

# PAPER ROSES

*A Novel*

TEXAS DREAMS, BOOK 1

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# 1

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March 1856

“It’ll be all right.” Sarah Dobbs wrapped her arms around the child, wishing with all her heart that she could believe the words she’d uttered so often. The truth was, it didn’t matter what she believed. All that mattered was keeping Thea safe. And so Sarah knelt on the hard-packed dirt of San Antonio’s main street to wipe the tears from her sister’s cheeks. The child was hot, tired, and excited by the unusual sights, a combination that turned normally sweet-tempered Thea querulous.

“Let me see, sweetie.” Sarah reached for her sister’s hands, giving each of the tiny palms a kiss. Thank goodness, this time Thea had not hurt herself. When she’d run and tumbled, trying to chase a burro, all she’d done was torn her hem again. The dress could be repaired far more easily than the skinned hands and knees that had been almost daily occurrences since they’d left the train.

“It’ll be all right,” Sarah repeated, rising as gracefully as she could. *It will be all right*, she told herself, *when Austin arrives*. The journey that had been more difficult than she had dreamt possible was almost over. Once she and Thea reached Ladreville and the Bar C, the past would truly end. The old Sarah Dobbs would be gone forever.

“Walk?” Thea gave Sarah a look only a curmudgeon could refuse. Sarah was not a curmudgeon. She was a woman whose right leg was protesting the exercise and whose common sense was shouting that she and Thea should not remain in the hot Texas sun. She was also a woman who knew how desperately Thea needed to expend some of her seemingly endless supply of energy.

“A short walk.” Sarah smiled as a grin crossed the child’s face. It took so little to please Thea. *How could anyone have . . . ?* Deliberately, Sarah bit the inside of her cheek. *That’s all past*, she reminded herself. She wouldn’t think about the past. Instead, she walked slowly and deliberately, trying to minimize her limp as she looked for the man who held the key to her future.

Where was he? Where was Austin Canfield? Sarah kept a tight grip on Thea’s hand as they made their way down the street. Her tumble forgotten, Thea giggled at the sight of oxen with almost unbelievably long horns pulling two-wheeled carts.

There was no denying the differences between this city and Philadelphia. They were as real as the warmth that felt more like midsummer than the last days of winter, as real as the smells of dust and dung and dried leaves. But the greatest difference was sensed rather than seen or heard. There was a contagious vitality about this frontier town. Sarah saw it

in the way men swaggered rather than strolled; she heard it in the shouted greetings. Whether they spoke Spanish or English, enthusiasm was evident in every word. Texas was young and brash and exciting. It was everything she sought, or it would be if Austin were here.

But he wasn't. There was no doubt about that, just as there had been no doubt the previous dozen times she had looked for him. Though the center of San Antonio bustled with life, there was no one who fit his description. *I'm four inches over six feet*, he had written, *with sandy hair and blue eyes, and when I see you, I'll be wearing a grin as big as the state of Texas*. Sarah had smiled when she had read his words. Texans, she had heard, were prone to exaggeration. She wasn't smiling now. The last of their traveling companions had departed half an hour ago, leaving Sarah and Thea alone, more than a thousand miles and a lifetime away from home. She shook her head slowly, negating her last thought. Philadelphia wasn't home. Not anymore.

"Papa!" Thea tugged Sarah's hand and started to run across the road. Though they hadn't been there a moment ago, two cowboys had emerged from the saloon on the opposite side of the street and were lounging in the doorway.

"No, sweetie." Sarah wrapped her arms around her sister, restraining her. Neither of those men was the new father who had promised to meet them, the man who was now an hour late.

As if they had heard Thea's cry, the cowboys approached Sarah. "Might we be of assistance, ma'am?"

Sarah shook her head. When it had been apparent that Austin Canfield wasn't waiting for the stagecoach, the other woman who had traveled with them had advised waiting

inside the town hall, which Texans referred to by its Spanish name, *cabildo*, but Sarah, knowing that Thea would hate being cooped up in yet another small space, had remained outside. She had believed her mourning garb and the presence of a small child at her side would discourage unwanted attention. That had been the case on the train and the stagecoaches. But San Antonio was different. Texans were as friendly as Philadelphians were reserved.

“No, thank you, gentlemen. My fiancé will be here momentarily.” She hoped it wasn’t a lie.

Though the men exchanged amused glances, they retreated. With a sigh of relief, Sarah looked at the clock tower. She would wait for five minutes longer. If Austin hadn’t arrived by then, she and Thea would go inside.

