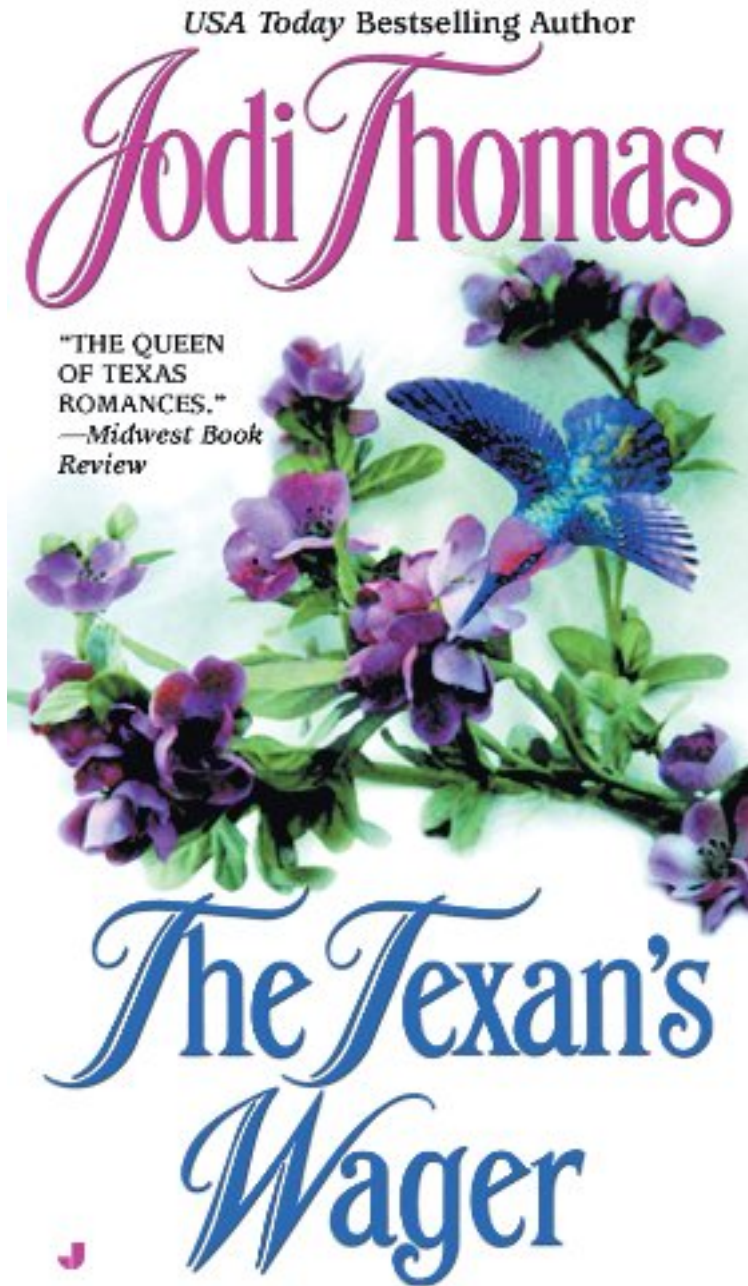


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The Texan's Wager



Par Jodi Thomas
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Description : Description du produitJodi Thomas's new Texas trilogy follows three spunky women who get kicked off a wagon train-and agree to enter the local town's "Wife Lottery." In The Texan's Wager, Bailee Moore is "won" by a strong, silent farmer who could be the key to leaving her troubled past behind...

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the first novel of a brand-new Texas trilogy, awardwinning USA Today bestselling

author Jodi Thomas takes her exquisite and often lyrical writing (Inside Romance) to passionate new heights as an emotionally wounded man and woman discover the true nature of love and marriage...Thrown off a wagon train with two other women and trying to avoid jail for a murder they committed, Bailee Moore agrees to enter a Wife Lottery a ploy concocted by the Cedar Point sheriff to secure wives for the men in the small Texas town. For the sensible Bailee, however, marrying Carter McKoy is like exchanging one life sentence for another especially since her new husband hasn't even seen fit to utter a single word in her presence. But still, she can't help thinking that something about this strong, silent farmer could be the key to leaving her troubled past behind and making a worthy wager with her heart.

