



# *Garrett's Gift*

Jayna Morrow

SWEET HOME, TEXAS



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*Sweet Home Texas Series #1*

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*You can make plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail*  
*Proverbs 19:21*

# 1

"I see you decided to show up." The harsh words grated like a meat grinder in Garrett Hearth's ears. They echoed with double impact in the unpretentious metal building that served as the town hall.

His brother, Gabriel, shoved a straw cowboy hat on his head and stomped in the direction of the large, glass front door. He slammed into Garrett's shoulder as he passed—a childish gesture, but one that spoke volumes.

Garrett took a step back to absorb the shock of his brother's aggressive gesture. The churlish greeting came as no surprise. Gabriel could always be counted on to let Garrett have it, no matter what the situation or who was watching. Garrett didn't understand Gabe's animosity.

"Good to see you, too." He raised his voice loud

enough for others in the room to hear. He wanted to draw attention, simply because his brother disliked it.

Gabriel never turned back. Guess he wasn't in the mood today.

Garrett pulled his attention back to the here and now. The folks filing out of the city hall building wore a variety of expressions—appalled, nonchalant, visibly stressed. He'd missed the meeting. Not that it mattered. Most everyone in town was against him anyway. Well, he didn't care. His property belonged to him, and he could sell it to whomever he wanted. He didn't owe anyone anything. But try explaining that to Gabriel.

A shaft of late afternoon light pierced his eyes as he opened the front door. A young woman with bouncy, brown hair and long, slim legs jogged out the door and caught up with Gabriel. Garrett watched as the two talked. The woman used lots of descriptive hand gestures.

Moments later, she returned to the building more slowly than she'd left. By this time, Garrett stood in the entryway alone. She stopped in front of him, the smell of earth and flowers wafting around her, and gave him a slight smile that ruffled his soul like a warm breeze.

"I need to lock up. Are you ready to leave?"

A pleasant enough voice, Garrett decided, although from this closer perspective, he noticed faint streaks of dust on her flushed cheeks.

She stood in the doorway and jangled a set of keys from fingertips that sported well-chewed fingernails. Her jeans were worn in the knees and torn in places. Soil covered the tops and sides of her athletic shoes. She wore a T-shirt that read *It's Easy Being Green* on the front. Rich, brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, but

some of it had worked free and was tucked behind her ears. She'd apparently been working outdoors, but her beauty shone through the dirt.

She tapped her toes, and Garrett remembered she'd asked a question.

"Yeah, I guess I missed the meeting. I better head out."

"A productive one, too. We're finally starting to convince the property owners that selling out to the developers is bad news for Sweet Home. We're already beginning to see the effects of heavy construction everywhere. Several school buses were late picking up children due to a road closure this week. And don't even get me started on the pile of waste building up the roadsides. Those vultures." She pursed her lips and narrowed a pair of velvet brown eyes.

Garrett stepped around her and out the door. He didn't want to get into a debate right now.

The roof's overhang blocked the light, making it possible to see without the glare. Her expressive eyes sparked with raw emotion, and for a moment, her passion for the town almost swayed him from his resolve on the issue dividing Sweet Home—to sell or not to sell.

Almost.

Progress had been creeping into the small Texas town for years. A rural area not far from Bishop, Texas, Sweet Home had drawn the attention of big-city developers. Developers had offered landowners serious money to sell. The situation had neighbor pitted against neighbor. For months, town meetings had tried to bring unity, but so far, the efforts had only added fuel to the fire.

"I'm sure I've seen you around before, but we

haven't officially met."

The young woman's statement refocused his mind, and he noticed her ringless hand stretched out toward him. How long had he been lost in those beautiful brown eyes?

"Garrett Hearth." Their hands made a warm connection. Hers sported a layer of dirt, which she transferred to him during the handshake, leaving his skin feeling gritty.

Enthusiastic *and* beautiful. Too bad she was on the wrong side. That made her a beautiful bother.

"I saw you talking to my brother, Gabe. How long have you two known each other?"

Rumor had it that Gabe was involved with some dark-haired woman, but nobody knew much about her. She lived out of town. Could this be her? For some reason, he hoped not.

