



*Ransomed
Trust*

**DEBORAH
PIERSON DILL**

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RANSOMED TRUST

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Dedication

For my Lord.

Praise

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Ransomed Hope

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"Hope, fear, wistfulness and faith - all four of these elements create the tapestry of a story that is sure to be on your keeper shelf." ~ Marianne Evans, author

Prologue

The familiarity of the place unsettled him.

Brandon Tennent set his duffel bag just inside the front door and surveyed the great room, feeling for one chest-tightening moment as if he'd never been gone and nothing had changed. Hard as he tried to keep his attention focused on the evidence of remodeling in progress, his gaze nonetheless drifted to the corner in which the liquor cabinet stood.

Only it didn't stand there now. Nothing did. All the furniture had been pushed to the center and covered with drop cloths. Scaffolding soared to the ceiling fifteen feet above, and the walls gleamed with a clean, white coat of primer. Had to be primer because, given an option, his sister, Ashley, would never paint a wall white. And now, finally, she had a few options.

The disconcerting current of familiarity tugged at him. So different was his new perspective, he hadn't expected the ranch to feel much like home. He had a sense of pleasure at returning, and he'd lost sleep wondering if that might be the biggest challenge yet. Already he could feel a particular thirst growing—one that was unique to this place...this house.

He'd talked through this scenario with his counselor. At some point the deeply entrenched habits formed here would exert their powerful force. But he hadn't expected the pull to come within seconds of walking into the house.

There was little chance of accessing the enshrouded liquor cabinet, and even less chance that it would still contain something to quench the constant thirst.

Still...he lifted an edge of the canvas. It might be worth a look. But...no. He pulled his hand back, dropping the cloth like a hot wire. One hundred fourteen days. That's how long he'd been sober. With the Lord's help, tomorrow would be one hundred fifteen.

"Brandon?" Ashley emerged from the kitchen and stood staring, her face clearly expressing shock.

Four months had passed since she'd last seen him...since he'd left for the treatment facility in Dallas. Brandon glanced down at the new pair of dark trousers he wore, the crisp white shirt open at the collar, long sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He had taken up running as a way of coping with his drive to drink, channeling the energy that had once been used to find a way—any way—to satisfy the addiction into something at least beneficial, if not productive. He had run enough to shed about thirty pounds and transform his formerly soft flesh into lean, strong muscle.

"Hi, Ashley." His voice was barely there when he tried to say her name. He cleared his throat. "How are you?"

"I'm good." She took a few steps. "How are you?"

The loaded question made him smile, and he closed the distance between them, pulling her into an embrace. "I'm good. Really, truly good."

Her arms closed around him cautiously, tentatively, and an ache rose to his throat as he recalled their last embrace, a desperate farewell just before he'd walked out of this house on his way back to rehab.

Would he make it more than two weeks this time?

She must be wondering. She wasn't the only one.

He let her go, and she stepped back.

"My word, Brandon. You look ten years younger."

She smiled, her eyes misting as she pressed a cool hand to his cheek. "You look healthy. And your hair is so short."

He nodded, ran a hand over the top of his closely cropped head, and nodded towards the scaffolding. "I see you've got some changes of your own going on here."

She gave him a sly smile as a twinkle replaced the uncertainty in her eyes. "Just a little painting to start with." She glanced up, apparently at the tall steel and wood platform. "I told Manuel I could save some money by doing it myself, but he insisted on hiring someone."

Brandon nodded again. There was no longer any need for her to economize so strictly, now that Manuel was in charge of things.

"Don't worry, though. I haven't touched your room, other than replacing the carpet."

There was a lightness in her manner. Peace and security had lifted her burden, and the resulting joy was plain to see.

All it took to achieve such a positive change was his departure. But now he was back, and what could he possibly offer?

Manuel had come to Dallas to check on him a couple of months ago. During that visit Brandon had sworn to do whatever it took to atone for everything he'd done—for driving Manuel away with nothing so many years ago, for ruining the ranch financially as well as functionally, for not providing for the needs of

his sister, for letting his addiction become the driving force behind everything he did. Better to live as a servant in his own father's house than to sleep with the pigs.

But he wasn't the prodigal son. His father had been dead for nearly two decades. And Manuel wasn't really his brother. Brandon had no rights here.

But soon, when she and Manuel were married, Ashley would. The ranch would be hers. It should have been hers in the first place.

The front door swung open, ushering in the cool, mid-morning breeze and filling the great room with even more light.

Manuel crossed the room, caught Ashley in his arms and kissed her.

"He looks pretty good, huh?" Manuel said, glancing at Brandon.

Ashley beamed and nodded.

"Are you up to riding out with me so I can show you what we've done and what we've got planned? Or do you need to settle in first?" Manuel asked.

Brandon shook his head. "Just let me drop my bag in my room, and then you can show me around."

"I'll meet you at the truck."

Brandon retrieved his duffel bag and turned for the hall that led to his room, but Ashley's sudden laughter bounced off the bare walls and filled the room.

Manuel had pulled her into his arms and nuzzled her neck while she scrunched up her shoulders against the playful onslaught.

