

Female newspaper editor solves mystery in 1800s central Texas.

Lone Star State of Death

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Bobbi Ann Chukran

Lone Star State of Death

An 1880s Texas Mystery

featuring
Samantha Emmeline Slater

Limestone Ledge Press
Leander, Texas

Chapter 1

Central Texas, late 1880s

AS THE 12:05 FROM FORT WORTH puffed, whistled and bellowed into the tiny train depot of Lowell's Crossing, Samantha Emmeline Slater suddenly shivered as she peered out of the grimy window through the dark black steam and soot that enshrouded the train.

The train whistled again and came to a slow, grinding halt, the wheels clacking and screeching against the metal tracks. Although the sun was shining brightly, the mournful, low voice of the locomotive whistle gave Samantha the shivers—like someone walking over her grave, as her aunt used to say.

Well, at least it's not a ghost town, thought Samantha, as she rose wearily from her seat, clutched at her back, and slowly began to make her way with the other passengers down the aisle to the door. She briefly paused before giving her hand to the conductor who helped her down onto the platform. She took a long, hard look at the scene around her, blinking against the bright sunshine and the waves of heat, smoke and steam still belching from the train. She coughed, and dabbed at her eyes with her white lacy handkerchief. It came away black with soot. Samantha glanced down at the skirts of her best summer dress and was annoyed to find that it, too, was smudged black.

It was obviously Market Day. The hard-packed dirt streets of Lowell's Crossing were filled with the hustle and bustle of horses and their riders, farmers loading rickety buckboards until they groaned to the ground and overflowed with large barrels of salt, molasses and flour, and the excited squeals of small

children as they tried to stay out of the way of their parents. And the dust—oh the dust! It was everywhere.

Sam watched with interest for a moment as the farmers unloaded their sagging wagons of the goods they had brought to town to exchange for the provisions that they couldn't provide for themselves. There were several wagons stuffed to the top with cotton—more cotton than Samantha had ever seen in her life—and even a wagon filled with animal hides.

She daintily held her white lace handkerchief to her nose as a shield against the ubiquitous dust that was a fact of life in these frontier towns, gathered up her long skirts and three layers of petticoats and boldly glanced around, looking for someone. As cries of recognition greeted each of the other fellow train passengers, and the crowd around the platform dwindled, Samantha felt more alone than she ever had in all of her nineteen years.

She was beginning to have serious thoughts about turning tail and running back to her hometown of Fort Worth when she noticed one other lone figure anxiously waiting on the platform by the depot. He reminded Samantha of a long, skinny vulture—fidgety and nervous. She turned in the opposite direction to avoid him.

The tall, lanky, and very dusty man frowned as he studiously watched the other passengers take their leave one by one until Samantha was the only passenger left standing there. He took a long look, then shook his head. She was a mighty comely young lady, and very pretty—but that wasn't why he was here.

He fidgeted, pulled his watch out of his vest pocket, looked at it, frowned, then politely tipped his hat to the woman as she glanced his way, but he just as quickly looked in the other direction. He pushed back his hat, scratched his head, and squinted into the sun.

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Samantha glanced up and down the wide dirt street and was relieved to see the boardinghouse sign not far from where she stood. She could see Albright's Mercantile and Post Office, the livery stable and blacksmith's forge and the Sheriff's Office. But she still didn't see the other building she was looking for. She knew it had to be there somewhere; the town was tiny.

She cautiously looked back at the man, who was still hovering around and beginning to look anxious. She had expected the assistant printer at the newspaper to meet her at the train. Surely this dusty, dirty cowboy couldn't be him! She decided to speak to him—maybe he knew where the newspaper office was. “Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me where I can find Thomas Hill?”

The man looked startled for a moment and his face flushed deep red.

“Why, yes ma'am. I know where you can find Mr. Hill,” he said, stammering. “I mean, I know Mr. Hill...I mean, I *am* Thomas Hill!” He squinted again, snatched his hat off his head and peered more closely at Samantha. “Beggin' your pardon ma'am, but I don't think we've ever met. You're not from around here, are you? Do we know each other?”

