



# The Homeplace

By Michelle Ferrer

1858, Clear Fork of the Brazos River, Texas

**Mucking out stalls ranked low on Rachel Wallace's list of farm chores. Short-handed as they were during planting season, the job fell to her. She shook the last stalks of clean straw from the pitchfork and stretched to ease her back. Her Pa insisted on a clean barn to keep the livestock healthy. Truth be told, she agreed and didn't really mind the work—especially in the cool of the spring when wildflowers spread their sweet aromas to mix with the earthy scents of fresh hay and straw.**

The rumble of horse hooves pounding down the lane at a hard gallop drowned out the rider shouting her name. He hauled back on the reins and ran the last few yards to the barn. She tensed as the boy stumbled in the dust. Sweat poured from his reddened face. He struggled to catch his breath. "Miss Rachel, you gotta come."

"What's happened? Spit it out, boy."

"It's your Pa. He got hurt," he gulped and pointed to the corn field near the bluff. "It's bad, Miss Rachel. Real bad."

She gripped the boy's shoulders. "Jedediah, tell me. Is he dead?"

"No, but he's cut up somethin' awful. The plow horse shied sideways and dragged him over the share blade."

Rachel grabbed the reins of the lathered horse and swung herself into the saddle. "Get a fresh mount and ride for Doc Sanders at the settlement."

"What if he won't come?"

"Hog-tie him to your saddle if you have to but get him here. Get goin'!" she hollered over her shoulder and rode for the bluff.

Rachel paced the length of the porch. She had lost count of the hours since she and Eli disentangled her father from the wreckage of reins and plow. Eli Miller, along with his sons Albert and Jedediah, had crafted a crude litter to carry him home. Mercifully, he stayed unconscious and didn't bleed out on the way. Doc Sanders stayed by her father's side all day except to call for hot water and clean towels.

A darksome feeling settled over the farm as Rachel and the Miller family mechanically tended to chores while they waited for news. Eli's wife Emma kept the coffee hot and dished out biscuits and stew to those who had appetite enough to eat.

Rachel leaned against the porch railing as the sun's rays slipped below the bluff leaving an echo of brilliant pink gold across the sky. The evening spring breeze freshened and quickly cooled the air although Rachel hardly noticed. Throughout this horrible day, she was haunted by the image of her father on the ground covered in more blood than she had seen since the last hog butchering. Her father, strong as the oak tree anchored on the bluff, was the steady force over the farm and her world. Now, he lay unconscious not twenty feet from away from her. All she could do was wait.

A door opened to her right. Emma stood in the doorway outlined by the light from the kitchen lantern. In silence, they stared at each other across the dog-trot breezeway.

"You come on in, now, Rachel. Let's get some warm food in you. You haven't eaten a bite since breakfast."

"I'm alright. Ain't really hungry. I'll just wait here for Doc."

Emma crossed the boards between them and tucked her arm into Rachel's. "This won't do, honey. I know you're worried, but starving yourself won't help your Pa. Now, let me fuss over you a bit and we'll both feel better."

Rachel let herself be led into the kitchen and settled into a chair. The table was set with a plate of fresh hot biscuits and a dish of apple butter. Warm stew bubbled on the stove. She felt Emma's eyes on her as she took one bite and then another until all that remained were biscuit crumbs. She reached for another while a small bowl of stew and a cup of hot coffee appeared next to her plate.

Rachel took in a spoonful of stew, then another. She paused and looked up at Emma. "Doc been fed?"

Emma nodded. "Took him a tray about an hour ago. Your Pa was sleeping when I went in."

Rachel pushed away the empty dishes and crossed her forearms on the table. She stared into the lantern light. "I was thinking out there on the porch about Pa lyin' in the field this morning. I ain't never seem him so still and quiet except for the day Mama died."

"You're scared aren't you, honey."

"I feel like I've been kettled and kicked by a half-broke pony. Pa's always been the strong one standin' tall. Didn't matter none what disasters got handed us. He always knew what to do. Now, I've got to be his rock to lean on, but I don't know if I can."