After a moment, she sighed and rested her head against his shoulder, seeming to relish the protection in his embrace. She was happy, and so was Manuel.

Everything here was different now, and it wasn't only the clean, white primer that brightened the atmosphere.

Brandon knew he would never, no matter how hard he worked, ever deserve the second chance they both had given him. But he would try. Every day, from now on, he would do his best to be worthy of it.

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One year later

Was it possible he'd actually gone away?

Lucy hooked the kitchen window curtain with one finger and cautiously pulled it aside, peeking out at the breezeway which led to her apartment door. She didn't see him lurking in his usual spot on the landing of the stairs. But that didn't mean he wasn't lurking elsewhere. She drew in a breath and let the fabric fall back into place as memory replayed the words of the police officer who came out two weeks ago.

Nothing they could do, he'd said. Standing around outside wasn't illegal. Especially since the lurker apparently lived in the same apartment complex.

Lucy put away the few dishes that were in the drain rack, and then peeked out the window again.

Clean cut and decently dressed, he never made any threats; he politely asked how she was and offered to carry her grocery bags. But every day he lurked around the stairs and the breezeway watching her door, waiting for her to step outside. Always asking where she was going, as if it concerned him.

She didn't even know his name.

But somehow, he knew hers.

If she was going to leave, now would be the time. But where would she go? Visiting hours at the nursing home would be over in an hour. She could go there

and sit beside her mother until the nurse asked her to leave. But every visit to her mother was more difficult than the last, compounding grief upon stress that the most important person in her life didn't recognize her anymore. Still, it would be somewhere to go. And listening to her mom tell stories of their life together as if she were speaking to a stranger was preferable to remaining under surveillance here, wondering if the stalker outside would choose tonight to finally do something illegal.

Lucy grabbed her purse and pulled the front door open, stepping out with more confidence than she felt. She locked the door, walked to the stairs and ran right into him.

Large hands gripped her shoulders, seemingly to steady her. "Are you headed somewhere, Lucy?"

Her heart stopped for an instant, and a jolt of adrenaline shot through, making her fingers tingle. But she kept her composure, backing out of his grasp and stepping around him.

He followed.

"No place special." Her breath caught and her voice faltered as she faced him. She cleared her throat. "Just out."

"Oh." He looked her over from head to toe.

It made her feel exposed, and she pulled her shoulder bag in front of her as if it could offer some protection.

"Well, you look really nice for going no place special."

"Thanks," she murmured, glancing quickly down at the plain knit top and knee-length floral skirt she wore—the clothes she'd worn to work, but that he seemed to interpret as provocative. The beaded flip-

flops would slow her down if she needed to run. But now that she was outside, she didn't dare go back in. He could push his way into her apartment too easily. No, she'd take her chances out here.

She turned for the steps and hurried down, her footsteps falling as hard on the steel beneath them as the heart beat in her chest. The keyless entry remote had her powder blue Beetle unlocked in time for her to pull the door open and slide in without delay. She tossed her purse on the passenger seat, pulled the door closed, and locked it immediately. A shaky relieved sigh slipped out as she thrust the key into the ignition and placed trembling hands on the steering wheel.

The man stood on the upper breezeway, leaning against the rail, smiling at her. He laughed as she started the engine and pulled out of her parking space. Clearly, he enjoyed frightening her, probably all the more so because it wasn't illegal enough for anyone to stop him.

Lucy drove to the highway and took the on-ramp, her heart rate slowing and thoughts churning. Even if she went to visit her mother, she'd have to leave within the hour. And she absolutely could not go back to her apartment tonight.

Stalker Man had never been so confrontational. He had never gone so far as to touch her. And if he was waiting for her when she returned—which he always was—there was no telling what might happen.

She could check into a hotel for the night, but some irrational part of her still feared he'd find her and be waiting outside the door when she awoke in the morning. She wanted to be out of this town. Someplace remote. So she drove. The next town was about fifty miles away. The gas gauge said she had half a tank. It

should get her that far.

Thirty minutes later the sunset had given way to dusky evening. Her headlights illuminated a sign advertising guestrooms at the Ransom Oaks Ranch. Turn at the next junction, it read, then go twelve miles. That sounded even more remote than the next town. So when the turn came, she took it.

“Lord, please let there be a vacancy,” she whispered.

The road, though well graded, was not paved, so she let up on the accelerator. Twenty minutes later, just about the time she was certain she was lost, a big house with glowing windows came into view at the top of the hill. The road ended in a circular drive.

Lucy cut the engine and took in the sight as she stepped out of the car. The limestone and timber façade seemed to rise naturally from the ground like a fortress. The covered front porch spanned the entire width of the house. Porch lights glowed, beckoning her to sit and relax in one of the Shaker-style rockers painted robin’s egg blue, or the cushioned porch swing at the far end. Maybe she’d be able to do that in the morning, just sit outside with a cup of coffee or tea. No worries, no fear.

She reached for her purse and then pulled an overnight bag from behind the driver’s seat. The bag was stocked with a few necessities: a change of clothes, nightgown, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, soap. She’d put it in the car two weeks ago, after the police had done nothing to resolve the danger from the stalker. She’d packed it in case she needed to make a quick getaway.

