, I've got this." He ducked slightly as he hurried away from the helicopter.

When he reached the building he hesitated, unsure if he had a right to go inside. He could call Isaac West and let him handle this. He could walk away and pretend he hadn't noticed anything off. He could avoid getting involved because that only led to problems. When a man cared too much, women tended to think long term and not a helping hand.

He stepped through the door into the large entry with its vaulted ceilings. No noises greeted him. The woman—Sierra—

had disappeared.

He glanced in her office. Empty.

Next he tried the hallway off the main entry. He heard a noise from a room on the end. As he approached he saw that it was a kitchen. He entered the brightly lit room. It appeared empty. He turned and started to leave. Then he saw her. She was sitting next to a worktable, knees drawn to her chest. There was a stark look of terror in her eyes. Her hands covered her ears and she stared as if not seeing him.

He approached cautiously. When he reached her, he crouched to the floor and waited to see if she would notice him. Eventually her head turned slowly, her gaze locking with his.

“Go,” she said.

“I’m afraid I can’t.” The last thing he wanted was to get involved here. But he knew this feral look. It’s what happened to a person when they’d seen too much, been exposed to too much. But he also knew she saw an enemy as she perused his features, his dark hair. Maybe an hour from now that look wouldn’t be there. But, at this moment, her mind was telling her he was someone to fear.

“Look at me,” he said. “You know where you’re at.”

Her fists curled as if she meant to strike out. But then she curled her arms around her knees, hugging them tight as she shook her head. “Go away. Please.”

“I can’t. I have to make sure you’re okay.”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” she said with a surprising bit of

bravado that could have convinced someone else she was just fine.

“I’m not sure, maybe the look in your eyes when I walked through the door a bit ago. Or maybe the fact that you’re sitting here practically in fetal position.”

“Maybe I was praying.”

“Were you?”

She shook her head, one tear finally slipping free. She swiped at it with a finger.

“I never cry,” she said quietly, as if to herself.

“Ah, I see. Would you like me to make you a cup of tea?”

“No, I’m fine.”

He moved so that his back was against the wall, putting him next to her rather than facing her. He knew from experience that it was best if she didn’t feel cornered. Not his own, but the experience of a good friend. His business partner.

Sometimes a person just needed space to pull themselves together.

She breathed deeply and continued to wipe at tears, whether she admitted to crying or not. He got up and made himself at home, finding a cup, tea and sugar. He considered telling her about Roger. Roger had battled PTSD silently, as if it were something to hide, to be ashamed of. Max guessed that to those battling the past, it felt like something to hide.

It shouldn’t be hidden. A person with any other disease would seek the comfort and help of family, friends, physicians. He had

finally convinced Roger of that.

He made the tea and handed it to her. She studied the cup, studied him. He held his free hand out to her and she shrank back from him. He considered telling her his background. That his grandfather had been an Assyrian Christian minister who'd migrated to America, where they could be free from persecution. Where they could worship without fear of repercussion. Where his wife and daughter would be safe. His daughter, Max's mother, Doreena.

Max's father was a mixed bag of European heritage, like most Americans. He could trace his father's ancestry to the early colonists.

But he didn't owe this woman explanations. She didn't owe him any, either.

He was just as American as she was. His grandfather had given them the American dream. He didn't ever take that for granted.

He continued to hold his hand out to her, not even considering why he cared. She wasn't his problem.

But he knew that if he did leave, the helicopter would start back up and he had little doubt that the sound would push her over the edge.

She took his hand. Her fingers wrapped around his, firm and strong. He pulled her to her feet and still he held her hand. He found it strangely frail as he clasped it tight, holding on to her as she surveyed her surroundings. She didn't let go.

"You're okay," he assured her.

“Am I?” she said softly, taking the tea from him. “Even with all evidence to the contrary?”

“We all have bad moments.”

She sipped the tea and walked away from him. “Really? Has anyone ever found you cowering in a corner?”

“Once,” he admitted.

She took a seat at the island that ran the length of the kitchen.

“Really?”

He sat next to her, saw her stiffen at his nearness. “Yes. Really. Once, when I was about eight. A tornado hit the outskirts of Hope.”

“You’re from Hope?”

“That’s what you’re taking from my story? I just opened up to you. I exposed my deep-seated fear of storms.”

She laughed, the sound soft. “Right. I’m sorry that you’re afraid of storms. Do you still struggle with thunder and lightning?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “Tornadoes are my real fear. You can’t control them.”

“You’re a control freak, so your fear is born out of the need for control and not the storm itself.”

“Yes, I guess that must be it. Or the damage they do.”

He wanted to ask her what caused her fear, but he knew that it must be personal. She hid it from prying eyes. She covered her tears with jokes.

“Thank you for coming back...?” She gave him a meaningful

look.

“Max St. James,” he offered.

She gave him a thoughtful look. “St. James. Melody’s brother?”

“Yes.” He glanced at his watch. “I have to go now. Will you be okay?”

She lifted her tea but didn’t take a drink. “Of course. Embarrassed but okay. And if you could do a girl a solid and not tell everyone that you found me cowering in a corner...”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

He left her to her tea and her memories. He knew that he would most definitely see her again. The two of them were on a committee together. She just wasn’t aware yet. As he left the wedding chapel, he wasn’t sure how to feel about spending more time with her. The last thing he wanted to do was make more connections in Hope.

His plan had been to buy back his family ranch and make a quick exit to Dallas. But it seemed like God had other plans for him. He hoped God understood that the last thing he needed were complications.

## Chapter Two

Sierra found a chair and pulled it where she knew the sounds would be more muffled. In a moment the helicopter would take off.

“Brace yourself,” she whispered. She shuddered at the thought of being dragged into the past by memories that would feel too much like the real thing.

She knew the mechanics of the flashback. The fear would trigger a response in the brain. The images would flash and she would confuse past and present. She would relive the smells, the sounds, the horrors of the accident, of being taken captive, of watching from a distance as her only source of help flew away, unable to locate her.

Coping mechanisms. She needed her coping skills. She held the cup of warm tea, keeping the aromatic blend close to her face.

Cup in hand, she stood, knowing she couldn't fight this fear cowering in a corner. She marched out the front door of the barn just as the massive helicopter whirred to life, the rotors spinning and the engine winding up to lift the monster vehicle off the ground.

