

Celia Yeary

Merry
Christmas,
Victoria

A vintage-style photograph of a sewing machine with blue thread spools, a lit candle in a silver holder, and various sewing accessories on a wooden table.

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Merry Christmas, Victoria

Victoria yearns for the love of one special man. However, rancher Cade Hollister treats her as a friend, so she follows his lead. As she works alone in her cold dress shop on Christmas Eve, he stops by, visits, and walks her home. At the door, he gives her an unexpected kiss.

Cade has loved Victoria for a long time, but he's never found a way to tell her. This Christmas, though, he takes a chance. Will his surprise gift make her understand how much he loves her?

Chapter One

Nineteenth Century, Texas

The soft snow fell as it had all day. Now that dusk colored it, the big, fluffy flakes drifted down like golden dancers floating through the air.

As Victoria peered out the front window of her shop, the last few shoppers hurried to their buckboards or horses to make the cold trek home. Hugging her arms around her body, she turned back to the pot-bellied stove. She opened the front, and with the poker, stirred the hot coals to rekindle the flame, enough to keep her reasonably warm for another hour or so. She had to finish the dress tonight.

Victoria adjusted the flame in the kerosene lantern, then sat and brought the dress to her lap. To sew with a needle and thread, she had to remove her mittens, and when she did, the icy air in the store instantly grabbed the warmth from her fingers. Before she picked up the needle, she moved closer to the stove, and rubbed her hands together while blowing on them.

As she bent to her sewing, a man stopped and peered into the window of the shop. She lifted her head, held her breath, and waited. He opened the door, and stepped in.

Victoria knew how to put on a show, how to pretend her heart didn't thud in her breast, and how to force herself to breathe slowly. Without rising, she greeted him.

"Cade. Come in. I'm sure you're freezing."

He kept his hands in his pockets, and the wide-brimmed western hat pulled low over his dark, thick hair. His big, broad shoulders, encased in a sheep's wool coat, relaxed a tiny bit.

"Mind if I sit?" His deep voice wafted over her like a warm, summer breeze.

"No, not at all. I need to keep working, though. I'd ask if I could help you, but this is a woman's dress shop, so I'm certain there's nothing you'd purchase. Or am I wrong? I do have ladies' gloves and reticules, but that's all besides dresses and suits."

"Who would I buy something like that for?" He sat down in a straight-backed chair near her. His voice sounded a little edgy, impatient.

"Well, I...oh!" She had pricked her finger with the needle.

He leaned forward. "Hurt yourself?"

"Only a stick. I do it all the time." She wiped the drop of blood away and sucked on the finger to stop the pain.

Cade watched her as he removed his hat and hung it on his knee. She wished he wouldn't stare. It made her fidgety.

"How long does it take to make a dress?"

"Even though I work fast, it still takes days. Mama taught me well how to sew, knit, and crochet. Now, cooking? Papa says I burn water."

Cade chuckled. "I suppose we all have our talents."

Smiling, she asked, "Where've you been? You'll never make it home tonight. The snow's coming down harder all the time. By eight o'clock, you'll have a difficult time navigating down the road."

"I'm staying with Aunt Lucille and Uncle Roy tonight."

"What about Delbert? Won't he be alone way out there?"

"He has a lady friend visiting. I never say a word, but he knows when I'll be away, and he somehow manages to have Lynnette there."

"Well, on Christmas Eve, everyone should be with the person he loves."

He turned quiet, so Victoria resumed her stitching. Only the hem remained unfinished on the dark green velvet holiday dress. No lady would outshine Doreen Stanley on Christmas Day.

Cade cleared his throat. "What will you do tomorrow?"

"Me? Well, I'll be at home with Papa, Mama, and Areta. She's so excited about Christmas, but then, she's only ten."

Cade kept his eyes on her. "When are you going home?"

"When I finish this part. Doreen will come to the house early in the morning and pick it up. She wanted it especially for the church service, and then at home when she and her family have guests for a luncheon buffet and party."

"Are you going to the party?" he asked.

"Me? No, Cade. I'm not invited. Only special friends are."

"You're not a special friend?"

"Goodness, no. I'm only the seamstress." Victoria stopped to bite off the thread. "There. All finished."

"So, you can go home now?"

"Yes, and I'm so happy. I'm tired and cold and I can't wait to get out of here."

"Should I tamp down the fire?" He stood and replaced his hat.

Victoria spread the finished dress on the worktable and smoothed the wrinkles as best she could. "I'd appreciate it," she said, moving across the room to take a long box from a shelf. "Thank you. By the way, why were you out so late tonight?" She lifted the lid off the box, and began to line it with lightweight paper.

"Had to go to the depot to pick up something."

"Well, thanks for keeping me company. Is that fire out real good?" She didn't look up.

"It is. I'll escort you home and carry your box."

"No need. Don't you need to visit Doreen?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you and she..."

Cade cut her off. "Do you want me to escort you home or not, Victoria?"

She paused, and his jaw clenched and his brows snapped together in a frown. "Well, yes, I suppose so. But we'll have to walk."

"I know that. My horse will follow me."

"All right. Thank you."

Chapter Two

Victoria's hands shook as she pulled on her coat and buttoned it to her chin. Cade always caused her stomach to flutter, even if he was down the street and she only caught a glimpse of him. Now that he was close to her, she thought she might throw up from nervousness.

No man she'd ever stepped out with matched Cade's demeanor, caliber, and good looks. He seemed to be very particular, though. She couldn't remember his last lady friend, but then, she didn't see him very often. When she did encounter him, he always stopped and looked at her, spoke politely, and moved on after a few minutes.

"Ready?" he asked, standing at the door with the box under his arm.

"I think so." She took a moment to glance around.

Outside, Victoria covered her head with a heavy woolen shawl and wrapped it around her neck, leaving the ends trailing down her back. She tugged her thick mittens on and smiled at Cade.

"Ready," she said.

The walk to her house wasn't bad, but when it was especially cold, she thought she'd freeze before she arrived at the front door. Someday, she knew she should seek out a place of her own. A grown woman of twenty should be either married or live alone.

Halfway to the house, she stepped on a patch of ice. To catch her balance, she flailed her arms about, but she fell on her back anyway. Cade knelt beside her immediately.

