



Faith

BRIDES OF THE WEST

LORI COPELAND

Over 400,000 *Brides of the West* novels sold

BRIDES OF THE WEST





LORI COPELAND



Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Lori Copeland's website at loricopeland.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers.

Faith

Copyright © 1998 by Lori Copeland. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of card copyright © by MartinaM/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of postmark envelope copyright © by Preto Perola/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of wagon wheel copyright © by Nancy Tripp Photography/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of black-eyed Susan copyright © by Stephanie Frey/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Back cover photograph of brown paper copyright © VadimVasenin/Depositphotos. All rights reserved.

Designed by Libby Dykstra and Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Diane Eble

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Faith is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

Previously published in 1998 under ISBN 0-8423-0267-0.

First repackage first published in 2007 under ISBN 978-1-4143-1534-8.

Second repackage published in 2020 under ISBN 978-1-4964-4193-5.

Printed in the United States of America

26	25	24	23	22	21	20
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*In loving memory
of Tonya Sue Garnsey
and Myrt Petersen.
Your memory lives on
in our hearts.*

Prologue

“You’re what?” The tip of Thalia Grayson’s cane hit the floor with a whack. Riveting blue eyes pinned Faith Marie Kallahan to the carpet like a sinner on Judgment Day.

Faith swallowed, took a deep breath, and confronted her auntie’s wrath with steeled determination. “I’m sorry, Aunt Thalia, but it’s done. We took a vote; we’re going to be mail-order brides. There’s nothing you can say to change our minds.”

Thalia’s eyes pivoted to Faith’s sisters, Hope and June. “Don’t tell me you go along with this nonsense.”

June nervously twisted a handkerchief around her forefinger. “We’ve prayed diligently about it.”

“Well, I never!” Thalia blustered. The pint-size figure could turn into thunder and lightning when agitated. Faith didn’t relish the coming storm.

A cold wind banged shutters and rattled dead branches of weathered oaks outside the window. Snow lay in dirty patches along leaning fence posts. March wasn’t a pretty sight in Michigan.

Faith took a tentative step toward her aunt, hoping to temper her wrath. She knew the news came as a shock, but Aunt Thalia was old, and she couldn't bear the financial burden of three extra mouths to feed. "Aunt Thalia, I know the news is unsettling, but it's the only solution."

Thalia's hand came up to cover her heart. "Marry complete strangers? Thomas's children—mail-order brides? Have you lost your minds? Faith, your papa always said you were rowdier than any two boys put together! Mail-order brides." Thalia shuddered. "How can you break your auntie's heart like this?"

"Faith. The size of a mustard seed. We are embarking upon this journey with faith that God answers his children's needs." Faith hugged her auntie's stooped frame. "Isn't it wonderful!"

"No, it's not wonderful! It's a terrible idea!"

Faith sighed. Yes, Papa had said she made Belle Starr, the lady outlaw, look like a choir girl, but her tomboyish ways had never hurt anyone. She might favor bib overalls rather than dresses, but the last thing on earth she wanted was to worry or upset anybody—especially Aunt Thalia.

Hope rose from the settee and moved to the hall mirror, fussing with her hair. "Aunt Thalia, it isn't so bad, really. We chose our mates carefully."

"Answering ads like common—" Thalia fanned herself with a hankie. "And just how did you decide who would get what man?"

Hope smiled. "By age, Auntie. Faith answered

the first promising response. Then I took the next, then June.”

“We’ve prayed about it, Auntie. Really we did,” Faith said.

Opening the magazine in her lap, June read aloud from the classified section they’d answered: *Wanted: Women with religious upbringing, high morals, and a strong sense of adventure, willing to marry decent, God-fearing men. Applicants may apply by mail. Must allow at least two months for an answer.*

Smiling, she closed the publication. “Shortly after Papa’s death we decided to answer the ad.”

Thalia turned toward the window and made a sound like a horse blowing air between its lips. “Father, have mercy on us all. Thomas would roll over in his grave if he knew what you’re planning.”

More proud than ashamed for solving what once seemed an impossible situation, Faith calmly met her sisters’ expectant gazes. They had agreed. Becoming mail-order brides was the only reasonable way to handle their circumstances. Aunt Thalia was approaching seventy. Although her health was stable, her financial condition wasn’t. Her meager funds were needed for her own welfare.

Papa’s untimely death had shocked the small community. Thomas Kallahan had pastored the Cold Water Community Church for twenty-six years. While in the midst of a blistering “hellfire and damnation” sermon one Sunday morning three months earlier, Thomas had keeled over dead.