She could see the men inside, the pilot with his headset, the passenger who stared out the glass door, making eye contact with her. From the distance he held her gaze. She remembered the color of his eyes. They were the oddest mixture of moss green,

brown and gray. Dark eyes but with a light that reminded her of sunshine filtering through a forest canopy. He had short, curly hair, lean, suntanned features. He knew how to control situations. It came naturally to him. He also knew people. He'd immediately seen the fear in her expression.

She knew people, too. Her job in the army had been human intelligence. The irony had been that she wasn't particularly good with people. She was a loner by nature. And yet she'd been very good at her job.

The man holding her gaze was not the enemy. As the helicopter circled, he waved. She waved back. She wouldn't get lost in memories.

As the helicopter cleared the tree line, she began to breathe. She had survived. Making her way to one of the patio sets on the wide stone-tiled front porch, she sat on the wrought-iron chair, and enjoyed the scent and the sounds of country life. The horses grazing in the field, pulling at the drying winter grass. In the distance a tractor moved a big, round bale of hay.

Peace, that's what she'd found here, in Hope. Peace was what she felt a short time later as she retrieved a cup of tea and returned to the front patio to sit and make notes on future events that would be held at the venue. She had a meeting scheduled for four o'clock. In her current state of mind, she almost hoped they would cancel.

Time slipped away as she worked, sipping on tea that had grown tepid. She glanced up when she heard a truck coming

down the gravel road from the main house. It stopped and Isaac West jumped out, shoving his hat down on his head as he did. She turned and headed for the front doors of the building. He followed close behind.

“Why are you here?” she asked as she headed to her office.

He caught up with her. “What? I don’t look like the kind of guy who just shows up.”

“Not generally.”

“I am the kind of guy who can be here for a friend.”

“Go. Away.” She took a seat behind her desk and picked up a file. “St. James/Barton Wedding” she’d written across the front. Max’s sister.

Melody St. James was twenty-five, had been dating Andrew Barton for five years and had her wedding planned to the last detail. That made Sierra’s life strangely complicated. When a young woman had been dreaming of her special day for years, it was difficult to help her match reality to her fantasy wedding.

It dawned on her then why Isaac had appeared at just the right moment to bother her. “He sent you, didn’t he?”

“He?”

“Max St. James. That’s how you arrived at just the right time. Of all the interfering...”

Isaac cleared his throat. “Did you get off to a bad start with my old friend?”

She ignored the question.

“I don’t need to be checked on. I’m very capable of taking

care of myself.”

Isaac kicked back in the chair opposite her and had the nerve to put his booted feet on the corner of the oak desk that happened to be her pride and joy. It was an antique, passed down through generations. Not generations of her family, but a family.

“Get your feet off my desk,” she growled.

He quickly moved his feet to the floor. “Are you okay?” he asked, showing his serious side.

“I’m fine.”

He studied her. “It wasn’t a bad thing he did, caring enough to call and have someone check on you.”

“He doesn’t know me. It was intrusive. I’m not sure why he felt he had a responsibility to call in a welfare check on me.”

Isaac’s expression went from serious to amused and she was thankful. Amused, she could deal with.

“You’re so prickly sometimes.”

“I’m not.” She opened the wedding file. “I’m fine and I have work to do.”

“Right.”

She looked up, seeing the skeptical expression of a man she considered a friend. “I survived it. There, that’s honesty for you. I can admit that it took me by surprise. It’s been at least a year since I’ve had a flashback. But I’m still standing and that’s a win.”

“That’s always a win.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated.

“I never said you weren’t,” Isaac said with a casual shrug of

his shoulders.

Sierra sat back in her chair. She rubbed her hands down her face and sat silent for a moment, face buried, trying to think of something that would put his mind at ease. “I heard the helicopter, but I held it together. I was nice to a child. I made sure she was safe.”

“If you were nice to a child, that’s a definite win.”

“You know I’m not fond of them. And this one—” She shuddered. “She’d been outside and she had that outdoor kid smell. You know the one.”

“Yeah, I know.” He leaned back, deceptively relaxed. “You have to let people in, you know. Friends. Family. You can’t always shut down and keep people out of your space.”

“I know that. But I don’t trust easily.”

He arched a brow. “Isn’t that the truth. I’m still not sure if you trust me.”

“I do trust you. I just don’t trust you to stay out of my business.” She smiled.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes and she knew that there was more. Isaac could be intrusive. He knew when to push. He also knew when to give a person space. He was still here, watching her, waiting.

In the silence, she had too much time to think. Her mind kept replaying the moment when Max St. James walked up to her, dark-skinned, curly hair, piercing gaze. She’d been taken aback by his presence, by him. Unfortunately she hadn’t seen the last

of him. The file sitting on her desk meant that he would be in her life for the next couple of months as she planned Melody St. James's wedding.

"Will you be at the holiday dinner this Sunday after church?" Isaac finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Holiday dinner?" She had no idea what he was talking about.

"The Hope Community Church holiday dinner. We have it on the last Sunday in November every year. It's open to the community, so we serve food all day, because we never have enough room for one big sit-down dinner."

"And what do you want me to do?" She asked because she knew from his tone that there was more. He wanted her involved. They all did.

"I only want you to join us. We're all still family."

Sierra smiled. The residents of Mercy Ranch were more than family. They'd seen each other through some of the roughest times. They kept one another motivated. In the past couple of years, a few of them had gotten married, including Kylie's marriage to Carson West, Isaac's brother and the oldest son of Jack West. Jack owned and operated Mercy Ranch. It was his way of giving back to soldiers who had fought and been injured.

"You want me to help, don't you?" she asked, knowing his real purpose for bringing up the dinner.

He grinned. "Yeah, I want you to help."

"I'll help," she said. She wasn't excited about it, but it would show them all that she hadn't closed herself off completely.

“Good.” He lifted his arm to check the time. “About Max...”

“Another interfering male?” she added.

“No, he isn’t. He had a friend, a business associate. Max understands PTSD.”

“Right, but I don’t need him mucking about in my life.”

“Mucking about?”