“No, we don't. But I was told that a Mr. Hill was to meet me here at the depot and take me to my new place of employment. He seems to be late.”

The man stared. “Uh, employment, ma'am?” he gaped at her. “I don't know what you mean. You mean...like...a job?”

Impatience leapt into Samantha's voice. “Yes, Mr. Hill. My new job. At the newspaper. The *Lowell's Crossing Lone Star*. Surely you've heard of it!”

Thomas Hill was starting to look kind of green around the gills. “Holy smokes. The newspaper!” He scrubbed his hand over his jaw and frowned. “But I didn't expect...”

Samantha was tired from her journey and had had enough of this stupid, dirty, dull-witted man. “Never mind! I’ll find it myself. The newspaper office can’t be too hard to find in a town this small, now can it?” She peered through the grime around her, trying to read the signs on the buildings farther down the street. She snatched up her valise, gathered up her skirts and petticoats and swished down the wooden sidewalk, holding her hat onto her head so it wouldn’t blow off into the dirty street.

“Wait a minute!” the man shouted.

Samantha’s steps slowed as he loped along to catch up. “Are you kin to Sam Slater by any chance?” he asked, but looked as if he really didn’t want to hear her answer. Surely she wasn’t...

“My name is Samantha Slater, Mr. Hill. Sometimes I allow my dear friends to call me Sam. Why?”

The man flushed deep crimson and began stammering again. “Oh boy! That’s what I was afraid of. We didn’t expect you...I mean, ma’am...we uh...kinda...” He gulped and stared.

“Well, spit it out, Mr. Hill!” she snapped. “I really don’t have all day.” She pursed her lips and started tapping her foot. “Well?”

He took a deep breath and crushed his hat between his hands. “We expected a man, ma’am. Beggin’ your pardon, but we didn’t expect no young woman.” He cringed as he said the words. “No offense, ma’am.”

Samantha was startled for a moment, then began to laugh. “You thought I was going to be a man? Now isn’t that funny! How amusing. Mr. Hill, do you really think I look like a man?”

Tom glanced sideways at Samantha, took a long, hard look, then quickly forced his eyes to the ground. “Well, uh...no ma’am. Surely not.”

“Well then, Mr. Hill, now that you’ve figured out I’m not a man after all, can we get down to business? Where is the newspaper office?” she demanded.

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Tom gulped and looked around. “It’s down the street, ma’am, but...”

“But what, Mr. Hill?”

“Well...it’s about the owner of the paper, Mr. George Stanley. He ain’t gonna...I mean...he’s gonna be real surprised, too. Just like I am.”

Samantha stopped abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk, and Mr. Hill almost ran into the back of her.

“Mr. Hill, what are you trying to tell me? I wish you’d just come right out and tell me what’s going on!” She swung around to face him. “Why should he be surprised? When I sent you my letter of reference from my former employer in Fort Worth, he clearly stated my name as Miss Samantha Slater. I know, because I typed it myself.”

Mr. Hill cogitated for a second on this bit of news, his jaw working up and down and his nose wriggling back and forth. “Well, that’s very strange. My boss told me that the letter we got was handwritten, ma’am. I remember, ‘cause he said he could barely read it. And it said your name was Sam...Sam Slater, ma’am. That’s why I’m kinda surprised.”

“Why, that low-down, lyin’ son of a...” Samantha took a deep breath, gritted her teeth, and then laughed as the truth dawned on her. She wondered why she had had no problems getting hired for the job at the Lowell’s Crossing newspaper. Now she began to understand. Obviously her former employer, bless his heart, had fibbed a bit on her application, switching it with the letter she had so meticulously typed herself. Jobs of any kind were hard to come by in central Texas—especially jobs for a young unattached woman such as herself. Most girls Samantha’s age were already married and on their way to raising a large brood of children. And it was even rarer for a woman to end up in a position like this one—the assistant to the editor of a small town Texas newspaper. She sort of wished she had got the job

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on her own merits as a writer and type-writer operator, but felt grateful to have the job under any circumstances. Well, she would show them! She would prove to her new boss that she could do the job. Even if she *was* a female!