"*Victoria*. Are you all right?"

She reached out for his arms and held on.

"I...I think so."

Cade supported her as she sat up. He rubbed up and down her spine, causing waves of heat to flow through her body. His gentle touch, even though it was through layers of thick clothing, almost made her stop breathing.

"I'm fine, really, Cade."

He helped her stand and stood back.

"I think everything works," she said with a laugh. "Oh! Is the box all right?"

"I'm not worried about the damn box."

Victoria brushed at her skirts. "You may not be concerned, but I certainly am. That represents many hours of work, and I can't afford to spoil it."

She heard him mutter something like, "*Damned woman*". Was he referring to her?

They continued to her house in near silence. As he walked up the steps to the porch, he remarked, "Your mother has candles in the window."

"Oh, that's Areta's doing. She's determined we have a pretty Christmas. She made chains from colored paper to drape over the mantle, and I created bows from old ribbon and lace. She thinks it looks like a fairyland, so she'll be happy as a lark tomorrow."

Cade turned to her. "Is that important to you? Making Areta happy?"

"I suppose. Why not? She's the most excited one. In my mind, she should be as happy as we can make her."

"What about yourself, Victoria? What would make you happy?"

She smiled and glanced at him. "It wouldn't take much. If I could have anything, it would be a man to love and a home of my own."

"You've had your chances. Why haven't you settled on someone?"

She shrugged. "Because...I guess I never loved any of them. They didn't love me, either."

"Guess I'd better go. Aunt Lucille will be looking for me. You have a Merry Christmas, Victoria, you hear?"

"Yes, Cade, and you too."

Before she turned away, he caught her shoulder and brought his face close to hers. He looked into her eyes and whispered, "I'm going to kiss you, Victoria."

And he did.

Chapter Three

Inside the house, she laid the dress box on a table. Standing with her eyes closed, she held her clasped hands to her breast, while her heart fluttered and danced. Cade had gently placed his lips on hers, and she became still as a statue when he had given her the brief, sweet kiss, a whisper of a sensation. The main thing, no matter how slight and soft, the kiss transformed her. She'd wished for over two years he would pay her attention and ask her out or come by to visit. Usually, though, he'd tip his hat, she'd give a little wave, and both would keep walking.

Once, at a church social, he had approached her and started to speak. She'd hoped he might suggest they have dinner together, but she was already with Thomas Dalrymple, who had walked up with two cups of cider. Cade had excused himself.

She glanced at the candles and moved to blow them out, but she saw something in the corner.

Next to the fireplace sat a large square object, covered in... a tablecloth? Obviously, it was a secret. Did Papa buy something that big? What could it be?

As she walked up the stairs, her curiosity was too much to ignore. She tapped lightly on her parents' door. In a few seconds, her mama opened it.

"What do you want, honey? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine. I..."

"Is that Victoria, Maureen?" she heard Papa call from the bed. "Tell her to come on in here."

Victoria entered the cozy, warm room. Her mama crawled onto the bed beside her husband who propped himself up on the pillows. He removed his spectacles and placed them on the table near his Bible.

"What's the big, square thing downstairs? I saw you'd covered it, so I didn't peek. Is it a doll house or something for Areta?"

Her mama leaned forward. "It's something special for you, honey."

"For me?" She looked back and forth at each face, wondering what they could have purchased that was so big. "Mama, you didn't spend a lot of money on me, did you? I told you to use our Christmas cash for Areta. She's the one who should have presents. I don't need—"

"Hush now, honey. We didn't buy it."

"Then who did? Oh, no, it wasn't Milam, was it?"

"No, it was Cade."

"Cade Hollister?" she asked in an octave higher than her usual voice.

"Yes, but honey, he said we shouldn't tell you until tomorrow. He wants to come by and watch you open it."

Victoria jumped from the bed, ran out the door, down the hall, and practically launched herself down the stairs. At the bottom, she grabbed the newel post to swing her body around to the front room. She snatched the tablecloth off the box.

THE SINGER COMPANY. The World's Finest Treadle Sewing Machine-Within a Table-With Four Handy Drawers for Notions!

Victoria sat heavily on the floor, staring at the black lettering on the side of the crate. Good Heavens! What has this man done? He's spent a fortune on...a *sewing machine*! A real, honest-to-goodness SINGER!

Victoria closed her eyes. Why did he do this? She knew it would cut hours and hours off her work, not to mention saving her fingers from more calluses and sticks and jabs. At night, sometimes, her fingers were so stiff she had to soak them in warm water and rub liniment on them, the kind they used on their horses.

Oh, my land! He cares for me. He really does, and I've always looked the other way.

She stood and buttoned her coat, wrapped the shawl around her head and neck, and pulled on her mittens. As she moved to the front door, her mama came down the stairs.

"Victoria! What're you doing, honey? You can't go out there. You'll catch your death. Please, stay here."

Victoria stopped. "I can't wait. This is too important."

"But he asked that you stay here."

"Maybe he didn't mean it. Listen, it's only a few blocks to his aunt and uncle's house. I'll hurry, and I'll be fine. But Mama, don't you understand? I have to see him tonight."

"But..."

"Mama," she whispered, "he walked me home and kissed me at the door."

"Ahhh," she said. "Please, be careful. We won't sleep until you come home."

Chapter Four

Victoria slipped out the front door, and began the walk to see Cade. With every step, her heart beat harder and faster.

At the door to Roy and Lucille's house, she paused, but before she could knock, Cade opened the door. He reached out, caught her outstretched hand, and pulled her inside.

For several precious moments, they stood in the foyer and gazed at each other.

"You came," he said.

"Yes. I did, and...hello," she whispered.

He held both her hands and brought them to his chest. "My heart is pounding, Victoria. I can hardly speak."

"I know."

He shook his head. "No, you don't. You don't really know me."

"Yes, I do. You're the one in my dreams."

"For so long, I wanted to kiss you and hold you."

She whispered, "I thought I was only a friend. That's all I've ever been."

"I've loved you a long time, Victoria."

"Oh, Cade. I've been in love with you for years. But you just came and went, and you were always with someone else, and I'm only a..."

"Shhh," he said softly, placing his fingers across her lips. "Never say you're *only* anything. To me, you're everything, my whole world, and I couldn't find a way to tell you, to show you."

