

The Truitts of Texas Book One

What Brings
Us Joy

TERESA WELLS



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*To Rick.
Your love and encouragement made this
book a reality.*



Chapter 1

The Victorian crazy quilt, a fad a hundred years ago, was an American invention in vogue for about a quarter century from 1875 to 1900. Like giant jigsaw puzzles, they were made of irregular pieces of silk, satin, velvet or plush sewn onto a solid backing of a lighter material and further decorated with embroidery stitches.—The San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, California) Sunday, September 01, 1985.

June 4, 1895

As far as the neck could crane, dry prairie grass and squat trees dotted the dusty landscape. Delia Truitt pressed her forehead to the glass and groaned. Texas was worse than she'd imagined.

As the train's steady rhythm slowed, the steward opened the compartment door, accompanied by a whoosh of air and the clackety-clack of wheels on tracks. "Next stop, Blooming Grove."

Delia's pulse skittered. She'd lived in one home all her life.

After eighteen years, she knew every creaking stair, each branch of the magnolia trees, and could walk the lane to her grandparents' home with her eyes closed. She knew every shop owner in town and which one would slip her a swatch of silk or satin for her crazy quilt. How many times had she bicycled alongside her school chums and debated the merits of women's suffrage? But all that changed the day Papa told them the bank was foreclosing. In Texas, Uncle Robert agreed to provide shelter and work for six months.

It was after the six-month time period that worried Delia.

Her fourteen-year-old sister, Hazel, snapped her book shut with a sigh. "What if nobody likes me in Blooming Grove?"

Delia waved away the words as if they were gnats. "Don't be silly. You'll make pals in no time, especially since you're still in school."

Hazel's blue eyes widened. "Oh! Maybe I'll have a beau."

Delia lifted a brow. "Don't you think you're a little young?"

"Better too young than eighteen with no prospects."

Delia dipped her chin. "I don't care one whit about courting and marriage." Not entirely true, but her snippy little sister didn't need to know.

The train's pace slowed, reigniting the nervous sensation in her stomach. Delia touched the quilt piece lying on her lap. She'd been too lost in her anxious thoughts to complete the border of Herringbone stitches. Now the needle hung suspended on the white embroidery thread where she'd stopped working. She completed the stitch, then secured the thread before reaching for the scissors.

Before she could open her sewing box, her attention snagged on movement among the other passengers. Murmurs and gasps grew louder. Across the aisle, a man pointed to something outside.

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Hazel grabbed Delia's arm. "Look outside. That man is too close."

Just beyond their window, a weathered man on horseback scowled at the passenger train, rifle propped against his leg. When their car slowly rolled past, Delia's gaze connected with his. She drew back with a gasp. "What an awful man."

Hazel rubbed her arms. "I know, like he wanted to murder every one of us."

"Betcha he's gonna rob the train."

Delia started, and Hazel whirled to glare at their mischievous older brother, seated behind them. "Rabb Truitt! That's downright mean. I'm going to sit next to Thomas. He's my favorite anyway."

With a huff, Hazel flounced up the aisle, and Rabb slid into the vacant seat next to Delia, grinning. "Works every time."

"You shouldn't tease like that, especially when it might be true." The man had scared her, too, but if she admitted her fear to Rabb, he'd tease her mercilessly.

"Shoot, he's just a cowpoke. Besides, y'all coddle Hazel. She's gotta have leather skin iffen she aims to survive in Texas."

"Iffen? You sound like you have had no education."

"And you sound like a proper school marm."

Outside, the brakes screeched, and the locomotive jolted to a stop alongside a brick depot bearing the sign Blooming Grove. Before she could save it, her quilt slid to the dirty floor. Rabb reached for it, then yelped. He put his smallest finger in his mouth, frowning. "You oughta be careful with them needles, Red."

"I hope you didn't bleed on it." She examined the fabric, relieved when she found it unblemished. "I've worked too hard on this to have it spoiled."

"Can't figure why. That thing wouldn't keep a mouse warm."

