



TEXAS EVER AFTER

If the
**BOOT
FITS**

**KAREN
WITEMEYER**

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*To my daughter and fellow fairy-tale fanatic.
Bethany, you are my book buddy, my craft partner,
and the musician who fills my life with beautiful harmonies.
My life is richer because it is shared with you.*



It is better to trust in the Lord than
to put confidence in princes.

PSALM 118:9



1



**THREE CEDARS RANCH
PALO PINTO COUNTY, TEXAS
SUMMER 1889**

She'd only been home from school for two weeks, and already her father was trying to marry her off. Silently fuming, Samantha Dearing yanked open the door to her father's study and stepped inside.

Her mother had raised her to be a lady, insisting she never raise her voice or engage in disagreements in public, so when Samantha discovered the true purpose behind this evening's event, she'd not dumped the punch bowl over her father's head or engaged in a childish tantrum. No, she'd approached the mighty Eli Dearing with a smile, waited patiently for him to conclude his conversation with one of the wealthy bachelors he'd invited to his daughter's ~~auction~~ welcome home party, and sweetly asked for a private word with him.

The silk skirt of her azure ball gown swished loudly as Samantha swept past the sitting area on the left to reach her father's desk on the right. Her impassioned stride stretched the limits of her narrow skirt, and the bustled train felt slightly

unbalanced when she swirled around to face the man entering behind her.

A scuffling noise by the bookcases drew an instinctual glance, but when she saw no evidence of vermin ready to dash across her path, she turned her full attention—and ire—on her father.

“I will not be sold to the highest bidder!”

Her father frowned and pulled the door closed behind him. “Keep your voice down.”

“Of course.” She sketched a most irreverent curtsy. “Whatever the cattle king demands.”

His mouth tightened. “I don’t know what burr got stuck in that bustle of yours, girl, but I expect to be addressed with respect.”

“And I expect to be *treated* with respect.”

A fierce light flared in her father’s steel blue eyes. The tendons along his throat stood out from his neck as he stepped closer to her. “Did one of the guests do something improper?” The question rumbled from his chest in a dangerous growl.

Samantha blinked, taken aback. Could it be he actually cared more about her well-being than she’d assumed? After being banished to finishing school for the last three years, she’d calculated her rank to be somewhere below the steers and above the chickens.

Her stance softened just a touch. “No, Daddy. No one behaved improperly. But the gentlemen you invited to this little soiree seem to be under the impression that I’ve returned to Texas to seek a husband. They all appear determined to apply for the position, rattling off their assets as if they were fabrics in a dress shop competing to be made up into my next gown. The expensive imported lace that would raise my social status. The handsome blue silk that would match my eyes. The pragmatic poplin that would work hard while still allowing a splash of elegance.”

The fierceness drained from her father's eyes, replaced by a rather hazy fog. "What does dress fabric have to do with anything? Talk plainly, Sam."

"My name's Samantha."

"I know what your name is, girl. I gave it to you."

Was that hurt in his eyes? She didn't think a man as tough as Eli Dearing could be hurt by something as insignificant as a daughter's rebuff. A pang vibrated through her heart at the visible evidence to the contrary, but she stifled the throb before it softened her. He had no right to use the pet name from her childhood. The day he'd stopped taking her up on his horse with him and banished her to the house, he'd made it clear that he had no use for a daughter. Then when Mother finally birthed a son, Samantha had all but ceased to exist in her father's eyes.

Sam was the name of a girl trying to be the son her father wanted. Samantha was the grown woman whose dreams no longer relied on her father's approval.

"You want plain speaking?" Her fingertips tingled with strange energy. She'd never stood up to her father in so bold a manner. Exhilaration warred with terror inside her breast, but if ever a situation called for reckless courage, this was it. "I won't be forced into an unwanted marriage just so you can expand your holdings."