“Go! I have work to do. Remember, I run this wedding venue for your father. And if you see him, tell him I’m not good at all of this happily-ever-after stuff.”

“I think he’s hoping it’ll rub off on you. I’m starting to think it must be working. A person who says stuff like ‘mucking about’ has obviously been reading some romance novels.”

“I don’t believe in romance.” She hid her face so he wouldn’t see the heat traveling up her cheeks.

“Don’t let Max get under your skin. He’s not much of a romantic, either. Too busy. I keep telling him women like it when a man shows up. Maybe someday he’ll find one he cares enough to show up for.”

“I don’t need to know about Max St. James.” Sierra shot him a look and then picked up the file and walked out of her office. She had a meeting and the last thing she wanted was to have her client’s brother on her mind as they met to discuss wedding details.



Max stood outside the doorway to Sierra Lawson’s office,

catching the last few sentences of her conversation with Isaac West. He hadn't planned on coming back today, but when he'd gotten home, his sister had informed him she had an appointment at the Stable wedding venue and he had to accompany her because, after all, it was his money she was spending.

He definitely hadn't planned on listening in on a private conversation. But he hadn't walked away quickly enough and had heard his name mentioned. Both were reasons to stay and listen. Now he had to make another decision: make himself known or walk away.

"Max, did you find her?" Melody's question made the decision for him.

"That dirty rat." He heard Sierra gasp, accompanied by Isaac's deep laugh. "Listening in on private conversations."

He stepped into her office, trying hard to be his normal composed self. After all, he was Max St. James. He knew how to keep his expression neutral to make the best deal. He didn't let anything or anyone get under his skin.

So why did he feel like a teenager being called into the principal's office? He pulled on the brim of the cowboy hat he wore and managed to not shuffle his feet.

"I didn't hear much, and most of what I did assured me we won't be best friends."

"Max!" his sister gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. "I apologize for him," she said to Sierra. "He isn't usually this rude."

"I don't need you to defend me, Mel," he told his sister. "I

did listen to your conversation. But I didn't mean to. I apologize. And Isaac's portrayal of me is wrong. Mostly wrong."

Sierra glared, her hazel-green eyes dancing with fire. He nearly smiled. Instead he opted for contrite, but, man, it was hard to do.

Sierra glanced from him to Isaac. She didn't say anything and didn't really need to. Her expression said it all. She was angry, cornered and...beautiful.

"I have to get home to my wife." Isaac headed for the door. "Godspeed, my friend."

"Prayers appreciated," Max joked. Because he'd known Isaac most of his life, he knew that Isaac would never let him be "Max St. James, Tech Tycoon." With Isaac, he was just Max, number 32 on the Hope High basketball and baseball teams, a decent partner in team roping and someone most parents warned their kids to steer clear of.

"Men!" Melody snorted as Isaac left. "Now, let's show my brother the venue. He's going to love it so much, he'll want to get married here."

"Oh, are you engaged, Mr. St. James?" Sierra asked, her wide-eyed expression telling him she knew he wasn't.

"No and I have no intentions of getting married anytime soon. Let's have a look at the venue and then we can discuss the plans that have already been made."

Sierra led them through the building that had been built like an overlarge stable. The main area, longer than it was wide and with

a cathedral ceiling, was the wedding chapel. What might have been an indoor arena was the reception area. The entire venue was light and airy. Stained glass in the chapel allowed warm, golden light to seep into the large, open room.

Melody talked in great detail about flowers, decorations, food. He tried to focus but it all sounded like she was speaking a foreign language. He'd never expected this from his sister. She'd always been so rational.

He didn't want to interfere but he had doubts about the fiancé who hadn't stepped foot on Oklahoma soil in months. According to Melody, he was busy working in California. Max hoped that was the truth.

"What do you think, Sierra?" Melody had hold of the other woman's arm and he saw Sierra stiffen. But she smiled, as if trying very hard to accommodate his sister's affectionate nature. "Heart-shaped filet mignon or salmon. Isn't that perfect?"

Sierra's face said she thought the idea was anything but perfect.

He swallowed and looked away but not before she gave him a look that begged for assistance. He shrugged but didn't reply, leaving her to come up with an answer for his sister.

"I think that sounds costly," Sierra said. "But of course it's up to you. You're the bride."

"I'm paying for this nonsense," Max inserted. "Why do we need heart-shaped food?"

Melody rolled her eyes. "It isn't about need, it's about want."

“There would be a lot of wasted food,” Sierra informed Melody. “They would have to cut the meat to make the heart shape.”

“Oh, that is a waste. Okay, nothing heart-shaped except the cakes and cookies for the dessert table. And I’d like to do a traditional dance. My grandmother has been teaching me and she feels very strongly that the dance should be done immediately following the ceremony.”

“Traditional dance?” Sierra looked confused.

“Our grandmother is Assyrian,” Melody said over her shoulder as she hurried toward the stairs that led to the loft where the bridal party lounge and dressing rooms were located. The groom and his attendants had a separate building. “Our grandparents came to America in the sixties. They’re our mother’s parents.”

Following close behind his sister, Max walked next to Sierra, noticing her thoughtful expression.

“Our grandmother—we call her Nonni—is still very traditional in many ways,” Max said.

They had reached the top of the stairs and stopped on the wide landing. Sierra unlocked the double doors and motioned them into the bridal suite, which included a large sitting area and windows offering a brief glimpse of Grand Lake.

“Max, come inside, look around.” Melody took hold of his hand and dragged him in.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the expression on

Sierra's face. For a moment, she looked sad. He wondered why.

"We should go now," Max told his sister. "I'm sure Ms. Lawson has other clients, other things to do. Not that this hasn't been extremely fun for her."

"I'm sorry, Sierra, I should have realized..." Melody hugged the wedding planner again. His sister didn't notice the other woman freeze up. "I've just been so excited to show Max everything. I knew he wouldn't really appreciate the details, but I knew he'd pretend."

"I'm glad for your sake that he pretended," Sierra said, putting some distance between her and his sister.

"Okay, we'll go, now that my brother is properly impressed. But, Sierra, I would like to extend an invitation to you, to participate in some of our pre-wedding activities."

"Pre-wedding activities?"

Melody walked back down the stairs, staying next to Sierra while Max forged on ahead of them. He knew the look in his sister's eyes, the one that said she had a plan.

