

LONE STAR BRIDES

BOOK  TWO

**A MOMENT
IN TIME**

TRACIE
PETERSON



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Chapter 1

DENVER, COLORADO
NOVEMBER 1893

Alice Chesterfield could feel the intensity of the man watching her. Not just any man. She knew very well who it was and why he continued to hound her steps. Gathering her brown wool skirt in hand, Alice did her best to avoid the muddier spots in the road as she crossed to the small fabric store on the opposite side. Her heart pounded wildly. Her breathing seemed to catch in her throat.

Would he follow her there? Would he dare? She had been plagued by this stranger—this man who'd been responsible for upending her world—for over a year now. The wind picked up just as she reached the door of the establishment and chilled her to the bone. At least she told herself it was the wind that caused her shivers. Forcing herself not to look back, Alice raised her chin and slipped inside.

Stay calm. Don't let this disturb you any more than it already has.

A small bell over the door heralded her entrance. The warmth of the room was welcome, but it did little to help the icy fingers that seemed to run down Alice's spine. Reaching her gloved hand out to touch a bolt of blue cotton broadcloth, she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath.

"May I help you?"

Alice jumped at the voice and opened her eyes to find a matronly woman standing at her right.

"We don't have much in stock, as we're closing our doors on Friday."

Alice nodded. So many of the smaller businesses had folded since the banking crisis struck earlier in the year. "I'm looking for needles. The mercantile was out and suggested you might have some."

The woman shook her head. "Sold the last of them on Monday. I have some pins and plenty of thread, but as you can see for yourself, my shelves of fabric are pretty much exhausted. I can give you a good price on this broadcloth."

"Yes, well . . . thank you. I don't really need any fabric." Alice steadied her voice as she glanced out the window to see if the man was still there. He was.

"I haven't seen you in here before." The woman frowned. "I would have remembered you . . . your scar."

Alice put her gloved hand to the scar that ran from ear to chin on the right side of her face. "I . . . well . . ." She didn't know quite what to say to the woman's open rudeness.

"Such a pity it should have happened. Your old man do that?" She watched Alice carefully. "I used to be married to a man who carried a knife. Thought nothin' of threatening me with it from time to time. Eventually he threatened the wrong man, and now I'm a widow."

"No," Alice said, shaking her head. "I'm not married."

She glanced over her shoulder at the man who continued to wait for her on the other side of the street. “I was attacked—a year ago.”

The woman didn’t miss a thing. “That the man?” she asked, nodding her head toward the stranger.

Alice realized this woman might well be her salvation. “Yes. At least he was responsible. He calls himself Mr. Smith, and he’s been following me since I left home.”

“Well, I won’t brook any nonsense,” the woman stated, moving back behind the counter. She pulled up a shotgun. “Like I said, I was married to a man who got his way at the end of a knife. I just won’t have it.”

“I wonder,” Alice said, moving toward the counter, “is there another way out of here?”

“Of course there is.” The woman pointed. “You go ahead through that curtain over there, and it will take you through the storeroom and into the alley behind my store. I’ll keep an eye on the no-account, and you get on home.”

Alice looked at the older woman with gratitude. “You are a blessing from the Lord.”

“Bah, I don’t know about that,” she said, squinting her eyes to study the stranger. “I do know about mean-tempered men, however. Now, get on with yourself.”

“Thank you.” Alice hurried through the curtain and made her way to the back door. The alley was a muddy mess, but she didn’t care. Picking her way through the ruts left by numerous delivery wagons, Alice slipped between buildings and disappeared.

She all but ran the rest of the way home. It wasn’t that Mr. Smith didn’t know where she lived, but she would feel a lot better once she was safely behind the locked doors of the Wythe house.

Hard times in the financial world had altered the stately

beauty of the upper-class estates that lined the road. Many of the wealthier Capitol Hill residents had closed their houses and moved away. With silver devalued and the mines shut until further notice, Denver had suffered a tremendous blow to its economy. No one knew that better than the stuffed shirts of this elite neighborhood.

Reaching the red stone and brick house she'd come to call home, Alice hurried up the back steps and burst into the kitchen, not even bothering to remove her muddy boots. Thankfully, there was no one there to chide her. The housekeeper and butler had resigned their positions the month before, and due to the financial situation, Mr. Wythe had not seen it possible to fill their jobs.

