

Cinderella Texas

Molly Noble Bull

A Sweet Modern Day Western Set in the Cattle Country of South Texas

Author's Historical Notes:

Cinderella Texas is a modern-day Christian western romance novel set in the cattle ranching country of South Texas near the Gulf Coast. This area of Texas was once called the Nueces Strip, named for the Nueces River, and it was also called the Wild Horse Desert. The entire area has a hot and humid semi-tropical climate. Yet some of the largest ranches in the country, if not the world, can be found in the area of Southern Texas where this story takes place.

The Famous King Ranch is said to be larger than the state of Rhode Island, and today it is headquartered in the town of Kingsville about forty-five miles southwest of Corpus Christi, Texas. Twenty-five or so miles farther south from Kingsville is the headquarters of the huge Kenedy Ranch, and these two ranches, The King and the Kenedy Ranches, introduce a series of privately owned ranches that extend all the way to the Mexican border. At one time, it was possible to travel horseback or on foot from the area where the King Ranch is located all the way to the Rio Grande River without seeing a town of any kind by journeying from one ranch to the next to the next.

The cowboy is fading into American history along with the frontier spirit that made it special. However, those who visit South Texas can find it again, if they know where to look.

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This is a revised and updated version of *Cinderella Texas*. The original version had a two-story house on the cover and was published as an e-book only, but this version will be available in paperback and as an e-book.

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Chapter One

“Alyson, are you all right?”

Alyson Spencer grabbed a strand of her hair, curling it around her forefinger as she always did when she didn't want to answer a question. “Yes—Yes, I'm good.” But she wasn't. She was still reeling from all that had happened in the last seven days. Nevertheless, she turned to her roommate, sending Hailey her widest smile. “Why?”

“I don't know.” Hailey shook her head. “You've looked a little lost ever since you graduated.”

“What could be wrong? Other than the fact that I think my boyfriend is cheating on me, and I still don't have a teaching position for the spring term, everything is great.”

“I know you want to teach here in Dallas.”

“I most certainly do.”

“But it's the middle of the school year. You know all the teaching jobs are already filled. I think you should apply for that home-school job at that big ranch I was telling you about. Living on a ranch owned by people as rich as the Greens would be like living in a castle with servants at your beck and call. You did apply, didn't you?”

Alyson didn't answer her red-haired roommate for a moment. She didn't want to admit that she had applied—even to herself.

Hailey's forehead wrinkled. “Well, did you?”

“Okay, I did. Satisfied?” Alyson asked, “But I wouldn't accept, if they offer me the job on a silver platter.”

“Oh, I just love silver platters.” Hailey’s infectious grin always made Alyson want to smile right back at her. “If you get the job, may I borrow the silver platter?”

“Hailey.” Alyson laughed. “You can have my mine, if I take that job. But if you want a platter, you better start saving for one because I’m not leaving Dallas, Texas. As you well know, my not-so-sweet ex-boyfriend is moving away, but I’m staying right here.”

“Whatever. But I want that silver platter; and I’m not about to buy one.”

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Quatro Greene was sick of wasting valuable time—*burnin’ daylight* as he called it. He sat at his desk on the top floor of the Greene Building in downtown Dallas, considering his options. The noonday looked hot, blinding—especially above a sea of tall, gray buildings and framed by the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office.

He’d been staying in his penthouse apartment in Dallas for almost a week interviewing possible teachers for his children, Robby and Bethanny, and no closer to finding a suitable one than on the day he arrived. He needed to get back to the ranch. He could have branded and shipped six truckloads of cattle faster than it was taking him to screen these women.

Quatro glanced down at his boots. He could almost see his face in the shine of the black leather, and he also wore a white dress-shirt and a tan western-cut suit. He always felt like a dude in city clothes and probably looked like one, too. Did people actually like living all pent-up in a prison-like existence called a city? He longed for a pair of well seasoned jeans and the scuffed-up boots he normally wore.

He checked his watch again—five minutes until ten. Bob Stokes seldom arrived late for an appointment, and Quatro hoped to get the meeting with his lawyer over with as soon as possible and get on home.

His cell phone chimed *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. He clicked on. “Yes.”

“Mr. Stokes is here to see you, sir.”

“Thanks, Susan. Send him right in.” Quatro stood and released a deep breath.

The door opened. A short, stocky little man in a gray pinstriped suit stood in the doorway—not quite in and not quite out of Quatro’s huge glass and brick office. He held a manila envelope.

“Bob.” Quatro moved toward his guest, reaching out his right hand in friendship. “Good to see you again.”

“Good to see you, too, Mr. Greene.” As the elderly lawyer shook his hand, his thick lower lip formed a smile below a bushy, white mustache.