"Yes," she went on. "We're sewing a honeymoon blanket. It's a very old Assyrian tradition and my grandmother insisted. We are all taking part. My mother, grandmother, sister, myself, aunts, cousins. My quilt is patchwork, a little of the old country with the new. If you'll join us in the next couple of weeks, just bring maybe a scrap of material from an old shirt of yours. I want to make this blanket about the people in my life."

Sierra opened her mouth as if to object. Max had stopped in

the large entry foyer and he watched, waiting for her to come up with an excuse. Not that Melody would accept excuses.

He knew what his sister was up to. She liked the wedding planner, thought she was lonely and in need of someone. And he was that someone. His sister had always been a fixer, even as a child. When he had gone through his destructive teen years, she'd been the one constantly trying to find a way to bring him back to himself. She would plant herself in front of him, demand he stay home and read a book, help her with a school project, anything to try to win him back.

"Melody, it's time to go." He motioned her toward the door.

"Don't get all bossy businessman with me, Maximus St. James."

Sierra laughed a little.

"And this is why I don't like to take her places," he told Sierra. "Time for us to go home, Mel. Nonni is cooking tonight and you know she wants us all there."

Melody gave Sierra another quick hug. He would have to explain to her that she needed to pay more attention to social cues. Sierra Lawson had a bubble and she didn't want people stepping inside it.

He was more than willing to respect her wishes even if his little sister wasn't. He hadn't come here looking for ties to this community. He'd only come to make amends. Hope, Oklahoma, wasn't his home anymore. In this small town he still felt the past hanging over his head. Everyone knew his stories.

Except Sierra Lawson.

But he doubted she was curious about him. She had her own stories. Stories she didn't seem to want to share with anyone.

That was just fine with him.

## Chapter Three

Sierra waited until the church bells rang before she entered the sanctuary and found a seat in the back on Sunday morning. Unfortunately she wasn't the only one sliding in at the last minute. The doors opened and another latecomer entered.

This time Pastor Stevens noticed. He had just made a few announcements but he paused and smiled.

"I know several visitors are with us today. Why don't we take a moment to greet our newcomers, and even those you might not have had a chance to shake hands with."

Sierra groaned.

"Thought you could sneak in unnoticed?" Isaac West asked as he held out a hand. At least he knew she didn't like hugs.

But the huggers were out there, lurking, waiting to wrap warm and welcoming arms around her. She winced at the thought.

"I tried," she admitted.

Before she could say more, she was surrounded. It felt a lot like a mob but she knew it was all about well wishes and not an actual mobbing. She eased away from the push of people, smiling and acknowledging their warm welcome while trying to beat back the claustrophobia that darkened the periphery of her vision. Somehow she managed to speak to an older woman who held her hand, telling her how glad they were to see her.

Someone else reached for her other hand.

She reminded herself that this was good. People were friendly. They were all glad she'd shown up. They didn't know about her past, about growing up in the midst of her parents' destructive relationship or the weeks she'd spent being held captive in Afghanistan.

Taking a deep breath, she managed to smile as she started to back away. She desperately needed space. The urge to be free of the crowd started to claim her in its grip.

"Leave it to me." A solid chest brushed against her back and a deep but concerned voice rumbled near her ear. She didn't turn. She knew who that voice belonged to. She didn't want to rely on him, on anyone.

But now wasn't the time to argue.

"We're going to find our seats now. I think the service is about to start," Max said with an air of authority that had the crowd moving away, reclaiming their seats. His hand, strong and warm, held her arm. The touch grounded her.

She allowed him to take control, moving them to the refuge of a back pew. He released her arm as she took a seat but then he slid in next to her. Of course he did. He'd made it clear that they needed to find a seat before the service started. He'd said, "We're." Didn't he know how small towns worked and that he had given people, even kind and well-meaning people, something to talk about?

"Are you okay?"

She wanted to tell him to mind his own business. That she

could take care of herself. But all of the caustic remarks were buried beneath a layer of gratitude. She rarely allowed anyone to shelter or protect her. She didn't know why it was him, a stranger.

Maybe it was easier to allow a stranger into her life than to lean on friends who had already done so much and knew too much.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He didn't tease or mock. He merely nodded and reached for a hymnal that he handed to her. He took the other one in the back of the pew.

"I'm not always like this," she felt compelled to add.

"I know."

"Do you?" She lowered her voice, aware that one or two heads turned to give her a look. She didn't wait for his answer, instead she joined the singing, not wanting to disrupt the service.

The music seemed to be God's way of drawing her close to Him. It'd always been this way. Even as a child she would make excuses to ride her bike on Sunday morning so she could sit outside the neighborhood church and listen to the congregation sing. She never went in. Her father wouldn't allow that. He hadn't been a believer, so no one else had been allowed to believe.

The music touched the dark, hurting places in ways that sometimes the words of a sermon couldn't. Even now, the music chased away the memories that had started to drag her down. It lightened her soul with words of hope and promise.

The sermon seemed directly related to the last of the hymns, focusing on new beginnings. She closed her eyes at the final

words, that new beginnings sometimes required multiple tries. You might have to start again, but as long as you kept moving forward, there was hope.

His mercies are new every morning.

The congregation stood for a closing prayer and then headed toward the fellowship hall.

Again Max walked next to her, his hand on her back, guiding her through the crowd. She didn't need him guarding her. True, he was tall and broad-shouldered, an able bodyguard.

But she knew how to take care of herself. It was safer than relying on someone who might not be there when needed. Or someone who might let you down. She had rescued herself from the nightmare of her parents' divorce. She'd rescued herself from her captors in Afghanistan, managing to overpower a guard as American forces fought to enter the compound.

Yet here she was, allowing Max St. James to lead her through the sea of people, as if he were her Moses, parting the Red Sea for her to get safely to the other side.

"I know you can do this yourself," he murmured very close to her ear. As if he'd heard her thoughts.

"Of course I can."

She kept walking and realized that not once did she feel the dark edges of panic. His hand was on her elbow. He was strong. His presence was real. It was solid. He smelled good, too. Something expensive, with a touch of citrus and mountain air.