The sudden darkness of her father's scowl nearly had her backing up, but she fisted her hands and held her ground. Daddy might have passed the fifty mark a couple of years ago, but he was still in his prime. Tall. Strong. Frightful when angry. Yet never cruel. Knowing that allowed her to stand firm despite the trembling his glare induced.

"Do you see a shotgun in my hands?" He held out open palms. His sleeves retracted to expose tanned wrists. He might be dressed in a formal evening suit, but he was still a man of

the outdoors, honed by hard work. “No one’s forcin’ anyone to do anything. It’s just a party.”

She said nothing, simply lifted her chin.

“All right! So I might have made it known among my acquaintances that my daughter was coming home from Boston and that I hoped to see her settled before long. What’s the harm in that? It’s a father’s job to see that his daughter is provided for.” He slapped his hands against his thighs and paced away from her, veering toward the large mahogany desk, where he conducted his written business. “You’re nineteen years old, Samantha. Most girls with your beauty and advantages are already married and setting up their houses.”

He wasn’t wrong, but he also wasn’t right.

Samantha crossed her arms, her long white gloves pulling tight at the elbows. “Deciding who I’ll spend my life with should be *my* choice, not yours.”

He leaned against the side of his desk and heaved a sigh. “I never said it weren’t your choice. All I’m doin’ is wranglin’ the bulls into a pen so you can look them over and pick the one that suits you.”

As if she wasn’t disgusted by the prospect enough already.

“Yes, well, the *bulls* you seem intent on wrangling all bear a remarkable resemblance to one another. All wealthy and highly invested in the cattle market. Makes me think you’re less interested in my personal happiness and more interested in what advantage my marriage can bring to your ranching empire.”

Her father scowled as he straightened away from the desk. “You think you got everything figured out, don’t you? I’m a coldhearted snake who only cares about profit, willing to sell my daughter to the highest bidder.”

Well . . . yes. Wasn’t he?

He ran his palm over his face, suddenly looking older than she’d ever seen him. Uncertainty nibbled at her conscience.

“I’ll admit to knowin’ precious little about raisin’ a girl. I probably made a mess of things more’n a few times, especially after your mother passed, but never in all my days have I wanted anything but the best for you.”

He jabbed a finger toward the door. “That ballroom is filled with cattlemen and investors because those are the men I’ve had an opportunity to observe over the last two decades. I know which are men of honor and which are thieves. I know who will stand strong in hard times and who will seek the easy path. I know the ones who honor God with their lips and those who honor him with their lives. I culled out the best of the herd and invited them to this here shindig to meet the daughter I value more than all the beeves in Texas, but it seems she’s too busy makin’ assumptions and casting stones to give any of them a second look.”

Samantha staggered backward as his disappointment speared her heart. She’d thought herself calloused, so accustomed to his rejection that nothing he said or did could hurt her. How wrong she’d been. Moisture flooded her eyes, forcing her to blink back the tide.

Had she misjudged his motives? Was he really trying to do right by her?

His high-handed behavior still rankled. He’d never once asked her opinion or preference. Yet she couldn’t honestly say his tactics were any different from how the fathers of her Eastern schoolmates secured husbands for their daughters. Arranged marriages happened all the time among the elite. Mergers of families for wealth, connections, or status. Affection was beneficial but not essential. And tales of love seemed only to exist on the scandal pages.

“Daddy, I . . .”

He waited, but she couldn’t find the right words. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. Heavens, she hadn’t even considered she

might hold the power to do so. But she wasn't ready to apologize. It hadn't been wrong to stand up for herself. Perhaps she could have chosen a kinder method, spoken with more care, but—

"I've abandoned my guests long enough." Her father left her floundering in indecision and strode to the door. "Don't feel like you have to return to the party. I'll come up with some excuse or another to explain your absence."

Instinctively, she reached out as if to stop him, but he was through the door before she could take a single step. The door clicked closed behind him, setting off a quake that crumbled the walls of the canyon already separating father from daughter, leaving an imposing gulf that might never be spanned.

