

Praise for  
*Home on the Range*

“I’ve been so eagerly awaiting this book by Ruth Logan Herne—and it’s even better than I’d hoped. An overprotective cowboy daddy and the therapist masquerading as a woodland fairy princess called on to help his daughters . . . What could possibly go wrong? Just everything. The whole delightful story is full of fun twists and poignant turns. *Home on the Range* is a great new installment in the Double S Ranch series.”

—MARY CONNEALY, author of *No Way Up*

“*Home on the Range* showcases Ruth Logan Herne’s ability to write wounded, damaged characters grasping for grace with both hands. My heart ached for Nick’s loss, Elsa’s guilt, and little Cheyenne’s desperate need. As always, Herne’s story is sprinkled with hope and gives the reader glimpses of the One who came to save. A satisfyingly happy ending left me sighing with contentment.”

—MARY JANE HATHAWAY, author of *The Pepper in the Gumbo*

“In *Home on the Range*, the finely crafted second story in the Double S Ranch trilogy, Nick is caught in a downward spiral of repeating his father’s mistakes and no amount of cowboy gumption is going to fix things. But Elsa, a family therapist who sought refuge in Gray’s Glen to escape her own tragic past, defies her fears and conventional wisdom to connect with Nick and his daughters, bringing a soothing balm to this hurting cowboy’s wounds. Ruth Logan Herne explores the darkest recesses of her characters’ souls and bring light into the shadows, giving hope to the lost and healing to the broken. This latest story is no exception and one of her finest!”

—JAN DREXLER, award-winning author of *Hannah’s Choice*  
and *Mattie’s Pledge*

“A child in crisis, a hunky but clueless single father, and a reclusive therapist with a big secret . . . Intrigued? I sure was. *Home on the Range* is a fabulous story of hope, faith, and real-life family drama. Filled with heart-tugging emotion, delightfully sassy bantering, and a cowboy to die for—what’s not to love? I loved it so much I quickly ordered the first book in the series. Well done, Ruth Logan Herne!”

—VICKIE McDONOUGH, best-selling, award-winning author of *Sarah’s Surrender*, book 3 in the Land Rush Dreams series

HOME  
*on the*  
RANGE

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*An Unexpected Groom*

*Her Unexpected Family*

DOUBLE S RANCH, BOOK 2



# HOME *on the* RANGE

A Novel

RUTH LOGAN HERNE



MULTNOMAH

HOME ON THE RANGE

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*To Seth, my second son:*

*This one's for you, my guy who stayed close to "home on the range." You've grown to be a wonderful man in so many ways. I'm proud of you, son. And I really love the sweet wife and adorable grandkids!*

A decorative flourish consisting of three wavy lines that curve upwards and then sweep downwards to the right, ending in a long, thin tail.

# ONE

Nick Stafford stared at the half-buried, round-roofed dwelling and realized he couldn't go through with the elementary school principal's edict. Not if it meant meeting with a hermit who lived in a toadstool shack tucked so deep in the forest that woodland mice couldn't find it.

A hobbit house. No way on God's green earth was Nick Stafford about to risk his daughters' mental health by having them counseled by a recluse who lived halfway to a mole hole. No matter what the girls' principal said.

What was next? A hollow tree?

He did an about-face, ready to stride away, and came face to face with a dryad.

Cool gray-green eyes appraised him from beneath a hooded cloak, Celtic friendly, except they weren't in the lush green hills of Ireland. They were in the forestland of central Washington, and the thin spring leaves did little to protect him from today's chill drizzle. Which made her hooded wrap more sensible than his bare head.

A dark dog moved their way, darting furtively through the shadowed edges of the small, rounded property.

"Achilles. Stay."

The dog paused, peering at them through the dense undergrowth edging the rain-soaked clearing.

"Dr. Andreas?"

The rain and shadows shifted. An oblique ray of sun made



quivering raindrops sparkle along the mostly bare branches framing her. The quick change to filtered light forced his pupils to adjust.

He thought she winced when he said her name, but maybe it was the dance of light. With the shadows bobbing and weaving, he couldn't be sure, and when the sun broke through, brighter and stronger, nothing but a mild, placid expression stared back at him. "Elsa, please. And you are Nicholas Stafford?"

"Yes. Mrs. Willingham recommended you, and just so we start on the same page, I'm not here by choice."

