

CLAIRE
SANDERS

THEY CAN TRY TO BURN HER OUT
BUT HE WON'T LET THEM.

FROM THE
Ashes

A NOVEL

From The Ashes

Claire Sanders

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FROM THE ASHES

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Dedication

For Anne Wheeler, a wonderful, loyal friend.

1

In the eastern curve of Texas, forests grow as thick as abandoned resolutions. Trees aspire to be mainmasts for schooners, and morning's quicksilver light seeps through the canopy with dewdrop speed. In this wildwood, red eared sliders sunbathe and butterworts wait patiently for insect meals. This is the land of the Caddo, where runaway slaves and Confederate refugees hid. The people who live there call it treasure.

But amid the thickets and cane brakes, an old hatred festers. There are some who exploit deep-rooted fears and threaten those who dare to stand firm.

It is an intolerance that true Christians fight with determined love.

*Piney Meadow, Texas
Present day*

Jacob Fraser aimed the stream of high-pressure water towards the burning roof of All Saints Community Church. This was the fourth church fire he and the other volunteer firefighters had fought, and his heart sank lower with each blaze. Someone was intentionally destroying places of worship.

Familiar faces were in the huddled groups of onlookers. Arsonists liked to watch their handiwork.

Was one of his neighbors the culprit? Maybe it was George Hampton, his old Boy Scout leader, or Marvin Simpson, his Little League baseball coach. Maybe he didn't know the people of Piney Meadow as well as he thought.

Henry Washington, the pastor of the church, stood in front of a separate group of bystanders. His dark skin glowed in the firelight, but the brightness in his dark eyes was more than mere reflection. Was it anger, righteous indignation, or something more that ignited the fire inside the African-American pastor? Henry raised his Bible towards the flames and his congregation gathered around him.

Some embraced and others cried, but most stood in silence, their backs straight and their gazes fixed on their suffering church.

Above the roar of the fire, voices sang a familiar hymn.

Jacob's heart swelled with admiration. The fire might destroy their building, but not their faith.

A second truck from a neighboring community arrived, but there was no saving the All Saints Community Church. Jacob and the other firefighters could contain the blaze, but the church was beyond rescue.

At last, Chief Dutton gave the order to turn off the hoses.

While Jacob's team stowed the equipment, other volunteers raked through the charred ruins, putting out hotspots.

The county sheriff, Vince Miller, clapped Jacob on the shoulder. "Good job keeping the fire contained."

"We were lucky there's so little wind tonight."

"Is Chief Dutton around?"

"I saw him just a few minutes ago." Jacob scanned the area, and then pointed to a man talking into a radio. "There he is."

The chief raised one hand in acknowledgement and strolled towards Jacob and the sheriff.

Sheriff Miller shook hands with the other man. "What do you think, Emmett?"

"Same as the others. It burned too fast to be anything other than an accelerant." Chief Dutton removed his wire-rimmed glasses and wiped his sooty face with a bandana. "When are you going to call in the cavalry?"

"Already done it. The FBI is sending a special agent from the hate crime task force."

Chief Dutton let out a low grunt. "Hate crimes in Piney Meadow. Didn't think I'd ever see the day."

The scents of smoke and sweat clung to Jacob's skin as he removed his heavy firefighter's jacket.

Four churches in three months, all belonging to African-American congregations, and now the FBI was coming. What was happening to his hometown? Piney Meadow had always been a place where neighbors could live and work without the threat of violence.

He'd needed just such a haven after his stint with the Houston Police Department. Now crime menaced his refuge as sure as a nest of copperheads.

Rain clouds darkened the summer sky when Jacob returned to the site the next afternoon.

Henry Washington raised his hand in greeting and called to Jacob in a deep, gravelly voice. "Mornin' Jacob. Appreciate you meeting me here."

Jacob shook hands with the older man. "Sorry we couldn't save your church, Henry. At least no one was hurt."

"Yes, we were blessed in that regard."

Jacob's chest tightened as he walked through the rubble. Water-swollen hymnals lay amid pieces of broken pews, and shards of stained glass crunched underfoot. Burning a church was like hitting a baby; they were both defenseless and innocent. "I saw the sheriff at the diner this morning. He said he'd finished with the crime scene and you could start cleaning up." He bent to pick up the remains of a book, and then realized it was a Bible.

Henry took the Bible from Jacob and cleaned it with his handkerchief. "We plan to rebuild, of course, but a lot depends on the estimate you give me for the lumber and other building materials."

Jacob swallowed the lump in his throat. "I don't suppose you had fire insurance?"

Henry shook his head. "Heavens, no. My congregation is so poor the collection plate is often filled with pennies. You know my wife and I both have jobs. Our building was simply a meeting place for those who wanted to worship the Lord."