Tom deposited her at the door unceremoniously, thrust a copy of the *Lone Star* in her hands, tipped his hat, and scurried away, mumbling something about finding the boss. Samantha looked around the tiny office. It made her think of her family. Her mama told her that her daddy used to say she had ink in her veins, just like him. Her father had been a newspaper man when she was a very young girl, and she had a faint recollection of playing in his office in the middle of all the type cases and stacks of paper. He must have been right, because Samantha had wanted to be a writer as long as she could remember. She wanted to talk to people, ask questions, and scribble down their stories. She felt an overwhelming excitement as she breathed in the heady scent of the newsprint, the inks and the leaded type that was used to make up the text of the newspaper. He had left them all when she was so young, but she did have a few cherished memories of him working, his long sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his white apron streaked with black ink, and the stacks of paper with fresh ink sitting on the worktable to dry.

Her mother had been horribly distraught at the idea of her only daughter following in her father's footsteps. Mrs. Slater had tried desperately to interest Samantha in the more womanly pursuits of china dolls, needlework and making new frocks, for example. But Samantha would rather write than anything, and was spinning tales of her own as soon as she learned to talk.

Of course, that was before. Before he took off and left them both behind. Samantha frowned as the happy memory suddenly

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turned dark. Her mother didn't last long after her father left them, bless her soul. She slowly faded away until one day she just couldn't hold on any longer and died. Thank goodness Samantha's aunt was around to take her in and help her finish growing up. But the day she turned eighteen years old, she left home and went to the big city of Fort Worth to try to make her own way in the world. She looked for a job, and finally found work with the *Cowtown Livestock Reporter* for a year before realizing that she didn't want to spend the rest of her life doing stock reports or writing about horse feed. She wanted to spin tales about real people, not cows!

All that was behind her now. Samantha was determined to get started at a real newspaper, just like her father had, even if it was in a tiny town like Lowell's Crossing.

The *Lone Star* office was quiet now. She knew that the paper was printed once a week on Friday, so she had almost a whole week to learn her job. She knew she could do it. Samantha was glad to be alone for a few minutes in the peace and quiet of the cozy office. The horribly long train journey from Fort Worth to Lowell's Crossing was crowded, dirty, hot, exhausting and very noisy. Samantha walked around the tiny office, noticing the old wooden chair with the well-worn seat, the oak roll-top desk piled high with old, dusty newspapers and the lone typing machine sitting in the corner on a small work table. Samantha ran her fingers over the keys, imagining that she was typing out her first real news story. She turned and glanced around the rest of the room.

Against the wall was an old rickety bookcase, crammed full and overflowing with dusty tomes and papers. Samantha read a few of the titles. *The Holy Bible*, *The Old Farmers Almanac*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and a textbook on journalism were prominent, along with a copy of *Aesop's Fables*. Samantha nodded in appreciation; it seemed that the

editor was a well-read, intellectual fellow. Just the kind of editor that a small town like this needed. She would hate to find herself working with a complete dolt. Like that Hill fellow, for instance. She shuddered.

Sam wandered into the back room where the printing was actually done. The room was also small, but tidy. The sight of the press took her breath away. She ran her hands along the sides of it, reveling in the feel of the cold, hard metal and imagining it clacking away, turning out hundreds of copies of the *Lowell's Crossing Lone Star*, all with her name on the front page.

Samantha sighed and jerked her thoughts back to cold, hard reality. It was not very likely that she would be allowed to sign her name to any stories for a long time, if ever. Samantha was no stranger to the realities of a small town newspaper. As assistant to the editor, she would most likely get to do some leading and in addition to setting type, if she was lucky, also do some type-writing. No doubt, since she was a woman, she'd also be expected to sweep the floors, tote and fetch the coffee and arrange for vittles, too.

That didn't matter to her. She was eager to get to work, no matter what she had to do. She was determined and anxious to lose herself in work and to put the memories of Ft. Worth and her old job behind her.