"Then leave."

She didn't blink, didn't move, and for a moment he was caught up, staring into Monet-like watercolor eyes, absolutely gorgeous if you liked whimsical characters in a fairy-tale setting.

He'd tried for a fairy-tale ending once. But he'd crashed and burned because no matter what he did to make his princess wife happy, Whitney Stafford hadn't been ready to take the role of queen seriously. She ended their marriage after abdicating the throne to run off with the court jester, a.k.a. one of the ranch's rodeo-riding hired hands. She'd abandoned her husband, her vows, and, worst of all, two beautiful daughters to become a rodeo cowboy—chasing buckle bunny.

But he couldn't possibly have heard correctly. Did the wood nymph just tell him to go? What kind of therapist did that?

She moved toward the door, reached out, and twisted the handle. The door opened easily, no key needed. Of course if you were this far off the grid, maybe no key was ever needed. He started to follow her, but she turned, effectively blocking the entrance. "You're still here."

"We had an appointment." He stretched out the last word, miffed by her mandate, his life, his lack of choices, and pretty much everything known to man, and despite what his older brother, Colt, said, he was not one bit depressed. He was simply mad about everything, and that was his God-given right.

“Mr. Stafford—”

“Nick is fine.”

“Mr. Stafford,” she continued in a cool, clear voice. “I don’t want to be here either. Which means our sessions are doomed, so why waste time? You have a life, dysfunctional, of course”—an easy shrug and her matter-of-fact expression said that was a given—“but you haven’t done irreparable harm, so you’re free as a bird. I have a life as well, and I appreciate my privacy more than most these days, so let me save us both from a dead-end path we needn’t take. Go home. And if things continue to spiral downward and out of control, take my sister’s advice and find a therapist you do want to see. I’m closed.”

She took one step back and shut the door in his face.

She couldn’t do that, could she? They had an appointment. He’d even set up a reminder on his phone! He’d scheduled time to see her, against his will, and he’d followed through.

*You followed through because Angelina and your brother hounded you until you walked out the door. Left on your own, you’d have conveniently forgotten the whole thing. Do you want to make the same mistakes your father made thirty years ago? Or try to fix things for the girls by expending some kind of sincere effort? Cheyenne nearly got killed earlier this spring because you refused to compromise. But of course—the voice of reason paused as if resigned to being brushed off—the choice is yours. Again.*

Well, he *was* here. He’d shown up as promised, and finding her little hut in the woods hadn’t exactly been a cakewalk.

He glared at the door and lifted his hand to knock.

A long, low growl from behind him said the dog wasn’t all that enamored by his presence either.

Nick was pretty sure this couldn’t get worse, but then a brightly colored bird winged its way to the tree alongside the house, squawked,

flapped its wings, and screeched, “You’re a jerk! You’re a jerk! You’re a jerk!”

The dog sank back on his haunches and barked twice in agreement.

Nick conceded defeat. The bird was right. He dropped his hand and started to back away from the door, hoping to escape before the dog attacked while the bird pecked his face off. Where was his trusty Remington long barrel when he needed it? Sixty feet away, in the rack behind the seat of his extended-cab ranch pickup truck.

The dog barked again, but this bark didn’t sound threatening. It sounded sad, if such a thing was possible, and the croon in the bark said the mutt was either looking forward to hand-to-paw combat or he wanted someone to pet him.

Nick crouched and tapped the path beneath him. The dog ambled over. He sank onto the stones and flipped to his back, waiting for a good scratch.

“You’re no watch dog, that’s for sure,” Nick said as he rubbed the dog’s belly. “As far as protection goes, you’re on the low end of the scale, my friend.”

“Dumb dog! Dumb dog! Dumb dog!”

Nick glared up at the raucous bird. “Listen you rude, loud pile of feathers. No one needs your guff, okay? And you’re so stinking ugly, no one more than twenty miles north or south of the equator would even use your feathers to decorate their hats. So there.”

“You’re arguing with a macaw.” He hadn’t heard the door open but was kind of glad it had.

“Just having my say,” he returned, not looking up. “The bird’s obnoxious and it poops when it roosts.” He shrugged a shoulder toward the offending pile to the dog’s left. “Reason enough to make pie out of it right there.”