PROLOGUE August 8, 1883 Halfway between Fort Dodge and Santa Fe Bailee Moore watched as the last few stragglers of the Roland wagon train disappeared into the fiery sunset. The dust from fifty teams of oxen pulling huge Conestogas settled around her along with the shattered remains of her final dream. She thought she heard the wagon master, Broken-Hand Harrison, yelling, "Catch up! Hold tight!" But the call she'd listened to every day since they had left Independence, Missouri, was no longer meant for her or the two women standing beside her. Their one wagon and four oxen now had no place in the long line heading west. The three of them had been cut from the group and abandoned as easily as a drover cuts the weak from a healthy herd.

"They'll be sorry," Lacy Dillavou whispered behind Bailee. "They'll all wish they hadn't kicked us off. Someone will turn around and come back for us, you'll see. And then they'll apologize." Her voice trembled. "No." Bailee fought back her own tears as she faced the girl ten years younger than she. Bailee's father had always insisted she be practical even when the truth hurt. Lacy, though in a woman's body, was little more than a child clinging to hope when none existed. Bailee tried to soften her words. "No one will turn back, Lacy. No one will come for us." "Then we'll follow from far enough behind that they won't know." Lacy gulped back a cry and tried to act older than her fifteen years as she glanced at her two companions. "We can't just stay out here in the middle of nowhere without anyone to help us." "We can't follow." Sarah Andrews's calm voice cut across Lacy's sobs. "Even if the three of us could manage the team, there is no one to hunt for food. In a week we'll be out of supplies. In two weeks we'll be starving." Bailee looked into Sarah's sad eyes. Though only twenty, Sarah's pale blue depths lacked any spark of vitality. She believed herself dying, and despite Bailee's efforts, Sarah grew weaker every day. Her face was as pale as her white-blond hair, and her eyes were almost void of color. She reminded Bailee of a faded painting of an angel she'd once seen. It almost seemed cruel, forcing her to live and remain on an Earth far too harsh for her nature. In the weeks since the wagons rolled through Fort Dodge, Sarah had lost first her baby, then her husband, to fever. When she became ill, the wagon master ordered her wagon burned, along with everything she owned. A few days later Bailee insisted on giving her a ride and was ordered to the back of the train. Lacy joined them to help nurse Sarah back to health. A week later all wagons stopped and a council was called. A council bent on ridding itself of all undesirables. "I wish I were a witch like they say I am!" Lacy shouted at the thin line of dust in the distance. "I'd turn them all into crows. They should've shot us outright. What chance do we have?" She leaned against the wagon wheel and gave way to sobbing. Bailee couldn't stand to watch Lacy cry or Sarah draw into herself. Yet, Lacy's question echoed in her mind as she began making camp just as she had done every night for weeks. It would be dark in an hour, and a fire had to be built. Without weapons or protection the light from the fire would be their only defense. As she gathered wood, Bailee forced down her fears and tried to think. Be logical. Be practical. Be sensible. She could almost hear her accountant father lecturing her with his glasses low on his nose. But logic made her hesitate when Francis Tarleton asked her to marry him. She'd told herself she was being practical when she insisted he go on without her. He'd make his way, build a home, and send for her. Bailee dropped a load of wood on the ground a few feet from the wagon and headed for the stream to find more. She made several trips before finally stopping to wash. In the stillness of twilight she pulled Francis's tintype from her pocket and faced the truth. It had been three years. He wasn't going to send for her. He hadn't written for months, and, even before that, his letters gradually stopped mentioning her joining him in Santa Fe. He hadn't gone on ahead of her, he'd gone on without her. Even if he were somehow waiting in Santa Fe, he'd never accept her as a bride when he learned of the trouble she'd caused the night she left Independence. She hadn't left with her father's blessing, but with his curse. Francis wasn't the kind of man to overlook a mistake. In a gust of wind the thin image on tin flicked from her fingers and splashed into the water. Bailee didn't even try to grab at the treasure she'd held dear for so long. She let it float away, along with her dream of marriage and family. She stared down at the outline of herself in the dark water. She would be twenty-six her next birthday. Her father always said she was lucky: being sensible was far more important than being pretty. It was time to face the