The impassioned minister dead, at the age of forty-two. The community could scarcely believe it.

Mary Kallahan had died giving birth to June sixteen years earlier. With Thomas gone, Hope, Faith, and June—the youngest, so named because Thomas had felt anything but charitable toward the baby at birth—had no one but Aunt Thalia.

Aside from his deep, consistent faith, Thomas had left his daughters with nothing.

Faith had taught school in the small community while Hope and June had taken in sewing and accepted odd jobs. Each had a small nest egg they had earned, but their combined funds could not support a household on a continual basis. For now, they lived with Thomas's elderly sister, Thalia, aware that the arrangement was temporary. Faith had reasoned that they were grown women; they should be starting their own families.

At nineteen, Faith was the oldest. Hope was seventeen; June, sixteen. It was high time the girls found suitable husbands, an unenviable task for any woman in a small community where men were either married, too young, or too senile to be considered matrimonial prospects.

Kneeling beside Thalia's chair, Faith tried to calm her. "We'll be fine, Aunt Thalia. Why—" she glanced at Hope for support—"God truly must be smiling down upon us, for all three of us found a husband within a month."

Hope brightened. "Three fine gentlemen have asked for our hands in marriage."

“Rubbish.” Thalia sat up straighter, adjusting her spectacles. “You’ve agreed to go off with three strangers! Three men you know nothing about! What has Thomas raised? A gaggle of hooligans?”

“They’re not complete strangers,” June pointed out. “All three gentlemen have sent letters of introduction.”

“Hrummph. Self introductions? I hardly think they would write and introduce themselves as thieves and misfits. There’s no telling what you’re getting into.” Her weathered features firmed. “I cannot permit this to happen. As long as there’s a breath left in me, I will see to my brother’s children. Families bear the responsibility to care for one another. The Lord says those who won’t care for their own relatives are worse than unbelievers.”

Stroking her aunt’s veined hand, Faith smiled. “We know you would care for us, Aunt Thalia, truly. And it would be ideal if there were three young gentlemen in Cold Water in need of wives, but you know there isn’t an eligible man within fifty miles.” The good Lord knew Papa had tried hard enough to get his daughters married.

Thalia’s lips thinned to a narrow line. Her blue eyes burned with conviction. “Edsel Martin lost his wife a few months back. Edsel’s a good man. Hard-working. Deacon in the church.”

“Sixty years old,” June muttered under her breath.

“Merely a pup,” Thalia scoffed. “Lots of good years left in Edsel.”

Edsel made Faith's skin crawl. She'd never seen him wear anything other than faded overalls and a soiled shirt to cover his enormous belly. His pea-soup-colored eyes cut right through a person. She shuddered. The corners of his mouth were always stained with tobacco spittle. Edsel was looking for a wife all right, and she only needed to be breathing to meet his criteria.

Faith was plain worn-out avoiding Edsel's invitations. The past two Sunday mornings, he'd been insistent that she accompany him home for dinner. She knew full well she'd end up cooking it, but she went, cooked, cleaned his kitchen, then hung his wash, even though it was the Sabbath. And Edsel a deacon! It wasn't the kind of "courting" she'd expected.

Edsel might be a "good man," but Faith wanted a young, strong husband to work beside. She could chop wood, plow a field, or build a fence as well as any man. What she didn't do well were womanly things: cooking, cleaning, tending house. She'd attracted a fair share of criticism because of it, but she was a tomboy at heart and just once she'd like to find a man who valued her help—her ability to seed a field or shoe a horse as good or better than any man.

A gust of wind rattled the three-story house, sending a shower of sparks spiraling up the chimney. Faith shivered, rubbing warmth into her arms. Aunt Thalia's parlor was always cold. Bare tree branches rapped the windowpane; frigid air seeped through the cracks.

Hope left the mirror to kneel beside Faith at Thalia's feet. Arranging the old woman's shawl more securely around her shoulders, Faith said softly, "When I get settled, I'll send for you, Aunt Thalia. You can come live with me."

"Hrummph." Thalia looked away. "Best not be making such promises until you know how your new husband feels about that."

"Oh, I can tell by his letter he is most kind." Frosty shadows lengthened into icy, gray twilight as Faith shared her future husband's promises of a good life and a bright future when they married. "He said he would always look after me, I would want for nothing, and he promised to be a wonderful papa to our children."

Hoarfrost covered the windowpanes as darkness enveloped the drafty old Victorian house. Patches of ice formed on the wooden steps. A pewter-colored sky promised heavy snow by dawn as the women knelt and held hands, praying for their future—a future none could accurately predict.