Emma patted her shoulder. "You want me to stay the night with you?"

Rachel straightened up in her chair and shook her head. "No, thank you, Emma. I'm that grateful for all you've done for us today. You go on home and tend to your family. I'll holler if I need you."

Alone in the kitchen, Rachel felt the silence hang on her like a thick fog. She was relieved that the Millers' house was a short stroll away where she was always welcome. Over the last seven years, Eli and Emma along with their six children had become as much family to her as her own kin. She often forgot they weren't blood related. She trusted them as much as Pa.

Footsteps from the breezeway announced Doc Sanders. He lowered himself into a chair across from her. The weary lines in his face marked the hours.

"He's stable for now. The plow blade missed the artery, but gut wounds are hard, Rachel. And he's lost a lot of blood. I gave him laudanum to make him sleep."

"Is he gonna die, Doc?"

"If he makes it through the night, there's a chance he'll mend."

"Well, that's a relief. I don't think I can stand him dyin'."

The doctor rubbed his whiskered chin. "There's something else you need to know. Get hold of yourself and listen hard, girl. With the reins looped around him, he was twisted sideways when the horse shied. Your Pa's back is broken. I don't think he felt the plow blade cut into him, which is a blessing. If he does pull through, though, he won't ever walk again."

Her eyes never left the doctor's face while the color drained from her own. She tucked her chin and took a deep breath. "Does he know?"

She blinked when the doctor shook his head. "That'll matter more to Pa than me. At least, he'll be alive. Let's keep this quiet for now."

Rachel noted the bags under the doctor's eyes and the lines of fatigue around his mouth. "Emma made up the spare room for you. You look all in, Doc. Why don't you take a rest. I'll sit up with Pa."

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Rachel crept across the bedroom floor and gazed down on her father lying still under the covers. His face was so pale and fragile like one of Mama's china cups. His eyes were closed and sunken in their sockets. A pile of blood-stained towels littered the corner of the room. She eased softly into the chair next to his bed.

"That you, girl?" His raspy voice quavered as he took in shallow breaths.

"I'm sorry, Pa. I tried not to wake you."

"Sit closer. Been a long time since we had time to palaver."

"You in any pain? Want something to eat?"

He shook his head and reached for her hand. "Just tired. Happened so fast, I don't hardly recollect much. How bad is it?"

"I ain't gonna lie, Pa. It's bad. The horse pulled you over the plow. You've lost a lot of blood, but Doc says there's a good chance you'll mend. You're gonna be laid up a while, though."

"How are you gonna manage the spring planting and tending to me, too?"

"Don't worry, Pa. The Millers are here. And Tom'll be back any day now from the horse sale. If need be, we can use some of that money to hire extra hands. We'll get it done. You just work on gettin' well."

"Tom . . . should've been back a week ago. Daughter, you sure you want to marry him? You love him enough to deal with those spells of his?"

Rachel pursed her lips while considering the question. "I s'pose I never thought about it that way. I know he can be hard to handle sometimes. Probably 'cause of that tomahawkin' he took as a kid. I'm of age now, and the pickin's in this country are mighty slim. You're kind enough not to say, Pa, but you know that I ain't the prettiest flower in the basket. Tom and me, we've been kinda bespoke for a

long time. Don't know about love, but at least we're used to each other."

He cracked a thin rueful smile. "Well, you did come out all gangly and tall like me. And you got my long face. But you also got your mama's thick strawberry hair and cornflower blue eyes. You got her quiet grit, too. Like her, you don't say much, nor nothin' you don't mean." He paused to catch his breath.

"You're a fine woman, Rachel. No need to sell yourself cheap. Now, promise me. Promise, you won't never sell this farm, no matter what."

"I ain't goin' anywhere. Hell-fire, Pa, our whole family is buried on that hill yonder under the oak tree. If that don't make this place our home, nothin' will. Don't you fret, now. We're stayin' put and nobody's livin' here but us. And you'll be here to see to it."

"You'll honor our agreement with the Millers?"

"You can count on it. They're family."