She gave him a sideways glance. “You know very well it’s not supposed to keep anyone warm, human or otherwise. This is art.” She blew a speck of dirt from the fabric before folding it into a small bundle and tucking it into her carpetbag.

Departing passengers formed a line to exit, and the air filled with eager chatter. Delia pulled on her white gloves and stood, placing her hand on her stomach. If only she’d had breakfast. But her appetite had disappeared somewhere outside Georgia and everything familiar. “I suppose we must go.” She patted her straw boater. “Is my hat straight?”

“Yup.”

She swatted his arm. “You didn’t even look. What kind of woman makes her first appearance with her hat askew? Please, Rabb.”

With a roll of his brown eyes, he pulled his lanky body to stand and studied her. “It’s straight.”

He placed his derby on his wavy hair before stepping into the aisle with a gesture for her to precede him in the queue. She peered out the compartment windows for a view of the town. “I can’t see anything for all that steam.”

The young woman in front of her peeked over her shoulder with a giggle, obviously aimed at Rabb. This kind of silly flirtation happened all the time when her brother was around. She supposed Rabb was decent looking, if one liked tall men with square jaws.

The locomotive steam dissipated, and she could make out the town through the smudged windows. Horse-drawn wagons and pedestrians made their way along the broad street lined with two-story brick buildings and single-story clapboard storefronts.

Rabb tapped her shoulder and gestured for her to close the space between her and the rest of the line proceeding up the

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aisle. Close behind her, he said, "Listen, I been doing some thinking."

"I hope your head doesn't ache from the effort."

He nudged her forward. "Hey, now, I'm serious. I need to settle down."

"Ha!"

"What's funny about that?" Hurt dimmed his brown eyes.

"I'm sorry. It's just the idea of you as a responsible husband and father seems a little far-fetched." She winced and tried again. "You can't blame me for being surprised. You've never said anything about a family."

He snorted. "Don't you think it's time? I'll be twenty in a couple of months."

"Hmm."

"Problem is, I need a good woman."

"That's not a problem. Women practically fall at your feet." She inclined her head toward the girl ahead of them to illustrate his effect on women.

He grimaced. "Naw, that's just flirting. That ain't what I'm talking about. You gotta help me out, Red."

Her shoulders fell. "Why me?" The last thing she wanted was to be responsible for him. She'd had enough of trying to corral his antics during their school years. This fell to her simply because they were always in the same class, despite him being a year older. "In fact, you owe me plenty for all the homework I finished for you."

"And one of these days, I'll pay you back. Meantime, help me get a good woman, like you."

She splayed her fingers over her high collar. "Like me? Well, if you aren't the sweetest thing."

"Only, my woman's gotta know how to cook."

Delia dropped her hand. "Very funny." Of course, he would bring up her lack of talent in the kitchen.

“And I want a woman who can keep a house. Darn my socks. Mostly, she’s gotta be pretty. So, once you make friends, bring them around.”

She turned to face him. “Absolutely not. You want a maid, not a marriage.”

“Come on, you know what I mean. Do it for your favorite brother. Please?”

An idea sprouted. Perhaps she could budge a little, as long as she got something out of the agreement. After all, any friend of hers would be too clever to fall for his schemes. “If I agree to introduce you to my new acquaintances, what will you do for me?”

He shrugged. “What do you want?”

She pretended to consider this, though she knew exactly the task she had in mind. “I suppose I could introduce you to my new friends, if you’ll keep my bicycle in working order.”

“Is that all? Sure.”

Was that all? It was everything. That bicycle gave her freedom. She could go where she liked, all around the town, without asking one of her brothers to escort her. But the maintenance required to keep it in working order was bothersome.

“We have an agreement, then.” She thrust her hand toward him, and after a few seconds, he took it in a firm shake.

At the exit, she stepped through the narrow door, pausing on the top step to gaze at the people below. She shaded her eyes against the glare.

“Here we go.” Papa extended his hand to help her down the steps and onto the uncovered platform. Self-conscious, she touched her straw hat and glanced down at her green travel suit.