People spoke to them as they walked, as if no one noticed

anything unusual about the two of them. Or so she thought. As they entered the fellowship hall, she spotted the people who would have questions. Kylie West, once the therapist at Mercy Ranch, and a wounded warrior herself, spotted Sierra and her eyes narrowed. Isaac West, Kylie's brother-in-law, had a more amused expression. And then there was Melody St. James and others that Sierra assumed were Max's family.

The two of them entering this room together was creating a firestorm of speculation. Not something she wanted.

She pulled away from him.

He released her. "You're okay?"

"I am." She meant to say it with a touch of rebuke but it came out softer, as if she were reassuring him. She let it go. "Thank you, for back there. For bailing me out."

"Anytime."

Then he left her and joined his family. An older woman greeted him with a hug, making him bend down so she could kiss his cheek. Sierra guessed her to be Nonni. She was a small woman in a floral dress, with graying dark hair pulled up in a bun. After kissing his cheek, she began to talk, gesturing rapidly with her hands. Melody laughed and gave her grandmother a hug. His parents, whom Sierra had met during initial wedding planning, gave Max hugs. His was a close family.

"Are you going to join us?" Kylie appeared at Sierra's side.

"What?" Sierra pulled her attention away from Max and his family.

Her friend's gaze trailed to the St. James family and returned to study Sierra.

"They're lovely people," Kylie said. "I'm glad they were able to buy back the ranch they sold. This was their home for a long time."

"Yes, it's good they were able to get it back." Sierra clasped her hands together, trying to appear excited. "Let's get this party started, shall we?"

Kylie raised a brow at her enthusiasm. "I'm not buying it, Sierra."

"Oh, come on, you know I love big, festive events."

They both laughed. The laughter shook loose some of the darker emotions she'd been feeling the past hour and a half. It felt good to have lighter emotions rising to the surface.

"Of course you do." Kylie drew her toward the kitchen. "I thought you could serve desserts. Keep them cut, on plates, ready to be picked up by the guests."

"Sounds easy enough."

"It is easy. You'll get to socialize a little, serve dessert and have fun."

Sierra gave an exaggerated shudder. "Socializing and having fun. Two of my favorite activities."

Kylie showed her all the cakes and pies, the table she would stand at, the plates and cutlery stacked up on the side. And then she looked past Sierra's right shoulder and smiled a little too brightly.

“Here’s your helper now!” Kylie exclaimed.

“Helper?”

Warning bells went off in Sierra’s head. She looked up from the cake she’d been about to cut, expecting Max St. James. But she was wrong. It was his grandmother.

“Nonni, I’m so glad you can help us.” Kylie gave the older woman a hug.

“I’m glad to help. I have so many fond memories of these church dinners.” Nonni extended the smile to include Sierra. “And you, the wedding planner, I’m so glad we can finally meet. Melody talks of you constantly.”

“I’m not sure why!” Sierra said.

Max’s grandmother smiled big. “Because you say what you think.”

Sierra felt a rush of warmth slide up her neck. “Oh, there is that.”

Nonni patted her arm in a motherly way. “We would like for you to join us, working on the honeymoon quilt. And, also, if we could talk about food. Maybe we can add a few traditional dishes to her reception dinner. I don’t want to take over.”

“Nonni, don’t tell fibs.” The deep voice came from behind Sierra. “You always want to take over. They say it’s where I got my type A personality.”

Nonni’s forest green eyes sparkled with joy. “Max, you’re going to help us serve dessert?”

“No, I don’t think so.” He moved to his grandmother’s side,

smiling at Sierra as he placed a protective arm around his grandmother's shoulders. "I have things to do."

"Watching football isn't a thing to do," Nonni warned. "We're serving dinner today. You can miss the game just once. You and your father. You can help with dessert. Your father can help with cleanup."

"I'm not sure about that," Max countered.

"Oh, I am sure." Nonni smiled brightly and the battle was won.

It happened that quickly. One minute Sierra and Nonni were working the dessert table and Sierra thought it might be fun to get to know this older woman. And the next minute Max became a part of the equation.

Sierra had been backed into a corner. The only upside to the situation? The sweat on Max's forehead as he realized he'd been outmaneuvered by his grandmother.



Nonni had a way of making him feel trapped. He loved her and would do anything for her. Which was the reason he stayed to help serve up cake and pie. He stayed, knowing she had something up her matchmaking sleeve.

Not something. Someone. Specifically, Sierra Lawson. She obviously didn't see why this project had failure written all over it. He wasn't interested. And neither was Sierra.

In his mind, a matchmaker only worked when a person wanted or needed help finding love. His grandmother, on the other hand,

liked a challenge. She seemed willing to try matching the two most unwilling subjects.

Fortunately for him, he had experience dealing with Nonni. Sierra had been taken by surprise. A sneak attack by his grandmother. She'd adjusted quickly, though, and was now listening intently as his grandmother talked about food and recipes.

His grandmother pointed to her *kilecheh*. "These are our Christmas cookies," Nonni told her. "The rolled pastry is filled with dates, the other is filled with nuts, sugar and cardamom. They're very good. Try one."

"I shouldn't." Sierra held a hand up to protest but Nonni stuck a pastry in that protesting hand.

"No, you should. They have no calories at Christmastime." Nonni laughed at her joke. "These are my grandson's favorites."

He reached for one as Nonni watched, waiting for Sierra's response.

"They're very good. Is that a yeast dough?" Sierra asked after finishing the small date-filled pastry.

"It is." His grandmother glowed as she began to tell the younger woman all about her *kilecheh*.

His grandmother loved sharing traditions and loved a willing listener even more.

Sierra asked questions in her serious way. She wasn't a person who gave false compliments, he realized. She seemed very detail-oriented, matter-of-fact in her questioning. He guessed this to

be the reason Jack West had given her the job of running the Stable. She also baked. He knew this because Melody had shown him photos of the wedding cakes, going on and on about how amazing and beautiful they were.

He'd half listened because at the time he hadn't met Sierra. He hadn't known she had hazel eyes, auburn hair and a way of avoiding eye contact when she was uncomfortable. She also had a way of smiling that took a man by surprise.

