

LONE STAR BRIDES

BOOK  THREE



**A MATTER
OF HEART**



TRACIE
PETERSON



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers

11400 Hampshire Avenue South

Bloomington, Minnesota 55438

www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1269-7 (cloth)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1060-0 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1270-3 (large-print pbk.)

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Gearbox

Cover photography by Brandon Hill Photos

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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In memory of Ruth Seamands—
Mama Ruth to writers and believers near and far—
an incredible woman of God.
Can hardly wait to see you again!
Save me a chair.

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Chapter 1

TEXAS

LATE AUGUST 1896

They're all talking about me.

Jessica Atherton could feel their furtive glances. *They have their husbands and children, and I'm still unmarried. Me, the one who was always the most beautiful, the most favored.* She frowned and looked back at the paper in her hands. Her thoughts betrayed an unappealing attitude, which Jessica was only beginning to recognize.

I am spoiled. Just as spoiled as everyone says. Shallow and selfish.

She raised her head and forced a smile as she met the gazes of several women. The women had gathered at her parents' home for a meeting of the Texas Cattle Women's Society, so there was no escaping their looks and comments.

They pity me.

The very thought annoyed and vexed Jessica in a way she

couldn't ignore. At the age of twenty-one, Jessica had planned for her life to be much different. She'd imagined herself married and living a life of luxury in Houston or perhaps in some large city like Chicago, where she had often visited her grandparents. She had held great plans for her life—travel, wealth, opulence, and of course, a handsome man at her side, lavishing her with gifts and adoration.

“So, Jessica,” Aunt Laura whispered, leaning close, “how are you holding up?”

Jessica knew her aunt was sympathetic to the situation. “I feel rather like an animal caught in a trap with no escape. My only choices are to gnaw off my own leg or await the kill.”

Laura Reid smiled and patted her niece's hand. “They're soon to depart. With the business end of things complete, most will need to get back to their homes. It's not a good time of year for socializing—too much work needs their attention.”

Unfortunately, Jessica knew these particular women were inclined to visit, even with work awaiting. Hannah Barnett was said to be arriving at any moment with her daughter-in-law, Alice, and new grandson. Jessica figured the women were there for the long haul, since this would be Alice's first social appearance since giving birth.

“You know they won't leave before they've seen the new baby,” she replied.

A baby that might have been mine.

The very idea gave her a bevy of mixed emotions. On one hand, Jessica wasn't even sure that she wanted children. And on the other, she was still smarting from the fact that the scar-faced Alice Chesterfield had managed to steal away the only man Jessica had ever figured to marry—Robert Barnett.

Of course, it hadn't been all that much of a theft. Robert and Jessica weren't in love, and it was only because of people's assumptions that they were linked as a couple. Their so-called romance was something created in the minds of their sentimental mothers, who saw their children as good choices for each other. Still, it bothered Jessica that Robert had so quickly cast her aside.

"Well, perhaps you can slip away," Aunt Laura suggested.

"If the moment presents itself, I will. Until then," Jessica conceded with a heavy sigh, "I must simply endure."

"Jessica, have you settled on any particular young man now that Robert has a wife and child?" Mrs. Pritchard asked from her other side. The woman was a notorious gossip and loved to get the inside scoop on everyone's life. Her husband owned one of the stores in Cedar Springs, and it gave her the perfect conduit for sharing information.

Jess looked to the gray-haired woman with a smile. "Goodness, no. I'm enjoying being able to come and go as I please. I'm not saddled down in any way, and if I want to travel or leave for an extended visit elsewhere, I have only to pack my bags."

"But you must be lonely at times," her friend Beth offered. Beth was Mrs. Pritchard's youngest daughter and Jessica's longtime chum from school. Beth had married at eighteen and already had two children, who were now being cared for with some of the other children in another part of the house. Earlier, she and two other young wives announced they were having another baby.

Jessica knew that Beth was truly concerned for her well-being, but with all gazes now fixed upon her, Jessica felt completely out of sorts. "Of course I'm not lonely. Goodness,

I have people around me all the time and plenty of suitors.” She gave a light laugh, as if the entire world knelt at her feet. “I’m perfectly content.”

But she could see in the eyes of the other women that they didn’t believe her.

Another of her former schoolmates, Constance Watson, piped up. “I don’t believe any woman can be completely content until she is wed. I know I wasn’t.” Several of the women nodded as she continued. “Life completely changes once you marry, and as Mother often says, it will change again when children come along—an event I hope soon to know.” She smiled sweetly at Jessica. “I hope that you, too, will know those pleasures for yourself—both marriage and motherhood.”

Jessica heard a hint of sarcasm in the woman’s tone but smiled in return nevertheless. “Well, bless your heart for sayin’ so.”