Alice didn't really mind. At eighteen, she was willing to work to get what she needed. She'd certainly never had a maid to wait on her hand and foot, even when her father was alive. Instead, she was the one required to work. Mrs. Wythe—Marty—had been kind enough to let Alice stay on with them. She'd hired Alice, without references, as her personal maid, and over time the relationship had developed into something more. Now, despite Marty's being able to pay only a small pittance, Alice remained for the comfort and assurance that she was cared for by someone.

"I thought I heard you in here," Marty declared, coming into the kitchen. "Were you able to . . ." Her words trailed. "What happened? Was it Smith again?"

Alice knew it would be impossible to hide her fear. "He fell in step behind me almost from the start. I tried to lose him in the shops, but he watched me too carefully. Finally, I just accepted that he would trail me wherever I went and pretended not to care. With the help of a woman at Bennett's Fabrics, I managed to get away unseen."

Marty crossed her arms in contemplation. “Of course it won’t stop him. I think it’s time we speak with the authorities.”

“But what will we tell them that I haven’t already explained?” Alice asked. “They know all about him but don’t care. They said they were much too busy with the increase in crimes. People are desperate.”

Marty narrowed her eyes. “That’s no excuse. Of course crime is increasing with so many people suffering financial ruin. Even so, it’s not right that a young woman can’t feel free to walk down the street without being accosted. Next time, I’ll drive you myself, and we’ll see if Mr. Smith is inclined to reacquaint himself with my shotgun.”

With her muddy boots discarded, Alice put them on the back porch and then hurried to clean up the mess she’d made on the floor. Marty had already retrieved the mop and pail. Alice took them from her and smiled. “I’m supposed to be the hired help.”

Marty laughed. “Those days are long gone, as you well know. I can’t help but wonder when Jake will walk through the door and tell me the bank has closed its doors. He knows his job there hangs by a thread. Mr. Morgan told him the banks were falling into failure like dominoes lined up in child’s play.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what to expect from one day to the next. But then, I suppose no one does.”

Alice nodded and worked to clean the floor. “I know I’ve said it before, but I think it’s time you stop worrying about giving me any money for pay. I’m blessed just to get to eat and have a bed to sleep in. You should just put that money aside for emergencies. That’s what I’ve been trying to do.”

“Yes, well, I was going to address that subject with you. My money is pretty well dried up. I could write to my sister

and brother-in-law in Texas. They still haven't paid me for the ranch, but I know they're most likely hurting, too."

Shaking her head, Alice opened the door and emptied the bucket outside. There was an icy bite to the air and she shivered. Looking quickly around, she saw the unmistakable outline of a man near the stable. She hurried back into the house and slammed the door closed. Locking it, she looked to Marty. "He's out there."

"Not for long." Marty took off and returned momentarily with her shotgun. "I think I should have a little talk with him."

"But it's nearly dark," Alice protested, "and Jake, I mean Mr. Wythe, isn't home yet. What if Mr. Smith decides to call your bluff?"

Marty smiled. "Who said I'm bluffing?"

Alice put her hand on Marty's arm. "Let's just pray instead. He'll leave soon enough, and if you threaten him, he'll just come back later."

"I don't appreciate being made a prisoner in my own home," Marty replied. "Even if you could give him what he wants, he needs to know he can't push people around."

Alice thought back to the man's demands. The night he'd sent his men to waylay her father, it had seemed they were to be victims of a simple robbery. But the attack turned out to be more than expected. One man had sliced Alice's face to motivate her father, and when her father protested, he was shoved to the ground, hitting his head and dying almost immediately. Alice was hospitalized and was sick for weeks afterwards with a fierce infection. When she regained consciousness and eventually her health, Alice prayed that would be the end of the ordeal. Mr. Smith, however, had appeared not long after the incident to ask about an envelope that should have been in her father's satchel.

“I wish I had what he wanted. I wish I could find a way to rid us both of his threatening presence.”

“Men like that are never satisfied. Your father was delivering gold certificates for the bank. Mr. Smith believes they should be his, but we know that isn’t the case. However, since no one knows where those certificates got off to or even where the envelope might be, Mr. Smith will have to accept his plight. You can’t get blood from a turnip.”

Alice put her hand again to her face. “But you can get it out of people. I would never forgive myself if harm should come to you or Mr. Wythe.”

Marty placed the shotgun on the top of the wooden worktable. “No harm is going to come to anyone. Not if I can help it. Now, as you pointed out, it’s getting late. Let’s get the stew from yesterday heating. When Jake gets home we’re bound to hear all the worrisome news, and Mr. Smith will be nothing more than a minor thorn in our flesh.”



