

*Ransomed
Hope*

A CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE

**DEBORAH
PIERSON DILL**

RANSOMED
HOPE

Deborah Pierson Dill

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RANSOMED HOPE

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Dedication

For Pepper, whose hopes for me have never wavered.

Other Titles by Deborah Pierson Dill

Perfect Shelter

Return to Me

Moving On

Prologue

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12

December, seventeen years ago

As if this week hadn't been difficult enough.

Manuel Vega's filthy, worn boots fell heavier than usual on the wide, hand-hewn planks of the foyer floor. He didn't stop to reflect on the bare Christmas tree in the great room, ten feet tall and still not reaching the ceiling. Regardless, the sight raised a fresh wave of grief that went immediately to war with the indignation of being called in from the feeding, summoned like a truant ranch hand to face Brandon and Mr. Cole. Seemed like this could have waited at least another few days. Until the memory of the funeral wasn't quite so immediate.

Manuel stopped at the door, removed his hat, and quickly ran a hand through his hair. What was Brandon up to, anyway? Hard enough to keep the place running on an even keel at this point. No doubt, he was ready to establish his authority in a big way. A deep breath filled Manuel's chest, and then he reached for the knob.

Bright afternoon sunlight poured in through the enormous office windows, just the way Franklin had

liked it. Today the sky was clear, the air crisp, and Manuel could see hilltops for miles from the house's perch atop the highest hill on the ranch.

Franklin had sent the contractor into a fit during the addition of this part of the house by insisting on the removal of windows that had already been installed. The change meant reframing most of two walls to accommodate bigger windows. He'd wanted more light.

Manuel let the memory wash over him along with a peaceful sorrow as he approached the room's center. Franklin had always said that if he had to be cooped up inside an office, he at least wanted to be able to look out his window and see his livestock grazing in the pastures.

"So, when will you be leaving?" True to form, Brandon Tennent wasted no time in getting to his self-absorbed point. He didn't turn from the window when he spoke.

Manuel swallowed down the ache rising in the back of his throat as the image of Franklin standing in the same spot, staring out the same window, dissipated like mist. Manuel glanced from Brandon's back to Cole, the family attorney. "Excuse me?"

"I assume"—Brandon turned from whatever held his attention outside and faced Manuel—"now that my father's gone, and there's no longer anything here for you, you'll finally be moving on."

"What do you mean there's nothing here for me?" He glanced back at the attorney who shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Just that, Manuel. There's nothing here for you now." Brandon took a seat in his father's chair behind the massive oak desk, his contempt nearly tangible.

"You probably think you're in the will, am I right?"

Manuel stood silently. Why wouldn't he be named in the will? This was his home. He may be on the payroll, but Franklin Tennent had been his legal guardian until he'd turned eighteen, and in the four years since then had treated him as nothing less than family.

"Well, you're wrong." Brandon actually smiled, seeming to take a great deal of pleasure in the revelation.

Manuel took a step back and instinctively turned to Mr. Cole. "I...I'm not in the will?"

"The will is twenty-five years old." Cole looked down. "It was drawn up the year Brandon was born. Brandon is the only beneficiary."

Manuel hated the confusion that must have registered plainly on his face as he glanced from the attorney back to Brandon. "What about Ashley?"

"What *about* Ashley?" Brandon snapped the question back at him. "There's *nothing* here for you. Least of all, Ashley. Do you think my sister is love-struck enough to marry a man with nothing? She may be young and irrational where you're concerned, but she's not stupid. Where would you have her live, Manuel? Your pickup? Or that pile of rocks Dad gave you that you and she like to call a house?"

Manuel turned to Mr. Cole. "Does Brandon get the whole estate and she gets nothing?"

"I'll make sure Ashley's taken care of." Brandon leaned forward in his chair. "She's not your concern."

"How?" Manuel held his temper tightly in check, but his disdain could not be restrained. "We all know you wouldn't hesitate to cheat your own sister if you thought you could get away with it." He turned back

to Cole. "This isn't right. If the whole estate goes to him, he'll gamble it away within a few years' time. A will can be contested, right? We can go in front of a judge and fight it, can't we?"

