

WHEREVER YOU GO



TRACIE
PETERSON

Books by Tracie Peterson

<p>BROOKSTONE BRIDES <i>When You Are Near Wherever You Go</i></p>	<p><i>A Matter of Heart</i> <i>Lone Star Brides (3 in 1)</i></p>	<p><i>Whispers of Winter</i> <i>Alaskan Quest (3 in 1)</i></p>
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<p>LONE STAR BRIDES <i>A Sensible Arrangement A Moment in Time</i></p>	<p>ALASKAN QUEST <i>Summer of the Midnight Sun Under the Northern Lights</i></p>	

*with Judith Miller **with Kimberley Woodhouse

For a complete list of Tracie's books, visit her website
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“Come one, come all to the Brookstone Wild West Extravaganza—the only wild west show to give you all-female performers of extraordinary bravery and beauty! Women whose talent and proficiency will amaze and delight people of every age!”



ONE

MAY 1901

TOPEKA, KANSAS

Mary Reichert posed for the newspaper photographer as she'd done hundreds of times before. As the Brookstone Wild West Extravaganza's top trick and sharpshooter, she had earned a reputation for being second only to Annie Oakley.

"Smile, Miss Reichert," the photographer called from behind his tripod. "This one is for the paper."

Mary beamed a smile and held her Smith & Wesson hammerless .38 revolver at an angle to show off the elaborate etching on the nickel plating. The photographer took the picture, then motioned for the winner of the day's shooting competition to join Mary. He was hardly more than a boy. He wore a suit of brown tweed two sizes too small but was fiercely proud of having beat all the other competitors to shoot in one final round against Mary.

The competition was the idea of the show's owner, Oliver Brookstone, and his assistant, Jason Adler, whose father had a financial interest in the show. Prior to each show, the promoters and town officials set up a competition between locals.

Participants would shoot both a rifle and pistol of their own choosing until the top man or woman was chosen. This person would then be called down from the audience to compete against Mary during the Brookstone show.

“What is your name?” the photographer asked the young man.

He tugged at his collar and cleared his throat. “Boyd. Boyd Butler.”

“All right then, Mr. Butler, I want you to stand next to Miss Reichert and hold up your pistol toward her. Now, Miss Reichert, you hold your pistol toward him.”

Mary nodded and shifted into the desired pose.

The man focused his camera and then raised his head to address Mary. “I wonder if we might push your hat back just a bit. I’m getting a shadow.”

“Of course.” She gave the custom red Stetson a slight nudge. It was one of ten that had been specially made for her by the John B. Stetson Company.

The photographer eyed the scene again and nodded. “That’s good. Now, instead of a smile, I think a serious expression would be fitting—show a little competition.”

They did as instructed, and he completed the picture just as Oliver Brookstone appeared. Oliver was resplendent in his master of ceremonies costume—a bright red coat and black pants. His vest was gold and his bow tie black, and atop his head he wore a black top hat.

“My dear Mary, it’s time to take your place. The show is about to start.” He turned and hurried back toward the arena.

Mary could tell from the sound of commotion that the audience was growing more and more excited. She looked at the young man beside her. “Well, Mr. Butler, are you ready for your big moment?”

He gulped and nodded. She wondered if he would freeze up altogether once they were in front of the large crowd.

Mary took pity on him. She slipped her revolver into her holster and reached out to pat his arm. “Don’t be nervous. Just pretend nobody is there. It’ll just be you and me having a friendly shooting competition.”

He flushed. “Yes, ma’am.”

She might have laughed at his wide-eyed look of fear, but she knew he was just a boy trying hard to be a man. Laughing at him would only make matters worse.

Music sounded from the arena, and Mary knew that was their cue. Oliver was about to start the show. In years gone by, there was always a big parade of all the performers, but this year the attention and excitement behind the shooting competition made it necessary to start with that. Should the competitor beat Mary, there would be a big to-do, with a trophy presentation and purse given to the winner. So far, however, no one had bested Brookstone’s top shooter, and no one really expected that anyone would.

When Oliver cued Mary and Mr. Butler to join him in the center of the arena, she saw the young man freeze in place. She looped her arm through his. “Come on.” She all but dragged him out in front of the cheering audience.

“Topekans,” Mr. Brookstone announced through his megaphone, “I give you the talented and beautiful Mary Reichert and your own Boyd Butler. Boyd is the winner of your community shooting competition. Let’s give them a hand!”