"Gabe's your brother?" Her eyes lit up like amber stars. "Then you're another descendant of this town's founding family!"

A sense of pride surged through him and then fell away like leaves from a tree in autumn. His ancestors had settled here long ago, and others established homesteads around them. The Hearth family had named the town. For many years, life in Sweet Home had been ideal for residents—pure, simple country living.

Now it was time for change.

"Yeah. That's my family."

"You must be so proud of your rich heritage. What a history this area has."

In the hay fields, golden bales glowed in the early evening sun and reflected in her eyes. Beyond them, a densely wooded area boasted a variety of trees—old

oak, pecan, and cottonwood stood tall and majestic alongside smaller mesquite trees. All of them slated to be cut down.

"War, drought, the Depression, flooding...this town has made it through it all." This gal was nothing if not single-minded. "I can't imagine anyone wanting bulldozers coming in and tearing it down. Oh, well. We just have to keep praying." A big smile spread across her face, replacing the severe expression from half a second before.

Garrett allowed his gaze to roam from her face to take in the rest of her. Whatever she did outdoors must involve physical labor. Well-defined muscles in her arms flexed slightly as she turned the locks on the door. Even in work clothes, she had a classy air about her.

"Oh! Your brother." Her ponytail bounced as she spoke. "I didn't answer your question. I haven't known him long. I'm a landscape architect, and Gabriel hired me to update the grounds at his house. Been working over there all day, and I'll be there at least another two days. Lots of work."

Thinking about the job must have made her self-conscious because she dusted her jeans and held grimy hands in front of her, fingers splayed. "I'm a mess. Barely made it to the meeting—not a chance of going home to clean up. I didn't call the meeting this time, and it wasn't convenient at all."

"Don't worry about it." Garrett couldn't help grinning at her sudden discomfiture. "You look perfect. And these old farmers and ranchers don't give a hoot about appearances. You're fine."

*So she wasn't Gabe's girlfriend. Excellent.*

~\*~

Garrett's smile of approval put Micara at ease.

"Thank you." She'd locked the town hall doors, and they stood on the concrete steps that led to a large, dirt parking lot. A handful of people still lingered near their pickup trucks, talking to each other. Griping about the land issue, no doubt. She wished more of them had spoken up during the meeting, but most were afraid to speak out. Sometimes she felt as if she did all the talking at these gatherings. But at least the townspeople listened, and most of them agreed with her. She wasn't in this fight alone. Tonight's meeting was a fine example because she hadn't called it. Other people were getting involved. Pippy Warren, a local lawyer, had stepped in tonight to share lots of information. Having an attorney's perspective was a real eye-opener.

Garrett seemed like a decent man. And since he was from the town's founding family, it would be an asset to have him in her corner. Gabriel Hearth came to all the meetings, but she'd never seen Garrett here. *Lord knows I need something to go my way.*

Micara hadn't been born in Sweet Home. She'd spent most of her childhood in the big city. But both her mother and her grandmother were Sweet Home natives. She'd spent time during holidays and summers here, and had always dreamed of calling Sweet Home, well, home. Micara and her mother had shown up on her grandmother's doorstep when Micara was seventeen...and they hadn't left since. Her mother had promised her a perfect life in Sweet Home. But what was entailed in being happy? And what exactly was a perfect life anyway? She'd read that true

happiness centered on appreciating what you have and counting your blessings.

Some folks couldn't see the danger posed by developers. The hefty amounts of money they offered painted enticing mental pictures of early retirement and lives of ease. Only, these weren't offers from individuals who planned to build a home and make a life in Sweet Home. The offers came from businessmen who made it clear what they would do with the land once they acquired it. In no time at all, the sleepy little town would give way to restaurants and shopping centers and planned neighborhoods.

And with those things came more people and housing and crime.

*Why can't they see?*

So far, none of the town's major landowners had sold. Many others said they would, but their properties weren't large enough. The developers wanted the massive lots, the substantial acreage owned by the earliest residents—the Clark, Harris, McKinnon, and Brown family estates. And, of course, they wanted the town's founding family to sell—the Hearths.