He’d figured to tick her off, because she had animal-loving, tree-

hugging, far-left liberal written all over her eccentric outfit, but she surprised him by laughing. Only her laugh sounded rusty, like his.

“I can’t deny I’ve been tempted.”

“Is there more to your menagerie?” He angled his gaze up while still petting the dog. “Stray monkeys and elephants, perhaps? A dinosaur or two? *Jumanji* inspired?”

Her smile deepened at the mention of the fantasy movie. “No, just these two. Why are you still here?”

He studied the dog, then her, assessing. “I’m not sure. Now that I know the dog’s not going to maul me, I could have simply walked to my truck, backed around, and left.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.” He stared around and shrugged again. “I’m in a bind. I’ve got to do something to jump-start my oldest daughter, and the principal . . . your sister, right?”—he met her gaze and she nodded slightly—“gave me your card and threatened further action if I don’t get help for both my girls. So here I am, in the last place I ever expected to be.”

“In the woods, petting a dog?”

He frowned at her deliberate misinterpretation. “Hunting down a therapist to fix things that never should have been broken.”

“Ah.” She sank onto one of two garden benches, still damp from the quick rain shower. “Life has a way of doing that, doesn’t it?”

“You got that right.” He kept petting the dog, and when he paused, the hound pulled his head around and pushed it against Nick’s flank, a silent plea for more. “I’ve got two daughters. Cheyenne and Dakota.”

“Western girls.”

“Except they’re not,” he answered instantly, as if denying the girls’ ranch identity was important. And it was, to him, but that was part of the problem. “Well, they weren’t western girls, that is. Washington girls, sure, but not *western*, as in riding and roping. Is there something

wrong with a father wanting what's best for his children? And who has the right to question that?"

"Is it the questioning that's hard or the fact that your definition of *best* is being criticized?"

"What do you know about it?" He sounded petulant, but he didn't care because he was sick to death of people second-guessing his choices, his ideas, his deeds when it came to the girls and just about anything else these days. He shifted to face her. "Do you have kids?"

"No."

"Do you work with kids?"

"Not currently."

"So what makes you an expert on them or me?"

She accepted his question with a nod, and between the hood and the curved chair made out of bent forest limbs, he felt like Luke Skywalker chatting with Yoda, only he actually *liked* the Star Wars character. "You search for understanding."

Yup. Yoda, all right. He sighed.

"And yet, when others want to help, it has to be on your terms, your way."

"Not always," he shot back, indignant, and when she didn't meet his gaze, he realized he was angry . . . again . . . because she'd hit the truth and he didn't like it when people hit the truth. He sighed and stood with one last pat to the dog. "Listen, this probably won't work."

She nodded, quiet.

"And it's silly to waste our time."

She accepted that as well, still quiet.

"I—" He shrugged. A quick breeze shook the baby leaves above him, sprinkling him with fresh raindrops, chilling him despite the warming spring temperatures. "I'll get on my way, and one way or another, we'll muddle through. Families have been doing this a long time. I don't expect we're any different than most."

“And that’s all right with you?”

Her voice didn’t change but her question hit home. “I—”

“To settle on chance rather than taking firm steps to set your children on the right path?”

Put that way, he sounded pretty stupid and self-centered, as if he knew what was best for the girls. If he’d known that, for real, they wouldn’t be in this hot mess of crazy right now. Cheyenne was about to fail her grade, and Dakota pretended acquiescence while she did what she pleased, a dangerous combination for a first grader.

“Sometimes people just need someone to talk to. Someone they’re not trying to protect. Someone who’ll listen to their complete thought without building instant brick walls of rebuttal.”

“You think I should bring them to see you.”

She lifted her eyes to his, and when she did, he recognized something he hadn’t seen when their gazes locked before.

Pain. And that realization inspired added caution. “I don’t know anything about you.”

“A valid point. The kind of thing a responsible parent would say. What would you like to know?”

“Why are you buried in the woods?”

She made a face at the stone drive leading up to her small home, then raised a brow to him. “You found me, which means I’m not buried.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

She shook her head. “I said that I’m a private person.”

