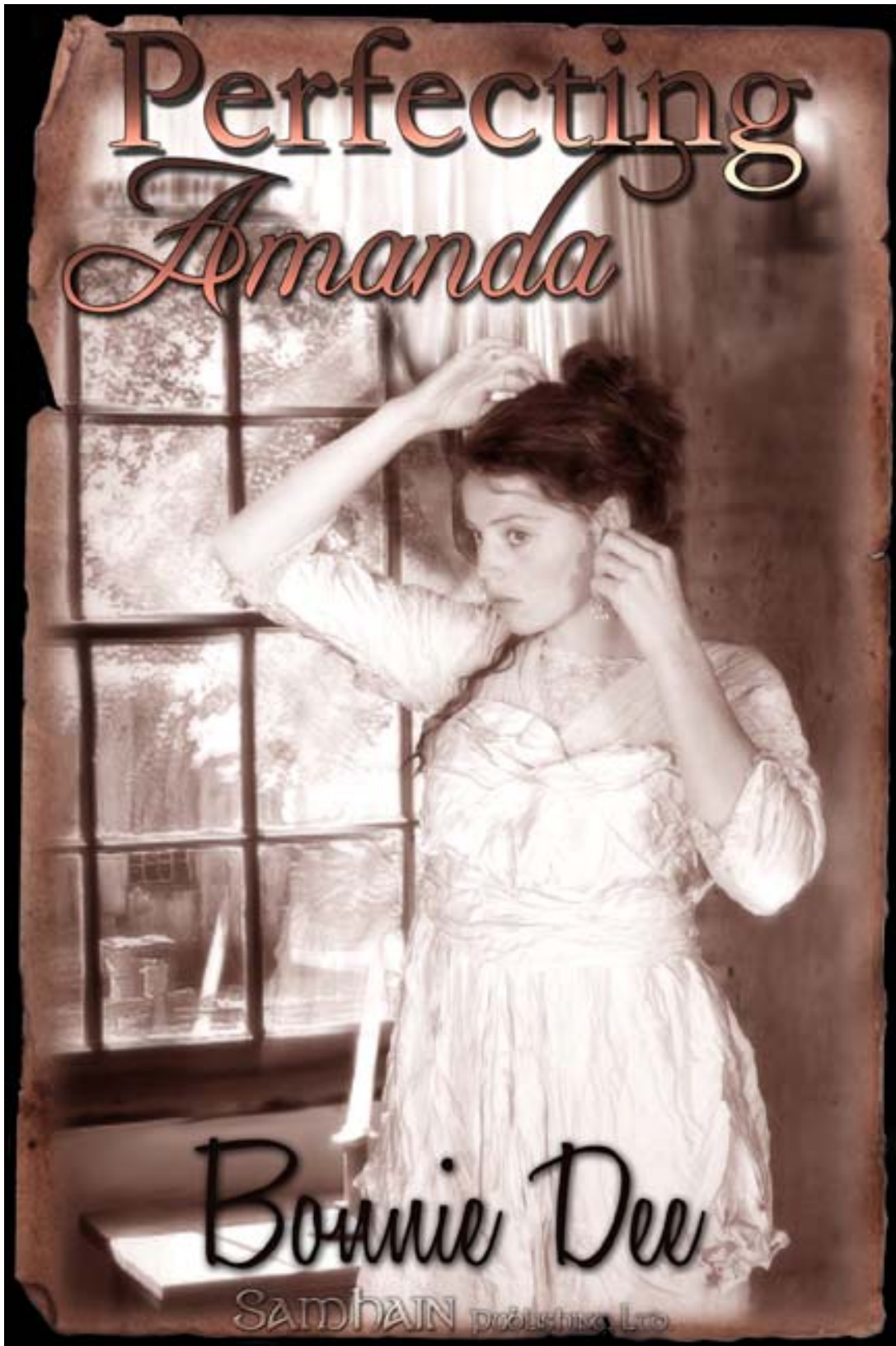


Perfecting *Amanda*



Bonnie Dee

SAMHAIN publishing, Ltd.

eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Perfecting Amanda
Copyright © 2007 by Bonnie Dee

Cover by Vanessa Hawthorne

ISBN: 1-59998-607-8
www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: September 2007

Perfecting Amanda

Bonnie Dee

Dedication

To Mike, the king of my hill.

Chapter One

Kansas City, 1893

Amanda McCormick frowned and checked the time on the gold watch pinned to the front of her jacket. Her prospective husband was very late. What if he never arrived? What if this ill-conceived adventure was the biggest mistake of her life?

She'd been waiting over an hour on the bench in front of the Kansas City train depot, feet crossed at the ankles, hands folded on her lap. She examined each new man who came into view as they walked to the ticket window or passed the depot on their way to the feed store. Some glanced at her as they passed, but none walked up to her with recognition on his face. No one was there for her.

The Missouri heat was smothering her. Sun reflected off the weathered gray boards of the depot, making her seat on the bench even hotter. Sweat trickled down her spine and her clothes clung to her skin. Back home in Michigan, a cool breeze blew off the lake on even the hottest summer afternoon. Right now she'd be sitting on the side veranda of her aunt and uncle's house drinking a cold glass of lemonade if she'd listened to her family instead of her own impetuous heart.

As she gazed down the dusty street at the bustle of wagons, pedestrians and horses jostling for space, a pervading sense of fear swelled inside her. She may have made a very serious mistake in traveling west to meet a near stranger. Her relatives' doubts about her long-distance engagement to Travis Baxter appeared to be coming true.

“Excuse me, miss. I noticed you’ve been waitin’ here a while. Are you expecting someone?”

Amanda jumped at the voice which suddenly came from behind her. She turned toward the station agent. Bushy eyebrows and a huge handlebar moustache dominated his face.

“My fiancé is supposed to meet me, but maybe he misunderstood the time.” She didn’t believe her own words. Mr. Baxter had sent her the ticket and railroad schedule along with his last letter. There was no mistake about where and when they would meet.

“What’s your fiancé’s name?”

“Travis Baxter. He’s coming from Reederville, Kansas. Maybe something happened to detain him.” She tried to imagine what that might be. Had an accident befallen him or was he merely running late?

“I’m sure your feller will be along soon, Miss...?”

“McCormick. Amanda McCormick.” She extended her gloved hand, noticing the white was now a grimy gray.

The station agent took her hand with a smile. “Well, Miss McCormick. Your fiancé wouldn’t keep you waitin’ on purpose. No doubt he’ll be here soon. If you want to sit inside my office, I can’t promise it’s cooler than out here, but at least you’d have some privacy.”

She glanced at the other benches outside the station. People stood on the boardwalk with baggage near their feet waiting to catch the next train. A couple of old men, who looked like permanent fixtures on their benches, watched people come and go.

Surely Travis would be there any minute now and if she went inside, she might miss his arrival. Besides, with its tin roof and tiny windows the station office would be like an oven. Outdoors at least an occasional bone-dry breeze lifted the damp tendrils of hair from her forehead. “No thank you, sir. I’ll continue to wait out here.”

The station agent paused another moment, seemingly in no hurry to get back inside. “So, this fiancé of yours, what does he look like?”

“Oh.” She blushed at having to admit she’d never seen the man she had agreed to marry, not even a tintype. All she had to go on was Travis’s description of himself. “Um, about six feet tall, brown hair and blue eyes. He’s a farmer.” That was all she had to offer. It wasn’t much and could have described any man. It suddenly struck her what a long way she’d traveled to meet a man who might never appear, leaving her stranded and practically penniless in a town far from home. Her stomach clenched and she felt sick.

The station agent was so friendly Amanda confided, “I’ve never actually met Mr. Baxter, you see. We corresponded through the post, fell in love and I’ve come from Michigan to marry him.”

“Ah.” The man nodded. “Well, young ladies are still scarce out here, although it’s hardly the frontier anymore. Sometimes it’s not easy to find the right spouse.” He patted her shoulder. “There are worse ways to begin a marriage. Don’t worry, young lady, I’m sure your fiancé will be here soon.”

She smiled and nodded then turned her attention to her purse, rummaging through it as if there was something she needed. Now that she’d shared so much information with the ticket agent, she wished he’d go away and leave her alone with her worries.

Taking her cue, the agent strolled up the uneven boards of the walkway and disappeared back inside the station.

Amanda opened her reticule, took out the last letter Travis had sent her and unfolded the creased pages to re-read his words.

Dear Amanda,

It was wonderful to receive your last letter telling about your preparations for your trip to Reederville. I’m doing my own preparations here so the house will be ready for you. There are improvements that will make your household chores much easier, such as an indoor pump at the kitchen sink. In the future, I plan to do more to modernize the old house.

I can’t tell you how happy I am you accepted my proposal. Over the months of our correspondence, I’ve begun to feel a connection with you that I was unable to find with any of the women I know here in Kansas.

Enclosed are the train schedule and a ticket to Kansas City. I will be there to pick you up at the depot.

The letter had included both time and date. There was no possibility she'd gotten the wrong day. After telling her a bit more about the farm and his plans for its future, he had ended the letter with the more personal address, "Your devoted Travis," which he'd begun using after her acceptance of his proposal.

So where was her devoted Travis now? In his letters, he'd seemed a caring individual and the type to be punctual and orderly, but Amanda had no way of knowing what the man was really like. Her eyes prickled. She blinked, determined not to shed one tear in front of the curious old men on the bench nearby. She wiped a gloved finger beneath one eye.

A shadow fell over her.

She squinted up at the man standing before her, silhouetted against the sun. He was a dark shape without features against the bright light. It was impossible to read his expression.

"Miss McCormick? Amanda?" His deep voice reverberated up her spine.

"Mr. Baxter?" She shaded her eyes and squinted as she tried to focus on his face.

"Please, call me Travis. I can't believe you're really here. I'm so happy to see you." He moved out of the sunlight and she could finally see him.

Her breath caught. Travis Baxter was even more handsome than she'd pictured him in her daydreams and she was even more nervous than she'd imagined she'd be at this first meeting. Beneath his flat-crowned black hat, dark hair curled over the edge of his white collar. Two slightly up-tilted black eyebrows gave him a quizzical expression and accented, vivid blue eyes glittered with reflected sunlight. He wore a sharp, blue suit with a string tie and a deep burgundy vest. His long legs ended in a pair of fancy black boots. The man didn't look like a farmer at all. It touched her that he must have bought these brand new, fashionable clothes to impress his soon-to-be bride.

Amanda continued to stare as he took a seat beside her on the bench. It was hard to believe this was the simple, salt of the earth man with whom she'd exchanged correspondence for almost a year, the man with whom she chosen to spend the rest of her life. "Travis Baxter?"

He smiled. "I'm sorry for being so late. I had trouble on the road." He removed his hat and rested it on one knee. His dark hair lifted in the breeze. "I'm so happy to finally meet you, Amanda. Although we *have* met before, haven't we? Your letters made me feel like I've known you forever. I can call you Amanda now rather than Miss McCormick, can't I, since we're practically husband and wife?"

"Oh... Yes. Of course." Travis had called her that in his letters for a while now, but it must seem strange to him to say it aloud to a woman he'd only just met in person. He enveloped her hand in his warm grasp. She felt the heat through her thin kid gloves.

"Darling, I've dreamed of this day."

Amanda's mouth opened, but no words came out. Travis had never once referred to her as "darling" in any of his letters. He was much more effusive in person than she would have expected, not at all like the reserved man she'd come to know through his writing.

"You must be parched and near fainting in this heat. Let's go to the hotel and have a drink before dinner. I've arranged rooms for the night. It's a long drive home and I thought you'd traveled enough for one day. We'll head out tomorrow." Travis stood and drew Amanda to her feet.

"My bags." She gestured toward her trunk and valises.

"We'll get them later. Take what you need for the night and the depot manager can store the rest until tomorrow."

The force of Travis's strong personality swept her along. A night in a hotel wasn't what she'd expected. He'd said in his last letter they would be married by the preacher in Reederville before going home to the farm. However, exhausted as she was from the journey and from nerves, it would be nice not to travel any more today and perhaps to enjoy the luxury of a bath at the hotel. Amanda didn't want to admit even to herself that the idea of the wedding and particularly the wedding night,

was beginning to frighten her out of her wits. What would it be like to be intimate with a near stranger?

“How was your trip?” Travis asked.

Amanda selected the small valise she'd used for her night in the sleeper compartment of the train. “It went well. There was a delay while they made a repair and once we had to wait for cattle crossing, but overall the train made good time.”

“Wonderful. And how was leaving home? Difficult?”

“My family wished me well, although they still don't approve my decision.” It was an understatement. Amanda's aunt and uncle, who'd raised her since she was eight, thought she was crazy for rejecting the suitable young men of South Haven to travel west and marry a stranger. They didn't understand the connection that had grown between her and Travis through exchanged letters, how her feelings for him had grown strong enough to allow her to say “yes” to his proposal. “It was hard to say goodbye to them and to my cousins.”

Travis slipped an arm around her waist. His nearness was overwhelming, making her pulse race and her body tingle in unseemly places. Amanda wanted to shy away like a skittish horse.

He cupped the side of her face and kissed her mouth lightly. “I'm sorry to hear that. I'll do everything I can to keep you from being homesick.”

Her cheeks burned and her lips vibrated with the imprint of his kiss. The brief touch of his hand on her cheek left a phantom pressure behind when he pulled away. The sudden rush of lustful feelings inside shamed her. She felt anyone could see how aroused she was by his soft kiss, but when she glanced at the thinning crowd nearby, no one was even looking at them.

Travis beckoned a porter. “Could you please move my fiancée's things into storage for the night? We'll be back for them tomorrow.”

The tall, black man in a navy blue uniform nodded, picked up two of Amanda's cases and carried them into the depot.

“The El Dorado is nearby and it’s the best hotel in town.” Travis’s hand pressed the small of her back as he led her away from the depot.

Pedestrians plunged across the street whenever there was a break in the heavy traffic. Travis guided Amanda around a pile of steaming dung and hurried her out of the way of an oncoming wagon and onto the sidewalk. His hand at her waist was strong and steady and felt like it was burning right through the fabric of her clothes. She liked the sense of protection he gave her, making her feel safe and cared for. The nervous fears about her wedding night were slowly fading, replaced by an eager curiosity. How frightening could intercourse be if his slightest touch felt so good?

“It’s busy here. Very different from back home,” she said.

Travis slid his hand up her back and rubbed her shoulder. “I hope I can make Kansas feel like home for you.” He turned her toward him and leaned to kiss her lips again, a soft, lingering pressure that made her pulse flutter. Pulling back, he looked down into her eyes. “I’ll certainly try.”

His steady blue gaze seemed to plumb her depths and read her secret thoughts. Amanda’s stomach flipped. Between her legs, the pulsing heat grew. She dropped her gaze and walked on, cheeks flushing.

“Is this the El Dorado?” She stared up at one of the largest buildings on the street with “El Dorado” emblazoned on the sign over the door and felt foolish for asking.

“I hope you like it.” Travis took her elbow to guide her through the door into the hotel.



Spencer Teague, flush with cash due to some lucky cards the previous night, was in the mood to spend it on a woman, but not the whores and barmaids who were his usual companions. Today he wanted to converse with and make love to a fine, high-class woman outside of his normal sphere, someone who could be an interesting dinner companion

as well as assuage his sexual needs. With his charm and luck, maybe he could seduce some Kansas City society matron at the tea room in the El Dorado hotel.

But his afternoon agenda abruptly changed when he saw the woman sitting on the bench in front of the depot. The copper flash of her hair, her elegant features and wide hazel eyes scanning the crowd set his pulse racing. Spence wanted to be the person she was searching for.

His life philosophy had always been simple: “Want. Take. Have.” When he saw the pretty redhead, his loins sprang to life and he sauntered over to find out what her story was and how available she might be. As luck would have it and his luck was almost always good, he got there just in time to hear her tell the station agent her story. Spence learned her name, her destination and all the information he needed about her prospective husband.

Acting on impulse, as was his nature, he decided to play the part of the fiancé and see how far he could get with the lovely Amanda McCormick. It was harmless fun, an intriguing diversion on a sweltering August afternoon. He became Travis Baxter, loving fiancé, on the spot, cajoling her to come with him to the El Dorado with no trouble at all. Her reaction to his kiss was revealing. She was hot and eager for some sexual relief—she just didn’t know it yet.

In the lobby of the hotel, Spence paused a moment to take stock and plan his next move. “Darling, I’ll escort you to the tea room then make sure our rooms are ready and have someone carry your bag up.”

“All right.” Amanda gazed around the opulent lobby of the fanciest hotel in Kansas City and he wagered she’d never seen the like back in Michigan. The floor was covered with expensive carpets and scattered with small gilt chairs and potted ferns. Overhead, fans stirred the stifling air, keeping the hotel a few degrees cooler than the oppressive heat outside.

Spence chose a table in a private, shadowy corner of the tea room and pulled back a chair for Amanda. He stooped to kiss her cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

At the front desk, the concierge perked up when Spence offered him several bills. “I’d like your best room for the night with champagne waiting in the room.”

“Yes, sir.” The man didn’t blink when Spence signed the guest registry *Mr. and Mrs. John Smith*, even though Spence already had another, smaller room in the hotel under his own name.

After crossing the lobby again, he stood in the doorway of the tea room for a moment, looking at his pretend bride-to-be with fascination, admiring her long, pale neck, her oval face and clear eyes, the swell of her breasts beneath her white blouse and her bright, auburn curls. Spence pictured that hair tumbling down from its pins or fanned across a white pillowcase. He imagined her breasts free of the constraining shirtwaist and corset. They’d be full and round, the nipples a deep rose color. He fantasized Amanda’s eyes closing and her lips parting in ecstasy. His cock stiffened and he smiled. An evening of pleasure lay ahead if he played his cards carefully—and Spencer Teague always played carefully, especially when he cheated.

Chapter Two

Amanda looked up as Travis walked toward her across the room. Her pulse sped and her breath caught. Despite the wilting heat, he looked crisp and cool, his white shirt dazzling against his dark blue coat and the burgundy vest stylish without being flashy.

Travis looked collected and confident, making her feel messy and awkward as a child. Her hand went to her hair, tucking strands back into her loose bun. Then the man's penetrating gaze swept over her body and Amanda felt like anything but a child. It was as if he were undressing her with his eyes.

Her hand dropped to the front of her blouse and fiddled with the top button. Beneath the cotton blouse and chemise, her breasts felt like they were swelling and expanding. Her nipples grew hard and tender where they brushed against the lacy top of her corset. Between her legs the aching, pulsing sensation started up again. Amanda shifted in her chair and pressed her thighs together to stop it. She was glad her fiancé was such a pleasing figure of a man. It wouldn't be difficult to be intimate with him when the time came, but a hotel tea room was not the place to be experiencing these base urges.

Travis sat across from her, setting his hat on the table. "Now you must tell me more about your trip."

"I've never ridden on a train before. It was exciting at first, but after a few hours—"

He laughed. "The novelty wears off quickly. Still, it's more comfortable than stagecoach and faster than a riverboat."

Amanda was puzzled. "I thought you hadn't traveled much. In your letters you said you grew up on the farm, that it was your brother who left the homestead and headed west."

"Yes. But even a farm boy has to go somewhere occasionally. I've taken a few short trips."

The waiter appeared almost magically beside the table and Travis ordered lemonade and vodka for both of them.

Amanda frowned. "What is vodka?"

"A tonic. It's a Russian import, very restorative for the constitution and it will help you relax after your stressful journey." Travis leaned forward, arms crossed on the table, and locked his gaze with hers. "Please, tell me all about Michigan. I want to hear everything about your life."

She smiled. "I don't think there's anything I haven't told you in my letters. My life up to this point hasn't been very exciting."

"Hearing it from your own lips is like learning all about you for the first time. Besides, I love the sound of your voice. It's so light and musical. Beautiful...like you." The word "beautiful" came out low and husky. His gaze lingered on her lips.

Her tongue darted out to lick them and she swallowed. Her musical voice seemed to be frozen in her throat. "Th-thank you," she stammered. His compliments made the aching in her breasts and between her legs intensify.

As if aware he was making her too nervous, Travis dropped his gaze to the menu the waiter had handed him. "Are you hungry? It's early, but we could order something light to keep us until supper."

At his words, her stomach growled. She blushed. "I wouldn't mind."

The waiter returned with their drinks and Travis ordered biscuits and jam.

Amanda sipped the cold, sweet-tart lemonade. She found she was so thirsty that when she set the glass back down, it was half empty. "That's delicious. I've never had lemonade with such a bite to it."

Travis sipped his drink and smiled. "So, tell me more about your family."

"As I mentioned in my letters, my parents died of influenza when I was eight and I've lived with my mother's family ever since. My aunt and uncle's home is very close to Lake Michigan in a town called South Haven. My cousins are a bit older than me. Dale and Dennis, the twins, work at my uncle's hardware store and both are married. Alice just married the son of the Presbyterian minister in town. Rose is attending a ladies' college. She plans to become a teacher."

Travis looked at her. "You sound wistful. Did you want to go to college, too?"

She dipped her head and rearranged her cutlery. Rose's admission to college was a sore point and not something she had shared with Travis before. "There wasn't enough money for both of us to go. Alice is their daughter. I couldn't ask Aunt Millie and Uncle Ned to pay for me. The money my parents left me was long since used up on my care."

"No one put it in trust for you?"

She shook her head. "Five children is a lot to raise even with Uncle Ned owning a store. They needed to use the money for my clothes and things." Travis seemed to be suggesting her relatives had taken advantage of her finances. She frowned. "They love me like their own child. My aunt and uncle did not misuse my inheritance."

Travis offered a conciliatory smile. "Of course not. I didn't mean to imply that."

Amanda finished her lemonade and set the empty glass on the table.

"You want another?" Before she could answer, Travis beckoned the waiter again.

Her stomach felt warm and her head light and airy. She suddenly realized they'd been talking almost exclusively about her. She had many questions for Travis about himself, Reederville and the farm. It was time to turn the conversation. "You said you had trouble on the road. What happened?"

“Wagon broke down. A wheel. I fixed it as best I could, enough to get me the rest of the way here then left it at the livery stable for repair. It should be right as rain for our journey home tomorrow.” Travis leaned farther across the small table. He extended his hand and touched her cheek. “I’m so sorry I kept you waiting. It must have been frightening sitting at the station alone. I hope you never doubted I would come.”

His piercing eyes were like deep wells she might fall into and never be able to climb out of. She blinked and tried to focus. “No. I wasn’t worried,” she lied. “I knew you’d arrive eventually.” Another drink was placed in front of her and she picked it up and sipped.

Travis offered her the plate of biscuits with butter and jam.

She took one and bit into the light, flaky, sweetness. It made the lemonade seem sour. Her stomach rumbled and she covered the noise with a question. “What’s Reederville like?”

“Quiet. Small. Reederville isn’t too far across the state line into Kansas.” He shrugged. “What can I tell you? It’s farm country. There’s a lot of...wheat. And, uh, corn.”

His lack of enthusiasm was surprising after the way he’d spoken about the land in his letters. His written descriptions of rich earth and abundant crops had piqued her interest in seeing the fertile plains. And his plans for acquiring more land and expanding his farm had let her know she would have a fine, comfortable home in which to raise their children. It sounded like the perfect place to have a family. Now, Travis didn’t sound very excited about the farm at all. Instead, he told her a couple of stories about unusual characters in Reederville and about how quickly a grass fire could spread across the plain.

“It’s very flat land. You can see both sunrise and sunset and any kind of weather moving in,” he said. “But you’ll see Reederville and the farm soon. Right now I’d like to enjoy this elegant hotel, relax and spend some time getting to know each other. Are you ready to go up to the room and rest?”

She looked down at the plate of biscuits, surprised to find only crumbs. Her lemonade glass was empty again, too. When she looked

back up at her fiancé, her eyes seemed to move slower than her head. She must be more tired than she'd thought. "Yes, please."

Travis stood, pulled out her chair and helped her rise. He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and led her to the lobby and up the broad curving stairway. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. There was a mix up about the rooms. I asked for separate rooms, but they put us in a suite. I'll sleep on the sofa. It will only be for this one night. Tomorrow we'll be married by the minister in Reederville and no one ever needs to know we had to share a room tonight."

Amanda was shocked. They might be engaged, but to consider sharing a room, even in platonic innocence, was unheard of. The heat in her cheeks flared again and between her legs it felt as if melted honey had been poured over her privates.

She opened her mouth to protest, but her tongue felt thick and it was hard to form words. "I suppose it will be all right. As you say, no one needs to know and we'll be married tomorrow."

It was all she could do to keep her balance as she walked up the stairs, clinging to Travis's arm. She was definitely ready to lie down.

Two flights up, they walked down a short hall and Travis unlocked the door of a room and opened it.

"Just a minute. We have to do this properly." He put an arm around her back, another behind her legs and swooped her off her feet.

Her head spun giddily.

He carried her into the room, turning sideways so they could both fit through the door. Amanda knocked her head against the frame and they both laughed at the clumsy moment.

Travis set her down on her feet, cradled her head and kissed the side of it. "Sorry, darling."

Amanda gazed glassy-eyed at the luxurious hotel room, as large as two small bedrooms. There were many fine, fancy homes in South Haven where Chicago people came by train to spend their summer vacations. But she'd never been inside them. Her uncle's modest home was adequate to house their large family, but the décor was simple and

utilitarian. She'd certainly never seen such opulence as this in her entire life. A tall four-poster bed stood at one end of the room. A small sitting area with sofa and chair faced a fireplace, unlit in the August heat. On a table by the divan were glasses and a silver basin with a bottle of champagne floating in half-melted ice water. Two large windows with ornately looped royal blue drapes overlooked the street and let in the harsh, late afternoon sunlight.

Travis led her to the sofa and settled her there. He popped the cork on the champagne and poured two glasses then crossed to the windows and released one side of each drape to dim the room. The windows were open but let in little breeze, only dust. A ceiling fan turned slowly above them, but did little to cut the heat. "I'm sorry it's so hot. It doesn't make it very romantic."

Amanda agreed. Perspiration beaded on her forehead, dampened her armpits and the length of her spine. She felt sweaty and not very beautiful with her hair straggling down from her coiffure.

Sitting down next to her on the sofa, he handed her a glass of champagne. He raised his glass and touched it to hers. "To our union."

She sipped the ice-cold fizz much too fast. It tasted sweet yet dry and felt so cool going down her parched throat.

Travis set his glass aside, loosened his tie and removed his jacket and vest. He unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt.

She watched as if from a distance, feeling too disoriented to react. The only thought that formed in her mind was how handsome he looked in just his shirtsleeves. His shirt was so clean and white she wanted to reach out and touch it—touch the man beneath it and see what his hard muscles and warm body felt like. Her fingers ached to know, finally, what a man was really like.

Moving closer to her on the settee, Travis reached to cup her face in one hand and bent his head to kiss her lips.

She felt his warm breath on her mouth and then soft wetness. Her eyes drifted closed and her lips parted in a little gasp. It wasn't as if she'd never been kissed before, she reminded herself. Doug McCray had

graduated from holding her hand to kissing her before he left for college and she never saw him again. But this felt completely different. The pressure of Travis's lips was more assertive and considerably less sloppy than Doug's inexperienced kisses.

Travis stroked his thumb along the side of her jaw and moved his mouth against hers. The wet tip of his tongue brushed her lips.

Amanda started and her eyes flew open. But, as he caressed and kissed her, slowly, seductively, possessively, her eyes fell shut again. She relaxed and allowed the pressure of his mouth to increase and his tongue to slide as smoothly as the brush of fingertips over her closed lips.

When he pulled away, she leaned toward his absent mouth. Her eyes opened once more and met his.

They were hooded, dark with desire. "You're so beautiful."

She half-smiled, embarrassed and thrilled at the compliment. On occasion Doug had said she looked pretty, but no one had ever called her beautiful. It wasn't a word she connected with her appearance, but Travis's intense gaze told her he was speaking the truth as he saw it.

He sat back, took another sip of champagne and pushed a hand through his dark brown hair, lifting it from his forehead. "It's unbearably hot in here."

She drank from her glass, too, then set it down and fanned her face with her hand. "Yes. It really is."

"Perhaps if..." He reached out and unbuttoned the neck of her blouse.

She batted his hand away, abruptly alert and shocked. "Mr. Baxter!"

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry for taking such liberty, but you'd be so much cooler in just your chemise." He nodded at the silver basin that had held the champagne bottle. "And we have all that ice. It would cool your body."

Her hand went to the front of her blouse, poised over her heart. She stared at the ice then at his ice-blue eyes that made her hotter instead of cooling her. Her heart beat between her legs as well as in her chest,

pounding fast and erratic. “I suppose we *are* to be wed tomorrow. Maybe it would be all right...just because of the heat.” She unbuttoned the top button of her high-necked blouse. Then the second...and the third, her fingers trembling and her flesh going simultaneously hot and cold as she exposed it.

She was frightened, yes, but she also incredibly excited in a way she’d never felt before in her life. Taking off her blouse in front of her fiancé was more thrilling than the time she’d ridden Cousin Dale’s bicycle down the big hill near their house and nearly crashed at the bottom. She felt anything might happen now as she careened out of control and she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, do a thing to stop it.

Amanda’s gaze never left Travis’s face while his stayed riveted on her moving fingers and the increments of flesh revealed to him.

Blood rushed through her veins and roared in her ears. She couldn’t believe her audacity in disrobing for a stranger, prospective husband or not. And yet her hands kept moving until the entire row of buttons on the front of her blouse was unfastened. She grasped the open front of the blouse and the little lilac jacket and slid both down her shoulders and off her arms.

Travis gazed at the pale swell of cleavage rising above her corset then his eyes returned to her face. “It’s a wonder you don’t pass out wearing that thing. Turn around and I’ll loosen it for you so you can breathe. The idea of corsets is ludicrous, don’t you think?”

As if in a trance, she turned her back to him. In a moment she felt his hands working at the ribbons harnessing her into the corset. Her eyes closed and she breathed in, intimately aware of his proximity and the heat of his hands moving near her back. She felt the ties loosen and her rib cage expanded as she drew a deeper breath. She caught a whiff of Travis’s cologne underlain with his own male scent. Another wave of arousal swept through her at the basic masculine odor that awakened the femininity in her.

His hands moved around her sides, removing the corset from her body. “There. That’s better. It’s much too hot a day for propriety.” Warm

laughter percolated in his voice. His breath puffed against her bare shoulder as he spoke.

That was when she fully realized she was sitting in nothing but her thin chemise, her breasts unbound from the restraining corset. Her back was still to him. He hadn't seen her yet and she felt both dread and excitement at the prospect of turning around. He would be able to see the shape of her breasts and even her nipples through the sheer fabric.

He moved in front of her, dropping to his knees at her feet, not letting his gaze linger on her chest. "Shoes, too." He bent his head, concentrating on working the long row of shoe-buttons out of their holes.

She gazed down at the crown of his head. His hair grew in a neat circle from a central point, but there was also a counter swirl an inch to the right, making an endearingly boyish cowlick. The sight of him bowed over her feet was entrancing. Amanda held her breath, waiting for him to take a shoe off and actually touch her foot, her stomach fluttering at the prospect.

Travis looked up at her with a grin. "Lots of buttons." He turned back to his task, fighting the buttons until he finally released her feet. He tossed one shoe then the other on the floor and caressed her stockinged feet.

She shivered at the foreign touch where no hands but her own had ever been before. She feared her sweating feet might be aromatically indelicate, but he didn't hesitate to fondle them. His fingers rubbed the bottoms of each foot and squeezed her toes. He grasped her ankles and smoothed his hands up toward her calves, kneading and pressing her flesh.

Her body quivered with desire. Her hardened nipples pressed against her chemise. She wanted his hands to go higher still, to roam farther up beneath her skirt. What would it feel like to have him touch her there—right where the throbbing ache between her legs yearned for a touch? Her lips parted and her breathing was ragged.

Travis released her legs and sat back on his heels. Smiling, he looked up at her flushed face. “Will it offend you if I take off my shirt and vest, too? This room really is stifling.”

Beyond words, she nodded then gazed in fascination as he unbuttoned his shirt and shucked off both shirt and vest. Beneath them, he wore a sleeveless undershirt that displayed his muscled biceps.

He was not a brawny man, but lean and wiry. Despite the lack of bulk, his shoulders and chest were strong and well built—probably from pushing a plow, although his skin wasn’t as tanned as she would have expected from long hours under the sun.

Realizing she was gaping at his body, she glanced up to his face to find him grinning at her. She blushed. Or thought she did. At this point she’d been going deeper shades of red for so long she must look like a tomato.

“Will you let me do something for you?” he asked. “Something that will cool you down?”

Again she nodded then cleared her throat and croaked, “All right.”

He rose from his knees and took several shards of rapidly melting ice from the champagne bucket. Seating himself behind her on the sofa, he touched the ice to the base of her neck then slid it across her back from shoulder to shoulder.

She sucked in an audible breath, squirming at the cool sensation on her over-heated skin.

Behind her, Travis chuckled. He dipped the hand with the ice over her shoulder and ran it along her neck, collarbones and chest. Droplets of water rolled down to collect on the tops of her breasts then settle in the valley of her cleavage. As he rolled the ice over her hot flesh again and again, the ice melted and the top of the chemise became damp then soaked transparent. The wet fabric outlined her heaving breasts and the dark hue of each straining nipple.

Her gaze fixed on Travis’s moving hand, the bit of ice growing smaller as it melted. She gasped and shivered when he licked the back of her neck and along her shoulders.

“Mm, salty.” His voice was a low rumble. “Taste.” He reached over her shoulder to turn her head toward him and covered her mouth with his. When his tongue insinuated between her lips, she tasted the salty flavor of her own sweat. A quiet moan issued from her lips, the desperate, hungry sound shocking her. Was she that wanton? What must he think of her, capitulating to him so easily—even if they were to be wed tomorrow?

It was awkward turning her head to kiss Travis over her shoulder, but there was also something very erotic about the angle exposing the side of her neck to his caressing fingers. His hot hand moved from her throat to her chest and lower still until he cupped one of her breasts, fondling and squeezing lightly.

If his touch on her ankles and calves had aroused her, his hand molding the damp material of her chemise around her breast set her on fire. She struggled for air, while he continued kissing her deeper.

He pulled away just long enough for her to gasp in a breath.

“Is this all right?” Without waiting for an answer, he went back to kissing her and rubbing her taut nipple with his thumb.

Instead of protesting and pushing him away, she arched into his hand. They weren’t married yet. This must be a sin, but for the life of her she didn’t care.

He kissed her jaw, her neck, the top of her shoulder then turned her body to face him. Leaning down, he licked the sheen of water glistening on her chest. When his tongue lapped over the top curves of her breasts, Amanda sucked in a breath. He kissed and licked along the neckline of her chemise then dipped even lower and took her erect nipple into his mouth, tasting it through the thin fabric.

The sensitive bud ached at the feeling of his hot, wet mouth surrounding it. She put a tentative hand on his head, holding him to her. She wanted more, much more and wasn’t even sure what “more” meant.

Travis looked up at her. “May I?”

Without any idea of what he wanted to do, she nodded. Yes, of course he could do anything. Anything! It felt so good.

Lifting the hem of her chemise, he pulled it up.

She raised her arms so he could draw it over her head and sat bare-breasted before him, shivering despite the heat.

Travis took more ice chips floating in bucket of water, leaned forward and offered her a shard to suck on. She accepted it on her hot tongue like a communion wafer. It sated her thirst, leaving her mouth fresh and cold.

Resting another piece of ice on the slope of her breast, he eased it down the contour toward her nipple.

Her stomach jumped and her breast quivered as the freezing cube of ice smeared over her aureole and hard, peaked nipple. She whimpered in pleasure, arching her chest.

Travis transferred the melting ice to her other nipple, circling slowly around the mound of her breast toward the hard point in the center. He glanced up at her with a mischievous grin on his face. "Feeling cooler?"

No. She felt like she was in the heart of a blazing inferno. Not only her stomach, but the private place between her legs clenched and released in spasms. For a brief moment, she dared to imagine the cube of ice tracing over her privates. The thought made her sex contract even harder. "Please," she whispered.

"You want me to stop?" The smug smile on his face let her know he was quite aware she didn't want him to end this exquisite torture.

She shook her head.