Cheers went up all around. Mary smiled and waved with her free arm. She nudged Boyd. “Wave. They’re cheering for you.”

He nodded and lifted his arm. She wondered if he’d even make it as far as the actual competition before fainting dead away.

“Boyd will attempt to best Miss Mary in a little contest we’ve put together,” Oliver continued. “It’s nothing arduous, folks—we wanted to keep everything fair and square. We’re

going to toss glass balls in the air, and Mary and Boyd will take turns shooting. The first to miss is the loser, and the other will be our winner.”

The audience clapped all the louder, and some began to chant Boyd’s name. It further unnerved the young man, and he glanced at Mary.

“Try not to think about them. Just remember you won the competition fair and square against the others. Now you just need to best me.” She winked and immediately realized it was the wrong thing to do. Poor Boyd. He looked like he might be sick at any moment.

Mary couldn’t give him a second thought, however. The contest began, and for a moment she thought he might actually be able to go the distance. As the balls were slung high into the air, Boyd met the challenge. Mary didn’t think he’d best her, but he might at least make the competition interesting. But on the sixth ball, his concentration was broken by a sudden rousing cheer. The ball flew into the air and he fired . . . and missed. Across the audience, an exasperated cry echoed.

“Well, folks,” Oliver Brookstone called out, “that’s just the way it goes. Let’s give Boyd Butler a big hand for being the finest shooter in Topeka and for being able to go a few rounds with our Miss Mary Reichert.”

The audience burst into cheers and applause. Mary waved, then took Boyd’s hand and raised it in the air. After the clapping began to die down, Oliver presented Boyd with a certificate and a consolation prize: two free tickets to the next Brookstone performance in Topeka.

Mary was glad when the competition concluded and the routine of the show began. She joined the parade on horseback with the other performers. So far the show had enjoyed great success and a very busy year. If she hadn’t been so preoccupied with the loss of her brother, August, she would have been the

happiest of any of them. Unfortunately, August's untimely death the year before continued to haunt her. Especially knowing he was murdered and no one was being made to pay for it.

She lined up with the other performers and waited for Ella Fleming to Roman ride a two-horse team into position. Standing atop the bare backs of the matched geldings, Ella waved to the crowd, her long blond curls fluttering behind her. A second and third team came behind her, but it was Ella who held Mary's attention.

August had been killed on Ella's family's farm, and Ella had overheard her father and former fiancé admit to the deed. Mary had wanted nothing more than to see justice done and those two men forced to admit their guilt. But instead, nothing had happened to them. Nothing at all. They had reported that August had been trampled to death by two wild colts, and the sheriff and doctor who'd investigated the matter agreed. Not that anyone would dare to say otherwise. By the men's own admission, there wasn't a person in the town or surrounding counties who would ever make a stand against them. Both men held the local populace in their debt, and those who didn't owe them feared them and would never dream of speaking out against George Fleming or Jefferson Spiby.

The injustice of it ate at Mary day and night. She wanted her brother's killers to confess and take their punishment. She wanted someone to put aside their fear or devotion to the two men and see them jailed or, better yet, hanged for their offense. She tried to pray for peace of heart and mind, but it wasn't to be had. She didn't think God was even listening. Her grandmother had once told her that God heard every prayer, but if that were true, then why wasn't He answering?

Everyone exited the arena except the Roman riders. Their performance was first. Ella would be busy for the next twenty minutes.

“Are you all right, Mary?” Lizzy Brookstone rode up alongside her. She looked concerned.

Mary dismounted and handed her horse off to one of the wranglers. “I’m just brooding over August.”

Lizzy gave a sympathetic nod. “I suppose being so close to your grandparents’ farm brings all of that back.”

“It does.” Mary had quit the Brookstone show prior to last year’s season and had been living near Topeka with her grandparents in order to prepare for her wedding to neighboring farmer Owen Douglas. When news of her brother’s death had come, they had been devastated—shocked beyond reason. Now, being back in the area only reminded her of how bad it had felt to lose him. How she had still found no way to gain justice for his murder. Since arriving in town, Mary hadn’t been able to put it from her mind.

“Are your grandparents here today?” Lizzy asked.

“They said they planned to be.” Mary shrugged. “Kate too. She said she had to speak to me about something.”

“Mary?” a feminine voice called.