"The SINGER Sewing Machine. Cade, it must have cost a small fortune."

"Not so much, but I'd give everything I own, just for your love."

"But don't you see? You needn't give me anything. Except a kiss."

"And a vow? Suppose I asked you to marry me?"

"I'll marry you, because I love you. But..." She stopped and smiled into his eyes. "I love my sewing machine too."

"When we marry, will you still work in your shop?"

"Whither thou goest I will go. And whither I go, my sewing machine goes."

He laughed low in his throat. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart."

"And Merry Christmas to you, my darling Cade."

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About the Author

Celia Yeary, a native Texan, former science teacher, graduate of Texas Tech University and Texas State University, is mother of two, grandmother of three, and wife of a wonderful, supportive Texan. Celia and her husband enjoy traveling, and both are involved in the church, the community, and the university. Central Texas has been her home for forty years.

She has published ten novels, seven novellas, and articles for a local magazine.

You may find out more about Ms. Yeary at her website:

<http://celiayeary.com>

or at her blog:

<http://celiayeary.blogspot.com> titled *Romance...and a little bit of Texas*

Ms. Yeary's books are available at most online book retailers.

They include:

Texas Promise: Cameron Sisters Book 1

Texas True: Cameron Sisters Book 2

Truck Stop Paradise

Rodeo Man

Lone Star Dreaming (Collection of Shorts)

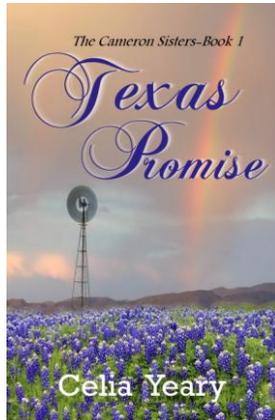
Kat and the US Marshal

Charlotte and the Tenderfoot

Addie and the Gunslinger

Angel and the Cowboy

Sneak Peek



Texas Promise

*Still restless, but no longer idealistic and insecure,
he knew he had to go home...*

After two years, Jo Cameron King's life as a widow abruptly ends when her husband returns home to Austin. Unable to understand his anger and bitterness, she accepts a call to travel to the New Mexico Territory to meet her dying birth father whom she knows nothing about. Her plan to escape her husband goes awry when he demands to travel with her.

Dalton King, believing lies his Texas Ranger partner tells him about Jo, seethes with hatred toward his wife. Now he must protect Jo from his partner's twisted mind, while sorting out the truth. Jo's bravery and loyalty convince him she's innocent. But can they regain the love and respect they once shared?

Chapter One

Texas in the Spring, late 1890's

Jo King jumped from the wagon, tied the horses to the railing, and ran around the building to the front as the one-forty-five rolled in. *Dang, I'm almost late. First time that train's ever been on time.*

Skipping up the steps, she ran along the platform, waving the smoke and steam away from her face. Her boots thudded on the boards in rhythm with the chug-chug-chugging of the train. With her right hand on top of her hat, she kept her straw skimmer from flying off, so her long blond hair wouldn't float all over the place. With her left, she hiked up her calico dress to avoid tripping on the hem.

Jo slowed to a fast walk when she noticed the reactions of some of the waiting people. A few turned to stare. Two women standing under the overhang of the Austin, Texas Depot clucked their tongues and wagged their heads. One leaned toward the other and said loud enough for all to hear, "You would think a grown woman would know better than to *run* like a ten-year-old boy. What a *disgrace*." The other woman nodded emphatically.

Smiling and shaking her head, Jo picked up the pace and ran with the train a few more yards until it came to a complete stop. The whistle pierced the air and the wheels screeched, metal on metal, bringing the black monster to a halt.

Jo grinned at the sight of her little sister, peering through a clean spot on the soot-covered window, waving her hand. *My lands, I can't believe she's seventeen and all grown up.*

The same excitement that rippled through Jo ran through the crowd as the train finally heaved out its last hot breath. Passengers waiting to board the train stood back slightly but still strained to view the unfolding scene of disembarking passengers. To her, nothing was quite as exciting as watching complete strangers walk down the steps and see them greeted by a husband, a wife, a parent, or a child. Those waiting were giddy with excitement. Few people could manage nonchalance or an uninterested demeanor on a depot platform when a train pulled into the station, and least of all her.

At last, the conductor descended the steps and waited to assist the passengers safely to the platform.

Jo stood on tiptoes and watched True smooth her long, black hair down in the back as she stood in line at the top of the steps. Only two more passengers and her turn would come to walk down the steps. *Please,*

oh, please, hurry, she thought. *Let her off this train*. Jo tried to peer over the robust woman in front of her, but her impatience urged her to push through the crowd. "Let me through. Excuse me, please. Oh, sorry. *Whoops*. Didn't mean to step on your toe, ma'am."

"True!" Jo squealed, then laughed, when True clumsily stumbled down the last step. With the help of the conductor, she managed to stay on her feet. Guess the hours of walking with a book balanced on her head didn't take.

True threw herself into Jo's arms. In tandem, they screeched and jumped up and down in place. Jo completely ignored the crowd.

"Oh, True, I could hardly wait for you to arrive. I'm so glad to see you. You don't know how I've missed you." Tears ran down her own cheeks, and True sniffed and sobbed.

"Come over here in the shade." Jo tugged on her hand to pull her along the platform. "How was your trip? Did everything go all right? Mama and Papa worried so much about your coming to Austin."

"Oh, Jo, you don't know how happy I am to be here at last. I got so homesick those last few weeks in Boston. I *had* to stay with Mama and Papa for a while out at the ranch to soak up their love and attention. You know how it is, don't you? You attended school there, too, although not as long as I did."

Jo turned to her sister and hugged her closer. "Oh, I remember. How is dear old Miss Wharton, anyway? Did she ever crack a smile while you were there?"

True giggled while shaking her head. "I'm fairly certain her poor face is frozen in place, but Headmaster O'Rielly made it all bearable. He's a peach."

"That's right, he is, but I couldn't take more than one year of curtsying, playing the piano, folding napkins, and embroidering. I did like the history and mathematics courses, though."

"Well, I learned everything I need to know on how to be a lady those two years. But I'm back home, now, and ready to go to work."

