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Chapter One

Deliverance, Texas

Late 1800s

“SHE’S late.” Liza Shepherd slipped a pinch of snuff into the corner of her mouth, then fanned herself with a scented hanky.

Nicholas checked his pocket watch a fourth time, flipping it closed. Mother was right. His bride-to-be was late. Any other day the stage would be on time. He poked a finger into his perspiration-soaked collar, silently cursing the heat. He’d wasted half a day’s work on Miss Kallahan, time he could ill afford. Fence was down in the north forty, and ninety acres of hay lay waiting to fall beneath the scythe before rain fell. He glanced toward the bend in the road, his brows drawn in a deep frown. Where *was* she?

Calm down, Nicholas. Work does not come before family obligations. Why did he constantly have to remind himself of that?

A hot Texas sun scorched the top of his Stetson. Fire ants

scurried across the parched soil as the town band unpacked their instruments. Tubas and drums sounded in disjointed harmony. He wished the town wouldn't make such a fuss over Miss Kallahan. You'd think he was the first man ever to send for a mail-order bride—which he wasn't. Layman Snow sent for one a year ago, and everything between the newlyweds was working out fine.

Horses tied at hitching posts lazily swatted flies from their broad, sweaty rumps as the hullabaloo heightened.

High noon, and Deliverance was teeming with people.

Men and women gathered on the porch of Oren Stokes's general store. The men craned their necks while womenfolk gossiped among themselves. A few loners discussed weather and crops, but all ears were tuned for the stage's arrival.

Nicholas ignored the curious looks sent his direction. Interest was normal. A man his age about to take a wife fifteen years his junior? Who wouldn't gawk? Running a finger inside the rim of his perspiration-soaked collar, he craned to see above the crowd. What was keeping that stage? It would be dark before he finished chores. He stiffened when he heard Molly Anderson's anxious whispers to Etta Larkin.

"What is Nicholas thinking—taking a wife now?"

"Why, I can't imagine. He owns everything in sight and has enough money to burn a wet mule. What does he want with a wife?"

"I hear he wants another woman in the house to keep Liza company."

"With the mood Liza's in lately, she'll run the poor girl off before sunset."

“Such a pity—the Shepherds got no one to leave all that money to.”

“No, nary a kin left.”

Nicholas turned a deaf ear to the town gossips. What he did, or thought, was his business, and he intended to keep it that way.

A smile played at the corners of his mouth when he thought about what he’d done. Placing an ad for a mail-order bride wasn’t something he’d ordinarily consider. But these were not ordinary times. In the past two years since his father had died, he and Mama had been at loose ends.

Eighteen years ago he’d thought love was necessary to marry. Now the mere thought of romance at his age made him laugh. He’d lost his chance at love when he failed to marry Rachel.

Looking back, he realized Rachel had been his one chance at marital happiness. But at the time, he wasn’t sure he was in love with her. What was love supposed to feel like? He’d certainly been fond of her, and she’d gotten along well with Mama—something not many could claim, especially these days. Rachel was a gentle woman, and in hindsight he knew he should have married her. He had come to realize that there was more to a satisfying union than love. Mama and Papa’s marriage had taught him that love of God, trust, the ability to get along, mutual respect—those were the important elements in a marriage. Abe Shepherd had loved Liza, but even more, he had respected her. Nicholas knew he could have built that kind of relationship with Rachel if he had acted before it was too late.

Well, water over the dam. Rachel had married Joe Lan-ner, and Nicholas had finally faced up to the knowledge that love had passed him by. He would turn thirty-five in January, and he had no heir. There was no blood kin to carry on the Shepherd name. No one to leave Shepherd land and resources to.

Mama thought he'd lost his mind when he sent for a mail-order bride, and maybe he had.

He smiled as he recalled her tirade when he told her what he'd done—"Why on God's green earth would you want to complicate our lives by marryin' a stranger?"

Why indeed? he thought. God had blessed him mightily. He could stand at the top of Shepherd's Mountain, and for as far as the eye could see there was nothing but Shepherd land.

Shepherd cattle.

Shepherd pastures.

Shepherd outbuildings.

