



Lily stepped inside then closed her eyes as she leaned her back against the front door. Relief washed through her, warming her like spring sunshine. She had a job. A home. She could care for her family. Thank God.

“Ah, you smile. Is good.”

Francisca’s gentle voice broke Lily’s reverie. She opened her eyes as her beaming friend stepped into the small parlor.

“*Señor* Grimes say something good, *sí?*”

“Very good.” She told her friend of the man’s offer. “He sounded so kind. If I hadn’t been standing there hearing the words myself, I wouldn’t have known it was him.”

“God can break and use hardest rock, even rock like *Señor* Grimes.”

“Yes, He can. I’m still praying about everything. But unless I feel the Lord is telling me no, I think I’ll accept his offer tomorrow.”

“Would be good to stay in your house. Good for you and *tu chiquita*.” The clock on the fireplace mantel tolled three. Francisca glanced toward it. “I go fix *Señor* Grimes supper then come make yours.”

“He usually doesn’t eat early, and I can fix ours.”

“Not this day. *El jefe* can eat when food is cooked or later. He can decide.” The determined set of Francisca’s plump jaw said arguing would be useless.

“All right. Thank you.”

After Francisca left, Lily surveyed the empty parlor trying to think of something to occupy her unexpected free time. She wouldn’t dream of going against her sweet friend’s wishes and fixing their supper herself. She could darn Ella’s torn stocking, but Harvey’s socks also lay in that basket next to the rocking chair. Going through any of his things was more than she could bear for now. Instead, she grabbed her Bible from the homemade end table beside the settee.

A piece of paper from inside the book fluttered to the floor. Frieda’s last letter to her that she had yet to answer. Her dear friend would want to know what had happened. And Frieda would pray. Lily needed all the prayers she could get.

Such news should be shared first with her family, but she’d waste expensive paper and ink sending them even a short note. She sighed. Frieda wrote that her parents had burned every letter they’d received from her after she and Harvey had eloped. So Lily hadn’t written to them in years.

But she wouldn’t trade the five years of happiness she’d had with her husband for anything. Especially not for a life with the business-owner man her parents had picked for her. She preferred marrying for love instead of money.

Sitting at the kitchen table writing about Harvey’s death brought fresh tears. Pain or no pain, this chore needed done while she had time to do it. When she got to the part about Mr. Grimes’s job offer, her hand no longer shook as she dipped the pen into the ink well.

Such peace had to come from God. He must want her to continue working for the man. A shaft of sunlight pierced the window pane and illuminated the paper in front of her as if to confirm her thoughts.

Francisca walked into the kitchen as Lily finished the letter. "You try write family one more time?"

"No. Only my childhood friend. Frieda will be truly sad and pray for Ella and me." Unlike her parents who might rejoice at Harvey's death if they knew.

"It's good you still have such fine *amiga*." The older woman patted Lily's shoulder. "All your *amigos* here will pray too."

"I know. Thank you."

SINCE THE SUN was high enough to warm the chilly morning air, Toby headed toward the corral. The feisty bay that had thrown him yesterday would not win. Unlike the roan that had killed Harvey. He'd finally slept some last night. He hoped Mrs. Johnson had done the same.

He hoisted a saddle and blanket onto the top fence rail. The ornery mustang needed to be saddle broke last week. Too soon he'd have to go to town and start hiring for roundup. The last year or so, he'd gladly left that chore to Harvey. His gut knotted up at the thought of his late foreman. Such a man would be about impossible to replace. A man who'd accepted Toby, flaws and all, without nosy questions.

A figure in a dark blue cape snagged his attention when he glanced south. Strands of light blonde hair escaping a bonnet shone in the sunlight as Mrs. Johnson knelt beside her husband's grave. When she rose, he let out the breath he'd been holding in. She appeared to be steady on her feet. No sounds of crying drifted his direction on the late morning breeze.

The overwhelming urge to check on her made his heart pound so hard he wondered that it stayed in his chest. He gripped the fence rail, the rough wood pressing into his hand. Trying to watch over someone weaker could cause a searing pain worse than any possible splinter might. The war had taught him that.

But his fingers loosened up one at a time as if somebody else pried them off the rail. He sucked in a couple of deep breaths. Might as well go see about her. The sooner he could get his mind back on work, the better.

He trudged toward the family graveyard, halting just outside the low gate as he stared at Mrs. Johnson's back. She hadn't moved since she'd stood to her feet.