He squeezed her hand and smiled. She sat quietly next to him, content to be near while he rested. From the open window, the echoes of gathering crows grew louder as they neared the house. Rachel's eyes opened wide, amazed at the number of birds in the flock that kept growing until they peppered the sky black.

Her father roused at the familiar echo of their evening calls. A weak smile touched his lips.

"Pa, listen to all those crows comin' to roost. Did you call them in? You always could mimic their caws as good as they do. Looks like they're headed for the big oak on Cemetery Hill. Maybe they heard about your accident and are here to cheer you up."

"They're a welcome sound, Daughter. I'm tired now. You talk to them for me, tonight."

"Okay, Pa. You rest easy now. Doc says you need to sleep." She tucked his arm under the covers and sat close until Doc Sanders relieved her.

Too agitated to sleep, she wandered to the oak tree for a talk with the crows although it was full dark now and they might not be feeling too chatty. Moonlight guided her to the top of the hill. To her surprise, the birds had not settled for the night. The tree hummed with the rustle of wings shuffling in the branches.

Rachel stood under the tree puzzled by the large gathering. The crows flew in to roost most every night, but a gathering of this size was unusual. She sniffed for signs of a coming storm, but the air was soft with no crackle in it. As if the birds spoke to her, she suddenly froze in terrified understanding.

"You know, don't you. All of you. My Pa is dying. And

you've come to say good-bye."

She gasped and leaned against the tree trunk as the world started to spin. A suffocating ache in her chest threatened to crush the breath out of her. She slid to the ground as wracking sobs rumbled up from her stomach and exploded from her throat. Tears streamed down her cheeks in rivers that wet her blouse. She fumbled to her knees and clasped her hands together in desperate prayer.

"Oh, Pa, stay with me. Please don't leave me. Dear God, please . . . oh, please, let him stay. I need him more than you do. PLEASE," she shouted up the tree and into the heavens. "Please," she whispered.

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Rachel turned the horses and cows out into the meadow to graze while she cleaned the stalls. After breakfast, she would cut some prairie hay and leave it to dry on the ground. The stifling heat arriving in early May promised a sizzling summer to come. They would need all the fodder they could gather to keep the stock fed.

In the weeks that followed her father's funeral, Rachel buried the crushing ache of grief under the rhythm of farm chores. The crows disappeared as if the air on the farm had soured. She missed their nightly ruckus.

Eli tasked Jedediah with moving the small flock of sheep to the upper meadow leaving them another hand short. Eli and his remaining sons shouldered the extra burden of Jedediah's chores. Tom's continued absence put a strain on everyone. Rachel's patience with him grew thin. They needed not only his help with the farm but also the money from the sale of their horses to see them through to the harvest.

She propped open the barn doors to let the fresh morning breeze sweep through. The cool air helped dry her sweat and offered a reprieve before the sun sent the temperatures soaring.

An urgent high-pitched whinny from her broodmare, Sallie, echoed across the meadow. The horse pricked her ears and curled her tail high as she pranced around her foal. Lula's cowbell rang out as she steered her calf to the safety of the herd on the far side of the meadow.

Scanning the tree line, Rachel caught a glimpse of tawny fur as two coyotes sprinted to flank the foal. Sallie circled the foal keeping herself between them and her baby. She kicked and bit at the predators as they looked for an opening to get the foal.

"Buck, sic 'em," Rachel yelled forgetting that Buck was in the north meadow with the sheep. She grabbed the Mississippi muzzleloader and aimed, waiting for a clear shot. One coyote maneuvered to lunge for the foal's leg.

Rachel fired as the other vaulted over Sallie's back. Both coyotes yipped and somersaulted flat on the ground. Neither moved.

Surprised, Rachel trotted to the dead animals. She'd fired only one bullet, not enough to take down both animals. She knelt beside each one confirming the kill.

Behind her a deep voice rumbled like thunder. "Reckon we got 'em."

