

# *Whispers in the Valley*

**Sisters of the Heart 2**

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## Chapter One

**Friday, February 8, 1884**

She wasn't running away.

Victoria Holton tried not to sigh as she stared out the train window. Maybe if she repeated that enough times, she'd believe it. Maybe. Maybe if she wished hard enough, she'd wake up in her childhood bed and the last two months would be nothing but a bad dream. No maybes about that. It would not happen. Her childhood bed had been sold along with the house and all its contents.

Her life had been upended, so here she was, almost two thousand miles from Philadelphia. If that wasn't running away, she didn't know what was.

*Think about something else*, she told herself. *Like the beautiful scenery*. It was too early for the bluebonnets, but the Texas Hill Country was even more dramatic than Victoria had expected. She had seen many lovely parts of the country on her journey west, but there was something special about this portion of the Lone Star State. She had expected the hills to be green, and some of them were. But others had outcroppings of limestone and sandstone, adding drama to an otherwise pastoral scene. And then there were the trees: magnificent live oaks, others that the conductor told her were called bald cypress, some evergreens whose names she did not know. They all combined to create an unforgettable scene.

She would think about that, not the man she loved so dearly but would never see again. She would smile at the glory of God's creation rather than weep over all that she'd lost. She would fill

her heart with the anticipation of being reunited with Sophia and Gideon, of meeting the rest of Sophia's family, of seeing the buildings that made Sophia's home one of the most distinctive towns in the Hill Country.

She could do that. She would do that. And maybe if she did, she would be able to convince herself that she was not running away.



"Marriage can be wonderful."

Peter Mulholland tried not to frown at the man who sat across the desk from him. Gideon was the only one of the five deacons who'd remained in the parsonage office after the meeting, and that, Peter knew, was because Gideon was more than a member of the church's leadership council. In the eight months since he'd arrived in Carr Valley, Gideon Spencer had become Peter's closest friend, the one who shared his hopes and fears with Peter, the one who listened when Peter had voiced his frustration at the seemingly arbitrary decisions the deacons had made, the one who was trying his best to make an unpleasant situation seem bearable.

"I don't doubt that. I saw how happy my parents' marriage was, and I only have to look at you and Sophia to see that marriage can be wonderful." His friends' love was apparent in the tender glances they shared, the way their voices changed when they spoke of each other, the loving touches they didn't realize others had witnessed. There was no question that Gideon and Sophia were as deeply in love as his parents had been. That was what Peter wanted, a love that would survive life's inevitable challenges.

"I always knew I'd marry someday," he told Gideon. "What I resent is others trying to dictate my future. That's what they're doing by telling me I need to find a bride now."

It had been almost two years since Peter had seen the woman he called Joy leaving a shop in the center of Philadelphia, her smile so radiant that Joy was the only name he could imagine her having. They hadn't exchanged a single word nor shared a glance, but

though common sense told him he would never see her again and that he should forget her, Peter could not. Instead, Joy had become the standard against which he measured all women. So far, no one had come close.

Gideon ran his fingers through his hair, a sign that he wasn't comfortable with what he was about to say. His friend was a couple inches taller than Peter, a full six feet in height, with brown hair considerably darker than Peter's and brown eyes instead of blue. No one would mistake them for brothers, although they often shared the same opinions.

"I tried to convince the others that they were wrong"—Gideon's eyes darkened—"but Mack Harris voted with Henry Burgess and Alan Trane." That left only Gideon and Edward Carlton. When matters had become contentious in the past, Mack had sided with Edward against Henry and Alan, leaving Gideon to serve as peacemaker. Most of the time his arguments for moderation had succeeded, but not today.

"I know you did your best. It's just that ..." Peter stopped, realizing he wasn't ready to share the doubts that had begun to plague him with anyone, not even Gideon. Like the memory of Joy, the fear that he might have made a mistake was something no one else needed to know.