"Uh, I don't mean to interrupt ..." Just what he meant, even he didn't know.

The lady jumped. She turned to face him. "You're not interrupting. I intended to find you sometime today, anyway."

"You did?" He removed his hat as he approached her.

She nodded. "I've been praying about what to do. I'd like to accept your gracious offer to let me stay on here."

"I appreciate that." He ignored her mention of prayer while swallowing his comments about graciousness having nothing to do with his offer.

Not that he wasn't thinking of her and her needs and his obligation to her as Harvey's widow, but he needed a housekeeper. She'd save him a heap of trouble by not having to hunt for another one. Hiring hands himself for the upcoming roundup and cattle drive would be bad enough. The less he had to deal with other people, the happier he stayed. Yet having this lady think something so nice about him felt good.

Except he'd done nothing to deserve it.

"Thank you more than I can say." Her soft voice interrupted his morose thoughts.

"You're welcome." Words he could honestly say he meant for a change.

"It's almost too warm to need this." She looked down as she toyed with the folds of her cape. "Um, there's something I should tell you. Something you need to know ..." Her voice cracked.

The pain in her tone made him swallow hard.

Staring up at him, she sucked in a ragged breath. "I'm in the family way. If you don't want me—"

"Charlotte told me. I want you to stay here."

She held his gaze before giving him a radiant smile that shone all the way to her eyes. Warmth that didn't come from the February sunshine coursed through him. He wanted to look away, but couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Thank you. Those words aren't adequate, but they're all I have."

"You're welcome." He looked down at his hat and released his grip on the soon-to-be rumpled brim. No telling how long it had been since he'd used those words lately, much less said them twice to anyone. "Uh, I'd better get back to that ornery mustang."

"And I need to see how Francisca is doing with Ella."

Before heading toward the gate, he set his hat back on his head then tipped it to her.

"Mr. Grimes?"

He turned her direction.

"I can start back tomorrow since Charlotte will come for Francisca this afternoon."

"If you can. Otherwise, I can fend for myself a while."

She shook her head. "I'll see you in the morning as usual."

"If you say so." His lips turned up in a grin that he couldn't stop. He'd put the momentary sparkle in her eyes with his offer of help. His steps back to the corral felt lighter than they had in a long time.

Until reality slammed him in the chest as hard as the cantankerous bay probably wanted to kick him. Watching out for anyone would open him up for the kind of agony he'd shielded himself from for years. Seeing she had a job and a roof over her head was enough. He'd risk nothing more.

A LIGHT KNOCK SOUNDED on her front door as Lily settled Ella on her bed for a nap. Francisca was ushering Charlotte inside when Lily walked into the front room.

“How are you?” Charlotte handed her squirming son to her cook before reaching for Lily’s hand.

“I guess better isn’t the right word, but I’m all right.”

“Oh, Lily.” Charlotte enveloped her in a hug.

Lily soaked in the sympathy for only a moment. If she weren’t careful, she’d be in tears again. She stepped back and looked into her friend’s kind brown eyes.

“Are you sure I should take Francisca home today? Eduardo says to tell her to stay as long as you need her.”

“Sí, I stay longer if you want.”

“You’re a dear and a wonderful help. But go home to your husband.”

“You’re sure?” Charlotte patted Lily’s arm.

“I’m sure. I need something to do. Getting back to my usual schedule tomorrow should be good for me.”

“What do you mean?” Charlotte’s eyes widened.

“Your brother still wants me to be his housekeeper. God gave me a way to take care of my family almost before I asked.”

An uncharacteristic frown creased her friend’s forehead. “I’ll tell you the same thing David and I told Toby when he mentioned his idea to us. How are you going to keep people from gossiping about you?”

“What is there to gossip about?” Lily held out both hands, palms up.

“Toby’s not married. Neither are you now. You’re young and pretty. He’s twenty-eight, only four years older than you.” Charlotte gently placed her hands on Lily’s shoulders. “Have you thought how that will look to some people, especially on an isolated ranch?”

“No ...” Sucking in a deep breath, Lily studied the pattern of the rag rug on the floor. “Who else would give a woman in my

condition a job?" She looked her friend in the eyes. "With God's help, your brother and I will make this arrangement work."

Charlotte sighed. "I hope and pray you do."

"God gave me this job. He will work everything else out."
Lily squared her shoulders.

If only she felt as confident as she sounded.