Jake ate like a starved man and Marty once again felt guilty that they were still in Colorado instead of Texas, where Jake would rather be. Her husband longed to return to ranch life, but Marty stood in the way of that happening. Though they both had been born and raised on Texas ranches, Marty and Jake had opposite feelings toward those settings. Jake’s parents had been forced to sell off the family ranch when the drought of the ’80s had caught up with them. It had ripped a part of Jake’s heart away, and he had mourned the loss ever since.

While I couldn’t leave Texas quick enough.

Marty toyed with her bowl of stew. She had been widowed in Texas, and although she once owned a ranch and could have

made all of Jake's desires a reality, she'd kept the truth from him—until recently. Even now when he talked of returning to Texas so he could get work with friends or maybe even at her brother-in-law's ranch, Marty cringed and changed the subject. She had hoped that in selling her ranch to her brother-in-law, the matter would be closed for good.

She smiled at her husband, pretending her past mistakes didn't haunt her. She had asked for his forgiveness and the Lord's, as well. But she just couldn't seem to forgive herself. Especially now.

"Has Mr. Morgan said anything more about closing the bank?" Marty asked.

Jake looked up from the piece of bread he'd been about to break in half. "No. He's hangin' on like a man breakin' in a new bronc." His Southern drawl rang clear, as it often did when Jake let down his guard.

"There's a chance he might be able to pull through?" she asked, trying not to sound too desperate.

"There's always a chance," Jake said with a look of seeming indifference. Then he offered her a smile.

It was one of the first she'd seen in days. "You seem hopeful."

He shrugged. "I guess there's not much else we can be. I figure we have to have hope. I know God hasn't forgotten us down here. Someone reminded me today about the depression of '73. Things were bad then, too, and we fought our way outta that one."

"Mr. Brentwood at the orphanage mentioned that, as well," Marty countered. "Apparently his father was some type of investor back then and lost most everything. He managed to rebuild his business, however, and that was what gave Mr. Brentwood the money to start the orphanage." Marty had taken to volunteering at the orphanage frequently, especially

since the economical problems had forced Brentwood to let go of so many workers. “He also reminded me that God sometimes allows things to happen that we can’t begin to understand in order to benefit us later.”

“We can be assured that God will never forget us,” Alice agreed, “although sometimes it does seem He’s distracted.”

After losing the butler and housekeeper, Marty had insisted Alice join them for meals and be an extended member of the family. At first the girl had been uncomfortable with the idea, but she was gradually getting used to it.

For several minutes the conversation waned. Marty finished her bowl of stew, and though she could easily have eaten more, she settled for what she’d eaten. Jake would need another serving, and there wasn’t much left.

“I hope you won’t mind,” Jake said, putting his spoon in the empty bowl, “but I arranged with a man today to take some of the furniture from the house. He’ll be by tomorrow to crate it off.”

“Let me refill that for you, Mr. Wythe,” Alice said, jumping up.

“Thanks. I have to say it makes a mighty fine meal on a cold night.” He smiled at the younger woman and then looked back to Marty. “Anyway, like I was sayin’, he’ll be here tomorrow.”

Marty tried to hide her frown. She knew this was probably a sign of things to come and didn’t like it. If Jake felt it necessary to sell furnishings, he’d probably had his salary reduced once again. She tried to force a smile. “I think that sounds wise. We certainly don’t need so much stuff. With winter nearly upon us I thought perhaps we should close off the third floor all together. Alice can sleep in one of the second-floor bedrooms. It should help dramatically with the heating.”

“I agree,” Jake replied as Alice placed the bowl of stew in front of him. “Thank you, Alice. Next time, though, I can just fetch it myself.”

Marty turned to Alice. “Jake and I were just talking about closing off the third floor. It’s hard enough to heat the downstairs bedrooms, and we figure it will save on the overall heating of the house. You can take one of the second-floor bedrooms in the same wing as ours. That way we can also close off the other unused rooms.”

Alice nodded. “That’s perfectly acceptable to me. I’ll arrange it tonight. Did I also understand that Mr. Wythe is selling off furniture?”

“Yes.” Marty looked to her husband. “Just some of the things we don’t really need.”

It wasn’t the first time Jake had sold something from the house. In the beginning he’d only handed off his own meager possessions for cash. Now he was actually going to sell things that could be considered as belonging to the bank.