"And work you will, sweetie. We have much to do." Jo looked down the platform. "Oh, look, they're unloading the baggage car. We'd better run down there and see to your things."

True laughed. "You're the runner, not me, but let's do hurry."

Curving their arms around each other's waist, they walked in step to the luggage car. With their heads together, they talked and giggled. People turned to watch them as they walked past.

"Jo," True said. "You brought a *buckboard*? Didn't Papa buy you one of those buggies with a canopy and fringe all around?"

"He did, but we needed something more substantial to haul all your things. I know for a fact you have enough for a whole school full of girls." True laughed. "All right. I'll keep quiet. I'm just so happy to be here."

* * * * *

"Hurry, True, I can't wait for you to see the building."

Jo walked impatiently along the plank walkway in front of the stores and restaurants on Congress Avenue. She never failed to glance straight ahead at the State Capitol of Texas, where it sat on a slight rise, making it look even more majestic.

She loved Austin. The city thrived, enjoying an economic boom, as did most of Texas. Austin, in particular, benefited from the good times, thanks to the state government located here, and the University of Texas, growing by leaps and bounds. She had big plans for her future, just like everyone else in town.

Several weeks had gone by since she and the family had learned of Dalton's probable death. Now, she believed he truly had died, but she still held out a little hope. No harm in that. Her dreams already had been shattered when he'd ridden off three weeks after their wedding. They hadn't even settled into a marriage. Now, her heart felt numb, dead like he probably was, as cruel as that sounded. However, she could put on a happy face, just like always. She would continue her charade, until one day, perhaps she really would be. The only way now to be content was to take care of herself. She had to.

True asked, "Jo, does this building have electricity and fans in the ceiling? Mama and Papa's house, as beautiful as it is, really needs electricity. I don't know why Mama will not give up."

Jo flipped her long, blond hair back over her shoulder, grabbed True's hand, and pulled her along the boardwalk, dodging other people here and there. "You know she doesn't like change. She's still insecure from our early days, just the two of us barely scraping by. I guess she's afraid if she changes one thing, another one will change as a result—something she wouldn't like. Oh, it's too hard to explain. Come on, we're near."

"This is a long walk from your house. Do you plan to do it every day, twice a day? Good grief, Jo, use your horse and buggy."

Jo laughed. "You are so delicate, baby sister. You have to toughen up. Especially, if you're going to work with me."

"Maybe we could buy one of those new motor cars," True said wistfully.

Jo spread her arms. "Do you see any here in this town? You turned soft back East. But did you ever ride in one? I can just imagine riding in a motor car."

Suddenly she bumped into a body because she wasn't looking where she was going. "Oh. Sorry. I wasn't paying attention." Now she did, after straightening her bonnet and looking into the eyes of a familiar man. "Why, Lieutenant Bailey. What're you doing in Austin? Do you live here now?"

The man stared. "Mrs. King. How delightful to see you." He swept his fashionable hat off his blond curls, captured her hand, and kissed the knuckles. With a broad smile, he turned to True and bowed to her. "And Miss Cameron, how good to see you, also."

True only glanced at him and did not return his greeting.

"So, do you live here, sir?" asked Jo. He was the last man on earth she ever expected to see.

"Forgive me," he said. "I almost forgot your question when I saw you. You're more beautiful than ever. Yes, I've taken up residence here. Perhaps only temporarily, though. I've rented an apartment close to the river, a couple of miles from here. My Texas Ranger days are over, and I'm looking around for a position of some sort. As of now, I'm enjoying my freedom as long as my finances will allow."

Not knowing how to respond, nor wanting to, she glanced toward True. "Well, that's nice. We really must be running along now, if you will excuse us?" She turned to go, but he side-stepped to remain in front of her, crowding her. *Maybe if I stomp on his toe, he'll move.*

"I apologize for holding you up. You did seem to be in a hurry."

True spoke up. "My sister is always in a hurry. If she weren't in a city, she would be running instead of walking fast."

Jo laughed and nodded her head in agreement. "I'm very unladylike at times, I admit. The city will force me to act with more restraint, I suppose. Although I've lived here for a couple of years, I haven't reformed yet."

Stephen Bailey laughed, and kept his gaze on her face, making her a little uneasy. Before he departed, he spoke to Jo. "Will you do me the honor of having dinner with me some evening? Perhaps we should talk and become friends, now. When you have time, I would very much like to hear what you've been doing and how you are. And maybe you can give me some advice on how to live in this fair city. You know, the ins and outs of the social scene."

Jo hesitated, but only for a moment. She harbored some uncertainty concerning him, and she had almost forgotten the circumstances. She remembered thinking he either lied to her and her family about Dalton, or simply did not do his part when the two of them captured the outlaw, Jim Kirkland. Oh, well, what would it hurt? She was a widow, wasn't she?

"Thank you for your invitation, sir. Why don't we, instead, have lunch, perhaps tomorrow?"

"Certainly. Have you tried the restaurant in the Driskill Hotel? It's billed as the 'finest in the whole country'."

Now, Jo laughed right out loud. "Yes, I've been there once and almost had to mortgage my house to pay for my meal. It's quite luxurious and exquisite, and you must have a reservation at least a week in advance. How about the German Bakery across the street?" She pointed to the fashionable restaurant. "It's really a breakfast and lunch place, quite popular, especially with the government workers from the Capitol."

"That sounds fine. A good suggestion. Shall I pick you up someplace?" He looked around as if determining where she had been going.

"I'll meet you there at one o'clock. The main crowd will be gone, but it'll still be busy. Is that all right?"

"Yes, ma'am. And Miss True, would you care to join us?"

He seemed suddenly to remember she was standing there.

"Oh, no, thank you. I'll have my own luncheon engagement to attend."

"Good day to you both, then." He doffed his hat.

"Goodbye, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Jo watched Stephen Bailey walk away with a jaunty step, while whistling softly. *I wonder what or how much he knows about Dalton. They were partners, after all. Stephen came home, but Dalton did not.*

"Mercy me, Jo. I've never seen a man so entranced with a woman. He completely forgot I was standing there. Not that I cared, because I didn't want an invitation. Clearly, you were his only target."

Jo jerked her head toward her sister as they continued walking. "What are you implying? You sound as if you don't like him."