The handsome Hearth standing beside her rubbed at the scruff that covered his face. Micara liked the raw edge. Garrett was rugged but in a purposeful way. He wasn't out to impress anyone.

His blue-gray eyes were distant, almost hollow. They didn't match his welcoming smile. His smile said he was glad to be here, but his eyes said he wanted to be somewhere else.

When he looked at her, it was as if he was looking just beyond her. But then again, the eyes were the window to the soul. Maybe she recognized something he wasn't expressing to the world.

Why had he missed the meeting? And why hadn't he attended any of the others? There hadn't been many, but each one was critical. It seemed like a new problem popped up every day. Last week, it was ruts in fields from illegal parking of heavy machinery. This week, it was problems with the school bus routes due to road closures.

"You look familiar. What's your name again?"

Ahh, so he was aware of her. "It's Micara Lee."

"Micara."

His deep voice struck a chord in her soul. She liked the way her name sounded when he said it.

"That's unusual."

"My mother had an aunt named Cara whom she was close to. When she was little, she started calling her *My Cara*, and it stuck. Her aunt passed away before I was born, so my mother came up with Micara in her honor. But you probably didn't want to know all that. I talk too much. Sorry."

Garrett chuckled. "It's all right. I like to hear you talk."

Was he flirting?

Was she?

"Talking a lot can be a powerful weapon. I keep calling these meetings—well, not this one—hoping that if I talk their ears off, they'll finally listen to me. It's been months, and some people still say they're going to sell." Sadness overwhelmed her, and she slowed down for emphasis. She met his gaze and found it hard to look away. "All it takes is one, and it starts a trickle-down effect."

She located her car key on the metal ring. In addition to caring for the lawns of many businesses, she and her mother also cleaned the buildings on a

regular basis, so her janitor's key ring was large.

"I know what you mean." His head bobbed up and down.

"It was nice to formally meet you, Garrett."

"Likewise."

She nodded and then headed for her car.

Garrett strode to his truck and waved before he drove away.

Before she could get her car door open, Pippy called her name. Micara sighed. She was never getting out of this place.

A large woman, Pippy placed her hand on the door and took a moment to catch her breath. "What did you think of the meeting?"

"People are talking. And the information you handed out will help. They respect you more than they respect me."

Pippy's breathing was almost back to normal. "They respect you, hon'. It's just that you're telling them to turn down large sums of money. That's a tough decision in a recession when people have bills to pay and most jobs are located in Bishop and other nearby towns anyway. Why not move closer to where they work? The information I gave them is either gonna convince them to stay or help them get a better selling price." She laughed heartily. "Trouble is, anytime you educate people, you take the risk of it backfiring."

"That's true. I can't help but feel like a troublemaker."

"Lemme tell you a little something about troublemaking. Did more than my share of protests and rallies back in the day—and several stints in jail for getting a bit crazy with all that. My young years were a

time of passion and making changes. One of my most meaningful projects was saving Sweet Home from change." Pippy's gaze drifted down as if she was reliving the memory. "Sweet Home is a small, country town but it's a big city compared to some time ago. When I was growing up here, there was nothing but a folksy downtown area, one building for the school, and only a fraction of the houses that exist now.

"Then developers swooped in and started building new homes. That's why the brick homes you see look similar. They were built in the same decade. And I protested all of it. Not because I didn't care for progress, but because I was big into saving the environment back then. I put my heart and soul into it, but progress won."

Micara stared at Pippy with a questioning gaze. History was known to repeat itself, but could Sweet Home handle round two?

"Now don't let that scare you. A lot of good came out of that earlier progress. You're bighearted, Micara, and that heart's in the right place. Keep doing what you're doing. I'm here to support you. Feel free to call me anytime."

"Thanks, Pippy. You've been a great help." Micara climbed into her car and her friend plodded toward her own vehicle.

She had a lot to think about.

## 2

Micara slammed on her brakes.

A large sign filled too much space on the edge of the Clarks' property. Its shadow stretched out across half of the road.

She threw an arm across the passenger seat to keep her purse and lunch from spilling into the floorboard, then veered to the side of the road and stared.

