

THEN HAVE THEM MAKE A SANCTUARY FOR ME,  
AND I WILL DWELL AMONG THEM.

Exodus 25:8

MERRY K. STAHEL

*Christmas*  
*Sanctuary*



# Christmas Sanctuary

Merry K. Stahel

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## **Christmas Sanctuary**

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## Dedication

For my beloved Pa, Ken Kesner. Thanks for making a difference in my life. I love you.



## Praise for Merry K. Stahel

### *Faith:*

Merry K. Stahel has written an emotionally charged book...Stahel created a fabulous storyline that is appropriate for any age reader. I highly recommend this book. She is definitely on my "must-read" list. Kudos, Mr. Stahel!

~ Brenda Talley, Romance Studio

Stahel's delightful characterizations...engage and enchant the reader who finds herself equally enthralled with the contemporary love story just as she was the ancient one between Ruth and Boaz.

~ Crystal, Kwips & Kritiques

### *Child of My Heart:*

Ms. Stahel has written a book with complex issues with such emotion that the reader can't help but feel a close bond with the characters in this story...

~ Val, You Gotta Read Reviews

LOVED IT!!! This is one of those little numbers that you read and when you get to the end you just want to start all over again...A total winner.

~ Romance Reader, Seriously Reviewed







# 1

“Oh, no.” Dea felt the thud of her battered heart as it dropped into her empty stomach.

“What is it, Mommy?” Garrett struggled to unclip his seatbelt, sitting up to peek over the dashboard. “Oh. It’s a church.”

A church.

She peered at the address and matched it to the sign propped against a huge live oak. 1225 North Street. David, Oklahoma. A phone number and the last pastor’s name, Jesse McTavish, was printed beneath it. And underneath that, a Bible verse. Dea stared at the verse.

*“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Exodus 25:8.”*

Sanctuary.

She and Garrett definitely needed that.

When she’d stopped in town to get groceries and ask directions, the clerk hadn’t mentioned the building was a church—she had, however, given Dea the scoop on the last occupant of their future home.

“A curmudgeonly hermit with a grudge. Been that way since his wife and son died a while back. Moved out. Never changed the mailbox or the sign...Lost his faith, that one.”

Dea hadn’t paid much attention. She hadn’t known what sign needed changing, but now it was clear. Still she had no intention of letting some bad-

tempered old man influence her decision. He wasn't the first to lose his faith or the last.

She'd come too far.

But, dear Lord, a church?

And it was out in the middle of nowhere. The parking lot next to it was paved, but weeds grew in cracks in the pavement.

An *abandoned* church.

What had Aunt Amelia been thinking to leave Dea a church? And the eighty acres surrounding it. Dea's gaze settled on the little wrought iron fence off to one side...just great. A cemetery, too!

"If we fix it up, Mommy," —Garrett's small voice was placating—"and paint that top thing, maybe we can make it pretty again."

She looked at the steeple. The church was made of brick, but the wooden eaves and the steeple did need a new coat of paint.

"And pull the weeds," Dea muttered, feeling a sense of anger and betrayal. She didn't have money to buy paint.

"And mow the grass. And fix the sign." Garrett's voice was warming to the theme.

"Oh, honey."

Immediately, his face fell, and he huddled in. His beautiful blue eyes filled with the hopelessness that had dogged them for the last year.

She felt like a heel. Even if she had nothing left in her so-called heart, did she have the right to ruin it for Garrett?

"It will be a lot of work, honey." She ruffled his hair. "We'll have to slave to make it look nice."

"But we can do it, Mommy." Garrett straightened, the hope in his eyes shining bright.

Dea's heart crumbled. She wondered how he could be so trusting. She'd done nothing to deserve his trust. How could he still hope? Was it the innocence only a child could feel? She strained to hide her dismal thoughts.

"The lady said the house was in back." The excitement in his voice was almost catching.

Almost.

Dea turned the car and followed the weed-choked driveway to the back of the church. The now-familiar glimmer of fear rose again.

There was no house. Only a huge barn with a corral and the remains of a garden to the right of it. Another large building with broken windows looked like a dormitory. Was that the house?

To the right was another garden. This one had a wild tangle of flowers that needed pruning. A two-car garage bordered the final line of the L-shaped back yard. Above the garage was what looked like an apartment or attic. A shutter hung loose at one of the several broken windows. Was that the house? She looked over the rolling pasture and saw nothing else.