Coming to stand beside her, Rabb whistled low. “Look at all these folks!”

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She'd expected to see a smattering of grimy gunslingers, especially after encountering the horseman earlier. But this group resembled the people she'd just left behind in Georgia. Men held umbrellas aloft to shade their women, who laughed and chattered in their puffed-sleeved, pastel finery. A sudden gust of hot wind caused most to clutch the brims of their feathered hats. Voices rose in a cacophony of joyful greetings, sharp directives, or sing-song advertising, the latter courtesy of the knickered boys hawking newspapers or shoeshines.

The tension in her shoulders relaxed. Maybe this move wouldn't be so bad.



Papa's brother, Uncle Robert, arranged for delivery of the few pieces of furniture they'd brought, and told them to go ahead to the carriage. "We don't want to keep Mary waiting, you know."

Mother frowned, her hand on the growing bulge in her midsection. "Children, let's not dawdle."

Delia exchanged a look with Rabb. "Children? Who's she talking about?"

Hazel tossed her head. "Me. I'm her baby."

Rabb yanked Hazel's hair. "Enjoy it now, kid. That baby's gonna be here sooner than you think."

"Shush!" Wasn't it just like him to speak of such an indelicate topic? She quickened her pace, much too interested in their new town to hang back with her siblings. Men in dapper suits tipped their bowler hats as she passed, their glances unmistakably admiring. Delia smiled to herself.

Just ahead, a middle-aged woman in a carriage waved a white handkerchief at them. "Hello, hello, this way."

Mother rushed forward to embrace the woman, presumably Aunt Mary. After introductions were made, Aunt

Mary waved them aboard the large, open-air carriage. “What an auspicious group of young people. You all were just little tikes when we left, and just look at you now.”

Capturing Delia’s hand in hers, Aunt Mary smiled warmly. “Your beautiful auburn hair reminds me of your grandmother’s, when she was young.”

Now this was a woman she could love. “Really? My cousins said as much, but since I only knew Grandmother with white hair, I wasn’t sure.”

“And your papa wrote us about your talent with needle and thread.”

Mother sighed. “If only she’d use her talent for something more practical than crazy quilts.”

The comment stung. True, Mother frequently chided her for spending so much time on her pretty quilts, but to criticize in front of this relative was different.

Delia was relieved when Aunt Mary broke the silence by changing the subject. “Looking at you young folks is like looking at the faces of home. Like I said, Delia takes after Mama Truitt with those brown eyes and red hair—you, too, Rabb. Thomas, you are the image of your father when he was young, with your dark blue eyes and hair. And Hazel, you favor your mama.” She winked at Mother. “We shall see who the babe resembles. When will he or she arrive, dear?”

Mother’s cheeks reddened. Before she responded, Hazel said, “October.”

Aunt Mary clapped her hands. “An autumn baby! Right in time for the county fair.”

County fair? Delia started to ask her for details, but Uncle Robert and Papa joined them, saying the wagon with their belongings would deliver the goods later this afternoon. With great flourish, Uncle Robert put the carriage into motion.

Aunt Mary clasped her hands. “Our first stop is our home. I

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thought y'all must be hungry, seeing as it's noon. My cook has prepared luncheon."

The journey to their grand Queen Ann-style home didn't take long. In no time, the family sat in upholstered chairs around an ornately carved wooden table. Delia traced the rim of the fine china, remembering luncheons back in Georgia. She tamped down the longing for home.

The chicken sandwiches were the best Delia had ever tasted, and the lemonade was just the right blend of tart and sweet. Conversation was easy and relaxed until Uncle Robert lit a cigar and squinted at Papa.

"Will, what do you think of Texas so far? Not as primitive as you'd thought, eh?" His baritone chuckle sounded without waiting for an answer. His meaty arm gestured to the elegant dining room. "As you can see, I've done well for myself. If you play your cards right, I think you can overcome your foolish financial decisions and make a decent life out here."