*Future Home of Hidden Oaks Gated Community.* A computer-generated picture of rows of cookie-cutter luxury homes filled the space below.

Just yesterday, she'd told Garrett Hearth, "All it takes is one." Here was that one. Now the domino effect would begin. No wonder the Clarks hadn't shown up for the meeting. They must have been too ashamed to show their faces. Or they didn't care. Probably both.

A rumbling noise drew her attention to the right side of the property.

A yellow bulldozer rammed a group of pecan trees. Her blood boiled and pulsed in her veins. Dust

rose up and gushed through the open window. The inside of her cramped car was closing in, making it burdensome to breathe as the air supply diminished and heated up. The roof brushed against the top of her head, her knees crammed into the dash, and her elbows pushed against the compacting door. At least, that's what it felt like in her mind. Her preference for wide-open spaces couldn't be more prevalent now. She threw open the door and dashed across the empty street. Her heart raced faster than her legs, but she did her best to keep up. She had to do something.

In seconds, the hulking bulldozer towered over her, a giant metal force to be reckoned with.

No turning back now.

Noise from various pieces of heavy equipment roared in her ears. She grabbed a stick off the ground and hit the bulldozer, snapping the twig in half. She threw it down. The mammoth machine rolled by, and Micara jumped up on the platform, pounding the cabin window with her fist. Her banging sounded like nothing more than insignificant taps, but it drew the attention of the driver, whose eyes grew wide. He pressed the brakes and turned the ignition keys. The machine sputtered to a stop and died with a rush of air. She hopped down and stood with her chin out, hands planted on her hips.

The driver jumped from the cab, heavy brows pulled together, lips set in a tight line. His heavy boots marked the ground when he landed—hard—right next to her. For the first time since she'd stopped her car, fear sent an icy trickle up her spine.

"What in the world are you trying to pull, lady?"

"I... I..." Micara had no words. The man's sweaty, dirt-streaked face was scowling, and every ounce of

bravery left her. What had she intended to accomplish with her impulsive actions, so out of character for her? What a ridiculous spectacle she'd made of herself. Heat burned in her cheeks and in waves over her entire frame.

"You wanna get yourself killed?" With fuzzy brown hair and beard, and two prominent front teeth, the man resembled a furry beaver, but his brown eyes were kind in spite of his fury.

Micara shook her head. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead, and she swiped at it with one sleeve. It was so hot out, and she'd been working in the heat at Gabriel's place all day. She was supposed to be taking a lunch break, and then she'd head right back over there. "I'm sorry. I—I'm really sorry. I don't know what I was thinking." Tears brimmed.

She swung around and hurried to her car.

The man cursed in a deep, gravelly voice. Several beeps and the bulldozer's engine roared to life once again. Smoke escaped the pipes at the top of the machine. A cloud of dust puffed out from underneath. Was that vibrations she felt traveling through the ground or numbness from the shock of what she'd done?

Micara took a moment to calm down, fighting the tears that threatened to fall. She'd not handled that well. Not at all. She dialed Pippy's number with a trembling finger. After several rings, it went to voicemail, and she waited for the beep. "Pippy, it's Micara. Having a moment. Call me when you can. Bye." She eased onto the street toward Gabriel's house.

~\*~

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

The concrete walls of Sweet Home High School, where Garrett taught Senior English and coached football, echoed the disturbing chant. Garrett rounded the corner. He couldn't see through the ring of students, but whatever was going on inside that ring couldn't be good. Pushing past two skinny boys, adrenalin shot through him and sucked the air from his lungs.

Their chanting pounded. “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Inside the circle of teens were two figures in bright clothing. Fists thrashed through the air. He opened his mouth to tell them to break it up, but before he could utter a word a fist slammed into his jaw, and he hit the ground.

“Dude, you hit Coach Hearth!” Garrett heard the voice through the thick haze in front of his eyes and the ringing in his ears.

The two fighters, arms entangled, froze in place and turned.

The haze cleared.

Their eyes widened when they saw him struggling to get up.

Regaining his footing, fury pumped through his veins and he faced them. He grabbed the fighter closest to him and pressed him up against the concrete wall. He wouldn't hurt the kid, but Garrett wanted to make it clear he wouldn't be pushed around.

