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Prologue

ANDERSON COUNTY, TEXAS—1870

Ten-year-old Meredith Hayes balled her hands into fists as she faced her tormentor. “Hiram Ellis! Give me back my lunch bucket this instant!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Meri. Did you want this?” His voice dripped sarcasm as he dangled the small pail in front of her.

She lunged for it, but her hands met only air as the older boy snatched it away and tossed it over her head to his snickering brother. Meredith ricocheted between the two, never quite fast enough to get more than a finger on the tin.

Why was she always the one to get picked on? Meredith stomped her foot in frustration. She thought she’d gotten enough of a lead today after school, but Hiram must have been watching for her. He’d had it out for her ever since her family moved to the area last spring. Probably because the land they bought used to belong to his best friend’s family.

“Meri, Meri, quite contrary,” Hiram sang in a ridiculously high-pitched voice, skipping in a circle around her and swinging the lunch bucket back and forth. A group of girls came around the bend and stopped to giggle behind their hands.

Meredith asked for help, but they just stood there smirking and whispering behind their schoolbooks. Even Anna Leigh, her desk mate and the one girl Meredith thought a friend. Angry tears pooled in her eyes, but Meredith blinked them away. She'd not let Hiram win.

"You're a bully, Hiram Ellis."

"Yeah?" Hiram stopped skipping and glared at Meredith. "Well, you're a carpetbagger's daughter."

"My papa's not a carpetbagger. He's a teacher, just like your sister."

Hiram's face scrunched up like a pumpkin that had started to rot. "My sister teaches white kids. Not good-for-nothin' darkies."

Meredith raised her chin and repeated the words she'd heard her father say countless times. "They're freedmen. And they have just as much right to learn as you do."

"If those *freedmen* were still slaves, like they oughta be, Joey Gordon's pa wouldn'ta been killed by Yankees, and Joey would still be here." Hiram glowered and strode toward her, his boots pounding into the earth. Meredith instinctively retreated a step before she remembered she wasn't afraid of him.

"You want this stupid tin back?" Hiram growled out the question as he halted a couple of feet in front of her. "Go fetch!"

He sprinted to the edge of the road and hurled the pail through a thick stand of pine trees. Meredith watched it fly, wondering why God thought it fair to give a mean-tempered boy such a strong throwing arm.

The bucket clipped a tree limb and disappeared over a small rise. A hollow clang echoed through the pines followed by a series of quieter thunks as it tumbled down the back side of the hill.

Meredith winced. Mama was going to skin her alive for bringing her pail home dented and busted. The only thing worse would be not bringing it home at all.

Meredith glared at Hiram and trudged forward.

“Meri, no!” Anna Leigh ran up and clutched Meredith’s arm. “You can’t. That’s Archer land.”

Archer land? Meredith looked around to get her bearings and swallowed hard as recognition dawned. Anna Leigh was right.

“No one steps on Archer land. Not if they value their life.” Anna Leigh shook her head, eyeing the trees as if their branches might reach down and snatch her off the ground. “Just let it go, Meri.” She backed away, tugging on Meredith’s arm. But when Meredith made no move to follow, Anna Leigh released her with a heavy sigh.

It couldn’t be as bad as all that. Could it? Meredith gazed through the pines, to the small hill that hid her lunch bucket. Her heart thumped against her ribs. It wasn’t very far. If she ran, she could get her tin and be back before the Archers even knew she’d been there. Then again, everyone in Anderson County knew the Archer boys were trigger happy and plumb loco, to boot. What if one of them was hiding out there somewhere, just waiting for her?

“I hear they got bloodthirsty hounds that can sniff you out the minute your foot steps off the road.” Hiram spoke in a low, husky voice. “Dogs that’d sooner gnaw your leg off than look at you.”

Meredith told herself to pay him no mind. He was only trying to scare her. But she couldn’t quite banish the image of a big black dog barreling down on her, teeth bared.

“You know Seth Winston . . . and his hand?”

Meredith didn’t turn around, but she nodded. The man

ran a store near her father's school. He only had three fingers on his right hand.