Nick had been raised between two brothers. His older brother, Colt, jumped headfirst into every situation, confident of his success, always needing to prove himself, while Trey, his adopted younger brother, found his paths made smoother by faith in God and humanity, but Nick knew both men. Their outward natures hid a lot of internal junk. Being stuck in the middle made him privy to a wide family spectrum. “And that

answer says you're either not capable or not comfortable living a normal life surrounded by everyday occurrences. So why should I trust my children with someone who has clearly shrugged off everyday existence?"

"Privacy equates to inability." She mused the words with a measured look at him. "Interesting assessment."

"Hey, fixing you isn't on my agenda, and while I appreciate the way you've put together the setting"—he flicked his attention to the house, the dog, and the talking bird—"this is all a little too surreal for me. Thanks for the time, Doc. Send me a bill and I'll put a check in the mail. I'm going to guess you don't do a whole lot of online banking out here."

"No charge," she answered smoothly as she rose from the bench. "I wish you well, Mr. Stafford. No offense taken."

"None meant, ma'am." He reached out to shake her hand and felt like a fool when she didn't extend hers. "Well, then. Have a good day." He did an about-face, strode back to his truck, climbed in, and backed it around before aiming the big V8 up the slope. He turned onto the main logger's path, carved out over a decade before and kept clear by an avid group of hunters, and followed that to the county road.

He was right back where he started. The principal wouldn't be happy, his family wouldn't be happy, and hey, news flash! He wasn't happy.

He stopped for gas, picked up a package of his favorite popcorn treat, Halfpops, then went for broke and bought two more and ate all three bags on the way back to the Double S. He stuffed the empty bags into one of the storage bins behind the seat so the girls wouldn't see them. He was careful with their snacks when they were at home, more so because he knew Angelina would feed them anything she pleased at the ranch. Since he respected and possibly feared the former Seattle detective who had agreed to marry his know-it-all big brother, he held his tongue about it and the girls weren't worse off.

*Whitney would have a fit if she was here, and you know it.*

He knew it and he didn't want to care. But something about a woman leaving her husband and two beautiful little girls meant he must have done something drastically wrong. Otherwise, why would a woman turn her back and walk away from her children?



*You tossed aside a chance to help two little kids? What are you thinking?*

Elsa shoved the mental scolding aside and moved toward the house. She knew exactly what she was thinking. She didn't dare let herself get drawn in by another anxious parent, even if the guy was a twelve on a "smokin' hot cowboy" one-to-ten rating system. Sure, he needed help. She saw it in his eyes and heard it in his tone, even as his words refuted her sister's directive.

*You want to help him. No. Strike that. You're intrigued about helping the girls, especially the older one. You've worked with kids like her before, and you're good at what you do. Isn't it time to move on? Especially if it can help this child? And if you help the big sister, the younger one benefits as well. Are you willing to let Will Belvedere's depraved choices steal more of your life?*

"You're a jerk! You're a jerk! You're a jerk!"

Elsa didn't need the bird's ill-timed reminder. It was there in the mirror's reflection, in the set of a stubborn man's shoulders, the understandable question in his eyes. Who in their right mind *would* bring their precious children to a therapist with her mental health record? No one. Not if they knew her history.

He was right to run hard and fast, and she was just as right to let him.

The phone rang as she finished laying out food for Hoyle in the parrot cage. She raised the phone, read her sister's number, and clicked



End, but Rachel wasn't fooled by that. She called right back, knowing Elsa couldn't resist two tries in a row, just in case something serious had happened. She answered the phone as she opened the front door for the bird to return to his cage for the night. "Hey, Rach. What's up?"

"Stop ignoring my calls; how did the appointment with Nick Stafford go?"

"Patient/client privilege, HIPAA rules, leave me alone."

"Stick to basics, then," her older sister insisted. "Did he show?"

She could answer this honestly and keep the guy temporarily out of trouble. "Yes."

"Good."

"You sound genuinely pleased," noted Elsa as she wired the bird's cage shut. "Why?"

"His daughters are delightful, even if Nick is oblivious," Rachel replied. "They're smart, funny, and have a lot going for them. But it's real tough when you're old enough to understand that your mother's new boyfriend is more important than her children."

"You think they know?" Nicholas Stafford had seemed more protective than the average angry single dad she'd met while in active practice in a Seattle suburb. She wouldn't have labeled him as a rash talker in front of his kids, but then she'd been wrong before. A tight sigh wound its way up from gut level. She forced it back, determined to stride forward.