The boy struggled and turned his red face toward Garrett.

Garrett was stunned. This student wasn't a troublemaker. “Matthew?”

This kid didn't have two dimes to rub together, but Matthew had an exceptional mind and incredible

athletic ability. Now in his senior year, he'd already been scouted by several colleges to play football.

Garrett dropped his hands. He spun in time to spot the other kid jogging out the side door and toward the student parking lot. "Hey!" He took off after the youth, shoving students out of the way. About twenty feet into the chase, the hurting shot through his leg, and he went down. *Not now. Not again.* Pain blossomed like a burst of fireworks and light exploded behind his eyes.

Several students, including Matthew, rushed to his side. The rest ran for help.

All Garrett could do was grip his knee and writhe in agony.

Moments later, heels clicked on the hardwood floor.

"Mr. Hearth, everything's gonna be OK," the principal knelt to the floor beside him. "I'll take you to the hospital in Bishop."

He heard her voice, but the words made little sense. He craned his neck until he made eye contact with Matthew Bertram. "What were you thinking?" His voice was rough. "You could lose your scholarship if you get suspended." Pain threatened to make him hurl his lunch, so he shut his eyes.

"I didn't start it, Coach. And I didn't hit you, either. Austin did." Matthew swiped at a tear. The thought of losing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity would make any man cry. Garrett knew the feeling first-hand. No amount of physical pain could amount to the level of emotional distress he'd felt the day his football career ended.

"Austin Harris? Or Austin McKean?" Helping Garrett stand on his sturdy leg, the principal shifted

into discipline mode.

“McKean.” Garrett was shaky on his uninjured leg, but his memory didn’t waver. He knew the culprit. Austin McKean, the rogue member of his football team. Talented, but bothersome to manage. His attitude had often been a problem both on and off the field. It caused friction between his teammates and coaches.

“Noted.” She lowered him into a wheelchair the nurse brought out. Principal Sparrow Walker was new, but the school nurse had been through this a couple of times over the years. Wheelchair ride to the car and then a trip to the hospital. No doubt, the nurse had informed Principal Walker of Garrett’s...condition. He hated that everyone knew about his injury and that it continued to give him problems. Coach Hearth, the ticking time bomb who needed a campus plan to diffuse the situation in case of emergency.

Principal Walker’s cold gaze bored through him, but he was determined to speak his peace. “Matthew is telling the truth. I hope you’ll cut him some slack.”

“We take fighting seriously at this school.” Then she wheeled him out the door and toward the employee parking.

He wanted to argue, but the burning pain in his leg intensified. He allowed Principal Walker to help him into the back of her car, where he collapsed across the seat and closed his eyes. Thirty minutes to get to the hospital in Bishop, and he was in so much pain he wanted to vomit. He only hoped his stickler-for-the-rules principal drove fast.

~\*~

Tests confirmed that he'd re-injured his knee, though not to the extent of the original injury, and he wouldn't need surgery. A few days of home therapy and a week or two of wearing a leg brace, and he'd be back to normal life. Just what he needed at the start of football season. Keeping up with those high school boys was hard enough under normal circumstances. A brace would make it even more arduous with a limited range of motion and slower pace.

"What did the doctor say?" Sparrow Walker glanced at him, and then whipped her gaze to the road ahead. She had waited at the hospital and offered to take him home.

"Same old thing. Wear a brace and take it easy. It's gonna be a tough task during football season." He paused to adjust his cramped leg. "Speaking of football...I want to talk to you about Matthew Bertram."

"What about him?" Her brow creased.

"He wasn't the one who started the fight."

"I understand he's one of your best athletes, Mr. Hearth, but it doesn't matter who started the fight."

"Matthew is a special case, and you know it, Ms. Walker."

Her grip tightened on the steering wheel. "I can't play favorites just because someone is an outstanding athlete."

Garrett sighed and closed his eyes. He rested his head against the back of the seat before trying again. "You know what kind of student Matthew is, and you know about his scholarship opportunities. Are you really going to ruin his chance of playing college football because another boy jumped him?"