truth and stop running toward a man who wasn't waiting for her. The one dream she'd ever let herself believe in was that she'd marry, and now that would always be a dream, nothing more. Slowly Bailee stood and walked back to the others. Lacy had stopped crying and was building a fire. Sarah already curled into her blankets, so thin beneath them her body appeared more a twisting of sheets than a person. "We have beans and cornbread," Lacy said as the fire sparked. "If we're careful and eat only once a day, the supplies will last a few weeks. By then another train is bound to come along." Hard times were nothing new for Lacy; she'd told of being on her own since her mother died five years ago. She'd had her cry, now it was time to get on with surviving. Bailee shook her head. The Roland train left late in the year. Some said if they didn't reach the Rockies by August first, they'd never make it across before snow buried them. The chances of another wagon train following so late in the year were slight and cattle drives that crossed this trail heading north mostly traveled in the spring. Lacy worked around the campfire, building her hopes as she built a meal. "I know they feared Sarah has the fever, but she won't give us nothing. I can feel it in my bones." Bailee managed a smile. "Your feeling it in your bones is one of the reasons you got left behind with Sarah and me. They feared Sarah might give them the fever, but they knew you gave them the shakes with your talk." Lacy made a face. "Hush your teasing or I'll cast my evil eye on you." "And what?" Bailee laughed out loud. "Make me an old maid, lost out here in the middle of nowhere with a sick woman and a girl?" "I'm fully grown," Lacy corrected. Huge brown eyes turned up to Bailee. "Do you really think we're going to die out here?" "No." Bailee made up her mind about an idea that had been rolling around in her thoughts all afternoon. "And we're not staying here hoping someone will save us." Catching Bailee's determination, Lacy nodded. "Come morning, we're loading up with wood and water and heading back the half day to where we saw the red barrel for mail at that crossroads. From there, we'll turn our wagon south." Lacy's smile faded into panic. "South?" Bailee tried to sound determined. "That's right. Come morning, the three of us are heading straight for Texas. We've got two weeks to get there before we starve." Lacy's mouth opened, but no sound came out. She didn't need to say a word; Bailee read her thoughts in her stare. She'd just named the one place lower than hell in Lacy's mind. The one fate that might be worse than starvation. Texas. Reprinted from *The Texans Wager* by Jodi Thomas by permission of Jove Books, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

Copyright 2002, Jodi Koumalats. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission. From *Publishers Weekly* Two emotionally scarred people find love in this fast-paced Western from Thomas (*To Wed in Texas*, etc.). When Bailee Moore and her two female companions are voted off a wagon train, they reluctantly make their way to Texas, where they are accosted by a wild, smelly man set on stealing their wagon. The three women bash the brute over the head and promptly turn themselves in to the nearest sheriff, convinced they've committed murder. Instead of sending them away to be hanged, however, Cedar Point's wily sheriff devises a marriage lottery, in which the women are raffled off and married to men willing to pay their prison fines. Carter McKoy, a silent recluse with a tragic past, draws Bailee's name, and though she deplors her lot, she quickly warms to him. The first half of the novel ambles leisurely along as Bailee and Carter come to know one another, but the pace picks up abruptly when Bailee learns the man she allegedly killed is alive and eager for revenge. Though the intrigue subplot fleshes out Carter's character and allows for some compelling cowboy action (complete with fistfights and bullet-dodging heroics), it detracts from the real drama between Bailee and Carter. Thomas's crisp prose, sprightly dialogue and homespun characters will charm most readers, but some may be left puzzling over the novel's loose ends. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.