

*In His Will* © 2006 by Cathy Marie Hake  
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## Chapter 1

The old man's gone to the Big Daddy in the sky."

Dylan Ward winced. The opening remark set the tone for a memorial service that turned into a full-fledged travesty. No respect. No reverence. No words of redemption. Their pastor from back home got sick, so the funeral home hastily plugged in a replacement. Though he didn't hold with judging another man's walk with the Lord, Dylan suspected this so-called preacher had gotten his degree from a matchbook cover. While leading them in the Lord's Prayer, he flubbed the recitation in several spots.

Following that debacle, Miller Quintain's relatives gave eulogies revolving around memories of his financial generosity. Their words became a can-you-top-this, he-loved-me-most competition.

Unwilling to let a good friend's life be summed up in such shallow terms, Dylan rose and buttoned his suit coat as he walked to the front of the chapel. Turning to face the small collection of people, he caught sight of a woman who must have slipped in late. She sat at the very back, alone. Over her black dress, she wore a blue-and-green-plaid flannel shirt. Everything about this funeral was surreal.

Dylan looked at the rose-decked casket and then faced the room. "When I was seven, Miller Quintain told me a man can live with gritty hands and muddy boots, but he's got to have a clean heart. . . ."

A short while later, Miller's relatives jockeyed for one of the four seats at the graveside. If last night's storm hadn't softened the hard-packed Oklahoma soil, their crocodile tears could. Dylan stood off to the side and understood why Miller specified the service was for family only. He'd been a simple man who didn't want a lot of fuss and wouldn't want the folks back home to witness a circus like this.

Things would get much worse before the day ended. After several years of open discussion, Dylan knew what Quintain's will would hold. Miller warned him to expect a nasty scene once these greedy relatives discovered they weren't inheriting his fortune.

The woman in the flannel shirt walked the long way around the cemetery and silently took a place a few feet from Dylan. High cheekbones and slightly slanted green eyes set her apart—she didn't look anything like Miller's relatives. She'd put her mahogany-red hair into a sophisticated bun at the top of her head

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and probably used half a can of hair spray today to keep it under control. Small wisps teased their way free and coiled into twirly, springy tendrils.

The way she clutched a bunch of wildflowers to her heart touched Dylan—not only because of her sorrow, but also because of the devotion it revealed. Instead of buying something, she must've gotten up early to gather the bouquet from the Oklahoma countryside Miller had loved. Silently she slipped forward, laid the offering by the head of the casket, and stepped back.

The substitute showed up and nervously rubbed his hands together. "You've already said your good-byes. It's an emotional time. Why don't we say the Twenty-second Psalm together in closing?" He looked at the redhead. "Do you know it? Would you like to start us off?"

She gave him a baffled look, seemed to think for a moment, and slowly nodded. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent."

"No, no. That's not it." The preacher's brows beetled.

Dylan looked at the woman, astonished she'd been able to remember that passage. "What about the Twenty-third Psalm?" They made eye contact, and she nodded. He started out, and she joined in. "The Lord is my shepherd. . . ."

At least they could make this right.



Sondra Thankful huddled in Kenny's old shirt. It offered little solace. Grief crashed over her. First her husband, then her dear friend, Miller. *God, why is it Your will for me to be alone?*

The minute the prayer ended, Miller's relatives started to bicker. Sondra backed away from the ugliness. She'd forgotten how her heels sank into the ground at Kenny's funeral until they did the same thing now.

"Careful." The tall man who'd recited the psalm braced her elbow for a moment. From what he said during the service, she knew who he was: Dylan, the neighbor Miller thought of as a son.

Sondra subtly took stock of him. His warmth and spicy aftershave filled her senses as his six-foot height and broad frame blocked the wind. Steady gray eyes seemed to search out details and file them away, and the shadow on his square jaw made it look as though he'd spent a less than restful night. The wind played havoc with his fine black hair, and his charcoal gray suit jacket gaped as he raised a hand to shove back a lock of it. He looked ill-at-ease in the suit, and freshly polished cowboy boots made it clear where he'd rather be.

"I'm Dylan Ward. Miller was my neighbor."

"I'm Sondra Thankful. Miller spoke very highly of you, Dylan."