There was no moon tonight, and the Milky Way glistened above like she’d never seen before, pulling a

soft gasp from her and promising peace.

Yes, this would do nicely for the night. He couldn't possibly find her here.

Brandon glanced at the microwave clock when the doorbell rang. Eight thirty. There were no reservations for tonight, and he wasn't expecting anyone.

Ashley and Manuel always used the back door. The ranch was too far from civilization for drop-in visitors, especially at this hour.

He turned the tap off and patted his hands dry on a towel. Plans for a hot shower and early bedtime ebbed away, and irritation nagged at a corner of his mind. He and Manuel had barely made a decent start on building the new fence, and Brandon's chest and shoulders ached from the day's labor. His bed was what he wanted most right now. But he headed for the door and pulled it open to find a woman waiting on the front porch.

A beautiful woman. She pushed a loose strand of hair behind one ear, drew the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth, and shifted an overnight bag from one hand to the other.

The irritation vanished.

"I'm sorry. I don't have a reservation." She smiled ruefully. "But I'm hoping you have a vacancy for the night."

Brandon pulled the door open wide and stepped aside. "We're completely empty until Friday. You can have your choice of rooms."

She stepped inside and took in the great room with wide eyes.

He pushed the door closed, a smile emerging at her reaction to the room. The house's scale was something he had always taken for granted. But, observed now, through the eyes of a complete stranger, it was fairly impressive.

She turned to face him.

"So, what brings you to the Ransom Oaks?"

"I saw your sign on the highway." She seemed to really see him for the first time. Her curious expression shuttered suddenly behind watchfulness. She glanced around as if looking for something.

An escape route, maybe?

"I thought it sounded like a nice place to stop for the night."

Brandon crossed to the large rolltop desk Ashley had found to house room keys and the reservation book. "Well, let's get you checked in. Can I have your name and address?"

"Lucy Kramer..."

When she didn't continue he glanced up at her. The color had drained from her face and she bit down on her bottom lip and gnawed it. He could see her working furiously to manufacture details, which made him think that Lucy Kramer probably wasn't her real name. Or maybe it was and it just slipped out when she intended to give him a fake one.

"Do you really need my address?"

"Um..." Brandon shook his head.

Lucy Kramer was her real name. She clearly did not want to lie.

"I guess not, if you don't mind not being on our mailing list. How about an email address?"

She shook her head and her teeth bore down on her bottom lip again.

"Can you tell me what town you're from, at least? We just like to keep a record of where our guests come from. My sister envisions a big map on the wall with a pin stuck in the hometown of everyone who stays with us."

She raised her hand to her mouth and bit down on her thumbnail, considering. "Lauretta," she said, finally.

Brandon made a note of it, fighting the smile that tried to form. "You didn't make it very far."

Lucy dropped her hand and smiled, seeming to relax slightly. "I wasn't aiming to go *very* far. Just...away."

She had a pretty smile and big, jade-green eyes. Hair the color of honey and very fair skin that had an almost translucent quality. He was staring. Brandon blinked and glanced back at the reservation book. "I'm Brandon, by the way. Brandon Tennent."

"Do you own the ranch?"

Brandon was glad she couldn't see his face when she asked the question. Maybe she wouldn't notice the deflation that subject still caused in his soul. He shook his head and reached for the book, flipping the cover closed. "No. My brother-in-law and sister are the owners."

"Oh." Her voice brightened. That seemed to please her. "Are they here?"

"No." Brandon glanced up at her. "They live in the little stone house down the road there. You passed it on your way up the hill."

Her smile faded and she pulled her purse in front of her like a shield. She even took a step backward. "Are you the only one here?"

"Aside from you, yes."

Her face blanched and she looked away.

"Is that a problem? I can text my sister and have her come up if that would make you feel better."

She swallowed hard. "No, it's fine. Do you need a credit card?"

Brandon pulled the phone from his pocket and sent a quick text to Ashley. This girl was clearly spooked. "You know what? We can settle all that when you're ready to check out."

The phone gave a shuddering buzz as Ashley's return text lit the screen. She was on her way.

"You're safe here, Lucy." Brandon said.

Lucy's eyes filled. "Thank you."

A moment later, he heard the back door open.

Ashley emerged from the kitchen.

"This is my sister, Ashley." He met his sister's puzzled expression. "Ashley, this is Lucy Kramer. I believe she'll be needing to stay a few days."

Lucy nodded, a tear trailing down her cheek. She swiped it away with her fingertips and turned to Ashley.

"Did Brandon get you registered?" Ashley shot him a look.

"Yes." Brandon said. "I think I got everything we need."

"All right, then." Ashley picked up the woman's bag and led her down the hall towards the guestrooms. "Let's get you settled."

When Ashley realized the lack of information he'd gathered from Miss Lucy, she would probably feel the need to go over with him, yet again, the procedure for checking a guest in. But he'd hold his tongue and let her. Whatever Lucy was running from had left her on guard and with a need to control something—