Constance sat back in her chair and nodded soberly. “I will pray for you.”

“Yes, we must all pray that God will send Jessica a husband,” Mrs. Smith said, smiling at her daughter. “Constance is always so willing to pray for others.”

Jessica wanted to flee the room but knew she couldn’t without causing a scene. Instead, she folded her hands and thanked the ladies for their concern and prayers.

“I thought Hannah would be here by now,” Aunt Laura commented to the group.

Jessica’s mother nodded. “Should be anytime now. I can hardly wait to see the new baby.”

“What was it they named him?” one of the older ranch wives asked.

“William Robert Barnett,” Jessica’s mother replied. “After

his grandfather and father. Hannah tells me they intend to call him Wills, but her husband has nicknamed the baby Billy Bob.”

The women smiled or chuckled and continued to ask questions about the baby and the mother’s health. Jessica never thought she’d be glad for the topic to settle on Alice and her child, but at least it took the focus off of her own inadequacies.

Inadequacies. It seemed like such a harsh word, but Jessica could think of no other. These days she was her harshest critic. Others were always commenting on her charm, beauty, and accomplishments. She had finished out at one of the best schools for young ladies that Texas could boast, and she’d done well academically in her earlier school years. Some even commented on her being quite intelligent and in possession of a good wit. Surely a woman with such attributes could not be called lacking. In addition to these qualities, Jessica knew her waist was the smallest in the county, and her face had been compared to those of various Greek goddesses. She had always known of her appealing looks. Her mother, also a woman of great beauty, had warned that she could easily use her appearance to manipulate others. She urged Jessica to draw closer to God and forget about her loveliness.

“*God doesn’t consider a person’s outward appearance, and neither should we,*” her mother had chided.

Jessica always thought that strange. Why would God have made some things beautiful and others ugly if He hadn’t expected folks to notice?

“Oh, that must be them!” her mother announced at the sound of an approaching carriage. Having every window open to allow for the least hint of breeze on this stifling hot day caused the sound to echo throughout the house.

The gathering seemed to rise and move slowly en masse to

greet the new arrivals. Happy to see them all exit the house, Jessica sprang to her feet. This made the perfect opportunity for her to slip away unseen. She hoped for at least a few quiet moments to herself and made her way out the back door, past the barn, and toward the horse pen, where her own mare, Peg, stood loyally waiting. The humidity and heat of the day made her feel even more miserable.

“Are you as unhappy as I am, Peg?” Jessica asked, reaching out to stroke the velvety muzzle of the dapple gray. The horse had been a gift from her father and mother six years earlier, along with a very smart sidesaddle. Jessica had been delighted at the time and remained so. She and Peg were the best of friends. “At least you have plenty of shade and water.”

The mare lowered her head to search Jessica’s hand. “I’m sorry, girl. I didn’t think to bring you a treat.” Jessica reached up and stroked the black mane. She was a true beauty, standing sixteen hands high. Her dappled body bore an intriguing pattern set against the black mane and tail. Peg was the perfect mount for Jessica. Both horse and owner were beautiful and unusual.

For a moment Jessica allowed the mare to nuzzle her, then stepped back. “Maybe we’ll go for a ride later, when it cools down a bit.”

“I could escort you” came a familiar voice.

Jessica turned to find Lee Skelly. Lee was shorter than most of the men, but quite muscular. He acted as her father’s foreman and right-hand man when her brothers Howard and Isaac were otherwise occupied, as they were now.

“Have you had word from your brothers about when they’re headin’ home?” he asked, leaning back against the fence of the pen.

“Mother said they would be home by Christmas.”

“They still buildin’ new houses for colored people in Corpus Christi?”

Jessica nodded and pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve. Her mother’s friends had written to encourage the mission. Howard and Isaac, true humanitarians that they were, eagerly gave up ranch work in favor of construction. Both had a mind for politics, and this was exactly the kind of thing that would speak of their giving characters.

“They are enjoying the change of pace, I think.” She dabbed at the perspiration forming on her face and turned to leave.

“So what about that ride?” Lee asked, coming alongside her.

Jessica continued walking. “I don’t think my father would approve. It isn’t becoming for me to be out with a man my own age without a chaperone.”

“I’m completely honorable,” he protested. “We can even take old Osage with us.”

Jessica thought of the older man who was once her father and grandfather’s ranch foreman. Osage was nearing eighty now, but he hadn’t slowed down much, despite her father’s insistence that he retire. Having no part in lounging around, Osage kept an eye on things around the house and took time to oversee some of the younger cowboys in training.

“I won’t make that kind of demand on Osage. He has enough to keep him busy.”

“Ah, Jess, you could talk him into it. If not Osage, then maybe your pa would make an exception and let me escort you.”

