

★ TEXAS GOLD COLLECTION ★

WHAT
MATTERS
MOST

—A—
TEXAS GOLD
NOVEL

KELLIE COATES GILBERT



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Leona Abbott Coates,
who bought me my first book and fostered my love
for story with her bedtime tales.



I'm sorry. We really need someone a bit more qualified. All of the positions we currently have available require a college degree—at a minimum.”

Leta Breckenridge fixed her eyes on the woman standing behind the table lined with job application forms. “Oh—okay. Well, thank you for your time anyway.” She placed the glossy brochure back in its spot on the table, taking special care to line up the edges with dozens just like it. Her fingers lingered for just a moment before she gave the lady in the suit a weak smile and moved on.

With a sigh, Leta pulled a pen and a notebook from her bag and marked off another company name from the list.

Taking time off work to attend the job fair this afternoon was turning out to be a waste of time. She couldn't even get her foot in the door at most of the companies she was interested in, even at an entry-level position. Not without having finished her degree.

Same story as always.

Determined not to let the situation get her down, Leta quickly glanced at her watch. She'd stay another half hour before getting ready to head back to the store. Maybe she could talk Mike into letting her make up the hours—and the lost earnings.

“Leta?”

She turned in the direction of a vaguely familiar voice just as Cassie Manning broke through the crowd, a wide smile planted on her face. “Leta, I thought that was you. Long time no see.”

She quickly tucked the notebook back in her bag before letting herself get drawn into an embrace. “Hey, how are you?” Cassie smelled . . . expensive. Like the little samples Leta had collected from the Macy’s counter last week while in the mall with Katie.

Her former classmate gave her a puzzled look. “What are you doing at the job fair?”

“I’m . . . uh . . . I’m here with a friend.” She couldn’t believe how easily the lie slipped from her tongue.

“Oh? What is your friend looking for? Maybe I can help.” Cassie pulled a small gold case engraved with her initials from the pocket of her suit jacket. “I’m the human resources director for Greater Austin Enterprises. Have your friend stop by our booth. We’re looking for candidates for our new division in Dallas, if she’s willing to relocate.”

Leta took the business card. “Uh, thanks. I’ll let her know.”

Her stylish former classmate, dressed in an impeccable plum-colored suit with matching heels, slipped the case back into her pocket. “What about you? Where did you land after graduating?”

Leta rubbed her sweaty palms against the fabric of her own skirt, one she’d been lucky to find in her generous roommate’s closet. How was she supposed to explain she’d relinquished her dream of becoming a landscape architect and instead settled for working in the floral department at Central Market? Or that she’d taken on a second job at a dive bar just to make ends meet? *Yeah, let’s tell her that.*

In a stroke of pure luck, her classmate’s phone rang. “Sorry, I have to get this.” Cassie turned and buried herself in a conversation, leaving Leta to ponder the best way to extricate herself before being put on the spot again.

In a quick move, Leta pulled her own phone up and pointed to the screen as if she’d just received a text. She whispered, “Gotta go. Catch you later.”

Cassie nodded. “Hold on,” she said into her phone. She smiled in Leta’s direction. “You’ve got my card. Call me for lunch sometime—okay?”

Leta nodded a little too enthusiastically. “Sure thing.” She blew a kiss and scurried off down the aisle, past all the well-dressed job seekers pitching their hard-won credentials to waiting personnel directors like Cassie.

Outside, Leta slipped her sunglasses in place and hurried to the other end of the parking lot where her car was parked. Despite it being late November, the temperature lingered in the low eighties. She couldn’t wait to get out of this skirt and back into crop pants and flip-flops.

An Austin winter didn’t exactly replicate a Currier & Ives print, but despite the lack of snow, it had been known to turn cold and freeze on occasion. Sometimes without much warning. Given that, these temperatures were a treat.

She pushed the key into the ignition and started the engine with a relieved sigh. The used Chevy Blazer now showed close to 150,000 miles on the odometer. One never knew when the ole bucket of bolts would cough and take its final breath.

Leta headed north. Twenty minutes later, she pulled onto Burnett just south of 45th, then slowed in front of a small ranch-style house. Like many of the homes in the modest Brentwood neighborhood, the house she lived in had been built in the sixties. Her mother had rented it from Ben Kimey, a gray-haired widower who lived two doors away, when Leta was still in grade school.