"Travis Archer shot them two fingers clean off when Winston tried to pay a call after old man Archer died. Woulda done worse if Winston hadn't hightailed it outta there as fast as he did. And don't think you'd be safe just 'cause you're a girl. They peppered Miss Elvira's buggy with buckshot when she came to collect the young ones to take them to the homes she'd found for them. Nearly put her eye out."

"At least . . ." Meredith's throat seemed to close. She forced a little cough and tried again. "At least they weren't hurt too bad."

"Only because they escaped." Hiram came up beside her and spoke directly into her ear. "Five other men weren't so lucky. They came out here at different times, each with hopes of buying the Archer spread. None of them were ever seen again." Hiram paused, and Meredith couldn't fight off the shivers his words provoked. "Their bodies are probably buried somewhere out there."

Something rustled just beyond the pines. Meredith jumped. Hiram laughed.

She should go home. Just leave the pail and go home. Mama would understand . . . but she'd be disappointed.

"I dare you," Hiram said, finally drawing Meredith's attention. "I dare you to go after that tin."

"Don't do it, Meri," Anna Leigh begged.

"Oh, she won't. She's too scared." Hiram's cocky grin resurrected Meredith's pride.

Crossing her thin arms over her chest, she glared up at him. "I'll get it. Just see if I don't."

The girls behind her gasped, and even Hiram looked a bit uneasy, which only served to bolster Meredith's determination. She marched to the tree line, turned back for one last

triumphant glance at the stunned Ellis boys, and dashed off in the direction the pail had disappeared. Her shoes crunched on fallen pine needles and twigs as she ran, her breath echoing loudly in her ears as she huffed up the hill.

She stopped at the top and clutched her aching side as she scanned the ground for her lunch bucket. Something shiny glinted in the sunlight down and to the left. Meredith smiled and hurried forward. *This isn't so tough.*

Her fingers closed around the handle of the battered tin, but when she turned to head back, the hill blocked her view of the road. Suddenly feeling very isolated, she bit her lip as forest noises echoed around her. A twig snap to her left. A rustle to her right. Then from somewhere in the distance behind her, a dog barked.

The Archer hounds!

Meredith fled, scrambling up the hill. But the sandy soil was too loose. Her feet kept slipping. She clawed at the ground with her fingers, to no avail.

Another bark sounded. Closer this time.

Meredith gave up on the hill and just started running away from the barking. The slope gradually lessened, and she spotted a flat section up ahead where the pines turned back toward the road. Aiming for the opening, she veered between the trees.

As she looked up to gauge how close she was to the road, her right foot hit something metallic. A loud crack rent the air a second before a pair of steel jaws snapped closed on her leg.



“Good girl, Sadie.” Travis Archer folded his wiry adolescent frame as he hunkered down and stroked the half-grown pointer. “We might turn you into a huntin’ dog yet.”

She still barked too much when she got excited, frightening off the game, but she'd successfully pointed a rabbit and held when he called *whoa*, so even though the hare scurried away before he could get in position to shoot, Travis was proud of the pup's progress.

"Let's try again, girl. Maybe we'll find some quail for you to flush. Jim's getting tired of fixin' squirrel mea—"

An agonized scream cut Travis off and raised the hair on his arms. He hadn't heard a cry like that since his mother died birthin' Neill.

Sadie barked and took off like a shot. Travis called for her to stop, but the pup ignored his command and ran west—toward the road. Snatching up his rifle, he gave chase. If a new threat had wandered onto Archer land, he'd do everything in his power to protect his brothers.

The barking intensified, and it sounded as if Sadie had stopped. Travis slowed his pace and brought his rifle into position against his shoulder. It wouldn't be the first time some greedy land grabber tried to draw him out, thinking four boys were easy pickings. He might not be full grown, but he was man enough to defend what was his. No one was going to drive him and his brothers out. No one.

Travis wove through the narrow pines, catching a glimpse of Sadie's black coat. He recognized the spot. It was one of several places he'd hidden coyote traps. He'd posted warning signs, but some idiots were too cocky for their own good. Hardening himself against any pity he might feel for the interloper, Travis fingered the trigger on his rifle and stepped around the last tree that stood between him and his target.