"That means a lot—especially today." He studied her for a long moment. "He was pretty cryptic about you. All I know is that you're a teacher and volunteer at a

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children's group home here in Lawton. He used to loan you baby chicks."

"Mmm-hmm. I posted a note in several feed stores, asking if someone would let me borrow chicks for troubled children to hold. Only one rancher in the whole area responded—Miller Quintain."

"That's Miller," Dylan confirmed with a decisive nod. "The man had a knack for filling the empty places in other people's lives."

"He did." She turned to stare at the horizon.

"Why chicks?"

"They're teeny and light—quiet, too. Even the smallest child can cradle one. It's great therapy for kids who've gotten beaten up by life. When they feel completely out of control, it helps to have something soft and warm to hold on to."

Dylan's gaze dropped to her hand. Sondra hadn't realized she'd bunched the flannel shirttail in her palm until his eyes narrowed. Just as quickly, compassion softened his features.

"Excuse me." Overwhelmed by grief, Sondra barely choked out the words and turned away. Her heel sank in the grass as she buried her face in her hands and wept.

"Whoa. Easy there." Dylan gathered her closer to his side and cradled her head to his chest. He didn't shush her or even say anything more; he merely held her as she sobbed. When she started to calm down, he pressed a handkerchief into her hands. "Here."

"Thanks." She pulled away and dabbed at her eyes. "I'm going to miss him so much."

"So will I." Dylan's solemn voice carried the ache of deep loss. Sondra sensed his presence at her side as they walked across the cemetery.

A man in a custom-tailored suit who'd been on the fringes of the funeral stood at the curb. He raised his voice because of the wind. "Are you Sondra Thankful?"

"Yes."

"I'm Geoffrey Cheviot of Cheviot, Masters, and Associates. My apologies that I relied on my secretary to call you. You are coming back to the office?"

Sondra gave him a baffled look. "I don't belong."

"Mr. Quintain was an old-fashioned man. He specified his last will and testament was to be read following the service." The attorney's face reflected no emotion as he added, "Miller requested you be present."

"Who is she, anyway?" one woman wondered aloud. Miller Quintain's relatives all suddenly focused on her—but their interest carried more malevolence than curiosity.

Dylan gently curled his hand around Sondra's elbow. He kept his voice low. "Come—for Miller."

Put in that light, she didn't give it further consideration. "I'll be there."

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The attorney smiled with unmistakable relief. “Good. I’ll see you at the office.”

Dylan kept hold of Sondra and headed toward the parking lot. She inched closer to him, both for warmth and protection. The wind carried a chill, but the stares of Miller’s relatives were downright frigid. Dylan halted for a split second to allow the wind to buffet a crinkling sheet of newspaper across their path and then continued on. “Which car is yours?”

“My ride’s just around the corner.”

He leaned forward and looked past her. “The bus?” Incredulity filled his voice.

“My car’s in the shop.”

“I’ll give you a ride.” He nodded decisively. “We’ll swap stories about Miller.” He strode along until they made it to a well-kept, older pickup.

“I can take the bus. Really.”

Dylan shook his head. “I’ll put you in a cab. You can’t wait in the cold and ride on a crowded bus.”

She couldn’t afford to pay for a cab. *Miller trusted him, and the lawyer knows I’m with him.* She gave him a sad smile. “I’m not very good company today.”

“Neither am I. Here.” He unlocked and opened the door.

Once in the truck, Sondra fell silent. They both stared out of the windshield. Yesterday’s thunderstorm hadn’t lost steam until early this morning, and the clouds hung low, like ominous, gray monoliths in the vast Oklahoma sky. Dreariness coated Lawton as Dylan drove through the streets.

He turned on the radio. A quartet sang “Rock of Ages” *a cappella*. “This okay with you?”

“Yes. Comforting, even.”

Sondra’s thoughts wandered aimlessly, and Dylan seemed equally content with the silence. The hymn ended, and another began. *I should ask him to tell me more about Miller. Hearing about Miller would—*

“How long did you know Miller?”

“Just about two years.” She smiled at the memory. “The first time we met, I thought he looked like the man on the Luden’s cough drop box.”

Dylan chuckled. They spent the next fifteen minutes remembering their friend. Dylan pulled to the curb and announced, “Here we are.”