Some even said the moon belonged to Shepherd—Shepherd's Moon, the town called it, because of the way it rose over the tops of his trees, beautiful, noble in God's glory. God had been good to him, better than he deserved. He owned all he wanted and more, yet at times he felt as poor as a pauper.

The emptiness gnawed at him, a misery that no abundance of material possessions could assuage. Where was the love he should have known? Rachel had walked through his life, then walked out of it. Had he been so busy acquiring material wealth that he let the one missing ingredient in

his life, the love of a woman, slip past him? The question haunted him because he knew the answer: He had let Rachel walk away and marry a man who, rumor had it, now drank and mistreated her. He should have seen it coming—Joe was not a godly man. But he'd done nothing to stop her, and now he had to watch her suffer for his mistake.

There were other women in the town who would have given anything to marry Nicholas Shepherd, but he had never loved any of them. Then, after his father died and Mama became so unlike herself—so moody, so irritable, so stingy—he didn't think anyone would put up with her. At the same time, he wondered if what she needed more than anything was another woman around to talk with, get her mind off her grief. He began to think that maybe he should marry—not for love, but for other reasons. To have someone to keep Mama company, help her around the house. Mama wouldn't think of hiring help, though they could afford it. But maybe a daughter-in-law would be a different matter.

Then there was the matter of an heir. What good was all his fortune if he had no one to leave it to? Perhaps a daughter-in-law, and eventually grandchildren, would help Mama and make all his hard work mean something. He had amassed a fortune, and it would be a shame if no blood kin were able to enjoy it.

He had been praying over the matter when he'd come across the ad in the journal for a mail-order bride, and the thought intrigued him. The answer to his problem, and his

prayers, suddenly seemed crystal clear: He would send for a mail-order bride. Much like ordering a seed catalogue, but with more pleasant results. He would, in essence, purchase a decent, Christian woman to marry with no emotional strings attached.

This marriage between Miss Kallahan and him would not be the covenant of love that his parents had had; this was a compromise. He needed a wife, and according to Miss Kallahan's letters, she was seeking a husband. He had prayed that God would send him a righteous woman to be his help-mate. To fill his lonely hours. Someone who would be a comfortable companion. Love didn't figure into the picture. When Miss Kallahan accepted his proposal, he accepted that God had chosen the proper woman to meet his needs.

Admittedly, he'd grown set in his ways; having a wife underfoot would take some getting used to. He valued peace and quiet. What his new bride did with her time would be up to her; he would make no demands on her other than that she help Mama around the house, if Mama would permit it. And he did like the thought of children—eventually—although he wasn't marrying a brood mare.

Mama didn't seem to care about anything anymore. She still grieved for Papa, though he'd been dead almost two years now. Nicholas's fervent hope was that having another woman in the house, someone Mama could talk and relate to, would improve her disposition, although he wasn't going to kid himself. He couldn't count on Mama's taking to another woman in the house. But as long as Faith under-

stood her role, the two women should make do with the situation.

Removing his hat, he ran his hand through his hair. What was keeping the stage?

“Brother Shepherd!” Nicholas turned to see Reverend Hicks striding toward him. The tall, painfully thin man always looked as if he hadn’t eaten a square meal in days. His ruddy complexion and twinkling blue eyes were the only things that saved him from austerity. Vera, a large woman of considerable girth, was trying to keep up with her husband’s long-legged strides.

“Mercy, Amos, slow down! You’d think we were going to a fire!”

Reverend paused before Nicholas, his ruddy face breaking into a congenial smile. Turning sixty had failed to dent the pastor’s youthfulness. “Stage hasn’t gotten here yet?”

“Not yet.” Nicholas glanced toward the bend in the road. “Seems to be running late this morning.”

The Reverend turned to address Liza. “Good morning, Liza!” He reached for a snowy white handkerchief and mopped his forehead. “Beast of a day, isn’t it?”

Liza snorted, fanning herself harder. “No one respects time anymore. You’d think all a body had to do was stand in the heat and wait for a stage whose driver has no concept of time.”

Reverend stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. “Well, you never know what sort of trouble the stage might have run into.”