Where was he? Sarah looked around for what seemed like the hundredth time, hoping that a tall, sandy-haired rancher would appear. He didn’t. She took another deep breath as she considered the reasons he might not have come. Perhaps his horse had gone lame. Perhaps a wheel had fallen off the wagon. Those were possibilities, and they were far more palatable than the alternative. Surely Austin hadn’t changed his mind. Surely he hadn’t been lying when he’d written those wonderful letters. Surely he wasn’t going to abandon her and Thea the way everyone in Philadelphia had. Or was he?

“No, sweetie. No skipping.” Though Thea wanted to run, running was one of the things Sarah could not do. Was that the reason Austin was not here? She paused as doubts assailed her. Had Austin reconsidered and realized he had no desire to wed a woman whose right leg was twisted and scarred and an inch shorter than her left?

Sarah reached into her reticule and touched the packet

of letters, trying to reassure herself. *“You speak of your imperfections as though the rest of us bore no blemishes.”* There was no need to open the envelopes and withdraw the pages, for she had memorized the words Austin had written, just as she had engraved upon her mind the appearance of the brash handwriting that was somehow at odds with the eloquent phrases. *“My dearest Sarah, if there is one thing I have learned, it is that no one is perfect. But you, my sweet wife-to-be, are closer to perfection than you know.”*

She wasn't perfect. Far from it. Still, her heart had soared with happiness when she'd read that sentence. It was Austin who was perfect, for he had somehow known exactly the right words to woo her. Sarah hadn't expected to be courted. This was, after all, a business arrangement. But there was no denying the fact that she had reveled in Austin Canfield's letters. They had been the one ray of light in those horrible months after Mama and Papa's deaths.

Reverend Lang claimed they were proof that God loved her and was watching over her. Sarah knew otherwise. God had deserted her and so, it appeared, had her bridegroom.



What else could go wrong? Clay Canfield bit back an oath as he stared at the mare. It wasn't her fault. When he had come into the stable to harness the horses, Clay had discovered Nora ailing. If the fact that instead of greeting him eagerly as she did each day wasn't enough, the sorrel mare lay curled in a ball. Those big brown eyes lacked their normal sparkle, and her nose didn't even twitch when he pulled a carrot from his pocket. Clay clenched his fist, snapping the carrot from the force of his grip. He didn't need this. Indeed, he did not.

The last thing he needed was an ailing horse, particularly today. But he had one.

“Miguel,” he called when he heard the stable hand’s heavy tread, “Nora’s sick. You’d better look at the others before you feed them.” Clay knelt next to the mare and checked her gums, nodding when he saw they were still pink. “C’mon, girl.” He reached for Nora’s halter. “It’s just a touch of colic.” Clay wasn’t certain of that. It was, he had discovered over the past year, easier to treat people than animals. Humans told you what hurt, while horses could only look at you with mournful eyes. Nora might have colic; she might have something else. The one thing Clay knew for certain was that another innocent being could not die. Ladreville, Texas, had been the site of far too many Canfield deaths.

Clay glanced at his black armband and shuddered as waves of pain and anger swept through him. The man responsible for that would pay. Unfortunately, not today.

“C’mon, Nora.” Clay spoke softly as he slid the halter over her head. “We’re gonna get you on your feet and walk a bit.” That had helped the last time the mare had had colic. With a little luck, it would work again. Clay’s lips twisted in a wry smile. He was the last person on earth who should expect luck to favor him.

“I’m taking Nora out.” Miguel knew what to do in the stable. Clay walked, slowly at first, leading the mare around the paddock, trying not to look at the horizon, where the sun was even now tinting the sky. He should have been on the road by now. Instead . . .

As Nora whinnied, Clay stopped and laid a reassuring hand on her muzzle. “It’s all right, girl. We’ll get you feeling better soon.”

With her flaxen mane and tail and the white blaze, Nora was a beautiful horse. Despite her advanced age, Clay had received offers to buy her, offers that he'd refused without a second's consideration. He'd never sell Ma's horse. Nora deserved to live out her days on the Bar C. That was why Clay was taking endless circles around the paddock, trying not to think of how much time had passed since he'd discovered Nora lying in her stall, trying desperately not to think of the last time Nora had left the Bar C and how she'd returned, a lifeless body draped over her back.

Clay forced himself to take a deep breath. They'd keep walking. And they did. It was only when Nora's digestive tract was once again functioning normally that Clay returned her to the stable.

