

# A JOURNEY OF FAITH

THREE COWBOYS FOR THREE SISTERS, BOOK ONE



VICTORIA WINTERS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



BOSTON, 1890

Faith Cummings cracked open the window and set the pie she had just baked on the sill to cool. She poured herself a cup of tea and sat, watching the curtains at the open window fluttering in the breeze. The entire house felt different, as if a dark cloud had lifted. Even the air felt lighter. Her father had recently passed. She could hardly believe that he was no longer upstairs in his room. He had not been much company at the end, but at least he'd been there, someone for her to focus on and care for. She shook her head to clear her thoughts then moved the pie inside and shut the window. While it had been nice to air out the room, it was not yet spring in Boston and too cold to leave the window open for long. She hugged herself and shivered. Change was in the air; she could feel it.

Faith did not much care for change. She had been well named, faithfully nursing her father without complaint throughout his long decline. She was content to stay at home, running the

household while her younger, more adventurous sisters, Hope and Charity, went out into the world making social calls, serving on committees and doing volunteer work. Why, Hope even had a job of sorts, helping set print at the newspaper, and Charity appeared in productions at the local community playhouse. She admired her sisters but had no desire to be like them.

She went to the fireplace and bent to stoke the fire. Her sisters would be home soon, and she wanted the house to be warm and welcoming, the very house that soon would no longer be theirs. Without Father's pension, it would have to be sold; the girls could not afford the mortgage on their own.

Faith could hardly bear to dwell on the future. What was she going to do now? At twenty-eight, she was certain that marriage and motherhood had passed her by. Why, she had never even had a serious suitor. She didn't want to become a governess and work for strangers; children made her nervous. She supposed she could take in laundry or work as a cook, but she preferred to bake. Everyone said her pies were heavenly; perhaps she could sell them to the restaurants in town. Boston was a big city, and there could be a demand, but she could only produce half a dozen or so pies a day. It would barely provide pin money, certainly not enough to live respectably on. She blew on the flame that was just starting to burn brightly then stood and studied her reflection in the looking glass hanging over the mantel. She was a slender woman, neat and tidy in a dark grey dress with an apron pinned to the front. Faith really did not know why she had never had a caller. She had grown up thinking she was plain with her blue-grey eyes and light brown curls, but Hope said she had the kind of beauty that grew on a person. Charity had agreed and said she drew people in with her smile. Faith was just so painfully shy that she didn't often gift strangers with her smile.

Just then, she heard someone at the front door, stomping the snow off their boots. Hope must be home. Sure enough, her

younger sister opened the door and strode into the house. Strode was a good word for how she walked. At the age of twenty-four, Hope was a large woman with long, thick, chestnut-colored hair who acted more like a man than a young lady. Faith greeted her sister and went to pour her a cup of tea. Hope was also well named. She had an adventurous spirit and was filled with hopes and dreams for the future.

"I'm home," Hope announced unnecessarily. "I've just been to the county assessor's office and then ran an advertisement in the newspaper for the house. They say there's a big demand, and it should sell shortly. And guess what?"

Faith shook her head as she handed the tea to Hope. She could not even begin to guess what had her sister so excited.

"There was a flyer hanging on a post outside the assessor's office. It said that there is land up for grabbing, out west! We could homestead on a plot of land, do some improvements, and then in a couple of years, it would be ours. Why, we could work it ourselves, build our own home. Think of it, Faith, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Faith was aghast. "We can't just up and move; they don't call it the wild west for nothing. Why, there are cowboys and Indians and outlaws. People carry guns. It's downright uncivilized. And besides, what would we do with all our belongings?" Faith asked.

Hope tapped her foot impatiently as she looked down at her timid older sister.

"What? It's better to sit here in this house, staring out the window? Why, there's a whole world out there, Faith! It's ours for the taking."

"Well, we certainly can't leave our little sister alone in Boston," Faith stated with finality, hopefully bringing an end to the discussion. She wondered what it would be like to have such a fearless and adventurous spirit. She, herself, had never suffered from the wanderlust that had plagued Hope her entire life.

"Charity will be fine. She and Thomas will soon be married. We will only be a train ride away. It will all work out, I promise. What do you say, Faith? Are you up for it?"

"It sounds to me like you've already made up your mind," Faith retorted. "You are going out west, no matter what I say. Isn't that so?"

Hope looked at her sister for a moment before she replied, "Yes, Faith, with or without you, I shall go west," she announced with a defiant tilt of her chin.

Faith cringed at the news. This would never have happened if Father were still alive. She ducked her head and tried to hide the tears threatening to fall. She could not imagine never again seeing her middle sister.

"Dear one, please come with me," Hope begged as she knelt and took her sister's delicate hands into her strong ones. "I'm afraid that if you stay behind, you'll end up being Charity's slave, living in her shadow and raising her children. It's not too late to have a life of your own, you know."

