

CHAPTER 1



APRIL 14, 1854, TRAVELING WEST...

Obedience Bartlett was miserable, trying to sit up straight in the coach as it jolted its way westward. They had traveled all night long and her neck and shoulders ached. She longed to lie down and relax, rather than worry about falling asleep and bouncing out into the floor of the coach.

This was the day they should reach Sacramento, and Aunt Faith had promised to send someone to fetch her at the stage depot. Perhaps the journey from Sacramento to Golden River wouldn't be too long, and she could nap when she got there.

For the second time that morning, she took the letter from Aunt Faith out of her reticule and read it, growing more excited, but more curious as well. The closer they came to Sacramento, the more anxious she became.

Aunt Faith's handwriting had grown choppy of late. But with this letter, it had smoothed out and was as it used to be. Obedience wondered if there was more going on with her than she was letting on. Uncle Oliver had passed away five years ago, and Obie had

offered to come and help out with the ranch and keep her company. In the letters that followed, Faith had penned she was considering selling the ranch. The subsequent ones said she couldn't bring herself to do it. But she had sold the cattle off, little by little.

What's the use of having a ranch if you don't use it? Obie thought.

She lowered her eyes once again to the letter.

Dear Obedience,

I had hoped not to have to ask you to do this, but it seems I must. You have, on more than one occasion, offered to come, and I have purposely neglected to ask. Now, however, I need you.

When Oliver passed, I planned to keep the ranch and continue to run it. It was his wish. Sterling, our old friend, stayed on for a long time and helped me after the others went to stake their claims in and around Golden River. Eventually, there was little for him to do, so he left as well. He does still come to check on me and look after the house. So does the sheriff. But the gold rush seems to be dying out, from what I hear, and along with it, Golden River, as people give up and leave to return home.

I hated to see the men go. At the same time, I'm the only female in the population surrounding Golden River. It's a rough town on the surface, Obie, but the men seem to have big hearts and are friendly and kind to me. Rough as it may be, I'm not afraid for my safety. When I do go to town, they are all very polite and helpful, but I've grown incredibly lonely out here by myself.

I wandered out into the pastures this morning, staring out at the empty barn, the empty fields. This place used to be full of activity. I regret terribly selling off the herd and allowing the men to go find other jobs. Oliver always encouraged me to carry on after he was gone, and I promised I would. There is only one cattle ranch in operation near Golden River now. Ned Rains owns it.

I miss Oliver so. I've let him down.

The past five years, I've dwelt in grief and self-pity and thought of nothing else but my loneliness. I suppose all wives do when they lose their husbands. But I've taken a good look at myself now. Golden River needs

me. The men who have given up on their claims need a place to work. If I don't hire them, they'll go somewhere else.

The town needs me, and it needs you. What can the two of us do together to bring it back to life? I'm not sure. But employment is certainly a start.

What I want to say to you, dear Obie, is that I want to see this place teeming with life and activity again. I have plans, and I need you to help me carry them out. I want to buy more cattle, a few horses, and bring the ranch back to its glory. I want to see Sterling and bend his ear a bit. But I'll wait until you arrive, so he doesn't perceive me as a crazed old woman.

If I hire men back, I'm capable of handling the cooking. But there will be other things I'll need you to supervise. You have a fine brain; you're good with figures. I've let the place go a bit in the past few months. Fences will need mending; the barn roof needs patching—and, no, you cannot do that, my dear. I'll need to hire the men—and you'll need to help supervise. I heard someone in town say the other day that Sterling was thinking of leaving. That would break my heart. I'd love to hire him back and get him to help me run this place.

I know this is a lot to ask of you. You're a widow yourself, so I know you understand what I've gone through. And you've only just reached your thirtieth birthday. Your life must be busy. I realize you probably are constantly bothered with suitors who want to ask for your hand, but if you aren't already committed, I must beg of you to come. I need you, Obie.

There is money to do all these things I have mentioned. What I've lacked, in the years since Oliver died, is the heart to do it.

The funds for the stage journey are included. I wish rail was here in the west, but perhaps it won't be too long. They say the journey is so much faster that way.

I look forward to seeing you very soon.

Your Aunt Faith

Obie, as her aunt had called her since she'd married into the family, folded the letter up once again and tucked it into her reticule. She looked across at the two girls who had joined her on the journey several weeks ago. They were still sleeping, and she leaned

her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, knowing sleep would once again elude her.