"Who is *we*?" Brandon shot up out of the chair.

"Me and Ashley." Manuel stepped toward Brandon, but the attorney rose to intercept him before he could reach the desk.

"You could. But it would be tied up in court for years. And ultimately a judge would end up deciding who got what." Cole's grip on Manuel's arm loosened hesitantly. "Everything could be ordered sold and the money split evenly. And, Manuel, you would probably still walk away empty handed."

Manuel glanced back at Brandon, who settled into Franklin's leather chair, the picture of smug satisfaction.

"Then she really would have nothing, wouldn't she?" Brandon sounded almost pleased by that idea.

Not exactly nothing. She'd have half of a sizeable estate. Even after attorney fees and court costs, it would be plenty for them to start over. But this ranch had been in her family for five generations. To have a judge order the property sold because Manuel had insisted on contesting something that wasn't rightfully his in the first place...it wouldn't be right.

Mr. Cole tucked a file folder into his briefcase, snapped it shut, and laid a sympathetic hand on Manuel's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son. I'll leave you two to discuss this."

Manuel took a deep breath, struggling for calm. "No point in that. I guess I'll get back to work."

"Uh, no." Brandon eased further back in his chair and smiled again. "I'm letting you go. Consider it a

nudge from the nest.”

“Letting me go? I’m not just some hired hand. I’m family.”

Brandon laughed.

Manuel shot a desperate look at Mr. Cole, who pressed his mouth into a grim line and shook his head.

Brandon’s laughter faded and his features hardened. “You have until six o’clock tonight to clear out.”

The clear late-afternoon stood in stark contrast to the emotions churning inside her. Ashley Tennent pushed a wayward strand of hair behind one ear and sighed as a pair of doves called mournfully to each other in the distance. The December air was perfect: crisp and clean, and getting cooler as the sun crept closer to the horizon. But this Christmas would go down as the worst ever. She pulled her sweater closed tighter, squeezing her eyes shut against the lingering image of the bare Christmas tree in the great room.

Only a week ago they’d carried that tree inside. And no sooner had they tightened the screws on the stand than Daddy had collapsed onto the floor beside it. Now he was gone, and she couldn’t hang the decorations. Maybe Manuel would help her drag the thing back out today, so it wouldn’t stand there reminding her. She would ask, but he wouldn’t remove the tree. He would insist that the decorations go up like normal so they could celebrate Christmas as her father would have done. And he would be right.

Ashley opened her eyes as the gravel-crunching sound of an approaching truck silenced the cooing

doves. She fixed her gaze on the deserted limestone house in the distance—her favorite place. The house her great, great grandfather had built a hundred and thirty some odd years ago, still stood nestled among sprawling live oaks that were even older than the house. Two stone chimneys buttressed either end, while a rusted tin roof covered the rest. It was a testament to the pioneers in her lineage who made their way west with the whole wide world in front of them.

She had always hoped her father would give the old place to her. Instead, he'd given the limestone house, along with the original hundred acres of the Ransom Oaks Ranch, to Manuel. It was just as well. Someday they'd fix up the place together and make it their home.

The truck chewing up the road slowed to a stop, and Manuel stepped out and came to stand beside her, his warmth drawing her into the comfort of his arms like a magnet.

"You OK?"

She nodded and burrowed into his embrace, grief diminishing slightly. "Better than yesterday. Mr. Cole said something that helped a little."

"What did he say?" The vibration of his quiet voice deep in his chest was a comfort.

"He said that nothing would ever be the same again." She turned her head so she was looking at the house in the distance. "Like after Mama died. Life can never go back to the way it was before. But he said we would work through the grief and find a new normal."

She closed her eyes and let the idea settle into her heart, wondering what life might look like this time next year. She peered again at the old house. Maybe

they would be married by then, and that would be their home. Daddy had wanted them to wait until she was twenty. But with him gone, what would be the point?

