

★ TEXAS GOLD COLLECTION ★

WHERE
RIVERS
PART

— A —
TEXAS GOLD
NOVEL

KELLIE COATES GILBERT


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To Eric and Jordan Gilbert
My heart's treasures—my sons.



When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you. . . .
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Isaiah 43:2–3 NIV

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*C*onference hotels all look the same.

This is what Juliet Ryan thought as she stepped into the lobby of the Renaissance Marriott Convention Center, with its enormous floral arrangements and lengthy granite-topped counter lined with check-in clerks and their pasted smiles.

Even though she'd given up the secret vice months ago, Juliet found herself wanting a cigarette. Especially today, when the need to calm her nerves with a few quick puffs tugged at her like a leash.

She mentally shook off the craving and gave herself a pep talk. She had no reason to feel this anxious. Not really.

Then why was she letting him back in her head?

In quality control circles, the North American Food Safety Symposium (NAFSS) was the pinnacle in a very high stack of conferences held across the nation each year. Even her father would have to admit her inclusion signaled a grand recognition among her peers that she'd finally made it. This conference featured only the elite candidates in the food safety field, and she was one of them. She had every reason to feel confident.

After fishing a schedule from the leather attaché hanging from her shoulder, she quickly located the Grand Ballroom on the map and made her way down a long hall in that direction. Midway,

she stopped to check her lipstick in a mirror that reflected an image of exactly what she hoped to portray—an educated, accomplished young woman who had earned the respect of her colleagues, not an easy feat in a field overrun with testosterone and gray hair.

Her spot on the dais was third from the end on a row of tables seating nine—not exactly the first order of prestige, but nonetheless a position of some cachet. After her presentation today, no doubt she'd cement a spot closer to the head of the table, even if she were the only woman presenter again next year.

On stage, Dr. Keller Thatcher, director of NAFSS, read off the impressive credentials of each of the panel members, while an audience of bobbleheads nodded their collective approval.

The first to take the podium was Leonard Paternoster, a plaintiffs' attorney who had carefully cultivated his notoriety after winning several highly publicized landmark awards—all delineated in the brochure Juliet nervously folded in her hands.

Mr. Paternoster gripped the podium. "Good morning, everyone. I am an attorney specializing in foodborne illness cases. Before I go any further, I need to disclose that I am here for one reason alone—and that is to help you put me out of business."

Juliet listened to the spiel she'd heard many times before, knowing the somber-faced attorney had been positioned to go first for good reason. The threat of a lawsuit always made people in the food industry sit up and pay attention. No one wanted another deadly restaurant outbreak like the Jack in the Box situation in the nineties.

She'd been in junior high when a silver-haired talk show personality named Phil Donahue interviewed those affected by the outbreak. Juliet's father wanted to take credit for her career choice, but really, the moment Juliet knew she wanted to spend her professional life pursuing food safety was triggered by that television program and the look in Vicki Detwiler's eyes as she described

how her seventeen-month-old son tested positive for *E. coli*, and his agonizing last hours.

Of course, her career choice came with a few drawbacks. A person trained to ensure safety and wholesomeness of food products was rarely at the top of any dinner party guest list. She also hadn't counted on the bleak disinterest in men's eyes when they discovered how many hours she devoted to pathogens and coliforms.

Still, for all the disadvantages, Juliet loved her profession. Her work mattered.

She held on to this satisfying thought as she took her turn at the podium.

"Good morning. My name is Dr. Juliet Ryan, quality assurance director for Larimar Springs Corporation. I'm here to bring an added perspective to what my esteemed colleagues have shared this morning, and look at these issues from inside the walls of the food producer." Duplicating her father's calculated method for creating impact, she leaned forward ever so slightly and made eye contact with the audience. "We are on the front line, charged with keeping America's food products safe."

Over the next hour, Juliet communicated her carefully memorized points, all constructed to balance the often skewed belief that food corporations only thought in terms of the financial bottom line, then moved to her closing statements.