True shook her head. "Don't mind me. He just makes me jittery. He's too smooth. You know I haven't gone out with many men, and those that I have been with were mere boys. He's a man, and maybe I'm just not ready for that step. And Jo, don't take this wrong, but should you be going out? You're still Mrs. King."

"Don't worry about that, True. I'm a widow, I suppose, although I can't quite make that final step. On the other hand, I see no reason to mope about and keep hoping he'll turn up. It's just not going to happen. Put all that from your mind. Please? For me?"

True grabbed her sister's hand and squeezed. "Of course, I can. Don't pay any attention to me. You're a single woman."

Glad to change the subject, Jo stopped and threw out her arms. "Here it is. Now, stand here and look at the front. What do you think?"

"Oh, it's such a lovely brick building, very stylish. The dark red brick resembles the townhouses in Chicago. The windows are wonderful. They're wide and the arches at the top really make them stand out. Oh, and the door is *magnificent*. Could use a little varnish, maybe. What is it? Mahogany?"

"Oak, I think. I just love the oval glass in the door, and the edging of brass around it, and the carving on the surface of the wood really stands out. It's all a little dirty, though. The last occupant moved one block back because of the cost. It's not cheap to have a business on Congress Avenue." She stepped back and held her hands up, forming a square. "Oh, and picture this. Dark, forest green awnings over the windows, arched, also. Maybe, I'll get two of those big terra cotta pots to place on either side of the door. We could fill them with seasonal flowers."

True clasped her hands to her breast. Almost anything excited her little sister. "This is fabulous. I'm not an expert, but I think it's great. And it's on the west side of the street. You'll have shade in the afternoon."

"Now, look to my neighbor on the left. French Confectionery and Bakery. It's a very pretty little store. A little pricey, but that's what I'm looking for. Now, to the right. Franklin's Fashionable Clothing for Gentlemen. Perfect, huh?"

True laughed. "Yes, perfect. So, what will be the name of the shop?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Josephine's, A Touch of Lace, Finery for You. Too much? What do you think?"

"Oh, I adore the Josephine's, A Touch of Lace. Ummm, I should have to think on the other part. Depends where you're putting all that on a sign."

Flapping her hand in the air, she said, "We'll worry about that later. Let's go inside."

They spent the remainder of the afternoon inside the empty store. They walked around, went up and down the stairs to the second floor, admired the nice woodwork and the staircase, planned, discussed, and talked. By five o'clock, hunger overcame them, plus the building had warmed up considerably. No one had turned on the electricity, so the ceiling fans could not run. They locked up and started home strolling arm in arm.

Inside the door, Jo retrieved the stack of mail on the floor under the mail slot.

"Be right back, True." Jo ran up the stairs, removed her bonnet, and smoothed her hair down as best she could. She called it fly-away hair, so fine and straight, she could do little with it. At least, as half-sisters, she and True shared one trait. Straight-as-a-stick hair.

Since Jo employed no servants or cook, she and True put together a simple supper and carried it to the small breakfast room. As they ate and talked, she glanced through the letters and catalogs.

"More catalogs, Jo? I've only been here two days, and that makes six new ones."

"And more will arrive. We'll order some of our merchandise, of course, but I intend to have a design studio in the back half of the bottom floor. It's big enough to partition off. I've hired a woman who's a genius on the new sewing machines, and she has a sister and a friend who need work. I can only hire two for now, but maybe I can find a place for the third woman. They're really nice."

"Jo. You're not running an employment agency. Please be careful about letting your generosity get out of control."

"Yes, baby sister. Oh, and what I want to do is have special clothing of all types, from the bedroom to the ballroom, for the upper-class lady in Austin. I want to have some moderately priced, as well, for those who attend the same functions, but can't quite afford top quality outfits. One day, I'll also have a wedding boutique."

True sipped her tea. "You're going too fast for me. How're you going to entice these customers into your store?"

"Aunt Charlotte. She's ecstatic over my plans. Since Uncle Will's election to the Texas Legislature, she'll bring in even more contacts. When the swearing-in takes place, there'll be parties, balls, and teas all over the place. I intend to be up and running by then." She continued sifting through the mail. Suddenly, she froze with an envelope in her hand.

"Oh, Jo, I wish... What's wrong?"

Jo gasped at the envelope she'd picked up, stared, and turned pale. She held the letter in a trembling hand.

"It's from the Headquarters of the Texas Rangers in Waco." She sat back, shaken, staring at the piece of mail. "I know what this is. I'm sure of it. Oh, True, I'm not ready." She held it to her breast for a moment, took a deep breath, and opened it.

Dear Mrs. King:

I regret to inform you that upon a thorough search of the Chisos Mountains of West Texas, our investigative unit was unsuccessful at locating your husband, his body, or anyone who might have seen him.

The entire force of the Texas Rangers of this great state extends condolences on the loss of your loved one. We also grieve for the loss of a brother in arms.

We advise you to apply for Widow's Benefits as soon as you wish.

*Sincerely,
Captain Louis Lancaster, Texas Ranger Headquarters,
Waco, Texas*

Jo finished the letter, held it out to True, dropped her head in her arms on the table, and sobbed. Her shoulders shook with emotion while she cried her heart out, releasing all the sorrow she'd felt for more than a year. The sadness had begun three weeks after their beautiful wedding, when he had announced his departure.

She didn't even have love letters from him to cherish. The few he'd written had been stories of his exploits out West, hunting down an outlaw. A worthless piece of trash had been the cause of his death. She had felt empty and useless, a new bride, but not a wife. Now, numb and heartbroken, her soul emptied of all hope.

Dalton. Dead. Her mind wouldn't wrap around the concept. She couldn't even remember what he looked like, but she saw a black-haired, beautiful boy, her age, reaching out to her when they were four years old, saying, "Come on, Josie. Let's go play!"

That was the first time she'd seen him, and only the third child she'd ever seen in her life. Papa Cameron had brought her and Mama to his sister's house. Jo loved all of them instantly. Dalton and his brother Lee and sister Rosemary, all well loved and protected by their parents. The Kings had opened their generous hearts and beautiful home to a pair of dirty, bedraggled females. Probably, that was when she had fallen in love with Dalton. He was always sunny, happy, and loving. But something had happened, and he had stopped loving her.