"What are you going to do until you can rebuild?"

Henry pursed his lips in thought. "I've been wondering about Isaiah Beecham's place. That old church on his land is still standing. Think my congregation could meet there until we rebuild?"

Jacob rubbed the back of his neck while he thought. "I don't know about that, Henry. The land was deeded to Isaiah's granddaughter. You'll have to contact her."

Henry's eyebrows shot up. "Didn't know Mr.

Beecham had a granddaughter. Any idea how I would go about talking to her?"

"It might be easier than you think. I spoke with the lawyer handling the will because I want first chance at buying the Beecham acreage. He told me Isaiah's granddaughter is coming from Dallas this afternoon."

"Is Walter Davidson handling Mr. Beecham's estate?"

"That's right. Only lawyer Isaiah ever trusted."

"He's a good man, all right," Henry replied. "I'll give him a call. Think the granddaughter would be willing to lend the church to us?"

"Isaiah would've been glad to let you use it," Jacob said. "But the decision is up to his granddaughter."

"Have you met her?"

"I saw her at Isaiah's funeral, but didn't really get to talk to her."

"What about your family? If you buy the Beecham land, will my people still be able to use the church?"

"Shouldn't be a problem. But you know, that old building hasn't been used for more than twenty-five years. No telling what kind of repair it's going to need."

"Buying the materials might be a challenge, Jacob, but my congregation will supply the workers. As it says in Second Chronicles 'So the workmen labored, and the work was completed by them; they restored the house of God to its original condition and reinforced it.'"

Jacob grinned.

Henry was one of the few people who could pull out a Bible verse the way some people pulled out photos of their grandchildren.

"If you get permission to use Isaiah's old church,

my family will help however we can. Get somebody to look at the place, make a list of what you need, and then come down to the lumber yard." Jacob offered his hand to Henry.

"Bless you, Jacob. When I look at what's left of our church, all I can see is the remnants of hatred. But then you come along and blow that hatred away."

Thunder rumbled overhead as Jacob turned away from the older man. "Knock it off, Henry. You know how I feel about that kind of talk."

Henry chuckled deeply and clapped Jacob on the back. "All right, friend. I won't embarrass you any longer. I guess I'd better get into town and talk to the lawyer."

"I'll follow you there." Jacob climbed into his pickup truck and followed Henry onto the highway. Springing his offer on Isaiah's granddaughter might not be the best way to introduce himself, but not getting the Beecham land would mean he'd lost another important deal for his family's lumber business.

Hopefully, Isaiah's granddaughter would be sensible enough to follow good advice when she heard it. If she sold her land to Jacob, she could pocket the money and go back to her life in the city.

And Jacob could present four hundred acres of heavily timbered land to his family.

2

While a summer rain fell steadily against the louvered windows of Walter Davidson's law office, Judith Robertson tried to understand the document spread before her.

"I've marked the boundaries of your grandfather's property on this tax map," Walter Davidson explained. "As you can see, it borders the Sabine National Forest. I'll drive you out there if you'd like because you'll never find it on your own. Once you get off the main highway, most of the county roads are unmarked."

Judith frowned over the unusual document, embarrassed to admit she couldn't make heads or tails of it. The tax map looked like someone had served spaghetti on top of a crossword puzzle. "Your letter said there were buildings on the property."

"Three, as a matter of fact. There's a barn, a small cabin where Isaiah lived, and an old church."

"A church?"

"That's right. It was used by a nondenominational group for a while, but when they got enough money, they built a fancy place in town."

Judith crossed her legs under the table in an effort to stop her knees from shaking. There was nothing to be afraid of in the lawyer's office.

A soft knock at the doorway interrupted them. The lawyer's wife stepped halfway into the room. "Walter, Jacob Fraser and Henry Washington are here and

asking to meet with you and Miss Robertson.”

“That’s fine, Dorothy. Just ask them to wait a few minutes.”

The woman smiled politely at Judith and closed the door.

Curiosity pushed Judith’s fear to the side. Those two men had obviously known about her appointment with the lawyer. “Why do they want to meet with me?”

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Jacob Fraser most likely wants to talk to you about buying all, or part, of your grandfather’s land. His family runs the largest business in Piney Meadow—a lumber mill and a building supply. Henry Washington works as an accountant, but he also leads a small church group in town. I don’t know why he’s here. If you’re not ready to see them now, I’ll put them off.”

Judith uncrossed her legs and straightened her spine. “I might as well see what’s on their minds.”

Mr. Davidson opened the door and called to the two men. “Come on in, Jacob. How are you, Henry? Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Judith Robertson.”

Judith stood and shook the older man’s hand. He was a middle-aged, well-dressed man with kind eyes and a patient manner that put her at ease.

