

LONE STAR BRIDES

BOOK  ONE

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A SENSIBLE  
ARRANGEMENT

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TRACIE  
PETERSON



BETHANYHOUSE

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

Tracie Peterson, *A Sensible Arrangement*  
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Dear Reader,

Please join me in celebrating this, my one hundredth book. Over the course of twenty some years, I have enjoyed being published in Christian fiction. My writing has always been a ministry for me, and my heart has been blessed by the letters I've received from you that have shown how God has used the books to change lives. I'm very blessed to do what I love and to see God use it for His glory.

*God bless all of you  
in His love.*

*Tracie Peterson*

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# Chapter 1

## TEXAS

DECEMBER 24, 1892

Marty Dandridge Olson looked over the letters once again. There were three, and each contained a variety of information meant to assist her in making a decision. A life-changing decision.

“Hannah would call me mad,” Marty mused aloud. She picked up one of the letters—the latest—and noted the first line: *I have enclosed funds enough to cover your travels to Denver.*

Marty shook her head. *Am I mad? Crazy to seriously consider this matter?*

Putting the letter down, Marty got to her feet and paced the small kitchen. She put a few pieces of wood into the cookstove and stoked the fire. The chill of the day wasn’t that great, but she was restless and it gave her something to do—something other than contemplate those letters . . . and what had happened four years earlier.

Now nearly thirty-five, Marty was a childless widow who was known for her spunk and ingenuity. She was the kind of

woman who seemed destined to a life in Texas. Surrounded by family and friends, Marty had known a life of love and relatively little want. Why, then, was she so desperate to leave it all behind?

She had lived her entire life in Texas, or very nearly. Her birth in Mississippi had taken the life of her mother, leaving her to be raised by a deeply saddened father and loving older sister. Hannah had been more mother than sister to Marty, and at nearly twenty years Marty's senior, Hannah's guidance and wisdom had seen Marty through many difficulties.

If only her wisdom could have saved the life of Marty's husband.

"Thomas." She whispered the name and smiled. "You were always so very stubborn. I doubt anything could have saved your life once you determined to die."

Her beloved husband had died four years ago to the day. Gored by a longhorn bull, Thomas had suffered massive internal injuries but had remained conscious until the very end. Even now, Marty could recall his final words to her.

*"I reckon I've made a mess of Christmas, Marty, but never you mind. It ain't worth troublin' yourself over, so don't you go mournin' me for long."* The pain had been clearly written on his face, but he'd held fast to her hand, although his voice had grown weaker. *"I've loved you . . . a long time . . . Martha Dandridge . . . Olson. Don't reckon . . . there's a . . . better wife to any man."*

"So don't leave me," she had begged, kissing his fingers.

He had given her a weak smile and then closed his eyes one last time. *"I gotta go, gal."* And with that, his hand went limp in hers and he exhaled his last breath.

Marty remembered it as if it had been yesterday. How

she had mourned him—the loss unlike anything she’d ever known. Folks told her time would ease the pain, and in truth it had . . . a little. But time had done nothing to fill the emptiness. There were days when she feared the loneliness would swallow her whole.

She looked back to the table where the letters lay. Could this be the answer she sought? Could her decision fill the emptiness once and for all? The clock chimed the hour, and Marty knew it wouldn’t be long before the Barnett carriage showed up to take her to her sister’s for the Christmas celebration.

Marty took up the letters and tucked them in the pocket of her apron. There had been a time when she might have prayed about her decision, but not now. After God had refused her prayers to save Thomas’s life, Marty had hardened her heart. God was now only a bitter reminder of a trust that had been broken.

“I’m going to do it,” Marty announced to the empty room. “I’m going to marry a man I’ve never met and do not love. I’m going to marry him and leave this place forever.”



That evening as she settled in to exchange gifts with her sister’s family, Marty looked for the right moment to break the news. She had already determined she wouldn’t tell them about the classified advertisement that had started her plans. The *Dallas Daily Times-Herald* had run the request for a full week.