"It's Gray's Glen, small town USA. Of course they know," said Rachel. "Wives running out on rich husbands, chasing rodeo cowboys, ditching kids. Please, that's a reality TV show with no cable bill involved. Dakota might be a little less informed, but Cheyenne was older when Whitney took off. Trust me. She knows."

Mother abandonment, the toughest scenario for any child to surmount. Bad enough when inadvertent, like death, but the raw, ragged-

edged emotions left by a mother's deliberate abandonment could leave lifelong scars and present challenging behaviors.

"When are the girls coming to see you?"

Rachel wanted definitive answers. Elsa could throw the guy under the bus and tell her sister he wasn't going to follow through, or she could give him some time to figure out what he wanted to do. Life and emotions weren't as cut and dried as her big sister seemed to think. "Once again I'll cite patient/client privilege and leave it at that."

"Elsa."

"Rachel." Elsa blew out a breath as she studied the deepening shadows surrounding her forest home. "I understand the district's concern, and I'll keep you in the loop. For the moment, you're about to end the spring semester, all the kids will be on summer break soon, and then they have the entire summer to try and make headway. This isn't a quick fix, ever. You know that."

"I do, but Nick Stafford has already shrugged off my concerns for seven long months. We'll have to hold Cheyenne back a year, and while that's not the end of the world, I don't think being labeled as stupid by her peers is going to help anything. Her self-image is already soured."

"You can't just pass her?"

"Not and live with myself," Rachel retorted. "But I don't want to add to her passive/aggressive plate by pushing her over some unseen edge." She paused, sucked a quick breath, and backtracked. "Sorry, I didn't mean that the way—"

"You're fine, Rachel. And you're correct, the stubborn, quiet ones can brew a head of steam no one notices."

"I won't ask any more questions, but I want you to know that if you need information from me, I'll share," Rachel continued, and Elsa knew not all school administrators were that accommodating. If they were—

No, she wouldn't look back and wouldn't cast blame. There was plenty of it to go around. From a clinical point of view, she understood

not everyone could or would be saved. But every now and again, when shadows loomed and she remembered the sound of little Christiana Belvedere's voice, she wondered what would have happened if she'd called the school with her concerns that day. Would they have taken steps to hold the children there?

Probably not, but she'd never have the chance to know because she never made the phone call.

And then it was too late.

Her sister's words bothered her all night. Or was it the look of defeat in Nicholas Stafford's troubled brown eyes that messed up her sleep? In any case, she questioned her snarky attitude and her judgment well into the next morning. Finally, she stormed into the house, picked up the phone, and hit Nick Stafford's number. He answered on the second ring, which meant he wasn't crazily avoiding her. "Double S Ranch, Nick speaking."

"Mr. Stafford, this is Elsa Andreas." Was he hauling in a breath? Looking around him, uncomfortable? Peeved and considering hanging up the phone without another word?

*Stop creating the scenario and let it occur naturally. Why is it so easy to use your training on everyone except yourself?*

"Yes?"

"I've been reconsidering our conversation yesterday."

"The one where you held all the cards and treated me like some kind of low-level species beneath your dignity?"

"That would be the one." To her relief, he laughed, so she waded in. "I've had time to think about the girls and their current situation and how I might be able to help."

"Doctor, I—"

"Here's the thing," she went on, ignoring his objection. "You and I don't have to be best buddies for me to be effective with your children. And yes, I decided I wanted a more solitary setting last year, but a love

of solitude doesn't negate years of education and practical experience in family therapy. My sister has legal means at her disposal to ask a court to order your children into therapy, but is that what you want?"

"Absolutely not." His voice went hard.

"My thoughts exactly. Here's my suggestion. You come over here again—"

"Or you could come here, save me the drive to Middle-earth."

"Funny. Like I haven't heard that before." Rachel tweaked her about it all the time, but she had to hand it to Nick Stafford. It sounded funnier coming from him.

"Your steady barrage of company makes Tolkien jokes, Doc? Why do I suspect that's not the case?"

"Reiterating," she drawled, disregarding his comment, "you could come over here and our first session could be a family session. You get to know me, I get to know all of you, and the noisy bird is a great conversation starter for kids. It's neutral ground, Mr. Stafford. Kids do better on neutral ground. And yes, at some time I'd like to come there. With your permission, of course. Rachel and I were raised on a ranch up north, so animals, hay, dogs, and farm equipment are a comfortable setting for all concerned."