Mary turned to find her sister. “Kate! I was just telling Lizzy that you planned to be here.”

From atop her dappled buckskin, Lizzy waved. “Nice to see you again, Kate. That dress is beautiful. Pink definitely suits you.”

Kate smiled and touched the lace at her throat. “I bought it with the last of my teaching money.”

“The last?” Mary asked, looking her sister up and down. “Why the last? Did you quit?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. That was part of what I came to tell you.”

“But I thought you loved teaching.”

Kate looked at her gloved hands. “I do, but the school prefers their teachers to be unmarried.” She glanced up as if waiting for the full effect of her words to settle on her sister.

Mary knew Kate had been interested in Owen Douglas, and

when Mary jilted him to rejoin the wild west show, Kate had asked if she might seek him out. Mary had given her blessing. She and Owen had been childhood friends, and everyone had supposed they would marry. But while Mary had loved Owen as a brother, she could never work that love into something more marital. Owen had understood. Neither had ever fallen in love with the other.

“Owen and I were married a few weeks ago,” Kate blurted. “I wanted to have you at the wedding, but I knew you were tied up with the show. I know I should at least have written to let you know, but things happened so fast, and before I knew it . . .” She let the words fade into silence.

Mary couldn’t hide her surprise. For a moment, words wouldn’t even come. It was Lizzy who reached down from her horse to extend a hand of congratulations.

“I’m so happy for you, Kate.”

“Thank you, Lizzy.” Kate only glanced at Lizzy before turning back to Mary. “I’m so sorry if this is a bit much for you.”

Mary shook her head. “It’s all right. I’m just surprised.” She tried to force her thoughts into order. “Of course I’m delighted. You and Owen are well suited for each other, and I know you’ll be happy together.” She embraced her sister. “I wish I could have been there.”

As they pulled apart, Kate reached out to touch Mary’s cheek. “Are you truly all right with this? I know you said you were back in October, but we didn’t talk about it after that.”

“I thought you might write and tell me how you were progressing, but honestly, it’s all right.” Mary pressed Kate’s hand with her own. Her little sister and only living sibling was married. “Is Owen here?”

Kate nodded. “He’s keeping our seats with Oma and Opa. He thought you might appreciate not having to face everyone at once.”

“That was thoughtful.” The reality of it all began to sink in. Mary was happy for her sister, but at the same time, almost felt as if she’d been wronged. That was silly, of course. If Owen and Kate had found true love, and she had no reason to think they hadn’t, then she was glad they had married. Still, the thought of having to face them all was more than she wanted to contend with right now. Especially since she still had to perform, and her concentration was of the utmost importance.

“Look, I need to get ready for my act.” Mary looked over her shoulder at Lizzy. “I can’t remember—are we here overnight or leaving right away?”

“Neither. Our train is out at midnight. If you’d like, there’s plenty of time to go out to the farm and visit your family.”

“I was thinking maybe we could just go to dinner. I’d be happy to pay,” Mary said, turning back to her sister. “A celebration dinner to congratulate the newlyweds.”

Kate smiled. “I know I’d like that, and I’m sure the others would too, but you know Opa will never let you pay for it.”

Mary smiled. “Well, just tell him I insist. I’ll see you after the performances.”

Kate leaned forward and kissed Mary’s cheek. “I’m so glad you’re happy for us.” She hurried from the staging area and back to the arena.

“Are you really all right?” Lizzy asked.

“I’m fine. Really. Shocked, but fine.” Mary watched Kate disappear back into the stands. “I teased her about taking our wedding date so the plans we’d made wouldn’t have to be undone.” She drew a deep breath. “I’m honestly happy for them. Owen needed a wife. Since his folks died and he had the farm all to himself . . . well, he needed someone.”

Lizzy tugged at a loose button on her sleeve. “Still, it can be hard to have it actually happen this way, what with your sister marrying him.”

Mary shrugged. “I’ve always seen Owen as a brother, so maybe it’s exactly as it should be. Now he’s really my brother. At least, my brother-in-law.”

“So long as you’re going to be all right. You’d best hurry. You’ll be on in five minutes. I need to find Agnes and ask her to secure this button.”

“I saw her and Brigitte heading to the dressing room earlier.”

“Then that is where I must go, and you must dazzle the audience with your greatness.”

Mary looked at the clock and nodded. “Indeed. The show must go on.”