Manuel's chest swelled with a deep breath of the crisp air. "I have to go."

"Where?"

"Ashley." The weight of his tone made her look up at him. "I'm leaving."

She took a step back, cold rushing between them and chilling her in a way that nearly stole her breath. "What?"

"Brandon is sending me away."

"Brandon can't send you away."

"He can. He did. And I'm leaving."

Her mind reeled as with a blow. He couldn't leave. Where would he go? What about all their plans? What would she do without him? "When?" The word came out on a whisper as her voice failed.

"Now. My truck is packed, and I'm headed out."

"Manuel, no. You can't. We need you. I need you. Come back to the house with me and we'll sort this out. We'll talk to Mr. Cole. There has to be something—"

His hopeless, anxious expression silenced her. He shook his head and looked away, teeth bearing down on his bottom lip as he swallowed hard.

She reached out and pulled him close again. "You could stay there." She turned to the house in the distance. "That place is yours."

He cleared his throat. "That place over there?" A gentle smile emerged. "With the rusted out roof? And the skunks under the porch? You want me to live there?"

"We can fix it."

He shook his head. "Ash, I don't have a job. And Brandon isn't going to give me an allowance to live on. And he's not gonna let me work or live here anymore, either."

"You can get a job in town, and I'll help you with the house..." She let her voice trail off. Making that house livable would take far more money than any job in town would offer. But the thought of him leaving frightened her in a way she'd never experienced. What if he never returned? Something in her chest squeezed tight at the thought. "Manuel, please don't go."

"It's not up to me." He raised a hand and brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "I'm going into town tonight. I have a little saved up. I'll stay there for a while, regroup. Make a little money. Then I'll be back."

"When?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Soon." He kissed her softly. "But I'll be back. OK? I'll be back."

1

December, seventeen years later

The front door slammed behind Ashley, muffling the sound of Brandon's bellowing, though not drowning it out completely. He'd already had so much to drink since he got home this afternoon he was barely lucid. Figuring out what he was ranting about—what he was accusing her of—took some time and almost more energy than she possessed on her best days. But the source of his wrath finally came spewing out as he wailed the one word that embodied all that had ever been wrong with his life.

Manuel.

"Are you the reason he's here?" Brandon's irate accusations pursued Ashley as she pulled on her coat and bounded down the front porch steps to her truck, keys in hand.

"Did you call him to come back and save us? That pile of rubble has been under construction for the past year, but has he called you once? He's down there moving in right now, and it doesn't look like you even knew about it. Do you think he still cares anything about you after all this time?" Ordinarily, she wouldn't believe a word he said. Her brother had probably destroyed so many brain cells on his binges she might attribute his ramblings to drunken hallucinations. But he seemed so certain. Manuel was there at the old

house. And so was a moving van. And they were off-loading furnishings and boxes as if someone was moving in.

She climbed into the pickup and started the engine, throwing the gear shift into drive and steering towards the road without thinking. An ache rose up in the back of her throat and she swallowed it down, focusing instead on how the road, which should have been graded years ago, jostled her in the cab. She couldn't remember the last time she cried, and she resisted the present urge desperately. But emotion welled up before she could get a handle on it.

"God, help me," she whispered. "What if it is him? After all these years. What do I do?"

Slap him.

Ashley laughed regretfully. God would never prompt her to violence, but her own angry, first impulse might. Her ironic laughter faded as the house came into view. A moving van was backed up to the newly refurbished front porch and two uniformed men unloaded a brown leather sofa. Someone was moving in.

She stopped the truck at the gate to the old place and stared. It had to be him. Unless he'd sold the place. And that wouldn't make any sense. Not given all the money the property must be making him now.

Ten years ago the drill rigs had gone up, and then they'd come down leaving the steel Christmas trees in their place, signifying good, gas-producing wells—at least a dozen of them. That development had coincided with Brandon's sudden steep descent to the bottom of the vice pit in which he remained to this day.