Samantha shook her head, sighed and took a seat in the old wooden chair. She picked up her copy of the *Lone Star* and began to scan the front page headlines. *Man Stung 15 Times While Trying to Remove Bee-Hive from Outhouse. Chicken Thieves Get Away with Prize Rooster. Limestone Quarry Opens. Livestock Show Postponed Due to Rain.*

Samantha stared in disbelief as she flipped through the rest of the paper. Where was the real news? Where were the stories about the financial crisis in New York? Where were the stories about the horrible floods in the Ohio Valley? And most

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importantly, where was the news about the new fashions coming in from Paris, and up from New Orleans? She shook her head. Certainly there was a place for local news like the opening of the limestone quarry, but not on the front page. Oh, how she'd love to help make this little paper into the best one in the state! Of course, she'd never be able to compete with *The Austin Daily Statesman*, but there was still a place for a small town newspaper that the citizens could count on for the local news.

She threw the paper aside in disgust. She glanced at the clock on the wall and wondered what was taking Mr. Hill so long to find the owner of the *Lone Star*. She was awfully tired and hot, and was looking forward to getting to her room at Miss Mable's Boardinghouse and taking a nice hot bath before getting supper and going to bed early. She jumped up, smoothed her dress in front of her, and was looking around for something better to read when she heard a loud commotion in the street outside the newspaper office front door.

She turned, and before she could say a word, two men burst through the door, carrying a third man. The man they carried was tall and rangy. His hair was raven black streaked with gray and he had a rather bushy mustache that curled up on the ends. A scruffy beard covered the bottom and sides of his face. He jerked away from the men, stumbled around, took a few steps on his own, then collapsed in a heap on the floor.

One of the men, noticing Samantha standing in the doorway, tipped his hat then gently moved her aside. "Outta my way, young lady. We've got a hurt and bleedin' man here. Bill, go fetch the doc, will ya? I think I just saw his horse down at the bank. Hurry up, don't dawdle around all day!" One of the men quickly ran out of the office into the streets, yelling for the doctor to come quickly.

Samantha looked down at the wounded man. His head was bleeding and his clothes were covered with dust from head to

foot. Deep red stains covered the front and back of his shirt and his jeans. His whiskers were already caked with dried blood and mud. He looked very pale and drew a ragged breath which shook his thin, wiry body.

Samantha saw something flicker in his deep dark eyes and just as quickly it was gone. He looked up through bleary eyes and reached out for her, as if to take her hand. He wheezed, "I was looking forward to meetin' you."

"Where is he?" a booming voice called as another man crashed through the door into the office. Assuming this was the doctor, Sam looked up, surprised to see how very young he looked. And how very handsome, too. She quickly took a breath, and gave him a shaky smile.

Seeing her standing there, he tipped his hat, then turned his attentions to his patient. "Well there, George, Bill told me you had a little set-to with that Black Devil of yours. Why'd you want to go and get yourself all trampled for?" He looked around at the small group gathered around him. "One of you men go fetch me some whisky. I think he's gonna need it. And go get my bag from my office. Hurry up!" He glanced at Samantha. "I don't know who you are or why you're here, but see if you can stand out of the way."

A small group of gawkers tried to crowd into the tiny room, craning their necks to see what was going on. "Get all these people out of here," the doctor shouted. Amidst some grumbling and complaining, the crowd reluctantly moved out onto the sidewalk as one of the ranch hands closed the office door against their prying eyes. "We tried to take him to your office, Doc, but he wanted to come here," one of the men explained, glancing over at Samantha.

Samantha sidled over to Tom, her eyes wide with apprehension. She wasn't exactly fainty with the sight of blood. Lord knows she had seen her share of bloodshed in Fort Worth

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after the large herds of cattle came through and the cowboys got liquored up and started shooting off their mouths along with their Colts. Fort Worth wasn't called *Cowtown* for nothing. She had just never quite come this close to it before.

Thomas took a look at her, and quickly pulled up a chair out of the way. "Are you alright, ma'am? Maybe you'd better go wait in the back room. You don't look so good all of a sudden."

She waved him away impatiently. "I'm fine, Mr. Hill. But who is that man? And what happened to him?"

"Which man, ma'am?" He looked around the room.