"Stand up. Let me help you out of your skirt and petticoats." When she hesitated, Travis added, "There's no need to be shy, darling. We *are* engaged and by tomorrow we'll be wed. What's the harm in having our wedding night a little early?"

She stood with her arms crossed over her breasts, shielding them from his sight as though he hadn't just touched them intimately. Once more, her face flamed at the thought of him seeing her completely naked. Her sense of morality told her it was wrong while her base instincts wanted more of the exciting feelings Travis roused in her.

“Here.” He poured another glass of champagne and stood to offer it to her. “I’ll go first so you don’t feel so strange, all right?” He lifted the undershirt over his head and cast it on the floor then unfastened his pants with surprising casualness, as though he stripped in front of strange, young women every day.

Amanda sipped the champagne, emptying her glass as she stared at Travis disrobing. She’d never seen a naked man in her life. For that matter, she’d rarely seen a shirtless man, only occasionally, working in a field. Even on the hottest day, workmen wore undershirts in public. The sight of Travis’s tight muscles rippling under smooth skin held her transfixed. His body was beautiful, like the Greek gods draped in togas, pictured in mythology books. Those beautiful pictures had always left her with an odd, aching feeling she only now recognized as desire because the feeling was magnified a hundredfold as she took in every curve and angle of his body.

He finished stripping then straightened and stood before her, nude. It was impossible for her to keep from examining what lay below his waist. A sparse trail of hair led from his navel to a dark thatch at the juncture of his legs. Thrusting toward her in a demanding way was a thick, erect shaft, mottled red, with veins throbbing along its length. The round head was almost purple. So, this was a penis, the thing that would fill her yearning sex and give it relief—the font of new life, the progenitor of children.

The penis was much bigger than Amanda had thought it would be.

She realized she’d been gaping directly at Travis’s groin for several moments and her gaze shot up to his face. Amanda swayed on her feet, suddenly dizzy from the combination of champagne, heat and surging lust.

Travis stepped forward, took her empty glass and set it on the table. He moved in close and held her against his hot body, thrusting his hands into her hair to hold her head steady while he kissed her deeply. His tongue plunged into her mouth and his lips encompassed hers.

Her breasts were smashed against his hard chest. Her arms went up around his neck, holding him close, gripping his shoulders to steady herself as his kiss increased the dizzy swirling in her head.

His hands combed through her hair, disarranging her loosely-piled bun. He pulled away from her mouth to whisper, "I want to see you with this down," then removed her hairpins so her long hair tumbled around her shoulders.

"Beautiful red hair." He lifted handfuls of curls and let them trickle from his fingers. "Bright as fire."

"It's not really red." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. Her brazen hair color had always been an embarrassment. She longed to be blonde or brunette like all her cousins. "It's auburn."

"Sorry, sweetheart. This is definitely red." He leaned in and kissed the mass of hair he held and for the first time in her life, Amanda didn't mind the color of her hair.

Turning her around with his hands at her waist, he unfastened the buttons on the side of her skirt and let it fall to the floor. He peeled off her petticoats and stockings, leaving her clad only in bloomers.

Seeming to understand she wasn't ready to surrender them, he held her close then lifted her in his arms to carry her across the room and lay her on the bed. He pulled back the covers to reveal clean, white sheets.

Amanda scooted over onto the sheet, which felt cool and smooth against her naked back. However, the rest of her body burned with mingled guilt, excitement, arousal and fear. It was far too late to wait for the wedding night now. She could see it in his erection and feel it in the desire raging inside her. At the same time that she longed for him, she assessed the size of his penis and feared it. Surely her body wasn't meant to encompass such a large organ. She breathed shakily as conflicting thoughts and emotions galloped through her like a herd of wild horses.

Travis smiled. "It's all right. Relax." He stretched out on the bed next to her and leaned over her to kiss her again. His mouth busily entertained hers, keeping her breathless with wet, searching kisses,

while his hand slid down her body. He caressed her breasts, fondling and pulling her nipples before slipping his hand down inside her bloomers. Without hesitation, he stroked her private parts.

She jerked in surprise at the intrusion of Travis's fingers, teasing apart the folds of her sex and dipping inside her. She hadn't known he would do this. He gathered her juices on his fingers then slid them up to touch a spot that made her gasp in shock.

She'd never felt anything like it, had never touched herself down there. It wasn't proper. And now this near stranger was caressing her, rubbing his fingers in little circles and sending waves of excitement coursing through her. Her hips lifted as Amanda offered herself to his touch.

He moved his mouth from her lips to her throat, sucking on the soft skin above her pulse point then licking his way down her chest. His mouth nuzzled the slope of her breast then latched onto her nipple, sucking hard and strong. The pulling sensation sent rolling waves of lust through her that magnified the growing heat in her sex.

His fingers never stopped moving, first rotating circles on that special spot then, just as Amanda felt something powerful building inside her, slipping down to invade her body once more. He moved a finger then two in and out of her while delicately nibbling her nipple.

Her skin was moist, sheened with sweat. She sucked in hot, humid air through her teeth, exhilarated and craving even more stimulation.

Travis didn't disappoint. He kneaded and suckled her other breast and moved his finger back to the sensitive bud. This time when she felt the swirling beginning of something building, he kept stroking. The desperate need grew stronger and stronger inside her, swelling and rising like a flooding river. She moaned and arched her back, raising her hips off the bed toward something unknown. Just when she thought she could take no more of the exquisite tension and must pull away from his inexorable touch, something burst inside her.

Fireworks exploded and rained down, sparking a multitude of colors behind Amanda's closed eyelids. "Ahhh!" She cried out a long, protracted

sigh of fulfillment. For a moment she lost consciousness of herself as a person and became a pulsing star.

When her foggy senses cleared, she became aware of Travis. He'd moved up beside her and lay with a hand propping his head, watching her face intently. "Good?" His tone was so casual they could have been discussing whether she liked a meal she'd just eaten.

Amanda blushed, embarrassed by her display of lust. "Yes," she admitted.

A big smile spread over his face. "Good." He kissed her temple.

He shifted and she felt his heavy erection poking into the side of her hip, making her realize they weren't finished. He had needs to be filled.

Her euphoria dimmed as nervousness about losing her virginity resurfaced. She'd learned through whispered conversations with other girls who had older, married sisters that it hurt. There might be tearing. Could she bear it without crying out?

She must have looked as worried as she felt, because he kissed her lightly. "Don't be afraid. I'll go slow."

He sat up in all his glorious nakedness, his muscles gleaming with sweat, and knelt beside her to pull her drawers down her legs. She resisted the urge to cross her legs, although her hands crept down to cover her privates.

"No. Let me see." Travis nudged her hands away from her ginger thatch of hair and gazed at her sex.

She burned hotter than ever. Her face must be crimson.

Then he did something more shocking yet. He leaned down and kissed her there—right on the sensitive button he'd been teasing and torturing with his finger.

More of those sparkles shot through her system and she jerked. It was too much, too powerful.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, crawling up her body and positioning himself between her legs. "Absolutely lovely." As he rose

above her with his weight supported on his arms, cords of muscle rippled in his biceps.

Amanda dared to slide her hands up the hard, flat plane of his chest to rest on his shoulders. Down below her waist, his hardness pushed into her sex, rubbing against her still-sensitive bud, making her squirm.

She looked up into his deep blue eyes. He was half —smiling, waiting for a signal from her. She must relax and place her trust in him. It was a symbol of the rest of their lives together, that giving of trust. Breathing out slowly, she nodded. “All right. I’m ready.”

Reaching down between them, Travis positioned himself at her entrance and pushed a little way inside. He waited for her body to stretch around his girth then pressed a little farther.

This wasn’t bad at all. In fact, it felt very good. That aching, yawning need between her legs felt filled to satisfaction. She lifted her hips and accepted more of his length inside her. Then he hit a barrier in her channel that prevented his slow, easy glide.

She looked up at his face, his jaw bulging tight with the effort of control, his eyes slitted in pleasure. “This will hurt a little,” he murmured then pushed through the barrier with a hard thrust of his hips and a low groan.

Amanda sucked in her breath at the pain.

“Sorry.” Pausing, he waited for her to accustom herself to the sensation then he pulled his entire length slowly back out. After a moment’s pause, he thrust into her again, slow, steady, easy.

It hurt a little, but at the same time she was entranced by the euphoric expression on Travis’s face. If he felt even a fraction of the pleasure he’d given her, she was glad to give him the same bliss. As he moved in and out of her body, filling then receding from her channel, she grew accustomed to the rhythm. Rising above the residual pain, her own excitement grew. She arched her hips to meet his thrusts and her hands slid down his sweat-slippery back to grip his hindquarters, drawing him deeper.

His breathing grew ragged. He grunted with each thrust and pressed harder and faster as his climax built. Then he shuddered and froze and she actually felt his release pulsing inside her. She hugged him tight while he gasped and groaned, her heart swelling with emotion.

Travis let out a relieved sigh and collapsed, crushing her to the mattress. His penis was still deep within her and his face was buried in the mass of her hair fanned across the pillow. She relished the weight of his body, so solid and real—in her arms at last instead of a ghostly suitor on paper.

Her sober, respectful, long distance fiancé, wasn't anything like she'd expected and this "wedding night" wasn't what she'd anticipated either. If this was the distressing act her aunt had warned her of in hushed tones, Amanda would be glad to have it every day for the rest of her life.

She held his fiery hot body. Both of them were drenched with sweat, but too relaxed and drained of energy to peel apart.

At last Travis rolled off and lay beside her, looking down at her. He stroked the damp strands of hair from her forehead. "Was it all right?"

She nodded. "I didn't know what to expect. My aunt spoke to me before I left home about the wedding night, but her explanation was a little garbled." Amanda smiled at the recollection of Aunt Millie's advice to "lie still and wait for it to be finished". "It wasn't like I thought it would be."

"Does that mean better or worse?" Travis traced a line with his fingertip down her breastbone.

"Different. More...earthy, but also more," she struggled to find the perfect word, "powerful."

He nodded. "Sex is a strange thing."

Amanda yawned and stretched, her spine cracking and her breasts thrusting up into the air. "When we're married, we can do that as often as we like."

"Mm. You and me on our little farm, what a life that will be."

She glanced at him, aware of the slight bite of sarcasm in his tone. "You don't seem as excited about farming as you were in your letters."

He paused, drawing a circle with his finger around each of her breasts. "I guess not. The truth is I had a visit from an old friend recently. Listening to the life he's led made my own seem boring in comparison."

"What has your friend done that's so wonderful?" Amanda felt protective of Travis and annoyed with the man who had made him doubt his life.

"My friend travels all over. He's been across the country, ocean to ocean."

"What does he do for a living?"

Travis shrugged. "Lots of things. He's a bit of a maverick, a gambler, occasionally a salesman and sometimes a thief."

"He sounds like a very unpleasant character. How do you know him?"

"Went to school together. But I stayed put in Reederville and he took off. After listening to his tales of life on the road, it made me wonder what I've missed by staying home."

She reached up and caressed his cheek. "He's probably somewhere thinking the opposite, wondering what his life would be like if he'd made a home and put down roots."

A quick grimace of a smile twisted his lips. "I guess so. Something to be said for hearth and home, I suppose."

"And family. Now we have each other and someday, children." Amanda combed her fingers through the fine strands of his hair. "What's your friend's name?"

"Spencer." Travis inclined his head to kiss her lips then whispered, "You're right. He's probably wishing right now that he had a sweet woman like you for a wife and a place to come home to every night."

Amanda smiled. Whatever doubts she'd felt while waiting at the train station wondering if he was going to arrive, were gone. The rosy picture

she'd painted in her mind of the rest of her life was firmly back in place. She couldn't wait to go to the farm and start her new life.

Chapter Three

As he lay with Amanda and listened to her talk of her hopes and dreams for their future, Spence felt a strange, twisting sensation in his gut. Must be something he'd eaten earlier.

"I've never lived on a farm," she confided. "But I can cook and keep house and I'm sure I can learn to do farm chores if you show me what needs to be done."

"It's not hard. Eggs to gather and a garden to hoe, that kind of thing." Spence pushed a long hank of her hair off her breast, revealing its generous curve, and molded his hand around it. The woman had a gorgeous body. The idea of it being hidden in shapeless housedresses while she lived out her days on some dreary Kansas farm made him sick. What a waste! What in the world had brought her and this Baxter fellow together? He was dying to know, but there was no way he could ask.

"I'm looking forward to it. I want to make our home perfect." Her eyes were bright and shining as she gazed up at him. Good God, were those tears in her eyes?

"Our home doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to have you in it," he said.

She smiled, a dimple appearing in each flushed cheek. There was a pause then she added, "The truth is I love my aunt and uncle and all my cousins, but I've always wanted my own home, a place that belongs just to me and a house and family of my own to care for. Does that sound selfish?"

"No. Isn't that what all women want?" Spence thought of the many women he'd known. Feathering a nest seemed to be built into them.

“I guess so.” She shrugged and her tit rose and fell in his hand.

He squeezed it lightly, his cock stiffening. He might be ready for round two soon. “Are you hungry? I could order room service.” Better not to sit with Amanda in the dining room when the real Travis might be searching hotels for her even now. Spence felt pretty safe since he’d signed into the registry under a fake name. The concierge wouldn’t volunteer the fact that a red-haired woman had checked into the hotel with a Mr. Smith. It was the man’s business to be discreet.

“Are you sure? Isn’t room service expensive?” Amanda’s eyebrows rose.

He wanted to lean down and bite one. There was something about the arch of a woman’s brow that aroused him. “This is our honeymoon. Don’t worry about the expense. Now, what would you like?”

“Nothing, thank you. Although I am thirsty.”

“Your wish is my command, princess.” Spence climbed from the bed and brought back a glass of water filled from the pitcher on the stand in the corner of the room. It was tepid, but Amanda drank deeply. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He settled beside her again, tossing the rumpled sheet over the foot of the bed so they lay naked. The sweat on their skin dried in the slight breeze coming in the window. He fell into an almost hypnotic trance, listening to the quiet breathing of the woman lying next to him.

Suddenly Amanda broke the silence. “Travis, I’m glad we didn’t wait.”

“Me, too.” He smiled, his ego stroked by her shy admission, but he wished she wouldn’t call him that name.

There was hesitation in her voice as she added, “I know we scarcely know one other despite all our letters, but I feel...I believe...I love you.”

Spence felt his tongue and brain go numb. “Me, too,” he whispered. He wanted to leap off the bed and run. This was not supposed to happen. Amanda had just effectively sucked the fun out of his afternoon’s entertainment.

She rolled onto her side to face him. “Shall we do it again?”

“Absolutely.” He couldn’t deny such a request coming from her sweet, earnest, kissable lips. He reached for her luscious body once more. There was no need to let a little guilt ruin a perfectly good sexual encounter. “Roll over and we’ll try something different.”

Amanda’s pretty eyebrows drew together, but she complied.

Spence spooned her, wrapping an arm around her and reaching down to caress her pussy. It was wet and sticky with their combined juices. He delved inside and stroked his fingers in and out then moved them up to caress the wonderful magic button that put a woman under a man’s spell. He’d been taught young how to please a female by a woman who lived up the mountain by his home. It had proved one of the most useful lessons he’d ever learned. A man could make any woman open like a flower and shower him with petals if he treated her right.

Amanda pushed into his hand, moaning softly.

He stroked her clit while rubbing his cock between the soft globes of her ass. He kissed the crook of her neck then bit down on it lightly. Taking a woman from behind was one of his favorite positions. Something about the vulnerability of her neck and shoulder made him rock hard. Besides, he didn’t want to look into Amanda’s face when they fucked this time. Her big, hazel eyes magnified that twisted feeling in his gut.

After massaging her clit for a while and pressing his erection into her softness, Spence decided he would treat the woman to something her bohunk farmer would likely never give her in their entire married life.

“Lie on your back,” he told her, kissing her shoulder. “Trust me. I’m going to do something that feels really good.”

Amanda rolled over and watched curiously as he moved down, positioning himself between her legs. He ran his hands up and down her inner thighs, moving higher each time to acclimate her to his presence there then he kissed her near the juncture of her leg and torso. When he looked up, her eyes were wide and shocked. She reached out toward him in a warding gesture. “Oh! I...”

“It’s all right.” He kept his voice low and soothing. “Don’t hide yourself from me.” Parting her thighs, he revealed the plump pink folds of her sex. Brushing his fingers through her ginger curls, he touched her clit to remind her of how much pleasure he could give her. “Relax and trust me.”

Her thighs quivered, but she dropped her hands to the bed and lay still, waiting.

He lowered his mouth to her pussy and licked it. Their combined essences were earthy and strong, but he liked the flavor. He lapped up the length of her slit very slowly with a broad sweep of his tongue then placed a chaste kiss on her erect clitoris, peeping from its red hood.

Amanda cried out and her body jerked beneath his restraining hands.

Spence smiled inside. Mm, how he loved what he could do to a woman with just his mouth. He licked the little bud once then turned his attention to torturing her until she begged for him. Kissing all around her pubic mound and nipping at the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, he touched her everywhere except her clit. Separating her folds with his fingers, he tongue-bathed her genitals, moving down to delve as deeply as he could inside her body.

She squirmed and writhed on the bed, whimpering with need. Lifting her hips, she offered herself to him. “Oh, please.”

He relented and covered her clit with his mouth, sucking gently. She was so worked up she cried out from the touch. He licked her bud over and over, holding her legs to the bed, while she struggled to rise. When he was sure she was on the verge of coming, he let go of her body and she bucked into the air.

Amanda arched off the bed like a contortionist he’d seen in a traveling carnival one time. The unexpected release of his hands made her rocket upward, almost knocking him off of her. He continued to apply inexorable pressure with his tongue, while she cried out and shook.

He watched her face. Her full lips parted as she gasped for air, her eyes closed in ecstasy. There was nothing more beautiful than a woman enjoying an orgasm.

Finally her eyes opened and she looked down at him lying between her legs. "Oh, that was..." She trailed off, unable to come up with sufficient words. "Thank you."

Spence kissed her belly then crawled up her body, turning her to resume his position behind her. He was ready now, more than ready, to take her again. Guiding his cock to her entrance, he drove inside.

Amanda didn't flinch or cry out this time. Her softened body accepted him easily as he slid deep into her.

He groaned at the wonderful feeling of hot, wet flesh surrounding his aching shaft like a sucking mouth. He moved in and out, his body curved around her back. His groin slapped against the round curve of her buttocks. His hand gripped her breast.

Spence closed his eyes and pumped hard, as desire rose in him like mounting stakes in a poker game. The tension was irresistible. He was less gentle this time, holding her tight and thrusting fast and deep, claiming her completely.

But when she moaned it was with arousal not pain and after she caught his rhythm, she pushed back onto his cock, meeting every thrust. The woman was a natural. Imagine how good she could become given time and tutoring. If she was his woman, he'd teach her to be uninhibited and express every secret sexual desire she held locked inside her.

Spence came with a growl of fulfillment that reverberated deep within his chest. He embraced the woman and spent his seed inside her in strong bursts. Surrendering to his orgasm, he gasped with relief. "Jesus!" he mouthed soundlessly against her nape, breathing in the delicious scent of her warm skin.

He'd experienced powerful orgasms before many times. This was no different than dozens of other times he'd shuddered against a woman's body, releasing tension then moving on with his life. But there was

something about this day, this moment...this particular woman, which shook him to the core. An irrational burst of emotion burst in him. He felt like laughing and crying at the same time. *What the fuck?*

He kissed between her shoulder blades then nuzzled her neck and hugged her body tightly to him again. Looking across the partial profile of her face, the curving cheek and jaw, the tilted tip of her nose and swell of her lips, Spence knew it was time for him to go. This deception had been fun, but it was time to end it before the real fiancé came bursting in and stabbed him with a pitchfork. Spence was playing with fire the longer he played the role of Farmer Travis.

He would leave now. He would say he needed to relieve himself then get dressed and walk out of the room and the hotel, catching the next train bound for anywhere.

Yawning and stretching, he nestled closer to Amanda's soft body. He would leave in a moment...after he took a short nap.



Spence woke before dawn with his arms full of warm, fragrant woman. The arm that was crushed beneath her body was numb, but other than that he felt great—really great. He breathed in the scent of Amanda's hair, sweet soap and human oils. It tumbled soft and red over her shoulder and his arm. If he lay with her another hour, the morning sun would light her hair like a flame, but he must leave before he got caught in his little game.

He hugged her then slipped his arm from beneath her and crept from the bed. He picked up his discarded clothes and put them on, before looking over at the bed once more.

Amanda hadn't moved. Her eyelashes rested against her pale cheeks in two soft crescents. Her bowed upper lip and full lower one made her look like a china doll, a beautiful, seductive china doll. The bedcovers were draped over her waist leaving her upper half a nude, white statue. Both her arms were curled up toward her chest so he could only catch

glimpses of her breasts. She was a goddess and he longed to take her one last time, but it was impossible.

What would it be like to have a woman like that to wake to every morning of his life? Would Baxter even appreciate her? For one brief moment, Spence imagined himself a different sort of man, the kind who settled for hearth and home then he snorted at the ridiculous image and turned away.

He stopped again, picturing Amanda's dismay on waking and finding him gone, imagining her horror when her fiancé finally showed—if he showed—and Spence's deception was revealed. He hadn't intended to care. His only aim yesterday had been to have a little fun and move on, but now he wanted to at least let Amanda know how much he'd enjoyed the time spent with her.

Spence tore the front page from the Gideon Bible on the dresser, searched Amanda's handbag until he found a pencil and jotted a message for her. He set the note on the pillow beside her, hesitated another moment watching her shoulder rise and fall with each breath then left the room.

Down on the first floor was the room he'd rented under his own name. There he quickly packed his valise and steamer trunk. He traveled light. His life was engineered to be fluid. That was the way he wanted it—nothing to keep him rooted to one spot, to tie him down in chains of responsibility that would eventually choke the life out of him like they had his father. But that morning, as he walked out of the hotel into the gray day, he felt another sharp pain in his gut.

Fuck me! Is this guilt or do I just need to get some breakfast? “Get a hold of yourself,” he muttered. He crossed the street and walked to the train station. The agent took his money and pushed a ticket toward him then Spence stood beside his baggage waiting for the early train to arrive.

The platform was empty and the wind whistled down the tracks, driving dust before it. The grains stung Spence's face as he bounced on his heels, gazing up the rails, yearning to be on the move again, to leave this uncomfortable, unfamiliar anxiety behind. He hardly registered the

sound of boot heels on the board walkway behind him, until he heard a man's raised voice at the ticket window.

"...Amanda McCormick. She would have arrived on the 3:45 yesterday. You don't remember a woman waiting here?"

"Sorry, sir. I wasn't here at that time yesterday. But there's a pile of bags in back storage room. Likely your lady friend gave up waiting and went to a hotel."

"Of course. I'll go check the hotels. If she comes back, will you please tell her that Travis Baxter is looking for her? Tell her to wait here." The man sounded exhausted and upset.

"Yes, sir."

Spence listened to Baxter's boot heels marking a steady rhythm on the boardwalk as he walked away. He didn't turn to look at the man he'd spent the night pretending to be, not wanting to see who Amanda was really getting for a husband. He strained to hear the whistle of the inbound train. God, he needed it to be on time before all hell broke loose!

He was lucky, as usual. As if at his command, the scream of a whistle broke the stillness, a plume of smoke rose above a stand of trees and the locomotive rounded the bend. He'd never seen such a beautiful sight as that engine, belching steam from its tall, black stack. It pulled up before the station with a harsh squeal of brakes and he leaped onto the steps almost before it stopped and thrust his ticket at the conductor.

The man examined and punched it.

Spence walked to the back of the car, stowed his luggage and took a seat. As the minutes of the train's stop ticked by, he stared out the window searching for any sign of Amanda or the real Travis Baxter. Tapping his fingers nervously on his thigh, he prayed the woman had sense enough to keep their interlude a secret. If she kept quiet, her fiancé would never be any the wiser.

On the other hand, Spence might very well see an irate farmer steaming toward the depot at any moment.

Not until the conductor called, “All aboard,” and the train jerked forward, did he feel safe. As the depot slid away and Kansas City receded from view, he relaxed back into his seat with a sigh.

Stupid game. Why do I do things like that? He shook his head at his own folly, the games of chance he enjoyed too much, the heightened sense of being alive that a near miss gave him. *But, damn, that woman had felt good. It really was worth it.*

He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering her smell, her soft body, her bright hair and feeling a little melancholy that he had to leave her behind. The train ricketed along the tracks, swaying from side to side. He fell into a trance, fantasizing what his life as Travis Baxter would have been like if he could have taken the other man’s place permanently—sex and breakfast every morning, supper and sex every night, a lot of plowing and planting in between. Hm, it just didn’t sound like him.

Suddenly the train stopped with a jerk and grinding brakes. His eyes flew open and he looked out the window, but could see nothing. He hailed the conductor, who strode past down the aisle. “What is it?”

“Something on the tracks. Keep your seat.”

Spence got up and went to the front of the compartment. He exited the car, stepping down from the connector platform in between cars then walked through the weeds alongside the cars and past the steam-spewing locomotive. When he reached the front of the train, he stopped short at the sight of what blocked the train.

A little girl stood in the center of the track. She wore a white, ruffled pinafore over a navy blue dress. Her feet were shod in black boots and her red hair was drawn into two pigtails. Wind whistled across the dry prairie soil, stirring dust devils that swirled around her. She stared at him with dark, sapphire eyes that pierced him. Her small heart-shaped face was solemn.

“What the hell?” he muttered. “Hey, kid, get off the track. That’s no place to play. You could get hurt.”

The girl lifted a hand and pointed at him. “You are a bad man. You have to go find her.” Her voice was as light and tinkling as sleigh bells, but her words struck him with the weight of cannonballs.

Spence cried out and awoke with a start. He jerked upright in the hard, horsehair-stuffed seat in the rail compartment, sweating and gasping for breath. His eyes darted to the window to see if the train was really stopped. Endless waves of prairie grass rolled past outside, shades of green and gold that undulated in the wind.

What was that? He leaned into the window, pressing his forehead against the glass to look toward the front of the train. It rounded a bend just then and he could see the engine and the empty track before it.

As he settled back in his seat, his pulse slowly returned to normal, as he stared out the window at the billowing white clouds in the blue sky. Spence rubbed his forehead and waited for the images of the dream to clear from his head. Damn, why did he feel so strange? He’d had a good time with a beautiful woman. She’d clearly enjoyed it, too, so where was the harm? There was nothing to feel bad about.

A high-pitched voice rang in his head. *You are a bad man. You have to go find her.*

Chapter Four

Amanda swam up from a deep, restful sleep into awareness of a strange bed in a dimly lit room. It took her a moment to remember she was in a hotel...with her new husband. Well, maybe Travis wasn't her husband on paper yet, but they'd consummated their vow to one another last night. Their new, perfect life together had begun.

She smiled at the memory and stretched her sore body luxuriously. That's when she realized the bed beside her was empty.

Her eyes opened wide and she rolled over. Both the bed and the room were vacant. Perhaps he'd stepped out to relieve himself. That must be where he'd gone. Then she noticed a torn piece of paper lying next to her. A nervous flutter beat like the wings of a caged bird inside her chest as she picked up the paper and read,

Sweet Amanda,

Thank you. I'll never forget my stay in Kansas City and the intimate time we shared.

As you'll find out soon enough, I'm not Travis Baxter. I hope you don't take this too hard. It was harmless fun, which your fiancé never needs to know about. He is a very lucky man. I wish you all happiness in your future life together.

There was no signature, just a drawing of a heart.

Was he teasing her? Was this some kind of cruel, awful joke? She couldn't entertain the thought that it might be true. Her hand rose to cover her mouth and her stomach rolled. She tasted bile. Her heart pounded so hard she couldn't hear anything else. The room around her seemed airless and the edges of her vision grew dark.

“Oh God, help me,” she begged aloud. “Please, God, let this be a nightmare.” She read the note again. And again. Nothing changed. The horrible fact that she’d had intercourse with a complete stranger washed over her.

She went back through every moment from their meeting at the depot through the passionate lovemaking, trying to pinpoint the second when she should have realized something was wrong, that he wasn’t the man he claimed to be, but she couldn’t see her mistake. She’d been completely, utterly duped, so excited and thrilled by her choice of a husband and positive she was finally starting her life—her own new life with a home of her own and a man to love her.

This is impossible. Impossible. It can’t be happening. Her mind chanted the words while her panic rose.

Amanda dropped the note and it fluttered to the bed. She swung her legs out from under the covers and rose. The insides of her thighs were stiff and sticky and a dull ache throbbed between them. The irrefutable evidence of what she’d done was there between her legs.

A whimper burst from her lips. She covered her mouth to hold it in and blinked away the tears welling in her eyes. If she cried, she might never stop. She walked to the basin and pitcher on the washstand, dampened a hotel flannel and washed between her legs, scrubbing vigorously to remove all trace of him. Dipping a second cloth, she sponge-bathed her face and body, cleaning the scent of sex and a stranger’s sweat from her shaking body.

Her mind whirled with questions. If the man she’d slept with wasn’t Travis, who was he and why had he done such a despicable, cruel thing? Why hadn’t the real Travis come yesterday? Had he arrived only to find her gone and, if so, where was he now?

She gathered her clothes and dressed, the questions on a repeating loop in her mind. After she’d calmed down a little, she thought she could at least answer the question of why. The man had done it simply because he could. It was clear from his note that she had been merely a diversion for him, a challenge, a harmless entertainment, a game. Her stomach

lurched as another wave of helpless rage surged through her. He had used her like a toy. How could someone who'd seemed so thoughtful and generous during love-making be so evil?

Logic told her that he must have overheard her conversation with the station agent at the depot. That was the only explanation for the man knowing so much about her and Travis. She reviewed every word they'd exchanged and realized he'd side-stepped personal questions, repeatedly turning the conversation back to her. He was slick. He was a smooth-talking, slimy Satan.

Amanda worked the last of her shoe buttons through their loops, remembering how the man-who-wasn't-Travis had unfastened them yesterday then caressed her feet. Her eyes closed and she breathed deeply, trying to control her fury and disgust. Then she stood a moment in the center of the stuffy suite, fully dressed and suddenly realizing she had absolutely no idea what to do next.

She couldn't report this crime. There was no one she could tell that she'd been violated and nothing a sheriff could do about it even if he believed her bizarre tale. She'd given herself freely to the man, albeit under false circumstances and now must hold this shame, guilt and anger inside her. There was no one with whom to share the burden.

What about the real Travis? What would she do if he never showed up to claim her? What would she do if he did? She couldn't marry him now, not with this depravity on her conscience. And she certainly couldn't tell him. Not ever. It was humiliating and painful and a decent man like Travis couldn't be expected to forgive her stupidity and lack of moral fiber.

How had she fallen for such a liar? How could she not tell the stranger who took her to bed was the wrong man? But, oh, he had felt so right. A flash of memory and rush of lust told her she couldn't pretend she hadn't felt things last night. Her body had responded to the man with a whore's panting excitement. She was no longer a virgin and the way she'd reacted to his touch proved she wasn't a lady. Nice girls didn't enjoy sex so much.

She walked to the wall mirror and stared at her pale reflection as she pinned up her hair. Then she picked up her valise and looked around the room one last time, the scene of her deflowering. Swallowing hard, she tightened her jaw and blinked away tears before walking out of the room into her uncertain future.

Down in the lobby, Amanda stopped at the front desk. The concierge was a different man than the one who had been there yesterday. "Excuse me, sir. I'm checking out of my room." It occurred to her the stranger might have left her with a bill as well as her humiliation. She prayed she had enough money to pay it.

"Your name, ma'am?"

She tried to guess what name the stranger may have signed in the guest registry. "I was in the suite on the second floor."

The man examined the guest register then looked up at her with a puzzled frown. "Your husband already paid for the room."

"Oh, of course." She forced a smile. "He went ahead with our bags and I didn't know if he'd taken care of it." Her eyes riveted on the registry on the counter. She had to see inside it, to see what name the stranger had signed.

For the first time that morning, God seemed to hear her prayer. A bellboy dropped a heavy case in the middle of the lobby and a wealthy looking woman yelled at him for his carelessness. The concierge's attention turned to the escalating situation in the lobby. "Is that all, ma'am?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He hurried off. Amanda seized the registry and flipped the page to the previous day, locating her room number. The elegant script proclaimed *Mr. and Mrs. John Smith*. His handwriting. He'd stood there and boldly lied on paper, while planning to have his way with her. Amanda bit the insides of her cheeks as rage choked her again.

She was about to close the book when an idea struck her. The stranger had had no luggage, which should have tipped her off something wasn't right. It meant he must have had a hotel room of his

own where his things were. She flipped through the book's pages until a striking signature that matched the other as well as the note he'd left leaped out and hit her like a slap in the face. *Spencer Teague*—her violator.

Amanda compared the signatures to be sure. Then she remembered that Spencer was the name he'd given her when telling about his traveling friend. He'd been talking about himself. So, she knew his real name and a little about him—what good did it do? Her fingers tightened on the page, crumpling it. Exhaling slowly, she closed the book. There was nothing she could do with the knowledge, but it made her feel slightly better knowing even that much. It returned to her a tiny grain of control.

Lifting her valise, she walked out of the hotel and toward the train station. It was still early morning and only a few wagons were on the street. Several pedestrians passed her, nodding or smiling, others too intent on their own business to pay any heed. She felt like hiding her face from all of them. Her body felt so different to her, bruised and stretched in private places. It seemed people should be able to see her shame emblazoned across her face. Her chin dipped low and her eyes focused on the ground as she walked.

“Miss McCormick? Amanda McCormick?”

The low, male voice made her head jerk up. She stopped dead in the street and stared at the brown-haired, blue-eyed man standing before her. “M-Mr. Baxter?” she stammered.

“Yes.” He smiled and gazed at her as if in awe. “I can't believe it's you. You look exactly as I pictured you.”

Why didn't we exchange tintypes? How could I have made this commitment sight unseen? That's what got me into this horrible situation. Amanda stood, at a loss for words. But she needed to say something, so she repeated, “Mr. Baxter.”

“Travis.” He reached for her valise and she surrendered it from boneless fingers. “I am so sorry I wasn't there to meet you yesterday. Did

you spend the night at the El Dorado?" He looked over her shoulder toward the hotel.

"Yes." The word came out on a faint puff of air. She cleared her throat and repeated, "Yes. That's where I stayed."

He kept gazing at her. The delighted smile came and went from his lips, playing over his generous mouth. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His long-sleeved blue work shirt covered him from neck to wrist, but the stretch of the fabric across his chest showed he was muscular. The real Travis's light brown hair was shot with streaks of blond from the sun. His face was darkly tan. He had strong, square features with prominent cheekbones, a straight nose and a firm chin and jaw. His gray-blue eyes were open and guileless as he regarded her. There was no doubt in her mind that she had the right man this time.

Taking her arm, he guided her across the street and toward the depot. "I want to apologize again for my delay. I was heading out yesterday when my cow went into labor. I had to deliver the calf and by the time I got on the road it was afternoon."

Amanda nodded. "How was the calf?"

"There was a complication and it died, but the cow survived." They'd reached the boardwalk in front of the depot and his heavy boots clomped along next to her small shoes.

Her gaze dropped to his feet. He was a very big man, larger than she'd expected. "I'm sorry." Her heart felt like a cold lump of steel inside her and tears prickled her eyes. She was apologizing for much more than the loss of his livestock.

"It happens sometimes." He held the door open for her to precede him into the depot. "Anyway, I was on the road when an axle broke on the wagon. I had it repaired in the nearest town, but by then it was pitch black on the road so I pulled over and camped for the night."

"What a terrible day." She thought of what she'd been doing at the same time and willed herself not to blush.

"Would you like to stop somewhere and eat breakfast before we load your things on the wagon?"

“No, thank you. I’d rather be on our way as soon as possible if you don’t mind.” She was afraid someone who’d seen her with Spencer Teague yesterday would spot her with Travis Baxter today and say something. It was an irrational fear. She was in a town full of strangers who couldn’t care less about her business, but the need to escape grew stronger inside her. At that moment, she realized her decision about what to do had already been made. She would keep her secret from Travis, marry this sweet, kind man and start a new life with a poisonous cloud of lies surrounding her.

“Is something the matter?” He inclined his head to look into her face. “You’re pale. Are you sure you don’t need a bite to eat?”

Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin and forced her mouth into a smile. “Just a little overwhelmed by everything. I’m fine.”

Travis paused a long moment. His voice was quiet when he spoke. “I hope I’m not a disappointment to you. Maybe you were expecting someone more—”

“Oh, no!” she interrupted. “No. It was a relief to see you at last. You’re everything I’d hoped you’d be.”

Travis’s hands twisted on the handle of the valise. “Because, if you think you made a mistake, if you want to return home, I’ll buy you a ticket.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I don’t want to go back. I want to go to the farm. You’re exactly the man I expected from your letters.”

The broad smile stretched his mouth again and his eyes lit up. “All right. I’ll get your bags.”

Her heart leaped to her throat when the same tall, black porter who had taken care of her bags yesterday approached. But after a swift glance, he paid no more attention to her. He helped Travis load the wagon parked at the side of the station.

As Travis took her hand and helped her up onto the seat, he said, “We’ll stop by Reederville before we go out to the farm. Reverend Jamison and his wife are expecting us for the wedding. They’ll wonder why we didn’t show up yesterday.”

Her wedding day! This was to be her wedding day. She was marrying a kind, honorable man under false pretenses. "That would be fine," Amanda said with a wan smile. "I can't wait to begin our life together."

Chapter Five

Travis slid his eyes sideways, confirming again that the beautiful, red-haired woman was actually sitting beside him on the wagon seat. After all the months of nothing but the written word binding them together, it was hard to believe she was here in the flesh. Amanda was much lovelier than he could have hoped for and he had to admit he was relieved.

But she seemed so pale and withdrawn gazing out at the prairie stretching into the distance on either side of the road, he wondered again if he was a disappointment to her. Several women in town seemed to think he was a catch, but it was hard to tell whether his appearance was pleasing to Amanda. Perhaps, as she said, she was simply worn out from the journey and the radical changes taking place in her life. He hoped that was all her silence meant.

Travis wasn't much of a talker himself. He'd about used up his day's supply of words explaining his lateness to Amanda. Now that they were on the road with no distractions or sounds except the clattering wagon, the buzz of insects and birdcalls, he was aware of how awkward the silence between them had become. He should say something.

Perhaps his inability to find someone special among the women in Reederville wasn't a lack of connection as he'd convinced himself. Maybe it was a flaw in him. He couldn't relate to a woman in person. While he'd been able to talk to Amanda on paper, he couldn't seem to think of anything to say now that she was finally here. God, why did communicating with women have to be so hard?

Ahead of the wagon, Esther dipped her head lower and her walk slowed to a lazy amble. The bay horse was old for such a long journey. The trip to Kansas City had worn her out.

He tapped the reins against her back. "Gee up there, Esther."

"So this is Esther? Poor old thing. She seems tired."

Travis glanced at Amanda, who was smiling sympathetically at the horse.

"Old Esther's used to standing in the pasture most of the day and only going into Reederville about once a week," he explained. "Trip's good for her though. Lets her know she still has a purpose in the world. She'll be fine."

They both fell silent again while another quarter mile rolled past. He tried to think of something interesting to tell her about his hometown or the farm, but her silence made him tongue-tied. When she spoke again, it made him jump.

"It's so flat and wide open. The way the grass waves in the wind makes it look like water. It's really rather like Lake Michigan."

He looked across the land, trying to see it through her eyes. To him it was mile after mile of sod that could be put to plow and made into useful farmland if someone had a mind. It looked different when he viewed it purely as a landscape. She was right. The green-blue hue of the grass did give the impression of undulating waves as the wind swept across it. Meadowlarks and swallows occasionally burst up from the grass and swooped erratically across the sky, catching insects. Several hawks circled high overhead, waiting for a careless rabbit to show itself. The sky was a brilliant blue without a cloud to be seen from one rim of the horizon to the other.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Yep, I guess it is at that." Travis slapped the reins on Esther's rump as the horse slowed again. "I almost forgot to ask, how was your trip?"

"Interesting. The station in Chicago was astounding. I've never seen such a huge place."

“That’s what I’ve heard. I’d like to see that some day.” Travis cast around for another polite question to draw her out. “Were you able to get any sleep on the train?”

“The berth was a little small, but the swaying of the train rocked me right to sleep.”

“Good.” He cleared his throat. “I imagine the bed in the hotel was a sight more comfortable.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Although you probably didn’t sleep much.”

“What?” Her startled tone drew his attention. She looked paler than ever, her features tight and pinched. He hoped she wasn’t feeling ill.

“I mean, wondering if I was coming or not. I apologize again for putting you through that.”

“It wasn’t your fault. And everything turned out all right in the end.” She smoothed the folds of her skirt. “Please, tell me more about Reederville. I’d like to hear about the community I’m going to be living in.”

“Well, you’ll meet Reverend Thomas Jamison and his wife, Hattie, today at the ceremony. I guess you could say they’re the social leaders in Reederville. The sheriff is Bob Dunkle. Leo and Olive Kirkpatrick own the mercantile. Ted and Marilyn Landers are my nearest neighbors. Their house is only a couple miles away. They’re a young couple just starting out and have two little ones, Rose and Tommy.” He looked over at her. “I don’t expect you’ll be able to keep all the names straight at first. There’s a passel of ’em. All told there’s almost two hundred people in Reederville—that’s including both town and the homesteaders.”

“Will it be just the minister and his wife at the wedding?”

Wedding. The gravity of what they were undertaking struck him and the flutter in the pit of his stomach returned even stronger. By tonight he’d be married to this woman. By tonight they would share a bed. “Yes. Some members of the congregation wanted to be present, but I thought... It seemed overwhelming enough, you and me getting married, I didn’t

think we needed more witnesses. Having Mrs. Jamison there is enough to make it legal.”

Amanda didn't answer and Travis glanced over to see her nodding.

“Is this too much all at once?” He used the voice he would use to gentle a nervous horse. “I know we agreed on getting hitched, but maybe you'd like some more time to get used to the idea. I'm sure the Jamisons would put you up at their place if you wanted me to come courting for a while first.”

She bit her lip then shook her head. “No. Mr. Baxter...Travis, I don't want you to think I have any reservations about this. I came out here to marry you and that's what I intend to do. I came to feel I know you through your letters and to care for you.” She turned to face him, looking him dead in the eye. “I want to marry you and start our new life right away.”

Travis hesitated. Her tone sounded more grim and resolute than eager and happy. Was that any way to start a marriage? But he was tired of being alone, tired of having no one to share his life. He'd prepared for her arrival and dreamed of it for so long he couldn't imagine what he'd do if something went wrong and they never married. If he gave her too much time to think about it, she might decide she was making a mistake and even though he'd offered her a ticket home earlier, he didn't really want her to take him up on the offer. Finally he nodded. “All right then. If you're sure, we'll marry today.”

“I am.” She smiled at him and two pretty dimples danced in her cheeks. “I plan to make a good farm wife if it kills me. You must show me how to care for the chickens and milk a cow. I've already helped care for a backyard garden at home, but I'm sure there's more gardening knowledge you can teach me, too.”

Her enthusiasm to pitch in and get started was adorable. It was that energetic, strong-willed attitude in her letters that had attracted him. She seemed different from any girl he knew. She expressed interesting opinions and was well-read, qualities a man didn't generally look for in a

wife, but which seemed they would make life much more interesting and fulfilling in the long run.

Travis glanced at her gloved hands comparing them to the red, work-roughened hands of most of the local women. He returned her smile, vowing he'd make her transition into this harsher way of life as easy as possible so that she'd never regret the decision she'd made to come west and marry him.



Later Travis scarcely remembered his wedding. Reverend and Mrs. Jamison welcomed them into their home, the pastor's wife hugging each of them, while Travis explained why they were a day late. The reverend had ushered them into the front parlor.

After that, his only memory was of Amanda filling his vision. Her face was pale as milk in contrast to her flame red hair. Her eyes were wide as a deer's and gazed at him so directly he felt she could see into his soul.

He thought of all he knew about her from what she'd shared on lilac-scented paper. She loved to walk along the shore of the lake, casting stones and trying to make them skip. She read everything she could get her hands on, but her favorite books were about other countries, especially Kipling's tales of India or histories of long-vanished civilizations and cultures. Amanda claimed she'd brought only a few of her books, but from the weight of one of her trunks, he figured it was pretty well full of them.

He knew she liked to draw and paint, but didn't consider herself good at either. And he knew that above all things she longed for a home of her own. Having been an orphan, even a beloved one raised by kind relatives, had made her desire a place of her very own, a place she belonged.

As he gave his vow to love, honor and cherish, he added to himself that he would make Amanda feel she had found her home. The next thing he knew, the Jamisons were toasting them with glasses of cider

then he was helping Amanda back into the wagon to begin the last leg of the journey.

When they turned off the dirt road onto the track leading to the farm, Travis snuck a glance at her to catch her first reaction. He tried to see the house, barn and yard as she would, with fresh eyes, but all he could see when he looked around was work to be done. He needed to repair the roof on the chicken coop. The front porch of the house had a few loose boards. Before winter he'd like to put up a snow fence at the perimeter of the yard to keep the prairie winds from blowing eave-high drifts near the house. It would make the walk from the house to the barn and coop a lot easier if he had less shoveling to do.

He pulled his mind away from the ever-growing list of chores and looked at Amanda's face again. Her eyes were bright and glistening as she gazed around. What did that mean? Was she tearing up because the farm was a big disappointment or because she was happy to be there? Women were impossible to read.

He opened his mouth to ask if she was all right then closed it again. She'd speak when she was ready and prompting her wouldn't help. Travis drove up in front of the house. Esther stopped of her own accord, making it clear from the droop of her head that she was too weary to walk a step farther.

He put on the brake, jumped down from the wagon seat then walked around to the other side to help Amanda down. When she put her small hand in his and he felt the warmth of it through her glove, desire surged through him. It was a minor touch, but Travis felt his skin burning from the contact. He wanted to feel her palm stripped of that kid glove, to touch her skin all over, trace the shape of her face with his fingers, run his hands over her shoulders and down her chest to her breasts. Imagined touching her warm flesh, the curve of her waist, the span of her back and the moist, secret place between her thighs.

In less than a heartbeat their hands parted as she set foot firmly on the ground and he let go, but in that moment he'd fantasized their entire wedding night. He stood, uncertain what to do next. Should he sweep

Amanda up in his arms and carry her across the threshold like a proper groom? It seemed audacious to take such liberties when things were already awkward between them.

He cleared his throat. "I'll get your bags in a minute."

"Yes. Show me the house first." She looked up into his eyes and Travis felt even taller than his six foot two. She was so petite, so pretty and his wife. A warm glow spread through him. "The outside is perfect. I love it."

He released a breath he hadn't even been aware he was holding. "Good. I'm glad you like it." Taking her elbow, he led her up the porch steps, opened the screen door and stepped back so she could enter. As he showed her the kitchen, dining room, living room and parlor downstairs, he felt a surge of pride about all the updates he'd made to the house. The fresh paint and new floor rugs looked good and best of all was the running water in the kitchen sink, a marvel which still thrilled him every time he pumped the handle. It was worth all the hours it had taken to run pipe to the house and install the new pump.

On the dining room table was a large bouquet of flowers and a covered plate. Travis removed the cover to reveal an assortment of cookies and a note.

Welcome, Amanda. I'll be real glad to have some female companionship nearby. I'll come over soon and help you get settled in. Your neighbor,

Marilyn Landers.

The tears, which had made Amanda's eyes shiny throughout the tour of the house, spilled over. "That's so sweet!"

Travis clenched his hands at his sides, struck mute and helpless by her crying. Should he pat her back? Hold her close and murmur comforting things? Or should he pretend he didn't notice and take her upstairs to see the rest of the house? He stood there a moment longer feeling big, dumb and useless while Amanda wept with one hand covering her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She wiped her eyes and gave him a trembling smile that made his heart thump hard in his chest. "I'm sorry." She gestured at the house around them and at Marilyn's cookies. "It's all so much to take in and so wonderfully neighborly of Marilyn. Don't mind me."

He nodded and smiled back. "Well, uh, if you'd like to see the upstairs..." His pulse raced faster as he ushered her before him up the stairs to the bedrooms. Very soon they would be sharing a marital bed and he would get to see and touch her naked skin. The idea of it thrilled him and left him shaken and embarrassed because he couldn't stop the lustful thoughts insinuating their way into his mind. If Amanda could see the things he was imagining, she would be disgusted and think he only wanted her here for one thing. Travis tried to shake off his animal desires and view his new wife with the respect she deserved.

Together they walked down the short hallway between the two bedrooms. He opened the door of the master bedroom to reveal the giant four-poster his grandparents had brought with them when they moved west from Maryland. It had belonged to his parents and now to him. It was the bed he and his brother had been born in and maybe someday Travis's own child would be born there, too. The bed dominated the room, the rest of which was filled by a dresser and a closet hidden from sight by a gingham curtain. A large oval, braided rug, made by Grandma Parsons, covered the floor.

He looked at the room then at Amanda, poised in the doorway with her eyes riveted on the big bed. "You don't have to... That is, at first I could sleep in my old room across the hall then when we're more comfortable with one another I could, uh, join you here."

His neck and cheeks burned as he spoke. Where had the words come from? He was surprised to hear them tumble out of his mouth as he'd never intended to make such an offer, but it was so clear she needed time to adjust. He'd rather come to her at her invitation than have her frightened and tense on their wedding night. But oh, how he hoped she'd turn down his offer. He desperately wanted to sleep with her tonight.

“Oh.” Her gaze slid from the bed to him. “Really? Would you mind? Just for a little while?”

He forced a big smile. “No. It’s fine. We have the rest of our lives to be together. We can take more time to get acquainted.” He squelched a stab of disappointment. “Good. Then that’s settled. If you’d like to get freshened up, I’ll heat some water for washing up and bring your things in.”

“That would be wonderful. I am a little dusty from the trip.”

As he led the way downstairs, he was very aware of her light step behind him. The fact of her existence kept breaking over him in waves; she was actually here to stay. It was both an exhilarating and frightening thought. His bachelor days and years of being accountable only to himself were over. He had a wife now.

A wife he knew only through letters and who would be sleeping in another room for the near future.



Amanda had never been more relieved in her life than she was on hearing Travis’s offer of separate bedrooms. Her anxiety after the discovery about her false fiancé had increased throughout the day. The idea of facing a wedding night on top of the harrowing experience she’d been through was too much. She wanted to throw her arms around Travis and kiss him for giving her the gift of time.

He led her into the kitchen. “Here’s the pump I put in this past summer so you don’t have to haul water in from the well. And there’s a gas stove for heating it. No more building a wood fire every time you want to cook.” He glanced at Amanda as he pumped the handle and water gushed from the tap into the sink.

She watched him fill the teakettle. It touched her that he’d made the improvements to the house for her. At home they’d enjoyed indoor plumbing, gaslights and a gas stove for several years. With Uncle Ned owning a hardware store, their house had been one of the first to have

every new convenience that came along. It was going to be an adjustment to use an outhouse instead of a water closet, but she'd signed up for the prairie life and would have to get used to it. She smiled at her new husband. "This is such a convenience. Thank you for installing it."

When the kettle was heating on the stove and Travis had left the room to get her bags, Amanda collapsed with her back against the counter. She gazed around the kitchen, *her* kitchen and thought how little she deserved it. Despite her best efforts to put thoughts of Spencer Teague out of her mind, images and sensations from the previous night kept intruding on her consciousness. She was sure they would recede with time, but for now her memories of their lovemaking were unrelenting—and the guilt the thoughts engendered was overwhelming.

"Mrs. Travis Baxter," she murmured to herself. "You are Mrs. Travis Baxter now." She turned and gazed out the window over the sink at the patch of yard and the garden beyond. It was huge. When Travis mentioned that the kitchen garden would be part of her domain, Amanda had pictured a small plot such as her Aunt Millie tended. This overgrown garden sprawled over what looked like a quarter acre. With Travis out in the fields every day, he obviously had no time to tend to it. Her work was cut out for her.

But that was good. She would submerge herself in the chores required to run a household and she wouldn't have time to think about the mistake she'd made. Soon it would be as though the encounter with Spencer Teague had never happened. She could suppress it with a conscious act of will, the same willpower that had brought her west in spite of family disapproval.

The whistle of the teakettle startled her from her thoughts. Locating a potholder, she lifted the kettle and mixed the hot water with cool water from the pump to wash her face, neck and hands. There was no mirror in the kitchen, so when she was finished drying her face she tucked in the loose strands from her chignon as best she could. After emptying the wash water down the drain, Amanda went into the dining room to find Travis.

“That’s the last of it.” He descended the stairs and met her in the dining room. “All your bags are inside. I just have to put the horse and wagon away.”

“Let me come with you. I’d like to see the barn and the rest of the farm. I can unpack later.” It was easy for her to show enthusiasm about a tour of the farm. She didn’t want to spend the next few hours indoors trying to think of something to say to her new husband. Viewing the farm would give them a topic to discuss.

“All right.” He smiled that big, easy grin, seeming pleased she was interested.

Outdoors, the sunlight was the stark white of late afternoon. The air swam with dust motes and heat waves shimmered above the acres of cornfields. Amanda shielded her eyes and gazed toward the horizon trying to see an end to the field.

“You can’t see it, but there’s a property line dividing my field from Landers’ about a quarter mile that direction.” He pointed toward where she was looking.

“I thought you raised mostly wheat.”

“Yes, but the wheat harvest is in July. The threshers have already been through and the grain sold. There’s a quiet spell now until late fall when the field corn is ripe. You’ll notice the kitchen garden suffered from harvest season. I ignored it for just a few weeks and now it’s a jungle. Not enough hours in the day to keep on top of everything.”

She imagined him working the land alone and still managing to keep his house neat and make improvements on it in anticipation of her arrival. He’d been handling a lot of work with no help at all. She vowed she would learn her part of the chores as soon as possible taking some of the burden off Travis. In a small way it would ease her guilt over her terrible secret.

He took Esther by the bridle and led her toward the barn, the empty wagon rattling behind her. “Like I said in my letters, I want to try some different crops. It’s not a good idea to plant wheat and corn year after year. It drains the soil. Most farmers have trouble making ends meet yet

they never try anything new. If my plans work, I want to buy up more land—make this the biggest farm in Kansas.” He was aglow with enthusiasm. His pale blue eyes reflected the light, looking bright as sapphires and the sun burnished his brown hair a deep honey-gold. He was so handsome and so sweet. It would be easy to fall in love with him.

“I’m sure you’ll succeed. You’re very determined,” Amanda said. “And it’s clear that you love this land.”

“I didn’t always,” he confided. “When I was seventeen, I couldn’t wait to light out of here. My older brother, Stan, had gone out to California at that age and I was itching to try something new myself. My father and I fought for most of a year then one day I just took off and joined the army.”

As he related his story, Travis backed the wagon into the barn, unhitched Esther and led her to her stall. The horse was so excited by the prospect of oats that her head lifted and she practically pranced, her limp forgotten.

“You never mentioned this in your letters,” Amanda said. “How long were you in the army?”

“Too long.” He filled the manger with oats and checked that the watering trough was full. “I got to see a lot of the west like I’d hoped, but it wasn’t what I’d imagined.” He hesitated as though about to add something else then ended with, “I was glad to come back to the farm when my service was done.” He vigorously rubbed down Esther’s sweaty flanks. “But by the time I got home, my father was dead. I’d missed my mother’s telegram telling me the news.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. She’d known both Travis’s parents were dead, but not the circumstances.

He nodded acknowledgement. “I felt awfully guilty, especially because my mother had to go through it alone and then try to keep the farm going by herself.” He came out of the horse’s stall and closed the gate behind him. “She died the following winter from pneumonia. She always had weak lungs, but I think her will to live was gone after Dad died.”

"I'm sorry," Amanda repeated then asked, "What about your brother? Is he still in California?"

Travis shrugged. "Don't know. After he left here, we never heard from him again. We didn't know what happened to him, whether he was alive or dead. That's what made my parents all the more determined to have one of their sons stay home. And being a young fool, their clinging was what made me determined to go." He paused, fastening the lid on the oat bin securely. "It was bad blood all around, but it would've been all right if I'd been able to get back here in time to make peace with my dad."

She couldn't say "I'm sorry" a third time, so she merely nodded.

He suddenly smiled, a flash of white teeth against tanned face. "Hells bells, I shouldn't talk so gloomy on our wedding day. Let me show you the rest of the animals then we'll take a closer look at that pitiful garden."

Barn cats rubbed up against Amanda's skirts as Travis showed her the cow in its stall. The animal lowed mournfully and steadily for its lost calf.

"Millie needs milking." He scratched the cow's knobby head then gestured to the cats. "And they're begging for their share. Soon as I'm done showing you around, I'll tend her."

"I'll watch. I need to learn how to milk."

He introduced her to the huge plow horse, Gideon, standing like a big, quiet statue in his stall. The horse chuffed warm breath against her hand when she patted its enormous nose.

Leaving the horses, cow and complaining cats behind, they walked to the chicken coop alongside the barn. The stench of chicken crinkled her nostrils as they neared the wire-fenced yard where a squawking flock of white and black hens milled. They clustered together, sometimes pecking one another, strutting with their heads bobbing comically. Sometimes one would disappear into the hen house.

"Some people let their chickens roost wherever they will, but I like to keep 'em enclosed so their eggs are easier to find. I don't have time to go on a scavenger hunt every morning. Keeps 'em safer from coyotes, too."

He led her toward the garden. As they walked past the house, Amanda noted the weed-choked patches in front that were abandoned flowerbeds. She could imagine how well tended they must have been under Mrs. Baxter's rule. Then she realized with a jolt that *she* was Mrs. Baxter now. It was up to her to make this house into a home again—a perfect home, where everything ran like clockwork and there were brilliant flowers gracing the front yard.

The garden out back was convenient to the kitchen. Rows of corn, string beans, tomatoes, peppers, cabbage and lettuce were entwined with weeds and wildflowers. Wild mustard plants, Queen Anne's lace and other weeds she didn't recognize threatened to choke out the food-producing plants. While the weeds thrived, the vegetables drooped for lack of water. The tomato plants dropped overripe fruit on the ground for lack of harvest and the green beans grew huge, tough and inedible on the vines.

"As you can see, I haven't had time to tend it or pick much." Travis scratched his neck and squinted at the garden. "You're welcome to salvage what you can, but don't worry too much about canning preserves. We can start again fresh next year."

She took the words as a challenge and resolved to whip the garden into order and can or dry every last vegetable. She would make the plants produce if it killed her. "I helped Aunt Millie with her garden. I'm sure I can tend this one."

After they'd viewed the garden, Travis escorted her back to the house. "I'll show you the boundaries of the fields another day. Why don't you unpack while I take care of the milking? I can show you how to do it tomorrow morning."

"All right." Perhaps Travis needed a little time alone. It had to be as odd for him having a stranger invade his house as it was for Amanda to be there.

Up in the master bedroom, she hung her dresses behind the curtain in the little closet and put her folded underclothes in the empty drawers of the dresser. The act of unpacking and organizing was somehow

comforting. She set her shoes on the floor of the closet then placed the photo of her family on top of the dresser next to a photo of Travis's family. The couple in his family portrait posed stiffly. The older little boy stood ramrod straight beside the chair in which his mother sat, holding a baby in a christening frock. Baby Travis's face was a blur since he'd moved at the last minute. Standing behind the wingback chair, Mr. Baxter frowned into the camera.

Amanda set down the picture then sat on the wedding ring quilt covering the bed. She imagined Travis's parents sharing this room all the days of their married life, moving through their days, raising their boys and tending their farm. Would this place ever feel like her own?

She gazed out the small window at the front yard. Off to the right, Travis was coming back from the barn with a pail of milk in one hand. It occurred to her that she might have to learn about separating cream and churning butter and her heart dropped. The extent of her knowledge of milk included stepping out the front door and picking up the glass bottles the milkman delivered. Perhaps she'd bitten off several mouthfuls more than she could chew by agreeing to become Travis's wife.

Letting the curtain drift back over the window, she gathered her empty carpet bags and put them in her nearly empty trunk. Travis would have to store it in the attic. It was too heavy for her to lift. The trunk full of books was down in the parlor. She'd unpack them later. Hopefully, there would be enough shelf space for all of them.

Checking her appearance in the small mirror over the dresser, Amanda smoothed her hair back into the bun at the back of her head. Spencer's voice rang in her head, telling her that it was red no matter how much she liked to call it auburn. His teasing voice in her mind filled her with mingled anger and a perverse excitement. Her body tingled all over as an onslaught of memories of what they'd done together washed over her.

"Stop it!" she hissed at her wide-eyed reflection. Setting down her comb on the dresser with a click, she turned and left the room to spend

time with her husband and learn how to process milk still steaming from the cow.



The rest of the afternoon and evening passed slowly and awkwardly for the newlywed couple as they struggled to make conversation to fill the silence between them.

With the huge secret weighing on her conscience, Amanda found herself chattering about her home and family in Michigan and asking an endless series of questions about farming and local people. She discovered that Travis was a naturally quiet man and she had to draw information out of him. Perhaps he'd seemed more talkative in his letters because he had time to stop and think about what he wanted to say and craft each sentence with care. That was the way he spoke, slowly and with consideration in choosing his words. She realized she needed to slow down and let him complete his thoughts instead of trying to finish his sentences for him.

For supper they ate the delicious stew and biscuits, which Mrs. Jamison had sent with them for their wedding night meal. Afterward Amanda was glad to have the chore of heating water and washing up dishes to fill some of the time before bed.

When she had finished, she sat on the front porch with Travis in a pair of rocking chairs that had been repaired over the years with various mismatched caning. The weather-beaten antiques were still comfortable, however and she began to relax a little as she watched the spilled paintbox of sunset on the horizon.

"My goodness, it's beautiful," she said. Mentally she was comparing it to sunsets over Lake Michigan and finding it not quite as showy. With the lake, there was the added beauty of the sky's reflection in the water. However, the rippling cornfields here shone a burnished gold that was nearly as pretty as water and just as fluid.

"Yes, it is," Travis offered then lapsed back into silence.

But it was all right. For the first time that evening, Amanda didn't feel the need to talk. For the first time, the silence was comfortable. And knowing she didn't have a wedding night hanging over her head relieved a lot of tension. She could sit here quietly with her new husband and almost feel peace.

When the last of the pink faded from the sky and the night song of the crickets had become deafening, they finally rose to go inside. He held the door open and she walked past him. Her arm brushed against his and heat blossomed in her belly. She was aware of his masculine scent and his tall, imposing presence walking behind her as they mounted the stairs. Amanda wondered what this night would have been like if Travis hadn't given her the option of separate rooms—and if she hadn't had Spencer inside her the night before. Everything would be different if she were still a virgin and ignorant of what men and women did together. Travis would lead her through it and she would have nothing to compare it to. Now, when they finally did come together, a corner of her mind would always have a stranger in it.

At the head of the stairs, they both paused.

"Well...good night." He leaned over and kissed her, not quite hitting her lips, his mouth settling on the corner of her mouth in a polite peck before he moved away. It was as chaste as the kiss he'd given her at their wedding ceremony under the gaze of Reverend and Mrs. Jamison.

Amanda was a little disappointed. "Good night," she murmured before turning, walking into the bedroom and closing the door behind her. She stood there a moment listening to his heavy tread as he walked to the room down the hall, the creak of the door hinges and the soft click of the door as it shut. She imagined him taking off his shoes, socks, shirt and pants and pulling back the covers on his bed. Did he wear an undershirt and shorts or striped pajamas?

Shaking her head, she moved away from the door with a cluck of her tongue. She quickly shed her own clothes and dressed in her nightgown, washed her face and hands with water from the basin then put out the light and climbed beneath the covers. The newly risen moon shone

through the window and across the foot of her bed. She stared at the square of light and thought about her new husband and her new life. Her wedding ceremony had passed in a blur. She scarcely remembered giving her vows, but now she was wedded to Travis Baxter for as long as they both should live. It was hard to comprehend the gravity of that promise.

Slowly she relaxed and drifted off to sleep. And in her dreams Spencer Teague came to her again. There was no sense or story in the dream, just a jumble of erotic sensations—his mouth and hands touching her all over.

She moaned and her body rose to his caressing fingers as it had in reality. Twisting on the bed, she tried to find relief for the pulsing between her thighs. The dream lovemaking increased in intensity. Whispered words, stroking hands and wet kisses filled her senses. When she finally jerked awake, she was sweating. Her hard, aching nipples poked at the light cotton fabric of her nightgown. Her sex was slippery wet with desire.

Breathing hard, she clutched one of her breasts through the thin material and kneaded it lightly. Her eyes closed again and she allowed her hand to steal down underneath her bunched up nightgown to touch between her legs. Her finger found the hard nub there that she hadn't really been aware existed before Spencer showed her the pleasure it contained. She wiggled her finger over the little bud as the pleasurable sensations increased until she gasped. She closed her lips tight, stifling the moan that threatened to escape as the heat rose higher and higher inside her. Desire spiraled upward before bursting in a flaming shower of sparks that electrified her nerve endings.

But even when she was finished and the last wave of pleasure had died away, the sense of yearning still throbbed inside her. Unfulfilled and ashamed of her newly awakened erotic desires, she drifted back into an uneasy sleep.



Spencer finished fucking the whore and collapsed on the bed beside her, panting like a dog. It had taken him forever to achieve an erection and even longer to get off.

There was a sharp rap on the door. "Hour's up," a bored female voice came from the hall outside the tiny bedroom. Heavy footsteps plodded on.

Spence rolled off the bed and pulled on his pants, socks and shoes. The woman behind him didn't stir as he dressed. She lay in the jumbled sheets, limbs sprawled, hair tousled.

"Got a cigarette?" she asked.

"No. Sorry." He put on his undershirt and shirt then dug in his pants pocket and threw some money in the girl's tip jar.

"Thanks." The word was muffled by a yawn.

He glanced at her as he slid his arms into his jacket. She had bright red hair. He'd chosen her on purpose to erase the memory of Amanda McCormick with a different redhead. It hadn't worked. Instead, he found that in order to get hard he had to focus on the woman's hair and to come he had to close his eyes tight and pretend she *was* Amanda.

Fucking pitiful.

"Thanks," he said before turning away and walking from the room.

In the hall outside, she waited for him.

Spence squeezed his eyes tight shut then popped them open again. The little redheaded girl from his dream was standing in the hallway staring at him with her damned accusing eyes. He was wide-awake this time, but he clearly saw her there—each strand of coppery hair and the green grass stain on the front of her white pinafore. "Go to her, you bad man!" she demanded.

"Christ! Leave me the fuck alone!" Travis bolted for the stairs, running past or maybe through the kid. He didn't look at her again, but thundered down the stairs, through the roomful of whores waiting for customers and out the door. His boots clocked along the late night street.

Occasionally he looked back over his shoulder as though he was being chased.

But the little girl was evidently done haunting him for that night.

Chapter Six

Amanda woke to her first day as a wife hours after the sun had risen. She sat up and threw back the covers, embarrassed at having slept in. She'd been determined to start right in making breakfast and showing Travis that she was going to be a good homemaker. But by the time she'd dressed and gone downstairs, he was gone and the smells of cooking in the kitchen let her know he'd made his own breakfast and hers as well.

On the table, he'd laid out silverware for her and a plate under a warming cover. The delicious aroma of breakfast wafted to her nose even before she removed the lid and saw the eggs, toast and bacon arrayed on the plate. Her throat constricted and her eyes stung with sudden tears. Travis was such a sweet man and she, with her shameful secret, was so undeserving of his kindness.

Sitting at the table, she ate the breakfast her husband had prepared for her while she lay sleeping, but her mind raced ahead to the many things she planned to accomplish that day. The house was already tidy, but there was always more dusting, sweeping and cleaning to be done. She needed to wash some of her clothes and Travis probably had some that needed washing as well. She hadn't taken stock of the pantry yet and didn't know what supplies she had on hand to create a meal, but she intended the first supper she cooked for him to be a culinary marvel and marvels took time to prepare. Then there was the cow she must learn to milk, chickens to feed, eggs to gather and that jungle of a garden to tackle.

After finishing the delicious breakfast, Amanda rose and pumped water into the kettle, setting it on the stove to heat for washing dishes.

Not having both hot and cold running water from a tap was going to take some getting used to.

“You’re up.” His unexpected voice behind her made her jump. She tuned to greet him as he walked into the kitchen. “Good morning. Sorry I slept in so late. I should be the one making your breakfast. Thank you.”

“It’s all right. I’m used to cooking.” He smiled. “You needed the sleep.”

Amanda looked at him sharply. Had she made noises in her sleep last night? Had she moaned or groaned or set the bed creaking with her tossing and turning? It would be humiliating if he guessed the erotic nature of her dreams. “Yes, it was a long train trip. But I’m bright-eyed and bushy-tailed now and ready to learn how to milk if you’ve got the time to show me.”

“I just finished. Millie couldn’t wait. But she’ll need to be milked again come evening. I’ll show you then.”

“Well, I’ll feed the chickens and gather eggs then.”

“All right. The basket’s just inside the pantry. Be careful putting your hand in the nest boxes, the biddies peck hard sometimes and the rooster’s likely to attack you. He’s not going to like a stranger poking around his flock.” He stood in the kitchen doorway a moment longer as if uncertain what to do or say next. “There’s not a lot for me to do in the fields now until harvest, but I do need to start repairing some fence. Will you be all right here on your own?”

“Of course. I have plenty to do to keep me occupied,” she assured him. “Could you tell me where the laundry tub is? I thought I’d do a small washing.”

“I’ve been sending my clothes out to a laundress in town. I figured we could keep doing that for now. You have enough to do around here just getting used to the place.”

“I can do it. I’m perfectly capable.”

Travis stuck his hands in his back pockets. “I know you can, but at least for the next few weeks we can have Mrs. Workentein keep doing the laundry. She kind of counts on the money. But if there are a few things you want to rinse out, the tub’s on the back porch. I’ll bring it into the

kitchen. It's the same tub I use for bathing, so if you've a mind to later, you can use it if you'd like a bath."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate it." Amanda's scalp felt itchy and washing her hair sounded like the first thing she'd like to do on her list of chores.

He hauled the big copper tub into the kitchen where it took up most of the floor space then he went with Amanda to the chicken coop and showed her where the chicken feed was kept and how much mash to give the hens.

"You going to be all right?" he asked again.

She pursed her lips as she tilted her chin to look way up into his face. The insinuation that she might not be able to handle herself on the farm didn't sit well with her. "Just fine, thanks."

He nodded and walked away, leaving her with hens swarming around her skirts and an empty basket to fill with eggs.

She watched him go, thinking that his muscular forearms looked mighty good with the sleeves of his work shirt rolled up above his elbows. She liked the way the shirt strained across his shoulders. Travis even managed to make denim overalls attractive.

Turning toward her work, she opened the door to the small chicken coop and went into the stifling interior. The contented black and white hens clucked on their nest boxes. Carefully, she slipped her hand under one soft, feathered body, feeling for eggs. The hen let out an indignant squawk and pecked her forearm—hard.

Amanda jerked back her hand, earning another series of pecks and more alarmed squawking at her sudden movement. The other hens began a nervous chattering, shifting nervously on their nests.

"Sh. I'm not going to hurt you. Good chicken, trust me. Just let me get my hand in." She murmured comforting phrases as she tried again to retrieve an egg from under the fat hen.

Another sharp rap of the beak on her wrist made her hiss with pain, but she managed to draw out two light tan eggs to place in her basket.

Making a circuit around the coop, she collected thirteen eggs in all and at least twice as many pecks. Amanda gazed down at her basket of pretty eggs in shades from dark brown to creamy white, proud of her minor accomplishment. She let the gate of the chicken's enclosure fall shut behind her and walked back to the house, dreaming of selling extra eggs in town and earning a little money. There was no way two people could consume over a dozen eggs a day. She wondered what Travis had been doing with the extras before now.

In the kitchen, she set the eggs in the cooling chest in the back of the pantry then turned to examine the shelves to find out what ingredients she had to make dinner with. There was dried salt pork and potatoes, corn meal and beans. She would have liked to have fresh meat, but the pork would have to do. After scooping two cups of dried navy beans in one of the larger pots, she pumped water on top of them and set the pot on the back burner of the stove. Since she hadn't soaked the beans overnight, she would hurry the process by cooking them on low heat for most of the day. Hopefully by the time she was ready to use them for supper, they'd be cooked.