True moved beside Jo and knelt on the floor. Her precious, loyal sister reached for her hands and squeezed them. "Oh, Jo, I've never seen you cry. You never cried over him, even when we all believed he was dead, and we had the memorial service out at the ranch."

Shaking her head, Jo wiped her nose and dabbed at her eyes. Turning so she could see True's face, she said in a wobbly voice, "Oh, sweetie, but I did. You don't know how many tears I shed in my bedroom, or sometimes, just the thought of him brought tears to my eyes. If you loved someone as I loved him, you'd understand. We were always soul-mates, Dalton and I. Even as children we stayed close when we had the chance."

"What will you do now?" True spoke softly, reverently, and patted Jo's knee.

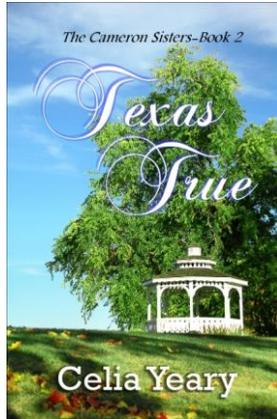
Jo shrugged her shoulders. "Now? The same thing I've done for almost two years—go on without him. At least I have the house and the shop. And I have you and Mama and Papa, Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Will. I may not be a real Cameron like you are, but I hold you dear to my heart. I will take care of myself."

"And I'll be here, too."

They hugged, and Jo's spirits lifted a little, simply because her baby sister adored her, and she knew it.

[Now available in ebook and print at most online book retailers.]

Sneak Peek



Texas True

Instead of running from a marriage built on deception, True Cameron takes charge of her own life. She works to make her husband see her as a partner and that he is worthy of her true love.

At a Governor's Ball in Austin, Texas, True Lee Cameron meets suave Sam Deleon. Before the night is out, she transforms from the coddled and protected younger sister to a woman in love. Reality crashes down when she accidentally learns he has deceived her. Daring to disobey him, she follows Sam to the oilfields and determines to live wherever he does. Has she made a mistake? Will she give up and return home where she can make her own rules?

When Sam Deleon meets the gorgeous young woman his mother has chosen for him, he fears falling in love, because he knows nothing about love. In order to carry out his mother's plan, he marries True and moves her to his mother's home, intending to visit enough to set the plan in motion. When True fails to obey him, he faces the possibility of losing her, thereby losing his inheritance and the family property.

Sam and True attempt a reconciliation and compromise. Together, they now face a nemesis, someone who determines to thwart every action they take, endangering not only their lives, but also those whom they love.

Chapter One

"Miss Cameron, may I have the pleasure of the next dance?"

The deep, masculine voice near her ear startled True so much she jumped and emitted an involuntary "Oh," that, even to her, sounded much like the squeak of a mouse caught in a trap.

Daydreaming, she had been focusing her rapt attention on a handsome man across the ballroom. The young, blond Adam Carter had looked in her direction, and she'd returned his gaze with as much interest as she could without appearing to be gawking.

She might be nineteen, but her experience with men fell into a category of non-existent. As soon as possible, she intended to correct the situation.

However, she was now required by the rules of social deportment, which she had learned well at "Miss Wharton's Academy and Boarding School for the Discerning Young Lady" in Chicago, to turn to the gentleman standing patiently to her left. As she did, he bowed slightly in a formal manner, which she had not seen in Texas by any of the local men. Even her father, who had a fine education from a Boston University and enjoyed wealth and success, did not bow to women. He would touch the brim of his Stetson or remove it, but he would never bow, for heaven's sake.

Collecting her wits, True looked up into a dark face that could have been a carved statue created by using a Spanish conquistador as a model. The sun had further darkened his natural bronze skin. His ice-blue eyes appeared startlingly bright in contrast. One thought popped into her brain as she perused this man. He was the exact polar opposite of the young, slim, blond man she'd been watching.

"Miss Cameron," the man with the deep voice drawled, "I'm waiting."

"I don't believe I've made your acquaintance, sir. It would not be proper at all to accept your invitation. Do you not agree?"

True only wanted to return to her daydream. This man looked, oh, she didn't know his age, but he was certainly older than she. However, she kept her voice modulated in the proper tone and obeyed every rule of good manners she'd learned.

"Miss Cameron, I could bring your father or your brother-in-law over so one of them might introduce us. Would that be acceptable?"

The statement surprised her, so she turned toward him. "My father? Do you know him?"

He nodded slightly. "Yes, I certainly do, ma'am. I work for your

brother-in-law, Dalton King, as the foreman in his Central Texas oilfield. Actually, I manage the whole operation over there, now that he moved to Houston to set up another one. I see Mr. King and your sister are here tonight, as well as your parents."

She arched her brows. "Well, who are you?"

He chuckled. A deep, warm, amused sound. "Sam Deleon, Miss Cameron. I saw you once right after the King's first well came in. You arrived with your sister, Josephine, from the ranch. Both of you were real excited."

True laughed out loud, losing her practiced manner. "Oh, I remember you. You looked quite different then than you do now. My, that was quite a week, wasn't it? An *oil well*. Dalton was as thrilled as a little child and Jo was as proud and excited as her husband."

Sam held his hand toward her, palm up, so that she could place her hand in his. "Now, about that dance?"

"Yes, I would be delighted, Mr. Deleon." She glanced across the ballroom. *Well, why not?* The other young man didn't appear to be interested. Or... was he coming her way to—

"You may call me Sam. Is that all right?"

She turned fully toward him and repeated his name. "Sam."

He danced like a dream, as though he had also attended a city school. Some of the men attending the dance had eastern educations and experiences, but most of the senators and representatives were Texas born, bred, and educated. Most were also a little rough around the edges. At a governor's ball such as this, everyone needed to display as much refinement as possible. To dance with this much skill and to display so much culture, a person pretty much had to live in Chicago or Boston for a time. Had Mr. Deleon? Where had he mastered the dances?

True remained with him for the next dance, and he enticed her to stay with him through a third, a waltz. By the time they finished all three, he'd managed to make her all dreamy, fluttery, and a little too warm. He was very nice, extremely handsome, and used all the correct mannerisms of a real gentleman.