Suddenly, the door burst open, letting a gust of wind into the room. Charity made her entrance. There was no other way to describe it, as if she were a character in a play, taking the stage. Their youngest sister had bright blue eyes and hair that was a wild profusion of curls the color of a copper penny, which she always wore unbound. Charity paused for dramatic effect, waiting until she was certain she had her sisters' undivided attention. Slowly, she walked towards the kitchen table and sank into one of the chairs. Suddenly, she burst into tears then put her head down on her folded arms. Faith rushed to close the door.

"Charity dear, what is it? Hope, get her a cup of tea." Faith, ten years older than her youngest sister, had always mothered her.

Charity lifted her head and wailed. "H-he's g-gone!"

"He, who?" Hope asked, putting the kettle on to boil.

"Thomas, my fiancé!" Charity replied, annoyed that her sisters

had not instantly realized the scope of her predicament. Faith and Hope's eyes met above their baby sister's head. They did not much care for Thomas. Besides being a flamboyant actor, they felt he was a rake and a bit of a scoundrel, but Charity had been taken by him ever since they'd performed together at the Boston Commons Theatre.

"Gone?" Faith asked, unable to comprehend why anyone would leave Boston. "Where did he go?"

"More importantly, why did he go?" Hope asked in that blunt way she had. She set the tea service on the table. "Tell us what happened, Charity, and start at the beginning."

Charity sat back and dabbed at her eyes. Faith knew that whatever happened, spinsterhood was not going to be Charity's fate. She was the loveliest of the three of them. Even now, her curls were perfectly arranged around her face as if she were posing for a portrait. Charity was a free spirit who did exactly as she pleased. She had not cared if appearing in theatrical productions had shocked the prudish matrons of Boston and made her an object of gossip. Faith only prayed that Charity had not been true to her name by being too lavish with her favors. She and Thomas had spent far too much time together without benefit of a chaperone.

"We were supposed to meet for breakfast at the café, but he never showed. I went by his boarding house, and the landlady said that he had taken his belongings and disappeared during the night. She said he owes her two months' back rent and her silver candlesticks are missing. She called the sheriff. I left before he arrived." Charity dissolved into hysterics. Her sisters had never seen her cry so hard.

"That scoundrel," Hope said, placing a cup of tea in front of Charity. "I knew he was no good. Men, you can't trust a one of 'em."

"Come now, dear," Faith urged as she put her arm around Charity's shaking shoulders. "You aren't helping," she scolded Hope, who just shrugged in response.

"Here, baby, drink your tea," Faith said. The three sisters gathered around the kitchen table. Faith and Hope patted Charity's hands and clucked sympathetically as she cried until she had no more tears left.

"I can't believe he left me without a word. Without a word and with our wedding just weeks away," Charity cried. "I loved him so. I am positively grief stricken."

"You would have had to postpone your wedding, anyway, because of Father's passing," Hope offered helpfully. This, however, did not seem to help at all. Faith and Charity just glared at her.

As fast as she'd started crying, Charity stopped. This was most unusual, her sisters knew. Charity liked to make the most of dramatic moments, drawing them out as long as possible. Suddenly, Charity stood, looking around the room with a critical eye as if she'd just remembered something.

"We are going to have a visitor any moment, sisters," she announced. Faith gasped and looked towards the parlor. The house was in no condition for callers. Charity caught her sister's look of dismay. "Don't worry, Faith. She won't be here long, and the house looks fine."

"Who is coming, dear?" Faith asked, trying to remain composed, but the panic in her voice gave her away. She didn't much care for visitors. If her sisters had callers, she would usually excuse herself and wait out their visit up in her room.

"Mrs. Reynolds, from the boarding house," Charity replied. Hope and Faith looked at one another; they knew no Mrs. Reynolds. "She saw how distraught I was over Thomas's disappearance. She said she wants to come to the house and talk to me. I presume it is about her mail order bride business." Faith and Hope stared blankly at her. "She arranges marriages between women in Boston with gentlemen out west. When I told her I had two single sisters, she was very eager to meet us all."

"I know what a mail order bride is, Charity, but I don't understand what any of this has to do with us," Hope protested as



Faith feverishly began to rush about the parlor, straightening and dusting.

"I know, I know, I'm not at all ready to talk about marrying someone else. I truly loved Thomas, and my heart is absolutely broken. But the matchmaker was persistent, and I didn't know what to do, so I invited her over. I just don't have the strength to deal with her, myself."

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to hear what she has to say," replied Faith, trying to be supportive.

"I agree. On my way home, I thought about it. Perhaps a change of locations, at this point, would be ideal. I wouldn't want to stay in Boston after a broken engagement. It would be a scandal that could result in all three of us being ostracized socially," Charity said.