Vera caught Liza’s hand warmly and Nicholas stepped

back. The woman was a town icon, midwife and friend to all. When trouble reared its ugly head, Vera was the first to declare battle.

“We missed you at Bible study this morning. Law, a body could burn up in this heat! Why don’t we step out of the sun? I could use a cool drink from the rain barrel.”

“No, thank you. Don’t need to be filling up on water this close to dinnertime.” Liza’s hands tightened around her black parasol as she fixed her eyes on the road. “Go ahead—spoil your dinner if you like. And I read my Bible at home, thank you. Don’t need to be eatin’ any of Lahoma’s sugary cakes and drinkin’ all that scalding black coffee to study the Word.”

“Well, of course not—” The Reverend cleared his throat. “I’ve been meaning to stop by your place all week, Liza. We haven’t received your gift for the new steeple, and I thought perhaps—”

Scornful eyes stopped him straightway. “We’ve given our tenth, Reverend.”

A rosy flush crept up the Reverend’s throat, further reddening his healthy complexion. “Now, Liza, the Lord surely does appreciate your obedience, but that old steeple is in bad need of replacement—”

Liza looked away. “No need for you to thank me. The Good Book says a tenth of our earnings.” Liza turned back to face the Reverend. “One tenth. That’s what we give, Reverend.”

Reverend smiled. “And a blessed tenth it is, too. But the

steeple, Liza. The steeple is an added expense, and we sorely need donations—”

“There’s nothing *wrong* with the old steeple, Amos! Why do you insist on replacing it?”

“Because it’s old, Liza.” Pleasantries faded from the Reverend’s voice as he lifted his hand to shade his eyes against the sun. His gaze focused on the bell tower. “The tower is rickety. It’s no longer safe—one good windstorm and it’ll come down.”

“Nonsense.” Liza dabbed her neck with her handkerchief. “The steeple will stand for another seventy years.” Her brows bunched in tight knots. “Money doesn’t grow on trees, Reverend. If the Lord wanted a new steeple, he’d provide the means to get it.”

The Reverend’s eyes sent a mute plea in Nicholas’s direction.

“Mama, Reverend Hicks is right; the tower is old. I see no reason—”

“And that’s precisely why *I* handle the money in this family,” Liza snapped. She glowered toward the general store, then back to Vera. “Perhaps a small sip of water won’t taint my appetite.” She shot a withering look toward the road. “A body could melt in this sun!”

An expectant buzz went up and the waiting crowd turned to see a donkey round the bend in the road. The animal advanced toward Deliverance at a leisurely gait. Nicholas shaded his eyes, trying to identify the rider.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. It’s just that old hermit Jeremiah,” Liza muttered. “What’s that pest doing here?”

Nicholas watched the approaching animal. Jeremiah Montgomery had arrived in Deliverance some years back, but the old man had kept to himself, living in a small shanty just outside of town. He came for supplies once a month and stayed the day, talking to old-timers who whittled the time away on the side porch of the general store. He appeared to be an educated man, but when asked about his past, he would quietly change the subject. The citizens of Deliverance were not a curious lot. They allowed the hermit his privacy and soon ceased to ask questions. Jeremiah neither incited trouble nor settled it. He appeared to be a peaceful man.

“Who’s that he’s got with him?” Vera asked, standing on tiptoe.

The animal picked its way slowly down the road, its hooves kicking up limpid puffs of dust as it gradually covered the distance. The crowd edged forward, trying for a better look.

“Why—it looks like a woman,” Reverend said.

As the burro drew closer, Nicholas spotted a small form dressed in gingham and wearing a straw bonnet, riding behind Jeremiah. A woman. His heart sank. A *woman*. A woman stranger in Deliverance meant only one thing. His smile receded. His bride-to-be was arriving by *mule*.

Nicholas stepped out, grasping the animal’s bridle as it approached. “Whoa, Jenny!” His eyes centered on the childlike waif riding behind the hermit. She was young—much younger than he’d expected. A knot gripped his midsection. A tomboy to boot. Straddling that mule, wear-

ing men's boots. The young girl met his anxious gaze, smiling. Her perky hat was askew, the pins from the mass of raven hair strung somewhere along the road.