“Good afternoon, Miss Robertson. I’m Henry Washington, pastor of the All Saints Community Church.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said politely, and then turned her attention to the other man.

“Jacob Fraser,” he said, shaking the hand she offered.

As his calloused hand gripped hers, Judith looked into his cobalt blue eyes.

Jacob Fraser was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a flannel shirt, faded jeans, and work boots covered with red dirt. His light brown hair was flecked with gold and his rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed well-muscled forearms. He wasn't the first good-looking man she'd met, but he was the first one who'd made her mouth dry up with a simple handshake.

"Sit down," the lawyer invited, "and tell us what's on your minds. I was just showing Miss Robertson where Isaiah's property is located."

"You'll never find it by following that map," Jacob said, settling his lean body into a chair across the table from her. "It's at least twelve miles from the highway."

"That's what I told her," Walter said with a chuckle. "Do you want to see the property, Judith?"

Judith gave a curt nod. "Definitely. Is it possible to see it this afternoon?"

"Yes." Walter answered. "But I've got another appointment at three and can't take you until later."

"I'd be glad to take you out there," Jacob volunteered. "But there's something I'd like to talk to you about, first."

"Me, too," Henry said.

Judith waited for her heartbeat to return to its regular rhythm. She was alone with three men, but that didn't necessarily signal danger. She reasserted her take-care-of-business façade.

Henry Washington smiled good-naturedly, calmly waiting for her reply.

Jacob Fraser, however, had a serious look about him, as if he had important business that couldn't wait.

Judith took a drink of water and concentrated on making her voice not quiver. "What's on your mind, Mr. Fraser?"

"Call me Jacob," he said with a friendly smile. "Mr. Beecham sold timber to my family over the years, and I was negotiating a sale before he passed away. I'd like to make you an offer."

"And you, Rev. Washington? Do you also have a business deal to discuss with me?"

"No, ma'am," he said, his eyes twinkling. "What I'd like to talk to you about is more in the line of a favor. I've been the pastor of the All Saints Community Church for the past ten years. We're a small congregation of local folks who meet twice a week to study God's word and to praise the Lord."

Judith tried to give her full attention to the preacher, but could not tune out the way Jacob scrutinized her. While Henry spoke in a soft, earnest voice, she could feel Jacob's gaze travel from her feet to her face. Determined not to blush under his inspection, she concentrated on the preacher.

"A few nights ago," Henry continued, "our church was burned to the ground. We have nowhere to meet."

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"And you want to use the church on my grandfather's property."

"That's right. But there's more you should know. During the last few months, there have been three black churches burned in this county. My church made the fourth."

Judith's stomach clenched with disgust. Burning a church was a particularly heinous form of hatred. But, as her minister had often said, there was no such thing as a fortunate coincidence. She'd been given a church for a reason.

She had so much to think about. So much to pray about. "When do you need an answer, Mr. Fraser?"

“My name’s Jacob,” he said, “and although I’d like to close the deal quickly, I can understand if you need a little time.”

“And you, Rev. Washington? When do you need an answer?”

“I don’t have a deadline, Miss Robertson, but I am anxious to get my flock under a roof. Mr. Isaiah’s church is going to need some repair before we can meet there, and, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to bring members of my congregation out to your grandfather’s place to inspect it.”

Judith felt the men’s expectant gazes. Her first reaction was to out-and-out give the church to Rev. Washington, but she’d learned the cost of making rash decisions. “I’d like to see the property before I decide, but I will tell you this much. There won’t be any decisions made in haste. You gentlemen might as well know that up front.”

Jacob and Henry traded long, meaningful looks, and then Henry smiled at Judith. “That’s fine, Miss Judith. I understand completely. I’d best be on my way. It’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

She shook Henry’s hand and he stepped out of the room. If he was disappointed, it didn’t show in the straight set of his shoulders or the air of quiet dignity that radiated from him.

“If you’d still like to go out to your grandfather’s place,” Jacob said, “I’ve got time.”

Judith’s throat tightened with a familiar anxiety. She’d just been informed that her grandfather’s property was secluded. She wasn’t about to go there with a strange man. She focused on the lawyer. “Was there anything else you needed to tell me, Mr. Davidson?”

“No, that’s it. Now that you’ve signed the papers, I’ll take care of the rest. The land is yours, free and clear. But keep my number handy. If there’s anything my wife or I can do for you, just give us a call.”

Judith gathered her purse and shook Walter’s hand. “Thank you, Mr. Davidson. I’ll be in touch.”

A minute later, Judith stepped into the misting rain and looked at Jacob. He seemed like a nice person, but one could never be sure. Accepting a ride from a man she’d just met was definitely on the list of stupid moves made by naïve women. Even if that man was handsome in an overgrown, clean-cut sort of way.