Growing up, she used to know everyone up and down the street, even delivered her mother’s infamous chocolate meringue pies to their neighbors on birthdays and holidays. Now, most of the residents were strangers and the houses had sadly fallen into various stages of disrepair.

Recently, Mr. Kimey agreed to pay for paint and Leta had done her best to spruce up the outside of the house, painting the front door a brick red, which offset the small covered porch nicely. She’d

also splurged and lined the steps with ceramic pots filled with white azaleas. She longed to do more but simply couldn't afford the expense.

After parking in the narrow driveway alongside the house, she gathered her large file of leftover résumés and headed up the front steps. She went for her keys when suddenly the front door swung open.

"It's about time you got home." Her roommate grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. "Where have you been, anyway? Come in and sit. I met this new guy and—" Katie stopped midsentence. "Oh—the job fair." She slapped her forehead. "I nearly forgot. How'd it go?"

Leta tossed her bag on the sofa and slumped down beside it. "Just dandy."

Katie sank to the floor and sat cross-legged. "Uh-oh. That doesn't sound good. What happened?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "Nothing happened. That's the problem. Once these companies learn I don't have my degree, they won't even look at my résumé."

"Did you remind them you attended UT and finished three years before you had to leave? I mean, that should at least count for something."

Leta shook her head. "Not much. I mean, even the credits I earned don't exactly have broad application in the current job market."

There was sympathy in Katie's expression. "C'mon, it can't be that bad."

"It's like a merry-go-round. I can't afford to quit working so I can return to school, and I can't get a better job until I finish school. At this juncture, I'm just going in circles and getting nowhere. I feel like everybody around me has been invited to the ball, and I had to stay home because I didn't have the right clothes to wear."

Her friend leaned forward and patted her knee. "Leta, I know you. You're smart and innovative. There's little doubt you'll figure

all this out. I promise you have a bright future ahead. You'll attend that ball someday."

"Maybe—if I can get a lucky break somewhere along the line." She knotted her long blonde hair at the back of her neck. "Enough about all that. Now tell me about the new guy. Let me live vicariously through you."

"At twenty-six, you might want to make time to start dating. You can't stay single forever. I mean, I know your schedule is tight, but there are plenty of online options to meet people."

Leta held up her palms. "I know, I know. Enough about my sad life. Now spill."

Katie's eyes brightened, the way they always did when a new guy came onto the scene. Leta tried not to feel jealous. Her roommate was blonde and cute and had a personality that just drew everyone to her, especially men.

As her roommate had so eloquently stated, her own busy schedule had pretty much squelched any kind of social life.

Katie drew a big breath. "Well, his name is Bart. That's his nickname. His real name is Rubart Nelson. I mean, who names their kid Rubart?" She popped up and darted for the kitchen. "Want some sweet tea?"

Leta shook her head.

Her roommate withdrew a glass from the cupboard and moved for the refrigerator. "He said his grandmother used to call him Ruby." Katie visibly shuddered as she loaded her glass with ice. "How lame is that? Anyway, I met him at Halcyon over in the Warehouse District. He was behind me in line to get coffee and we just started talking." She reached for the pitcher. "He was so easy to talk to. We ended up sharing a table and sat there for nearly three hours."

"What does he do? For a living, I mean?" Katie had a tendency to date men in dead-end situations who often lacked the monogamy needle in their moral compass.

Her friend stopped mid-pour. "That's the best part. He's in

commercial real estate. Leases retail space in shopping centers.” She grinned. “And—get this part—he drives a BMW and wears khakis, polo shirts, and leather loafers.”

Leta raised her eyebrows. “Well, that is an improvement.” The last one, a drummer in a band that played on weekdays out at the Broken Spoke on South Lamar, had a wardrobe of holey jeans and Hooters T-shirts. The loser had broken her best friend’s heart and nearly drained her bank account.

Katie returned to the living room, glass in hand. Leta stood and hugged her, nearly spilling the iced tea. “I’m glad. Really, I am.” She slipped the glass from her friend’s hand and took a deep swig.

“Hey, I asked if you wanted some.”

Leta handed the glass back half empty. “Sorry,” she said, grinning. “And I’m going to have to cut this discussion about your fabulous love life short because I’ve got to get going. I have to be at the store in less than an hour, and I want to shower first.” She headed down the hall.

“Someday *your* great guy will show up. You just wait and see,” her roommate shouted after her.

Leta laughed and hollered back over her shoulder, “Ha—I guess my mom isn’t the only one who lives in a fairy tale.”