At that moment she bestowed one of those rare smiles on his grandmother. Nonni beamed and issued another invitation besides helping with the honeymoon quilt. She would love for Sierra to help her bake pastries and cookies for Christmas. It was a large undertaking. Each year his grandmother baked for several days then she would take the baked goods to her old church in Tulsa, to other Assyrians.

His grandmother had a big heart. She loved to nurture. He could see the gleam in her eye. She'd found a likely candidate for all of that nurturing.

Fortunately people started to arrive. His grandmother and Sierra worked side by side, serving cake, cupcakes and pies. As people came up to their table, his grandmother hugged them and doled out compliments and encouragement. Sierra took the role as the quiet one, working to keep the sweet treats flowing.

"Max, we need another cake. Hurry, hurry, slice it up and bring it over." Nonni issued the order without looking.

He turned and nearly tripped over a small child. He recognized

her immediately. “Linnie, how are you?”

The little girl with the tangled blond hair now had her curls in a ponytail. She wore a blue dress and tennis shoes. Her eyes flashed with recognition and she gave him a slight smile, but then she started searching for her mother.

“Linnie, there you are.” A harried-looking young woman with a baby on her hip, and leading a child a little younger than Linnie, approached.

“You must be Linnie’s mom. I’m Max St. James.”

Her cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. “Oh, Mr. St. James, I’m so sorry she’s bothering you. I’ve been meaning to thank you for helping us find her.”

“I’m not really the one who found her...” He hesitated. “Miss —”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Patsy Jay.” She took his hand in a hearty handshake. “I’m so glad to meet you. And I’m so thankful for what you did to help find my daughter.”

“Allow me to introduce you to Sierra Lawson. She’s the one who actually found Linnie.”

He pointed her toward the dessert table and Sierra. Linnie had already spotted her and he watched as Sierra squatted so that she could be eye to eye with the child.

“Hey, Linnie! Imagine seeing you here!” Sierra gave the little girl a warm smile.

Linnie flung her thin arms around Sierra’s neck.

“I got in trouble,” she told Sierra.

Patsy Jay stepped close to her daughter. "She doesn't usually take to strangers. It's been hard for us since..." Patsy shook her head. "Since the accident. I'm going to nursing school. I'm gone a lot, working and attending classes. My mom watches these three. It's a lot." Her cheeks burned scarlet. "I'm sorry. You didn't need to hear all of that."

Sierra stood and he noticed that Linnie had hold of her hand. "Patsy, you don't have to apologize for doing your best for your family."

Patsy teared up. "Thank you so much. And I wanted to invite you and Mr. St. James to my house for dinner. I live in trailer 12 at the Cardinal Roost. I don't have a lot but I'd like to do something for the two of you."

"Oh, I..." Sierra glanced down at the little hand holding hers.

Patsy bit down on her bottom lip. "I understand if you can't make it."

"Of course we can," Max responded. "When?"

"Thursday at six?" Patsy's hand rested on her daughter's shoulder. "We would like that, wouldn't we, Linnie?"

The little girl nodded.

Sierra handed Linnie a piece of chocolate cake on a small paper plate. "We would love to come to dinner."

The word *we* took Max by surprise. No doubt she didn't mean to make it seem as if they were a couple. They were barely acquaintances. Furthermore, he hadn't been part of a *we* in years. He had a habit of letting women down and he guessed that Sierra

had been let down by too many people in her life.

Their gazes connected and he knew that her thoughts had taken the same path as his. If they allowed people to connect them as a couple, things would spiral out of control.

That was the last thing either of them needed, and the one thing Sierra didn't need was to be another person he let down.

## Chapter Four

Monday morning Sierra woke up to a clap of thunder that shook the windows. The weather had been warm but a cold front had arrived and the two air masses collided to form one powerful storm system. She prayed it would move through quickly with no real severe weather. With Christmas less than a month away, what they needed was a good cold snap, maybe some snow. But they definitely didn't need damaging winds or tornadoes.

Peeking out the window, she shivered. The sky was one massive dark gray cloud. The storm pounding the side of her apartment required baking.

In the kitchen she flipped on all of the lights, flooding the room in nearly startling brightness. She told the smart speaker to play songs from her panic playlist, smiling at the name she and Kylie had used for the songs that were meant to draw her out of a panic attack. The first song was one she loved to sing along to.

As she sang out loud, she started boiling hot water for her tea and put two slices of bread in the toaster. Next she grabbed a cookbook, the one with all of her favorite cake recipes. She browsed through the pages and finally went to her go-to vanilla cake. A lovely, simple cake made with real vanilla.

She pulled out bowls, beaters, ingredients and lined it all up on the counter. Baking had been her escape for years. As a girl enduring her parents' fights, she would bake. Bake and keep to

herself, hiding the shadows of her life so that others couldn't see what was going on inside the lovely brick facade of the Lawson home. Her banker father would leave the house, briefcase in hand, smiling at neighbors. Her mother would slide designer sunglasses on her face to hide the bruises.

Sierra would bake. And eat. Now she baked but she didn't eat the cupcakes, cakes and pies. She gave them away to the other residents of Mercy Ranch, the place she'd called home for the past three years.

She sifted together the dry ingredients, enjoying the process, the smells that changed as she added each one. Vanilla happened to be her favorite.

She prepared the round cake pans and poured the batter in equal amounts. There was another crash of thunder and all the windows rattled from the power of the storm. She nearly dropped the bowl. Her hands shook. She wrapped them in her apron and told herself to be calm, take deep breaths, focus.

From the living room she heard the front door creak on its hinges. She poured water over the tea bag in her cup and walked to the living area. Kylie West waved as she dropped her purse on the sofa.

"I was on my way to breakfast with Maria when I saw lights on and thought there might be coffee."

Sierra headed back to the kitchen to put the cakes in the oven. "You know I don't drink coffee. Come up with a better reason for knocking on my door in the middle of a storm."

“I saw the lights on and thought you might be up, and I wondered, again, why you won’t accept a service dog.”

“They’re messy. They shed. They require too much.”

“A Labradoodle doesn’t shed, or not much. They give more than they take.”

“I’m afraid I would forget to feed it, or water it. That would be terrible. That’s also why I don’t babysit those cute kids you all seem to like bringing into our lives.”

“You’re not as unaffected by them as you like to pretend. I’ve watched you holding Eve’s little Tori when they come to visit.”