She whirled around to face a mountain of a man with a big gun to match. And tall enough that she had to raise her chin to look him in the eye. His brown slouch hat sat on thick wavy black hair that came to his shoulders. Heavy work boots along with denim trousers held up by suspenders over a tan cotton shirt said he was a farmer. She noticed he was clean shaven although that didn't appear to be a daily event. His full lips pulled back in a smile revealing even teeth. A Kentucky rifle rested on his shoulder.

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***Well, I'm grateful to you, Mr. Reed. You're a good shot yourself. I guess you saved me from having to beat that second coyote to death.***

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"You're a good shot, ma'am. Those two ain't a bother no more. You want the hides, or should we leave them out there for the buzzards?"

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Beggin' your pardon. My name is John Reed. I'm from Fayette County, Kentucky."

"Well, I'm grateful to you, Mr. Reed. You're a good shot yourself. I guess you saved me from having to beat that second coyote to death."

His laugh was full and hearty. "Glad to be helpful though that mare of yours is feisty enough to save you the trouble."

"Rachel. I heard shots. What's goin' on out there? You alright?"

Rachel looked around John Reed and waved toward the house. "We're comin', Emma."

"Mr. Reed, Emma's the best cook in these parts. To give you thanks, you're welcome to share breakfast with me and my family if you care to partake."

As always, breakfast was a noisy and spirited affair with the Miller clan. Rachel tried hard to ignore her Pa's empty

chair. When they had all eaten their fill, the girls cleared the table leaving Rachel, Eli, and John Reed alone to talk. Emma refilled the coffee cups and joined the conversation.

"Mrs. Miller, Miss Rachel promised you're the best cook hereabouts, and that was no lie."

"You're kind to say, Mr. Reed."

"Y'all are a lively family." John Reed sipped his hot coffee and nodded to the empty chairs. "Looks like you're missin' a few."

Eli chimed in. "My son Jedediah's camped out in the north meadow with the sheep. We'll spell him in a couple of days when Tom gets back. He's on an errand."

"If you'll pardon my being personal, I can't quite work out the relations. Mrs. Miller, are you Miss Rachel's sister?"

Rachel smiled. "Emma for certain feels like a sister to me, Mr. Reed, but no. The Millers were headed west when their wagon broke a wheel and an axle just outside our farm. Emma was close to her time with little Emily, so it made sense for them to rest a spell. They've been here ever since. And we took in Tom when his folks was killed by Indians. You can find all my blood kin up yonder on that hill by the big oak tree."

Rachel swallowed hard to steady her voice. "My Pa just passed on. I don't think I could've made it through without the Millers sharing the grievin' with me. So, you're right. We're a lively family, even if the blood is different."

"Blood ain't the only way to make a family. Leastways not as I see it. Seems to me like you've cobbled together a fine family from strays needin' and wantin' a place to call home. I'm right sorry to hear about your Pa. I lost my wife and baby girl to the milk sickness about a year ago. After that, my heart just wasn't in that farm no more. Didn't feel like home with them gone, so, I struck out for Texas."

Eli leaned back in his chair crossing one arm over the other. "What brings you here today, Mr. Reed?"

"Well, I met a fellow in Fort Worth. He said I should come to the Cross Timbers Settlement and take a look at the Wallace farm. Said it was a choice piece of land and up for sale 'cause Old Mr. Wallace had died of a sudden. He sure didn't steer me wrong. This place feels right, where a man can make a lasting home. So, I'd like to make an offer on it."

Three pairs of eyes stared at John Reed. Rachel took a deep breath. "Where in Fort Worth, and when, did you meet this man?"

John Reed smothered a laugh. "About a week ago, in a saloon . . . uh, pardon, ladies. It's kind of a funny story. He was pistol-whipping a fella for calling him a cheat at cards. I pulled him off 'cause a man can't have that kind

of behavior over a card game. Well, sir, when I set him on the floor, he took one look at the size of me and decided to settle down. We had a couple of drinks and that's when he told me about this place."

No one at the table laughed. Eli asked the burning question. "What was his name? Can you describe him?"

"Uh, a young fella, about twenty-somethin'. Kinda thin but wiry. Had a big scar across his forehead. Side of his head looked a mite bashed in. Can't quite recollect his name. Jamieson, I think. That's it. Tom Jamieson. Wait-- would that be your Tom?"