That insufferable idiot! Samantha gritted her teeth as she fought to keep her temper. "The man who is bleeding all over the floor, of course! Who is he?"

"Why, that's the boss, ma'am...George Stanley. He's the owner and editor of the newspaper. He's the one that hired you from that Fort Worth paper."

Ah...so this was George Stanley. She peered at the man for a moment. "What happened? Do you know what happened to him?" she asked.

"I was out lookin' for him, to bring him in here to meet you, when a couple of his ranch hands rode into town driving their buckboard hell-bent for leather. Why, the next thing I knew, George tried to climb outta' the back, and just fell out, right in the middle of the street out yonder. Like to got run over by the Bickenses' buggy, too. These men picked him up and brought him in here."

He shook his head sadly. "I don't rightly know what happened to him, but one of them said that he'd gone kinda crazy out at his ranch. He started stumbling around and running into things, then jumped up onto his horse and took out like the devil hisself was on his tail. A little down the trail, the horse reared up, went crazy and threw him off, trampling him to

pieces.” Tom shook his head, but looked pleased with himself for having so much useful information.

Samantha watched the ministrations of the young doctor, wondering who or what could have done this to the editor of the paper. Although his face was streaked with blood and grime, from what she could see, Mr. Stanley looked to be about forty years old, and was quite handsome, with a somewhat craggy face. Samantha frowned. There was something vaguely familiar about that face. *Ah, yes. That’s it*, she thought. She had seen his photograph on the front page of the *Lone Star* at the library in Ft. Worth.

Samantha sighed. It was just her luck to come into town right in the big middle of something like this. She had only been here for less than an hour, and already the editor was laid out on the floor of the office. Although Samantha knew that newspaper editors in frontier towns weren’t exactly always the most popular of the citizens and commonly stirred up all kinds of trouble, she had heard that Lowell’s Crossing was a nice quiet little town. Supposedly so different from Fort Worth. She was too young to remember many of the details, but her mother had told her that her own father had stirred up quite a ruckus of his own now and then.

Sam shuddered, and tried not to think about all the blood that was beginning to stain the office floor. The men continued their hurried activity for a few more minutes, then abruptly stopped and stepped back from Mr. Stanley’s prone body. “Well, he’s gone,” said the doctor, shaking his head sadly. “Bill, you’d better go tell Sheriff Gilbert. And go get the undertaker while you’re at it.” The doctor turned back to the cowhands that had driven the buckboard into town. “Well boys, you’d best go back out to the ranch and break the news to Mrs. Stanley. And be gentle with her, will ya’? Tell her I’ll be out later to see how she’s doin’ and

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bring her something to calm her nerves. Lord knows she's gonna need it after this."

The cowhands looked at each other warily. One of them, bolder than the rest, dressed in a red shirt and bandanna, said with a satisfied smirk, "Well, I suppose that's the end of that he-devil horse now. Miz Stanley has just been waitin' for a chance to get rid of that old Black Devil." He shook his head. "A damn shame, too. Such a fine piece of horse flesh."

The cowboys shook their heads and began to leave, tipping their hats to Samantha as they passed. They shuffled outside, hopped back up onto the buckboard, and drove out of town.

Thomas took a long look at Samantha and rubbed his whiskery jaw. "Well, if that don't beat all!"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, ma'am," he drawled, "looks like our boss just got hisself kilt. And since I ain't no writer, well ma'am it...it looks like you'll have to do it for now. Looks like you're the new editor of the *Lowell's Crossing Lone Star*. At least until Miz Stanley finds someone else. I expect that ain't gonna be on her mind for a while, to tell the truth, though."

Samantha's mouth dropped open. It took her a moment before she could speak. Was this man saying what she thought he was saying? "Tom, did I hear you correctly? Did you just say *our* boss?"

"Why, yes ma'am...*our* boss. I work at the paper too. Didn't I tell you? I musta plumb forgot in all the ruckus here. I'm the printer's apprentice. Or at least I was." He frowned and scratched his head. "I guess I'm the bona-fide printer now, since I ain't got nobody to apprentice to all of a sudden. I set the type and keep the press runnin'. I thought you knew. I thought I told ya?" He grinned. "Yep, we'll be workin' together, I expect. Just you and me. Right here together. I reckon we'll be a good team, you and me. Don'tcha think?"