"Good news, boss," Miguel called out as Clay led Nora to her stall. "The others are all fine."

"That is good news." The first of the day. The first in a long time. Clay rubbed Nora's nose again before giving her a ration of bran.

"I thought you were going to San Antonio today." Miguel's voice came from the other end of the stable, where he'd started to muck out stalls.

Clay shrugged his shoulders. "I was. I am." He looked down at his sweat-stained shirt and wrinkled his nose. He couldn't go looking or smelling like this. As he headed for the pump, Clay glanced up. The sun was now above the horizon, staining the sky a bright red that promised unseasonable warmth. It would be a good day for travel, if a man wanted to travel. Clay did not, at least not when that traveling involved a return trip to Ladreville and the Bar C. Unfortunately, what he wanted didn't change anything.

He dipped his head under the pump, then walked toward the house. As he pulled out his watch, Clay frowned again. He'd be late. There was no way around that. Caring for Nora had taken more than two hours. Though he had planned to arrive in San Antonio before the stagecoach, now he would be late. Very late, and that meant Miss Sarah Dobbs and her little sister would have to wait.

Clay climbed into the wagon that Miguel had harnessed. It wasn't fair. The woman had traveled all the way from Philadelphia, expecting to be met by her bridegroom. Instead, she would be forced to wait, and when that waiting ended, the only things she would have were Clay and a message he would have given almost anything not to be delivering. It wasn't fair, but life, Clay had discovered on far too many occasions, wasn't fair.

He tightened his grip on the reins. If he'd been able to ride Shadow, he could have made up lost time, but riding wasn't an option, not when he needed to transport Miss Sarah Dobbs and all her earthly possessions to Ladreville. So here he was, driving the wagon, while the sun's inexorable rise reminded him of just how late he was and how many miles he had yet to cover before he met his brother's bride.

And the child. Mustn't forget the child that Austin had claimed was part of God's plan. Some plan. Clay clenched his fists, trying to fight back the pain. *Why?* he demanded. *Why did you let it happen? Austin believed in you. He said you were a loving God.* There was no answer. It appeared God was not listening. No surprise there. God hadn't listened to Clay Canfield in a long time. And, it appeared, he had not been listening to Austin, either. That was why Clay was on his way to San Antonio to meet the Canfield bride. And the child.

What would she do when she learned the truth? Clay tugged on his hat brim, trying to block the sun. As the red ball lit the horizon, the horses continued to lower their heads. Clay wished he could follow suit, but—unlike them—he needed to watch more than the road. This country held hazards far more serious than potholes, including marauding Comanche. And at the end of the road was the greatest hazard, at least to Clay’s equilibrium: Miss Sarah Dobbs.

How would she react? How would any woman handle the announcement he was forced to make? Clay lowered his chin in another vain attempt to keep the sun from blinding him. If Patience had been faced with the news, what would she have done? Would she have swooned or simply wept buckets of tears? Clay had seen her do both when she had been upset. He squinted, and this time it was not in response to the sun’s rays. Odd. He could not conjure the image of his wife’s face. That had never happened before. Clay shook his head, trying to clear it. What mattered today was Miss Sarah Dobbs, the woman whose stagecoach was even now lumbering into San Antonio.

How was he going to tell her? An hour later as he drove the wagon into the heart of the city, Clay was still searching for the words to make the announcement easier to bear.

He stared at the woman who stood in front of the *cabildo*, a small child at her side, looking at the town hall’s clock tower with what appeared to be barely controlled impatience. Though he could see only her back, there was something about the tilt of her head that spoke of anger. Clay couldn’t blame her for that. In a similar situation, he doubted he would have bothered to mask his impatience. The stagecoach had arrived over an hour earlier. Austin should have been here,

ready to help her alight from the coach, showing her that he was as eager to marry her as his letters had claimed. Instead, Miss Sarah Dobbs and her sister had been left alone in the middle of San Antonio, as out of place as a piece of mesquite in a Boston parlor.

The woman turned slightly, revealing her profile. There was no doubt about it. This was Sarah. Clay would have known her, even without the miniature she had sent to Austin. “*Medium height, medium brown hair, medium brown eyes,*” she had written in one of her letters. This woman was all that, and more. Though her fancy clothing was the first clue, the slightly imperious tilt of her head and the proud angle of her shoulders announced to the world that this was a lady, an Eastern lady. She turned again, and this time she looked directly at Clay, her eyes flickering from the top of his hat down his dusty clothes before she dismissed him. The action surprised Clay almost as much as the fact that she had remained outdoors rather than seeking the sanctuary of the *cabildo*. Sarah Dobbs was no shy miss. Instead, she appeared to possess more self-assurance than he had expected, certainly more than Patience had. Clay clenched his jaw at the knowledge that he would be the one to destroy that confidence.