"I hardly think—" Hope began, but Charity quieted her with a glare. Hope was the last person to understand the rules of polite society.

"I know what those old biddies think of me, Hope. I'm too theatrical and not proper and, now, this broken engagement. I'm not going to lurk about in the shadows, ashamed to show my face. Maybe we should listen to what Mrs. Reynolds has to say with an open mind. Since we are losing the house, this could be the perfect solution for all three of us. I mean, really, what is left for us here in Boston?"

Hope nodded in agreement. "I have no problem with the idea of moving west. There's land out there, land for the grabbing. We could build something for ourselves. But explain to me, Charity, why do we need husbands?" Hope asked, confused.

"Let's let Mrs. Reynolds explain how it works," Charity replied. "Hope, go do something with your hair. I'll help Faith tidy up."

"What's wrong with my hair?" Hope asked.

"You look unkempt. Redo it."

Hope ambled off and returned a few minutes later and began to straighten the kitchen.

"I thought you were going to do something with your hair?" Faith said, looking at her.

"I did do something with my hair," Hope glowered. Her sisters were always trying to make her over. She couldn't help it if she had a thick mane of hair that was impossible to keep neatly pinned.

The girls had barely finished tidying when there was a knock at the front door. The three sisters stood in the foyer and straightened their skirts then checked their reflections in the small looking glass nearby. At a nod from Faith, Hope opened the door. Standing on the stoop was an attractive older woman. She smiled brightly at the three women and entered at Hope's invitation.

"Come in please, Mrs. Reynolds, I presume?" Hope asked. Mrs. Reynolds was colorful and well turned out, wearing a tartan plaid skirt and velvet jacket with a stylish hat atop her dark hair. Faith noted that her hair was a bit too dark, her lips a bit too red. Was the woman using cosmetics? Before she could ponder the question further, she was distracted by the large book under Mrs. Reynolds's arm.

"Hello, Mrs. Reynolds, thank you for coming," Charity said, stepping forward and steering Mrs. Reynolds towards their father's chair. "I was so distraught at the news about my fiancé that I don't think I would have regained my composure without your kind concern." Charity again began to cry. "I cannot believe that I was practically left at the altar."

"There, there, dear," Mrs. Reynolds said. "I am certain the young man found himself in difficult straits and did the only thing he could think to do. And, believe me, he will miss you much more than you will miss him. I do believe that you are one of the loveliest young ladies I have ever seen. I am certain that any of the men I represent would be thrilled to have you as a future bride."

Charity smiled at Mrs. Reynolds and dried her eyes, then she pulled Faith over in front of her. "Let me introduce my eldest sister, Faith. She's just twenty-eight, and I don't know why she insists on

wearing her hair in that unflattering bun and dressing like a dowdy matron."

Faith tugged self-consciously at the lace collar on her charcoal grey dress. "Well, our father recently died, and we are in mourning," Faith said, looking pointedly at Charity's emerald green dress.

Charity continued on, seemingly without noticing. "I can assure you that Faith is quite pretty, once she lets her hair down," Charity went on.

Faith managed to smile, her lips a tight line.

"And this is Hope," Charity went on, walking over to stand by her other sister. "She is twenty-four, will turn twenty-five in May. She's the middle sister, even though most people take her to be the eldest. She's, well, she's strong and fit and a hard worker. And she's not bad to look at, either, in her own handsome way."

Hope glared at Charity, not liking being sized up like a prize pig.

"Oh my goodness," Mrs. Reynolds said, peering at all three girls through a set of opera glasses. "A house full of charming young women of marriageable age. Are you all interested in finding husbands out west?"

"No!" Faith blurted out. Hope shrugged, and Charity looked indifferent. Mrs. Reynolds knew that she had her work cut out for her. If she could convince one sister to move west, perhaps the other two would follow.

"You'll have to excuse my sister, Faith," Charity explained, concerned that she might have hurt Mrs. Reynolds feelings. "She's a bit timid, but I can assure you, she'll never stay behind in Boston by herself. Wherever we go, she will go. And she will make some gentleman a wonderful helpmate. Why, she single-handedly nursed our father through his final days."

Faith was shocked. Everything Charity had said with such assurance was true. She would follow her sisters anywhere. Was she that predictable?

"And you, Hope, are you ready to settle down and take a

husband?" Mrs. Reynolds asked, sizing up the large young woman. The girl did indeed have a handsome enough face, but she possessed a solid body and a set of shoulders like a prize fighter. This did not concern her, however, for most men preferred a woman with some meat on her bones. Settling the Great Plains was not for the frail of frame.

"To be honest, Mrs. Reynolds, I very much desire to relocate out west and get some land of my own. I'd like to prove that a woman can do her own homesteading."