Asher Ellis peeked under the sofa, praying he'd find no feet in his field of view. Technically, no feet were visible, but only because Miss Dearing's fancy blue dress swept the carpet, hiding everything beneath. Asher bit back a groan. His one chance to find the evidence necessary to reclaim his family's home was obliterated by a petulant princess and her ill-timed tirade.

Please leave. Please leave. Please leave.

The uncooperative woman remained unmoved by his silent pleas. She remained unmoved altogether, stuck in that singular spot as if a pair of needle-wielding mice had scurried beneath her hem and sewn her slippers to the expensive carpet.

Asher's lips twitched at the thought. He'd have to tell Fergus about that one. His little brother was constantly creating stories about mischievous animals, usually when he needed someone to blame his own mischief on, but the kid's imaginative tales delighted their mother, and anything that lightened Mama Bess's load was worth encouraging.

Plus, imagining Miss Snooty squealing and dashing about

the room after discovering said mice was a pleasure too rich to resist. She'd be barefoot, of course, having pulled her feet from the immovable slippers in a panic. Her dress hiked up, her fancified hair askew. She'd scream for Daddy, and of course Daddy and probably half the men in the ballroom would come running, guns drawn.

Asher's amusement died. His little fantasy had taken a dangerous turn. He needed fewer people in the study, not more. And there definitely should not be any weapons involved. Especially since the only creature currently hunkering on all fours in this room was *him*.

A delicate sniff echoed through the still room like a gunshot. Asher flinched and held his breath. Was she going to cry? Crying wasn't good. Crying meant hiding. Which meant not leaving. Crying could also mean collapsing on the very sofa he was sequestered behind. Isn't that why rich people kept fainting couches around? So their women could artfully collapse whenever their emotions became too weighty? This sofa sported arms carved from solid oak, so it didn't exactly fill the bill, but something told him Miss Dearing could make it work. She seemed the determined type.

Another sniff sounded. Followed by a soft rustling of fabric. Was she fetching a handkerchief? Wiping her eyes? Straightening her gown? Impossible to tell when all he could see was the bottom two inches of her skirt.

Just leave, woman. You're not gonna solve any of your problems in here. I, on the other hand, can solve all of my problems if you'll take your disgruntled self elsewhere.

Unbelievably, she complied. Her skirt swayed and swished all the way to the door. The handle rattled. A breath inhaled. Hinges whined. Then Miss Samantha Dearing and her tragic courtship woes slipped out into the hall, leaving Asher blessedly alone.

Finally.

Thank you, God.

Breaking into another man's house might be walking a thin spiritual line, but his cause was just. Eli Dearing had wrongfully evicted Asher's stepmother and brothers from their home. Callously put them out on the street with no way to support themselves. Besides, the Lord had sanctioned the work of spies before. Even helped them escape capture, in the case of the men sent into Jericho. What Asher was doing wasn't much different.

He wasn't here to steal anything or harm anyone. All he sought was proof that Mama Bess had not been late on her payments. With evidence on his side, he could leverage Dearing to get their home back, or at least obtain some kind of restitution to help them get back on their feet. Asher *knew* the rents had been paid. He sent his wages to Mama Bess every month for that express purpose. Had been doing so since his father died six years ago. There was no way she'd been delinquent. Dearing had just kicked them off the land because he'd wanted to, and his wealth and influence kept anyone from questioning his actions.

Not wanting to chance any other unwelcome visitors, Asher locked the door before resuming his search.

The study was large and rather unorganized, making the task more complicated than it should have been. It took ages for Asher to find the ranch ledgers for the last three years on a random shelf near the floor behind Dearing's desk. Deciphering the accounting system required more precious time as he hunted for itemized rent logs as opposed to generalized totals from all land holdings. Not easy since Dearing owned half of Palo Pinto County and over a dozen properties elsewhere.

At last, he found the records he sought. Tenant Elizabeth Ellis. He ran his finger along the column of numbers, his brow