He drew in a deep breath, trying to calm his thoughts. In the past this small room where he wrote his sermons and counselled parishioners had been a sanctuary for him. Today it had felt like the site of an ambush. Prior meetings with the deacons had been held in the sanctuary, but today they'd arrived unannounced and had insisted on remaining here. If they'd intended to make him uncomfortable, they'd succeeded, and that only intensified Peter's concerns.

Rather than complete the sentence he'd begun, he said, "Nowhere in the Bible does it say that ministers must marry."

"That's what I told the others, but you heard their arguments."

Peter might have heard them, but that didn't mean he agreed with them. "They believe my being single is distracting the young women in the congregation."

Gideon's shrug indicated that he found this argument at least partially valid. "You do have a"—he paused, searching for the correct word—"shall we say, a following."

That was one way to describe the gaggle of girls who tried to attract Peter's attention. There was nothing wrong with them, other than that he could not imagine spending the rest of his life with any of them. He understood that as one of the town's bachelors he might be the object of interest, but why didn't they focus on Baxter Washburn, Chauncey Landis, or one of the Gilmore brothers?

"I don't encourage them."

Once again, Gideon raked his hair. "I know that, but that doesn't stop them—or their parents—from hoping. I suspect that's the reason Mack voted the way he did. Isn't his daughter one of the young ladies who trails after you?"

"Yes, but ..." Peter sighed. "I can't imagine that wedding Bertha Harris would make me any more capable of counseling my married parishioners." That had been the second argument the deacons had raised.

This time Gideon chuckled. "From what I've seen, it would make you appreciate silence. She chatters more than three squirrels fighting over a nut."

"Be charitable, Gideon." Peter did his best not to laugh at the unfortunately accurate description of his most ardent admirer.

"I *was* being charitable. Seriously, Peter, the deaconate is right about one thing: you'd probably be happier if you were married."

Had his friend sensed the doubts Peter had been experiencing, the way he questioned the foundations of his life? He thought he'd hidden that, but perhaps he hadn't.

"All you have to do is find the right woman," Gideon concluded.

Gideon made it sound simple, but it wasn't. Peter knew that even if he could find her, which was impossible given the distance

between them, Joy wasn't the type of woman who'd marry a minister with only a modest means of supporting a wife and family.

"How do you propose I find the right woman?"

"I have no idea."

Ten minutes after Gideon left, Peter abandoned his hope of finding comfort in his office. Grabbing his hat and coat, he headed outside and began what was usually an effective way to calm his thoughts: a brisk walk. Somehow the motion of putting one foot in front of the other while he breathed fresh air rarely failed to soothe him. Today it had no effect.

As he strode east, he tried thinking about trivial things like the unimaginative names the townspeople had given their streets. The north-south ones were called First, Second, and Third, while those that divided the town from east to west were named Church, Main, and South. After the railroad had been built a block south of South Street, there had been concern that the tracks would make it difficult to expand the town in that direction. Heated discussions had ensued until Gideon—always the peacemaker—had pointed out that nothing was preventing expansion to the west. The east was out of the question, because no one could imagine what to call a street that preceded First.

If only the residents of Carr Valley could limit their worries to how to expand the town. Surely that was more important than whether their minister had a wife. But according to the deacons, Peter's marital state was causing dissension, and that couldn't continue. He shook his head in disgust that even the seemingly innocuous subject of street names had brought him back to the deacons' ultimatum. Oh, they hadn't phrased it that way. No one had said that his contract would be rescinded if he didn't marry, but Peter knew that if he did not accede to their "suggestion," Henry Burgess would involve the entire congregation.

Another thought assailed him. Was this latest demand part of Henry's campaign to get Peter to resign? Since his almost weekly criticism had failed to achieve the goal, had Henry decided to escalate matters by involving all the deacons? If so, he'd miscalculated.

Peter had no intention of being either coerced into marriage or forced to resign.

*Stop thinking about Henry. Keep walking.* When he reached First Street, Peter turned around, but as he approached the corner of Church and Third, he paused. Though he'd planned to continue west on Church, he found himself heading south, almost as if his feet were moving of their own volition. And at the corner of South Street, he once again turned in an unplanned direction, heading toward the train depot.