She filled the teakettle with water and set it to heat...again. She was going to get very tired of not having a hot water heater. It was a luxury she'd taken for granted back home, as was the indoor toilet. Sighing in annoyance, she trudged out back to the privy to relieve herself.

When she returned to the house, the kettle was already screaming. Amanda took the long-unused box of laundry soap and made suds in the tub with an equal mixture of steaming hot water and cold water from the pump. By the time she dunked her underclothes in the water, it was already cooling off. She washed her stockings and petticoats against an old-fashioned washboard, heated more water for rinsing then wrung the clothes out as best she could by hand. She had hated Aunt Millie's wringer washer, which often demolished buttons or got stuck if you fed too many clothes through it at once, but now she'd give anything to have that hand-cranked machine at her disposal.

She carried a basket of wet garments out to the line. The clothesline was dirty and probably hadn't been used since Travis's mother passed.

Amanda had to wipe it down before she could hang her clothes on it with the pins she'd found in a bag on the back porch after a long search. When she returned to the house to empty the washtub, the beans were bubbling on the stove, steaming water spilling over the edge of the pot. Amanda turned the gas fire as far down as she could and checked the water level on the beans. There was plenty to cover them.

After dragging the heavy copper tub across the floor, sloshing water as she went, she tipped it into the grass by the back steps. By the time she'd accomplished this, she was red-faced and sweating. She took a moment to stretch, push the damp hair off her forehead and gaze out at the swaying corn under another hot August sun. The breeze never seemed to stop blowing across the flat landscape, yet it brought little cooling comfort.

Her gaze turned toward the garden. "All right then. Let's see what I can pick for dinner." She went back into the kitchen, swabbed up the spills from the floor then took her empty egg basket and a couple of pots and headed out to the garden. Standing for a moment on the edge of the large plot of land, Amanda imagined she was entering a jungle in India like in one of Mr. Kipling's tales. The string bean plants were taller than her head. Pumpkin and squash vines lay coiled and tangled, like snakes, choking out some of the more delicate plants. The lettuce had already bolted in the hot summer sun so there was none to salvage for salad. Some of the tomatoes were round, red, juicy and waiting to be plucked, but many had fallen to lie squashed and rotting on the ground beneath the plants.

Amanda squatted and began pulling weeds from around the light green, feathery tops of the carrots. She bent over the rows and was soon intent on plucking every bit of crab grass and ground cover that threatened to obliterate the carrots. It was easy to lose track of time engaged in her battle against nature. She'd twisted her hair high up off her neck and worn her coolest calico dress, but even so sweat pooled on the nape of her neck and trickled down her spine. It stained the armpits of her dress and beaded on her forehead and upper lip. Occasionally she'd brush at her face, smearing dirty streaks across it. But full of

dogged determination, she kept pulling weeds as the sun crept across the sky.

Once again Travis's voice startled her as he entered the garden where she was immersed in her project. "Are you going to take a break for lunch?"

She jumped up, her knees cracking and her lower back aching from the cramped squat she'd held for so long. "Oh my goodness, is it that late? I'm sorry. I meant to prepare lunch for you." She brushed her hands together and the dry, dusty earth caking them flaked off and drifted to the ground.

Travis smiled, his eyes scanning her from head to toe, lingering just a moment on the swell of her breasts outlined against the blue-sprigged calico bodice. "We have leftover stew from Mrs. Jamison. That'll be fine."

She walked with him toward the house, feeling dirty, disheveled and embarrassed by her seeming inability to have her husband's meals ready on time. What kind of a wife forgot to prepare the noon meal?

Inside the kitchen, Amanda cast a longing eye at the copper washtub. It was small compared to the porcelain bath back home, hardly suitable for a long soak, but right now even a sponge bath would be wonderful. She washed up at the pump, scrubbing her hands with rough lye soap while the cold water swirled the dirt down the drain. By the time she'd splashed her face clean and dried off, Travis had already set the table and heated the leftovers. The stew smelled delicious, overpowering the odor of steaming navy beans that pervaded the kitchen. Her stomach growled, as he said grace over their meal.

She almost lost her appetite at the reminder of God, who must despise her now that she was a fallen woman, but one bite of the stew banished her spiritual worries. She was too ravenous to worry about God's opinion at the moment. "I must ask Mrs. Jamison for the recipe," she said. "I've never tasted such good stew."

"Looks like you made a dent in that garden. But don't spend too long out in the sun. You can get heat stroke. Do you have a hat to wear?"

“Nothing suitable.” She thought of her straw hat with the wide red ribbon and cherry cluster resting on the brim.

“I’ll try to find one of my mother’s old sunbonnets and her garden gloves, too.”

Amanda hated wearing hats, but he was right, she should shield herself from the sun. Already the skin on her cheeks and nose tingled with sunburn. “Thank you.”

Lunchtime and the brief reprieve from work were over too soon. Travis gave her the limp, blue sunbonnet he’d found in the attic and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek before heading back out to the fence line. “Don’t work too hard,” he cautioned. “There’s always more to do tomorrow.” He gave a tug on the brim of the faded, old bonnet framing her face.

She smiled up at him, fighting an impulse to rise up on her toes and kiss him back—on the lips. But Travis turned and left before she could act on her desire.

After crossing the kitchen to the stove, she lifted the lid and checked on the cooking navy beans. They’d absorbed a lot of water and were plumping up nicely. She threw in salt pork for flavoring. In another couple of hours she’d add green beans, tomatoes, carrots, turnips and whatever other garden vegetables seemed suitable to make soup. Replacing the lid, she walked back out to the garden. Her step wasn’t as springy as it had been that morning and her daydream about exploring the jungles of India wasn’t as exciting.

About a half hour later she was pulling out some stubborn pokeweed, which had grown almost as tall as a stalk of corn, when a cackling sound caught her attention.

Amanda looked up to see a black and white hen strutting through the newly-weeded carrots. “How did you get out here?” She dropped the huge weed she’d wrested from the ground and walked toward the chicken. “You’re supposed to be in your pen. Don’t you know there are chicken hawks just waiting for a biddy like you?” As she snuck toward the hen, it moved away from her, keeping just out of reach. She chased the bird in

slow motion through the garden and out into the grass, always a couple of paces away from catching it.

Perhaps if she couldn't catch it she could shoo it the direction she wanted it to go, like a cowboy herding cattle. She shook her skirt and apron, driving the plump hen back toward the coop. When she rounded the corner of the house, she sucked in her breath at the dismaying sight before her. The front yard was full of chickens. The whole flock had escaped their enclosure and was wandering through the grass pecking at the ground. "Oh no!"

Her gaze flew to the gate she thought she'd closed. It was hanging wide open. She must not have latched it. Chickens were everywhere. She hardly knew how to begin to round them up. Flapping her skirt at the one in front of her, she continued to drive it toward the pen. "Come on, ladies, time to go home."

Amanda clucked and cooed and talked to the chicken, steering it all the way home. But at the last second, the hen veered off with a squawk in a different direction. Cursing, she tried to capture another one. This time she decided to forgo the herding approach and just grab for the nearest hen. She ran around the yard, reaching for this one and that one, as the hens darted to and fro, always just out of reach.

She was sweating, fuming and in tears by the time the bright idea struck her to entice the chickens home to roost with food. She went to the bin at the back of the coop and scooped out a ration of meal then stood in the poultry yard tapping the tin, rattling the corn so the chickens would hear it. Within moments they came flocking from all parts of the yard back into their enclosure. Shutting the gate behind the last one, she cast the feed on the ground, feeling like chucking the tin at their stupid bobbing heads, as they clucked and pecked.

After putting the pan away, closing the lid of the feed bin—tight this time, closing the gate behind her and latching it securely, she went toward the house. She had no idea what time it was, but from the angle of the sun it must be getting toward suppertime.

From the corner of her eye she saw a chicken flutter past heading toward the coop. She let out a quiet scream of frustration and went to let the straggler in with the rest of the flock, hoping there weren't others she'd missed.

After stopping by the garden to pick a few handfuls of vegetables, she headed toward the house again. Before she even reached the kitchen door, she smelled the odor of burnt beans. Smoke swirled out of the kitchen window and through the back door screen.

"Oh no!" She rushed inside to turn off the stove. The ring of blue flame still burned steadily beneath the pot. Smoke curled out from underneath the edges of the lid, sending noxious fumes throughout the house. She picked up the pot with a pair of holders and carried it outdoors, smoke streaming into her face all the way. Setting it down in the grass, she took off the lid to stare at the mess of burned beans within then went back into the house to air out the kitchen.

The air was hazy with smoke. Amanda waved it toward the window with a dishcloth. It was worse than trying to herd chickens. Without form or substance, the smoke coiled around her, the smell making her choke. She needed a proper fan to stir the still air. Grabbing a baking sheet from one of the cupboards, she flapped it wildly around her and some of the smoke seemed to dissipate.

After a few minutes, exhausted from her efforts, she checked out the rest of the house. It was less smelly than the kitchen, but still smoke hung in every room. With very little breeze coming through the windows, there was nothing to drive out the smell.

For a while she went around with her cooking sheet, flapping it here and there, doing the best she could to clear away the fumes, but finally she glanced at the clock and saw it was almost six. Travis would be back and hungry any minute and there was no dinner prepared.

Her eyes smarted and it wasn't just the smoke stinging them. She was hot, sweaty, exhausted and wanted nothing more than to be back home, walking along the beach, catching a cool breeze off the lake with the water lapping over her bare feet. What insanity had possessed her to

travel west to marry a man she hardly knew and live the life of a farm wife?

She washed her red, chapped hands and broken dirty nails with lye soap at the kitchen sink, rinsed the tears and dirt from her face and headed back into the pantry to come up with something to feed her husband for dinner.



Travis thought about Amanda all day as he worked straightening fence posts and re-stringing wire. She looked so pretty standing in the kitchen washing up the breakfast dishes. Her red hair glowed in the morning light coming through the window and her blue, flower-sprigged dress was crisp and fresh.

But when he came home at lunch and found her squatting in the garden and she turned her dirt-streaked face up to him, she looked even prettier. She was like some Charles Dickens urchin struggling pitifully against insurmountable odds. Travis wanted to scoop her up, carry her into the house and bathe her, telling her not to worry about gardening or feeding chickens or cooking him meals. All she had to do was let him make love to her and he'd be satisfied. As a matter of fact, he spent most of the afternoon fantasizing this scenario, especially the part where he patted her rosy skin dry and lifted her in his arms to carry her off to bed. Beyond that he wouldn't let his mind wander or he wouldn't have gotten any work done at all. As it was, his cock pressed hard and swollen against the seam of his pants.

He wanted Amanda—wanted her desperately. It had been too long since he'd had a woman. The good Christian girls of Reederville weren't an option and he didn't feel right about going to prostitutes, although he had on occasion during his army days. As a result, there'd been no sexual release for him, other than his own stroking hand, for a long, long time.

Living with Amanda and not having her was driving him crazy and this was after only one day of platonic co-habitation. He didn't know how long he could keep it up. He prayed that tonight she'd invite him to her room to properly begin their union as husband and wife.

Shouldering his shovel and wire cutters, he tucked his work gloves in his overall pocket and headed home. The house truly felt like a home now that he had someone to share it with. And it would feel even more like home as he and Amanda grew closer and eventually had a child or two.

After putting the tools away in the barn, he walked toward the house. He smelled burnt beans before he even went inside. He took off his work boots and left them on the back porch then opened the kitchen door. The burned smell was even stronger. A slight haze of smoke still hung in the air. Amanda was stirring something on the stove with her back to him.

Travis wanted to walk up behind her and slip an arm around her waist. Instead he paused in the doorway, clearing his throat so he wouldn't startle her this time.

She turned toward him, her face flushed from the heat of the stove. "Sorry. I burned the beans. We're having eggs, potatoes, salt pork and toast instead. And some vegetables from the garden." She looked close to tears or as if she had just finished crying.

"That sounds just fine." He smiled to set her at ease, acting as if he didn't notice her eyes were puffy and pink. "I'll get washed up." He walked to the sink and pumped water then added a little hot from the kettle on the stove, washing his hands, face and neck, before drying them on a dish towel. "Can I help with anything?"

"No," she said curtly. "Please just sit down at the table. I'll bring the meal in a moment."

Travis obeyed. He was touched when he saw the dining room table set with his mother's good china, the flatware lying straight on either side of the plates. Living on his own, he'd become accustomed to grabbing a plate from the cupboard and a fork from the drawer and leaning against the kitchen counter more often than not.

Amanda came from the kitchen with a serving dish in each hand. She refused his second offer to help, making several trips back and forth until she'd brought everything they needed for the meal. Finally she sat across from him and folded her hands.

He said grace, concentrating on her face, not the words of the prayer. The poor little thing looked exhausted and miserable, worse than she had at lunch. He wanted to put a smile on her face more than anything.

"I was going to make a navy bean soup, but as you can smell, I had an accident." She unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap.

Travis dug into the meat, potatoes and scrambled eggs. "This is just as good. I love eggs." He lifted a forkful and placed it in his mouth then struggled not to choke. He'd never tasted anything so salty in his life. He chewed and swallowed without making a face before reaching for his glass of milk.

"Something's the matter." Amanda watched him drink half the glass.

"No. It's fine."

She took a bite from her plate and frowned. She chewed and swallowed it down. "Salty! It's terrible! How could I mess up something so simple?"

Travis wondered that himself. "Did you soak the salt pork in water first? You have to soak some of the salt out before you cook with it."

"No," she moaned. "And I added salt to the eggs." Her voice trembled and a sudden sob burst out. She covered her mouth, trying to choke it back.

"Aw, honey, it's okay." Travis felt a terrible desire to laugh, but now was not the time for levity. He rose from the table and went around it to crouch next to Amanda, slipping an arm around her shoulders.

"I'm stupid! I can't do anything right. First the chickens then the beans and now I can't even make a simple meal." She pressed the heels of her hands hard into her eyes as if she would stop the tears that continued to leak out.

“It doesn’t matter,” he soothed. “We can eat the vegetables and bread and butter. It’ll be fine. Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying!” she snapped, her voice cracking. “I’m not!”

He stroked her hair back and kissed her temple. “Why don’t we forget about eating right now? I’m going to draw you a nice hot bath to soak in. That will make you feel better.”

“No,” she moaned. “I’m supposed to be the one helping *you*, not making more work for you. You’re out in the field all day, the least I should be able to do is give you a decent meal!” The last word was lost in a sob.

Travis rose from his half crouch, pulling her up out of the chair and gathering her into his arms. As he held her shaking body close, he’d never been so grateful to have a rumbling stomach. He’d gladly skip several meals or face mounds of over-salted eggs if it meant being able to hold and comfort her like this. Her soft breasts pressed against his chest, her body filled his arms and he felt a stirring in his groin at the proximity. He breathed in her scent, sweaty, salty, womanly and his desire grew stronger. He had to release her and step away before she felt the result of that desire poking into her crotch. The last thing he wanted to do was alarm her with his base needs.

“I’m all right, really,” she sniffled, rubbing her eyes dry. “Let’s sit down and eat whatever part of the meal is edible. I’m starving and you must be too.”

They resumed their seats across from one another. While they ate, she told him the details of her day and by the end they were both laughing about the escaped chickens if not the burnt beans.

He helped her clear the table, scrape the leftovers into the garbage and wash the dishes. Then he heated water in several of the largest pots and poured them into the copper tub.

Amanda thanked him for his help before he left her to bathe.

Standing outside the closed kitchen door, he imagined her in there, taking off her dress, her shoes and stockings, her unmentionables, until she stood nude in the center of the room. He heard a splash and pictured

her stepping into the tub, naked and lowering herself into the water. It took every ounce of his willpower to keep from opening the door a crack to take a peek. He forced himself to move away, going out to the barn to settle the animals for the night.

As he filled Esther's manger and forked fresh bedding down from the loft, he realized he'd be sleeping alone again tonight. After the day Amanda had suffered, there was no way she was going to be in the mood to begin the sexual aspect of their married life.

Soon. He comforted himself. This getting-to-know-each-other period was but a short moment of time in the entire course of their marriage. He must be patient. Eventually she would want him.



Spence was on the train out of St. Louis heading east in the dead of night. He'd been caught cheating at poker, almost got his ass kicked by some gentlemen at the Red Rose Saloon and had to make a run for it. He'd bought a ticket on the next train out of the station.

Sitting up straight in the hard seat, he refused to let his eyes close as the train rattled on through the midnight landscape. He didn't dare sleep, lest he see the terrifying little girl again. Although now, apparently, she could appear to him while he was awake, too.

He nibbled the peanuts he'd bought and chased them with swigs of beer. It was all the dinner he was going to get. It seemed like days since he'd last sat down to a meal.

Sometime around two in the morning the train stopped in Ashland right near his home town of Cooter, Kentucky. For a moment he considered getting off the train. Maybe a visit with family would be good right now...if any of his kin in Cooter would even speak to him. He'd never said goodbye or looked back when he took off at age sixteen.

But Spence didn't get off the train. He sat in the uncomfortable seat with his forehead pressed against the cool windowpane, trying to see out into the dark. As the train pulled out of the station and wound around

the foothills of the Appalachians, he thought how different his life would have been if he'd stayed there, living in a tarpaper shack and descending into the ground every day, never seeing the sun. He'd only worked the seam two months before he ran away and it had felt like dying every single day.

If he still lived in Cooter, he'd take whatever shit the mining company shoveled and eat it, licking master's boots like every other miner. His lungs would already be coated black inside and he'd be spitting coal dust mixed with blood like his dad by the time he was thirty. Dead by forty, leaving behind a broken down woman and a passel of kids.

No. He'd done right to get away, to escape as soon as he was able to scrape together enough cash to catch the train out of town. Most of the time he never thought about the family he'd left behind. They had each other and didn't need him. He'd always been a thorn in everyone's side anyway, especially Daddy's.

But it might have been nice to stop at Ashland and walk the fifteen miles up to Cooter...just to see if Mama was still alive.

The steam engine's whistle shrieked as they went through another crossing.

He stared out into the night, struggling to keep awake and thinking about how fucked-up a family could make you. His dad had killed himself to keep his wife and five kids fed and sheltered. Spence had sworn he wouldn't be that man when he grew up and so far he'd managed to escape the shackles of dependents.

He planned to go right on living for himself just as he'd been doing for a dozen years. No one was going to tie him down. He wasn't going to be held accountable to anyone, certainly not to a scary little dream girl who wouldn't let him rest. And not to some red-headed female, who haunted him as well.

Chapter Seven

Amanda's second day as a farm wife began better than the first. At least she was up in time to prepare breakfast and have it waiting on the table by the time Travis returned from the barn. After they ate, they went back out to the barn and he taught her how to milk Millie.

"Don't be afraid of her. Move your stool in a little closer and lean against her side for balance when you reach underneath."

She hadn't expected to be nervous. There was nothing to fear, yet the sheer size of the cow made her uncomfortable. As if sensing her unease, Millie shifted, making it hard for her to grab her teats and pull.

Travis quieted the beast and wrapped his hands around Amanda's, demonstrating the proper technique.

She was conscious of his closeness, his breath stirring her hair and his hands callused and warm over hers. His male presence made her stomach jumpy and her sex tighten. Memories of her sexual experience with Spencer Teague darted through her mind and she wondered what the same act might be like with Travis's big hands touching her all over.

She finally managed to get a grip on the cow's teat and a thin stream of milk shot from the udder into the pail. She was proud of the accomplishment, but soon her hand grew sore from the repetitive motion. Milking took more strength than she'd expected. When she was finished, Travis took her place on the stool and stripped the last of the milk from Millie's udders with a few practiced pulls.

Before he went out to the fields, he showed her how to strain and separate the milk and how to work the tin Dazey churn. It was easier than an old-fashioned wood paddle churn, which Amanda had feared she

might have to use. There was a hand crank on the outside to turn it round and round. But it was still harder than buying butter from the milkman as she had back home.

No wonder farm women worked from dawn to dusk. There was an endless list of tasks to keep them occupied. No sooner had she fed the chickens and collected the day's eggs, when she remembered that she'd never taken her washing in the previous day.

When she went to remove her undergarments from the clothesline in the backyard, she found the line had snapped and all her clothes were lying on the ground. She lifted up a camisole and a pair of stockings, beat a little dust off them and decided it wasn't worth another washing. They were clean enough.

After folding and putting them away, she washed the breakfast dishes and churned butter, taking breaks from cranking the handle to make her bed, clean house and prepare dinner. Today she was going to make cornbread and beans she had set soaking the previous night. There was no way she would ruin a meal two days in a row.

The morning passed quickly as did the lunch hour with Travis. Conversation between them was still stilted at times with long, silent pauses, but Amanda's discomfort was fading. At least now she could tell him about her progress on small tasks around the place and ask his advice about the butter churning which seemed to be taking far too long. The farm gave them something in common right away.

After lunch, she worked on the garden again, shielding her head from the sun with the ugly bonnet. She'd pulled the last scrubby weed out of the turnip patch and straightened to survey her work, when she heard her name called.

"Amanda Baxter?"

Mrs. Jamison had called her Mrs. Baxter after the wedding ceremony, but this was the first time Amanda had heard her new surname spoken so casually, as if that was who she was now. She turned to see a woman walking toward the garden. Two small children trailed behind her.

“Hello,” the young woman, little more than a girl, called out. “I’m Marilyn Landers from down the road.”

Amanda smiled, brushed her hands off on her apron and walked down the long garden row toward her guest. “Pleased to meet you. I’d shake your hand but...” She held up her filthy hands, palms up.

“Good Lord, what are you doing working out here in the heat of the day?” Mrs. Landers demanded. “You’ll fry your brain like an egg. Weeding’s best done in the early morning or late afternoon.” The woman was tiny and as spindly as a dry twig. A sprinkling of freckles were scattered across her elfin face framed by pale brown hair drawn back into a single long braid down her back. She didn’t look much older than the small boy standing by her side, staring at Amanda. The toddler girl demonstrated no such shyness, running straight to Amanda and holding out her arms to be picked up.

She scooped the pudgy baby up in her arms. “My goodness, look at you.”

“Pearl likes you.” Mrs. Landers smiled, as if her little daughter’s seal of approval ensured that she would like Amanda, too. “And this here brave boy clinging to my leg is Tommy.”

Holding the little girl on one hip, she nodded solemnly at Tommy. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Tommy disappeared behind his mother. The woman rolled her eyes and shook her head. “He’s feeling shy these days for some reason.”

“Won’t you come in and sit down, Mrs. Landers?” Amanda offered. “It’s such a pleasure to have company.”

“Please, call me Marilyn. I can’t tell you how excited I was to learn I’d have a neighbor lady at last. I get lonely for my sisters sometimes. The women in town have their own little clubs and such, but there isn’t much opportunity on a farm for socializing. Back home there was five of us girls all sharing the chores, singing, fighting and laughing together. I do miss them.” Marilyn took her boy’s hand and walked with Amanda toward the house. “It must be a world of change for you, coming out here all the way from Michigan.”

“It’s different,” she admitted. “I lived in town and I’m learning every day how much I don’t know about farm work.”

“I’ll help you out. Believe me, even if you grew up on a farm, it’s different running a household on your own. Made me appreciate my Ma a lot more when I married Ted and started my own home.”

Little Pearl squirmed in her arms. Amanda set the tiny girl on the ground and she trotted ahead of them toward the house, leading the way as if she was the hostess.

“There’s so much to do. I don’t know how you manage to take care of children and do everything you have to do. Thank you for the cookies, by the way, they were delicious.”

“I’ll give you the recipe.” Marilyn held Tommy’s hand and swung it as they walked. “The important thing is not to try to do too much at once.” “There’s always more chores to be done. You could work sunrise to sunset and not finish everything needs doing. So just take a little bite out of it every day and then make sure to stop and enjoy the sunshine.”

Amanda smiled. She liked her new neighbor already. It was easy to feel a kinship with this even-tempered, cheerful girl.

Marilyn looked curiously around the house as they walked through it on their way to the front porch, stopping in the kitchen to get glasses and a pitcher of sweetened tea. “You know, I’ve lived down the road from your husband for four years now and never been inside this house. It’s about time he got hitched. I’m looking forward to visiting back and forth with you all.”

“Me, too.” Amanda took a seat under the shadowed overhang of the porch. It brightened her day to have a real visitor to her very own home. She and Marilyn sat and sipped tea and watched the two small children playing in the dirt in the front yard.

“Hope you’ll excuse me being rude, but how did you land Travis Baxter? There are plenty of women in this county who’d have been only too happy to be in your place. All he’d tell my husband was that he was going to pick up his bride at the station in Kansas City. That’s the first we heard he was getting married.”

Amanda flushed. It was a little embarrassing to tell how she'd responded to Travis's personal ad in the newspaper. It made her seem desperate. But maybe she had been. "We've been writing back and forth for about a year. I liked the way he expressed himself in his letters and he made the prairie sound so beautiful I wanted to come here."

Marilyn cocked an eyebrow. "Really? I'll bet you were disappointed. Not at Travis," she hastened to add. "He's a fine man. But at your first sight of the land. It's pretty flat and dull."

"I think it's beautiful and the sunsets are glorious."

"How did you two meet?" Marilyn pressed. "A long distance courtship like that is kind of unusual."

Amanda couldn't sidestep the issue and plunged in, explaining about the personal ad she'd seen in the paper requesting a pen pal. She admitted her desire to make a home of her own.

"There weren't any bachelors back in Michigan?"

"Yes, I suppose, but once I started my correspondence with Travis, I wasn't interested in any of them."

"Hm."

"This must sound crazy to you." It sounded crazy to her, too, as she said it. She wondered how Marilyn would react if she told her the rest of the story about her encounter with Spencer Teague and her false wedding night.

Marilyn rocked in her chair. "There's a lot of ways to fall in love. My mama married the brother of her first husband after he died of a fever." Marilyn grinned. "If she hadn't, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you today. However you met your husband and came here, I'm glad of it."

Amanda smiled. She watched Pearl throw a handful of dirt at her brother. He punched her in the arm. Marilyn ignored the sibling squabbling.

"But there will be some who aren't," Marilyn continued. "Carrie Nordstrum for one. She had her sights set on Travis ever since he came back home from the Army, even though he didn't pay her the slightest

mind. She's going to be angry as a bag full of wildcats when she finds a stranger hooked him right out from under her nose."

This was the kind of inside knowledge that Amanda had been looking for. "Tell me. Travis didn't share many details about the people around here and he certainly didn't share that information. I'm still not sure why he was searching for a wife from so far away if there are suitable girls here."

"Men," Marilyn scoffed. "They don't dig very deep and Travis probably isn't even aware that Carrie's been casting her net for him." She shrugged. "On the other hand, maybe he knew exactly what Carrie and the others wanted and chose to go looking for a different kind of woman. I don't know the man well, but I get the impression he feels things deeper than a lot of men and that he's got some secret sadness he carries around in him—something he could never share with a light-headed girl like Carrie Nordstrum." She smiled at Amanda. "Maybe it was God sent him looking for you, 'cause here you are now."

After that, she proceeded to regale Amanda with gossip about Carrie Nordstrum and many other denizens of Reederville and the surrounding area.

Amanda listened, fascinated and by the time Marilyn was finished, she felt she had a much better understanding of the social structure of Reederville. She'd also learned a mother could settle childish arguments, administer discipline, wipe tear-streaked cheeks and cuddle two tired children without interrupting her verbal dissection of an entire community.

"Gracious, it's getting late," Marilyn noted as the angle of the sun slanted beneath the porch roof and fell across their laps. "Time for me to get these kids home and start supper. Before I go, is there anything I can help you with?"

"Chickens," Amanda said. "I've never killed and plucked one in my life, but I planned to have chicken for Sunday dinner."

"It's not hard. It's all in the wrist," Marilyn said. "A quick twist and *snap*. I'll come by and show you how on Saturday. Also, you want to

make sure you don't kill one of your good layers. Watch your flock this week and figure out which hen is past her prime."

"Oh. All right." Amanda was taken aback. It sounded so callous. "Also, I was wondering about laundry. Travis said he's been sending his out to Mrs. Workentein and offered to keep doing that. I told him I could do my own washing...but it's harder than I thought."

"Good Lord, are you crazy? If your husband's able and willing to pay for a washerwoman then by all means take advantage of it! I'd happily eat nails if someone would wash my baby's dirty diapers for me."

Marilyn's amazement made her feel foolish. She realized her insistence on doing everything herself was merely stubborn pride. If Marilyn saw no shame in letting her laundry be done by others then Amanda would accept Travis's offer with great relief.

"Goodbye. See you soon." Her new friend gave her a brief hug then rounded up her little ones and set off toward home.

Standing on the porch, she watched the petite woman and her two elfin children walk up the drive toward the dusty road then went inside to begin cooking dinner. She was excited at the prospect of going to church on Sunday and meeting the townspeople she now knew something about. She was especially anxious to see Carrie Nordstrum, the woman who had wanted to be in her shoes.

Chapter Eight

Over the next days Amanda developed a routine. She felt much more settled now that she knew what she needed to accomplish every day and what her limitations were. Things went more smoothly and she had no more mealtime disasters like that first day.

Travis was around a lot and insisted on helping her with the garden. “This is a quiet time on the farm,” he explained. “Until harvest all I can do is wait for the feed corn to ripen and pray we don’t have hail, locusts, tornadoes or a prairie fire before I can strip the fields.” Besides gardening with her, he also spent some time roofing the chicken coop and erecting a snow fence along the edge of the yard.

Amanda was very aware of the fact that he was growing impatient with separate beds at night. He never asked if he could join her, but each night before they climbed the stairs to their respective bedrooms there was a long, pregnant pause before he kissed her good night. Between that and the hungry looks he cast her throughout the day, she knew what he wanted. But the days slipped past and she couldn’t bring herself to invite him into her bed.

When they finally did have sex, she hoped she would be able to convince Travis she was a virgin. Her body was still tight. There was no way for him to know that her hymen had been ruptured, but what if he realized it right away and said something? Fear of that was part of the reason she delayed their union. Sometimes she wished he wasn’t such a gentleman and would make the choice for her, pushing her into it so she could quit worrying about it.

They kissed now, but only polite brushes of the lips that merely served to remind her of the passionate melding of Spencer Teague’s

mouth with her own. She would catch herself daydreaming about his kisses and her hand would rise to touch her lips.

During the days, she remained busy and was able to keep her mind occupied. Her physical relationship with Travis might be stalled, but their friendship was growing deeper. Moving past their initial awkwardness, they began to talk more and more. In the evenings they sat on the front porch as the sun set and Amanda read a chapter aloud from one of Kipling's books. Travis was entranced by the exotic tales of India and Amanda read until her throat was sore.

But then there was always that tension-fraught moment just before they retired and afterward, as she lay in bed, her mind would once more turn toward Teague and the unforgettable things he'd done to her body. She would lie sleepless despite her exhaustion, tossing and turning and too often now, trying to satisfy herself with a hand between her legs.

Amanda was almost glad when Travis asked if she would mind skipping Sunday service that first week because Esther was too lame to pull the wagon. Although she was eager to meet people, she felt too guilty about her secret to set foot in church. That Sunday afternoon, after her successful chicken dinner, they spent time with the Landers family. Amanda was intrigued by big Ted and tiny Marilyn's relationship. Marilyn was the driving force and Ted the genial, obedient courtier to his queen. Yet they flowed together like water. They dealt with their children as a team and often finished one another's sentences. This was what Amanda hoped she and Travis would be able to emulate in their marriage one day.

When two weeks had passed since her wedding day, Amanda decided that the only way to erase her sexual encounter with the false Travis Baxter from her mind was to replace it with the real thing.

"Well, guess it's about that time," Travis said one evening, rising from his chair on the porch and folding his newspaper. It was too dark to see any longer. The sun had set and the moon cast a pale white light. Lightning bugs flashed here and there and the shrill of crickets was almost deafening.

“Yes.” Amanda put the sock she’d been darning into her workbasket. She hadn’t made a stitch in the past half-hour. Not only was it too dark, but she was too nervous to concentrate, knowing what she was about to do. She stood from the rocking chair and it teetered. Her pulse pounded as she approached Travis and put a hand on his arm. “I thought maybe tonight...” She didn’t even have to finish the words.

His face lit up. Even in the darkness she could see his eyes widen. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “I think it’s time, don’t you?”

Her husband nodded in silent agreement then, after a breath of hesitation, inclined his head and kissed her. His mouth covered hers and moved softly against her lips.

Amanda tilted her head back and rose on her toes. Her hands slid up his warm chest and curled over his shoulders. A thrill of pleasure tickled between her legs at the feel of his big, strong body pressed against her. His hands on her spine supported her and held her close. They roamed up and down, rubbing her back through the thin cotton fabric of her dress. Suddenly she wanted to feel those hands on her naked skin, longed to strip off her dress right here on the front porch and to tear his shirt away. She wanted him to desire her so completely that the raw male animal beneath his polite veneer surged to the surface. Amanda half hoped he would ravage her under the dark velvet sky with the sound of crickets rising louder and louder all around them.

But after a moment he pulled his mouth from hers and stepped away. “Why don’t you get ready and I’ll...join you in a little bit?” His words were jerky and he sucked in a shaky breath when he was finished speaking.

Amanda knew the kissing had affected him, but not enough to make him sweep her off her feet and carry her off to bed. She looked up into his shining, hungry eyes for a moment then nodded. “All right.” She turned to go inside.

In her room, *their* room, she washed up for the night, took the pins from her hair and brushed out the auburn curls. She put on a clean,

white nightgown and turned the lamp down until it cast a dim, orange glow. Climbing under the covers although the night was hot, Amanda sat and waited with a fluttering stomach for Travis to come to her.



Although he'd been waiting for this invitation for two weeks, Travis couldn't believe it when she finally said, "I think it's time, don't you?"

Hell yeah! His mind answered. It took a moment for his body to catch up then he stepped forward, took her in his arms and kissed her as he'd wanted to do from the moment he first saw her. She felt wonderful in his arms, soft and round in all the right places and so warm.

Her mouth, too, was soft, her full lips like little pillows cushioning his pressing mouth. He longed to dip his tongue between her lips and taste her, to tear off her clothes right there on the porch and take her like an animal. Fire raged through him and he had to beat it back before it consumed him. He was afraid he would lose control and release before he even got inside her.

But God, the last thing he wanted to do was frighten Amanda. She was a virgin and his wife. He must treat her carefully, gently and with the utmost respect. Before he could make a fool of himself, he stopped kissing her and stepped back. He offered her time to prepare herself and she took it.

After the screen door squeaked shut behind her, he listened to her quiet footsteps on the stairs. Standing at the porch railing, he gazed out at the lightning bugs and breathed deep draughts of air to cool himself down, but he pictured Amanda up in her room, *their* room, getting ready for bed. He imagined her taking off her dress and hanging it up, removing her shoes, stockings and underwear then dressing in a white nightgown.

Travis walked out into the front yard to gaze up at the crescent moon and pulsing stars then at the square of light marking Amanda's bedroom

just as the light inside went dim. She was ready. She was waiting for him.

His heart pounded and sweat rose on his prickling flesh as he went into the house and climbed the stairs. He paused outside her room, staring at the door for a moment before going to his boyhood room. He stripped off his shirt, washed up at the basin, combed his hair then stood for another moment breathing, trying to calm his racing pulse.

Dressed in his undershirt and a pair of loose pajama bottoms, he crossed the hall and knocked on the other bedroom door.

“Come in.”

Could there be anything more stirring than a woman’s soft voice giving that invitation? He opened the door and walked into the darkened room. His gaze went straight to Amanda’s sheet-shrouded form sitting up in the bed. Her bright hair was lit from behind by the bedside lamp. A nimbus of glowing light haloed her head. Her nightgown, as white and virginal as he’d pictured, was buttoned up to the neck. Travis fought the urge to rush to the bed and rip the front of it wide open, revealing her breasts and body like a Christmas present.

She cleared her throat and he realized he was taking too long. He moved across the room, pulled open the sheet and slid into the bed beside his bride. Leaning toward her, he cupped the side of her face and drew it to him for a kiss. He nuzzled at her lips, pressing them then opening his mouth against their warm, softness.