Her hand shook as she reached for the door handle. Garrett was already hopping out. He didn't seem to notice there was no house.

"Look, Mommy! The church has back doors!" He giggled as he bounced up the three stone steps. "What kind of church needs a back door?"

*One where the sinners could run out and hide from their fellow man.* She knew too much about sin. And about hiding.

"Come on, Mommy!" Garrett was tugging at the door.

It took three tries to get the right key. Her mouth

dropped open in surprise as she opened the door.

The house *was* behind the church.

Literally.

Attached to it.

No way to escape. No matter what she did, she would always be in church. Her aunt would get her way at last.

*Oh, Lord, please don't do this to me.*

"Mommy! I want this bedroom!" Garrett's voice snapped back her attention.

She forced her feet to move through the living room—past the broken chair that was the only furniture, past the gleaming oak and tile fireplace that she would have admired in normal circumstances, and into a fully furnished little boy's room. The border paper had tractors, backhoes and trucks on it. Bright blue walls set off the cheerful green of the furniture. Yellow accented the shelves. The bunk bed had red bedspreads and blue poles. Two bean bags were stationed in a corner, one red, and one blue. Crayon colors for a little boy.

Dea looked around in amazement.

While Garrett explored the closet she went quickly down the hall looking into the two other bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, great room and what was obviously meant to be the pastor's study. No other furnishings besides the broken chair. And yet, this fully furnished room made for a little boy.

Dea wondered who her benefactor was. No one knew she was coming did they? The lawyer was from Stillwater, and he'd mailed Aunt Amelia's Will, a letter and the keys. She pulled the letter out to re-read it. Maybe she'd missed something.

## Christmas Sanctuary

*Dearest Dea,*

*If you're reading this then it means I've passed on. There isn't much left of anything. I sold what furniture I could, stored the rest in the barn, and came to live here at Cimarron Oaks. I kept the property though, and have passed it on to you since Laceys have lived on this land since the original Land Run.*

*All the buildings belong to the Laceys. The big one was originally an orphanage. Then it became a boarding house and later a bunkhouse when we used to run cattle and had a few cowboys around. The space over the garage was originally the ranch foreman's apartment. It's all empty now, Dea. Empty of the laughter, of the love that used to be here. Fill it again, my dear niece. Fill it with love and laughter.*

*Think of it as a second chance. That's what I did. And I got your Uncle Owen because of it. This is where your mother and I met Owen and your Dad. We never got a chance to come back to live because Owen went ministering other places. But it has always been ours.*

*I know you're troubled. I saw it in your eyes when you last came to visit. Oh, Dea, I wish for you...well, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride as they say. I'll say a prayer for you. Take this place. Think of it as a Christmas present, this house. Make it mean something to you. Give Garrett roots. Bring him here and remember a lot of Laceys have lived and loved here. You'll be safe here. And Dea...keep God and hope in your heart. Only good can come from it. God Bless you, always.*

*Love, Aunt Amelia*

*A second chance.*

Aunt Amelia was aware of Dea's life crumbling away. How had the woman known they weren't safe? How many people had seen and known and felt pity?

And now Dea felt nothing. Well, almost nothing. Fear ate at her daily and was a constant companion. But with Aunt Amelia's legacy, maybe the fear would go away.

*A Christmas present.* Dea remembered Christmases with Aunt Amelia when her own parents were alive. But not here. Uncle Owen was a minister, and they'd lived other places while Dea was growing up. They'd shared every Christmas since Dea could remember. Owen and Dea's father were twins and the two women they'd married were sisters. But now they were all gone.

"Mommy can I go look outside?" Garrett's happy tone dissolved her depressing thoughts.

"Yes, you can." Dea looked at her little son, seeing the bright smile and feeling the knife twist in her gut. What kind of mother let her son live in fear?

Her kind.

Dea stopped the thought. No more self-pity. No more recriminations. Life was starting over now. Garrett could be happy. He could play outside without fear.

"I like this place, Mommy," Garrett said shyly. "Is it really all ours?"

"It's really all ours." Dea took a shaky breath. "You stay away from the road, OK? And just do a little exploring. It's getting dark. I'll start unpacking the car and see about dinner."

"OK!" Garrett punched the air and shot out the door.

