

The Cattlemen's Ball
Celia Yeary

~~*~A Free Short Story~*~*~*

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The Cattlemen's Ball

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Nineteenth Century

Ryan Lee Cameron stood in a hallway off the main entrance to the enormous Chicago Regal Hotel Ballroom. He noticed a sign that read "Washroom," walked to the door, pushed it open, and walked in. Blinding lights and walls of mirrors startled him so much he almost bolted. Men in their fancy black suits exited from stalls and moved to gleaming white sinks to wash their hands with water that poured from gold faucets. He needed a place to hide for a few minutes to collect his nerves, but there were too many men coming and going to make him comfortable. Taking a deep breath, he exited the room and stood against the wall in the hallway.

The cattle sale had gone extremely well. Now he could go home to Texas, back to the ranch old man Bartlett Snow had given him, and begin his real life. He hoped Bartlett would be proud of him when he brought home the big check. The money would go a long way to further the development of the ranch.

Ryan had wandered on his own since the age of eleven, until at the age of sixteen he happened upon a small run-down ranch near Nacogdoches. The owner had no family, and he took Ryan in and treated him as though he were his son. The two worked as a team for ten years, buying adjoining property and building the herd. The house suffered for a while, but they had managed to add on a couple of rooms and change some of the features. It was as good a home as Ryan had ever known.

Now, here in the big city of Chicago, Ryan was to attend his first Cattlemen's Ball, an outstanding shindig put on by the Cattlemen's Association. He left the washroom, knowing his boots were as clean as a five-year-old pair could be. His one and only suit was adequate, though not cut in the latest fashion. Even though constructed of coarser wool, it sported a lining that almost resembled silk. He'd managed to get to town and buy a new white

shirt, but now he noticed it didn't exactly look like those the other men wore. Still, he liked it and believed it looked just fine.

After a few moments, he smoothed his straight black hair from the top to the back, and walked through the wide double doors. The beautiful music, such as he'd never heard, filled the room and helped create the festive atmosphere. He'd never seen so many women in one place in his life, and every one of them looked pretty, even those a little more plump around the middle than others.

"*Ryan*. Hold up, there, son."

The man approaching was one of the sellers from Texas he'd met at the yards the day before.

Ryan nodded, smiled, and held out his hand. "How're you tonight, Mr. Davies?"

"Fine, fine, boy. I'm glad to see you made it. Did you find the bar?"

"No, sir, just walked in."

"Well, follow me and we'll get you a drink. Finest bourbon made, or if you prefer, a gin and tonic. Wouldn't imagine you'd want one of those sweet wines the ladies like. My wife's nearby somewhere. I want you to meet her. Here we are. Bartender, fix up this gentleman here."

"Bourbon and water but cut the liquor in half."

Mr. Davies raised his eyebrows. "Don't drink, son?"

"Not really, but I wouldn't mind trying it. I want to have a lot to tell Bartlett when I get home. He can't get around much anymore, but he sure loves good stories."

Ryan held his drink, sipped, nodded his appreciation, and looked around the room. The band tuned up, and men milled around, looking for partners.

"Oh, here's my wife. Honey, this is the young man I told you about yesterday, Ryan Cameron."

They exchanged pleasantries, and Mr. and Mrs. Davies excused themselves to move toward the dance floor.

Ryan stood to the side while he watched the dance and wondered if he could do that if he had a partner. The steps didn't look too difficult, and if he partnered with a woman who knew the routine, he'd probably make it all right.

First, though, he needed a dance partner.

As the first number progressed, Ryan scanned those who stood around the perimeter of the room and talked or just looked around. His gaze riveted on one young lady. *Damnation, if she isn't the prettiest little thing I've ever seen.*

He waited a few seconds to determine if she had an escort. Since she stood with other females, he reckoned they were all single and available. Carefully, he placed his glass on a table and took long strides across the room straight toward her.

Amazingly, she had looked across just as he took the first step. Their gazes locked and remained so until he stood directly in front of her.

"Howdy...I mean, good evening, ma'am. My name is Ryan Cameron and I'm from Texas."

The lady gazed at him through eyes the color of Texas bluebonnets. She had the most handsome white-blond hair he'd ever seen on a woman. Even though small and delicate, she stood very straight with her chin up slightly, her head tilted, and looked up into his face. The hem of the pink dress she wore brushed the tops of his boots, but he couldn't have moved back if his life depended on it.