Amanda responded. Her lips parted, pliant under his and when he dared to dip his tongue between them, she didn’t pull away from the intrusion. He allowed his tongue to delve into her mouth, touching the tip of it against hers. In response, she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, pulling him even closer. Her tongue stroked sinuous as a snake around his, surprising him with her ardor.

He groaned and kissed her harder. His erection pressed eagerly against the flap in the front of his pajamas. It felt like he’d been walking around half-hard ever since she arrived and he was tired of the aching in his balls and cock. He hoped he could maintain enough control to be

careful with her. This was her first time. He needed to go slow and be gentle.

Running his hand from her neck all the way down her back, he could feel how hot her skin was under the transparent lawn of her nightgown. He brought one hand around to the front of her body to cup her breast. It felt firm, round and heavy in his hand. Feeling her nipple pressing into his palm, he grasped it with his fingers and toyed with it through the fine fabric.

She moaned into his mouth and twisted at his touch.

Encouraged, he unbuttoned the front of her bodice and slipped his hand inside to caress her bosom once more. It was soft as kitten fur, the breast smooth and the aureole crinkled around the hard nub of her nipple. His hand skimmed from one breast to the other. Impossibly, his cock hardened even more at the erotic thrill of at long last touching her naked body. He continued to kiss her while fondling her breasts, making love to her mouth as he'd wished to do for so long.

Amanda was responsive, arching her back, offering her breast to his hand. Her hands slipped beneath his undershirt to caress his back.

Travis pulled away from kissing her. He looked into her wide hazel eyes, the pupils dilated dark with desire and moved his hands to her shoulders, pushing off her nightgown. The curves of her shoulders and the slope of her neck were graceful, her collarbones, delicate. His heart hammered as he unfastened the row of buttons down the front of the nightgown to reveal more of her body.

He couldn't look away from her ripe, full breasts with their erect rosy nipples. Her stomach twitched beneath his hands as he spanned her waist just above the band of her pantalets. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

Amanda smiled and tugged his undershirt up his body. He lifted his arms so she could pull it over his head. Tossing it aside, she put her palms flat against his belly and slid them up to his chest. Her hungry eyes reflected her satisfaction with the way he looked making him glow warmly inside. "You are, too."

Travis was a little shocked by her brazen examination. He'd expected her to be shy and nervous. Instead she seemed as eager to see him naked as he was to see her.

He laid her back on the bed, kissing her lips once more then tugged her nightgown down her body and off her hips, leaving her top bared. He hadn't quite expected to be allowed to see her like this. Many ladies would only submit to their husbands in the dark, under the covers. A man might feel and touch and fill his wife for years without ever seeing her absolutely naked.

Amanda breathed heavily, her breasts rising and falling, the nipples poking straight up into the air.

Leaning over, he sucked one into his mouth. He cupped one soft breast in his hand while rolling the hard nipple against his tongue. His eyes drifted closed as he licked and sucked one swollen bud and then the other.

"Oh." The word was a soft exhalation.

He looked at her face to find her eyes closed and her pink lips half-parted. Her obvious pleasure sent a fresh wave of lust stabbing through him. He didn't just *want* to be inside her, he needed it with the force of a flooding river pushing against a dam.

Moving up to lie between her legs, his weight supported by his arms, he rubbed his erection against the soft mound of her crotch. It felt good, but the layers of material between them were a hindrance.

He knelt to release his cock from the front flap of his pants, loosen the tie on Amanda's underwear and pull them down her hips. He stared with fascination at the dark shadow of hair between her legs then dragged his eyes back up to her face, not wanting to embarrass her with his rude gaze.

Lowering himself over her again, he gazed into her eyes and stroked stray curls back from her forehead. "This might hurt a little, but I'll try to be careful." How much had her aunt told her about sex? What was she expecting it to be like?

He reached between her legs and stroked her labia, separating the soft folds and feeling for the damp entrance there. He guided the head of his penis to it, nearly shaking when he felt her hot wetness envelope him. Using every ounce of his willpower, he refrained from plunging into her like a stallion and instead pressed inside with gentle firmness. Her channel was tight and so slick. A deep groan of satisfaction rose in his throat. He'd expected to feel some resistance within, but despite her tightness, there was nothing to stop his long, slow slide. Travis had heard that was sometimes the case. Not all virgins had that barrier.

Amanda lay tense and still beneath him. Her breath came and went in quiet bursts between her lips. She let out a soft sound and drew her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I'm sorry. Does it hurt?" He clenched his jaw tight and forced himself to stop moving.

She shook her head against the pillow. "No. Go ahead."

Travis pushed his cock the rest of the way inside. Her body was a world of steaming wetness that he never wanted to leave. For a moment, he paused, enjoying the heat then withdrew in agonizing increments.

Again she made that little sound. He didn't know if it was a moan of pain or pleasure. Maybe it was both.

Travis thrust into her once more and his eyes closed. His blindness intensified the exquisite sensation of being surrounded by flesh. His fingers dug into the sheets, gripping the fabric as he plunged again and again.

Her hands stroked down his back to grip his buttocks and draw him even more firmly into her. Hips arching to meet his thrusts, her quiet moans grew louder.

The whimpering, feminine sounds excited him. He pushed harder, deeper, freeing himself to take her the way he wanted to. He stopped worrying about her virginity and possessed her with one powerful thrust after another, grunting with effort. As his balls drew up, his cock began to pulse, ready to explode. Like a spring, his orgasm coiled tight then suddenly released, expanding outward, an unfurling of ecstasy. He

emitted a low animal growl as he spent inside his woman. *Now she is mine. Now she is truly mine forever.* The knowledge filled him with satisfaction and joy. Travis opened his eyes and gazed down at his beautiful wife.

Her eyes were closed and a frown furrowed her brow, signaling either intense pleasure or pain. Doubt flared in him. He hoped he hadn't been too rough with her. *Should have taken more time.* But this was their first time and they would have the rest of their married life to find a rhythm together.

He'd learn to bring Amanda as much pleasure as she gave him. He knew better than to think a woman was a pure-minded vessel, unable to feel the earthy passion a man did. When Travis was stationed at Fort Carey, he'd once visited a prostitute and when they'd finished having sex, he'd asked her what women really felt about the act. She'd told him all women, even wives, could enjoy it, but a man must understand that females experienced it a different way. The prostitute had given him useful tips, things to do with his hands and mouth, which Travis, immersed in his own desperate need, had not used tonight. He would do better next time.

Rolling off her to recline at her side, he put an arm over her warm body and kissed her moist shoulder. "I love you." He offered the halting words, shy to express his deep feelings aloud.

She turned on the pillow to face him, her eyes glistening in the ambient light. "I love you, too." She wiped her hand across her eyes.

Travis couldn't begin to understand women and why they cried so easily, but figured her display of emotion was a good thing. He hugged her even closer, content in the knowledge that Amanda had truly become his wife tonight.



Staring up at the ceiling as she listened to Travis's breathing grow deeper and slower, she was glad he'd fallen asleep, unable to bear talking

with him right now. There were too many emotions tumbling through her. She hadn't lied when she said she loved him, but wasn't sure she was "in love" with him, if that phrase even meant anything.

What more do you want? He's a sweet, caring man. You can make a good life with him. He's your husband. Amanda scolded herself for her ambivalent feelings, but couldn't force herself to feel the way she should.

She hadn't minded the sex tonight. It felt quite good, but hadn't left her replete and shaken to the core like... She refused to allow her mind to complete that thought. Her false wedding night with Spencer Teague had been a horrible mistake with no basis in reality. Two bodies coming together without a union of souls and minds was not making love. They'd had sex like a pair of sweaty animals. There was no communion there, no sharing, because she had no idea who the man really was. Even if she wanted that wild sexuality again, which she didn't, it was impossible. Teague was not a part of her life and never would be.

Amanda turned her head toward Travis and watched him sleep. His eyelashes curved against his cheeks. His brown and blond-streaked hair lay tousled on his forehead. His lips were parted as he breathed deep. He looked boyish and young.

She could learn to love him. She would eradicate her erotic fantasies about Teague and she *would* learn to love her husband completely.

Someday, with children and grandchildren sitting around her dinner table, she wouldn't even remember the brief time she'd spent with a stranger in a hotel room once long ago in her youth.



Spence couldn't remember what town he was in. He hadn't slept more than a few hours at a time in days. He was disoriented and exhausted, but afraid to relax. His dreams were plagued by either the accusing little girl telling him he was a bad man or erotic extravaganzas featuring Amanda McCormick which left him with a raging hard-on. He couldn't get the woman out of his mind and he didn't understand why.

She was just another woman. He'd had dozens in his life. Hell, probably well over a hundred.

His luck had run out at the gaming table. His concentration was shot and he'd made stupid mistakes. The win he'd celebrated by fucking a red-headed stranger was his last. Apparently, he'd left his luck, his card-playing skills and maybe even his mind behind in Kansas City.

When he started having trouble keeping his dick up, it was the last straw. One night he picked up a woman at a bar in whatever town he was in that day. They were both drunk and she was an easy lay. They went back to her tiny house where kids slept in the next room. He climbed into bed with her and brought her to climax easily with just his finger.

Spence moved on top of her with no more preliminaries, anxious to have a good fuck and be done with it, maybe catch a little sleep in her warm bed before he headed back out into the cold world. He guided his dick into her, murmuring all the stuff women like to hear, telling her how special she was and how he'd never felt anything like this before. And then it happened.

His cock began to soften just as he was filling her up. He willed it hard, concentrating on every sexy image he could imagine, but nothing changed—if anything, it wilted further. He struggled on in vain, grunting and pushing with his semi-rigid shaft, hoping it would rally.

“Is there a problem, honey?” the woman whispered.

“No,” he snapped. “Just give me a minute.”

“It's all right,” she said. “It happens sometimes.”

Not to me, it doesn't. Not ever! Spence said nothing, but flopped and flailed for another few seconds before surrendering. He pulled out and rolled over onto his back panting.

The woman put her hand on his heaving belly and patted it. He resisted the urge to slap her hand away. “It's all right,” she repeated. “You can just sleep here a while if you want. I don't mind.”

If he hadn't been so exhausted, he would've gotten up and left right away. But he closed his heavy eyes to rest them for a moment at the woman's urging.

The little red-headed girl stood on the front porch of a farm house. The wind blew her skirt around her legs and locks of hair across her face. She brushed her hair aside and stared at Travis from under two straight, reddish eyebrows. "Go find her. She needs you."

Travis woke with a cry and sat bolt upright. "Jesus! Stop it!"

"Shh!" The woman beside him sat up and put a hand on his arm. "Quiet down. You'll wake the kids."

"Christ," he buried his face in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'm going fucking insane. I can't take this anymore."

"What?"

Ignoring the woman, Spence tossed the blanket off his legs and swung them out of bed. He dressed in a flash. Before he left, he thanked the woman and apologized for his lack of performance. It was the least he could do.

Then he was out the door and back on the street with nowhere to go and no money to get there. He walked through the dark, lonely town and cursed the day he'd laid eyes on Amanda McCormick.

Chapter Nine

“So, you’re Mrs. Baxter? I’m so pleased to meet you.” Carrie Nordstrum’s voice was like pulled taffy, sweet but stretched thin and likely to turn brittle. A pretty woman with wheat blonde hair extended her gloved hand to take Amanda’s. “I’m sure Kansas must seem so *foreign* to you coming from the east. It’s a wonder you can bear it.”

“Well, Michigan isn’t the east coast. People here seem pretty much like back home and I’m happy to be with Travis wherever we live,” Amanda said smoothly.

“Yes. I’m sure you are.” Carrie’s smile stretched wider. “Such a long way to come for a husband.”

Her intimation that Amanda could find no marital prospects in Michigan was clear, but she ignored the jab and took the statement at face value. “It was rather a long train ride, but it was fascinating to see so much of the country.”

“Well, we’re certainly glad you made the trip,” Mrs. Jamison entered the conversation. “I don’t believe I’ve seen Mr. Baxter look so happy in a long time.”

Olive Kirkpatrick, the mercantile owner’s wife, joined in. “After all the heartache that man has been through with his brother disappearing and his parents’ deaths, he deserves some happiness at last.”

Amanda would have liked to ask more about Travis’s brother Stan, but didn’t want to let on that she didn’t know everything about the Baxter family already. She should ask her husband these questions, but somehow the moment never seemed right for prying into his family history when he seemed reticent to share it.

Carrie Nordstrum gave another tight smile. “Well, Mrs. Baxter, a pleasure to meet you.” She moved away, trailing her disappointment and disapproval behind her like a long scarf. Amanda was glad to be done with the awkward encounter.

It was a crisp, clear September day, perfect for standing around the church yard chatting with friends after Sunday service. Amanda had been warmly greeted by almost everyone except Carrie and several other single ladies. Reederville seemed to be a welcoming community.

She’d been married to Travis for a full month now and this was the first time they’d been to church. Other Sundays had been spent sleeping in late and making love. After their initial, rather awkward sexual experience, things had improved dramatically as far as Amanda was concerned. Travis was a considerate and thorough lover, who took his time and saw to it that she was as fulfilled as he was by their lovemaking.

Once Amanda had committed herself to their marriage and laid her erotic daydreams aside, she’d begun giving herself to her husband fully and allowed herself to enjoy what he gave her. She learned to appreciate his quiet, gentle approach to pleasing her. Just thinking about it now set a slow fire burning between her legs.

Over Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s shoulder, Amanda caught Travis watching her from across the church yard where he was standing with several men. His blue eyes shone crystal clear, reflecting the blue sky overhead and spoke to her of a hunger which had nothing to do with wanting his Sunday dinner. A smile curved his lips as he gazed at her and she felt her skin blush and her sex tighten. It couldn’t be any clearer what he was thinking. She dropped her eyes from his before one of the ladies noticed the potent exchange. “Excuse me,” she said to Mrs. Kirkpatrick and Mrs. Jamison. “I must go talk to Marilyn Landers.”

The two ladies bid her good morning and she moved away toward her friend. Although she’d known Marilyn such a short time, she already felt closer to her than to many of the girls she’d grown up with, including her cousin, Rose.

Amanda smiled and nodded at people as she passed. Her new life was perfect, really. It was everything she'd hoped it would be. She would have been completely content this morning except for the one niggling worry which grew bigger every day. She hadn't had her monthly cycle.

Her body was generally as regular as clockwork and her period should have started sometime in the week after she arrived in Kansas. With all the new adjustments in her life, she hadn't even noticed she was late until a few days ago. Then one day it struck her that the exhaustion and increased appetite she'd been feeling over the past weeks might not be related to her working hard. And this morning, before she and Travis left for church, she'd felt so nauseous she couldn't eat but a few bites of her breakfast.

The signs were there and the uncertainty was making her crazy. As she approached Marilyn, Amanda determined to share her worry—although, of course, not the reason the idea filled her with dread.

“Howdy, neighbor,” Marilyn greeted her as she drew close then gestured to a women standing nearby. “Amanda, I'd like you to meet my mother-in-law, Mrs. Maizie Landers and these are Ted's sisters, Lucille Kirkpatrick and Mary Landers. Mary's engaged to the Zondervaan boy, Richard.”

Amanda smiled and nodded, once more feeling a little overwhelmed by all the new names and faces she must memorize. She chatted with the group of Landers women for a little bit then Marilyn, seeming to read her mind, linked her arm through Amanda's and led her away from the group. “Is something wrong? You look a little pale.”

They strolled around the side of the church to the fenced graveyard behind it and wandered among the stones and wooden crosses. “I think I might...” Amanda trailed off, uncomfortable discussing such an intimate matter with Marilyn despite their friendship. “I wonder if I might be going to have a baby.”

Marilyn stopped walking and her eyes opened wide “Really? So soon? Congratulations.”

“I’m not positive. But my monthly is late and I wondered if there are ways you can tell. You being a married woman and mother, I thought...”

“Of course, I’ll be glad to give you any advice I can. Are you eating more, or feeling ill and nauseous? Either one could be a sign. Are you tired often?”

“Yes to all of those things,” Amanda said, her heart dropping as her suspicions were confirmed. “I was afraid they meant something.”

“Afraid?” Marilyn hugged her arm. “Aren’t you happy?”

“It’s just so soon, like you said. Travis and I are only beginning to know each other and it would be nice to have some time together before we begin a family.” She invented a plausible reason for her fear.

“Babies come when they will.” Marilyn shrugged. “You’ll be happy when he or she gets here. It’s impossible not to love a baby.”

“Mm.” Amanda forced a smile, but inside her already jumpy stomach felt ready to vomit. There was every chance this child was Travis’s, two weeks ago had been the first time they’d made love and they’d done it often since, but there was the possibility it belonged to Spencer Teague. There was no way to be sure. The guilt Amanda had felt at hiding her mistaken affair was magnified tenfold with the knowledge that she could be carrying another man’s baby and passing it off as Travis’s. But there was absolutely no way she could tell him. It was far too late now. She must keep the secret buried deep inside no matter how it gnawed at her.

Marilyn patted her back and peered up into her face. “It’ll be all right. Really.”

“I know. Of course it will.” Amanda widened her smile by sheer willpower. “Thanks for talking with me about this, but please don’t say anything in front of Travis yet. I’m not going to tell him until I’m absolutely sure.”

“Naturally.”

The two women walked on through the headstones then back out of the cemetery gate. A fall breeze cut through the fabric of Amanda’s dress and sent a shiver up her spine. She could feel winter coming despite the day’s sunshine and wondered how her life would change by next spring.

She would have a baby, a new life to love and care for, a little piece of the future.

But what if the child was not Travis's? What if Spencer Teague's fox-sharp features were stamped on its little face? What if her shame was there for all to see?

Swallowing the bile in her throat, she forced her heaving stomach to relax and put on her biggest smile as she greeted one after the other of her new Reederville neighbors. No one, not even Marilyn would ever know the anxiety that haunted her heart.



Travis sat on a bale of hay in the barn, supposedly repairing a bit of worn harness, but actually staring off into space, thinking. He wondered what he was doing wrong. Amanda had seemed to be warming to him. After the initial two weeks of abstinence had come their glorious wedding night and then everything grew bright. Travis was absolutely content with his new wife and new life.

They'd fallen into a comfortable daily routine. Every morning he woke nestled next to Amanda's warm body. Often he lay there watching her shoulder rise and fall as she breathed. He would move aside her hair and kiss the back of her neck until she moaned and murmured in her sleep. Usually he'd press his needy cock against her rear and kiss her until she awoke and responded. Then they made slow, easy love in their warm bed before starting their day.

But everything had changed abruptly. Travis could almost pinpoint the day. It was the first Sunday they'd gone to church and Amanda had met the community of Reederville. Maybe something had happened while she was socializing with the ladies, maybe something had been said to change her opinion of him or to make her feel like an outsider here. Women could be catty like that. All he knew was that she was very quiet on the ride home and her mood didn't improve over the next couple of weeks.

Now in the mornings he kissed her once or twice then let her sleep while he got up and tended to the animals. The poor woman seemed so tired. Her face was pale and her eyes shadowed. She came from a much easier lifestyle. Perhaps the unending farm work was too much for her. Travis wished he'd prepared her for how hard it would be. In his letters he hadn't thought to mention the fact that there were no gas lights or heated water or a water closet in the house. Amanda had been used to those things back home. The conditions out here must seem so primitive to her.

Or maybe she was ill. Fear clenched his heart at the thought. The idea of losing her to some disease was unthinkable, but Travis was too used to loss in his life to believe the ones he loved were untouchable. He knew all too well that death could snatch a person away right in front of your eyes.

He cursed at the worn leather strap as it snapped in two in his hands. He stood from the hay bale and hung the broken harness back on the wall before walking from the barn. Whatever was wrong with Amanda, it was time he found out the cause. If it was something he'd done, he would apologize. If it was something he hadn't done, he would do it. If she was tired, he'd make sure she got more rest, or hire a girl from town to help with the work. If Amanda was sick, he'd take her to the doctor. *And what if she's just unhappy with the choice she made and wants to go home?* An insidious voice whispered to him that he was a disappointing lover, a poor husband, an inadequate man.

Travis walked into the house and listened for Amanda. At first he heard no sounds coming from the kitchen or upstairs then the faint sound of crying hit him like a punch to the gut. He went to the kitchen and pushed open the door.

Amanda sat at the kitchen table, head bowed into her folded arms, her shoulders shaking with her quiet, heartbroken sobs.

For a moment he almost backed out of the kitchen and left her to her privacy. He didn't know if she would want him to see her like this. But then his earlier resolve to fix whatever had gone wrong between them

strengthened his nerve. He walked into the room, taking care to step hard enough to get her attention so he wouldn't startle her. "Amanda?"

Her head went up and turned toward him. Her eyes were pink and her tear-streaked face swollen.

"What's wrong? Please tell me," he begged, going to her, dropping to his knees beside her chair and laying a hand on her back. "Please. If there's something I've done, I'm sorry. I can change—"

"No." She cut him off. "No. It's nothing you've done. It's me. It's just me."

Travis tried to decipher her meaning. He thought of the first meal she'd cooked, what a disaster it was and how that had driven her to tears. Maybe she was disappointed in herself and thought she wasn't a good enough wife. "Sweetheart, there's nothing wrong with you. I love you. I've never been so happy in my life as I have been since you came here. It's making me miserable that you aren't happy too. What can I do?"

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and gazed at him steadily. "I guess I have to tell you sometime." She drew a deep, shaky breath, held it and let it out. "Travis, I think I'm going to have a baby. I have all the symptoms. Marilyn agrees."

Travis sucked in a breath and forgot to let it out again. *Marilyn knew and he didn't?* "A baby." The word was a choked whisper. "But that's wonderful! Did you think I'd be upset?"

"I don't know. It's just... We've had so little time alone together and now there's going to be a huge change. I didn't know how you'd feel about it." Her gaze scanned his as though trying to read his thoughts. A worried frown knit her eyebrows and her mouth was tense.

"I'm happy! We're starting a family." He gathered Amanda in his arms, half pulling her off the chair.

She threw her arms around his neck and clung tight, her face buried in his neck, her tears wetting his skin. Travis remembered listening to married men talking about how emotional their wives sometimes got during a pregnancy. Suddenly everything made sense; Amanda's tears,

her pale skin and shadowed eyes were all because of the new life growing inside her. That meant it wasn't his fault. It meant her mood would pass. He was so relieved his heart rose and lodged in his throat. Tears stung his own eyes and he hugged his wife even tighter.

The stayed in a close embrace for several long moments before Amanda pulled away. She looked at him, still with the worried frown puckering her forehead. "Will it be all right? Can we afford it?"

He reached his hand to her face and smoothed the lines away. "Don't worry. It was an excellent wheat crop and the corn looks to be a winner, too. We can afford a couple of babies if you've a mind to have them." He smiled.

Amanda offered a trembling smile in return. "It will be all right," she murmured almost as if convincing herself. "Everything will be perfect."



Spence pushed the broom across the sticky bar floor, driving a litter of butts, sawdust and dried mud before it. All the chairs were turned seat-down on the tables to give him better access to the floor beneath, but even so it was a pain circling around the room, trying to make it clean. When he was done with the sweeping, there was the pleasure of mopping awaiting him. He grimaced at the thought. Manual labor had never been his forte.

"Hey, cutie, when do you think you'll be finished?" Lucinda came out from the back room with her coat on, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her red lips.

"Not soon enough." Spence paused and leaned on the broom.

"I could stick around a while...if you wanted to walk me home?" The barmaid perched on the edge of one of the stools and took a drag of her cigarette, puffing out a plume of blue smoke. "Got nothing better to do."

Spence considered. Lucinda was a looker with dark hair, olive skin and exotic almond eyes. She'd told him her mother was a flamenco dancer and her father a rich landowner back in Spain, but through a

series of unfortunate circumstances Lucinda had been reduced to waiting tables at the Wayside Tavern in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Spence appreciated the embellished details in her story. He was a master at crafting a false history himself.

If he walked Lucinda home tonight, he'd have a softer bed to sleep in than the cot in the store room of the bar, but he'd be forced to perform sexually. Since he seemed incapable of maintaining an erection these days, he didn't want to be put to the test. Sweet as Lucinda was, he knew she couldn't stand to keep the news of his impotency to herself. It was humiliating enough suffering a flaccid penis without everyone at his place of employment knowing about it.

"Aw, darlin', not tonight, but thanks for the offer." Spence pushed his broom over to the bar, leaned it against the counter and hitched himself up onto a stool next to her. "Buy you a drink though."

She laughed. The bartender, Arliss, had already left for the night. They were the only two in the building so she leaned over the top of the bar and snagged a bottle of whiskey from beneath it. Spence set out a pair of shot glasses and poured. They both tossed back the fiery liquid and set their glasses back on the bar with a thump.

"Spencer Teague." She gazed at him with her luminous dark eyes. "What is your story? Why is someone as smart as you drudging for Mr. Beacon? You must have better prospects than this."

"Not at the moment," he said, twirling his shot glass around with one finger. "Had a run of bad luck at poker and now I've got no stake to get back in the game." It was enough of the truth for Lucinda. He reached for the bottle and poured them another shot each.

She sighed. "I know what you mean about bad luck. I'm only here temporarily. Soon I plan to be onstage, a dancer like my mother."

"I'm sure you will." Spence was kind. He didn't picture the girl rising any higher than a burlesque review. He waved his hand at the empty bar around them. "This is just short term."

“Right,” she agreed, drinking her whiskey with no more reaction than if it was water. “You’ve been all over, haven’t you? Where do you think you’ll travel next, when you’re back in the money?”

“I’ve been thinking of taking a trip down to Memphis...or I might go out to Kansas City.”

“Kansas City.” She smiled. “It’s such a modern place. So busy. I’d love to go there. I bet I could get a job in the theater in a heartbeat.”

“It is a bustling city,” he agreed. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Have you ever had...a dream you kept having over and over?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. I used to have this one where I was chased by a bear with no head.” She paused and stared at the row of bottles behind the bar. “Except sometimes it did have a head, but the face on it was my Uncle Pete’s.”

So much for Spanish relatives, he thought. “Have you ever had a dream when you were awake? A sort of vision or hallucination that wouldn’t leave you alone?”

She cocked her head and gazed at him. “Not really. Why?”

The whiskey glowed like warm coals in Spence’s stomach and loosened his tongue. “I did something once...to someone. It was kind of a bad thing I guess and now I keep having this dream, at least I think it’s a dream, of a little girl telling me to go back and... Hell, I don’t even know what she wants me to do! I can’t undo what I did. How am I supposed to fix it?”

“An angel,” Lucinda said. “It sounds like an angel.”

“You believe in that stuff?” He’d grown up with religion, but laid it aside long ago.

“Yes. Absolutely! You have to do what the angel says or you’ll never be able to rest. My mama told me a story like this once.” She laid her hand on Spencer’s arm on top of the bar. “You have to go back to Kansas City.” She paused a moment. “I could go with you.”

Spence twirled his shot glass again, lost control of it and sent it rolling to the floor. "Maybe. When I get some money together, maybe I'll go."

"And maybe you'll take me?"

He smiled at her. It never hurt to give a woman hope. "Sure."

She slid off her barstool and moved close to him, standing between his thighs and leaning in to kiss him. "That would be wonderful."

Spence felt no stirring at all between his legs. He was getting worse. The only time he could get and keep a hard-on now was when he daydreamed about Amanda McCormick, but when he tried to imagine her while he was with another woman, it never worked. He still couldn't keep a damn erection. Grasping Lucinda's shoulders, he moved her gently away. "But right now I'd better get to work and you'd better get home."

Her face registered disappointment. "I could wait for you, if you wanted to come over," she offered again.

"Not tonight." Spence stood and gave her a quick kiss then escorted her to the door and waved goodbye. He stood for a moment in the silent tavern then resumed his broom-pushing. As he worked, he thought about his developing plan, examining it from every angle looking for possible flaws.

He'd taken the janitorial job at the Wayside so he could observe the handling of the daily receipts. The bartender emptied the cash drawer at the end of the night and put the deposit bag in the safe in back until morning when the owner, Mr. Beacon took it to the bank. Saturday nights were the busiest time of the week and the deposit didn't go to the bank until Monday morning.

Spence had thought long and hard about the best way to intercept that money. He was no robber, had rarely fired a gun in his life, but he was no safecracker either. There must be another way to steal the money and disappear from town before the theft was noticed. His forte was in winning people's confidence with his warm, friendly manner and open smile that made even strangers trust him. It was a gift.

He had to make the bartender, Arliss Franklyn, trust him as a pal, become accustomed to his presence in the bar and forget to be careful around him. Maybe Spence could even help with tending bar, giving him access to the till. With charm and persistence, it was only a matter of time before he got the combination to the safe.

When he had money in his hands again, he'd head down to Memphis...or maybe Kansas City.

Chapter Ten

The second harvest season began in late October. The farmers worked from dawn to dusk harvesting their corn crops. Amanda had learned that feed corn must be picked at the peak of dryness in order to store well over winter. Too much moisture content would ensure fermented, spoiled animal feed in the dead of winter.

Witnessing the long hours of intensive labor made Amanda glad she'd arrived after the wheat harvest in July. Marilyn had told her that threshing season was an even busier time. A new-fangled machine called a binder cut the wheat so the men no longer had to use a scythe. The resulting bundles were stacked in windrows to dry before the threshing machine separated wheat kernels from straw stalks. The huge, steam-driven thresher was a modern marvel. Threshing teams moved from farm to farm all over the state. Marilyn said the women never stopped cooking, washing dishes and cooking again for the crew from the moment they arrived until they moved on again. Every member of a farm family was part of the big event with even the littlest boys and girls running back and forth with water and snacks for the field workers.

The corn harvest was a more local endeavor with the men from nearby farms helping each other out when they could. Farmers walked down the rows hand-picking ears from the stalks. Travis demonstrated the process to Amanda, showing her the special glove he wore with a peg in the palm. "See, you twist the ear from the stalk, shuck it with the peg then toss the corn against the beat board in the wagon."

The big draft horse, Gideon, plodded patiently along the rows following Travis as he stripped the corn from the stalks. When the wagon was full, he drove it to the corncrib and shoveled in the ears. Air-flow

through the wooden slats allowed the corn to dry. Later, it would be shelled with a hand-turned machine much like a butter churn.

Amanda was amazed by the extreme effort the process required. Even though Ted and a few other neighbors helped, Travis was so exhausted most days that he ate supper then went straight to bed. One night he fell asleep at the supper table. Between one bite and the next, his chin dropped to his chest and his fork from his fingers. The first few days of the harvest his hand was so cramped from the repetitive motion that he could hardly grip anything by the end of a day. Despite the heavy work gloves he wore, his hands were callused and rough. When they touched her naked flesh, they were rough as sandpaper.

She liked the feeling. Her body tautened and yearned toward Travis's thick, clumsy fingers. The initial nausea of her pregnancy had disappeared after a couple of months, replaced by a ravenous appetite for food and an insatiable desire for sex. Unfortunately, her husband was usually too worn out from long, hot days under the broiling sun to have the energy. A few weeks earlier when Amanda was awash in guilt, shame and morning sickness it would have been a relief. Now that she was feeling better and had decided to close the door on her fears about the baby's paternity, it was a disappointment. She wanted Travis inside her, possessing and assuring her with his body that they belonged together and their future was secure.

Growing accustomed to the routine of her days, she followed Marilyn's advice about pacing herself in her work and taking breaks when needed. She fed and watered the chickens, milked the cow, cleaned the house and harvested everything she could from her garden. Marilyn helped Amanda can vegetables and make jam and Amanda returned the favor, enjoying the noisy clamor of Pearl and Tommy getting underfoot in Marilyn's small kitchen. Most morning and afternoons Amanda walked out to the field with fresh cold water and a snack for Travis and whoever was helping him that day.

One day a thunderstorm moved in after lunch. Amanda sat on the front porch, cranking the handle of the butter churn and watching the storm develop. In this flat land there was nothing to impede the view of

angry black and purple clouds piling up on the southern horizon. They raced across the sky, eating up the blue as they came and eventually swallowing the sun. Rain came down in sheets, driving her off the porch and into the house.

A short time later, Travis came in, soaked through. She could smell rainwater and sweat when he came into the kitchen and wrapped his arms around her. She squeaked and wiggled against his big body. His sopping clothes wet her light, cotton housedress through, making it stick to her skin. "Stop! You're soaking wet!" She smacked his chest with her palms, but it was like hitting a rock.

He bent his head and gave her a big kiss. His breath was warm against her face, his tongue hot inside her mouth.

Amanda wrapped her arms around his neck, running her hands through his wet hair. It was getting long at the collar. She should give him a trim, she thought absently as the strands slipped through her fingers.

Their mouths fused together in wet, hot passion for several minutes before he pulled away. He gazed into her eyes, curving his palm around her cheek before dropping it to her stomach. The damp front of her dress molded to her body showing no telltale lump indicating the baby inside. "When do you start to show?" he asked, rubbing his hand over her belly.

"Marilyn says sometime in the next couple of months. It's still early." Amanda watched his hand circle around and around on her stomach. Her crotch tensed with desire.

"Marilyn says'," Travis mimicked with a grin. "That woman is a font of wisdom."

His teasing made her smile. It was true; she referred to Marilyn at least once a day. "Marilyn taught me to bake bread," "Marilyn showed me how to make pickling brine" or "Marilyn explained how to save seeds from the beans for planting next spring."

"What would we do without Marilyn." Travis's hands roamed up the front of Amanda's dress, unbuttoning it. He pulled it down to bare her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her naked skin.

She shivered at the air on her damp arms and his tickling mouth on her shoulder and throat. She stood still, thrilled as he stripped her of her clothes right there in the kitchen. It felt decadent, sinful and extremely arousing. When she stood nude before him, he shrugged out of the straps of his overalls and pulled his shirt off over his head. He cursed as he tried to untie his bootlaces with the overalls pooled around his ankles.

Amanda laughed at him and bent to help him out of his shoes and socks. Crouching at her husband's feet, she looked up the length of his hard-muscled body, admiring his thick legs, flat belly, chiseled chest and huge biceps—all damp and shiny from rainwater. Her gaze settled on his face. His eyes were dark and half-lidded as he stared hungrily down at her.

Her face was on a level with his private parts. She had a sudden strong urge to seize his jutting erection in her hand and fondle it, but that would be so wrong. Ladies didn't behave that way.

His hips rocked forward as though he was offering himself to her. Maybe he wanted her to touch it. Hesitantly she took the thick, hard shaft in her hand and looked up at him with a question in her eyes.

His tongue darted out to lick his lips. It was clear he enjoyed her touch.

She encircled his penis in her hand and moved it up and down feeling the weight and girth of his member. It was so hot and alive, pulsing within her fist. Soft skin covered the rigid shaft. From this close she could see blue veins running along the length and watch the red head emerge as the foreskin retracted. His penis was an amazing thing.

After she'd stroked it a while, she wasn't sure what else to do and was about to stand up when Travis's hand wrapped around hers, positioning it a little differently and rubbing harder. He thrust his hips forward even farther until his member almost brushed her lips.

In a flash, Amanda remembered Spencer licking and sucking at her privates and how wonderful that had felt. She pushed the thought out of her mind, but kept the message it gave her. Travis wanted her to take him into her mouth.

She licked tentatively up the length of his shaft, tasting his essence, a musky, salty flavor. Wrapping her lips around the head, she sucked it into her mouth.

Above her Travis drew in his breath with a gasp and pushed into her mouth.

Amanda swallowed him farther while moving her hand up and down the way he'd shown her. She was rewarded with a low groan of pleasure that sent a thrill up her spine. Her nipples ached with the need to be touched. Her breasts were tender recently and seemed fuller than normal. Right now they felt enormous, swollen with desire.

She sucked on his penis until her jaw grew sore and her knees stiff from kneeling on the hard floor. At first his hands rested on either side of her head, but he clutched her hair as he drove into her mouth faster. "Ah, stop," he groaned. "Stop now."

Pulling her to her feet, he wrapped his arms around her, cupping her bottom and lifting her up onto the kitchen counter. The flat surface felt cold against her naked buttocks and thighs. He moved between her legs, positioning his member at her moist entrance then he drew her body down onto his shaft, entering her with a relieved sigh.

The kitchen counter was just the right height for Amanda to perch on the edge and them to fit together perfectly. She held onto his broad shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips to grapple him to her.