Jessica threw him a glance and shook her head. “He’s not likely to agree.”

“Why not? I’m a good fella, Jess. I think we could have a right good future together.”

At this she stopped. “Are you proposing to me?”

He gave a sheepish grin. “Well, why not? I’m a fella of my word, and you’re a beautiful woman. We could have a great life together.”

“You don’t even know what I want out of life.”

“I figure you want the same things every girl wants: security, family, a home.” He took on an air of confidence and asked, “Ain’t that right?”

Jessica shrugged. “I couldn’t say. I don’t know what I want.”

He laughed. “Jess, you don’t need to want for anything if you agree to be my gal.”

Turning, she looked hard at the man. “It would hardly be appropriate for me to be your gal. You’re my father’s foreman.” The minute the words came out of her mouth, Jessica thought they sounded terrible. Lee frowned, and Jessica knew he’d taken offense. She hurried to cover her tracks.

“In your position here, the other men might think Father was giving you an unfair advantage if he allowed you to court me.” *There. That doesn’t sound quite so arrogant.* But from the continued scowl on Lee’s face, Jessica wasn’t sure he’d even heard her.

“You don’t think I’m good enough for you?”

Jessica felt her cheeks warm at the question. “I have no thought of it either way,” she lied. “I know it would not meet with my father’s approval, and therefore have not contemplated the idea. I do know, however, that a simple thing like that could cause all sorts of problems among a group of men.”

She shrugged. “Besides, Lee, I have no desire to marry

anyone. I rather like having my freedom. I can come and go as I please. And I very well may do just that. I have cousins who live in Chicago. I got to know them when I spent time up there with my grandparents. They've been begging me to visit."

Lee shook his head. "You don't think I'm serious, do you?"

She put her hands on her hips. "And just what is that supposed to mean?"

It was Lee's turn to shrug. "Just that you don't think of me as a man, as a possible beau. You're the boss's daughter and deserve much better than the hired hand. And why not? Your pa owns this place. It's like he's king over this ranch, and that makes you his little princess. Can't have the princess marryin' the pauper."

Jessica hated his analogy. God had already been pricking her conscience about the way she acted and the times she'd made other people feel ill at ease. For a moment she felt completely defenseless.

"I'm . . . I don't know what to say." Jessica shook her head and fixed her gaze on his face. "I really wasn't thinking any of that, Lee. You're a fine man. My father thinks highly of you, and I don't have any reason to believe you wouldn't be a proper suitor."

"Then why won't you step out with me?"

She knew the reason but worried he would take it wrong. "I don't see a future in it." She held up her hand. "Before you go off thinking I'm being uppity or believe myself too good for you, let me tell you the exact opposite is true."

He frowned. "Whadd'ya mean?"

"It has nothing to do with whether you are good enough for me. It has to do with me." She shook her head. "This isn't

coming out right. I don't mean it's all about me and what I want out of life . . . or need. It's about me . . . being . . . a mess."

He laughed. "Oh, Jess, you ain't no mess. You're the purtiest gal in these parts. Now, if you wanna see a mess, you ought to see my little sister. Grief, but that gal can't hardly turn around without breakin' something or causin' disaster. Ma says she puts her foot in her mouth more often than she puts on her shoes."

Jessica wanted to shout that he had no idea what she was saying, but she held her tongue. Maybe part of maturity was recognizing when to fight your battles.

Lee sobered, as if realizing he'd acted inappropriately. "Sorry, Jess. I didn't mean no disrespect."

"I know," she said, and the sadness in her voice hung in the air. She turned and made her way to the house, hoping Lee wouldn't follow her and press for more. He didn't, and Jessica let out the breath she'd been holding.

Poor Lee. He truly was a nice young man, but Jess had never seen him as anything more than one of the workers. Not because he was of a lower station, but because she simply only saw him in that capacity. She'd not dealt with him much at social events, and he wasn't really one to attend church.

"There you are," Beth said, thrusting a bundle at Jessica as soon as she entered the kitchen. "We're all taking turns holding little Wills. It's your turn."

Jessica looked down at the dark blue eyes of Robert's son. Something akin to deep regret washed over her.

He might have been mine. If I had been a different woman—with a different heart—I might be the one sharing my son with family and friends.

“He’s beautiful,” she whispered, almost afraid to say anything more.

“We all thought so,” her mother said, coming alongside. “Hannah says he’s the spitting image of Robert.”

Jessica nodded. “Yes, I think she’s right.”

The baby started to fuss, and Jessica feared she’d done something wrong. She looked to her mother with a questioning expression. Alice stepped in just then and took Wills.

“He’s just hungry. I hope you don’t mind if I take a few moments to feed him.” She said it more to the group than to Jessica.