Goblet to her lips, Delia froze. Did she hear him correctly? One look around the table confirmed it. Papa coughed into his napkin, no doubt stalling his reply. Mother's lips pressed into a hard line. Delia lowered her drink. How dare her uncle speak of their impoverished circumstances? The breeze from the open window gently ruffled the tassels on the velvet curtains, the only movement in the dining room.

She had to say something, take up for her father. But before she could, Papa spoke. "Let's speak about this in private."

"Come now, Will, we can talk plainly. Surely you see how foolish it was to trust our cousin with your funds. Of course, our father always said you were too gullible for your own good." Uncle Robert laughed. He thumped Papa's arm as if to coax his agreement, though Papa didn't respond.

Mother's fork clinked against the glassware. When she spoke, her words were low. "I beg your pardon, my William is

neither foolish nor gullible. He is the kindest, most thoughtful man I know." Her voice broke. "I knew this move was a mistake."

She started to rise, but Papa stopped her, speaking too quietly to discern. Delia held her breath. She should stop all this. But what could she say?

Uncle Robert puffed on his cigar, blowing a stream of smoke over the table. He watched Mother and Papa's whispered conversation, tapping his bulky gold ring upon the wooden armrest. "Esther." He waited until she and Papa reluctantly met his gaze. "Do you really think I would bring your family all this way, at considerable expense, I might add, if I thought so little of my brother? I'm a businessman, and a good one. I brought you out here expecting your success."

The knuckles on Mother's fists were white, but her voice was level. "I'm well aware of our obligation to you. My husband and I will not only meet your expectations, we shall exceed them."

Aunt Mary chuckled and patted Mother's hand. "Of course you shall, dear. We have no doubt of it. Now let's stop all this serious talk and enjoy the meal, shall we?"

Oh, this was dreadful. They just arrived. Why all this dissension? Delia knotted her napkin in her fist and stared at her brothers, willing them to take action.

But it was Hazel who took center stage. Yawning loudly, she pouted. "Can we go now? I'm exhausted."

Aunt Mary sprang up. "Well, of course, dear. How very rude we've been, keeping you all from your new home." She cast a side-eyed glance at Uncle Robert. "Come, let us be on our way."

He smushed the cigar on a porcelain bread plate. "But there's chocolate cake for dessert."

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His wife arched her eyebrows. “Robert, the child said she is tired.”

The steely words hit their mark. Uncle Robert’s expression sagged. “Oh, fine.” He tossed his napkin onto the table and hurried from the room, his wife on his heels.

Everyone rose to follow them. Delia glanced at her parents and watched as Mother reached for Papa’s hand. Papa lifted her fingers to his lips, and Delia turned away, touched at the rare show of affection. How often she took for granted the way they supported each other. These last weeks had been so difficult, but she never doubted her parents’ love for each other. Perhaps that was more important than a comfortable way of life.

Delia hurried to her sister and took her aside. “Was that real, or did you purposely distract all of us?”

Hazel’s eyes brightened with mischief. “You be the judge.”

Delia laced her arm through Hazel’s and followed their brothers out of the room. Just then, the door to the kitchen swung open, and Mrs. Van Dyke, the cook, entered the dining room bearing a tall layer cake in her hands. She stopped short. “Where’d they go?”

Turning back, Thomas pushed a dark lock of hair off his forehead and cast a longing glance at the confection. “Ma’am, is that chocolate cake?”

Mrs. Van Dyke beamed. “Would you like to take some with you? It’d be a shame to let it go to waste.”

Thomas lit up. “I’d sure appreciate it, ma’am.”

The woman returned quickly with a brown paper-wrapped parcel and placed it in Thomas’s big hands. “There you go.”

Rabb clapped Thomas on the shoulder. “Looks like uncle’s not getting his cake.”



Clarence Parker wiped his brow, standing after attaching the last wheel on the carriage. He had to admit, the conveyance was a beautiful creation. This was the finest piece of work he had ever crafted, thanks to Mr. Hardy granting him unrestricted creativity in making carriages. The coach was constructed for the banker and mayor, Clive Waldrop. The man was hard to satisfy, but this level of craftsmanship left no room for criticism.