"Hands where I can see 'em, mister, or I'll put a bullet in . . ." The threat died on his lips.

A girl?

Horror swept over him, loosening his grip on the rifle. The barrel dipped toward the ground.

“D-don’t shoot. P-p-please.” The girl turned liquid blue eyes on him. “I didn’t m-m-mean any harm.” Her tearstained face stabbed him with guilt as she bravely tried to swallow her sobs.

“I ain’t gonna shoot you.” Travis relaxed his stance and set the weapon aside. “See?” He held his palms out and took a cautious step toward the girl sitting sideways beneath the tree. “I thought you were someone else. I ain’t gonna hurt you.” Although judging by the blood staining the edge of her ruffled pantalets, he already had.

“W-what about your d-dog?” She eyed Sadie as if the pup were some kind of hellhound.

“Sadie, heel.” The pointer quit barking and padded over to Travis’s side. He motioned for her to stay, then gingerly approached the frightened girl. “I’m gonna get that trap off your leg. All right?”

She sucked in her bottom lip, her eyes widening as he approached, but she nodded, and something inside Travis uncoiled. He’d no idea what he would’ve done if she’d gone all hysterical on him. Thankfully, this gal seemed to have a decent head on her shoulders. Travis smiled at her and turned his attention to the trap.

His stomach roiled. The thing was clamped above the ankle of her right leg. She whimpered a bit when he reached for the spring mechanisms on either side of the trap, no doubt anticipating more pain. The metal chain clanked as she moved.

“Try to keep still,” he instructed. “Even when the trap opens, don’t pull yourself free. Wait for me to help you. Your leg might be broken, and we don’t want to do anything to make it worse. Understand?”

Another brave little nod.

Travis grabbed the release springs and was about to compress them when the girl spoke.

“Can I . . . hold on to you?”

Closing his eyes for a second, Travis swallowed, then gave a nod of his own. “Sure, kid.”

Her hands circled his neck as he bent over her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

He cleared his throat. “Ready?”

The side of her face rubbed against his upper arm. “Mm-hmm.”

Travis pressed the spring levers with a firm, steady pressure until the trap’s jaw released. Once it clicked back into its open position, he gently removed her foot from the trap.

“I need to check your leg to see how bad it is.” Her arms still around his neck, Travis rotated her until her back brushed the tree trunk. “Rest here.”

He eased away from her hold and lifted the edge of her pantalets a few inches up her shin. The skin had been broken, and there was a deep indentation where the steel had clamped her leg, but she’d had the good sense to keep still, so the bleeding was minimal. There seemed to be swelling and discoloration around the indentation, though, and that worried Travis.

“Can you move your foot?”

The girl flexed her foot and immediately hissed in pain. “It hurts.” Her voice broke on a muted sob.

“Just be still, then.” Travis gritted his teeth. Probably a fracture. “I’m gonna look for some sticks to splint your leg with, and then I’ll get you home. All right? Don’t worry.”

On his deathbed, his father had made him swear never to leave Archer land, to protect it and his younger brothers at all

cost. And Travis had done exactly that for the last two years. But today, he was going to have to break his promise. He had to make things right with this little girl. Had to get her home.

Travis stood and scoured the ground for splint-worthy sticks while silently vowing that, before he went home, he'd spring every stinking trap on his property. No way was he going to run the risk of something like this happening again. He'd thought that any troublemakers who found themselves snagged would be able to free themselves with a minimum of fuss and leave with a sore leg to remind them not to return. The traps were too small to do significant damage to a man's leg, especially through the thick boots most of them wore. But a child? A *girl*? Travis never even considered such a scenario.

By the time he made his way back to the tree, the girl had composed herself. "What's your name?" he asked, thinking to distract her as he fit the splint to her leg.

"Meredith."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it firmly around the sticks just below her knee. "I'm Travis."