"You must be Nicholas Shepherd."

"Yes, ma'am." His eyes took in the thick layers of dust obliterating her gingham gown. The only thing that saved the girl from being plain was her remarkable violet-colored eyes.

Jeremiah slid off the back of the mule, offering a hand of greeting to Nicholas. Nicholas winced at the stench of wood smoke and donkey sweat. A riotous array of matted salt-and-pepper hair crowned the old man's head. When he smiled, deep dimples appeared in his cheeks. Doe-colored eyes twinkled back at him as Nicholas accepted Jeremiah's hand and shook it. "Seems I have something that belongs to you."

Nicholas traced the hermit's gaze as he turned to smile at his passenger.

Offering a timid smile, she adjusted her hat. "Sorry about my appearance, Mr. Shepherd. The stage encountered a bit of trouble."

"Lost a wheel, it did, and tipped over!" The hermit knocked dust off his battered hat. "Driver suffered a broken leg. Fortunate I came along when I did, or this poor little mite would've scorched in the blistering sun."

Nicholas reached up to lift his bride from the saddle. For a split moment, something stirred inside him, something long dormant. His eyes met hers. His reaction surprised and annoyed him. The hermit cleared his throat, prompting

Nicholas to set the woman lightly on her feet. He finally found his voice. "Where are the other passengers?"

"Sitting alongside the road. Stubborn as old Jenny, they are. I informed them Jenny could carry two more but they told me to be on my way." Jeremiah laughed, knocking dirt off his worn britches. "They'll be waiting a while. The stage sheared an axle."

"I'll send Ben and Doc to help."

"They're going to need more than a blacksmith and a doctor." Jeremiah took a deep breath, batting his chest. Dust flew. "You better send a big wagon to haul them all to town."

The Reverend caught up, followed by a breathless Liza and Vera. "Welcome to Deliverance!" Reverend effusively pumped the young woman's hand, grinning.

Faith smiled and returned the greeting. The band broke into a spirited piece as the crowd gathered round, vying for introductions. The donkey shied, loping to the side to distance itself from the commotion.

"Nicholas, introduce your bride!" someone shouted.

"Yeah, Nicholas! What's her name?" others chorused.

Reaching for the young lady's hand, Nicholas leaned closer, his mind temporarily blank. "Sorry. Your last name is . . . ?"

She leaned closer and he caught a whiff of donkey. "Kallahan."

Clearing his throat, he called for order. "Quiet down, please."

Tubas and drums fell silent as the crowd looked on expectantly.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Nicholas cleared his throat again. He wasn’t good at this sort of thing, and the sooner it was over the better. “I’d like you to meet the woman who’s consented to be my wife, Miss Faith . . . ?”

“Kallahan.”

“Yes . . . Miss Faith Kallahan.”

Sporadic clapping broke out. A couple of single, heart-broken young women turned into their mothers’ arms for comfort.

Faith nodded above the boisterous clapping. “Thank you—thank you all very much. It is a pleasure to be here!”

“Anything you ever need, you just let me know,” Oren Stokes’s wife called.

“Same for me, dearie,” the mayor’s wife seconded as other friendly voices chimed in.

“Quilting bee every Saturday!”

“Bible study at Lahoma Wilson’s Thursday mornings!”

Liza stepped forward, openly assessing her new daughter-in-law-to-be. “Well, at least you’re not skin and bone.” She cupped her hands at Faith’s hips and measured for width. “Should be able to deliver a healthy child.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Faith said, then grinned. “My hips are nice and wide, I’m in excellent health, and I can work like a man.”

Women in the crowd tittered as Nicholas frowned. What had God sent? A wife or a hired hand?

“Liza!” Vera stepped up, putting her arm around Faith’s shoulder. “You’ll scare the poor thing to death with such

talk. Let the young couple get to know each other before you start talking children.”

Children had fit into the equation, of course, but in an abstract way. Now he was looking at the woman who would be the mother of his children.

“Pshaw.” Liza batted Vera’s hands aside. “Miss Kallahan knows what’s expected from a wife.”

When Nicholas saw Faith’s cheeks turn scarlet, he said, “Mama, Miss Kallahan is tired from her long trip.”