Quatro indicated a chair in front of his desk. “Please, sit down.”

“Thank you.”

The lawyer sat down, and Quatro returned to his chair.

“So.” Quatro pressed his fingers together, forming a steeple. “What did you find out?”

Bob removed several papers from the envelope and handed them to Quatro. “I plan to continue checking, but Miss Alyson Spencer sounds solid, sir. You said that the dean recommended her. Well, I talked to two of her college professors, and they agreed with the dean’s findings. I’ll be talking to two more of her teachers this afternoon. As I told you over the phone, Miss Spencer graduated with honors, attends church regularly and has no dangerous vices that I can find. She and her roommate live here in Dallas in an apartment complex.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting Miss Alyson Spencer. What can you tell me about the roommate?”

“Miss Hailey Howard is a drama major at North Texas University, and the two young women are childhood friends. Hailey Howard sounds solid, too. And from all I’ve learned so far, Miss Spencer seems to be a suitable teacher for your children—except . . .”

“Except what?”

“She has a boyfriend, sir. His name is Tim Conyers. He’s Hailey Howard’s cousin. Miss Howard probably introduced them. But Conyers could be a problem.”

“How’s that?”

“It appears that he and Miss Spencer have been dating for some time. Conyers works for an advertising agency, and he and Alyson are still engaged as far as I know.”

“And.”

“According to my sources, he was seen with another girl recently.”

“Another girl, huh? What a shame. Do you think Alyson knows?”

“That I couldn’t say.”

Quatro shook his head. “If she doesn’t know, she will—sooner or later. I would never hope the two will break up, but I’m not interested in hiring someone who might quit to get married. On the chance that she and her boyfriend are about to call it quits, I’d like to keep her on the list a little longer—wait and see how it goes.”

The lawyer nodded.

“See what else you can find out about Tim Conyers, and continue to build a folder on Miss Spencer. She sounds good. But you know I’m in a hurry to find a homeschool teacher for my children after the one I had just up and quit. Is there anything else I need to know regarding this matter?”

“Nothing that I can think of, sir.”

The lawyer's cell phone rang.

"Excuse me," Mr. Stokes gazed at his phone for a moment. "This is from Pete Lewis—the private investigator I hired. Could be important."

Quatro nodded, tapping a rhythmic beat on the top of this desk while Stokes spoke to his caller in hushed tones. Lines had appeared on the lawyer's forehead, deepening as the conversation continued. At last he hung up the phone.

"Bad news?" Quatro asked.

"Maybe. Miss Spencer was involved in an accident."

"An accident?" Quatro leaned forward in his chair. "Is she all right?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Lewis is at the hospital now, waiting for news. He said he would call me back as soon as he knew something. Should we start looking for another teacher?"

"I think it's a little early for that."

The lawyer nodded.

"Let's see what happens and pray that her injuries are minor," Quatro said. "I need to get back to the ranch." Quatro rose from his chair and led the way to the door. "I'll be flying back tonight, and you can get in touch with me at my office there. I'll want to know how Alyson is doing. If she is all right, I will do the interview over the phone."

"Certainly, sir."

Quatro gripped the sheets of paper the lawyer had given him. "And thanks again for these. I'm looking forward to reading them."

As soon as the door closed, Quatro stuffed the papers into his briefcase. He would read them on the plane.

He'd liked what he heard about Alyson and wanted to hire her. But if the accident was serious, she might have a long recovery. Robby and Bethanny needed a homeschool teacher as soon as possible, not six months from now.

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Three weeks later.

Alyson glanced over at Poncho, Quatro Greene's hired hand, in the front seat beside her. "You don't mean *this* is the Greene Ranch. Do you?"

"Si, senorita." Poncho reduced the speed of the double-cab pickup and wheeled onto the turning lane. "The ranch, he is here." He stopped in front of an ordinary-looking metal gate.

Alyson stared at him for a moment. "But we're out in the middle of nowhere. I haven't seen a town or another house for miles."

Poncho shrugged. His wide smile revealed a missing tooth in front. He opened the door on the driver's side.

Alyson studied the nice Hispanic man who had picked her up at the airport in Corpus Christi, Texas—earlier that morning. "Let me open the gate," she said.

"No, senorita. I will do it. You might get your clothes dirty."

As Poncho opened the gate, Alyson thought about her new boss, Quatro Greene. She hadn't stopped thinking about him since she read that magazine article where all the facts and rumors about him and his family were discussed. He was a rich widower with two school-age children, and he and his family were described as strange, secretive, and mysterious; and they were never seen in town unless it had something to do with business, visiting a doctor, or buying supplies.