She tried to clear the lump in her throat. “I appreciate your offer, Mr. Fraser, but I’d rather find my grandfather’s place on my own. I’ll be in touch when I decide what to do with the land.”

Jacob smiled down at her and slid his hands into his back pockets. “It’s no problem for me to take you out there now.”

“No, that’s OK. I’ll ask Mr. Davidson to write down the directions or I’ll use my GPS system to find it.”

“There’s no way a GPS has your grandfather’s property in its memory. The last two miles are dirt roads. Is that your roadster?” He gestured with his head.

“Why do you ask?”

“The low clearance on that car is going to make it difficult to drive on our dirt roads. Plus, it’s been raining for the last two days. The road will be mostly mud.”

Judith examined Jacob. If only she could see into a person’s soul and know if he was trustworthy. It was the only superpower she’d ever wanted. “Hold on just

a minute." She stepped back inside the lawyer's office. "Mrs. Davidson?"

The lawyer's wife looked up from her desk. "Yes, Miss Robertson? Did you need something?"

Judith's heart pounded as she peered through the window to make sure Jacob couldn't overhear, and then returned her attention to the lawyer's wife. "I know this is awkward, Mrs. Davidson, but I don't know who else to ask."

The older woman smiled encouragingly. "What can I do for you?"

"Jacob Fraser has volunteered to take me to my grandfather's place. Is it safe for me to do that? Can I trust him?"

Mrs. Davidson nodded. "I'd trust any member of my family with Jacob. Not only is he a former police officer, I've known his family for most of my life. They don't come any better than Jacob Fraser."

"OK," Judith said, blowing out a breath. "Thanks." Surely she could take the lawyer's wife's word. For the past year Judith had been praying for the courage to trust. Perhaps this was another opportunity to face her fears. At least she could take her own car. That way, if something did happen, she'd have a way to escape.

She stepped outside to find Jacob patiently leaning against a muddy pickup truck. "OK," she said with a confidence she didn't feel. "I'll follow you in my car."

"It'd be best if you rode with me. Like I said, the dirt roads are muddy and if that *is* your sports car, it'll never make it. I'll bring you back here when we're finished."

Judith considered her next action. She couldn't go through the rest of her life second guessing every decision. Mrs. Davidson had vouched for Jacob Fraser,

and that would have to be good enough. "OK," Judith said, inwardly wincing at the tremor in her voice.

Jacob steered his truck onto the highway and glanced at Judith. He liked what he'd seen in the lawyer's office. Tall and slender, with dark curls escaping from her ponytail, Judith had a type of careless beauty, as if she simply accepted her looks without worrying about the latest fashion. "I hear you're from Dallas," he said.

Judith tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "That's right. What about you?"

"Born and raised in Piney Meadow."

Her fingers shook as she dug through her purse and fished out a small notebook and a pen. "I'm going to write down the directions so I can find the place on my own."

"Good idea. Not only are most of the back roads unmarked, it's so dark at night you couldn't read the signs if they were." He drove a mile in silence, glancing over at Judith from time to time. She looked like a city girl in her black slacks and blue blouse, and those were probably real diamonds dangling from her ears. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to you at your grandfather's funeral."

"You were there?"

"My parents and I attended."

"I couldn't believe how many friends Granddad had."

"He was a good man, and he'd lived here his whole life."

"I would've liked to have stayed longer and met

more people, but my father had to get back to Dallas for work. Mr. Davidson told my dad that he'd handle Granddad's estate and get in touch with us." Judith crossed her legs, and then re-crossed them. She was as nervous as a fly in a spider's web.

Jacob tried more small talk to put her at ease. "I'm surprised you came by yourself today. Do you have family?"

"Just my father."

"No husband?"

"No, I'm not married." She grasped the notebook in one hand and fingered the pen with the other. "And, by the way, Mr. Fraser, I charge by the question. So far, you owe me forty dollars."

Jacob smiled at the subtle way she'd told him to mind his own business. "Forty dollars, huh? Well, I can afford it. And my name's Jacob."

She returned his smile, but it wasn't a genuine one. More like the polite smile a woman gave him when he held a door open. Why was Judith so anxious?

"It certainly is pretty country around here," she said. "I guess you're used to it."

"Never get used to it. Sometimes, when I'm out in the forest by myself, the beauty of God's creation still catches my breath." Jacob made the first turn off the highway.

Judith scribbled a note on the paper. Then she licked her lips.

He reached down to the floor of the pickup and retrieved a small ice chest. "I've got some water in here." He set the chest on the seat between them and handed her a cold bottle. Maybe she'd relax if she had a drink.