He kissed her mouth then moved to her breasts, nuzzling and licking each one before latching onto a tender pink nipple and sucking. The tugging sensation at her nipple telegraphed a hot bolt of need down to her sex. Her head fell back, exposing her throat and thrusting her breasts forward. A smile curved her lips. She'd never be able to prepare food on the counter again without remembering this day.

Travis surged up into her body, rising to fill her again and again. Soft grunts accompanied each thrust. Balanced on the counter, her movements were limited. She felt like a vessel accepting what he had to give and holding it inside her. As he began to move faster, her hands slid up from his shoulders to his neck and the back of his head. She combed

his water-darkened hair with her fingers, holding him to her breast. A comforting warmth blossomed inside her and with a surprised cry, she came. It was a subtle orgasm, nothing like the wildfire that tore through her when her clitoris was engaged, but it felt good and fulfilling in a quieter way.

Stimulated by her soft cry, he arched up between her legs, his groin slapping against hers as he pumped harder. His callused fingers gripped her buttocks and his breath panted near her ear. After driving into her hard several more times, he froze and released with a shudder and a long, satisfied groan. His head rested against her shoulder and she continued to cling to him tightly, listening to the steady rain pattering against the window above the sink. *Thank God for rainstorms bringing men in from the fields.*

“I love you.” His voice was muffled against her.

“I love you, too.” She stroked his wet hair. She felt glowing, warm and secure. The child growing inside her must be his. It had to be. Everything would be all right. Their future lay golden before them—a contented family in a perfect, happy home.



The next months passed quickly. After October the weather turned cold. Snow fell and by Christmas there was six inches on the ground. Amanda and Travis shared the holiday with the Landers family. It was a pleasure to see the children’s excitement over their gifts. The meal was delicious and Marilyn and Ted’s company entertaining. The two couples sang discordant Christmas carols then played in the snow with the children on their new sleds. Later they drank spiced cider and the men talked farming while the women discussed children and housekeeping until Marilyn declared it was time for some fun and forced the men to join in a game of charades. Amanda enjoyed the pleasant diversion of new friends and her first Christmas with Travis.

By January the swell of Amanda's belly was obvious. She felt ripe and full of life and would have been content with life but for the constant, low grade fever of guilt burning at the back of her mind. It was like having an old injury that never quite healed. You got used to it, but the discomfort never completely faded.

One cold winter night Amanda was torn from sleep by a loud cry from Travis. She sat up and turned toward him just as he, too, jerked awake. "What is it?" Her heart pounded at the abrupt awakening.

Travis bolted upright beside her. His chest rose and fell under his nightshirt. In the pale moonlight his face shone with sweat and his hair stuck out in all directions.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Bad dream?"

He swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. Go back to sleep."

"Tell me what it was about."

He fell back against his pillow, gazing up at the ceiling. The moon reflected off the whites of his eyes. "Nothing. I just...have this dream sometimes."

"Tell me," Amanda said again lying down facing him with her head propped on her hand. "Maybe if you talk about it you'll quit having it."

There was such a long pause she wasn't sure he was going to speak.

"It's about things that happened when I was out west in the army. My regiment was in charge of dispersing supplies at Wind River reservation in Wyoming." He swallowed visibly, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "I can't begin to tell you how the Arapaho people were mistreated, the spoiled supplies we passed out to them, the shortages, families freezing and starving to death all while under U.S. Government protection. It was shameful and I hated being a part of it, but I had no choice. I wished I'd never signed up and wanted nothing more than to finish my service and go home."

She nodded, stroking her hand up and down his hot chest while she listened.

Travis smiled wryly. “Farming was looking pretty good after all.” He paused. “Then a smallpox epidemic swept across the reservation. Instead of soldiers we became medics doing whatever we could to ease these peoples’ deaths, because they were all dying—there was nothing we could do to stop it. There was only one doctor.... One for the whole reservation!”

“That’s terrible,” she murmured. “Those poor people.”

“There was a little girl taking care of her whole family when they fell ill. She was too young to handle it and her family was dying all around her. I had to take her away to the Indian orphanage. She screamed and cried and clawed at me like I was kidnapping her to kill her.”

Amanda took his hand and gripped it.

“Later I learned she caught the disease and died anyway.” His voice was hoarse and he took a deep breath before he continued. “The dreams I have are about that winter. I haven’t had one for a long time, but with the baby coming I guess I was thinking about families and little kids.”

“I’m so sorry.” She felt helpless with no better words to offer than that. Curling up close beside him, she rested her head on his shoulder, the bulge of her stomach pressing against him. She continued to hold his hand.

Travis stroked her hair. “I think it’s time you went to see the doctor, just to make sure everything is all right.”

Amanda felt fine, but recognized the importance to him of a professional confirming it. “All right. But don’t worry, sweetheart. Everything is going to be fine.”



Spencer leaned back against the splintered wood wall of his jail cell and pondered for the millionth time how his life had gone wrong. He was in the third month of a five-month sentence for “fraud with intent to commit larceny”. Only the fact that he’d been caught before freeing the

money from Mr. Beacon's till had saved him from a much longer sentence.

The time spent incarcerated in the small, airless cell had given him plenty of opportunity to think, something he usually avoided by keeping busy and on the move. With nowhere to go and little to do, there were vast stretches of mind-numbing time for contemplation on his life and how fucked up it was.

When he'd first been locked into his cell, he'd paced all the time, moving around the tiny space like a caged wolf. He was in a state of near panic at his inability to walk free. His skin itched and his mind raced in pointless circles. He thought he'd go crazy and start shredding his own skin with his fingernails if he couldn't get out. That trapped feeling that used to torture him down in the mine was back, constricting his chest so tight he gasped for air.

And this was in just his first three hours in jail.

"Boy, don't wear yourself out," a voice had called from the next cell. "You'll have plenty of time for pacing. Sit yourself down a spell and breathe."

Spence was pathetically eager to latch onto a human voice. He gripped the bars and pressed his face against them trying to catch a glimpse of his next-door neighbor. "What's your name?"

"Rufus Small," the deep voice grated. "You?"

"Spencer Teague. How long you in for?"

"Ain't been to court yet. Suspect it'll be a while."

Spence wanted to ask what the man had done, but it seemed a bit soon in their relationship to ask. "So...what's the food like here?" He tried to adopt a light tone.

"Better than my wife used to cook, but then that woman could turn a sirloin steak into shoe leather."

They bantered back and forth a bit and Spence began to calm down. If not completely composed, he was at least able to stop pacing and sit down on the bunk instead, staring morosely at the hole in the floor

where he was supposed to piss. He learned that Rufus Small was originally from Georgia and had moved to Kentucky with his wife Laverne five years ago. He was a blacksmith, had served on the Confederate side during the war and still had some shot buried in his gut right by his liver. He'd met General Lee himself and shaken the great man's hand. Rufus wasn't with Laverne any longer. She'd died. From the way he said it Spence wondered if Laverne's death had something to do with Rufus being in prison. It chilled him that he might be talking to a murderer.

A while later, the guard came back, put out the lights for the night and told them to be quiet. Spencer lay on his side on his hard cot, knees drawn up toward his chest, staring at the wall in the darkness and wondering if the little girl would appear in his sleep that night. She didn't.

As a matter of fact, the fates took pity on him. Weeks passed and he didn't have another vision of the kid to remind him about what he'd done to Amanda McCormick. But his mind dwelled on Amanda just the same. He thought about the way she'd touched him, how good her body had felt beneath his. He remembered her hot pussy swallowing his cock and the soft, whimpering sounds she made as he thrust into her. More than that, he thought about the melodic timbre of her voice and the musical note of her laughter. He thought of what she'd told him about herself and her family in Michigan. He pictured her growing up on the shore of that big lake then pictured her living with Travis Baxter on his Kansas farm. Spencer thought of Amanda pretty much constantly, imagining himself in the role of her husband, talking with her in his mind, touching her in his sleep, until he couldn't quite recall which memories of her were real and which he had invented.

She'd become the perfect woman in his mind. For her he would be willing to be tied down, to give up his traveling ways and become the kind of man who stayed put. Baxter was a lucky bastard to have such a woman as his wife.

When he got out of prison, he'd go find her and see if there was any way he could win her over, convince her that he wasn't the devil incarnate and talk her into leaving the godforsaken Kansas wasteland to

come with him to the city. That was what he would do. It was what the little girl had told him to do, wasn't it? Go find her.

One freezing day in January as they shivered in their cells, Spence finally talked to Rufus about Amanda. He'd learned that Rufus was in prison for murder, but not of his wife. He'd been drunk a lot after his wife's death and one night accidentally killed a man in a bar fight.

"Hey, Rufe."

A grunt came from the other cell.

"Have you ever...done something you were ashamed...I mean, that you didn't feel too good about later?"

There was a pause. "I'm freezing my ass off in prison talking to a moron like you, what do you think?"

Spence's chattering teeth stilled long enough for him to grin. "Okay, besides that. Maybe something you did to hurt Laverne that you were sorry for after."

Another pause. "Yeah. I could have treated her better."

"There's this girl...this woman I can't get out of my mind." He spilled the story of his seduction of sweet, innocent Amanda McCormick for Rufus's examination. When he finished talking, there was another silence.

"You did that?" Rufus's voice was as deep and gravelly as a quarry. "Fucked some poor virgin while posing as her fiancé?"

"Yeah."

"You got some balls. How'd you know you'd be a close enough match to this Baxter?"

"Brown hair, blue eyes, that's all she seemed to know about him." Spence couldn't explain his need for the rush of tempting fate. "I took a chance. It was a gamble."

"Jesus, you're a mean son of a bitch."

"I didn't want to hurt her. I was just having fun." He sounded like a spoiled child even to himself.

“And now you want to go see this woman and try to make it right?” Rufus said. “Just how the hell did you think you were going to fix it? By showing up and wrecking her marriage, if you haven’t done that already?”

It was Spence’s turn to pause.

“Haven’t you done enough to this lady? Where’s your head, boy? Leave her alone.”

“I can’t. I have to see her again.” He didn’t want to share his dreams of the little girl. He’d sound crazy.

Rufus laughed harshly. “So you can try and get another piece of tail?”

“No. It’s not like that.”

“What? You think you’re in love. Son, you don’t know the first thing about it. If you did, you’d be putting this woman’s needs above your own.”

He thought of the little girl telling him to go to Amanda. “Maybe what she needs is me.”

Rufus made a scoffing noise. “A woman needs a man who’ll stand by her, be there through hard times and good. From what you’ve told me these past months, this is the longest you’ve stayed put in one place in your life and that’s only ‘cause they won’t let you out.”

“I just want to do the right thing.”

“Then do like I say. Leave her be. You think she’s going to be happy to see you again?”

Spence pulled his blanket tighter around his shoulders and watched a gray cloud puff from his mouth.

“You still there, boy?”

“Where else?”

“Don’t take it too hard. Everybody does things they’re sorry for. Sometimes there’s just no way to make it right.”

He leaned back against the wall and reviewed the stupid chain of events that had landed him in jail. Maybe Rufus was right and there was

no way he could ever apologize for what he'd done to Amanda. He should let the whole thing slide and leave the woman in peace.

Spence's eyes drifted closed. The little girl appeared against the dark screen of his closed eyelids. Her hair was in pigtails this time and she wore a blue and white gingham dress. Her solemn eyes nailed Travis down and held him tight. "Find us. We need you."

"Fuck!" Spence's eyes flew open and he sat up straight on his narrow cot. "Goddamn it, she's back!"

Chapter Eleven

Amanda got a clean bill of health from Dr. Litton and by February she was swollen with her pregnancy. It worried her that she was so big so soon. It seemed likely this baby would be born two weeks earlier than it should be, which wasn't enough time to tip anyone off, but was significant to her. Her fears about the child's paternity resurfaced with a vengeance until it was all she could think about.

Some of that agonizing might have had to do with the fact that winter blizzards had trapped her indoors for weeks. Travis at least went out to care for the animals twice a day. Amanda was restricted to the house. She could only sit by the window, scratching a patch of frost away from the glass to stare out at whirling whiteness while she knitted one article of baby clothing after another.

One afternoon in mid-month there was a bright, beautiful day. The temperature was up and the snow melting. Amanda was delighted when she glanced out the window and saw Marilyn trudging through the heavy, wet snow toward the house. She opened the front door to welcome her inside, but the look in the other woman's eyes told her something was wrong.

"What is it?" She ushered her into the hall.

Marilyn unwound the muffler from her face and unbuttoned her coat. "It's my ma. She's real sick. Ted and I are going to take the kids and go to Missouri to visit her. We're leaving tomorrow." Her voice was thick and she swallowed hard before continuing. "Mama's never even seen little Pearl yet. I don't want..." Her voice broke and she bit her lower lip.

“Oh, Marilyn.” Amanda hugged her tight. “I’m so sorry. I’ll pray for your mother.”

“We got the telegram just a couple of hours ago. Ted’s out in the barn talking to Travis about looking after our livestock. His ma is at our house with the kids.”

“Have some coffee,” Amanda urged, taking her friend’s arm. She led her to the parlor and settled her on the sofa before the fire then went to the kitchen to brew a fresh pot. Likely the two men would be in soon and would appreciate a hot drink too.

Marilyn warmed her hands on the steaming mug Amanda handed her. “I don’t know how long we’ll be gone. It might be a few weeks or even several months.” She glanced at Amanda’s protruding stomach. “I hope we’ll be back before your due date, but I just don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. When the time comes, Travis will fetch the doctor and we’ll make it through.”

“It’s not the birth I’m thinking about. Afterward you’ll be needing some help and with no relatives here to help you out... Well, I wanted to be around. But I’ll ask Ted’s mama and sisters to check in on you. They’re all real nice.”

“Thank you.” Amanda smiled weakly. She didn’t want to think about the birth. Her feelings about the baby were contradictory; a growing love for the little lump kicking inside her mixed with fear about its origins. What if the child was a spitting image of Teague so she could no longer fool herself? Could she live with the lie for the rest of her life?

“What’s the matter?” Marilyn looked at her, eyes narrowing. “Are you afraid of the birth? It hurts, but you forget about the pain once it’s over. Don’t worry yourself. Just let it happen.”

Amanda nodded. The secret she’d kept to herself for so long choked her. She had a crazy urge to tell everything, to share the burden with someone at long last.

“Is there something you want to ask me or to talk about before I leave?” Marilyn prodded. “You can say anything.”

She opened her mouth then closed it again, shaking her head. “You have enough to worry about with your mother.”

That only piqued Marilyn’s interest. “What is it? Tell me. I could use the distraction.”

Amanda’s hands were shaking. She had to set aside her coffee cup before she spilled it. Her heart pounded as she realized she was about to confess. The words were on the tip of her tongue. Marilyn had become her advisor and friend over the past months and it had always eaten away at her that she couldn’t be truthful with her. Amanda bit her bottom lip then began to speak. “If I tell you, can you keep it a secret...even from your husband, otherwise he might feel obliged to tell Travis?”

Marilyn frowned, beginning to look worried. “Yes. You can trust me.”

Glancing toward the front door, she wondered how long they had before the men came in from the barn. “Last summer when I arrived in Kansas City, Travis wasn’t at the station to pick me up right away.”

“The cow and the wagon wheel. I remember.”

“I waited for a long time. The station agent finally came by and asked if everything was all right and I told him my whole story.” Amanda’s gaze dropped to her hands twisting together in her lap. “Someone else was listening... A man. He... Oh, Marilyn it sounds so preposterous you aren’t going to believe how foolish I was.”

She leaned forward to cover Amanda’s hands with her own. “Go on.”

Speaking in a rush she spilled out the story of her seduction by the false Travis Baxter and the following morning’s revelation that she’d been duped.

“My God,” Marilyn whispered when she’d finished. “What kind of crazy man does something like that?”

“I should have told Travis right then, but I couldn’t. I didn’t speak and then it was too late. I convinced myself I could erase the truth from my mind and it would be like it had never happened. It wasn’t fair to him. I should have given him a chance to call off the wedding.” Her chest ached and she realized she’d scarcely drawn breath since she started

talking. "But I didn't. And it might have been all right. I might have learned to live with myself, but now..." She couldn't go on. She bit her cheeks from the inside to keep her mouth from trembling.

"The baby might not be his. Oh, Amanda."

"You must think I'm a terrible person." Her voice was tiny and tight.

"No. No." Marilyn wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they began to shake. "No. I don't. I understand." Marilyn patted her back and while Amanda wept.

Finally she gathered herself enough to speak again. "I should tell him now, shouldn't I? I should tell the truth before the baby is born. Whether it's his or not, he has the right to know, doesn't he?"

"No! I wouldn't."

Amanda looked up in surprise, wiping tears from her bleary eyes. She had been sure Marilyn would counsel her to tell the truth. "You wouldn't?"

"I know Reverend Jamison wouldn't advise you to keep a secret like this, but he isn't a woman who had a horrible thing like this happen to her. You should've told Travis before you got married, but, since you didn't, I wouldn't tell him now. He's a kind man and maybe he'd eventually accept it, but you're pregnant, Amanda, now is not the time to upset the apple cart."

Before she could say more, the front door opened and Travis and Ted clomped into the house, their snowy boots thumping in the front hall. Amanda didn't get to talk in private with her again until just before they left.

"Good luck," Marilyn said as she hugged her goodbye. "Hopefully Mama will be well soon and we'll be back before your due date. Meantime, you take care of yourself." She leaned in close and whispered. "Don't worry until there's something to worry about. Likely the little one is Travis's anyway, but you may never know the truth. Don't let it eat at you." Pulling away, she gazed into Amanda's eyes with a stern warning in her own.

Amanda nodded and smiled, embarrassed to find herself close to tears once more. She'd never been much of a crier until she came to Kansas. "Take care, Marilyn. I'll pray for your mother."

Travis wrapped his arm around Amanda's back, his hand resting on her thick waist. They stood on the front porch and watched the Landers walk up the road. "I know you'll miss your friend," he commented. "But I'll try to fill in for her—even if I'm not much good at quilting and crocheting." He glanced sideways at her and grinned.

She laughed and took his large, rough hand in hers. "It's knitting and I'll teach you how. It'll fill those long winter evenings."



There was a thaw in the weather at the end of February. All the snow melted and for two days straight cold rain instead of snow pelted down from the leaden gray sky. A leak developed in the corner of the bedroom. They woke to water dripping from the ceiling onto the dresser top. Amanda cleared it of the two photographs, her hairbrush, hand mirror and face powder and Travis's shaving kit, while he went to get a bucket to catch the drops.

A little later in the afternoon there was a lull in the rain so Travis climbed up on the roof to repair the shingles. The wind had torn away a few and he hoped a piece of tarpaper and some new shingles would solve the problem. Once a roof developed a leak sometimes it was hard to stop the water finding its way in, as though there were now mysterious channels it followed that no amount of repair work could fix.

It was freezing cold up on the roof with the wind whipping straight across the prairie and cutting through his clothes like a knife. His hands were red, chapped and stiff as he wielded the hammer. The roof was wet and soon his denim-clad legs were soaked through. He shifted his way along the peak, moving to a new spot and almost dropped his hammer. He forced his frozen fingers to grip it more tightly as he fit the last shingle in place and nailed it secure.

His face felt like stone and his eyelashes had a glaze of ice on them. He pictured the warmth of the fireplace in his snug house with Amanda sitting near it knitting baby things. His stomach rumbled in anticipation of the hot, meaty stew she had bubbling on the stove for dinner. Could life get any better? As much as he usually hated the winter months, this winter had been the best of his life.

Travis looked out across his land, the brown, barren fields sleeping now. He could stand another couple of months of cold because soon it would be spring, plowing and planting time and his child would arrive to make their little family complete.

Tucking the rest of the nails back into his pocket and hooking the hammer into his belt, he shimmied backward along the ridgeline. He'd placed the ladder at the peak of the house. It was just long enough to reach all the way up. Icy rain was falling again as he climbed from the roof onto the ladder. His foot slipped on the wet shingles and he gripped the ridge tight to keep from slipping. "Damn!"

Moving more slowly, Travis extended his leg to the top rung of the ladder and maneuvered off the roof. And then, in the moment he was balanced between roof and ladder, it happened. His foot slipped off the icy rung and he started to fall. He scrambled for purchase on the roof, his hands slipping all over the shingles finding nothing to grip, while his boot sought a secure foothold on the ladder. His heart jolted in his chest yet he didn't really feel afraid, he was so positive he'd regain his balance.

The moment seemed like a picture he was watching from afar as suddenly he realized that wasn't going to happen. His fingers gripped the very edge of the roof and then air. His foot never found the rung it had been seeking and in a second Travis was falling to the ground.

The breath rushed from his lungs. He didn't even have a chance to cry out before he hit the ground and the world went dark.



When Spencer walked out of the jail into the weak winter sunlight, he didn't have a dime in his pocket or anything besides the clothes on his back. His meager possessions had been left behind at the Wayside and he doubted Beacon had held onto them for him. Spence was unshaven and had lost several pounds from the scanty prison diet. He was sure he looked like a bum. Without a stake, he couldn't even get in a game to win some money. He had no idea how he was going to survive let alone travel to Kansas City.

But the drive to find Amanda McCormick—Baxter by now—was relentless. He could no more stop himself from searching her out in Reederville than he could stop the phases of the moon. It was imperative that he find her and do whatever he was destined to do.

In the end he hopped a boxcar traveling west. He crossed the great state of Missouri lying in a pile of straw and dung between the warm bodies of a couple of cows.

In Kansas City he made some money pushing broom at another bar then doubled it by suckering a shopkeeper with the twenty-dollar change scam. He earned more money playing pool, bought a cheap suit to improve his appearance and pulled a pigeon drop, netting over a hundred dollars.

With some cash in hand and fresh clothes on his back, Spence was ready to take the stage coach to Reederville and find Amanda.

Chapter Twelve

At least there wasn't any snow. Amanda had to remind herself to be grateful for anything that made life a little easier, because right now it was all she could do to keep from becoming overwhelmed, sitting down and crying her eyes out several times a day. As her numb fingers struggled to fasten the strips of harness leather, she tried to be glad that the roads were clear and she could drive to town today.

Since Travis's accident two weeks ago, the church congregation had been a pillar of strength and support for her. Gordon Hinglefeld, a bachelor who the Landers family had hired to take care of Ted and Marilyn's place, also tended the Baxter's livestock for a small fee. Amanda's labors were limited to cooking and caring for Travis.

Women from the community had rallied around her in the days after Travis's fall, cooking meals and staying to clean house or help her tend her helpless husband. Even Carrie Nordstrum had come by to offer sympathy. The pretty woman had given Amanda a pitying smile as she offered her covered dish. Maybe Carrie was feeling grateful she wasn't in Amanda's shoes after all, nursing an invalid husband.

Dr. Litton's prognosis about Travis's recovery was vague. He'd set his shattered legs in casts that covered him from hip to heel. The bright light in the midst of the misery was the fact that Travis could move his toes. His spine wasn't damaged. Dr. Litton thought Travis would walk again one day, but the healing process was going to be long and slow. The blow to Travis's head was what seemed to worry him more. At first the doctor had diagnosed a concussion, but on his last visit had hinted that there might be more brain damage.

Travis's excruciating headaches wrenched Amanda's heart. She suffered through them with him, able to do nothing except lay cold compresses on his forehead and administer laudanum to ease him back into numbness.

The doctor's fees were adding up with every visit and there was still the expense of the birth coming up. Although Dr. Litton told Amanda to relax and take her time making the payments, she was worried. The surplus in their bank account after the successful harvest was almost gone after paying property taxes, Dr. Litton and Gordon Hinglefeld. Amanda planned to stop at the bank today and see if she could apply for a small loan to see her through until spring. What she'd do when planting season came with no man to plow and sow the fields, she had no idea.

"Stop it!" she warned herself as desperation swelled inside her. "One task at a time." She hauled her bulky body up onto the wagon seat and chirruped to Esther to set the old mare moving.

Amanda glanced down at her swollen stomach, stretching her dress to its limits. At this stage in a pregnancy, women usually stayed at home for modesty's sake, but she had no choice. She only wished there were two of her so she could run her errands and stay at home with Travis. She hated abandoning him even for a few hours. He was absolutely helpless without her, imprisoned in his bed. Amanda had to turn his body to bathe him and prevent bedsores. She didn't know how much longer she could do this without help. He was so heavy and with the cast on, even heavier. A few days a week, Ted Baxter's sister, Mary, came to help, but day in and day out Amanda had to take care of most of her husband's needs by herself.

She tried to turn her thoughts outward instead of in for a moment. Looking out across the empty fields as she drove toward town, she drew deep breaths of frosty air into her lungs. Everything would be all right, somehow. God would send her help when she needed it most. She had to have faith in that, because there weren't any other options.

Amanda drew up at the hitching post in front of Kirkpatrick's Mercantile. She grunted as she heaved herself out of the wagon, taking that long step down to the ground. She was aware of the stares of passers-by as she walked toward the Savings and Loan and it grated on her nerves that she was the object of pity in Reederville. As she opened the door of the bank and walked inside, she counseled herself to be willing to look pitiable if that's what it took to get Mr. Farber to give her a loan. She schooled her face to reflect long-suffering bravery with a touch of melancholy as she prepared to meet the bank manager. It wasn't a hard expression to achieve.

After she'd waited on the hard wooden bench outside Mr. Farber's office for ten minutes, he opened the door and ushered her to a seat before his desk. "Mrs. Baxter, I'm so sorry to hear about your husband's accident," he said as he took his seat behind the desk. "It's a tragedy."

"Thank you, Mr. Farber."

"What can I help you with today?"

She briefly outlined her financial situation. "Our savings are depleted by the doctor's expenses and having a handyman take care of the farm. I'd hoped to get a loan to help during this difficult time."

Farber brushed his fingers over his moustache, smoothing it down. "I understand your situation, Mrs. Baxter. I'll help you fill out the paperwork, but I can't promise anything. A mortgage on your property is... Well, the last thing our financial institution needs right now is another farmer defaulting on a loan and I don't imagine you'll be able to make payments." He paused. His eyes shifted down to the papers on his desk. "I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Baxter, but you're just not a viable candidate for a loan."

"Mr. Farber, my husband and his family have been respected customers of this savings and loan for years. Are you telling me that now, when our need is so great, you're unable to help?" She hoped to shame the banker into considering her proposal, but he shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'll do what I can, but I don't want to give you false hope." He pushed a stack of papers toward her.

Twenty minutes later, Amanda walked back out of the bank and toward the general store where her line of credit was almost used up. Her throat was choked with tears she couldn't cry until she was on her way home. She was frustrated, frightened and shamed. How had their financial situation deteriorated so quickly?

Before she walked into Kirkpatrick's Mercantile, she paused and squeezed her eyes closed a moment. *Please God, I can't take much more. Please give me some help!*



Spencer stopped stock still on the board sidewalk and stared at the red hair of the woman standing in front of the general store. He knew Reederville was a tiny community, but he sure hadn't expected to bump into Amanda on his very first day there. He'd planned to sniff around, find out some facts about Baxter, maybe take a peek at her from afar before approaching her. Hell, he still hadn't worked out what he wanted to say to her or even why he was there. He had no idea what her reaction to seeing him would be, but could bet it wouldn't be pleasant.

What were the chances she'd scream and call for help if he walked up to her right now? He thought they were slim. She'd probably kept their encounter to herself. It was the sensible thing to do. A woman who had willingly slept with a stranger, even under the impression he was her fiancé, was not likely to share the tale later. He'd banked on it when he took her to bed.

"You're a mean son of a bitch." Rufus's voice echoed in his mind. *"You're a very bad man,"* the little dream girl added.

Spence took a couple of steps to the side trying to blend in with the shadow of the building. Maybe it was too soon. He wasn't ready to confront this woman.

At that moment, Amanda's head turned. Perhaps his movement had caught her attention. Perhaps it was simply fate. Her eyes lifted and fixed on him. For a moment her face was blank then a flicker of recognition

widened her eyes. Her mouth dropped open. Her expression was almost comical and Spence felt a giddy desire to laugh, which he suppressed. Laughing at her was surely not the best route back into her good graces—if there even was a route. However, he couldn't hold back the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth. After all this time of dreaming and daydreaming about Amanda Baxter and reliving their brief moments together, she was every bit as beautiful as he'd remembered—and hugely pregnant! His gaze fixed on the bulge of her belly, taking it in, before moving back up to her face.

He stepped forward. "Hello."

"You!" Amanda walked toward him, staring so hard the intensity of her eyes felt almost like a physical touch.

"Yes." He took another step, stopping several yards away from her. "I'm really here."

Her mouth opened and her head shook slowly back and forth. "Why?"

She wasn't screaming and hitting him yet. It was a promising sign. "I want to apologize." He lifted his hands, palms spread in a gesture of surrender. "That's all. It's been eating at me all this time. I would've come sooner, but I was...delayed."

"You want to apologize," she repeated, closing the gap between them until she stood only a few feet in front of him. She stared into his face as if still determining whether he was real or not.

He nodded, resisting the urge to look down at that massive stomach again.

"You're sorry for raping me?" Her voice was detached, cool and very quiet so only he could hear her, but her jaw was clenched so tight he could almost hear it creak. Her nostrils flared and even her red hair seemed to blaze with rage. She was gorgeous in her righteous anger. Spence couldn't drag his eyes away.

"I didn't," he said. "You know it wasn't like that. You wanted to—"

"Because I thought you were my fiancé!" she hissed. Her eyes darted right and left, checking the area around them for people. "You know I would never have done it otherwise. You lied to me and used me."

“I know. That’s why I’m apologizing. It was a rotten thing to do.”

“Why? Why would you do something like that to anyone? How could you?”

“Sometimes I’m a little...impulsive. You looked so pretty sitting there at the station and it seemed like...” He shifted his weight back and forth between his feet, trying to find an explanation that made sense. In the end he went with the truth. “I wanted you—as simple as that. It was a diversion, an afternoon’s entertainment.”

Amanda snorted. “Entertainment? What is the matter with you? And why, for God’s sake, would you come here now? Do you want to ruin my life more than you already have?”

“No! I told you, I’m here to apologize.”

Her arms went around her body, hugging herself. She finally looked away from him and gazed across the street. Her lips were tight with the effort of holding her emotions in check. “Well, you’ve apologized. Now please leave. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

“You married that Baxter guy?” He asked the obvious.

“Yes.”

Since she wasn’t looking at him he let his gaze wander to her stomach. The fabric of her dress was stretched tight over it. “And you’re happy?”

“Yes!”

“Good. That’s good. ’Cause I thought maybe...” He trailed off. There was no way he could ask if she needed help, needed him. The insistent little girl in his dream seemed very far away and ridiculous right now.

“You thought what?” Her gaze met his again. “This isn’t just about an apology. Why else are you here?”

“I thought...” He drew a breath, casting about in his mind for a sane way to phrase it. “You might...”

Looking past him, she whispered, “Shh.”

“Hello, Mrs. Baxter.”

A cool voice came from behind him. He turned to see a young woman with wheat blonde hair, a heart-shaped face and up-tilted nose like a porcelain doll's. She wore a stylish blue dress, too sophisticated for this one-horse town. She scanned Spence from head to toe, her curiosity palpable although she was too well-bred to express it.

"Hello, Miss Nordstrum." Amanda's voice was just as cool and polite.

The woman glanced at Spence, waiting for her to make an introduction.

He took her white-gloved hand. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Nordstrum. I'm Amanda's cousin, Spencer Teague. I was traveling west and stopped in Reederville to visit my dear cousin."

"Ah, of course." She nodded. "You're from Michigan, too?"

"Originally, but I've been traveling the country for quite a while now." He offered his most charming smile and lowered his voice to a confidential murmur. "I'm considered the black sheep in the family."

Miss Nordstrum looked at him with an interested gleam in her eye. "Well, it's certainly a good time for you to have arrived here, what with Mr. Baxter being laid up from his accident."

Spence paused to digest this bit of information. "Yes. Fortuitous. I hadn't heard about it until I arrived. Now, of course, I'm determined to stay a while and help out."

Amanda moved forward, inserting herself into the conversation. "Of course I told him that wasn't necessary." She stared hard at Spence. "I wouldn't want to interrupt your trip west. You have things to do and other places you need to be."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Family comes first. I'll make time. I want to help you in any way I can."

"How nice," Miss Nordstrum said. "I'll look forward to seeing you around then Mr. Teague, perhaps at church next Sunday."

"Perhaps." He smiled while Amanda slipped out from under his hand.

The pretty blonde bestowed a brilliant smile on Spence, but didn't glance at Amanda again before gliding off down the sidewalk. The

moment she was out of sight, Amanda rounded on him, slapping him in the chest hard. “What are you doing? Do you think I’d let you into my *home* after what you did to me? You’re crazy!”

“Cousin.” Spence grinned, hoping to defuse her anger with charm. “I’m here to help. Whatever you need done, I’ll do.”

“I *need* you to leave me alone. Get away from me. Leave!”

“Can’t do that,” he said with a shrug. “I’m a relative now. That Miss Nordstrum will spread the news all over town and how would it look if your cousin left without even a visit to the farm?”

“I’ll tell people you couldn’t stay.” She spoke through clenched teeth. “I’ll tell them you’re the lowlife of the family and I sent you on your way before you could cause any trouble.”

“Come on, Amanda. Give me a chance to set things right.” He dropped the charming act and spoke plainly. “How better for me to apologize than to help you out in your hour of need? What happened to your husband, anyway?”

“An accident.” She looked around the street nervously. “Look, we can’t keep standing here talking right on Main Street.”

“Then take me home. Let me do some labor to alleviate my guilt.” He lowered his head and looked up at her from under his brows. The hangdog look was usually a real winner with women.

She just stared at him with loathing etched on her face. “You’re disgusting. Do you think I would introduce you to my husband? Let you sit at my table and lie to Travis again by telling him you’re my cousin?” Her hand suddenly dropped to her belly, clutching the bottom of the mound as she winced.

Spence focused on the movement. The advanced state of her pregnancy had been nibbling like an anxious mouse at the edge of his mind during their entire conversation. Now a suspicion took shape. He nodded toward her stomach. “When are you due?”

“None of your business,” she snapped, turning away as though to enter the store.

“Isn’t it?” He moved alongside her. The image of the little red-headed girl, which he’d imagined represented Amanda in his mind, took on a bigger implication. He felt a little nauseous as he realized this baby might be his.

“No. Now please leave me alone.”

“I can’t.” He took hold of her arm, stopping her before she could walk into the store. “Please, just listen for a second.” He spoke in a rush before she could get away. “I’ve been having dreams—a kind of repeating dream—ever since that day we spent together. It sounds crazy, but this dream kept telling me to come here, that you needed me. So I’m here to help. I’ll do whatever you need and I don’t want anything, I swear.” He couldn’t believe he’d blurted it out. The raw edge of begging in his voice surprised him, but he couldn’t leave and suffer through the haunting again. He had to convince Amanda he meant her no harm and would do everything in his power to rectify what he’d done. “You need help. That Nordstrum woman said so. Please, let me.”

She paused, staring straight ahead of her, but apparently considering his words. When she spoke, her voice was level and emotionless. “You may carry my groceries and load them into the wagon. And you may come to my house and spend one night, but then you’ll take the next stage out of town. Understood?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Whatever you say.”

She pulled her arm out of his grasp and walked toward the door of the store, casting a glance back over her shoulder. “All right then. Make yourself useful.”



Amanda couldn’t believe what she was doing. As the wagon jostled along the bumpy road toward the farm, she slid a sideways glance at Spencer Teague. He looked different than she remembered him, maybe because she was used to Travis’s big frame. Teague appeared thin and pale. His fox-like features seemed sharper than ever, his dark eyes

bracketed by fine lines and shadowed underneath. His already prominent cheekbones stood out in stark contrast against the hollows beneath them. All in all, the man looked like he'd been ill for a while. Amanda wondered what he'd been up to in the months since she'd met him.

He glanced sideways, catching her eye and gave her a one-sided smile.

She glowered and turned away.

"So, what kind of accident did your husband have? What's wrong with him?"

"He fell off the roof a couple of weeks ago and broke both legs," Amanda grudgingly told him. "He also suffered a concussion."

"I'm sorry." Silence fell between them, broken by the rattling of the wagon and the steady plodding of Esther's hooves on the road.

"You're nothing like him, you know," Amanda blurted, surprising herself with the unexpected pronouncement. "I don't know how I could have imagined someone like you was Travis. Even at the time I thought you weren't like the man in the letters." She paused a moment before continuing. "My husband is a thoughtful, sweet, considerate man. He never would have pushed me into...doing *that* before our wedding."