A lot had happened since telling Hailey she would never take this job, and if Tim hadn't decided to stay in Dallas after all, she might never have accepted. But she was desperate after the truth finally soaked in; she wasn't going to find a teaching position in Dallas in the middle of the school year. Besides, she couldn't stop thinking about the day she saw Tim with that leggy blonde, worrying that she might see them together again. To stay in Dallas meant it could happen again and again.

Quatro had interviewed her for the job over the telephone. He already knew about her accident and questioned her about it. She was fine and told him so. He must also have known that she and Tim broke up because she told his lawyer about it, but Quatro asked her about it anyway.

“Do you have any marriage plans in your future?” he asked.

“No. I am no longer engaged.”

“Good.”

Good? She hadn't expected him to make such a statement. They had talked on the phone several more times after that, but this would be the first time they met face-to-face. He seemed nice—except for the “good” comment.

She'd wanted to look her best at their first meeting, and looking down, she straightened the hem of her gold top. Her focus returned to the main gate.

A sign in small black letters and written in Spanish was nailed to two cedar posts next to the gate. *Una Nacion De Dios*, she read. *Main 20*. Under it, she saw a No Trespassing sign printed in English with more Spanish words under it—probably a “no trespassing” sign in that language.

She didn't know Spanish, but maybe the number twenty meant that the Greenes owned nineteen other ranches. Since they were billionaires and probably lived in a mansion, she wondered why they hadn't invested in a more impressive entry.

Poncho got back in the truck and drove through. Alyson opened her mouth to ask a question, but before she could utter a sound, he got out of the truck again. He closed the gate and locked it.

Locked it?

Until that instant, Alyson hadn't known that she would be living behind a locked gate. Why wasn't this mentioned in the teaching contract she signed? Before she had time to consider what that might mean, they wheeled down a blacktopped road that curved toward several red barns.

"What do the Spanish words on the gate mean?" she asked.

"The Country of God."

Alyson smiled. "God's Country, I like that."

An old-fashioned wagon pulled by two brown horses was parked at the side of the road. A man wearing a cowboy hat appeared to be the driver.

"Who is that man?" she asked, pointing to the cowboy.

"Senor Quatro Greene."

"You mean my new boss?" She gave a short laugh. "You're joking."

"I make no joke, senorita. The man, he is Senor Greene." Poncho slowed and then stopped about ten feet from the wagon.

The cowboy waved to them. With his blue jeans tucked into his black high-topped boots and that slim body, Quatro looked too young to be a widower with two school-aged children. He

climbed down from his perch, and she noticed how tall he looked as he rearranged things in the back of the wagon.

Alyson pulled her make-up mirror from her purse for a quick look at her appearance. This time, she held the mirror at a different angle, hoping for a better result.

Nope. She shook her head. The cuts and bruises on her face, caused by the accident, still showed regardless of the extra layer of makeup she'd applied after leaving the plane.

Her wounds would eventually heal—without leaving scars, she hoped. She'd thought breaking up with Tim would leave scars. It hadn't. Hailey had been right about Tim all along. She dabbed a bit more powder, snapped the makeup holder shut and put it back in her purse.

She glanced back at the wagon as Quatro started toward them.

All right. She swallowed. Just because he's slightly better looking than I had expected is no reason to tense up. She raised her chin a notch. Okay, a *lot* better looking.

Quatro reached the truck in what seemed like four strides. He had high cheekbones and a dark complexion. He removed his hat and held it. Reddish-brown hair curled around the edges of his ears and at his hairline, and broad shoulders filled out his navy blue western shirt making his eyes look even bluer.

A trace of boyish mischief gleamed in his smile, causing her to want to smile right back. His grin faded. One dark eyebrow arched as he appraised her face. He knew about the accident, but this was the first time he actually saw her—much less her cuts and bruises.

Then Quatro's smile returned. He stuck his hand through the open window and shook her hand. "I'm Robert Greene, but my friends call me Quatro. You must be Miss Alyson Spencer."

"Yes, I am."

He held her hand a moment longer than she would have expected. And she felt the warmth of his palm.

She'd learned that *quatro* meant four in Spanish. And he'd signed her teaching contract as Robert Lee Greene IV.

He looked too handsome to be named Quatro. If they got on a first name basis, she would call him Robert.

Quatro turned to Poncho. "I want you to service my truck. Drive it on up to the barn for me after you put Miss Spencer's luggage in the back of the wagon."

"Si, senior."

Back of the wagon? Alyson frowned. Surely, he hadn't meant they would be traveling in that wagon.