How would she manage to help run a ranch? Even the prospect of it sounded overwhelming. Interviewing ranchers, who almost certainly knew what they were doing? What was she supposed to ask them?

She thought of her own five-foot frame standing in front of a six-foot tall rancher and saying, "Are you sure you're knowledgeable enough to work on a ranch, sir?" and laughed out loud. Of course, she couldn't say that. How absurd.

Jeddah and Daniella, sleeping across the coach, stirred, and for a moment, Obie thought she'd awakened them. Jeddah was a beautiful twenty-year old, with golden blonde hair and dark golden-brown eyes, and Daniella was nineteen and just the opposite, with her dark eyes and hair. She had no idea she was so adorable. Both girls had answered an ad for a mail-order bride in the tiny town of Golden River, California. What a coincidence that it was the same place Obie was going. She couldn't imagine the idea of marrying someone she'd never met. Daniella had been encouraged to answer the ad by her father, although her mother had been heartbroken at her leaving.

Jeddah's story, however, was different. She had nearly been thrown out by her family and made to do it. She'd wanted to marry a young man whom her family disapproved of. She admitted she hadn't really loved him, but her home life was difficult. When they forbade her to marry and threatened to cut her off from the family, he'd walked away. Her words to Obie had been, "Now I don't feel loved by anyone." The ad in the paper had given her a way out, and her family had not objected. She'd felt she had to leave.

Obie sighed. That seemed an incredibly cruel thing to do to a child. And Jeddah was only twenty.

Twenty. Only ten years younger than I am, Obie thought. It seemed an eternity had expired since Obie had been that age. John Joshua had swept her up that same year and married her, and she'd been

too naïve to realize what marriage meant. She'd been too young to make a lifetime commitment. John Joshua had money, and when he died suddenly from heart failure four years later, she'd been plagued with a long line of who, she was sure, only courted her for her fortune. After the last one and a particularly nasty experience, she'd decided it was time to stop seeing callers.

That was several years ago. If all men were this way, she'd *never* marry again. When Aunt Faith's letter had arrived asking her to come, she'd been ecstatic.

A wave of happiness washed over her. She had to admit she didn't feel thirty. She felt, as they approached Sacramento, as young as the two girls seated across from her.

Resting her hand on her reticule, she thought about what Aunt Faith had said in her letter. She had mentioned Obie handling the finances. How was she supposed to do that? What if the ranch didn't pay or wasn't successful? Would she be responsible for firing all the ranchers she had previously hired? She wondered who the sheriff was; her aunt had mentioned him in more than one of her letters, explaining how he checked up on her frequently and saw to her safety. Once, Aunt Faith had said he was almost like a son to her.

And Sterling. Was he more to Aunt Faith than a former employee at the ranch?

"Obie, you're frowning. What's wrong?" Daniella's voice spoke from across the coach.

She smiled. "Just thinking. You're awake. How did you rest?"

"Like a girl who's been riding in a coach for two months. How do you think?" A giggle followed.

"Be nice, Danny." Jeddah had opened her eyes and was struggling to sit up.

"Obie knows I'm teasing. Is it today or tomorrow we're supposed to arrive in Sacramento? I've lost track."

Obie looked out the window. "It's today. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Danny's excitement was obvious.

Jeddah's, however, was not. "No," she said, a worried crease of her brow making dimples at the bridge of her nose. "I'm scared to death. What if they don't come and get us in Sacramento? Where will we stay when we get there? What if they expect us to choose who to marry right away? We could make a terrible mistake. And I want my pick of the men. I won't just accept any of them."

Daniella shook her head. "You're a worrier, Jeddah. They said they'd take care of us, didn't they? I, for one, think it's terribly romantic to be able to have my choice of men. Oh! Jeddah, I hope we don't pick the same one."

Jeddah laughed, the musical sound filling the coach.

But Danny's delightful chatter kept on. "It'll be nice to meet men who are actually interested in having me. The suitors Papa dragged in when I was at home all seemed to act as if they thought it was against their better judgement." She paused and sighed. "But perhaps they were right. Mother says I'm far too much a tomboy to attract a man."

Obie was laughing softly at her. "Danny, I can't imagine that any young man would fail to be interested in you," she added. "But remember, both of you. if you get lonely, you can always come out and visit Aunt Faith and me."

"We will." Danny's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Of course, we'll be pretty busy seeing suitors."

Things settled down as they began to make the last few miles of the journey. She leaned her head back once again, and this time, she fell asleep to the gentle rocking of the coach.