She blinked and smiled, looking just like an angel about to bestow a blessing on him. "Good evening, to you too, sir. My name is Olivia Westmoreland. I'm quite happy to make your acquaintance."

Ryan nodded, as he gazed right into her gorgeous eyes. "Do you dance, ma'am?"

The lady placed her gloved hand over her mouth and leaned over slightly. *She was laughing. At him?*

She lowered her hand. "Yes, sir, that's why I'm here tonight...to dance. But no man has approached me. I wonder why that is?"

She cocked her head in the most appealing way. Her eyes twinkled with merriment as if she knew few men would dare approach her.

She was that special, he thought, that men would shy away because of feelings of inadequacy. But him? Ryan Cameron? Nope. He felt just as sure of himself as the day he walked away from the abusive home he lived in, carrying only a sack with a few meager possessions. No way would any man get the better of him ever again...even though that man might be bigger, richer, or smarter.

"Will you show me how to dance, then, ma'am? I'm a pretty fast learner. I can learn just about any dang thing thrown at me, including a fancy dance."

Again, she laughed, but this time she looked right up into his face.

"Oh, Mr. Cameron. You are so delightful. Of course, I'll dance with you. Shall we?"

She held out her hand and he took it into his right one, pulling her along.

"Uh, Mr. Cameron? Let's walk slowly, shall we? As if we were strolling. We don't want to appear to be fighting each other to get to the dance floor. Let me show you, shall I?"

Nodding, he waited for instructions, for lord knew he wanted to do the right thing.

"Now, I'll stand on your left. You crook your arm so that you hold your fist to your waist. Then wait until I place my hand inside the bend of your arm. At that moment, you may lead me to the floor."

"Got it." He nodded repeatedly, pleased the action was so simple. Why even old Hogleg Bishop at home could follow these instructions, even with one leg.

The music began rather slowly, from fiddles and some other big instrument that looked like a huge fiddle stood on end. The unfamiliar tune had a solid, constant beat, one, two, three...one, two, three...

"This is a waltz, Mr. Cameron, and it's the most difficult of all dances for the beginner. Shall we wait for a simpler piece?"

"No, ma'am, not a'tall. Just show me how my feet go."

She smiled and nodded. "All right, then. We dance in a box, like so. Now, watch my feet."

Oh, he watched, all right. He couldn't do much else, he was that caught up in her. If she wasn't something. How had he gotten so lucky to get her for a partner?

"There, now," she said. "I think we have it. Would you like to try it before the song ends?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I da...sure would."

Ryan talked to himself the few steps it took to be on the dance floor. She was a true lady, one born into the role, probably rich and pampered and educated, with a daddy and a mama who kept their eyes on her at all times.

"Wh...what?" Ryan, lost in his thoughts, had missed something she said. "Could you repeat that, Olivia?"

She stopped, released his arm, and turned to him. "You used my given name. Do you not know that is improper, sir? We've just met, and the proper term is Miss Westmoreland, or the word you've been using—*ma'am*."

Ryan thought about the quandary for a few seconds. Should he allow this lady to call the shots, to inform him what to say and when? He'd determined years ago that no one, no man nor any woman would dictate when and how he would speak and carry out a task. He was his own man, self-made with a strong will and determination that had not only saved his life, but also earned him respect and a good standing in the community of Nacogdoches.

In a very short time, Ryan had become completely bowled over by this young lady. Oh, he knew in his heart she was probably

too good for him on some level, but on the other hand, he had a total belief in his abilities and goals. He was as good as the next man...or woman...and would do as he thought best within any given situation.

Standing very still, Ryan remained close to her and gazed down into her gorgeous face. She, on the other hand, tilted her head back to keep eye contact with him. This tiny woman was not going to back down.

She didn't look upset, except she pressed her lips together a little, as though she waited for his response.

Olivia? Or Miss Westmoreland?

Taking a chance, he spoke softly. "*Olivia*. Will you repeat what you were saying? I missed it."

Both stood very still, staring at each other. Ryan wanted to swallow or clear his throat, but he refrained, not wanting her to see any discomfort or insecurity at all. He almost sighed out loud when she spoke with a hint of humor in her voice.

"I was saying...*Ryan*...that we should hurry if we intended to dance the waltz."

Whew. I'm glad that's over.

He grinned. "Well, let's get to it, *Olivia*. I want to dance with you more than anything."