Texas-born man now living in Colorado, working as a banker, wishes to correspond with a Lone Star lady. Seeking potential wife who would display the virtues, sensibilities, and wisdom

of a strong Texas woman. Must be willing to leave Texas for Colorado.

Marty was more than willing. She didn't desire to remarry and still wasn't sure why she'd responded to that ad, but after the man's first reply, she had known it was fate that had brought them together. Jacob Wythe wasn't looking for romance or love—just a woman who would bear his name and act as his companion.

“You aren't payin' attention, Aunt Marty.”

She looked up to find the entire family staring at her, her nephew Robert standing to her left with a gift extended. Marty flushed. “I am sorry. I was just thinking on . . . well . . .” She smiled and let the words trail off. “Let's see what we have here.” She took the gift box.

Hannah seated herself beside her husband, William. “I hope you like it.”

Marty pulled a bright red ribbon from the box. “I'm sure I will. You always have a way of figuring out just what I need most.”

She opened the box to reveal a set of four small leather-bound books. Lifting one, she spied the author. “Jane Austen. Thank you.”

“We knew you'd taken to reading more,” William Barnett offered. “Hannah said these were some of your favorites years ago.”

Marty nodded as she perused the titles. “Hannah used to read them to me. Andy thought himself above it all, but he always managed to sit close enough to listen in.”

Hannah laughed. “Our brother was not half so sly as he thought himself.”



“Speaking of Andy,” Marty said, looking up from the box, “have you had word?”

William nodded. Marty had to admit she held her brother-in-law in great affection; his marriage to Hannah had been the best thing that had ever happened to the Dandridge family. After the death of their father, William had stepped in as protector and provider.

“We had a letter just a day ago. Hannah wanted me to save it for tonight—kind of like havin’ Andy and his bunch with us.”

“Now’s just as good a time as any,” Hannah declared. She pushed back a graying blond curl. At fifty-three and despite years of hard work, she was still a beautiful woman.

*I envy her. I envy her peace of mind and happiness.* Marty shook her head and looked away. Envy was a sin . . . but so too was lying.

William pulled the letter from his pocket and opened it while Robert took a seat. “Andy and the family send Christmas greetings from snowy Wyoming.”

Marty shook her head. “I think he was ten kinds of fool to move his family up there. He never liked the colder weather.”

“Yes, but since Ellen’s family is from that part of the country, it seems only right,” Hannah reminded. “And they did live here for the first five years of their marriage. Long enough that we got to know little John. I’d love to visit them and get to know Benny, as well. He must be six years old by now.”

“Do you want me to read the letter, or would you rather talk about the family?” William asked with a grin.

Hannah elbowed him. “Read the letter.”

William nodded.

*“We are doing well. The longhorn seem to take the weather in stride. The herd increased again this year, and Ellen’s pa is pleased with the way things are going. John and Benjamin send their love. They both ride like they were born to a saddle. John can rope and help with branding as well as any of the hands. Benjamin isn’t far behind in abilities, as he is in constant competition with John.”*

Marty chuckled. “Imagine that.”

Hannah laughed, as well. “Given the way you two always tried to outdo the other, it’s no surprise.”

“Yes, but I was a girl, and it shamed him if I could do something better than he could,” Marty said. “I wonder if he’ll teach them steer-sliding.”

“I still remember when they taught me,” Robert said, joining in. “Seems like a mighty dirty trick to play on a fella.”

Marty smiled fondly at the memory of her brother teaching his nephew to steer-slide. It was a joke they played on all the new greenhorns, telling them that they had to learn to slide under a steer just in case they found themselves in a perilous situation. To everyone’s amazement, it had actually saved the life of one young fellow long ago, but Marty couldn’t remember his name.

“It was just a matter of initiating you to ranch work,” Hannah said, excusing the matter. “I’ve noticed it’s not a prank you’ve given up. Weren’t you showing young Micky how to slide under the fence just the other day?”