"*You're* Travis?" She said it with such disbelief that he stopped what he was doing to stare at her. She blushed and stammered. "I just . . . uh . . . thought you'd be meaner or bigger or . . . or something."

Travis shook his head and chuckled softly. "That's exactly what I want people to think. Me and my brothers are safer that way."

He looked around for something else to use to tie the bottom of the splint. Finding nothing, he took out his pocket knife and used the point to tear a hole in the seam at his left shoulder. Then he yanked until the sleeve pulled free and slid it down over his hand. He knelt back down and fastened it into place around her ankle.

“You know what you could do for me, Meredith?”

“What?”

He made sure the knot was tight, then smiled up at his patient. “When you get back and your friends start asking you questions, make me sound as big and mean as possible. The fact that I helped you get home can be our secret. Okay?”

Her eyes glowed with something besides pain, and she actually smiled. The weight dragging on his conscience lightened.

“Grab onto my neck again—I’m going to pick you up.” Travis shifted to her side and maneuvered an arm under her knees.

“Wait! I need my tin.”

He pulled back. “Your what?”

“My lunch tin. Hiram threw it into the trees. That’s why I came onto your land in the first place. I can’t go back without it.” She twisted and tried to reach behind her.

“Hold still,” Travis barked, not wanting her to hurt herself. “I’ll fetch it.” He grabbed the beat-up pail and handed it to her. Meredith cradled it to her middle, and Travis decided that if he ever met this Hiram person, he’d find another pail and give the numskull a wallop or two upside the head.

Travis slid his arms around Meredith and lifted her from the ground. The little warrior never cried out, just tightened her grip on his neck as he pushed to his feet. He examined the ground for the smoothest path to the road, even when it meant going out of his way. It was crazy, really—this urge to protect her. He’d spent the two years since his father died building barriers to keep the outside world out. But when this slip of a girl looked at him with trust blazing in her bright blue eyes, all he could think about was protecting the one piece of the outside world that had found a way in.

When he made it to the border of his property, Travis halted and inhaled a deep breath as his gaze tilted up toward heaven.

Sorry, Pa. I gotta do it.

Then, with a prayer for his brothers' safety resounding in his mind, he leaned forward and stepped off Archer land.



PALESTINE, TEXAS—1882

I don't think I can do it, Cass." Meredith peered up at her cousin through the reflection in the vanity mirror.

Cassandra pulled the hairpin from her mouth and secured another section of Meredith's braided chignon. "Do what?"

"Marry a man who wants me only for the land I can bring him."

"How do you know that's all he wants?" Cassandra leaned down until her face was level with Meredith's and winked at her in the mirror. "If you ask me, the man seems rather smitten, paying calls on you every Saturday night for the last month."

Calls where he spent more time discussing the lumber industry with her uncle than conversing with her. Wouldn't a man who was smitten spend his time talking to the woman he hoped to marry rather than her guardian?

Meredith sighed and turned to face her younger cousin. "I know I should be thrilled. Uncle Everett has told me again and again that Roy Mitchell is an excellent catch, and your mama nearly swooned when she found out he'd proposed. But something doesn't feel right."

“Maybe that’s because saying yes would mean letting go of a girlhood dream.”

Meredith squirmed under her cousin’s knowing look. Cassandra was the only person Meredith had ever told about her infatuation with Travis Archer. An infatuation based on a single encounter. It was silly, really. What girl would dream about a young man whose hunting trap had nearly taken off her leg? Yet something about Travis Archer had left a permanent impression upon her heart.

Cassandra understood that.

During holidays and family visits, the two cousins used to huddle together beneath the covers of Cassandra’s bed and spin romantic tales of the heroes who would valiantly rescue them from rockslides and stampeding cattle and even a polar bear or two when they were feeling particularly inventive. Meredith’s hero always wore Travis Archer’s face. Even now, she couldn’t stop herself from imagining what he must look like twelve years later. He’d been handsome as a youth. What would he look like as a man?

Standing abruptly and moving to the open wardrobe where she could riffle through her dresses instead of looking at her cousin, Meredith mentally crammed Travis back into the past, where he belonged.