Trying to control his anger, he jumped out of the wagon and approached his brother’s fiancée. “Miss Dobbs,” he said softly as he doffed his hat, not wanting to startle her. Two cowboys on the opposite side of the street appeared to be keeping watch. Clay suspected that if Miss Dobbs let out a cry of alarm, their protective instincts might result in a brawl. He most definitely did not need that. “Miss Dobbs,” he repeated, a bit louder this time.

Austin's mail-order bride had moved and was once more staring at the town hall, her hand placed protectively on the little girl's shoulder. At the sound of his voice, she turned to face Clay. For a second, her eyes were brilliant with hope. But as quickly as it had been ignited, the hope faded. "I beg your pardon, sir. May I ask who you are?"

"Papa!" The child grinned and raised her arms toward him.

Clay's hand tightened on his hat brim. "No," he said, forcing his voice to remain even, though he wanted to shout his denial. "I'm not your papa." *Thanks to Austin's God, I'm not anyone's papa.*

He raised his gaze to Sarah. "I'm Clayton Canfield, ma'am. Clay for short," he said as calmly as he could. In case she had forgotten the part of the letters where Austin had described his family, Clay added, "Austin's brother." As she nodded, Sarah looked past him, clearly expecting his brother to appear. The poor woman. She didn't deserve this. While his heart balked at pronouncing the words, Clay couldn't let her continue to believe that Austin was in San Antonio. "I've come to take you to the ranch."

Sarah Dobbs's composure seemed to slip. "But . . . I thought . . ." The woman who had seemed so self-assured now appeared vulnerable. Silently Clay railed at the events that had put uncertainty in her eyes. Sarah swallowed before she asked, "Where's Austin?"

The taller of the two cowboys straightened and took a step into the street, glaring at Clay. Seconds later, apparently reassured that Sarah was not being coerced, he returned to the shelter of the doorway.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Clay took Sarah's arm and led her

toward the wagon. “There’s no easy way to tell you this.” He lifted the child onto the seat, then assisted Sarah, waiting until she was settled before he spoke. Only then did Clay take a deep breath and force himself to utter the words that haunted him. “My brother is dead.”



Austin was dead. Sarah stared at the man who now would never be her brother-in-law. Austin was dead. It couldn’t be true. But it was. The man with the black armband had no reason to lie. Austin was dead.

“Take another sip,” Clay Canfield urged. Obediently, Sarah raised the tin cup to her lips and swallowed the lukewarm water. He must have thought she was going to faint. That was why he had insisted she sit before he told her the news. That was why he produced the canteen and cup. That was why he counseled her to take deep breaths. But she wasn’t going to swoon. She wasn’t even going to cry. Fainting and tears solved nothing.

Sarah closed her eyes for a second, grappling with the fact that the man who had written those beautiful letters asking her to marry him was gone before she had had the chance to meet him, to hear his voice and to see whether his smile really was as big as the state of Texas.

“What happened?”

“Drink, Sarah?”

Thea’s words interrupted whatever Clay might have said. Instinctively, Sarah clutched her sister. Precious, precious Thea. She was all Sarah had left. Losing her was unthinkable. But so was the loss of their parents. Mama had been so happy when Thea had been born, so excited about the

grand tour of Europe she and Papa planned for all of them, so eager to hold her first grandchild. And then . . .

Thea yipped.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.”

“Drink.” Thea grabbed for the cup.

Loosening her grip on her sister, Sarah held the cup while Thea sipped.

“What will Thea and I do?” The words tumbled out. An instant later, Sarah wished she could retract them. How selfish! This man’s brother had died, and all she could think about was her own situation. Hers and Thea’s. She was being as unkind as the parishioners who had shunned her, lest the scandal of her parents’ deaths taint them.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said. “I can’t even imagine how I’d feel if something happened to Thea.”

“God willing, you’ll never know.” Clay Canfield recapped the canteen and stowed it behind the seat, then flicked the reins, setting the wagon in motion.

“Where are you taking us?”

He shrugged, as if that should be evident. “To the Bar C. You must be fatigued from your travels. I imagine you’ll need a week or two of rest before you take the stagecoach East.”