Dea looked around one more time and then sent a small thought up to Aunt Amelia and God.

*Keep us safe.*

She was on the fourth trip from the car when

Garrett popped into the kitchen.

"There's a donkey in the graveyard."

"They buried a donkey in the cemetery?" Dea looked him in consternation. "And how do you know it's a donkey?"

"No!" Garrett started laughing.

Dea looked on in shocked amazement. Garrett hadn't given that belly-rolling-from-the-gut laugh in over a year.

"It's a live donkey," Garrett finally sputtered.

"A live donkey?" Dea let the bewilderment wash over her. Was he getting sick again? Delusional? Was he talking to his imaginary friend Alex and making up stories again?

"Yes." He nodded. "He's nice."

"How do you know?"

"I petted him." Garrett smiled, and Dea shook herself mentally. It was a real smile. The delight in his eyes sparkled. She'd not seen it in quite a while.

"The chicken wouldn't let me pet her, though."

"The chicken?" She said it faintly, sure now he was getting sick. She couldn't afford a doctor right now. Or medications. The ever-present fear clawed in her brain.

"Yes. Her name is Mary."

*OK. Time out.*

Garrett had obviously eaten something that did not agree with his delicate system. Her six-year-old son was delusional enough to believe someone named chickens. She wondered if there was a doctor in David, Oklahoma, population 457.

"I named her that because she's riding on the donkey's back."

That did it. She'd make the doctor look at Garrett,

and she'd figure out the payments later. Fear was blooming again. She couldn't lose Garrett. He was too precious.

"The donkey's name is Nat...handle."

"Garrett, I think maybe we better go see the doctor." Dea put a hand to his forehead. She wasn't sure if she should pray he was delusional because of a fever, or not. Maybe the stress of the last year had caused Garrett's mind to finally snap. With an imaginary friend, some doctors thought Garrett already had a form of mental illness.

"OK, but will you come see the donkey first?"

"Garrett..."

"Please, Mommy?"

He rarely appealed to her for anything; Dea's heart caved.

\*\*\*\*

Dea stood there with her mouth hanging open.

There was a donkey in the graveyard.

With a chicken on its back.

The donkey was chomping placidly on the grass near a leaning headstone. It was totally unconcerned that the little brown hen was settled as if she was in a nest getting ready to lay an egg.

Mary.

Of course. Mary had ridden on a donkey, and Garrett had remembered the Christmas story.

The donkey had a leather halter and Dea looked at the tooling on the side. Nathaniel. The donkey's name was Nathaniel.

"Nat. Come here," Garrett said.

The donkey looked up. The animal stared deep



into Dea's eyes and seemed to weigh something in his mind.

Finally, he looked at Garrett, and Dea swore there was a slight smile on that donkey's face. He ambled over to her son and leaned down to get stroked.

"See?" Garrett giggled as Nathaniel ran his velvet lips over the boy's fingers. "I told you he was nice."

"He must belong around here somewhere."

"He belongs right here," Garrett said firmly.

"How do you know?" Dea hoped they'd not have a battle over keeping a donkey. And a chicken. She had spent the last of her money on food for herself and Garrett. She couldn't afford another mouth to feed.

"He just does."

And that was another wonder. She'd not heard that stubborn tone from Garrett in a long time. The one that said he would get his way no matter what.

Dea decided to stave off the argument for another day. "We need to go eat dinner."

Maybe Nathaniel and Mary's owner would show up and take them away before she had to tell Garrett he didn't own a donkey. And a chicken.

## 2

The banging on the door made them both jump. Dea had spread a blanket on the kitchen floor for dinner. They both froze with the full-blown fear of the hunted. Dea tried to erase the fear quickly, knowing Garrett could not.

"Whoever it is sure makes a lot of noise," she said lightly, past the lump in her throat.

Garrett nodded, his eyes still haunted.

"He probably wants his donkey back."

"Nat and Mary won't go. They belong here."

Dea stood and put a hand to her hair before she remembered, before she thought. She let her hand drop. She didn't need attention from anyone.

Not ever again.

She went to the door and peered into the twilight at the man framed in the glass panel.

He didn't look like an axe murderer.

He didn't look ordinary, either. Pitch black hair, big chest in a flannel shirt, tall. Solid. And although he was scowling, there was an aura about him. She opened the door cautiously, keeping a clenched fist behind her back. Her heart pounded even as her mouth went dry.