"Come now, you have to admit I didn't have to push too hard." Laughter trembled in Teague's voice.

For a split second she pictured herself pushing him out of the wagon onto the ground. If he was knocked unconscious, she could back over him. The image almost made her smile. "You're the most vile person I've ever met," she told him conversationally.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I came here to apologize then I say something like that." He didn't sound repentant. "I don't know what gets into me."

"The devil?"

"Maybe," he agreed, humor still coloring his tone. "But you'll be happy to know I've suffered for it ever since. I lost my luck, my money, my sex drive and my freedom all because I couldn't get you out of my mind. It's been a bad few months." He turned toward her, the reins lying

loose in his hands. “Seven months to be exact. When did you say you were due?”

“I didn’t.” She felt his gaze fix on her stomach and wanted to shield it from him.

“Is there a chance that...?”

“No! This is Travis’s child.”

He nodded then twitched the reins against the horse’s back speeding her into a walk instead of a slow plod. “That’s good then. How soon will Baxter be able to walk again?”

“A couple of months.”

“Who’s helping you out meanwhile?”

“We have a man who comes twice a day to tend the livestock. Some of the ladies or their daughters help me out in the house a few times a week.” Amanda didn’t know why she was answering his questions. It was none of his business.

“You look worn out.”

“Thank you.” Her acid tone could have eaten through metal.

Silence fell for several miles before her curiosity got the better of her. “Spencer Teague is your real name?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you from? What do you do for a living? Who are you?” She fired the questions in rapid succession, hoping to put him on the defensive.

“Kentucky, originally. Up in the mountains. Mining country. But I’ve been on the move for a long time. Sometimes I’m a salesman, but mostly a gambler.”

She imagined he did a lot of morally derelict things—probably stealing and conning people out of their money everywhere he went.

“I’m not a terrible person really.” He looked over at her.

“Yes, you are.”

This time the silence lasted until they arrived at the farm and pulled into the barn. Amanda was astonished that Teague had to be told how to remove Esther's tack and stable her.

"I'm sorry. We didn't have horses growing up. When I rent a horse from a livery, they take care of it. I don't know a thing about them." He picked up the heavy box of groceries from the wagon box and followed her across the yard toward the house.

As they approached it, her pulse sped up. She couldn't believe she was going to introduce this man to her husband, calling him her cousin and lying yet again. If it hadn't been for Carrie Nordstrum bumping into them, none of this would have happened. Amanda knew the gossip would get back to Travis and it would seem strange and suspicious that she'd been seen talking to a mysterious cousin whom she never brought home. Better a perfunctory visit than send Teague on his way.

"Listen." She stopped on the front porch, pulling her coat around her against the frigid breeze. "You're from my father's side of the family and I simply never mentioned you before. Maybe you're my second cousin, the son of my cousin, Daniel and his wife, Marie. I've never met you before although I've heard of you. That'll explain how I know so little about you. You can use your own history that way."

Teague nodded. "What are your parent's names? I should know that."

"Harold and Priscilla." Amanda hated sharing their names with him. It seemed too personal, as though it gave him some power over her.

"And they died when you were...?"

"Eight." He was prodding at a long-healed wound that was still sensitive. She changed the subject. "All right. You know enough, just don't embellish too much and it should be okay." She opened the door and Spencer Teague followed her into her house.

Chapter Thirteen

Travis liked Amanda's cousin, although he didn't trust the man. Spencer Teague had a slippery charm that was hard to resist. He reminded Travis a little bit of his older brother. Stan had always had that same ghost of a grin on his face and a sardonic sense of humor. He was clever, impulsive, secretive and magnetic. Travis never knew if his brother meant half the things he said and had learned early not to trust Stan to follow through on his promises. Teague seemed like the same type.

"So where are you headed next?" He shifted his head on the pillow and pain stabbed down his neck. White light flashed behind his eyes. Travis clenched his jaw, breathing deep while he fought the pain under control.

"California, I guess. Maybe Oregon. I don't know. Wherever the wind takes me. But I'm in no hurry. I'll help out here as long as I'm needed." He nodded toward Amanda. "I might not have met my cousin before, but she's still family. I've only recently discovered how important that is when I stopped to see my own family again for the first time in years."

"That's a generous offer, but we're doing all right." Amanda leaned against the doorframe with her arms folded. She gave the impression she wished her black sheep cousin hadn't shown up. It was clear she wanted him gone and her tone bordered on rudeness. "You should carry on with your plans and catch your train tomorrow."

Travis was aware of the strain on Amanda during his two weeks in bed. It killed him that she had to handle so much alone, not the least of it dealing with his nursing care. It shamed him that she had to wash him and change his bedpan, as though the infant they were expecting had

arrived a few months too early. Although the neighbors and church folks were a godsend, they couldn't rely on their aide indefinitely.

"If your cousin wants to stay a while, I think we should consider his offer." He fixed Amanda with a steady gaze, letting her know he was serious about this. "Sweetheart, in your condition you need someone to carry wood and water and help lift me when you have to. An extra pair of hands would really be useful right now."

"I can take care of your stock, too," Spencer volunteered. "Save you paying a stranger. I'd be more than happy to do anything you need around here for a place to sleep and meals."

"Good. It's settled then," Travis said.

Amanda looked almost alarmed. "I—"

"Amanda," he cut across her protest. "It will be even harder in a couple of months after you have the baby. Without the Landers nearby, I'd feel much better knowing that there was someone who could fetch the doctor when your time comes and then help out afterward." His gaze moved to Spencer. "Would you be willing to stay through spring? I know I won't be able to plow and could use a worker in the fields when the ground thaws. I can't pay you much, but I'll do what I can."

Spencer stepped forward and took Travis's hand. "It's a deal. I'll stay as long as you need me." His grip was firm and dry and his smile broad.

Travis felt a weight lift off of him, but when he glanced past the man's arm at his wife, she looked stricken. Her wide hazel eyes fixed on their clasped hands. He wondered what bothered her so much about her cousin.

"It's getting late. I have to make supper." She crossed to the bed and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the lips, cupping his face and stroking his jaw with her thumb. "Is there anything you need before I go? If not, we'll leave you to rest. I'll start supper cooking then show Spencer around the farm."

"Spence. Call me Spence."

Amanda straightened and stared across the bed and Travis's prone body at Spence, who met her eyes and gave her a crooked smile. She

nodded, her mouth a thin line. "Come on then." Turning, she left the room.

"Nice to meet you," Spence said, looking back at Travis before walking through the door.

Travis lay there feeling helpless and useless. A dull ache resided in his head most of the time now. It increased to the insistent pounding that meant he needed another dose of laudanum. He should have asked Amanda before she left. Now he'd have to wait for her to come up later with his supper. He refused to use the bell she'd set on the bedside table to call her back.

For the moment, all he could do was close his eyes, try to relax and wait for the pain to subside.



"What do you want?" Amanda exploded at Spence when they reached the kitchen. "Why are you trying to weasel your way into my life?"

"I told you, I'm making amends."

"Excuse me if don't believe you. You're not the making-amends type," she scoffed. "What do you think you're going to get out of this? Money? We don't have any. A free place to stay for the winter? Well, believe me, it's not going to be free. If you plan to eat your meals here and sleep under our roof, you're going to work like a horse for it."

"I will."

"Good. You can start by filling this with water and setting it on to boil." She got the big pan she used to heat water for cleaning and shoved it at him. "Pump's over there." She folded her arms and watched as he worked the pump handle then carried the sloshing water over to the stove. "Back burner," she snapped. "I need to cook on the front ones."

"Um, how do I turn it on?"

Amanda tsked in annoyance as she showed him how to light the gas ring. "You've never used a stove before?"

He shrugged. "My ma did the cooking at home and after I left I mostly bought my meals at restaurants. Never had reason to cook." He turned from the stove to face her. "What now?"

"Now I'm going to show you what your duties will be out in the barn, and when Mr. Hinglefield comes to feed the stock today, I'll tell him we have a new hand."

It turned out Spence did have some experience in farm work. He'd mucked out stalls and milked a cow before. She enjoyed standing back and watching him do those chores.

He took off his jacket and vest and his stupid, fancy tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves to pitch hay down from the loft. His sinewy arm muscles strained as he carried feed for the mangers and buckets of water from the pump to the animals' water troughs. It was a joy for her to watch sweat break out on his forehead despite the chill in the barn.

He was just sitting down to milk the cow when Gordon Hinglefield arrived.

"Mr. Hinglefield, I'm sorry you had to make a trip over for nothing," Amanda said. "We'll pay you for today, but won't be needing you any longer. My cousin Spencer has arrived today and he'll be helping out until Travis is back on his feet."

Hinglefield didn't seem disappointed. "That's just fine, Mrs. Baxter. You don't have to pay me for today. I felt bad enough taking your money with you all in such a bad way. I'm glad you've got a relative here now."

After the man had left, Spence lifted the half-full pail of milk from under the cow.

"No. There should be more than that. You have to pull harder." She moved past him to sit down on the milking stool and strip the last of the milk from Millie's udders. It was difficult to reach beneath the cow with the bulk of Amanda's stomach in the way. There wasn't much milk this time of year, but it was enough for three people and the barn cats.

After directing him to fill the cats' pans, she watched in amusement as the man tried to pet the big, striped tom and almost got his hand clawed off for his efforts.

Spence carried the milk pail to the house and set it in the pantry. The milk had to sit overnight to let the cream rise to the top before the churning could begin. It was too bad because she would have loved to watch him take over the job she despised, cranking that handle endlessly until his shoulder was sore.

“Wash and peel these,” she demanded next as she dumped a half dozen potatoes in the sink and handed him a paring knife. “Don’t take too much potato with the skin. Slice them into quarters and put the pieces in this pot.” Giving orders to a willing slave was growing on her. She watched for a moment to make sure he did it right then turned to her own task of slicing smoked ham to go with the potatoes.

They worked in silence for a while then he paused in his paring and leaned with his back against the sink to watch her. “How long does the doctor think your husband will be in that cast?”

“A few months at least.” She cubed the meat on her cutting board and glanced at Travis, leaning there as casually as an old friend who’d dropped by and considered ordering him back to work.

“So not until after the kid’s born.”

“Yes.”

“How does it feel being all stuffed full of baby?” He sounded honestly curious. “It looks really uncomfortable.”

“It is. It’s kicking right now as a matter of fact. Would you finish your job, please?”

“Kicking? Really? Can I feel it?”

She held her knife pointed casually toward him and glared, incredulous at his temerity.

He grinned with his white shark’s teeth and raised his hands signaling surrender. “Never mind.” Turning back to the sink, he resumed peeling potatoes.

Amanda continued her cutting too, ashamed at the sudden flutter beneath her breastbone his disarming smile triggered. What was it about the man that affected her so?

Despite her attempts to shut him down with short answers or even rude silence, he kept up a one-sided conversation during the rest of the meal preparation, telling her about his travels, places he'd been and things he'd seen and done. Amanda was intrigued, although she feigned disinterest. She'd always wanted to travel. He asked her questions about herself, too, drawing out information about her family and how she'd adjusted to her new life in Kansas.

By the time their supper was ready, he'd almost managed to charm her into forgetting she was supposed to hate and despise him. He was such a talker it was hard not to respond.

When Amanda heard the faint ring of Travis's bell floating down from upstairs, Spencer Teague's spell vanished. She remembered she had a sick husband who needed and loved her—a husband this man had pretended to be in order to seduce her. Instantly her rage was back full force. She hurried upstairs to see what Travis needed.

"Sorry to bother you." His voice was whispery and weak. "I need..." He gestured toward the bottle of laudanum on the nightstand.

"Of course, I'm sorry I didn't get it for you earlier. You've been suffering all this time! Why didn't you ring for me before?" She rushed to pour him a spoonful. Holding it to his pale lips, she guided the spoon carefully into his mouth then laid his head back on the pillow, smoothing his hair from his clammy forehead.

His eyes closed as he waited for the drug to take effect. "You don't think much of this cousin of yours do you?"

"Well, I don't really know him," she hedged. "It seems odd asking a near stranger to live here and help out."

"But you need the help. He couldn't have come at a better time. It's as if God sent him."

"I suppose so." Travis looked so wan and miserable she didn't have the heart to argue with him. She smiled reassuringly and leaned to kiss his dry lips. "I'll make the best of it." After offering him a drink of water, she told him she'd be back soon with his supper and left the room.

Downstairs, Spence looked at her with raised brows. "He all right?"

“Yes.” She was back to monosyllables.

“It seems like he’s in a lot of pain.”

“He fell off the roof. Of course he’s in pain!” Grabbing a pair of plates, she served up the meal from the stovetop. She was not going to go to the trouble of serving dishes and place settings for this man.

She shoved a full plate toward him. “You can eat at the kitchen table. I’m taking a plate up to Travis.”

“I’ll wait for you and we can eat together.”

Amanda rounded on him. “We’re not going to eat together. We’re not going to do anything ‘together’. You’re only here because I couldn’t find a way to get rid of you. Is that understood?”

He dipped his head in acknowledgement, but that annoying smirk hovered on his lips. “All right.”

By the time she returned upstairs, Travis had fallen asleep. She cursed herself for not making him eat before administering his medicine. His lack of appetite worried her. He had lost so much weight in the weeks since the accident and it really showed on his big frame.

After the initial months of nausea, her own appetite had increased to the point where she could consume two platefuls of food at any given meal. Sitting in the chair beside his bed, she ate the potatoes, cabbage and ham, while watching Travis’s sleeping face. There was no way she was going to eat with Teague after she’d told him she wouldn’t. She dreaded spending the hours before bedtime in his company. Maybe she could invent more chores for him to do outdoors to pass the time. It was awkward and strange having him in her home and sleeping under the same roof. Amanda didn’t want to examine all of the reasons it bothered her.

As the light coming through the window turned burnished gold and then pink, she realized she’d been hiding in Travis’s room. Her plate was long since empty. It was time to go downstairs and face her unwanted houseguest again.

She descended the stairs, listening for sounds of the stranger in her home, but it was silent. She walked through the dining room to the

kitchen without encountering him. Perhaps he'd gone out to the barn or the outhouse—or maybe he'd taken all he could of her insults and demands and had started walking for town.

Rinsing her dish, she put away the food on the stove before going to the living room.

There, stretched out on the sofa fast asleep, was Spencer Teague. His shoes were on the floor, his legs crossed, ankles resting on the arm of the short sofa. She noticed one sock had a hole in the heel. His jacket and vest were tossed on the ottoman nearby and he slept in his shirtsleeves and pants.

She examined his relaxed face. His hair was a much darker shade of brown than Travis's and Spencer's eyebrows were finely arched lines against his pale skin. Thick black eyelashes fanned across his cheeks. His eyes, when they were open, were a deep, piercing blue. That was what had caught her attention from the moment he spoke to her at the train station. Sparks of light danced in their depths signaling a lively intelligence and an irrepressible sense of humor.

Spencer's features were delineated by strong bones that sculpted his jaw, chin and cheeks. His nose was straight and high-bridged. His generous mouth counterbalanced the sharpness of his narrow face. In sleep his lips were slack and parted. They looked soft, full and inviting of kisses.

Amanda stepped back in alarm as the unruly thought surfaced in her mind. She turned and fled from the room.

Upstairs, she went to the bedroom and kissed her sleeping husband good night then crossed the hall to Travis's old bedroom, where she'd slept since the accident. She stripped then dressed in her flannel nightgown and climbed between the icy sheets.

Amanda shivered until her body warmed the bedding, wishing she had the furnace of Travis's body lying next to her. She sat up in bed for a while to read about the hot jungle world of Kipling's India, but her mind wandered to Spencer Teague lying downstairs in the living room.

Her memory traced the features of his face then started to dwell on their night together so many months ago. She remembered what he'd looked like naked, how his mouth had felt on hers, the texture of his skin under her hands and his manhood buried deep inside her. She shifted uncomfortably. The book on her lap lay unread. Finally she slammed it shut and blew out the lamp.

She settled on her side, legs curled up toward the bulk of her stomach, arms close to her chest. Her eyes closed and she tried to sleep, but the knowledge of Spencer Teague on her sofa wouldn't let her relax. He'd probably be freezing cold before morning as the fire burned low on the grate.

Sighing, she climbed out of bed and went to the blanket chest at the foot of the bed in the master bedroom. She crept downstairs and into the living room. Spence's body was a vague, black shape in the greater darkness.

Silently, Amanda spread the blanket over the intruder in her home.

Chapter Fourteen

Spence pulled the earflaps of Travis's cap down tighter over his ears and turned up the collar of the big man's coat. He steeled himself to face the freezing wind, drawing a deep breath before opening the door and stepping into it. Shards of icy snow stung his cheeks and the wind cut right through his clothes. His boots, also Travis's and too large for his feet, broke through the hard crust on top of the snow and sank into two feet of whiteness.

Putting his head down to shield his face from the wind, he trudged across the farmyard toward the barn. He almost wished the cow and horses would die of some disease so he could quit taking care of them. Two weeks of farm life had convinced him that he hated everything about it. He hated the do-gooder impulse that had made him offer to help and he hated that demon child from his dreams for luring him here. Now that the memory of the dreams was fading, Spence wondered how he could have found her so real that he dragged himself across the country to this desolate place where the hard work never ended and he never received a word of thanks from Amanda Baxter.

His thick-gloved hands fumbled with the iced-over latch on the barn door. Finally he got it open and retreated from the arctic blast into the relative warmth of the barn. How could it be so damn cold? It was almost the end of March and winter showed no sign of ending. Usually this time of year he'd be in a balmy city down south, maybe Natchez or New Orleans. He'd be living in a nice hotel, sitting at the gaming tables with whiskey in hand or lying naked in tangled sheets with a pretty woman.

About a dozen times a day, he considered leaving, abandoning the Baxters to their miserable life. If he hadn't been trapped by the snow and

cold, he might have walked to town, but then he'd be stuck in Reederville. No coaches were running in this weather and the godforsaken town was so damn small the railroad didn't even stop there.

As he went about the now familiar tasks of cleaning stalls and feeding and watering animals, he thought about Travis, a man who had chosen this life—on purpose! Spence had come to Kansas to see Amanda and with vague intentions of convincing her to come away with him. In his mind, Travis Baxter had been a shadowy figure, an obstacle to overcome. He hadn't counted on getting to know and like the man so much.

As Amanda's due date loomed, her stomach grew even larger and every task became more difficult. Spence took over much of Travis's care, turning him to prevent bedsores, lifting him when Amanda washed his body or wiped his ass. Even with Travis's weight loss he was a heavy man. But the nursing duties took more than a physical toll on Spence; they drained him emotionally. The job was so intimate, caring for another person's body. He never would have chosen to do it, but was unexpectedly moved by it.

He admired the hell out of Travis. Despite the serious pain he still suffered from his head injury, the man remained patient and cheerful. Spence would've been whining like a child or roaring like an angry tiger at being cooped up in bed for weeks on end, legs trapped in casts, head trapped in pain. But Travis always remembered to thank both Spence and Amanda for whatever task they performed for him. What a fucking saint!

After finishing up in the barn, Spence trudged back to the house, the wind at his back now, pushing him forward. He blew through the back entrance in a rush of cold air, slamming the door shut behind him.

Amanda was heating water at the kitchen stove. The need for hot water never seemed to end. Hot and cold running water was one of the things Spence missed most about civilization.

"Could you carry the tub in from the pantry?" she asked without turning from the stove.

“Yes, mistress.” He adopted the mock servile tone he used with her when she was being demanding, which was all the time. He took off his hat, coat and boots then brought the large tub from its hook on the pantry wall and set it in the middle of the kitchen floor. “Anything else, ma’am?”

“Please, stay upstairs with Travis for a while. I’m going to bathe. When I’m finished, I’ll call you so you can have a turn.” She reached for the potholders, prepared to lift the heavy pan of heated water from the stove.

“Let me get that before you strain yourself and pop out the kid right here in the kitchen.” He grabbed the holders from her hands and carried the water to the tub. It took time and several large containers of water before the bath was ready.

“Thank you,” she said grudgingly as he poured the last panfull in.

“Sure you don’t want me to stay and help out?” he teased. A sudden image of water droplets rolling down her slick, naked body flashed in his mind and his cock stiffened.

Amanda glared at him, eyes narrowed like the angry, bad-tempered cats that lived in the barn. “Out!”

He was used to her glare by now and merely laughed as he retreated from the kitchen.

Upstairs, he found Travis awake, lying on his back staring up at the ceiling. He looked toward Spence as he came through the door. “Hello.”

“How’s the head today? Up to a little challenge?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Travis smiled.

“Want to play a game to pass the time? I’ll help you sit up.” Spence put his arms under Travis’s, wrapping them around the other man’s torso and hauling him up the bed then propping pillows behind him. He stood back, panting a little with his efforts. Travis was all dead weight. It was a wonder Amanda had been able to manage him at all.

“Thank you,” Travis’s face was pale and sweating, the move an effort for him.

Spence nodded. "Feels better sitting up for a while, doesn't it?" He drew out the deck of cards he'd brought with him, shuffled and fanned them then snapped them back into formation. "You any good at poker?"

Travis smiled again. "I'm more of a checkers man."

"We can do that, too, if you want." He sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to jar the invalid. He set Travis's meal tray across his legs in their stiff white casts. "First let's try a little five card draw." He set a small pile of wood chips in front of Travis. "Here are your chips."

Picking up a few of the misshapen bits of wood, Travis let them trickle from his fingers, smiling at the irony of using literal chips in a poker game. "So, Spence, tell me what made you go home to Kentucky after being away so long?"

He thought of the night he'd almost gotten off the train in Lexington, but hadn't. "I guess, I just wanted to see that everyone was still alive—especially my ma."

"And how'd they take it? Were they happy to see you again?"

He imagined how it might have gone if he'd walked home to the cabin on the ridge. "My mother and sisters were, but my brothers are hard men. You have to be to go down in the pit every day. They had no use for me at all."

Travis picked up the hand Spence dealt him and examined the cards. "If my brother came home after all these years, I'd be happy. I'd probably lay into him for disappearing like that, but I'd be glad to see him again."

"Where is your brother?" Spence tossed out three chips.

"He 'went to see the elephant'. The gold rush had been over for years, but Stan went to California convinced he'd find a vein that had been overlooked. I think mostly he just wanted adventure. He was never cut out for the farm." Travis matched his bet and discarded two cards.

Spence dealt him two new cards. "He never came back?"

Travis shook his head. "My mama died still waiting to hear from him."

As he drew the three hearts from the deck and bet two more chips, Spence wondered if anyone back home still wondered about him. If he'd had a brother like Travis, he might have kept in touch.

"Your mother told you about Amanda moving to Kansas?" Travis met him again and raised him two.

"Yeah. She suggested I stop on my way west." The story sounded unlikely so he embellished it. "I wasn't going to at first. I mean, hell, I'd never even met my cousin. It seemed strange to drop in out of nowhere, but I got to thinking about family and decided to do it. You could almost say I was drawn here. Something inside brought me." Spence looked hard at his cards and folded.

"Well, we're glad you came. You couldn't have arrived at a better time." Travis raked in the small pile of chips before him. "I can't thank you enough for all you've done to help out. I wish I could afford to repay you."

"Believe me, you don't owe me anything," he said truthfully. He always felt a little sick when Travis thanked him, imagining how he'd treat him if he knew Spence had conned Amanda into bed. Never one to second-guess his actions, Spence found, for the first time in his life, he felt pretty bad about something he'd done and its effects on other people's lives.

They played another few hands of poker, all of which Travis won. Spence was about to suggest they switch to checkers when he noticed the invalid's mouth was a thin, tight line and his eyes had that glazed look they got when a wave of pain overtook him.

"Enough! You're wiping the floor with my butt," Spence said. "I need a break. Play again later?"

"I'd like that." The other man gave a faint smile and nodded.

Spence gave him a jar so he could take a piss then helped him lay flat again. He pulled the covers over him and dimmed the lamp. The light of a cloudy sky cast the room in shades of gray.

Before he left the room, Travis's quiet voice floated to him. "Thanks again, Spence."

Stop thanking me! he wanted to beg. “Happy to help,” he said aloud.

Spence figured Amanda must be done with her bath and dressed since he’d been upstairs with Travis so long. He headed to the kitchen to take his turn in the tub, pushed the door open and stopped dead in the doorway. Amanda was out of the bath, but she wasn’t dressed.

She stood with her back toward him, naked but for a towel, her wet hair straggling down her back, the red tresses appearing a dark mahogany. She was in the process of drying her butt and legs so the towel only covered her lower half. The long, pale expanse of her back, her white shoulders, graceful arms, the curve of a single breast in profile were all on display for him. Her skin was pink and glowing with moisture.

Spence’s breath caught as she turned slightly. He gazed at the large, swollen breast tipped with a rosy, distended nipple and the round swell of her huge belly beneath it. Amanda’s body was distorted with her pregnancy. She shouldn’t look so desirable to him. His dick shouldn’t be so hard from just looking at her.

She registered his presence, looking at him over her shoulder. Her eyes went wide and she stared for several heartbeats. “Get out!” she shrieked, pulling the towel up to cover her body.

For another long moment, he hesitated in the doorway then withdrew, letting the door close behind him. An intense wave of desire coursed through him. Whatever had been wrong with his equipment before, it was definitely in working order now. His cock was swollen so hard he thought it would explode on the spot. It ached with the need to burrow deep inside Amanda. His hands wanted to touch her slick flesh and plunge into the damp mass of her hair. His mouth craved the taste of her lips.

“Jesus, what’s the matter with you?” he murmured under his breath, gazing at the stairs leading up to where Travis lay suffering. “Rufus was right, you *are* a nasty son-of-a-bitch.”



Amanda's heart pounded as she dried her body with the rough towel, put her underclothes and dress back on and wished she hadn't lingered over her bath. Knowing Spencer Teague, he'd probably caught her naked on purpose. He'd had a hungry gleam in his eyes as he gaped at her, the perverted fiend! How could he even be attracted to her when her belly stuck out like an overgrown pumpkin?

In the two weeks that Spence had been living with them, she had, at first, done her best to avoid him—impossible in such close quarters. Then she'd settled on treating him like a hired hand, giving him imperious directions and done her best to ignore his attempts at conversation, remaining detached and cool. Even when he expressed an interest in her books, asking questions concerning the far lands she loved to read about, she'd answered shortly.

But while she could ignore Spence during the day, she couldn't keep him from creeping into her mind at night. Lying alone in her bed, longing for her husband, she'd slip into a somnolent half-sleep and fantasize Travis's hands touching her, caressing her breasts and searching between her thighs. But somewhere in the middle of the fantasies, the man touching her often became Spence instead of Travis.

Amanda had vivid erotic adventures from which she woke breathless, her pelvis arching toward Spence's touch. There must be something wrong with her. She was a horrible, horrible person—nine months pregnant and in heat like a barn cat for a conniving stranger, while her poor husband lay in agonizing pain.

She shouldn't be thinking about men or sex at all, but developing gentle, maternal feelings for the child growing inside her. Instead, her body exhibited a wanton sexuality that humiliated her. She was not the perfect wife and mother she'd dreamed of being and this was not the perfect home she'd imagined back in Michigan. Her daydreams had never encompassed living with two men and having feelings for both.

Amanda finished dressing then prepared to empty the bathtub. She tugged on it, but the heavy, water-laden vessel wouldn't move. Spence

could take care of emptying the cold wash water and re-filling the tub for himself.

She sighed. She'd have to face him soon enough, so she might as well go out there and have it over with. Straightening her spine, she walked through the dining room and into the living room where he sat reading a book. "The kitchen is free now if you still want to bathe. How is Travis?"

"Sleeping." To his credit, he didn't give her a lascivious look or make any comment about what he'd seen. "Guess it tired him out, playing cards. Seems to me like the pains in his head aren't getting any better."

Amanda agreed. Dr. Litton had done all he could, but he was no specialist on head injuries. Even if the roads were clear enough to travel, they couldn't afford to go to Kansas City and find one. Besides, Travis couldn't stand the trip. "He'll get better." She parroted Litton's words which she no longer knew if she believed. "It will just take time."

Spence nodded and closed his book. Setting it aside, he rose and walked from the room, passing near enough that she could smell the scent of hay and sweat, a heady combination that attracted her like catnip. He stopped beside her—only a foot away, his shoulder practically touching hers—and turned his head toward her.

Beyond her control, her head swiveled to face him and she looked into his dancing, dark eyes.

A cocky smile curved his lips. "Just so's you know, I will be naked in the kitchen, so you might want to steer clear for a while." He paused. "Or not." He lifted his eyebrows then winked at her before walking on.

Amanda glared at his back, but her heart thumped at his teasing invitation. Could he see into her mind? Did he know that against all reason she craved him? Did he guess at the dreams that filled her nights?

"You're despicable," she called after him and was answered by his infuriating laugh.



Travis lay in his darkened room drowsing. He had lain for so long over the past month of his recuperation that he was never that tired, just worn out from fighting the pain in his head. The ache in his immobile legs was like a fleabite compared to the devouring pain in his neck and skull.

Laudanum eased it, but the drug shrouded him in a haze he didn't trust. When he'd been a soldier, he'd heard stories from some of the veterans of the War Between the States about battlefield injuries they'd seen or suffered and the laudanum addiction, which sometimes followed. He didn't want to become dependent on the opiate. He'd begun refusing it when Amanda offered it. But when the gray haze receded, the pain remained, solid and immovable as a rock.

He sighed and stared at the ceiling. At that moment, he'd give anything for the simple ability to roll over onto his side. He was so damn tired of being bed-ridden, useless to Amanda as both a provider and a husband.

While he appreciated all Spence did for them, Travis couldn't help feeling jealous of the fact that the other man was assuming his whole life bit by bit. He wanted to be the one caring for his wife as she moved into the final stages of her pregnancy, the one to fetch and carry for her as Spence was doing. He wanted to rub her back when it was sore and hold her body close at night, his palm pressed against the mound of her stomach, but right now with his legs encased in casts, they couldn't even share a bed.

This was not the way he'd imagined his life. He was not the husband he wanted to be and most days he hardly felt like a man anymore.

But Dr. Litton had promised the casts would come off soon, maybe even before the baby was born and Travis's hopes rested on that. When he had his legs back, everything would get better, whatever was wrong in his neck would snap back in place and the headaches would go away. He just had to hold onto that hope, rest, heal and wait for the day he could walk again.

Sighing, he closed his eyes. That day seemed very far away right now.

Chapter Fifteen

The first clenching pain in her abdomen came while Amanda was shaving Travis's jaw. "Oh!" she cried out in surprise and pulled the razor away from his throat before she cut him.

"What?" His eyes flew open. His half-lathered face turned toward her.

She set down the razor and put her hands to the bottom of the bulge as if to hold back the pain. She didn't answer, but concentrated on breathing slowly. The doctor had told her it would help.

"Is it the baby? It's too soon. It's only the beginning of April." His voice rose. "Where's Spence? Send him for Doc Litton."

She darted a quick smile at her husband to calm him. "Not yet. The doctor said to wait until the pains came at regular intervals. This might not be anything."

"But what if it is? What if something's wrong? And what if the doctor's out on call and doesn't get here soon enough? I think we should send Spence now."

Amanda laid a hand on his arm. "Sweetheart, it was just one pain." Already the contraction had eased. Before Travis could start panicking again, she held his chin steady and resumed shaving him. After scraping off the rest of the soap, she patted his face dry with a warm, wet towel. "Not much longer and those casts will be coming off," she said to change the subject. "I bet you're looking forward to that."

He refused to be distracted. "Are you all right now? Anything happening?"

"No. It's over." She picked up the tray with the shaving things on it and stood. "It's probably nothing. Like you said, it's too soon." Leaning

over, she kissed his smooth-shaven, sweet-smelling cheek then turned to walk from the room.

The second wave of pain hit before she reached the door. Her step faltered and the water in the shaving basin on the tray sloshed. She exited the room before Travis could notice there was anything wrong and closed the door behind her.

Leaning against it, she waited for the contraction to subside and cast a fervent prayer to heaven. *Please, God, don't make it come so soon. Oh, please don't let it look like Spencer.* In her recent nightmares the baby came out with Spence's adult face on its tiny body. She realized that with both men having brown hair and blue eyes and with the added mix of her own heritage maybe the child wouldn't bear the clear stamp of either man. Yet she couldn't stop her mind worrying at the idea like a rat trying to work cheese from a trap.

She walked down to the kitchen, emptied the shaving water and put the razor back in its case then poured herself a cup of hot tea. Sitting at the kitchen table, she sipped it and waited to see if the contractions she'd experienced were what the doctor had called 'false labor'.

She didn't have long to wait. Another pain blossomed, swelling from a tight bud to full flower over the course of several minutes. This pain was centered in her lower back and it was so strong it left Amanda gasping for breath as it eased.

Maybe it was time to get Dr. Litton. Maybe something was wrong with her or with the baby. She hadn't expected pains in her back. Still she sat and sipped her tea and waited to see if another pain came.

When nothing happened after several minutes, she got up and began heating water to wash the breakfast dishes. From the kitchen window over the sink she could see the Spence working in the garden. Over the past week there'd been an unseasonable warm spell. All the snow had melted and the ground had begun to thaw under a steady drizzle of rain. Today was balmy, bright and clear so she'd set him to pulling out last year's dried beanstalks and brown tomato plants. After he'd stripped the

garden bare and when the earth had thawed a little more, he could plow it for her.

She smiled as she watched him work, not only because it was a pleasure to see him do her bidding, but also because it was a comfort to know he was there. Deep inside, Amanda dreaded and feared giving birth. It was good to have Spence there to fetch the doctor when the time came and, she had to admit, just to have him nearby. It bothered her that she'd come to count on his presence, his sharp-tongued wit, raffish charm and disarming grin. If Travis was the salt of the earth, Spence was pepper. You could make a meal without it, but it sure added to the flavor.

As she dipped a plate into the hot, sudsy water in the sink, another contraction hit. It wrapped around her lower back toward her front like a belt of pain. Checking the watch pinned to her dress, she saw five minutes had passed since the last one. How much time had there been between the first few contractions? She hadn't been paying attention.

Perhaps it was time to send Spence for the doctor...just in case. Amanda went to the rear entry, took her coat from the hook, walked outside and toward the garden.

Spence was wrestling with a sunflower. Its roots clung tenaciously to the earth. He jerked and it gave way, pulling out of the ground with a huge clump of dirt attached to the root ball, making him stagger backward.

She laughed.

He turned toward her with a scowl. "Glad to amuse, my queen."

Amanda sobered as she felt the residual ebbing of her last contraction. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Let's see, you already have me scheduled to muck out the chicken roosts later this afternoon. What do you want me to do next, polish the barn floor?" He cast down the straggling sunflower stalk and walked toward her, hands extended. "Do you see these? They're so chapped and swollen I can't even shuffle anymore."

“Do you think they’re limber enough to hold reins?” she said dryly. “I need you to ride to town and get Dr. Litton.”

Instantly he quit whining and grew serious. “Is something wrong with Travis?”

“No. Me. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with me, but I think it’s time for the baby.”

His gaze dropped to her stomach and his eyes widened. “No. It’s too soon. It can’t be.” He looked up and met her eyes. A silent message passed between them.

“Sometimes babies come early. It doesn’t mean anything. Besides, I could be wrong.” As she spoke, another band of pain encircled her waist. She held her stomach through her bulky coat and drew in a sharp breath.

“Jesus!” Spence came up beside her and rested a hand on her back. “What can I do?”

“I told you,” she panted, shrugging his hand off her. “Get the damn doctor!”

“Right.” The fact that Amanda, who never swore, had cursed, sent him moving toward the barn. “Right. I’m on my way. Can you make it back inside the house?”

“Yes! Now go!”

Spence raced off.

Amanda prayed he’d get back with the doctor in time.



Spence stopped at the pump in the yard to wash the dirt from his hands and face, wiping them off on his shirttail before running the rest of the way to the barn. He saddled up Esther, something he’d never done before and which the old girl didn’t like. She shifted away from him as he tried to place the saddle on her back and whinnied nervously when he cinched the saddle under her wide stomach.