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Chapter 2

THE LAST THING SAMANTHA REMEMBERED seeing before she fainted was the bottom of George Stanley's bloody and dusty boots going through the front door, as the three men carried him out on their shoulders. For once in her life, Samantha was speechless. She had been in town approximately one hour, and she was already the editor of the newspaper. *Well, that was fast work*, she thought, and was immediately ashamed of herself. After hastily assuring the doctor that she was alright, thanks to Tom who was standing near enough to keep her from falling, she watched as the men carried away Mr. Stanley's body.

Samantha and Tom decided to get a fresh start the next morning on the newspaper work so she could get some rest from her long journey. He showed her across the street to Miss Mable's Boardinghouse. A friend of hers from Fort Worth had told her about Miss Mable's, and had recommended the place highly as a safe place for a young woman to stay. It was reasonably priced, and was close enough to the newspaper so that Samantha could walk across the street to work every day. Since she didn't own a buggy or horse of her own, she figured this was a good place to stay, although the noise would be fierce.

Miss Mable's Boardinghouse sat on the far edge of town opposite the *Lone Star* office, and could easily be seen from there. The two-story building was fancier than most of the other whitewashed clapboard wood structures in town, most of which had been built quickly to be practical and serviceable—and not very attractive. Miss Mable's, on the other hand, was freshly painted with sparkling white paint and dark green shutters. Wooden gingerbread trimmings hung above the front door and

decorated the railings along the front porch and the second story windows and gables along the steeply pitched roof. A row of homely rocking chairs lined up along the porch. Miss Mable decided that she liked living in town, it was awfully good for business, but she didn't want her home to look like a storefront. The ground floor of the building housed a formal parlor where the guests could gather for polite conversation or to listen to her play the massive piano that presided over one corner. These "musical extravaganzas" were popular with Miss Mable's boarders.

The ground floor also boasted an attached kitchen, a large dining room and Miss Mable's bedroom, which was stuck into the back corner like an afterthought.

On the second floor, the permanent women boarders lived in four tiny rooms. The third floor was kept for the day boarders who would ride into town on a more temporary basis. Samantha grimaced when she learned that Tom also lived on the third floor.

Mable Murphy was a robust, hearty woman, well weathered from the hot Texas sun. She still sported a bit of her Irish accent, although she had lived in Texas for most of her adult life. She wore a faded lavender calico dress that was covered by a voluminous white apron. Mable had been a widow for many years, and her two children had moved west after the War, leaving her to run the boardinghouse alone. She was constantly working on some sort of handiwork, and served as dressmaker to several of the ladies in town. As a widow woman, she did little bits of everything in order to make her own living.

The moment Samantha met Mable, she could think of only one word to describe her, and that word was "sunshine." The woman practically exuded warmth and brightness. Samantha thought that it would be very hard to get in a bad mood around

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her. She considered herself lucky to be able to stay at the boardinghouse.

Mable welcomed Samantha as if she were her own daughter. She bustled her up to her room, chattering all the way, and had hot water running into the bath before Samantha had a chance to unpack her small valise and hang her hat into the pine wardrobe provided for her in her room. The room was small, but clean, and homey. A colorful hand-stitched patchwork quilt covered the single bed and white muslin curtains covered the window.

“Supper will be ready in a few minutes, darlin’ . Just come on down when you’re ready,” Mable said, humming to herself as she went back downstairs after getting Samantha settled in her room.

The bath was a luxury, and Samantha was grateful to Miss Mable for providing this for her boarders. Many of the boardinghouses provided galvanized tin tubs and a bucket of hot water for their guests, if that. She lay back in the hot water and dozed until she thought she would shrink, and the water began to get too cold. She thought about her long journey, the irony of the editor dying the same day she came to town, and the fact that she was now the editor of the *Lowell’s Crossing Lone Star*. At least she was until Mrs. Stanley, George’s widow, could find a suitable replacement.