Maybe this would persuade him to give Clarence an opportunity for a loan. Time ticked away before Mr. Hardy would retire and sell the place. Hopefully, his employer would be patient as he raised the funds to buy the business. No doubt, others would want a shot, considering how profitable the hardware store had become.

He took his handkerchief and mopped his face. Footsteps sounded behind him, and he turned, surprised to spot Thad Lewis. "Hey, there, Deputy. You come to admire my work?"

The wiry man didn't return the grin. "Sheriff wants to talk to you."

Clarence tucked the kerchief into his shirt pocket. "Can it wait until I get off in a few hours?"

Lewis shook his head. "He said now."

Worry coiled in Clarence's gut. What did the lawman want with him?

He glanced past Thad, toward the door to the hardware store. "Let me tell Mr. Hardy."

"I'll wait."

Clarence walked back into the store. He found Mr. Hardy seated at his desk, scattered bits of paper before him. The man looked up, blinking behind thick glasses. "Just the person I needed to talk to. I can't seem to make sense of these numbers." He chuckled apologetically, gesturing to the ledger book.

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“Yes, sir, I’d be pleased to go over them. Only, I need to head over to the sheriff’s office for a bit.”

The older man stood with effort, concern in his expression. “Is something wrong?”

Again, dread corkscrewed in his belly. Clarence lifted his shoulders. “I’m not sure. Okay if I go with the deputy now?”

“Son, can I do anything to help?”

Son. Clarence swallowed. Mr. Hardy acted more like a father than Pa ever had. “Thank you, sir, but I’ll be fine. I promise I won’t be gone long.”

Mr. Hardy nodded. “Take your time.”

Clarence walked with the deputy along Second Street, no words exchanged between them. The departing locomotive was visible at the end of the road, the rhythmic chug-chug gaining speed to match Clarence’s heartbeat. At the lawman’s office, which also contained two jail cells, Thad held open the door.

Sheriff Akin stood, directing his gaze upon his second in command. “Deputy, go walk the town.”

Hanging his hat on a peg, Thad chuckled. “A little early for that, don’t you reckon?”

The sheriff’s droopy white mustache hid his mouth, but the muscle in his jaw pulsed. Finally, Thad threw up his hands.

“Aw, fine.” Thad shoved his hat on his cropped head. The door slammed behind him, making the window glass shudder.

Sheriff Akin’s eyes shifted to Clarence. “Pull up a seat.”

“Yes, sir.” Sweat dampened the fabric under his arms. He grabbed a ladder-back chair in the small lobby and situated it before the desk. Removing his hat, he let it rest on his lap. Glancing up at the wall behind the sheriff, he noticed a new Wanted poster. His insides went cold. So that’s what this was about.

Akin thumped the newspaper lying on his desk. “Seen today’s paper?”

Clarence shook his head. The older man wordlessly passed him the weekly issue of the *Blooming Grove Gazette*. The headlines confirmed his fears: **Big Jake Killed in Jail Break Out**. In the smaller typeset below, *Virgil Mason Escapes*.

His mouth turned cotton dry. He willed the tremor from his voice as he returned the paper. “They’re coming here.”

He hadn’t been aware that he’d spoken his thoughts until the sheriff leaned over his desk. “And just how do you know that? You got a tip this was gonna happen?”

“What? Oh, no, sir. I haven’t seen any of them since that day in court.”

“Then how do you know their plans?”

“I—I don’t.” He swallowed, unable to admit that this very thing had occupied his nightmares for the last eight years. “It makes sense. I testified against the gang.” Against Virgil. And if he was certain of anything, it was the depth of the outlaw’s hatred of turncoats.

The sheriff stroked his mustache thoughtfully. “And they want revenge.”

Clarence gripped his hat brim and nodded. How was this happening? He never should have settled down and grown comfortable. Not here, at least. He should’ve gone far away, to California or Oregon or Canada.

No prison was strong enough to hold Big Jake’s gang.

He needed to go. “Is that all, then? Mind if I get back to the store? Mr. Hardy needs me.”