"Father," Faith prayed, "be with each of us as we embark upon our journeys. Stay our paths and keep us from harm. We pray that we will be obedient wives and loving mothers. Thank you for answering our prayers in a time when we were most needy of your wisdom and guidance. Watch over Aunt Thalia, guard her health, and be with her in her times of loneliness. May we always be mindful that thy will be done, not ours." With bowed heads and reverent hearts, they continued to pray, silently.

Finally June rose and lit the lantern. Mellow light filtered from the coal-oil lamp, forming a warm, symmetrical pattern on the frozen ground outside the parlor window.

Tonight was Faith's turn to fix supper. She disappeared into the kitchen while June and Hope kept Thalia company in the parlor.

Pumping water into the porcelain coffeepot, Faith listened to Hope's infectious laughter as she thumbed through the family album, regaling Thalia with stories of happier times.

Beautiful Hope.

Faith the tomboy.

June the caregiver.

Frowning, Faith measured coffee into the pot and thought about the decision to marry and leave Cold Water. She ignored the tight knot curled in the pit of her stomach. Weeks of prayer and thought had gone into her decision. She had prayed for God's wisdom, and he had sent her an answer. Nicholas Shepherd's letter gave her hope. Nicholas needed a wife, and she needed a husband. She hoped the union would develop into one of loving devotion, but she would settle for a home with a godly man. During prayer she had felt God's guidance for her to embark upon this marriage.

The idea of leaving Cold Water saddened her. Aunt Thalia wouldn't enjoy good health forever. Who would care for Thalia when she was gone? And who was this man she was about to marry—this Nicholas Shepherd? She really knew nothing about

him other than that he lived with his mother in Deliverance, Texas, a small community outside San Antonio, and that he penned a neat, concise letter.

Sighing, she pushed a stray lock of hair off her cheek. Not much to base a future on. Through correspondence she'd learned Nicholas was in his midthirties and a hard worker. She was nineteen, but the difference in their ages didn't bother her; she found older men more interesting. And she was a hard worker. She smiled, warming to the idea of a husband who would always treat her well, who would not allow her to want for anything, and who promised to be a wonderful papa to her children. What more could a woman ask?

She would work hard to be an obedient wife to Nicholas Shepherd. The Lord instructed wives to obey their husbands, and that she would. It bothered her not a whit that Nicholas's mother would share their home. Mother Shepherd could see to household duties, duties Faith abhorred, while Faith worked beside her husband in the fields. The smell of sunshine and new clover was far more enticing than the stench of cooking cabbage and a tub full of dirty laundry.

Laying slices of ham in a cold skillet, Faith sobered, realizing how very much she would miss her sisters. Hope would travel to Kentucky, June to Seattle. She herself would reside in Texas.

Worlds apart.

The thought of June, the youngest sibling, brought a smile to her face. June was impulsive,

awkward at times, but with a heart as big as a ten-gallon bucket. Unlike Hope, June wasn't blessed with beauty; she was plain, a wallflower, some said, but with patience a saint would envy. June possessed a sweet, inner light superior to her sisters'. June was the caretaker, the maternal one. Faith prayed daily that June's husband would be a man who would value June's heart of gold and would never break her spirit.

Faith asked the Lord for patience for Hope's soon-to-be husband. He would need plenty of it. The family beauty was shamelessly spoiled. Hope assumed the world revolved around her wants and wishes. Hope's husband would need to be blessed with a wagonload of fortitude to contend with his new bride.

Nicholas Shepherd would need a hefty dose of patience himself. Those who knew Faith said she could be cheerful to a fault, but she knew she had to work hard at times to accept God's will. It wasn't always what she expected, and she didn't always understand it.

The sisters would exchange newsy letters and Christmas cards, but Faith didn't want to think about how long it would be before they saw each other again.

Sighing, she realized the new lives they each faced were fraught with trials and tribulations, but God had always fulfilled his promise to watch over them. He had upheld them though Mama's death, overseen June's raising, and filled times of uncertainty

with hope of a brighter tomorrow. When Papa died, they'd felt God's all-caring presence. He was there to hear their cries of anguish and see them through the ordeal of burial. Faith had no less faith that he would continue to care for them now.

Faith.

Papa had always said that faith would see them through whatever trials they encountered.

Besides—she shuddered as she turned a slice of ham—anything the future held had to be more appealing than Edsel Martin.



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 hankie.

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 Lanner, 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 catalog, 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 helpmate. 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 broodmare.

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 understood 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." Pleading 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, wearing 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 woodsmoke 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 gath-

ered 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, heartbroken 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?