She smiled, and Ryan felt the earth beneath his feet sway. The heavens opened, too, and heavenly angels sang into his ear.

The number ended, but Ryan had managed about five turns of the waltz. *Shoot, this is easy as falling off a log.*

The group faced the string ensemble and applauded.

"People are drinking something from little glass cups. Would you like some, *Olivia*?" He looked around trying to locate the place to get the drink.

"I'd love something cool to drink. Let's see what's available tonight. Shall I show you...*Ryan*?"

He chuckled. "Damn, if you aren't something."

Crooking his arm as she'd taught him, she slipped her tiny hand into the bend. As they slowly made their way through the crowd, she made a small sound like a laugh. "Do you curse often?"

"Pretty often, but I'm learning to keep it down in polite company. It's just that I'm not around ladies very much. Bartlett and I drive into town at least every other month to attend a church social or a celebration, such as the Fourth of July Picnic."

"So, you don't have a particular lady friend?"

"Nope. Uh, no, guess I don't. There's one nice woman who seems partial to me, and I enjoy talking with her and eating her pies. But Bartlett and I just don't have the time to do much socializing."

They arrived at a beautifully decorated table with big bowls of pink liquid.

"Here we are, Ryan. If you please, I'd like a cup of pink lemonade. No cookies for me, but you help yourself."

Nodding, he left her there and studied the situation. No lines. Everyone found an open spot and chose what he wanted. Looked like all the men got the refreshments, while the ladies stood around fanning their faces, talking, and giggling. He hoped Olivia didn't giggle. Laughing was good, but a twittering giggle grated on his nerves.

As he held two dainty cups of lemonade, he carefully made his way back to her. Halfway there, someone slapped him on the back, jarring him so that some of the liquid sloshed out of the cups. He came to a halt and looked down. Wet splotches on the toes of his boots. Shaking his head in disgust, he turned to the person who'd hit him.

"Sorry, old man. My name is Paul Wellington, close friend of Olivia's. I'll take her cup, if you like, if you want to clean up your boots."

Ryan clenched his jaw but struggled to keep his temper. *The fellow had done that on purpose.*

"No, I can manage. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"I didn't catch your name, sir."

The man fairly rocked back on his heels, keeping his thumbs hooked in the small pockets of his gold vest. He stared at Ryan, daring him to leave without properly introducing himself.

"Ryan Cameron. Now..."

The man almost sneered. "From Texas, I bet, with that drawl and those clothes. Why don't you let me rescue Olivia? She is just too good-hearted to get away on her own, and that way, you can save face."

Ryan turned and walked toward Olivia without saying another word. If he didn't relax his grip on the small cups, he'd shatter both of them. He managed to smile as he gave her a cup.

"Sorry it's half empty. I spilled a little."

Olivia remained silent as she took her cup and sipped, keeping her head down. He wished she'd say something or look at him. Had she witnessed the scene with Wellington? Did she really want him to leave but was too polite to say so? He'd have to find out.

"Tell you what, Olivia. Olivia? Are you listening to me?"

Lifting her gaze to his, she blinked and rolled her lips inward for a brief moment. "Yes, Ryan?"

"Listen. I think I'll find that girl in the blue dress and see if she would like to dance. Do you mind? That way, you can dance with your friends."

Well, damn. Tears filled her eyes. "Olivia? Olivia, honey? What's wrong? What have I done? I apologize from the bottom of my heart for hurting you. I should have known you'd enjoy being with your gentleman friends. You'll have to forgive me for barging in like a bull in a china closet."

She leaned close and whispered. "Ryan?"

His heart almost stalled. Leaning slightly toward her to hear over the din and the music starting up, he replied, "Yes, honey?"

"Will you take me outside for a walk in the gardens?"

Did he hear her correctly? He must have and that was the reason his heart almost beat right out of his chest. Taking the punch cups, he caught a waiter walking by with a tray and placed them there. Turning to her, he picked up her hand and held it between both of his, even though his were rough and callused.

"I'd sure like that. Which way are the gardens?" He brought her hand through the crook of his arm, and anchored her there as he placed his right hand over hers.

Olivia beamed brightly, smiling while the remnants of the tears sparkled in her eyes.

Not too slowly, he led them through the throng. *Ol' Paul Piss-ant* approached at a rapid pace, but Ryan looked the man in the eyes and raised his chin in a determined way, daring him to say a word.