“She’s not as stinky as some. And Glory’s little bundle of joy, Cara, is okay. When she isn’t smelly or crying because she’s teething. When did Mercy Ranch become a home for wayward teens and their babies?”

“You’re such a phony. You love babies and dogs.”

“Make yourself a pot of coffee,” Sierra offered. “I’m baking.”

She ignored the “Aha! I knew it!” look on Kylie’s face. It wasn’t easy having a therapist for a best friend. She’d had best friends in her life. Everyone had a best friend in grade school, then high school. But Sierra had never invited friends to her home, not with her parents being how they were. Kylie was the first friend she’d ever been completely honest with. It was refreshing, to have a relationship where she didn’t hold back a part of who she was.

It was the reason she didn’t date. She didn’t want to have a relationship where she couldn’t share her true self. She was tired

of fighting the past. She'd made huge strides at Mercy Ranch. She had a life here that she loved. She had friends.

Kylie made herself at home, because she'd once lived here. She pulled out the aging coffeepot, got it started, then helped herself to the banana muffins Sierra had made the previous day.

"I thought you were going to breakfast with Maria? Shouldn't you be at your house with your lovely doctor husband and two precious children?" Sierra asked as she poured batter into another cake pan.

"He took them to Holly's Diner for breakfast."

"I see. And...?"

"I wanted to visit with you. I know the last few days have been rough, and then this storm hit."

Sierra placed the two round cake pans in the oven and grabbed her tea to join Kylie at the kitchen island. "I'm fine. Really."

"How'd it go yesterday, serving dessert at church?" A knowing look lit up Kylie's expression. Sierra's friend did not have a poker face.

"Oh, you mean with Nonni?" She wouldn't mention Max St. James.

"Yes, Nonni, of course. She's a sweet lady. The family lived here for years, until they sold the farm and moved back to Tulsa. I'm glad they've returned."

"They seem to be a part of the community already."

Kylie got up to pour herself a cup of coffee. "Yes, I guess they are. And Melody getting married at the ranch seems so right.

How are the plans going?”

“She wanted a Christmas wedding. Her fiancé pushed it back to Valentine’s Day.”

“Why do you seem upset about that?”

Sierra closed her eyes, wishing for once that Kylie had a different job. Why couldn’t she be friends with an accountant, a schoolteacher, maybe a nurse? Anything but a therapist?

“Could we have a normal conversation?” Sierra asked.

“Oh, sorry. I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“You are,” Sierra agreed. “So, church was nice yesterday. I enjoyed the music.”

“It was. Do you have plans for Christmas?”

Sierra laughed a little. “Same as every year. I’m joining all of you on Christmas Day and hiding the rest of the time.” She paused. “Except I seem to have been invited to make cookies with Nonni and I’m also supposed to help sew a honeymoon quilt.”

“How fun.” Kylie grinned at her over the rim of her coffee cup, trying to hide her amusement.

“Really? Fun?”

“Of course,” Kylie agreed. “I have to leave soon, but save me a piece of cake.”

“I would, but I’m taking it to Lakeside Manor since it seems some Scrooge is trying to steal Christmas from the residents. I’m going to bake cupcakes for Patsy Jay’s children to decorate. I’ll make extra for you and the kids.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. But since you insist…” She flashed another quick smile. “I saw you talking to them yesterday.”

Sierra got up to make herself another cup of tea. “Patsy invited Max St. James and me to her house for dinner. She thinks she needs to repay us, although I don’t think we really did that much. The little girl wandered onto Mercy Ranch then the police took her home. Has she done this before?”

“I think one other time. I’m glad she had her dog with her.”

“Yes.” Sierra thought back to her own childhood and the long walks she would take to escape her parents and their fights.

Sierra glanced at the digital clock on the oven. “I need to finish up here and head to the Stable.” The Stable, a common name for a very uncommon wedding venue. “I’m going to decorate for Christmas.”

“Don’t you have another Christmas wedding coming up?”

“Yes, and they want twinkle lights and white poinsettias and trees. White trees! It’s a winter wonderland theme.”

“Are you going to decorate in here for Christmas?” Kylie asked.

Sierra got up to check on the cakes. The aroma of sugary vanilla goodness filled the kitchen. Aromatherapy. The storm forgotten, she inhaled deeply.

“I am. Glory and Cara are living here, too, and they deserve a tree and gifts.” Sierra admired the young mother. She’d started out as a teen mom from a dysfunctional home. For a time Kylie and Carson West were foster parents to Glory’s baby. The Wests

mentored Glory, helped her to get her life back on track, and she'd regained custody of her daughter.

"Does it bother you that Jack is allowing them to stay? I know Mercy Ranch is designated for military vets, wounded warriors, and Glory is just a teenager who made mistakes."

"She's a wounded warrior of another kind. She battled abuse, addiction, and won. She deserves to be here, too."

Sierra didn't look at her friend. She didn't need a pat on the back or kudos for being kind. She'd spoken the truth.

Knowing Sierra as she did, Kylie merely cleared her throat and moved on. "So about this dinner Thursday, with Max..."

"Stop."

Kylie laughed and didn't look at all ashamed. "You know he's fabulously wealthy, right? Software, a social media platform, government contracts and so forth."

"You know I don't care about the man's financials, right? He was nice enough to help look for Linnie, and her mother is kind enough to want to thank him."

"He's also handsome."

And he smelled amazing. She cringed at her thought. "I'm not interested."

"Of course not. But someday you will meet someone." Kylie carried her cup to the sink.

"I meet people all the time. I'm not interested in inviting a man into my world, my very fragile hold on sanity. I'm in a good place, Kylie. I don't need a man to make me happy. I don't need

to get married and have children. I don't want to repeat—" She cut herself off and just stared at her friend, because the words had rushed out before she could stop them.

"You don't want to repeat your parents' mistakes. I get that. But you should give yourself more credit. You aren't your parents."

"I know."

"If you're looking for the Christmas tree and decorations, they're in the storage room at the back of the building."

"I'll get them out and let Glory do the decorating. She should be home from her aunt's in Tulsa by the first of next week."