“Yes, I would imagine.” Liza frowned at Jeremiah, who was hanging around watching the activity. She shooed him away. “Go along, now. Don’t need the likes of you smelling up the place.”

Jeremiah tipped his hat, then raised his eyes a fraction to wink at her. Liza whirled and marched toward the Shepherd buggy, nose in the air. “Hurry along, Nicholas. It’s an hour past our dinnertime.”

The crowd dispersed, and Faith reached out to touch Jeremiah’s sleeve. “Thank you for the ride. I would have sweltered if not for your kindness.”

The old man smiled. “My honor, Miss Kallahan.” Reaching for her hand, he placed a genteel kiss upon the back of it. “Thank *you* for accepting kindness from a rather shaggy Samaritan.”

Nicholas put his hand on the small of her back and ushered her toward the waiting buggy.

As he hurried Faith toward the buggy, his mind turned from the personal to business. Twelve-thirty. It would be past dark before chores were done.



Nicholas lifted Faith into the wagon, and she murmured thanks. Ordinarily, she would climb aboard unassisted. She wasn't helpless, and she didn't want Nicholas fawning over her. She hoped he wasn't a fawner. But she was relieved to see her husband-to-be was a pleasant-looking man. Not wildly handsome, but he had a strong chin and a muscular build. He looked quite healthy. As he worked to stow her luggage in the wagon bed, she settled on the wooden bench, her gaze focusing on the way his hair lay in gentle golden waves against his collar.

His letter had said he was of English and Swedish origin, and his features evidenced that. Bold blue eyes, once-fair skin deeply tanned by the sun. Only the faint hint of gray at his temples indicated he was older than she was; otherwise, he had youngish features. He was a man of means; she could see that by the cut of his clothes. Denims crisply ironed, shirt cut from the finest material. His hands were large, his nails clean and clipped short. He was exceptionally neat about himself. When he lifted her from the back of Jeremiah's mule, she detected the faint hint of soap and bay-rum aftershave.

She whirled when she heard a noisy thump! Nicholas was frozen in place, staring at the ground as if a coiled rattler were about to strike.

Scooting to the edge of the bench, Faith peered over the wagon's side, softly gasping when she saw the contents of her valise spilled onto the ground. White unmentionables

stood out like new-fallen snow on the parched soil. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. “Oh, my . . .”

Liza whacked the side of the wagon with the tip of her cane. “Pick them up, Nicholas, and let’s be on our way.” She climbed aboard and wedged her small frame in the middle of the seat, pushing Faith to the outside. “A body could perish from hunger waiting on the likes of you.”

Nicholas gathered the scattered garments and hurriedly stuffed them into the valise. Climbing aboard, he picked up the reins and set the team into motion.

As the wagon wheels hummed along the countryside, Faith drank in the new sights. She’d lived in Michigan her entire life; Texas was a whole new world! She remembered how she’d craned her neck out the stagecoach window so long the other passengers had started to tease her. Gone were the cherry and apple orchards, gently rolling hills, and small clear lakes of Michigan. She still spotted an occasional white birch or maple, and there were pines and oaks, but the scenery had changed.

With each passing day on her trip, the landscape had grown more verdant and lush. The closer they drew to San Antonio, the more the countryside transformed. They passed beautiful Spanish missions with tall bell towers, low adobe dwellings covered with vines of ivy, and bushes of vibrant colored bougainvillea. At night the cicadas sang her to sleep with their harmonious *sczhwee-sczee*. Ticks were plentiful, and roaches grew as big as horseflies!

The elderly gentleman seated across from her had leaned

forward, pointing. “Over there is mesquite and—look there! There’s an armadillo!”

Faith shrank back, deciding that was one critter she’d leave alone.

“It’s beautiful land,” the gentleman said. “You will surely be happy here, young lady.”

Faith frowned, keeping an eye on the animal scurrying across the road. She would if those armadillos kept their distance.

Deliverance gradually faded, and the wagon bounced along a rutted, winding trail. Faith suspected her new family wasn’t a talkative lot. Liza sat rigidly beside her on the bench, staring straight ahead, occasionally mumbling under her breath that “it was an hour past her dinnertime.” The tall, muscular Swede kept silent, his large hands effortlessly controlling the team.