Paul stopped dead in his tracks.

When the cool night air hit Ryan, he breathed a sigh of relief. Close quarters like that dance hall didn't make him feel right. Knocked him off kilter. Sort of close in, stifling, almost with a sick feeling.

"Ahh, this is a lot better than in there. Too many people."

"Ryan?"

Would he ever tire hearing her say his name? If he had his way, he'd keep her for the rest of his life. The thought made him almost miss a step and stumble. His heart thumped and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. What had happened?

Had he fallen in love? How did a man feel when he loved a woman? Was this too soon, just a little crazy to even consider?

"What, darling?"

"Let's sit over there on the stone bench behind the bank of roses."

"Sure thing."

He helped her sit, even though she was perfectly capable. Somehow, he just knew that would be one of those polite tasks a man would do. Why...it just came natural.

When they sat, she began to talk. "Ryan Cameron, I have something to say. Will you listen?"

Dumbly, he nodded.

"You see, I am an only daughter, an only child, and when you meet my parents, you will need to stand strong and firm if you want to become acquainted with me. Do you, Ryan? Want to become acquainted?"

Clearing his throat. "Yes. I do."

She laughed a little. "All right, then. You see, I have turned down marriage proposals from five men in the last five years. Astounding, isn't it?"

"Not with you. I'd think every man in your vicinity would...love you."

Cocking her head in that cute way, she said, "Do you, now? Have you ever been in love?"

"Nope. Never had the feeling I have right now."

Placing her hand at her breast, she said softly, "Did I hear you correctly?"

Ryan paused. This was a big moment in his life, and maybe Olivia's, too. He was a man without much time to dawdle and court a woman, especially long distance. The thoughts swirling in his head almost made him dizzy, but on the other hand, if he didn't think them, he'd leave in three days' time and maybe never see her again.

"Olivia, will you marry me? I live in Texas on a pretty big ranch, but the house isn't much right now. It could be though, or I could build us a new one. Bartlett Snow owns the ranch, and he sort of adopted me ten years ago and since he has no family, the ranch is really mine. You understand?"

"Ryan? When I first saw you two hours ago, my heart beat so fast and furiously, I thought I'd faint. I said, *Olivia Westmoreland, you should become acquainted with this fine looking westerner. He looks like a real man with a heart of gold.*"

* * * * *

Two Days Later

The wedding had been simple but elegant. At least that's the word Ryan heard repeatedly on his and Olivia's special day in the beautiful church her family attended. With the sanctuary full, even on such short notice, he had proudly said, "I do," in front of total strangers. But Olivia was no stranger. He'd kissed and held her enough these last two days to make him think he'd known her always. Maybe he had in his dreams.

As they walked to the champagne table, friends nodded, smiled, and congratulated them. Just then, a man behind him chuckled. He turned to see Mr. Davies, the first man who had greeted him at the dance. His wife stood there, too.

"Hello, sir. Ma'am."

Mr. Davies clapped his hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Well, old man, I see you married way above yourself."

Ryan turned cold and hard but did not move a muscle. Olivia gripped his arm and remained as still as Ryan.

Mrs. Davies furtively glanced between the bride and groom, furiously fanning her red face. "*Horace*. What a thing to say."

Mr. Davies laughed out loud, bringing attention to the group. Now, they had an audience. "Aww, he knows what I mean. But that's fine by me, if it's fine with Olivia, here."

Not once since Ryan walked away from his horrible home life at age eleven had he allowed a man to get away with belittling him. The practice amounted to a kind of abuse, the same kind of words he'd heard in his young life. Now? No man nor any woman would treat him less than an equal.

"Excuse me, darling," he said to Olivia. "Mr. Davies, will you step outside, sir?"

The man turned as red as his wife and began to sputter. "Now, now, wait just a minute, here, boy."

Ryan kept his voice low. "Who're you calling 'boy'? Step outside and say that again."

Ryan had every intention of cleaning the man's plow, but he was some twenty-five years younger than the overweight man who maybe had a bad heart. He couldn't do it.

Repeating his command, Ryan said, "Please step outside, Mr. Davies. This won't take long."

Outside, the older man began to beg, apologizing with every kind word he could think of. "I am truly sorry, Cameron. I had a couple of drinks and those words just came out. I didn't mean one wor..."