He had backed away from the door and was standing on the steps, rather than the porch. His hands were hanging at his sides. His shoulders were relaxed, his head up and cocked to one side. Dea's

subconscious registered the non-threatening stance before her racing heart realized it. She relaxed slightly, but her heart still hammered.

This man must be aware that his size intimidated, but his body language was set to purposely diminish any fear in others.

Safe. That aura he projected was safe. Despite the unsmiling, stern expression on his face.

And God help her, but a shiver of something feminine, something soft and comforting crept into her mind, leaving her face flushed and warm. Big, strong, safe. All the things a man should be.

Her heart disregarded his scowl, a primitive instinct telling her this was a man who would care for his own. A man who would be gentle, who would watch out for his wife and children, who knew love.

*You're projecting, Dea.* Her mind, that cynical part of her body that warred constantly with her heart, was caustic. Nice-looking didn't always mean good people. Her own experience had proven that. Dea crushed her thoughts and waited.

Her gaze traveled up that massive chest and moved with difficulty past the third buttonhole on his shirt. She hated looking people in the eye, afraid they'd see too much of her own struggle. Her glance took in well-shaped lips, broad cheeks and finally, his eyes.

The shock rattled her back teeth and reverberated all the way to her toes.

Familiar blue eyes with overly long lashes squinted at her with an unfriendly light. She sucked a breath into suddenly starving lungs. *Dear Lord, save me.* She'd managed, without any of the ways she'd envisioned, to land from the frying pan into the fire.

No way could this man know who she was. Of

that, she was certain. But she knew him. His eyes gave him away. Eyes he shared with his son. Her son-in-name-only. Garrett. The man she'd come all the way here to find hoping against hope that he'd offer sanctuary...to Garrett, at least.

He didn't look like a man who wanted to offer sanctuary. He looked like a man who hated life. Old bitterness shaded his eyes, and a quiet despair seemed to hang over him. His beautiful mouth, which he also shared with his son, was turned down into a frown.

"I just wanted to let you know Nathaniel does this all the time," the man said abruptly. "I didn't want you to think I was skulking about."

He turned and walked away, unlatching the little gate and going into the cemetery.

Dea swallowed. She thought she'd have more time to prepare. More time to gather her forces. More time to find a spine and to do courageously what had to be done. More time to stave off the inevitable and gain some equilibrium after the past year of fleeing the demons.

Aunt Amelia's letter had come right when Dea was despairing of ever finding a way to get free from the mess her life and Garrett's had become. It was while reading Amelia's note that the solution had bloomed. The way that would keep Garrett secure for the rest of his life.

She'd planned to wait a few months, make life as normal as possible and then go looking for his father. She had hoped that Jolene Lacey hadn't lied about his general vicinity. Jolene, Dea's wild, unpredictable cousin, who'd shown up on her doorstep pregnant and scared.

Jolene had birthed Garrett, but Dea was his mother

in all but biology—and a little piece of paper Jolene had promised to sign, but never had. Jolene had signed guardianship of Garrett to Dea, but she'd skipped out before the court date for signing the adoption papers. The fact that she'd put "unknown" for the father had made it easy to draw up the adoption. Dea swallowed again. She couldn't think about that now.

For once, her lying cousin had told the truth. Garrett's father was no longer "unknown." Dea felt tears and choked them back. The ever-present fear was forming a solid ball in her stomach again.

The man looked hard. Bitter. Like life was something to get through and surprises were unwelcome.

And Garrett would be a surprise.

Dea took a deep breath. She would not leave Garrett with him if he proved as unsuitable a parent as her cousin. No way. Not ever. She'd run again if she had to. Tears gathered in her eyes as the hopelessness welled. She was so tired of running.

So very tired of it.

She wanted Garrett to be with his father when Jolene found them. She had hoped he would be a good man, a man who deserved to be a father, so Garrett would be safe. Safer than being with Jolene and the crazed boyfriend who'd snatched Garrett and held a gun to his head. The one who threatened to kill him if Dea didn't give him and Jolene money. The one who'd pulled the trigger in a macabre game of Russian roulette, even after Dea begged him not to kill Garrett.

And Jolene had stood there and laughed.

Even now, the terror of it reduced Dea to sweaty fear. The click of the empty chamber when the hammer dropped on the gun. Garrett's wide eyes, sparkling