"Companies across America are using the most sophisticated scientific techniques available to refine the processes used to kill pathogens." She paused for emphasis, appreciating that every eye was focused on her and what she had to say. Her message had hit its mark with the distinguished audience. This was her moment in the spotlight, and she'd satisfactorily shone.

Relieved, she took a deep breath and concluded, "Consumer health and safety are at the very core of what we do every day, and because of the collective efforts of dedicated food scientists and quality assurance directors in companies across America, outbreaks

are now rare, with fewer reported each year than ever before.” She let her lips part in a wide smile, showing off gleaming (and costly) white teeth. “Thank you.”

Juliet waited until the applause faded before extending appreciation to the directors of the symposium for inviting her to speak. She straightened her notes at the podium and prepared to return to her seat when a hand shot up in the back of the auditorium. “Uh, excuse me. I have a couple of questions.”

Juliet froze. Her eyes darted to the owner of the familiar voice.

“Isn’t it true that as recent as two months ago, twenty-four people in Kansas were sickened with cyclospora linked to honey? And only weeks before that, in California, over a hundred fell ill after eating frozen strawberries tainted with salmonella? I could name a dozen more such incidents, all in the last twelve months. I hope no one in this room lets down their guard, believing we’ve done even near enough.”

Hundreds of heads turned to face the voice, likely wondering who would be bold enough to challenge her assertions. But Juliet knew . . .

The voice belonged to her father.



Juliet scrambled for the elevator. She crammed her finger against the call button, then buried her hands in her attaché, feeling around for the pack of cigarettes she no longer carried. Frustrated, she pulled out a half-eaten package of antacids instead, popped two tablets, and chewed furiously.

Like a wrecking ball, her father had nearly crumbled her success on that stage.

She thought she would die of embarrassment, that the audience would be forced to watch her melt into a woman-shaped puddle. Thankfully, she’d pulled herself together.

“Oh, I think we all agree we must remain vigilant,” she’d coun-

tered. “That’s why hundreds of us are here in this auditorium, when we could be out on a golf course somewhere enjoying this gorgeous day.”

The remark drew a laugh and took the edge off the tension in the room. She’d successfully deflected what could have been a disaster.

A ding sounded as the doors opened to an already crowded elevator. Juliet shuffled inside and quickly moved to the rear, despite her tendency to feel claustrophobic. A man she recognized from the audience stepped aside, making room for her. “Appreciated your perspective this morning, Dr. Ryan.”

“Thank you,” she said.

The pedantic man nodded in her direction before turning to her father, whom she’d failed to notice earlier. He wore a slightly rumpled suit, and black frames were perched atop his fading brown hair with a mind of its own.

“Dr. Ryan, I admire your work. I read all your books. I especially appreciated *The Great Hunt for a Sustainable Food System*.”

Juliet’s face bloomed red as she realized his compliment had not been meant for her.

Her father thanked his fan, having the decency to give her an embarrassed smile first. Still, her mouth went dry, her palms instantly sweaty.

They rode in uncomfortable silence, stopping at each level to let passengers out. When the doors opened on the tenth floor, her father held the door with his hand to keep it from closing. He waited for an elderly woman with thinning hair to board, then hesitated only briefly before looking back at Juliet. “Well, this is my floor.” He gave her an uneasy smile. “Uh, you did a nice job today, JuJu. Your mother will be proud when I tell her.”

Juliet raised her chin, locking his gaze with her own. “Traveling without a pretty assistant? That’s not like you.”

His eyes steeled, his expression somewhere between sad and furious. He opened his mouth to respond but seemed to think better

of it. After looking at her for several long seconds, he turned and stepped from the elevator.

The doors closed behind him, leaving Juliet alone with the woman inside the elevator. Juliet responded to her frown with a raw look. “Oh, don’t worry. That was nothing. We didn’t even draw blood this time.”

Before the elevator could resume its upward chug, Juliet pounded the button to the lobby. With any luck, the hotel gift shop she’d passed earlier sold cigarettes.