The sheriff held up one hand. “Soon enough. Before that, I need you to do something for me.”

Clarence’s gut tightened. Was this some kind of test? The lawman hadn’t wanted his help before. He used his shirtsleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

Tension eased from the sheriff’s expression. “Look, I’m not

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looking to cast stones. I've watched you. Old man Hardy trusts you. Reckon I can too."

"You said you needed something?"

Akin speared the newspaper with his finger. "These varmints are headed to my town, and you're the only man who can spot them. If Virgil Mason comes to town, or any of his associates, I want to know. Can you do that?"

Was that all? "Yessir."

Sheriff Akin didn't wait for a response. "He likely does not resemble the boy you knew. He's a man in his mid-twenties."

His glance flicked to the Wanted poster. Even with a drawing as lousy as that one, he'd recognize Virgil. That sneer was etched in his memory.

He stood. "If that's all, I need to head back to work."

With a curt bob of his head, Akin dismissed him.

Clarence rose, eager to leave the cave of a room. Just as he laid his hand on the doorknob, the sheriff spoke.

"By the way, you might oughta keep an eye on the seamstress shop."

An incredulous guffaw rose to the surface. Did the sheriff seriously believe outlaws would come to Blooming Grove for a new set of clothes? The little lady who spent her days at the sewing machine looked terrified whenever he'd nodded at her through the window. "No offense, but that's probably the least likely place the group would go."

The lawman blinked. "Don't you know who the seamstress is?"

Clarence shook his head. Why did he care?

"She's Eleanor Baskin. Big Jake's widow."



Aunt Mary filled the ride to their farm with chatty gossip. Delia, still reeling from the tense luncheon conversation, gazed unseeing at the town, her eyelids growing heavy after the filling meal.

She started when Hazel nudged her. "We're here."

Wrapped in the web of slumber, Delia wiped a trail of saliva from her cheek. Her gaze caught on the wrapped cake in Thomas's hands. Her stomach gurgled. How wonderful to eat that delicious cake with a steaming cup of coffee.

"Where are we?" Tall grasses gently swayed on both sides of the narrow road. She inhaled the clean air, a needed contrast to the days of riding in a stifling rail car.

Uncle Robert hopped down from the carriage and faced the family with a sheepish expression. "This is the farm. I realize it looks a bit overgrown. But you'll have the weeds cleared and a new crop planted in no time. Folks around here won't recognize it."

For a long moment, no one spoke. What could they say? A strong breeze might collapse all the shacks within the tall weeds—the home, outhouse, barns, and other indistinguishable structures. A windmill provided a squeaky backdrop. There was nothing fine about this place. Certainly nothing to beckon them home.

Papa climbed down from the driver's seat and came to stand beside his brother. "This is what you brought me here to farm?"

Delia held her breath. Surely Uncle Robert would clap Papa on the back any moment and declare this a great prank.

Instead, the big man frowned. "I told you it needed a bit of work."

Papa let out a heavy breath and grasped the back of his neck. "More than a bit."

"You wanted work, and—"

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Papa held up his hand. "I'm grateful for all you've done to help us. But this? There's no way we can put this place in working order, especially if you expect to sell it in six months."

Uncle Robert said nothing.

Thomas hopped to the ground and strode to Papa. "You got me and Rabb. The three of us, we can do it."

Papa straightened, as if fortified by the quiet words. "All right, then."

Movement on the road caught Delia's attention. The wagon bearing their possessions halted in the middle of the lane. The driver called, "Where do you want this stuff?"

Papa walked to the wagon. "Just unload it here. Reckon we'll have to cut a path to the cabin before we start hauling the beds."

Uncle Robert took Aunt Mary's elbow. "Let's be on our way so they can settle in." He helped her into the carriage and took the reins in hand. "Let us know if you need anything."

Anything? By the looks of the place, they needed *everything*, beginning with a scythe to cut a path to their house through the tall weeds. From the road, she saw nothing that resembled a home.