“Goodness, Cass. I’m far too sensible to hold on to a bunch of silly daydreams. I put those thoughts from my mind years ago.”

Cassandra reached around her and took down the rose-colored dress Meredith only wore for special occasions. “You might have put Travis from your mind, but I think he still claims a piece of your heart.”

Meredith reluctantly accepted the polonaise and matching skirt and laid them on the bed. But instead of removing her

wrapper to dress, she hugged her arms around her waist and flopped onto the mattress. "You're right."

And where did that leave her? She hadn't seen the man once since that day. It was doubtful he even remembered her. If he did, the memory was probably a vague recollection of some scrawny kid who'd gotten caught trespassing. Not exactly a vision to inspire romantic feelings. Besides, none of the Archers ever stepped foot off their land. Waiting for Travis would be about as fruitful as waiting for a snowstorm in July.

"Give Mr. Mitchell a chance, Meri. Maybe he's the kind of man who doesn't know how to express his feelings." Cassandra sat beside her on the bed and patted her knee. "It'll be just the two of you today at lunch. Papa won't be around to distract him with business talk. Get to know him. You might be surprised by what he can offer you."

Meredith glanced sideways at her cousin, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "You know . . . I'm supposed to be the wise one here, not you."

"I may be three years younger," Cassandra said with a wink, "but that doesn't mean I don't know a thing or two about men."

"I can't argue with that. You've probably collected more courting experience in the past two years than I've had in the last five." Meredith smiled and nudged her cousin with her shoulder. "Look at the way Freddie Garrett follows you around."

"Freddie Garrett's barely fifteen, you goose. He doesn't count." Cassandra grabbed a pillow and swatted Meredith on the chin. Meredith, of course, had to retaliate. The two dodged and giggled until their sides ached so much they had to stop.

"I think you're going to have to fix my hair," Meredith

said as she blew a loose strand off her forehead. The ornery thing fell right back across the bridge of her nose, which set the two girls to laughing again.

Cassandra gained her feet first. "Come on," she said between chuckles. "Let's get you dressed, and I'll see what I can do about your hair."

Twenty minutes later, dressed in her best polonaise with her hair artfully rearranged, Meredith stood by the window looking out over the street. Her cousin had kissed her cheek and wished her well a few minutes ago and left her to gather her thoughts before her suitor arrived. The only problem was, her thoughts were so scattered, Meredith was sure she'd never pull them together in time.

Roy Mitchell had many admirable traits. He was ambitious and prosperous, and would certainly support a wife in fine style. His dark hair and eyes were handsome to look upon, and his manners were impeccable. Yet he stirred no strong feelings in her. And as far as she could tell, she stirred none in him.

What am I to do, Lord? Do I marry Roy and hope that affection comes, or do you have someone else in mind for me? Please make your will clear to me.

A brisk knock sounded on the door, but before Meredith could answer, her aunt swept into the room, her brows lifted in a scrutinizing arch. "I'm glad to see you had the good sense to dress for the occasion."

Meredith bit her tongue. After living with the disapproving woman for several years, she'd learned to speak as little as possible during their private . . . discussions.

"Come here, child, and turn around so I can see you."

Trying to ignore the *child* remark, Meredith did as instructed while her aunt clicked her tongue and sighed like a martyr who had been given a heavy cross to bear.

“Can you do nothing more to disguise that awful limp? We can’t have Mr. Mitchell second-guessing his offer before the engagement is official. I’ve already done all I can to ensure you every advantage. Cassandra has strict instructions not to enter the parlor while he’s here. Don’t want the man drawing unfavorable comparisons, do we?”

Aunt Noreen narrowed her gaze, as if she could sense Meredith’s inner doubt. “You’d best not do anything to sabotage this proposal,” she said, shaking her finger under Meredith’s nose. “Everett and I have too much riding on this for you to dillydally around. The man expects an answer today. And that answer had better be yes.”

When Meredith had asked God for guidance, she’d never expected him to shove it down her throat with a dose of her aunt’s less-than-flattering opinions. Was this really the answer she sought? Was God speaking through Aunt Noreen, or was Aunt Noreen just spouting her own agenda? Meredith didn’t mind rebelling against her aunt, but rebelling against God was another matter entirely.