A pall settled over the table muting the sociable mood. Rachel broke the awkward silence. "Mr. Reed, it seems you've been sent on a fool's errand. This farm is not for sale."

"I don't understand, Miss Rachel. This Jamieson fella swore he was acting on your say-so."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reed. This farm is not for sale."

Eli stood in the doorway and watched John Reed ride away. He turned to Emma standing by the stove with her arms crossed over her chest. They exchanged glances and looked at Rachel. She sat very still, staring into space, her arm hooked over the back of the kitchen chair.

"I remember when we found Tom. It was up by Birdville at the junction of the west and clear forks of the Trinity River. His family was killed by Indians. We buried what was left of them. Guess the Indians didn't find Tom. He was stumblin' around half-blind from a tomahawk wound to the side of his head. Birdville had no doctor. Mama wouldn't stand for leavin' him behind helpless as he was. So, we brought him with us. Mama tended to him the best she could. Took a full year before he could walk a straight line and talk without slurring his words.

"Pa always said Tom was never right in the head after that. We called his fits and temper storms his spells. Mama knew how to handle him. And I defended him. Ma and Pa took him in and raised him like one of their own. Gave him a family to hold on to. Now, he pays them back by stealing our land and all we hold dear. That rotten, black-hearted, son-of-a-bitch!"

Emma gasped. "Rachel, I've never heard you talk like that!"

Rachel looked up at Emma, her cornflower eyes turning blue steel cold.

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The rooster crowed and the rising light of dawn settled over Rachel as she lugged two pails of fresh warm milk to the springhouse to cool. She stepped outside to an easy

breeze blowing in from the high plains. Most often dawn was her favorite time of day when the critters and the land seemed at peace. This morning, after a restless night of pacing the floor and fitful sleep, she was tired and out of sorts.

Tom's betrayal of the family had turned the remaining vestiges of her secure life upside down. Pa had been right all along about Tom. She and Mama were wrong to have coddled him. The time had come to cut him loose and send him on his way.

She picked up a hoe from the tool shed and headed to the cotton fields. A morning of toilsome weed chopping might settle her down. Overhead, the familiar sound of long-absent crows caught her ear. She scanned the sky at the shrill three-caw predator warning. To the west, above their favorite oak tree, two crows harassed a buzzard hovering near their roosting site. Despite the buzzard's determination, the crows gave him no quarter and attacked from all sides. At last, the buzzard gave up and headed for easier hunting grounds. Rachel smiled.

Come the noon hour, bellies growled and sweat poured. When Emma rang the dinner bell, all hands washed away a collective field of grime and tucked into a hearty meal.

Afterwards, the farm went quiet as the drowsy heat sent everyone to their beds for a deserved afternoon rest.

Rachel had just shut her eyes when the jingle of bridle and a horse's snort announced a visitor. She made her way to the porch in time to see Tom dismount. Her eyes narrowed and her face hardened.

"Hi, Honey. I'm back." His disarming grin hesitated as he stepped onto the porch. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

Rachel took note of his shiny new boots, linen shirt and silk scarf. A clean palmetto straw hat kept the sun off his face. And a new pistol rested on his hip. "You've left us short-handed nigh on to two months now. Where you been--other than to the sutler's store?"

"Aw, now, Rachel. You won't be mad at me when I tell you. I stayed in Fort Worth tryin' to make some money to buy you a gold weddin' ring. I borrowed a little of the horse sale money as a stake. It's about time we tie the knot, don't you think?"

"So, where's the ring?"

"Well, I was gettin' there. But then I heard about your Pa and decided to hurry home. See, I figured with him gone, you'd want to get away from this place to forget. I came to help you with the sale."

Rachel nodded her head. "Well, you figured wrong. I'm staying where my kin rests. This is my home. I ain't leavin'."

"But, Rachel, I promised a man. You gotta sell."

"I know. John Reed. I sent him away."