In these clothes? She shook her head. *I don't think so.*

She paid big bucks for her gold silk pants and matching blouse because she had wanted to look her best at their first meeting. She also bought cowboy boots but never intended to wear them. In hindsight, she should have bought a new pair of jeans to go with the boots.

Quatro eyed Alyson for a moment. "If you will be so good as to climb up in the wagon, we can be on our way."

Stunned by all that she'd seen and heard, she felt her jaw drop. *Pull yourself together, Alyson*, she told herself. *There must be an explanation.*

Maybe the Greenes treated all newcomers to wagon rides. In fact, eccentric billionaires probably did pretty much anything they wished, and nobody said a word. A slow smile formed on her lips. Could it be that he knew how much she loved antiques and historical novels and did all this to make her feel welcome?

Quatro/Robert opened the door on her side. “I’ve enjoyed all our telephone conversations, and my family and I are looking forward to knowing you better.”

“I’m glad to finally meet you, Mr. Greene.”

“Please, call me Quatro—when the children aren’t around,” he said. “And I’ll call you Miss Spencer when they are. It’s important for them to learn to respect adults at an early age.”

“I agree,” she said.

His smile lingered as he offered her his hand. “Let me help you down from the truck.”

But when she stepped down, the wind hit her in the face. She opened her mouth to make another comment and tasted sand for the first time since her sandbox days.

Quatro had put an old blue quilt over the wagon seat. He patted it. “Sit here.”

He grabbed hold of her waist and gently swung her up into the wagon. Though in pants instead of a hooped skirt, she felt like Scarlet must have felt when Rhett helped her up in a carriage.

Now she had a new reason to keep reading those historical novels she enjoyed so much.

He snapped the reins, and they started off.

The air seemed hot and humid for February—apparently not unusual for South Texas. She studied her surroundings as they rolled along. The flat landscape looked thirsty and dry, and the black soil she’d seen on the drive from Corpus Christi was replaced by deep, white sand. Hailey would probably describe a desolate area like this as “sixty miles south of pretty.”

“You should be crowned Cinderella of Texas for landing this job, Alyson,” Hailey had said. “Who knows? Maybe they will name a town after you one day.” Hailey gave a dramatic sweeping motion with her hands as if she was introducing royalty to the world. “Can’t you just picture a sign on the outskirts of a town, reading Cinderella, Texas—one mile?”

Alyson had laughed when Hailey said those words, but she wasn't laughing now. Yet, one thing was clear. Southern Texas suffered from a drought—just like her heart did after the break-up with Tim.

Harsh words had gone on between them, and she gave back her engagement ring. But that didn't stop Tim from trying to persuade her to turn down the homeschooling job on the Greene Ranch. "Wait for a teaching position at a public school in Dallas," he said.

Not that she cared what Tim said or thought.

Scrubby mesquite trees and blowing sand dominated the entire area, and wagon-wheels squeaked as their journey continued to wherever they were headed. She saw a lot of cactus, too, probably the prickly kind. A roadrunner flashed across the road in front of the wagon, flapping its brown wings. The bird raced a gusty breeze on down the fence line and out of sight.

A bird flew down a fence-line in the historical romance novel Alyson was reading. She smiled internally. Her boss had told her over the telephone that his ranch was fifteen miles west of Bay Road. She'd thought Bay Road was the name of a street. Later, she learned it was a town.

Alyson felt her new boss looking at her. Maybe she should say something.

"I noticed, sir, that my contract was mailed from Bay Road, Texas. I fell asleep on the drive down from Corpus Christi and missed seeing it, but I know it must be near a beach with a name like that."

"Yes, it is."

She looked out toward the countryside. "Is it always this windy?"

He grinned. "Always. The Gulf of Mexico is just a skip and a jump from ranch headquarters."

"I didn't know that."

His deep Texas-drawl sounded folksy and warm—like chestnuts roasting on an open fire—not that she had ever tasted chestnuts—much less roasted them. Unconsciously, she tapped the spiked heels of her black pumps on the wooden floor of the wagon because she didn't know what else to say or do.

“You're nervous,” he said. “Please try to relax. I promise not to bite.” He smiled. “And you've never been to South Texas before, have you?”

“Once. When I was a child, we stayed at a beach-house on Baffin Bay for a few days.”

And I'm not nervous.

Alyson leaned forward in the wooden seat and crossed her arms over her chest. Who was she kidding? She was sitting in a wagon in the middle of nowhere with a mysterious cowboy and was about to enter unknown territory. Of course, she was nervous.

She'd noticed an ax in the back of that wagon just before he helped her climb onto it. Why did she keep seeing it in her mind? And why was she suddenly remembering every detail of *Mysterious Stranger*, that horrible horror movie about an ax murderer that Tim insisted they watch?