Free of the baby, Jessica hurried away from the gathering and sought the solitude of her room. The women might talk about her abrupt departure, but unlike times before, Jessica didn’t care.

“Let them talk,” she said, pacing her bedroom floor. “Those old biddies are always gossiping about someone. It doesn’t need to ruin my day. If they have nothing better to do than pick apart my actions, then so be it.”

She plopped down on the carefully made bed and sighed. She didn’t like people thinking poorly of her. She wanted them to like her, to desire her company. She wanted them to be impressed with her knowledge and abilities. Folks felt that way about her mother and her aunt, and it was only natural that Jessica should want the same.

“Is that just more of my self-centered ways?” she asked aloud. “Worrying about what people think of me?”

She looked around her room and couldn’t help remembering Lee’s earlier comment. This was the room of a princess. From her feather mattress and beautifully crafted canopy bed swathed in pink tulle to the wardrobe filled with expensive,

intricately designed gowns, Jessica was living the life of royalty. At least Texas royalty.

“But does that have to be bad?” she asked the empty room. “Is it wrong to enjoy fine things?”

Getting to her feet, Jessica crossed to the window, where new drapes of the finest damask had been placed only the week before. She had told her mother how tiresome the other drapery had become, and her mother had arranged for replacements. Toying with the fringed edges of the cream-and-gold material, Jessica knew that it had been an additional expense that could have been better spent. There had been nothing wrong with the other curtains. In fact, Mother had placed them in one of the other bedrooms.

Jessica turned and spied her reflection in the mirror. Soft brown curls had been carefully arranged atop her head. They spilled down the back to just cover her neck. She wore a gown of sheer white muslin with a lining of pale pink silk. Six-inch-wide lace in a V shape gave the bodice a narrowing appearance and made Jessica’s waist appear even smaller than it was. And with the full leg-o’-mutton lace sleeves, the gown seemed most ethereal—fairy-tale like. She always received compliments when she wore it.

Jessica touched a finger to the glass. Was that all there was to her? Was she just a pretty bauble designed to turn heads and fascinate suitors? Nothing more than a storybook princess?

She glanced back at the door to her room. Just on the other side and downstairs, a collection of women gathered. Women who had husbands and children, whose lives meant something, who had people who loved them.

“What do I have? What do I offer? Robert married Alice rather than be saddled with me.”

Knowing in her heart that Robert and Alice genuinely loved each other didn't ease her momentary self-ridicule.

"Of course Robert would marry someone sweet and quiet like Alice. Even with her scarred face. I say what I think, and often I'm loud and insist on my own way. No one wants those qualities in a wife."

She sat down once again, this time at her dressing table. Yet another mirror reflected her pensive countenance. Picking up one of a dozen ornamental hatpins, she studied it a moment, then stuck it in a pin cushion. One by one she did the same for the others. The action seemed to calm her.

Maybe I should marry someone like Lee. Maybe that's what I deserve—a loveless marriage to a poor man.

A light knock sounded on her door. "Come in." She leaned back as her mother entered the room.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Physically? Yes, I'm fine. Emotionally? I'm not sure."

Mother smiled sympathetically, and Jessica vacillated between wanting to scream at the implied pity and needing her mother's embrace.

"Is this about Alice and the baby?"

"I don't know. I think it's about everything. I'm starting to see some things about myself and my life that I don't really like. Things that need to be improved."

"Nonsense. You are perfect the way you are. Don't fret. One day the right man will come into your life, and he will sweep you off your feet and become the love of your life." Mother's expression became quite soft. "I know, because it happened that way for me. I thought I knew love with my first husband. Soon enough I learned there was no love between us. After he died, I was certain I would never find

true love. Then your father came into my life, and everything changed.”

Jessica knew her mother was trying to help, but her words rang hollow. “Everyone has things about them that need changing,” she said in a barely audible voice.

“I suppose that’s true; however, I know that you have a good heart and a wonderful nature. I don’t want you thinking yourself hopeless or without value because Robert married another.” Mother patted her shoulder. “You are my daughter, my baby. You have great value in my eyes and in those of your father. But more important, you have great value in the eyes of God. Remember that.”

Jessica nodded, but the words didn’t help. She hadn’t been as focused on God and spiritual matters as she knew her parents wished. Religiosity and showing up for the Sunday pew warming seemed more hypocritical than spiritual, and Jessica found reading the Bible to be a bore. She looked in the mirror and found her mother looking at her with an expression that suggested she wanted to hear her daughter affirm her willingness.

“I’ll try to remember it, Mother. I’ll try.”

“Good. Now why don’t you come downstairs and rejoin us. There are only a few people still here, and Hannah has taken Alice and the baby home. It shouldn’t be so painful for you now.”

Jessica gave a heavy sigh. Mother simply didn’t understand. Apparently, no one did.