"But, honey, don't you see? Selling the farm gets us a fresh start. We can head to Denver. I hear they found gold up there."

Rachel's jaw tightened as her patience ran out. "You ain't hearin' me. Take the horse money you already stole from us and go on to Denver. And don't come back. You ain't welcome here no more."

Tom's face darkened red making his forehead scar blaze white. "That ain't enough. I need the farm to make a decent grubstake. And you ain't gonna stop me."

He gripped her wrist and jerked her toward him. "You and me, we're going to the settlement and get hitched. Right after, you're selling this farm to John Reed. I ain't gonna spend my life grubbin' in this here dirt, and you're my ticket out."

With her free hand, Rachel slapped him hard. "Hell will freeze over first."

She didn't see his fist coming at her cheek, but did see stars as she hit the floor.

Tom grabbed the front of her shirt and pulled her face close to his. "I'll kill you if you don't sell."

She started to laugh. "That won't do you no good. The Millers own half this farm. And they don't like you."

Tom let go of her shirt and stared down at her. "What do you mean? So, you're tellin' me they get half, and I get nothin'?"

"Pa knew you were no good."

His lips tightened into a slit. He unholstered his gun and rotated the cylinder to full cock. "Get packed. I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

"To solve a problem . . . eight problems."

Rachel scrambled to her feet. She grabbed her Pa's Walker Colt and chased after him.

"Hey, Tom, you're forgettin' something."

"Yeah? Like what?" Tom turned to face her. His eyes widened as Rachel fired.

The explosion ripped through the quiet afternoon. The Millers rushed out of their house ready for trouble. Rachel stood over Tom as Eli and Emma came close. "He was gonna kill all of you so he could sell the farm."

Eli looked at the gun in her hand. Tom's gun lay next to him. Emma leaned over Tom's body staring at the wound that tore his throat out. She clicked her tongue.

"Looks like a big prairie rattler killed Tom. Got him right in the throat. Yep, looks like that rattler just hung on pumping that venom into poor old Tom. Sure is a shame." She looked up at the sun overhead. "Eli, you and the boys best get him in the ground. What with this heat and all, sooner's better than later. We'll have the preacher say a few words next time he's around."

A few days later, Jedediah brought the sheep down from the north meadow for their spring shearing. No one mentioned Tom or the fresh mound on the hill.

Rachel finished her morning chores earlier than usual. She poured herself a cup of coffee to savor in the cool breeze of the porch. She missed her Pa more than usual today. The family seemed off-center without him.

"Here's to you, Pa," she took a swallow and raised her cup to his memory.

A horse and rider loped their way up the lane followed by a tawny short-haired dog. She frowned thinking it was early of a morning for callers. The horse slowed to a walk as it neared the house. John Reed dropped the reins and made his way to the porch steps with the dog on his heels.

"Mr. Reed. Looks like you've picked up a friend."

"Yes, ma'am. He's been following me for a week now. Can't get rid of him, though I truly don't want to. He's a good hunter . . . keeps me company, too. I'm callin' him Ruffit."

"What brings you out here today?"

"I heard about Tom's passing. Snake bite's a hard way to go. And I've got a proposition for you."

"Mr. Reed. I can't make it no plainer. This farm's not for sale."

"I know that, Rachel. I'm asking you to hear me out. I've thought about movin' on . . . tried to several times. But each time this place calls me to it. I figure with Tom gone you'll be short-handed. Well, I've got a strong back and cash to boot if the need arises. I've got no place to go, and don't want to. So, if you'll have me, I'd like to stay and help you work the farm."

The silence between them grew as Rachel pondered his offer. He waited patiently for her answer.

"Does your offer include the dog?"

John Reed smiled and nodded.

Rachel turned to the house. "Emma, set out another plate for breakfast. We got a couple of strays out here needin' a home."

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**Michelle Ferrer**



Michelle Ferrer writes historical fiction and western stories that can't be ignored. She lives in Texas with an understanding husband. Michelle is a member of Women Writing the West and the Writers League of Texas. Her writing efforts are assisted by a warrior chihuahua who perches between lap and keyboard.