Ten years. And those rigs had gone up seven years after Manuel left. And still she'd had no word from

him. Now he was moving into his house, which had been beautifully restored in the past year. She'd once asked a contractor on the job site if there was some way she could contact the owner. With an apology, he'd said no, he wasn't free to give out that information—as if he'd been instructed specifically not to do so.

Ashley stepped out of her truck into the blustery, overcast early-December afternoon. She raised a hand to her mouth and scanned the house, the moving van, the activity on the front porch. Movers continued to unload furniture and box after box, carrying them inside, coming back out for more.

Then she saw him. At least, she thought she saw him. She squinted, trying to bring him better into focus.

He exchanged a few words with a worker, then pressed his phone to his ear and paced to the edge of the porch. The man whose presence commanded every last strand of her attention definitely wasn't the twenty-two year old cowboy who had departed seventeen years ago, but it was Manuel. Even from this distance, there was no mistaking him. Ashley stepped to the fence and curled her fingers around the top wire. A warm ember of hope stirred in her heart. He'd promised to come back, and although she'd always feared he wouldn't, now he had.

Manuel turned and paced the whole length of the front porch as he talked. His dark trousers and deep blue button-down shirt, tailored to perfection, spoke of money and position. She glanced down at her faded and frayed jeans, at the dingy t-shirt and worn out boots. She'd set the mop in her hands aside and immediately forgotten it when Brandon had come in

hollering at her, but evidence of the chore remained in the form of wet patches on her clothes, a sloppy ponytail, and rough, red skin on her hands. A sudden surge of shame prompted her to crawl back into her truck and drive away before he saw her. But she stood, rooted to the spot, unable to turn away.

Manuel turned and paced halfway across again, a wide smile lighting his features and breaking her heart wide open. He ended the call and his soft smile lingered. Then he glanced in her direction, freezing when he noticed her. For a long moment he simply stood there, his smile fading. Then he turned and walked into the house.

Manuel slipped the phone into his pocket and ran a hand through his hair. A quick glance out the front window assured him his eyes had not deceived. She wasn't a figment of his imagination. Ashley.

She climbed into a wreck of an old pickup and pulled the door closed. She sat for a moment staring at the house, then she turned the truck around and drove up the hill toward Franklin's house—Brandon's house.

He expelled a heavy breath and examined his trembling hands. Maybe he wasn't as prepared for this as he thought. He sat, and the cool leather upholstery of the sofa chilled him as he surveyed the state of the living room. His contractor had done a beautiful job adding every modern amenity while preserving the integrity and character of the house's architecture. Original plank floors glowed with a warm new finish. Stone walls encased modern windows. He glanced back out the front, his gaze lingering on the fence

beside which she'd stood.

Ashley would appreciate that the granite countertops had been quarried nearby. The fireplace was in perfect working order, and there was even some cord wood stacked on the hearth. She would like that, too.

Manuel rose to put a few pieces into the iron grate and open the flue. He wadded a scrap of newsprint from a nearby box and used it as tinder to get the fire started. Maybe that would fend off the chill from the open front door. He rose to his feet and glanced around again.

He had rebuilt this place with her in mind, knowing she'd never live here. She'd been married for twelve years now. The news of her expensive, ostentatious wedding had nearly flattened him. He didn't recall exactly how he'd rebounded. But he had.

Manuel took a poker from the hearth and prodded the logs as the tinder did its work. Maybe all this was his fault. When he left here, he'd been so sure Franklin's name would open every door. But it didn't open any. And Manuel had been worse off in those first years than he had been before his foster father had taken him in. He'd ended up not only broke, but destitute. He couldn't face her.

Then she'd gotten married. That same month, the energy company had started exploring the possibility of drilling on the hundred acres Franklin had given him, mineral rights and all. Then his circumstances turned completely around, and he'd been ascending to this point ever since.

He breathed deeply and recommitted to his plan.

He was totally prepared for this. Ashley could stand out at his gate looking as forlorn as she pleased,