"She'll enjoy decorating the apartment." Kylie agreed with the plan. "And you know she's going to hold you to the offer to bake and decorate Christmas cookies for the church Christmas program."

"I know. And I don't mind."

Festive lights, trees, pretty wall hangings. All of the trimmings of Christmas. And now she could add to that baking Assyrian Christmas pastries with an elderly woman affectionately known as Nonni. She wasn't going to lie to herself, though. She wanted to experience the traditions the older woman had passed down to her children and grandchildren.

She knew it would be as if she was standing outside, peeking in, taking a small piece of that family for herself. Her own family had never shared traditions, other than perhaps drinking too much on holidays and ending the day with fighting and

uncomfortable silence. Thankfully she'd had decent friends back then, the kind that had shown her a glimpse of real family life.

Sierra walked Kylie to the door. The rain had dwindled to a light mist. The grass glistened with the moisture and, in the distance, the sun tried to peek through the heavy gray clouds.

She remembered the verse, that His mercies were new every morning. Just as quickly as the verse skipped through her mind, hope kindled in her heart. It was a flicker of joy, a strange lightness to her soul. It seemed to come out of nowhere. And yet it was very real. As if spiritually and emotionally she had turned a strange corner and was traveling in a new direction.

Hope. Unexplainable. Unaccountable. Unexpected. It made her wonder, what did God know that she didn't?

Maybe it was the coming holidays? Whatever it was, for the first time in a long while, she found herself hopeful.



Melody caught up with Max as he was heading toward the barn, his boots sloshing in the rain-soaked grass. She was dressed for work, in a pretty sweater over leggings and boots. Somewhere along the way she'd ditched childhood, princess dresses and their mother's high heels and become an adult.

"Shouldn't you be on your way to work? You know, small children expecting their favorite teacher?" he asked.

"Teacher meetings, so I'm going in a little bit late. I was on the phone with Andrew. He's going to try to be here the week

after Christmas.”

“I see,” he said. He pulled gloves out of his pocket and tried to push back the doubts about this fiancé who couldn’t even bother to show up and take his sister to dinner. “Dad and I are buying cattle today. Too bad you can’t join us.”

As a kid she’d loved the sale barn and livestock auctions.

“Oh, I really wish I could but...”

“You’ve lived in town too long, City Girl.”

She laughed. “I haven’t. You know I still love the auctions. And I’m not the only one who’s lived in the city too long. Look at you, it’s almost looking like you still belong here. I like the hat.”

It had felt good, getting ready this morning. No suit and tie, just jeans, boots and his favorite cowboy hat. He was used to long hours and long days in an office. Fresh air felt good for a change.

“So what do you really want?” He slowed so that she didn’t have to run to keep up with him.

Ahead of them, their dad had the truck hitched to the stock trailer. Aldridge St. James had always been a farmer but he’d traded this for life in town, and a factory job. He’d done what was needed to get Max out of trouble and through college. Then it had been Max’s sisters, Melody and Cadence, in college. Cadence had married last year and was living in Texas.

A family ranch traded for the future of his children. Traded for lawyers for his son, who had driven a truck through a school building when he’d drunkenly confused the brake for the gas.

Max had worked hard to get back on track. Now he was giving

the life they loved back to his parents. He saw the difference in their expressions. They were able to retire now, knowing they could farm and live in the community they loved so much.

“Well?” he prodded, because Melody still hadn’t answered and looked uneasy. “Melody, if you need something, tell me. Is it the wedding?”

“No, of course not. You’ve done everything for the wedding. I can’t even begin to thank you for all your help. Financial and otherwise.”

He stopped and waited. “Spit it out.”

“Coats for kids. I know you’re already invested in helping with the Christmas at the Ranch event. But the weather is getting colder and you’d be amazed at the number of kids who show up to school without a jacket.”

“I’ll bring it up to the planning committee at the next meeting.” And he’d take the curious, sometimes questioning looks that some of the older folks on that committee would give him. He’d been in town for a month and had gotten used to the fact that, to a lot of the people in Hope, he was still the kid who’d crashed a truck through the school. He was still the kid who had driven recklessly, drank too much and hurt the nicest girl in town when he’d left her sitting at home the night of the prom.

“Give me a few days to work on this. You and your friends start putting together names. If I have to, I can call in favors from friends in Dallas.”

“Yes!” Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “You’re the best,

Max.”

“I try.”

She cocked her head to the side, the way she'd been doing since childhood. “Max, are you okay? I know it's been hard for you, being here.”

“I'm thirty-three, Melody. I've put a lot of years between myself and my mistakes.”

“I know. I just think you're still trying to make amends with everyone, and I hope you understand that the past is forgiven.”

“I do understand that. Don't worry about me, I'm good. But I want you to know something. If Andrew doesn't show up in town soon, I'm going looking for him and it isn't going to be pretty when I catch him.”

“He was here when we first met with Sierra and he will be back soon. He just didn't expect me to take this teaching job in Hope. He likes to have a plan and this wasn't on the list.”

“If he's marrying you, he'll have to get used to spur of the moment.”

“You're just trying to change the subject,” Melody accused her big brother. “And since we're both good at that, isn't Sierra the best? She's on the planning committee for the Christmas event, too, isn't she?”

“I think they're asking for her help, yes.”

“I like her,” Melody continued. “She is much nicer than she lets on.”

“I'm sure she is. And before you continue this, I'm not

interested. I'm only here until after Christmas and then I have to get back to Dallas. My company can't run itself, you know."

"You have Roger and you have an assistant. Give yourself a break. And I don't know why you're not interested in her."

His little sister made him dizzy. "First, I'm taking a break while I help Dad get this ranch going again. Second, I'm not interested because I don't have time for a relationship right now. And, third, I'm leaving in a month."

She saluted and looked more determined than ever. "Whatever, Big Brother, whatever. I've got to run. Don't forget the coats. And try being charming once in a while."

He watched Melody walk away and couldn't help but think about Sierra. The last thing she needed was a man who wouldn't be sticking around. She had enough to deal with. He wasn't going to add to the list.

Besides that, Sierra didn't strike him as a woman seeking a relationship. Her expression was guarded and shadows lurked in her eyes, telling more about her past than words ever would. He'd met other wedding planners. They tended to be a perky bunch with great social and organizational skills.

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