"Oh, Sam, there're my parents. Let's go talk with them, shall we? And there're Uncle Will and Aunt Charlotte, too." She tugged on his hand as they made their way across the crowded ballroom.

"Mama. Papa. Look who I have here. You know Sam Deleon, don't you?"

Buck thrust his hand out and shook Sam's. "Glad to see you, Sam. You've been working hard, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Cameron, I'm sure trying, but this dance seemed

important. The governor invited me, so I thought I better not turn down his party invitation." He turned toward Marilee. "How are you, Mrs. Cameron? You're looking lovely, as always."

"Why, thank you, Sam, and I might say that you look quite grand, indeed. I might not have recognized you, if it hadn't been for True. We watched you two dance. Just lovely."

"You've done a very fine job of rearing your beautiful daughter."

True tugged on Sam's hand. "The music is beginning. Are we going to dance some more?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

Sam and True excused themselves, and they made their way through the crowd to the dance floor. A thrill raced through True when she placed her hand on Sam's shoulder. The short formal jacket he wore had no padding, so the square shoulders were natural. His hands, rough and callused, held hers gently and warmly. She wished she could observe him from a distance as he danced, so she might watch his long muscular legs in motion.

My, my, my. He is certainly no boy.

Across the ballroom, True saw her sister, Jo King, motioning to her. "Sam, we should go over and visit with my sister and Dalton when this song ends. Is that all right?"

"If you like. I should speak to him, anyway."

"Why?"

"He's probably wondering why I'm at this ball."

"I can't imagine why."

"Doesn't matter." The music stopped, and he took her elbow, gently guiding her across the crowded floor.

As they neared, she noticed Jo and Dalton engaged in an intense discussion. That was just her sister's way. Jo always had something to say about every little thing, and True had a feeling she and Sam were the topic of conversation. Jo motioned for True to come over.

At that moment, Adam Carter walked by in front of Jo and Dalton.

"Adam. Adam, dear," she heard Jo call. "Would you come over here a moment?"

The young, blond god paused, turned, and immediately walked to the couple who had summoned him.

"Good evening, Mrs. King. Mr. King." Adam shook hands with Dalton and pressed Jo's outstretched hand. "You look beautiful tonight, Mrs. King. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," Jo answered. "We're enjoying ourselves immensely. Oh, why look who's here. My sister, True."

True almost rolled her eyes. She could see right through her big sister. Her emotions divided, True stepped forward with Sam and stood where her blond dream man moved to make room.

Jo spoke. "Tell me, Adam, are you graduated yet?"

"No, ma'am, but I hope to finish in December at mid-term. I've taken extra hours to finish as soon as possible. I don't want to spend my life going to school."

Dalton entered the conversation. "The university sure has grown, hasn't it? And it's getting recognition as a good institution of higher learning. You made a wise choice to attend there."

Adam beamed. "Thank you, sir. I really appreciate your kind words."

"Now," said Jo. "You know my sister, True, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to True and grinned. "I was looking forward to dancing with her, but I haven't been able to gain her attention."

True looked away. What could she say to his teasing words?

Jo prompted her. "Yes, well, she was certainly looking forward to seeing you as well. Weren't you, dear?"

"Oh, why yes, of course." She looked at Sam, ignoring Adam. "Are we going to dance? The orchestra will begin in a minute."

As she walked away with Sam, True knew her sister stared a hole in her back, and most likely was a little put out with her. As much as she loved Jo, she had to stop letting her sister run her life. It was time for her family to accept the fact she was a grown woman.

Sam left her alone while he found the punch bowl. She tapped her foot to the music, hummed under her breath, and casually looked around at the other dancers. Then, she saw her blond dream man walking straight toward her.

"Miss Cameron, you remember me? Adam Carter? You hardly looked at me earlier, like you didn't know me."

"Oh, but I assuredly do. Are you enjoying the party?"

True was interested, but she could already see he did not measure up to Sam. He was, indeed, a boy. Well, he was a man, but not a fully developed one.

"Yes, it's a nice get-together. I wondered if you might accompany me to supper. Ah, there's the bell now." He held out his arm so she might place her hand in the crook of his elbow.

True faced a dilemma. Sam hadn't said anything about going to supper, but he had gone to the punch table for her. "I'm waiting for Mr. Deleon, Adam. He's bringing punch. I don't think I can politely leave just yet."

Sam appeared with the cup and handed it to True. Unsmiling, he swept his gaze over Adam from the top of his head to his boots.

"What was your name?" Sam raised one dark eyebrow with the question.

"Adam Carter, sir. I was just inquiring if I might escort Miss Cameron to supper."

True noticed Adam held his own with the more mature man, standing straight and tall and looking him in the eye.

Sam hesitated a moment. "I see. That will be up to Miss Cameron." He indolently gazed around at the crowd.

True realized she must accept Adam's invitation. So, she did.

The evening progressed into the late evening hours when the last waltz began. Adam and True had danced every set since supper, because he would not let her go. Now, True anxiously waited for Sam to fetch her, as he promised he would.

* * * * *

Sam made certain he had asked True for the last dance, since that young Adam Carter had suddenly come between them. He must see her home, if she would allow it, and he had to make his move before he took his leave.

The last waltz ended almost exactly at midnight. True was exhausted, but she still glowed with excitement. The evening had been a perfect time, as far as he was concerned, dancing half the night, talking, and laughing with her. She was an incredible young woman.

All evening, except for the dances and suppertime she spent with Adam, Sam made every attempt to be perfectly attentive and polite and even funny. But now it was over.

As the waltz ended, Sam did not hesitate. He stood just long enough to applaud the band and the governor when he said good night to his guests. Immediately, Sam took True's hand and placed it in the crook of his arm, placing his other hand over hers to anchor her to his side. He began walking toward the exit without asking, and she hurried to keep up with his long strides.

A little breathlessly, she asked, "Where are we going?"

Without stopping, he amiably answered, "To my carriage. To drive you home."

"Oh."

"Do you have a wrap?"

"Well, certainly, but Sam, stop a minute. Will you, please?"

He did as she asked but did not let go of her. He smiled into her pretty face. "Yes, sweetheart, what is it?"

True gazed into his eyes. "I—"

"Yes?" He drew out the word slightly while leaning down to her face a

little and smiled. "What did you wish to say, my darling?"