Faith decided it would take time for the Shepherds to warm to her. She hoped they would be friendlier once they got to know her. Still, the silence unnerved her. She and her sisters had chatted endlessly, talking for hours on end about nothing. Generally she was easy to get along with and took to most anyone, but the Shepherds were going to be a test, she could feel it.

Please, Lord, don’t allow my tongue to spite my good sense.

She might not be in love with Nicholas Shepherd, but she had her mind made up to make this marriage work. Once she set her mind to something, she wasn’t easily swayed. Besides, she *had* to make the marriage work. She couldn’t burden Aunt Thalia any longer, and she sure wasn’t going

to marry Edsel Martin without a hearty fight. She would work to make Nicholas a good wife, to rear his children properly, and be the best helpmate he could ask for.

She glanced at Liza from the corner of her eye. Now *she* would need a bit more time to adjust to.

Her gaze focused on the passing scenery, delighted with the fields of blue flowers bobbing their heads in the bright sunshine. The colorful array of wildflowers nestled against the backdrop of green meadows dazzled the eye.

She sat up, pointing, excited as a child. “What are those?”

Nicholas briefly glanced in the direction she pointed. “Bluebonnets.”

“And those?”

“Black-eyed Susans.”

“They’re so pretty! Do they bloom year round?”

“Not all year.”

The wagon rolled through a small creek and up a hill. Rows upon rows of fences and cattle dotted lush, grassy meadows.

“Just look at all those cattle!” Faith slid forward on the bench. She had never seen so many animals in one place at the same time. “There must be thousands!”

“Close to two thousand,” Nicholas conceded.

“Two thousand,” she silently mouthed, thunderstruck by the opulent display. Why, Papa had owned one old cow—and that was for milking purposes only. She’d never seen such wealth, much less dreamed of being a part of it.

Nicholas glanced at her. “Shepherd cattle roam a good deal of this area. Do you like animals?”

“I love them—except I’ve never had any for my own. Papa was so busy with his congregation and trying to rear three daughters properly that he said he had all the mouths he cared to feed, thank you. I remember once Mr. Kratchet’s old tabby cat had kittens. They were so cute, and I fell head over heels in love with one. It was the runt, and sickly, but I wanted it so badly.”

Sighing, she folded her hands on her lap, recalling the traumatic moment. “But Papa said *no*, no use wasting good food on something that wasn’t going to live anyway.” Tears welled to her eyes. “I cried myself to sleep that night. I vowed when I grew up, I’d have all the sick kittens I wanted. Mama said, ‘Be merciful to all things, Faith’—did I tell you Mama died giving birth to my youngest sister, June—did I mention that in my letter? Well, she did. Faith, Hope, and June—”

Liza turned to give her a sour look.

“June,” Faith repeated, her smile temporarily wavering. “Papa was kinda mad at June when she was born. He took his anger out on that poor baby because he thought she’d killed Mama, but later he admitted the devil had made him think those crazy thoughts. It certainly wasn’t the work of the Lord. Lots of women die in childbirth, and it’s not necessarily God’s doing—but by the time Papa got over his hurt, it was too late to call the baby Charity, like he’d planned to do in the first place. By then, everybody knew June as ‘June’ and it didn’t feel right to call her anything else. Now Mama always said—” Liza’s iron grip on her knee stopped her.

She paused, her eyes frozen on the steel-like grip.

“Do you prattle like this *all* of the time?”

“Do you chew snuff all the time?” Faith blurted without thinking. She had never once seen a woman chew snuff. She was fascinated. Perhaps Liza would teach her how—no, Papa would know. And the good Lord.

“Hold your tongue, young lady!” Liza returned to staring at the road.

Faith blushed. “Sorry.” She watched the passing scenery, aware she was starting out on shaky footing with her soon-to-be mother-in-law. She vowed to be silent for the remainder of the trip, but she couldn’t help casting an occasional bewildered look in Liza’s direction. *Mercy!*

What did it hurt to talk about some poor kitten she hadn’t gotten in the first place?