Paul Morgan, the bank president and distant relative of J. P. Morgan, had presented the furnished house and mortgage to Jake, along with a promotion to bank manager. He had been carefully schooling Jake to eventually take a position of higher regard and wanted the Wythe family to be part of the socially elite. Marty couldn’t help but wonder whether the man would be accepting of Jake’s present plans, especially knowing they were months in arrears with the mortgage payment.

Jake had assured her that with his cut in salary, Morgan had promised that the mortgage would be covered by the bank as part of his pay. Marty didn’t say so at the time, but she’d never had a good feeling about this arrangement, since there was nothing in writing.

“Thanksgiving and Christmas are nearly upon us,” Jake declared. “It would be nice to have a little money so we can at least celebrate with a nice meal.” He once again smiled. “Not that this stew and bread isn’t just as satisfying. Even Cook didn’t make anything that tasted this good, but I thought maybe we could buy a ham or turkey.”

Marty remembered some of the outrageously rich meals they’d shared in the early days of her marriage to Jake. They weren’t even to their first anniversary, yet they’d gone from feast to famine. Marty’s sister, Hannah, had taught her that money would always be fleeting and a person shouldn’t ever put their trust in such a temporal thing. Even so, it was a very necessary thing, and Marty had to admit, she missed it.

“Can we sell the house?” Marty asked without thinking.

Jake said nothing for what seemed an awfully long time. “I’ve asked around, but no one is buying. No one wants a house that’s clearly above the normal man’s means.”

His serious expression gave Marty cause to wonder if there was more to it than Jake was letting on. “I didn’t know you’d asked around.”

“I was plannin’ on tellin’ you about it,” he admitted, “but only if it looked like a real possibility. I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

“I see.” Marty looked to Alice and then back to her husband. She offered him a smile. “I guess that isn’t what God wants for us then. If He had plans for us to sell this place, then He’d also send a buyer our way. We’ll just have to trust that He has something else in mind.”

“I agree,” Jake said with a tired sigh. “In the meantime we’ll just sell what we have to and get by the best we can.”

“Living frugally is something I know very well,” Marty assured him.

“Me too,” Alice agreed.

Jake nodded. “I know. But . . . I . . . well, it’s not what I wanted for any of us.” He looked as if he might say something more but got to his feet instead and once again smiled. “I sure didn’t mean to put a damper on supper. I’ll stoke up the fire in the sitting room and maybe we can retire there. Then I’ll read the Scriptures before we head upstairs.”

Marty said nothing to Jake, but once he left the room, she turned to Alice. “Something’s not right. There’s more to this than he’s saying.”

“Maybe he’ll tell you later tonight . . . in private,” Alice replied, gathering up the dishes.

“I’d just as soon he tell me now instead of letting me wonder about it.”

“Something else you might consider,” Alice said with a pause. “We could move our bedrooms to the first floor and close both the second and third floors.”

“There aren’t any bedrooms down here,” Marty said, and then it dawned on her what Alice was getting at. “But we have the two sitting rooms, the library, and the music room. We could certainly convert two of those into bedrooms. It’s not like we need them for entertaining.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll mention it to Jake. I think he’ll go along with it, as well. We’ll have to figure out how to get things moved around. I wish Samson were still with us.” Samson was the former stableman and driver, and Marty missed his presence when it came to moving furniture . . . and to intimidating the irritating Mr. Smith.

Marty helped Alice with the cleanup, but all the while her mind raced with thoughts of what was going on inside her husband’s head. It was only as they put away the last of the

clean dishes that Marty realized she'd said nothing to Jake about the reappearance of Mr. Smith.

I don't suppose now would be a good time to tell him.

She looked at Alice and forced a smile. "Well, we might as well join Jake." She pulled off her apron and hung it on a nail by the door.

"I'll be there shortly," Alice replied. "Let me put water on for tea."

Marty met Alice's gaze. The young woman clearly felt the tension. She had become Marty's dearest friend, and yet there was still so much the two women kept hidden away. Maybe it was better that way. Maybe if the worst came about and they had to part company it would be easier to bear.

"I doubt it," Marty muttered.

"What?" Alice asked.

Marty shook her head and turned for the door. "It wasn't important. Just me grumbling. Tea sounds wonderful."

She hurried away before Alice could press for more details. Sometimes life here was like juggling balls at a circus. Keeping everything in motion required not only skill but complete concentration. Unfortunately, Marty wasn't at all certain that she had enough of either one to get through this crisis.