“Thanks for the ride. Sharing memories like that has helped me.”

“Me, too.”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why I’m here.”

“Miller was a generous man. He may have left you a bit of money so you could keep taking the baby chicks to the kids.”

“It’d be great. They really make a difference.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ll bet they do. Tell you what—I don’t have a coop, but if Miller didn’t arrange for you to keep getting chicks, I’ll put one in, and you’re welcome to come pick them up just like you did before.”

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Her lips parted in surprise. “Wow. Thanks!” As he shut his door, she took a couple of deep breaths and whispered, “Lord, I could really use Your help here. You know—courage and strength. . . .” As soon as she unlocked her door, Dylan helped her out.

Geoffrey Cheviot personally met them at the door of the building. “If you’ll follow me. . . .” He led them to the law offices and into a sizable corner meeting room. Plush, camel-colored carpeting muffled their steps, and the oppressive gray from the sky filtered through the wall-to-wall plate glass windows. Several chairs sat in a semicircle facing an oak wall unit. Gesturing toward a pair of chairs closest to the door, he invited, “Please be seated.”

Sondra lowered herself into one of them and tucked her purse on the floor. Mr. Cheviot returned with the family members, and she shifted in her seat. *I don’t belong here with the friends and family.*

The staid-looking attorney waited until everyone settled into the seats, then opened the center doors of the wall unit to reveal a large television screen. He pulled a CD from a nearby shelf. “Miller Quintain has a written testament. You will all receive copies, but he also recorded it. He wanted to express his wishes to you directly. I’ll play it for you now.”

The sight of Miller’s sunbaked, laugh-wrinkled face made Sondra suck in a quick breath. Dylan must have heard that soft gasp, because he slid his big, rough hand over and gently patted her arm.

Miller stared into the camera and spoke as he always had—straight, to the point, and with a minimum of fuss. “Well, folks, this is it. My will is absolutely airtight. Settle for what I give you, or challenge my wishes and receive a single dollar for your gall. That being said, let me make it clear I just came from the doctor, and he’s certified me as being completely of sound mind. This is what I want done with all that I’ve amassed.”

“The old coot never did have any class,” one relative muttered.

Miller rattled off the names of seven relatives then drawled, “You never much bothered with me while I was alive, so I’m not feeling it necessary to fret much over your welfare, either. Getting here for the funeral set you back a tad, so I’m leaving each of you three thousand dollars to cover expenses. Consider yourselves lucky to get that much out of me. It’s a better return on those annual Christmas cards than you deserve.”

The room erupted. Angry shouts, cries, and growls filled the air. “Silence, please!” Mr. Cheviot demanded.

Miller continued on. “Edwin, as my brother, you never did have it in you to completely forget me. I know my money interested you far more than my companionship, but I want you to have one last go at something, so I’m bequeathing you fifty grand.”

“Fifty grand! Is that all?”

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The image on the monitor spoke on. “Then I come to Dylan Ward. Dylan. . .” Miller paused. A kind smile creased his weather-beaten face, making him look just the way Sondra remembered him. It was eerie to see the fondness and compassionate quality looming there when they’d just buried him. His lips moved. “Dylan, I think of you as being the son I never had.”

Dylan’s hand slid away from her arm. For some inexplicable reason, she had an almost overwhelming urge to snatch it back.

“The antique gun collection is yours. My horse and saddle—you’ve admired them, and I want them to go to you. Oh—and the gray enamel coffeepot? You know where to find it. It’s yours, Dylan.

“I hope you’ll understand.” Miller chuckled roughly. “Come to think of it, you probably won’t understand for a while, but I trust you will someday. I’m not going along with my original plan.

“I’m leaving you the easternmost two hundred acres and thirty percent of the value of my livestock, all to be granted to you one year from today—under one condition: the Curly Q must achieve the same annual profit margin for this fiscal year as it has averaged in the past five. Mr. Cheviot has the parameters in a file for your reference.”

Sondra couldn’t tear her gaze from Miller’s image. She heard the rough sound of Dylan clearing his throat. She didn’t care what Miller and he had worked out. It wasn’t any of her business. Miller had a right to do what he wanted, but she sensed something about this arrangement came as a huge blow.

“That brings me to Sondra Thankful.”