Samantha reluctantly climbed out of the tub, dried herself off, brushed the tangles out of her long, dark, curly hair, and dressed in a sprigged calico and a fresh petticoat that had seen better days. As soon as she started making some money, she’d think about having some new clothes made. But until then, she’d have to make do with her old ones. She smelled food, and realized that she was starving. She walked downstairs for dinner. The old pine table that sat in the middle of the dining room was set with three sets of chipped dishes but heaped with food—roast

pork, stewed okra, candied sweet potatoes, preserves, cornbread and a pecan pie.

Samantha's friend had also told her that Miss Mable was a wonderful cook, and from the looks of it, her friend was telling the truth. Sam ate as if she hadn't eaten in a week, and finally pushed herself back from the table with a groan. "Mable, that was wonderful! I haven't eaten this well in years."

Tom agreed and bobbed his head. "Yes ma'am, Miss Mable's the best cook in town. That's why I live here." Mable grinned as she heaped another piece of pie onto his plate. He turned to Samantha and winked.

Samantha looked around. "How many other boarders are here now?"

Mable shrugged. "Let's see. There's you, and Tom, and our schoolteacher, Celeste Morgan, for now. And me, of course. We get temporary boarders in here from time to time that just stay for several days or a week at a time. You know, people coming through town on their way to Austin, or people waiting for new houses to be finished—that sort of thing. Later on, in the winter, we'll probably get some cowboys in here that need a place to bunk down for the whole winter. Now that gets really interestin'," she said with a smile.

Tom agreed, his head bobbing up and down. "Yes ma'am. It's an interestin' group, alright." He glanced over at Samantha and blushed.

Samantha rose from the table and excused herself to go upstairs. "I've really had a very grueling day, Mable. Thanks again for the lovely dinner. It was delicious."

"Why, sure, honey. You do look a bit peaked. I imagine you're awfully tired after that long trip and what with all that unpleasantness over at the paper." She clucked her tongue. "Such a shame about Mr. Stanley, too. Although, well...I guess

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nobody deserves something like that. I'll see you in the morning for breakfast. Bright and early, now!"

Samantha said goodnight to Tom and trudged up the stairs to her room, overcome with weariness. She undressed for bed and gladly crawled underneath the patchwork quilt. It took her about two minutes to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Early the next morning after breakfast, Samantha walked across the street to the *Lone Star* Office. Tom was already there, arranging the type onto large wooden trays for the weekly edition of the paper. He shyly smiled at her as she walked in, and almost turned over one of the trays onto the floor.

"Mornin', Miss Slater, ma'am."

"Good morning, Mr. Hill."

"Um, Miss Slater?"

"Yes, Mr. Hill?"

"Uh, why don't you call me Tom? It makes me feel so old to be called Mr. Hill. We's probably close to the same age, anyhow. And if we're gonna be workin' together so much..."

Don't remind me, she thought. "Fine, Tom. Shall we get busy?" She took a deep breath and looked around for a moment, trying to think of what to do first and trying not to become overwhelmed at the task ahead of her. Oh, yes, the blood!

"Tom, could you please get me a mop and a bucket of water?" *First things first*, she thought, as she pushed the furniture away from the dark stain on the scarred pine floor. When he had brought the water, she drew up her long skirts so they would not drag in it, and began to gingerly mop up the mess. *Just like a man*, she thought, *to go get trampled by a horse, bleed all over the floor and then die, leaving a woman to clean up after him.*

Bobbi Ann Chukran

Samantha swabbed at the stain, and the scarred wooden floor, wondering how the men had managed to drag so much dust into the room with them. The floor was covered with chalky-white, dusty boot prints and pieces of dried hay and other grasses that now mingled with the blood on the floor.

In grim determination, Samantha cleaned up the blood as best she could, finally helping Tom to scoot the furniture back into place. She tried to erase the image of the dying man from her mind. *Well*, she thought, looking around, her hands on her hips, *looks like I've finally got a story to write.*

Female newspaper editor solves mystery in 1800s central Texas.

Lone Star State of Death

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