Needing to get away from the waving finger in order to think straight, Meredith stepped over to the wardrobe to collect her shawl, exaggerating her limp as she went. When Aunt Noreen moaned, Meredith smiled. She knew it was petty of her, but she refused to let the woman browbeat her without striking back at least a little.

In reality, the hitch in her gait was barely noticeable except on those days when she overexerted herself. Years ago, the doctor had explained that the bone damage she’d sustained from the steel trap had hindered the completion of normal growth in her right leg, eventually causing it to be slightly shorter than her left. With custom-made shoes that added half an inch of height to the right heel, she got along without much

trouble. Unfortunately, Aunt Noreen tended to see mountains where the rest of the world saw only molehills, especially when it came to Meredith's shortcomings.

Wrapping her ivory shawl around her shoulders, Meredith stared at the silky fringe instead of her aunt as she cautiously ventured into the conversation. "Papa always encouraged me to choose a husband with utmost care since the bond would last for life. I aim to follow his advice. Roy Mitchell has many fine qualities, but I need more time to get to know him before I can make this decision with confidence." She glanced up and found scowl lines furrowing Aunt Noreen's brow. "Today's luncheon will certainly help me achieve those ends," Meredith hurried to add.

"More time?" The woman sounded as if the words were choking her.

Aunt Noreen eyed the open doorway and prowled three steps closer to Meredith. "Did I ask for more time when your father requested lodgings for you in my home so that you could attend the Palestine Female Institute five years ago?" she hissed. "No. And two years after that, when your father's dealings with those . . . those *Negros* finally resulted in the end I predicted, did not Everett and I give you a permanent home?"

Meredith swallowed hard, trying to fight the memories of the fever that had taken first her papa and then her mother. They hadn't allowed her to come home, too afraid she'd catch the sickness. She'd tried to go to them anyway, but when her father refused to unbar the door and gazed at her through the front window, palm pressed to the glass, sunken eyes silently pleading with her to leave, she'd had no choice. She returned to her aunt and uncle's house and wept in Cassie's arms.

"My food has fed you," Aunt Noreen muttered, bring

Meredith back to the present. “Your uncle’s income has provided a roof over your head. You’ve been given more than enough *time*.”

Noreen sniffed and crossed her arms, looking uncomfortable as her focus jumped to the doorway before returning to Meredith. “You might not be aware, but your uncle’s business has experienced some setbacks in the last few years. We need the stability that a connection with Roy Mitchell would provide. He’s promised to partner with Everett once his land deal goes through. All his lumber will be cut exclusively by the Hayes mill. But the deal hinges on your marriage. No marriage, no partnership.”

Because Roy Mitchell needed her land—the land her father had left in her uncle’s care, intending that he restore it to Meredith when she married or turned twenty-five.

“Would you jeopardize Cassandra’s future simply because you’re unsure of your feelings?”

Meredith blinked. If she refused Roy Mitchell’s proposal, *would* she be hurting Cassandra?

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside the room for a moment before Cassandra’s smiling face appeared in the doorway.

“Papa sent me to fetch you, Meri. Your suitor’s here.”

Aunt Noreen gave her a pointed look and nudged her toward the door. “Go on, now. Let’s not keep Mr. Mitchell waiting.”

As Meredith stepped into the hall, Cassie’s eager smile, so full of innocence and romantic dreams, lit up her face. Guilt pricked at Meredith like a row of sewing pins protruding through her corset seam.

Cassandra deserved the best, and if marrying Roy would provide her cousin that opportunity, perhaps Meredith should make the sacrifice.

Yet when she entered the parlor and Roy walked toward her, she couldn't quite stem the quivers of panic that convulsed in her stomach.

Lord, I asked for guidance, and so far everything seems to point me toward marrying Roy. But if you have another plan, any other plan, I'd gladly consider it.

Roy extended his arm to her, and Meredith fought for a polite smile as she slid her hand into its expected place.