“I didn’t attempt it myself,” Robert replied. “I just told him it was something he needed to learn if he was gonna be one of our ranch hands.” He gave them a mischievous grin. “I figure if it was good enough for me . . .”

“Do you want me to continue reading?” William asked.  
“Sure, Pa. Go ahead.” Robert settled back in his chair and folded his arms with a sly smile. “Didn’t mean to stop you.” William looked down to the letter.

*“Ellen sends her love, as well as good news. You’ll remember our sadness three years ago when we lost our little girl just after birth. Then last year Ellen miscarried, and we feared we might not have another child. Well, the doctor just confirmed that she’s expecting and due to deliver sometime in the spring. We are of course quite hopeful that all will go well.”*

“That is good news,” Hannah said. “I know Andy wanted a big family, and Ellen was so sick after that miscarriage. It’s an answer to prayer.”

Marty bristled at the mention of prayer, but said nothing. William finished the letter with Andy sharing plans they had for celebrating Christmas, as well as his intentions for the ranch. Marty tried to appear interested.

“I’d say Uncle Andy has a good life in Wyoming,” Robert declared. “He sounds happy with his little family.”

“You should be thinking of getting a wife and family of your own,” Hannah told him. “You are twenty-six after all, and you have proven able to take on a great deal of responsibility. Your father and I are quite pleased with your work here.” She paused and gave him a knowing smile. “I believe Jessica Atherton would be even more pleased if you gave her a formal proposal.”

“Jessica’s still a child. Although I will say folks have been trying to pair us off since we were young’uns.”

“That’s hardly true, Robert. I have never wanted any of my

children to feel that we were choosing their spouses. I never did abide arranged, loveless marriages. And I know Carrisa and Tyler don't feel that way."

"Then why are you trying to marry me off?" Robert asked with a smile. "I figured with my sisters gone from home, you would want to keep me around."

Hannah shrugged and scooted in closer to William. "It's not your company I mind, but I would like to see you happily settled."

"She wants more grandbabies," William declared.

"Well, we do only have the one. Of course, I was like a grandmother to Andy's boys, but now they're in Wyoming and so far away. Not to mention they have her parents there to spoil them."

Marty felt an aching in her heart at the banter between them. The thought of having children always made her sad. She and Thomas had been married for ten years but she had been unable to carry a child to delivery. Marty blamed herself, even though Thomas never did. The sorrow was one she had hoped to bury with her husband, but that hadn't been the case. Her niece Sarah, Hannah and Will's oldest girl, had just given birth in September to her first son. Hannah and Will had returned from Sarah's home in Georgia some three weeks earlier, and the baby was all that Hannah could talk about.

*I would have made a good mother, but God apparently thought otherwise. I was a good wife, too. Thomas always said I was the best woman he'd ever known. I never gave him cause to doubt my love or my faithfulness.*

"You seem so distant this evening." Hannah's comment brought Marty back to the present.

“I’m just tired.” Marty motioned to the gifts she’d brought. “Why don’t you open my presents now?”

Hannah nodded, and Robert jumped up to hand out the gifts. Marty had spent a fair amount of time on each of them. For William and Robert she had crafted warm robes, which quickly met with their approval.

“I’ve needed a new one for ages,” William admitted.

“I know. I asked Hannah what I could make for you.” Marty smiled.

Robert leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. “Thanks, Aunt Marty.”

William nodded. “Yes, thank you very much.”

Hannah opened Marty’s gift and gasped. The bundle revealed a lacy cream-colored shirtwaist. “Oh, it’s beautiful. Oh, Marty, your work is so delicate.” She ran her hands over the intricately embroidered neckline. “This must have taken hours.”

“I remembered you admiring something similar when we were shopping in Dallas last summer. I’ve been working on it, as time permitted, ever since.”

“Well, this is by far and away grander. I shall cherish it always. Thank you.”

The room grew silent, and Marty figured it was as good a time as any to share her news. She’d mulled it over at length and had concluded that the best thing she could do for herself, as well as her sister . . . was lie. Something she had always been quite good at.