Ryan held up a hand. "Stop. I hate sniveling worse than I hate someone calling me a lowlife. Let me tell you, sir, yes, you are correct. I am not one of your kind. I am damn lucky Olivia overlooked the fact that I came from the poor house. She never mentioned it once. If she thought it, I didn't see or hear one thing negative out of her sweet mouth.

"Where I come from, a man is measured not by his wealth, but by his solid word, his good name, and his trustworthiness. Sir, I always keep my word. I enjoy a good name at home. And men trust me to be fair and do the right thing."

Mr. Davies removed his handkerchief from his pocket. Wiping the perspiration from his face, he held out his hand. "Sir, I am glad to know you. If you could find it in your heart to forgive me, I'd like to be one of those you could call a friend."

"I accept your apology. Friends? You'll have to earn that. Good night, sir. I must see to my bride."

Inside the church, Ryan scanned the reception room for his lovely bride. Still wearing her beautiful long white dress and holding her bouquet, she stood slightly slumped while she listened as a couple spoke to her. Her face had lost its color and vibrancy, and he wanted to kick himself. Why had he thought it necessary to confront a buffoon at this moment? Only Olivia mattered.

As he neared, she glanced toward him, visibly brightened, said, "Excuse me," and hurried to his waiting arms.

Gathering her close with her head on his chest, he smoothed the back of her hair a few times, murmuring love words to her very softly so only she could hear.

Lifting her chin with one finger, he whispered, "Olivia, honey, please forgive me. Here I wanted to make a good showing for you, and all I did was act as bad as Davies. If you'll overlook this one wrong-headed move, I promise to learn to be a gentleman."

Moving back, she smiled and took his hand. Pulling him along as he had once tried to drag her to the dance floor, she walked with quick steps to a door that led outside to a prayer garden.

There, she fell into his arms again, stood on tiptoes to reach his mouth, and kissed him with sweet, tender passion.

"Ryan Cameron, I believe in you with all my heart. I have no doubt you are one of the finest gentlemen I've ever encountered. It comes natural to you, don't you see? Thank you for standing up for yourself and making me proud. I *love* you, you know."

Ryan's heart swelled and his world opened up to something he'd never had—someone to love him.

"Honey, I'll work myself to the bone to make you happy. Ready to go home?"

"Yes. I am so ready."

"Then let's go pack up and get to the train. We have about two hours."

After one more kiss, they sneaked out the back, on their way to a new life.

~*~*~*~

Note from Author

The first Texas book is *Texas Blue*, published by The Wild Rose Press. In that story, Buck Cameron tracks and rescues a very young woman, Marilee Weston, from abandonment and isolation by her father. She has a very small daughter, Josie.

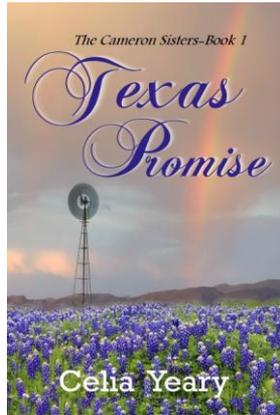
Buck takes Marilee and her daughter home with him to Nacogdoches, Texas. On the third night, they arrive at Buck's sister's home and spend the night. The next morning, Marilee dresses the best she can and walks downstairs.

A large oil painting hangs on the wall at the end of the stairs depicting a handsome couple—he with straight black hair and a square jaw. Marilee recognizes the resemblance to Buck. Sitting next to him is a beautiful petite woman with white blond hair, her hand on his knee. Her beatific smile warms Marilee's heart.

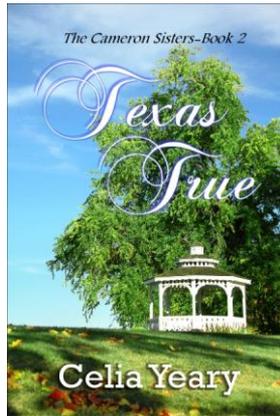
Later, she asks Buck about the couple in the painting. He explains they are his parents, Ryan and Olivia Cameron.

I hope you enjoyed this short story about Ryan and Olivia, for as patriarch and matriarch of the Camerons of Texas, they began a family with stories that move into the Twentieth Century.

Texas Promise-Book I-The Cameron Sisters
Reissued by Publishing by Rebecca J. Vickery
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Texas True-Book II-The Cameron Sisters
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Thank you,
Celia Yeary