In the hush that remained after the clip-clop of horses' hooves receded, Delia tried to tamp her frustration, pacing the rutted dirt road. This couldn't be their future. No one deserved to be dumped in the middle of nowhere and told to make the best of it.

Mother and Papa stood apart from the group, but Delia stepped nearer so she could hear their conversation.

"It's not so bad, is it?" Papa's face creased with worry as he stroked Mother's arm. "You and the girls can make the cabin nice and cheerful, can't you?"

"What cabin? You mean that leaning building barely visible through the overgrowth?" She scoffed and wiggled out

of his grasp. “I can’t believe Robert would ask it of me. Of any of us.” When Mother’s gaze met hers, Delia looked away. She should leave them to their privacy. Yet her desire to know his answer rooted her to the spot.

“Esther, we have no choice. We’re beholden to him.”

Delia’s hopes sank. They weren’t leaving this place. Sickened, she returned to her siblings. “We’re staying.”

Rabb scoffed. “What’d you think?”

She rubbed her face. “I’m so weary, I can’t think of anything.”

Thomas gestured to Rabb. “Come on, let’s have a look at this place.” He pulled a small notebook from his shirt pocket, along with a pencil. “I’ll make a list of things that need repairs.”

Delia put her hands on her hips. “That’s simple. It’s spelled e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g.”

Hazel leaned on Delia. “This is a nightmare.”

It was. Nothing had prepared them for the disrepair of this place. And to think, not so long ago, they’d lived in a large, bustling home with gas lights and an indoor water closet. A mansion, compared to the hovel before them.

Delia’s gaze caught on her mother’s bulging waist, and guilt assailed her. She nudged her sister. “Look, we both hate this place. But they need us to be brave. Especially with Mother’s delicate condition. We don’t want to upset her more than she is.”

Hazel shrugged. “I don’t want to trouble her. But I also don’t want to live in this horrible place.”

“I understand. But right now, don’t focus on this place. Mother needs us.” Delia lifted her skirt and, with mincing steps, made her way through the tangle of grasses and vines that caught at her feet, making her stumble. She halted in front of a log structure. “Oh!” Strong odor lay like fog around the

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place. Delia pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve to cover her nose.

Hazel cried out and squeezed her nostrils together. “Disgusting!”

Just behind them, Papa said, “An animal must’ve died.” He cupped his hand around his mouth. “Boys, see anything?”

Deep voices echoed from inside the cabin. A grinning Rabb emerged, holding a decomposing opossum by its long tail. “This.” He tossed it into the tall weeds on the side of the house, causing Hazel to squeal.

Mother raised her voice. “You two be careful in there. Watch for rotten floorboards.”

“And pray that roof doesn’t collapse,” Delia murmured. She swatted at a buzzing insect circling her head before turning to Papa. “How long has it been abandoned?”

Papa cleared his throat. “Not sure. Robert said some of the first settlers to the area built this dogtrot fifty years ago. They constructed it with summer’s heat in mind. That covered breezeway that connects the two cabins is where we’ll sleep, just like they did in the old days.”

She blinked. “With insects and rodents and wild animals?” To say nothing of the stifling heat. How would anyone sleep in such miserable conditions?

A curious bumblebee circled around the four of them. Hazel turned to Mother. “Please tell me this isn’t where we’ll live.”

Mother glanced at Papa. “I’m afraid it is.”

As if to punctuate the awful truth, the whine of locusts grew deafening. Delia covered her ears, though she could wail right along with them. This cabin, along with every other building on the farm, would suck the life out of her family.

Thomas and Rabb emerged from the dilapidated house. “Where’s that cake? I’m hungry.”

Teresa Wells

Rabb was perpetually hungry.

“How can you think about eating with that horrible stench in the air?” But even so, Delia followed the brothers back to the wagon. Maybe the dessert would lift her spirits a bit.

First to arrive, Thomas reached for the parcel that sat on top of a wooden crate, then jumped back. “Ow!” ” He wagged his hand. “Bees got to it.”

Sure enough, ten or more honeybees swarmed the treat. Not even a chocolate cake could survive this wild place.

Texas was much worse than she imagined.