"You're a ranch kid?" Doubt speared his voice.

"Not everyone finds their home on the range, do they?" She left the question rhetorical and moved on. "My familiarity with their setting might make sessions at your place beneficial."

"My father's home, you mean."

His father's home? She'd been tapping a pencil against the tabletop. She stopped. "You and the girls don't live on the ranch? I assumed—"

"We live in town, but I work here, so the girls are at the ranch fairly often."

"I see." And here might be conflict number one, because with a huge spread like Sam Stafford's Double S Ranch, why wouldn't his son be

living on the gorgeous rolling acreage spreading across the rich plain of the fertile Kittitas Valley? Too much family proximity? An aversion to the ranch? Separation of job versus daily life? Her mind jumped to possible scenarios, any of which might have an effect on the girls' behaviors.

He sighed, and he didn't try to cover it. In fact, he might have exhaled extra loud for her benefit, and when he did, she almost smiled. "Unless you prefer the long drive to Ellensburg," she continued. "They have many good therapists there, and I won't be offended."

Seconds mounted, and when he did speak, she knew she'd made her point. No one had extra time these days, and single parents suffered from lack of time more than most. "When should we come?"

She wasn't about to let scheduling mess up progress. "My schedule is flexible," she replied smoothly. "Yours isn't. What works for you? Do the girls have after-school activities we need to work around?"

"They do, but they're free on Thursday and Friday this week."

"Does that work with your schedule?"

Again the pause, but he didn't make her wait too long before he conceded. "I'll make it work."

"Perfect. Thank you. I'll see you and the girls on Thursday at five." She hung up the phone before he could answer. She was pretty sure he'd prefer being a no-show if she gave him the chance. He'd put Rachel off for most of the school year, which meant he was adept at shelving problems. Reticence in his tone indicated he was cornered, and Elsa had been a western girl for a long time. Born-to-the-saddle cowboys never liked being cornered. Now it was up to him.

She moved toward the door, set down the phone, and walked outside.

Clean spring air had swept away the smell of winter mold from leaf clutter and needle droppings. Birdsong surrounded her, bright and vibrant, assorted visitors singing welcomes as they cared for northern nesting grounds.

She used to love springtime. The dance of new life, resurrection, rebirth. She'd reveled in the fresh angle of the sun, its sharper rays, a more defined warmth. On her parents' ranch, they'd be birthing puppies, piglets, and calves—a true season of renewal. Her brother, Ian, and his family would come to help, even her littlest nephew. Ian had bought an old-timer's house up the road and fixed it up for his growing family so they could all be part of the ranching process. When Nick said he lived in town, her internal radar had spiked, but she'd been in Gray's Glen long enough to hear a little history. And current history in Gray's Glen revolved around Sam Stafford and the Double S.

She drew on her cape and stepped outside. The bark-like voice of a heron paused her. It was joined by another great blue, then another, and as she turned toward the honking voices of pterosaur-looking birds, a sweeter, more melodic tune made her stop. Moving slowly, she peeked around the corner to find the songster. On the southeast side of the shed, in the lee of a faded, peeling shutter, a purple finch knit bits of grass and weed in quick, decisive motions. His bright plumage danced in the warming sun, and when his mate flew in with more nesting material, he bobbed a quick look of true love her way and kept right on working as she flew off in search of more goods.

A young pair, most likely. Hurried, with no last year's nest to guide them, but the fury of first love and babies pushed them to commit. Did they stay together out of need or desire?

An age-old question that niggled present-day anthropologists.

She stared around her small holding, suddenly dissatisfied, and with a swoosh of her cape, she strode back inside and gathered her art supplies. She piled them into the car and followed the logger's road to a higher elevation where dense foliage welcomed her. She pulled her cloak close, set up the easel, arranged her colors in nonspectral order, and let the shadows draw her in.

Up here, she was safe amid somber grays, blues, and browns.

Brightly colored birds singing songs of love didn't find cozy nesting corners in the gloomy chill, and when she'd applied paint thickly to the eighteen-by-twelve canvas, she took a razor blade from the side pocket of her bag and began carving muted images of shadowed trees and lifeless branches, light along the edges and growing darker inside.

Like her.