True took a deep breath, exhaled with a *puff* and spoke in an almost normal voice. "Jo and Dalton will be waiting in their buggy to take me home."

"And why is that?"

"Because I live in their house. But since they actually live in Houston, they'll stay here for a couple of days. In their house."

Smiling slightly and nodding, he frowned in a teasing way. "I see. Suppose we retrieve your wrap and find them and inform them that you'll be riding with me."

"Well, all right. I'm not certain Jo will approve, but we can ask."

"Hold on a minute." Sam tried not to sound a bit perturbed, but he couldn't help himself. In his haste to get on with his plan, he forgot just how vulnerable and pampered she was. It was a known fact that most young ladies were married by age seventeen or eighteen and some even had one or two children by that age. True's family had reared her like a hothouse flower, and protected her as a child would be. He could be treading on dangerous ground here, and as powerful as the Camerons and Kings were, perhaps he should watch his step. He had an agenda, and he intended to succeed, but he had to use every caution.

Sam cleared his throat. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen. And four months."

"Isn't eighteen the age of consent? Most women make their own decisions by then."

A moment of hurt washed across her face, causing her beautiful, expressive eyes to blink rapidly. She bit her bottom lip and hesitated. Then, she brightened and said, "Let's get my wrap, Sam, and find Jo and Dalton. They'll need to leave quickly because their two children are home with Emma."

Outside in the long curved driveway, small buggies and curricles were lined up. Groomsmen assisted women into their seats and handed the reins to the gentlemen. As each vehicle pulled forward and finally onto the street, the line thinned down to a few.

Sam saw Dalton King and his wife patiently scanning the crowd. They were able to pull out onto the street, but obviously, they waited for True. Taking her arm, he proceeded toward them.

"Good evening, again. I see you're ready to leave. True tells me you need to be home promptly to see about your children. If it's permissible, then, I'll be glad to see True to your door." Sam made an effort to speak affably and casually.

Her sister glanced from one to the other. "True? Is that what you want?"

We needn't rush if you need a few more moments to say goodnight."

"Oh, you and Dalton go on, Jo. Sam and I were in the middle of a discussion about our educational experiences. So, I'll allow him to drive me home, and I'll be there shortly." She waggled her fingers at Jo and Dalton and turned to walk away, but Sam held her in place.

"Mr. King. Mrs. King. Are you certain my taking True home is agreeable to you? I don't want to overstep any boundaries here. I realize she came with you, but we're just becoming acquainted, and I would like permission to continue our discussion."

Sam forced himself to sound slightly contrite, when he actually felt no such thing. Dalton King was his boss, though, and True's father was a heavy investor in King Oil Company. Obviously, True was not only the younger daughter but the treasured and coddled one, as well. One hint that he was taking advantage of her, or that he hurt her in any way, and he would have hell to pay.

Clearly, Jo stood in his way as a formidable adversary. She was six years older than True, and she had looked after her little sister as though she belonged to her. He intended to court True, but he would need to act the perfect gentleman while seducing her. A delicate balancing act. But if there was one thing he knew how to do, it was to act the gentleman. His father relentlessly drilled it into him from an early age.

Dalton looked pointedly at Jo. "What do you think, honey? I say it's fine."

"Oh, well, certainly," she answered begrudgingly. "Mind the cold weather, though, Mr. Deleon. Don't keep her out too long."

Sam tipped his hat politely to her and answered, "No, ma'am. I wouldn't think of it. In fact, it's getting a mite chillier right now. So, we'll be going along. Ready, Miss Cameron?"

Sam admired the carriage he had purchased last week. It was the latest model with soft leather seats and a canopy, which almost completely enclosed them from view. He'd paid a pretty penny for the fine bay mare, and fed her the finest oats so her coat could be brushed to a high sheen. The groom had curried and combed the mane and tail perfectly.

Attending to the smallest detail for the sake of impressing Miss True Lee Cameron, Sam had brought a fur throw to place over True's legs and feet. He'd also had the forethought to cover the seat back with fur.

"Are you warm, sweetheart?"

True shivered some, even though the temperature was not very cold.

"Oh, Sam, this is wonderful. Thank you for everything tonight. I truly enjoyed myself. Wasn't the dancing fun? I've only attended school dances with students from the boys' school. Oh, listen to me. You're going to

think I'm a silly little girl. But you know I'm not, don't you?" She turned her head to look into his face.

He whispered as he leaned toward her, "I am well aware that you are a woman, darlin'."

"You are?"

"Yes," he continued in his whispered, seductive voice, "a grown woman has a special sweet fragrance and yours is unique. I could find you in the dark."

True suppressed a nervous giggle.

Sam watched with amusement as she turned her lips inward and pressed them together to keep the sound from escaping.

The horse walked along at a very slow, leisurely pace, just as Sam commanded it do. True needed time to warm up to Sam. He shifted the reins to one hand, and raised his right arm up and around her shoulders. As he did so, he gently tugged her toward him to fit under his arm.

As they moved along, he made casual conversation. True attempted to keep up and act the proper young lady, but she acted nervous and uncertain.

They neared the large two-story brick house, where True lived alone most of the time with the exception of a housekeeper. Sam leaned closer and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She turned her head and solemnly gazed into his eyes. While he held her gaze, he settled his firm, sensual lips on her soft, full ones.

True actually gasped, but she didn't pull away or move an inch.

Sam moved away slightly but she remained frozen. Then she moved toward him and mimicked his actions with her own brand of an untutored kiss. Her small, gloved hand moved to his face as she continued. Abruptly, she broke the kiss and quickly removed the glove and replaced her hand right back where she had it before. And she initiated another.

Sam was certain the earth shifted. The sensation of her kiss and her small hand on his face almost unnerved him. All well and good, but there was one little problem. He did not intend to fall for her. One week was all he had for now to be with her, and then he had to return to the oil camp. He would return with his heart intact.

Yes, she would do just fine. Her straight, midnight black hair would fit right in. Many Spaniards had blue eyes, and hers were as blue. They reminded him of liquid, maybe the blue of the ocean on a clear day. She was a little on the small side, and he was a little on the tall side, but all in all, she was perfect. Her education and refinement completed the package.

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