"Yes, dear, and that's very commendable, by the way, but would it hurt to have a strong man as a partner? A rancher for you, I think. Yes, one with land available for homesteading nearby would be perfect." Hope reluctantly nodded. Mrs. Reynolds' suggestion did make sense.

"Come with me to the kitchen table, girls. Let's look through my book. I call it my 'Lonely Hearts book'. It is filled with pictures of gentlemen who are hoping to marry lovely, morally-upstanding young women, such as yourselves. There just aren't many women in the Great Plains area yet. It's known to be a spinsters' paradise. The place is filled with attractive men longing for wives."

"We are supposed to choose a man based on some grainy picture?" Hope asked, puzzled.

"Actually," Mrs. Reynolds replied, "I have personally interviewed and screened each one of these gentlemen and can answer any questions you may have."

"You have?" Hope asked, blinking in astonishment. "How many times have you traveled to Wyoming, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"For eight years now, I have made the journey with my young ladies every summer and then return to Boston in the fall with my book filled with new lonely hearts. Matchmaking is my calling. I feel it's much more humane to personally pair two lovely people together rather than to have a young lady answer some random ad in the newspaper. Choosing a husband is too important a matter to leave to happenstance."

"And what does this cost, if I may ask, Mrs. Reynolds?" asked Faith, afraid they would not be able to afford the woman's services.

"For my young ladies, nothing. The gentlemen retain my services, dear."

"But I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to afford the journey," Faith went on, trying to imagine how they would ever get themselves to Wyoming.

"The gentlemen purchase your train tickets. I already have them locked away, ready to give to sincere young women who will honor their commitments."

"Think of it, sisters! All we have to do is point to our choice and we are practically on our way," Charity said, beginning to sound enthusiastic. Faith looked with dismay from her to the matchmaker. Charity seemed to be actually considering the idea of becoming a mail order bride, but Faith was not at all certain about proceeding with this.

"If we should agree to this, we would want to be together in the same area," she said, anxiously wringing her hands.

"Of course, of course. All of the men in my book are from the Cheyenne part of the Wyoming Territory. Gather round now," she sang out gaily as she set the book in the middle of the table. All three girls took a seat, unable to resist seeing what sort of men would need a spouse so badly that they'd hire a matchmaker.

Mrs. Reynolds opened the book to the center. "Here are my ranchers. Do you see any that strike your fancy, Hope?"

Hope leaned over and looked doubtfully at the pictures. "I'm just not certain about this."

Mrs. Reynolds extended one long-nailed, manicured finger and pointed to a picture in the center of the page. "Here is a gentleman you might be interested in, Hope. This is Noble Enders, a rancher with a small daughter. Have you ever thought of being a mother, dear?" Hope sat back in silence, contemplating the question.

"Mr. Enders is thirty-two years of age," Mrs. Reynolds went on. "He's six-feet tall, of stocky build, solid and rugged. He told me that

he is looking for a woman who is strong, sensible, and not afraid of hard work."

"Well, I am certainly all of those things," Hope replied, sitting bolt upright with a growing confidence.

Mrs. Reynolds read his advertisement out loud, finishing with, "And I should hope my future wife will know how to make biscuits and pies."

Hope laughed. "I suppose Faith could teach me the art of baking. But wouldn't having a husband make my future land his?"

"And his land would be yours, my dear. See how it all works out? He has one hundred forty-four acres and several hundred heads of cattle." Hope still looked doubtful, so Mrs. Reynolds turned her attention to Charity.

"A rugged, handsome cowboy for you, I think, Miss Charity. One who would tame your restless spirit?"

Charity's response shocked her sisters to the core.

"Pooh," she said, pushing the book away from her. "Tell me, Mrs. Reynolds. Who is the wealthiest man in that book of yours?"

"Charity!" Faith exclaimed. "Mrs. Reynolds is going to think we are gold diggers."

"I don't care what anyone thinks," said Charity with a toss of her head, which made her curls dance. "I have given up on romance. I gave my heart to Thomas, and where did it get me? Deserted and abandoned, that's where. If I'm going to uproot myself and move all the way to the Great Plains, I would want a better life awaiting me. Tell me, Mrs. Reynolds, are there any bankers in that book of yours?" she asked.

Faith shook her head and wished, not for the first time, that their parents were still alive. Their mother had died while all three girls were small, and their father had spent their formative years finding solace in the demon rum. Charity could have benefited from guidance and a strong hand, neither of which her older sisters had been equipped to provide.

Mrs. Reynolds didn't seem at all put off by Charity's

proclamation. "That's very sensible of you, dear." She took the book back and began looking carefully through it.

But Hope was not at all amused by her sister's proclamation. She began to scold Charity, who insisted there was nothing wrong in marrying for money. Mrs. Reynolds joined in, playing the peacemaker, and their voices escalated as the sisters argued with one another.