Sarah shuddered at the enormity of her dilemma. Return to Philadelphia? Impossible. “We can’t go back,” she said, wincing at the desperation she heard in her voice. There was nothing for them in the City of Brotherly Love other than ridicule, ostracism, and humiliation.

As Thea started to doze, Sarah took a deep breath, trying to find words to explain the situation without revealing too much. Had it been less than an hour since she’d assured Thea everything would be all right? How wrong she’d been.

Her mind whirling with unhappy thoughts, Sarah looked at the town that had seemed so appealing as the stagecoach had lumbered its way toward the center. Instead of the stone edifices that marked her hometown, San Antonio had adobe buildings, a vivid reminder of the city's Spanish heritage. Those were startling enough, but even more surprising was the juxtaposition of those graceful buildings with shops of rough-hewn wood and mismatched brick, shops whose almost casual architecture bore witness to the exuberance of the Americans who had built them, just as the curved lines of the adobe buildings spoke of the more formal society that had first established the city.

When she'd entered San Antonio, Sarah had been filled with anticipation. The man she had promised to marry would be waiting for her, and soon she and Thea would begin their new life. Thea would grow up never knowing shame. Now the anticipation was gone, destroyed by the brutal reality of death. In place of anticipation came the knowledge that once again Sarah and Thea were alone, their future as uncertain as it had been the day the attorney had told Sarah nothing remained. Their father's disastrous investments had resulted in the loss of not just Sarah's dowry but everything he owned, including the house she called home. That was the reason Papa had taken her mother's life and then his own, leaving Sarah and Thea alone and destitute, shunned by the people who had once pretended to be friends.

"We can't return," she repeated.

Clay nodded slowly, as if he understood the reason for Sarah's refusal. "I will, of course, pay for your tickets."

He didn't understand. Lack of money was only one of Sarah's problems. "Mr. Canfield, I have no reason to return

to Philadelphia. Ladreville is my home and Thea's. Or it will be, once we arrive there."

Though she wouldn't have the protection of Austin's name and the respectability that came with being a married woman, somehow Sarah would find a way to build a new life for her sister. Nothing—nothing on earth—was more important than keeping the promise she'd made the day their parents died.

They were outside San Antonio now, with the two ruts that served as a road stretching straight in front of them. Clay turned toward Sarah, his face reflecting his surprise. "It pains me to state the obvious, ma'am, but you no longer have a husband waiting for you. While it's true there are single men in Ladreville, I can't guarantee . . ."

"I don't need a husband. I am certain I can find a way to earn my room and board." Sheer bravado propelled her declaration. The truth was, Sarah had no salable skills. Playing the pianoforte and being able to capture a flower's beauty in watercolors were important assets in Philadelphia society; however, she suspected there was little calling for those particular skills in Ladreville, Texas.

"The offer of passage home still stands."

His words were meant to be kind. Sarah knew that. They shouldn't have stung like a rose's thorns, and yet they did. It was obvious Clay Canfield did not believe she could play a useful role in his hometown. The thought that he might be right rankled, for Sarah had no other choices, not if Thea was to have the life she deserved.

They rode in silence. In a desperate attempt not to think about the future, Sarah darted glances at the man on the opposite end of the seat. Though his eyes were the same deep blue Austin had claimed, Clay Canfield's hair was blond, not

Austin's sandy brown. Clay was a few inches shorter than Austin, perhaps an even six feet tall. Were his facial features the same? Sarah would never know. She glanced at the hand that had held the canteen. Odd. When he'd removed his glove, it hadn't looked the way she thought a rancher's hand would. There were none of the calluses she imagined ranching would create. Those heavy leather gloves must protect hands well.

Sarah choked back a nervous laugh. How could she be thinking about gloves when her fiancé had died? She didn't even know the cause of his death.

“What happened?”

“Do you mean, how did Austin die?”

Sarah nodded. She had heard that horrible diseases swept the Texas countryside, making the yellow fever that plagued Philadelphia seem mild in comparison. Wild animals and poisonous reptiles roamed the land, seeking human prey. And then there were the Comanche, whose moonlit raids struck fear in the settlers' hearts. Texas, she had heard, was no place for a gentlewoman. It seemed it also was not a place for Austin Canfield, since something had killed him.

Clay's lips thinned, and Sarah saw his hands tighten on the reins. “Someone shot my brother. A single shot, point-blank in the heart.”