There was no reason to go to the depot. He wasn't expecting anyone to arrive today. A mirthless laugh escaped from his lips. While others in Carr Valley had visitors, Peter didn't. When he'd left San Antonio to attend seminary in New Jersey, he'd lost contact with his boyhood friends, and the men he'd met in Princeton had gone their separate ways when school had ended. There was no reason—no reason at all—to meet the train, yet Peter could not ignore the urging.

He glanced at his watch when he was a few yards from the depot and saw that the train wasn't due for another five minutes. Perhaps it wasn't the train he was supposed to meet but the stationmaster. Perhaps God was reminding him that the Wallaces hadn't been in church on Sunday and that they might benefit from a visit.

He entered the limestone building that owed some of its unusual architectural details to the time Gideon had spent in France, pausing to let his eyes adjust to the relative darkness.

"Mornin', Pastor. You fixin' to go to Fredericksburg? There's plenty of room on today's train."

Gideon shook his head as he walked toward the stationmaster. Although the man was approaching fifty years old, there were no gray threads in Mark Wallace's brown hair, and the crow's feet that bracketed his eyes could have been caused by squinting in the Texas sun as well as by age.

"I came to see if there was anything I could do for you. The congregation and I missed you and Mrs. Wallace on Sunday." Peter had been told that they were key members of the choir, but he



hadn't realized how much the rest of the choir depended on the Wallaces to keep them on key until they weren't there.

Mr. Wallace shrugged. "The missus was under the weather for a few days. She shore did miss Mrs. Cleveland's chicken soup. Said it always cured what ailed her."

Peter had heard that the former minister's wife was a paragon, a Proverbs 31 woman. Was that why he'd been led to the depot, to reinforce the need for him to take a wife?

"If I'd realized that Mrs. Wallace was ill, I could have asked Mrs. Gleason to bring her some soup." His housekeeper was an excellent cook. So was Peter, although few in Carr Valley knew that. He could only imagine what Henry Burgess would say if Peter started preparing meals. He'd probably claim that wasn't something a proper minister did.

The stationmaster shook his head. "No need for soup now. The missus is fit as a fiddle. All that's wrong today is that my horse threw a shoe. I shore hope no one needs me to haul anythin' this mornin'. Harvey reckons it'll be another hour before he's finished."

The man who ran the livery was a fine farrier, a man who checked and rechecked his work, with the result that it took him longer than many townspeople thought it should for him to shoe horses or prepare buggies for rental, but no one quibbled with the quality of his work. Why couldn't at least one of the women who'd set her sights on Peter turn them to Harvey Gilmore? While he was ten years older than Peter, that shouldn't discourage a woman, should it? Harvey was well-respected by the community and would be a good provider. Surely Bertha or ...

"There she is." The train's whistle followed by the screech of brakes left no doubt that the stationmaster was announcing the arrival of the train from Austin, not one of the women who'd commandeered Peter's thoughts.

Though he had no reason to meet the train, Peter followed Mr. Wallace onto the platform and watched as the conductor opened the door to help the passengers disembark. Most days at least half

a dozen people exited the train, planning to spend a night or two at the Grand Carr. The combination of Gideon's unique design and Theodore Conrad's advertising campaign that touted Carr Valley as "the most beautiful town on the Conrad Texas and West's Austin to Fredericksburg line" kept the hotel at full occupancy most nights. Today, however, no one was rushing to climb down from the train.

The conductor shook his head as if confused, then snapped to attention when a woman stood at the top of the steps, the almost imperious angle of her head indicating that she was waiting for his assistance. She was taller than most women, only an inch or so shorter than Peter's own five feet ten inches, her hair so dark brown that it appeared almost black. He knew enough about women's clothing to recognize the expensive fabric and the impeccable cut of the stranger's coat, and unless he was mistaken—which he doubted was the case—her clothing had been made in Europe.

The woman who was descending from the train looked like the socialites he'd glimpsed in Philadelphia, making him wonder whether Mr. Conrad's advertisements had reached the East Coast. When she raised her head, shock caused Peter's heart to skip a beat. Joy was here.