“I have a bit of my own news to share,” Marty began. All gazes were fixed upon her. “I’m going to be traveling soon.”

“Truly?” Hannah looked stunned. “Where are you going?”

Marty drew a deep breath. “Colorado. Perhaps Wyoming to see Andy after that.”

“Why Colorado?” William asked.

“I have friends there,” Marty said. She had already planned for this part of the lie. “Remember the Stellington sisters? We were in finishing school together, and they were my best friends.”

“I remember,” Hannah said.

“Well, they’ve invited me to stay with them for a time in Colorado Springs. I thought it would be nice to get away from the ranch and . . . all the memories.” She added the latter to appeal to Hannah’s sensitive nature.

For several minutes no one said anything. Marty hoped it might remain that way. Though she didn’t want to lie to Hannah, she knew her sister would never approve of Marty running off and marrying a man she hardly knew. In time, Marty would have to let her know the truth, but for now, this was much easier.

“I must say,” Hannah finally said, “this is something of a surprise.”

“Well, I’d been considering it while you were away, but I didn’t want to leave before you’d returned. Now you’re back, so it seems a good time.”

“But winter will be a difficult time to travel,” William said thoughtfully.

“I’ll take the train, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Hannah frowned. “How long do you plan to be away?”

“Well, that depends.” Marty shrugged. “I hoped that maybe you could run my few head with yours and keep an eye on the place.” She didn’t want to tell Hannah that she had every intention of selling the ranch. Hannah would know something was up if she made that kind of announcement.

“What’s Bert got to say about it?” William asked.

“Well, he’s all for returning to work for you.” Bert Harris had come to help Marty with the ranch after Thomas’s death. He’d worked a great many years prior to that on the Barnett Ranch, and Hannah had insisted Marty allow him to assist. “Bert said with expenses on the increase, it’s probably for the best.”

William nodded and rubbed his chin. “He’s been worried about the low water levels. It isn’t near as bad as the drought was in the ’80s, but we’re still suffering for water. I don’t have a problem with this plan, Marty. You tell Bert he’s welcome to bunk here again.”

“And you’ll put him on your payroll?” Marty dared to ask. She hoped the question wouldn’t arouse suspicions. “I mean, since I won’t be around to oversee him and you can use him to work for you, I just wondered . . .”

“Of course we’ll pay his wages,” William replied. “He’ll do far more for me than he will for you anyhow. You haven’t but about fifty head. We’ll just run them with ours, and if you aren’t back by spring, we’ll separate them out and brand the new calves with your mark.”

“Or you could just take them in pay,” Marty said. “I don’t mean for you to be out money on account of my . . . desire to travel.”

“Surely you aren’t planning to be gone so long as that,” Hannah said, leaning forward. She gave Marty an intense look. “Are you?”

Marty shrugged and tried to appear unconcerned. “I might. Especially if I travel to see Andy, as well. I want to make provisions for every possibility. I figure I can close up the house and send the livestock to you. You can keep the animals as pay for checking in on the place from time to time.”

“Nonsense. That’s what family’s for, Aunt Marty.” Robert set aside the robe he’d been admiring. “I don’t mind going over there to check things out. I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you, Robert. Thanks to all of you. I know it might seem sudden, but as I said, I’ve been considering this for some time now.”

“I suppose if your mind is made up . . .” Hannah didn’t finish her thought, and again the room fell silent.

Finally, William reached out and took up the Bible. “Why don’t I read the Christmas story?”

“I’d like that very much,” Hannah said.

Marty thought she looked worried. *I hope she won’t try to change my mind on this. She always thinks she knows best, and this time . . . well . . . this time she doesn’t.* Marty bit her lip and lowered her gaze to avoid giving Hannah any opportunity to question her further. She gave a silent sigh.

*Just don’t challenge me on this, Hannah. Just let me go without a fuss, and we’ll all be a whole lot happier.*