“Come on, girl. Calm down.” He patted her nose before hoisting himself up onto her back and gathering up the reins. He wasn’t much of a horseman. He kicked Esther’s sides to get her going and she ambled forward. “You’ll have to do better than that,” he told her, kicking again.

This time Esther trotted for several yards while he bounced up and down on her back, but almost immediately she slowed again. “Christ, I could walk to town quicker. Giddy-the-hell-up!” Spence dug his heels in hard.

Esther whickered in annoyance and resumed trotting across the barnyard and up the path to the dirt road.

He struggled to brace his feet in the stirrups and rise and fall in time with the jounces, but it was all he could do to keep from slipping off. It was going to be a long trip.

While Esther alternated between an uneven trot and a slow walk, Spence thought about the ramifications of Amanda going into labor now. If the baby was born this early, the chance it was his increased. Damn, what a mess if it was his, not that the kid’s paternity might ever be clear. Babies looked like scrunched-up, little red-faced monkeys. It was hard to tell if they resembled anyone. By the time this child was old enough to show similarities to either parent, Travis would be back on his feet and Spence would be gone.

Travis need never know and he would never think to question whether the baby was his. Even if he did, Spence wouldn’t be around to have to deal with it.

The idea of escaping this predicament and the never-ending manual labor sounded good on this bright spring day. As his spine jarred from the horse’s gait, Spence seriously considered sending Dr. Litton to the Baxters then catching the next stagecoach passing through town. With the roads clear, they’d be running again.

But, if he disappeared, Spence would forfeit any opportunity to ever see his kid, if it was his kid. Amanda wouldn’t forgive him for running out on her twice. Hell, she hadn’t forgiven him for the first time as far as he could tell. Considering his options, his immediate future narrowed

down to one choice. He couldn't leave Amanda helpless and alone with a newborn baby and invalid husband. He couldn't leave Travis, who was depending on him to start the spring plowing soon.

He let out a harsh laugh. Esther whinnied, laid her ears back and picked up her pace again. "I'm going to be a plowboy," he announced to the horse. "I'm turning into a goddamn farmer." Even worse, he was allowing people to rely on him—the thing he'd sworn never to do when he left Kentucky. He'd wandered for years, footloose as the breeze, just the way he liked it. Now, he'd gotten trapped all because he'd been attracted to flaming red hair and couldn't keep his dick in his pants. "Damn, Esther," he said. "Even you don't plow."

When he reached Reederville, Spence was lucky to find Dr. Litton in his office.

"How close are the contractions?" the nurse asked. "Doctor's with a patient right now."

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Well, a lot of times these new mothers jump the gun, but I'll tell the doctor and he'll head out as soon as he's done stitching up the Jarvis boy."

"Um, all right. Should I wait for him?" With her dismissive attitude, he was half-afraid the nurse would forget to deliver the message.

The nurse almost smiled. "Don't worry, Mr. Teague. I'll send him along soon. You ride back and tell your cousin the cavalry's coming. If it makes you feel better, you can boil some water."

Spence felt like popping her one in her smug face, but he nodded and left the doctor's office.

He looked across the street at the blacksmith's where the coach from Kansas City stopped when it came to town. He pictured himself buying a ticket and riding that coach west to freedom. With a sigh, Spence unhitched Esther and hauled his weary ass back up on the saddle to suffer the bumpy ride home.

Travis rubbed his hand up and down Amanda's spine then gently kneaded her lower back as she tensed under the onslaught of another contraction. He waited until the pain seemed to have subsided before he asked, "Is it normal to have pains in your back?"

"I don't know," she snapped. "I don't know what's normal." Her face was red and tendrils of hair clung to her forehead. She stood and went to the window, lifting the curtain to look out into the front yard.

"Spence should be back with the doctor soon," he said, but he was worried. What would happen if the baby didn't wait? There was nothing he could do for Amanda. He felt useless, unable to comfort or help his wife.

"He's back," she said. "The doctor's not with him."

A few moments later, Spence bounded up the stairs and through the door, out of breath. "Litton's coming. His bitch of a nurse wouldn't bother him while he was with a patient, but she's sending him as soon as he's done. How are you doing?"

"All right." She walked back to Travis, took his hand and squeezed it. "I'm going downstairs for a while. I need to get some things ready."

"Have Spence help you."

Amanda glanced at her cousin. "No. There's nothing to lift. I'll be fine." When Spence appeared ready to follow her anyway, she glared at him. "Stay here. I don't need you."

Travis was embarrassed as he often was by his wife's rude treatment of Spence. He couldn't understand why the man irritated her so much.

After she left, Spence dropped into the chair next to Travis's bed. "How you holding up?"

"Nervous. What if the doctor doesn't get here in time?"

"He will. He knows his business."

"I'm not ready for this. How can I be a father and a husband when I can't even walk?" He slammed his hand against the cast that held him a prisoner of the bed. "I'm useless!"

“No, you’re not and you won’t be stuck here forever. Calm down.”

“I’ve been calm for six weeks. I can’t take it anymore!” He knew he sounded like a peevish child, but his anger had been building for a long time.

“The boulder cracks,” Spence drawled. “I didn’t think you ever lost your temper.”

Travis glared at him, beginning to understand why Amanda despised her cousin. “Have you ever been trapped, forced to stay in one place for weeks at a time, unable to do anything for yourself and as dependent on others as a baby?”

“As a matter of fact, I spent some time in jail.” Spence gave Travis a lop-sided smile. “So yeah, I have an idea what that’s like.”

“Jail?” Travis forgot his frustration for a moment. “Why?”

“Stealing. Unsuccessfully, I should add or I wouldn’t have been in jail. Told you I was the black sheep of the family.” He looked toward the window. “I think I hear the doc’s wagon.” He jumped up and went to look out. “Guess that nurse was listening after all. I’m going down to see if they need me to do anything, but I’ll be right back up and let you know what’s happening.”

Travis nodded. “Thank you.” He listened to the sound of Spence’s footsteps going down the stairs and thanked God again for sending this man when they needed him most. He considered Spence a friend, despite any annoying personality quirks the man might have and believed that under his prickly exterior, Spencer Teague had a good heart.



Baby Lydia was born five hours later. Spence had just offered Travis a bowl of soup that he refused to eat, when Amanda gave a piercing scream. Both men froze. Amanda had been yelling off and on for hours, but this cry sounded different. There was a brief moment of silence then the high-pitched, bleating wail of a newborn infant floated through the air from down the hall.

"It's out," Spence muttered, having a sudden image in his head of an animal escaping from a cage.

"Thank God! Go see how she is."

Obediently, he went down the hall and tapped on the closed bedroom door.

"Just a minute," Dr. Litton called. A moment later he said, "All right, you may come in."

Spence found his heart was racing as he opened the door. He didn't know what he expected to see, maybe blood and guts strewn all over the floor. It had sure sounded like Amanda's insides were being ripped out the way she carried on.

She lay against the pillows looking exhausted, her hair straggling down on either side of her wan face. She glanced up when he entered then looked back down at the blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms.

Spence walked closer and peered into the blanket. A red, squash-faced imp stared back at him with flat, black eyes. Two tiny fists waved on either side of the face. It was the most hideous creature he'd ever seen. As he tried not to grimace at its ugliness, the little mite opened its mouth and let out another of those pitiful mewls.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Amanda cooed. "Isn't she the most precious little girl in the world?"

If you say so, he wanted to answer. "A girl then?" He thought of the pig-tailed terror in his dreams.

"Yep." Dr. Litton sounded as smug as if he'd created the child himself. He packed his instruments back into his black bag.

Spence noticed the bloody rags gathered up and sitting in one of the basins he'd brought during the course of the day. It felt like he'd spent all day heating water and fetching it from the kitchen. Now he supposed he'd have to wash out the disgusting things. He looked back at Amanda, who seemed perfectly pleased with her ugly baby's appearance.

"Shall I tell Travis then?" he asked.

Amanda looked up at him. "You can take her to him. He'll want to see her." She lifted the baby toward Spence and he backed up a step.

"Are you sure? Uh, maybe the doctor should...?"

"Nonsense. You're going to be helping with this baby. Might as well get used to handling her," Litton said. "Amanda, I'll let the ladies know. I'm sure they'll bring meals and help all they can."

She was still offering the now squirming baby to Spence. "Take her."

He held out his arms and suddenly they were full of soft blanket. Spence continued to hold his arms stiff in front of him. He could barely feel any weight on them. "Is it supposed to be this small?"

"She," Amanda corrected. "Support her head. Don't hold her like a stack of kindling."

"Is she?" He shifted the infant in his arms, holding her a little closer.

"The baby's not that small. I'd say she's about seven pounds." Dr. Litton zipped up his case and took a last look at the baby. "She's a healthy one. Now if Amanda starts bleeding heavily or develops a fever, you come get me right away," he instructed.

"Hurry. Take her to Travis and tell him I'm all right," Amanda urged. "Please."

He didn't take his eyes from the little, squashed face as he walked down the hall. It was a wonder he didn't trip over his own feet. The baby's eyes were closed now and Spence was glad. He didn't want her to start wailing again. Besides, her blank-eyed stare made him nervous.

"Is everything all right?" Travis asked the moment he set foot through the door.

"Amanda's fine. It's a girl." Spence walked to the bed and thrust the baby toward him. "Take her. You have to support the head."

Spence was pleased to see that Travis held the kid as awkwardly as he had.

"She's so tiny!" His voice was awed. He touched her face with the tip of one of his fingers. His hand looked huge next to the baby's head.

“Not that little,” Spence reported. “The doc says she’s about seven pounds. That’s normal,” he added confidently.

“Oh. And Amanda’s really all right?”

“Yes. She’s just tired.”

Travis nodded, staring at the baby, entranced. “She’s perfect.”

Perfectly ugly. “Yeah.”

“We haven’t even decided what we’re going to call her.” His voice softened. “What’s your name, little girl?”

It suddenly occurred to Spence that he had no say in what they named the kid—maybe his kid. Watching Travis fawn over the baby, he felt an unexpected sharp stab of anger. His jaw clenched as he swallowed his jealousy down. “I’ll be right back.”

He turned and left the room before he said something they’d all regret.

Chapter Sixteen

“Spence, not like that. What are you doing?” Amanda demanded, grabbing his hand and moving it to a new spot on her pussy. “Do it like this.” She arched her hips forward and her shoulders pushed back against his chest. She gave a sexy, little gasp.

“Woman, don’t tell me what to do!” Spence growled, nipping the side of her neck. His finger rubbed steady circles on her clit. His other hand slid up to cover her breast, pulling on her nipple until she whimpered. “I control you, not the other way around.”

“Yes. Ah God, yes, Spenssssse.” His name trailed off in a hiss.

He rubbed his stiff cock against her ass then roughly pushed her away from him and bent her over the arm of a convenient chair. He pressed her face down into the cushions with his hand between her shoulder blades. The position lifted her ass, presenting her ripe, white cheeks for his inspection. He grabbed his throbbing cock, positioned it between the soft globes and pushed, entering her hot, tight depths with a satisfying surge of power.

Spence jerked awake with a grunt and a raging hard-on. Come welled from the slit on the swollen head of his cock. He wrapped his hand around his aching shaft and with a few deft pulls, brought himself off.

As white streams spurted over his belly, he cursed. The fucking wet dreams featuring Amanda were back and he couldn’t control what he did in his sleep.

He threw an arm over his face, blocking out the pale dawn light shining through the windowpane. Another long, hard day of plowing lay before him. Sunup to sundown every day he walked in the traces behind

Gideon as the blade cut through the earth, churning it up into furrows. "Christ, I hate my life," he muttered.

After lying on the sofa a few more minutes, he rolled off his hard, narrow bed and sat up. He could hear Amanda clanging pots around in the kitchen, preparing his breakfast. He hated plowing and he hated Amanda Baxter for reducing him to this.

Spence dragged his aching body to a standing position then shuffled toward the kitchen.

"Good morning," she said when he walked into the room. "It's not ready yet. You'll have time to tend the stock before breakfast."

"Wonderful."

"Lydia kept me awake quite a bit last night so I overslept."

"Hm." Spence ambled over to the stove and stared at the coffee pot, listening to the comforting sound of its percolating and breathing in the rich aroma. "Is it ready?"

"Not yet." She moved up beside him to set a frying pan on the stove. "Excuse me."

He backed off a step. His arm brushed against hers and the vivid dream he'd just experienced flooded his senses again. He looked down on her head, bent as she lit the flame on the burner. Wisps of red hair straggled down the curve of her neck. Spence remembered how he'd bit her neck in his dream and wondered what she'd do if he pulled her back against him right now and did it for real. He swallowed hard as his cock began to stiffen once more.

Amanda straightened and looked up at him. "Do you think you'll finish the south forty today?"

"I don't know." He'd become quite adept at plowing. There wasn't much to it, but the furrows seemed to stretch on forever. He wondered how any of these farmers managed to finish the job each spring, let alone plant seed, cultivate the plants and harvest the crop at the end of the season. The enormity of the tasks confronting him was overwhelming. It was like being on a chain gang with no parole in sight.

“Dr. Litton is taking Travis’s casts off today. Maybe in a few weeks he’ll be able to take on some of the work again.”

“That’s good,” Spence said, trying not to gape at her bodice. Her breasts were huge due to nursing Lydia. They strained against the front of her dresses, tailored for a smaller-breasted woman. Often there were damp patches on the fabric where milk had leaked from her over-full breasts.

His jaw tightened as he imagined taking one of those luscious tits into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the moist, hard nipple then sucking it. Warm, sweet milk would flow onto his tongue and she’d moan at the insistent tugging of his mouth.

“Move, please.” She nudged him aside and opened the oven door to place a tray of last night’s biscuits inside for re-warming. “Don’t forget to give the hens an extra helping of mash. They need it now that they’re laying again.”

Spence sighed and turned away from the stove. He plodded through the kitchen toward the back entry to put on his boots before going out to the barn. He hoped Travis would be on his feet and back to work soon then he could give up this never-ending penance and resume his own life.



Amanda blew out a long breath after Spence had left the kitchen. It took an increasing amount of effort to hide her reactions to his presence. She rarely made eye contact with him and did her best to brush past him as if he meant nothing. If he guessed at how her skin prickled when it touched his or how her lips went numb when she spoke to him, he didn’t show it. And thank God he couldn’t see into her mind—or her dreams at night.

Every single day she considered telling him it was time for him to move on, that his help was no longer needed. Getting rid of Spence was the only way she could resume building her relationship with Travis. She

could rediscover the spark of sexual excitement inside her for her husband and fan it into life as Travis's body healed and he was able to respond to her advances. But as long as Spence was around to distract her, Amanda had trouble feeling her earlier strength of emotion for Travis. Although she cared for him deeply, she doubted he'd ever stir her in quite the same way Spence did.

Despite her daily resolve to send Spence away, every evening another day had passed and she hadn't said a word. She tried to tell herself it was a matter of practicality. They needed Spence to work the land. It would be foolish to let an unpaid laborer slip away. In her subconscious, she knew the truth—she didn't want him to leave for more reasons than she cared to explore.

With a sigh, she turned to the mundane task of preparing breakfast, scrambling eggs, frying pork, taking the warmed biscuits from the oven, setting a plate on a tray to carry up to Travis. Before she even opened his bedroom door, she heard him coughing. The chest cold he'd developed over the past week seemed to be getting worse. Amanda pushed the door open and walked into the darkened room.

The lump on the bed shifted and the pale moon of his face turned toward her. "Good morning."

Amanda set the tray on the nightstand and lit the lamp. "Morning. Hungry?"

"I could eat a little."

She knew "little" was the key word. His appetite had decreased since the accident and even more so in the past few days. Amanda helped him sit up in bed, hauling on his torso with all her strength then positioned the tray on his lap. "I'll go get Lydia," she told him.

In the other bedroom, she found her baby daughter awake and waving her arms in the air while she made gurgling noises. Usually the infant woke with a scream of annoyance, demanding immediate attention. This was a pleasant change.

Amanda scooped her out of the cradle, which had held several generations of Baxter babies. "Hello, little angel." Lydia's temperament

was more devilish than angelic, but Amanda thought if she repeated the word enough it might stick.

She'd changed the baby's diaper a little while ago in the bleak pre-dawn hours when her little angel refused to sleep, so she carried Lydia down the hall to spend some time with Travis. "Here she is."

As Amanda had suspected, Travis's food was barely touched. His eyes lit up on seeing Lydia. "Good morning, princess."

Amanda unbuttoned the front of her blouse to release her dripping breast and settled herself in the chair beside the bed. Lydia zeroed in on her mother's nipple and began sucking greedily, making little choking sounds as she took in too much milk.

"You'd think she was starved. I just fed her a few hours ago."

"She's growing into such a big girl already." Travis gazed entranced at his wife and baby girl. "I can't wait to get these off," he struck the casts, "and get back to normal again."

"How are your headaches?" She prodded, knowing he didn't like to talk about them. "Any better?"

"Fine. I don't use the laudanum anymore." He said it as if it proved he was getting better. Amanda had her doubts. She saw his face tighten with pain often when he thought she wasn't looking.

He coughed and she noted that the cough was no longer a dry bark. She could hear phlegm rattling in his chest.

"That cough doesn't sound too good. Thank heavens Dr. Litton is coming today."

"I'm fine," he said impatiently. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Amanda didn't argue, as she switched Lydia to the other breast.

"How's Spence doing out in the field? Getting the hang of it."

"The furrows aren't exactly straight, but he's getting better," Amanda said, turning her face down and fussing with Lydia's blanket.

"Good. When all this is over, we have to offer him some payment. I know we can't afford much, but he's done so much for us and deserves more than a few months' room and board."

Amanda continued to hide her face, shamed by her duplicity. Part of her wanted to spill everything to Travis, but knew that was impossible now. She would have to continue to live with her lie. Confessing would only make her feel better. It wouldn't help him, especially in the middle of his illness.

They sat in the early morning quiet for several more minutes. Travis occasionally talking about something else he would do when he was back on his feet, Amanda telling about her sleepless night with Lydia.

Footsteps on the stairs signaled Spence's arrival. He leaned on the doorframe. Amanda didn't glance toward him. "Morning. Milk's in the pantry. Millie didn't give much. I'm finished with breakfast and I'll be heading out to the field, so if there's anything you need done before I go..."

"I guess not. Thank you." She covered her breast and moved Lydia to her shoulder to burp her.

"Thank you," Travis repeated. "I can't find enough ways to say it. If I couldn't plant a crop this spring, the farm would be sunk. You've saved us by doing the plowing. Hopefully, I'll be up and around before it's time to seed."

"Happy to help." Spence muttered something else about 'family' then beat a hasty retreat from the room.

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. The stress of living a lie and worse, physically craving Spence, was tearing her up.

Maybe today she'd finally do it. Maybe today she would tell him he had to go.



Walking along behind Gideon, Spence looked up at the clear, blue sky overhead and breathed a lung full of cool, spring air. As much as he hated the long days and having to roll out of bed so early, he had to admit it was kind of pleasant out here under the open sky. For a man used to late hours in smoky bars, never waking until well after noon, it

was a healthy change. He could see where a man like Travis would enjoy a lifetime of plowing and planting, but it wasn't for him.

His mind wandered to the family tableau he'd walked in on this morning. In the glow of the lamplight, Amanda nursing Lydia had reminded Spence of a painting of the Madonna and child. Travis was a proud paternal figure looking on, which left Spence as the kindly uncle. It was hard to be relegated to the role, although he didn't exactly see himself as the father either. He didn't know what he was.

Occasionally Amanda had asked him to hold Lydia while she accomplished some task or other. In those brief moments, Spence had examined the baby with fascination, pinching her miniature toes and fingers, touching the tip of her nose and tracing her seashell ears. He stared into her blank eyes, which were beginning to turn a light shade of hazel like her mother's, and Lydia gazed back at him. The kid looked like she was seeing right inside him, but Amanda had told him babies only peered so hard because they couldn't focus very well.

Lydia had gotten cuter after the red ugliness of her first couple of days. Spence snuck into Amanda's room and watched the baby sleep in her cradle sometimes. He thought she was pretty smart and beautiful for an infant and believed he knew exactly what she was going to look like as a little girl. Hadn't she haunted his dreams for most of a year? The rational part of his mind told him he was crazy, but his gut said it was his very own daughter who had browbeaten and threatened him until he did the right thing. Maybe it was his superstitious Irish streak showing, but he believed it in the depths of his soul.

In front of him, Gideon slowed as they came to the end of the row. Spence guided the horse and plow around the curve and set them up to till another long furrow. Head down, he trudged through the rough clods of dirt, which clung to his boots. His feet felt heavy as lead, rooted to the earth. He tried to pretend he was Travis and loved the land. He imagined Lydia and Amanda belonged to him and they would live as a happy family for the rest of their lives.

The call of a swallow broke his reverie. Spence looked up to see the bird dip and soar in crazy loops through the air. He wasn't Travis. He could never be that kind of man. He was as erratic as the swallow, shifting and moving, rarely landing. A family was not in the cards for him.

Setting his sights forward to keep the row straight, Spence walked on.



The doctor required Amanda's help as he cut away Travis's casts with a small saw. Very slowly the plaster parted on one leg as Amanda held the sections steady. When the whole thing had been removed from his leg, it stuck out from his body, bone white with black hair matting it. He had lost a lot of muscle mass and the leg looked thin and incapable of supporting his weight.

She glanced up at his face. He looked horrified.

Dr. Litton must have notice too. "Don't worry. It might take a while, but you'll be able to walk again. I'll give you some exercises to do to strengthen your legs so you can stand again."

Travis nodded, but didn't stop staring at his stick legs.

Amanda took his hand. "It's all right, sweetheart. You'll be better in no time."

Dr. Litton left a bottle of elixir to ease Travis's cough and help expectorate some of the mucus in his lungs. He'd diagnosed the cold as pneumonia—not contagious, but dangerous for Travis. "Apply mustard plasters to his chest and keep a pan of steaming hot water near the bed to humidify the air. Let me know if it gets any worse."

Amanda sat beside Travis on the bed. She stroked the back of his neck, toying with the ends of his hair and leaned in to kiss his cheek.

He turned his head toward her, wincing slightly at the movement and pressed his lips to hers.

“Everything is going to be all right,” she murmured. “You heard the doctor.”

“I know, but somehow I guess I thought I’d jump right out of bed and dance a jig once those casts were off.” He smiled ruefully.

“Well,” an idea blossomed in her head, “maybe you can’t dance, but I have an idea for a celebration.”

His blue eyes sparkled, the corners crinkling as he grinned at her. “What are you planning?”

“A surprise. I’ll help you get cleaned and dressed then I’ve got some things to get ready for this evening.”

She worked with him for a while, massaging and manipulating his legs like the doctor had shown her then helped him wash up and dress in a clean shirt. By that time, Lydia was wide-awake and roaring in her cradle. Amanda went to tend her before going down to the kitchen to work on her feast.

She and Travis had never had a proper courtship—going to a concert in the park, Sunday dinner with relatives or dressing up for a dance. Amanda had decided to prepare a delectable meal for Travis and wear her finest dress, which she’d only worn once for Sunday service. She’d ask Spence to mind Lydia that evening while she devoted herself to putting romance back into her marriage.



Spence sloshed icy cold water over his arms, face and chest at the outdoor pump. He liked to wash as much dirt off as he could before going in and doing a more thorough cleaning at the sink. He shivered as the cool air of early evening blew over his wet skin and ruffled the hair plastered to his head. Stomping mud off his boots, he left them on the back porch before going through the kitchen door. He dumped his dirty shirt, undershirt and socks in the entry before walking into the kitchen. There he stopped stock still, staring at Amanda.

She turned from the stove to look at him, her face pink and moist from the vapors rising from the bubbling pot. She wore an emerald green dress that shimmered with her movements. The back was drawn up in a stylish bustle. The green enhanced the rich red color of her hair, which was piled on her head in an extravagant arrangement. A few artful curls coiled in front of her ears and on her forehead. Her lovely oval face was like a doll's with a high-bridged nose, bowed lips and elegantly arched eyebrows over her clear, hazel eyes.

Spence saw her every day, but he hadn't seen her so dressed up since he first beheld her at the train station in Kansas City. He'd forgotten how beautiful she could be when she wasn't scowling at him.

He stood there, filthy, sweaty, damp and half-naked, feeling like something spewed out of the earth, a demon counterpart to her angelic beauty. He swallowed, but couldn't seem to force his legs to move or his mouth to come up with a smart comment. "You're beautiful," he said simply.

A smile twitched the corners of Amanda's mouth, but she quickly squelched it. Turning to the stove, she placed a lid on the bubbling pot. "Could I ask you to do me a favor?"

It was the first time he remembered her *asking* him to do anything since he'd arrived. She was usually ordering him. "What?"

"Would you mind Lydia this evening while Travis and I spend some time together? You know Dr. Litton took the casts off this afternoon and we want to celebrate."

"All right." It wasn't, of course, but he'd become indoctrinated into agreeing with whatever she requested. He wanted to tell her there was no way he was leaving her to Travis, that she belonged to him by all rights since he'd had her first. He wanted to say this as he pulled her into his arms and crushed her against him, covering her mouth with kisses. Instead he walked to the sink and pumped water.

"I have some hot water on the stove for you."

"Thank you."

She poured a kettle full of steaming water in the basin and handed him the bar of soap.

Spence was conscious of her standing by, watching him as he washed his face and neck, scrubbed his chest and underarms then rinsed. It made him nervous and set his cock twitching. He glanced sideways at her.

Amanda handed him a towel. Her face tilted toward his and she regarded him solemnly. "Thank you." Her tongue lightly touched her lip then disappeared back in her mouth. "I know that...all of this hasn't been easy for you. Not that you deserve any forgiveness, but you've proven by everything you've done that you meant your apology. So, I guess I'm saying I forgive you for...what you did."

What we did, Spence wanted to remind her. He gripped the towel in both hands. Water rolled down his chest and shoulders as he continued to look into her eyes. His lips parted slightly. He didn't know if he was about to say something or kiss her.

Her pupils were dilated, making her light eyes appear almost black. Her chest rose and fell with her breathing. The moment seemed to spin out forever. There was complete silence in the room except for the faint bubbling of the pot on the stove.

"Thank you," he finally managed to say, his voice cracking a little on the second word.

She nodded once then turned away.

Spence's hands were shaking slightly as he toweled himself dry.



Amanda fussed over the stove although the meal was ready. Her heart fluttered in her chest in reaction to what had almost happened between her and Spence. At least she thought something had been about to happen, but maybe it was her own fevered desire. The sight of his naked torso had made her mouth go dry and her sex pulse with need. His muscled shoulders, hard chest and flat abdomen all glistening with

water had set her nipples leaking. She would have to wake Lydia and feed her before the bodice of her dress stained. Amanda stirred the gravy and listened to Spence drying himself in the kitchen behind her. Not until he walked from the room did she finally release her breath.

Quickly she gathered plates and silverware and set them on the tray. She would take care of Lydia one last time before placing her in Spence's care then spend the rest of the evening with her husband on a proper date.

She went upstairs and found the baby awake in her cradle and starting to fuss. "Hello, tiny girl," Amanda murmured to her daughter as she lifted her in her arms.

The baby snuffled and clenched her fists. Her mouth puckered in anticipation of nursing. Eyes still closed, she turned her head, searching for the teat.

Amanda unbuttoned her bodice and held the infant close. Lydia latched on and pulled with all her might.

Looking down at the baby's features, Amanda wondered as always if she would ever know for sure which man had fathered her. Right now Lydia was a formless lump of clay. She had no telling features to signal her paternity, but if Amanda had to guess by temperament alone, she'd lean toward Spence. Lydia already appeared bright-eyed, quick, impatient and determined to have her own way.

The knowledge that she might be passing his baby off as Travis's sat like a stone in her stomach that would weigh her down for the rest of her life. There was nothing she could do to dislodge it.

Lydia released her nipple, milk dribbling from the corners of her mouth.

Amanda patted her face dry and held her up to her shoulder for burping before moving her to the other side, but Lydia twisted and wailed until Amanda let her continue nursing greedily.

She thought about the way Spence was with Lydia. She had to admit she felt complete confidence in his ability to care for the baby. She'd watched the pair of them together when he didn't know she was looking

and it was an amusing sight. He didn't adopt the adoring tone Travis did, calling Lydia a little princess or angel. Spence talked to the baby bluntly, telling her she was being difficult or berating her for acting like a demon. He told Lydia harrowing tales of what happened to babies who were too much trouble, how they got fed to the wolves or sold into slavery and asked if she wanted that to happen to her. All the while he cleaned, powdered and diapered her bottom expertly or distracted her out of a tantrum with her stuffed bunny. She'd even heard him singing to Lydia once, a burlesque tune with dirty lyrics sung in a deep baritone that reduced the infant to complete and blessed silence.

The fact that Spence cared for the baby made his inevitable leaving even harder. But she knew, especially after that moment between them in the kitchen, that it was becoming more urgent to send him away.

When Lydia was finished nursing, Amanda played with her for a few moments then changed her diaper and laid her back down in the cradle.

The baby was wide-awake, gazing with rapt interest at her own hands as they made magic symbols in the air.

Amanda smiled at her goggle-eyed fascination then went to the mirror to check her appearance. Her hair had to be tucked and pinned here and there and she realized she probably should have waited until after finishing the meal and feeding the baby to dress up. But overall, she thought she looked nice. After blowing a kiss to Lydia, she walked from the room.

Spence had just reached the landing of the stairs. He paused with a hand on the banister, looking down the short hallway at her. "I didn't know if you needed me yet," he said, sounding uncharacteristically hesitant and quiet.

"She's playing right now, but if she doesn't fall back to sleep, I imagine she'll want more attention soon."

Spence took a few steps down the hall toward her. "You want me to take her downstairs, cradle and all? Might make it easier, more, uh, private up here."

“Thank you. That would be very kind of you.” Her own nervousness rose at his halting offer. She hadn’t thought about her date leading to sex with Travis, but Spence clearly had. She doubted her husband would feel up to it, but the idea that he might and that they might engage in the act with Spencer in the same house made her stomach jumpy. It seemed strange and wrong somehow.

“All right then.” He moved forward, turning sideways to pass her in the narrow hall and pausing there. “Enjoy your evening.” His low voice and reverberated along her spine. The warmth from his body and the smell of soap and sweat made a warmth pool at the juncture of her legs. She looked up into his eyes as he stood before her, so near, so potent.

“Thank you,” she repeated. “Come and get me if you need help.”

“I can handle her.” He continued past her, entering the baby’s room.

Amanda walked to the master bedroom and slipped inside.

Travis was propped up in bed, cleaned, combed and dressed in his best shirt as she’d left him. His eyes lit up at her appearance. “You look beautiful!” he exclaimed, scanning her from head to toe.

“Thank you.” Smiling, she approached the bed and settled herself on the edge. She reached over and patted his leg gently through the blanket. “How do your legs feel? Do they hurt?”

“No. Only a slight ache. Mostly they itch.” He picked up her hand. “But, you know what? I don’t want to talk about my legs. I’ve had enough discussion of my health over the past few months to last a lifetime.”

“All right. I do have to give you your medicine though. It’s time.” She poured him a spoonful of the elixir and he dutifully swallowed it, pulling a face at the taste.

Amanda offered him water then a kiss. His flesh felt warm and fevered as she leaned close and pressed her lips against his. She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and rested the other on his shoulder.

The kiss was warm and soft, but brief. After a moment, Travis pulled away, turning his head to the side to cough. “Sorry.”

“No. You’re sick. It’s fine. We have a whole lifetime of kissing ahead of us.” She brushed his hair back from his hot forehead and kissed him there. “Are you hungry? I’ll bring up our dinner and afterward we can read some Tennyson or whatever you’d like.”

“Sounds wonderful.” He smiled and gripped her hand. “You’re so good to me. I’m sorry I can’t—”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear another apology from you. Ever since you were injured you’ve been apologizing for it. The accident wasn’t your fault and neither is the pneumonia. Sometimes things happen and people are sick for a while that’s all,”

“I just feel so weak and useless.”

“Never useless.” She kissed him once more then left to bring up the meal.

Downstairs she took a quick peek into the living room to see how Spence was managing with Lydia. He had the baby lying against his arms, facing him as he sat on the sofa, elbows on knees.

“And that’s how Seamus O’Toole outwitted the banshee and reclaimed his life.”

Lydia gazed up at him with focused attention as if memorizing every word.

Amanda smiled and slipped away to the kitchen.

Much later that evening, she lay pressed against Travis’s side, her hand on his chest, rising and falling with each breath. He’d eaten little of the meal, but had enjoyed her rendition of Tennyson’s “The Revenge: A Ballad of the Fleet”. They’d talked about Lydia and the coming summer when everything would be better. They lay together in silence for a while and the next time Amanda spoke she realized he’d fallen asleep.

His labored breathing worried her as did his continued headaches. Travis didn’t admit to them anymore, but she could tell when the pain was bad. After watching her husband sleep for several long minutes, she rose from the bed to take care of the supper tray.

Again she checked in on Spencer and Lydia. This time she saw the baby was asleep in her cradle and Spencer was reading Amanda's copy of *Twice Told Tales*. He glanced up at her. His eyes shining bright blue in the lamplight.

Amanda came into the room and sat on the chair across from him. "How was she?"

"An imp like always. The kid's fussy and stubborn." Spence closed the book with his finger marking the page.

"She does seem to have a temper."

"Wonder where she gets it." He looked pointedly at her.

She ignored the comment. "So, that story you were telling her earlier, is that an Irish folktale?"

Spence leaned back. "I suppose so. My ma used to tell it."

"Your family is Irish on both sides?"

"Yeah. But we downplayed it. Being Irish didn't fly too well living in Scotch Protestant country."

"How'd your family end up in Kentucky?"

"My parents never said and I didn't think to ask. It's just where we lived."

"How many children in your family?" He'd talked about his travels, but never said much about his family.

"Two sisters. Three brothers."

"And all your brothers are miners?"

"Where I come from, there's nothing else to be. Every man over the age of sixteen works down the pit."

"But not you." Amanda leaned forward, intent on understanding what made Spencer Teague tick. "You left."

"Yes." There was a brief pause then he added flatly, "I hated it. I couldn't do it. The idea of spending the rest of my life, year in, year out, underground... Every morning I felt sick from the moment I went down until I was safe back on top again. My brother, Doug, said I'd get used to

it, that I'd stop getting that trapped feeling after a while, but I didn't want to get used to it. I didn't want that to be my life."

She nodded. "Where'd you go after you left home?"

"Lexington first. It was the nearest big city. I found a job at a grocer's, but I had to run when I was accused of robbing the till."

"Did you?"

"Not that time." Spence smiled slightly. "I wasn't a delinquent yet."

"What happened? What changed you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You mean what turned me into the criminal I am today? Bad company, I guess. I fell in with some other kids on their own and they showed me the ropes. I learned it was easier to get money by grift or gambling than by working."

Amanda didn't say anything.

"One thing led to another and," he held his hands open, "this is who I am."

"You've never been back to see your family?"

"They wouldn't welcome me with open arms."

"You know, I lost my parents when I was little and, although I love my aunt and uncle, if I had a chance to see my parents again, no matter what they were like, I'd want to. Family is so important."

"Not to me."

She frowned. "Don't you ever think about having one of your own? Settling down somewhere and having a real home?"

"Being trapped? No."

"Do you feel trapped here? You don't have to stay, you know. You can leave any time. You probably should."

His eyes drifted to Lydia, sleeping in her cradle. "Do you know what brought me here, what was in those dreams I told you about?" He nodded toward the baby. "Her. I know it sounds crazy, but a little girl in my dreams told me I had to find you, that you needed my help. I think it was her."

Amanda swallowed. A little chill swept through her. She didn't know what to say to his strange admission. Whether he'd had a vision or thought he had, the result was the same. He believed Lydia was his child. "You know you can't be a permanent part of her life. She's not yours. Even if she is by blood, she isn't. She can't be."

"I know." There was a long moment of silence broken only by the sizzling of the damp log on the fire. Spence set the book he was still holding on the table. "As soon as Travis is up and around again, I'll leave."

"It's best," she said softly. The thought of this place without Spence's dynamic presence lighting up the rooms seemed bleak. She rose, walked to the crib and lifted the sleeping baby.

Without being told what she needed, Spence stood, picked up the cradle and carried it upstairs for her. Amanda deposited Lydia carefully back in bed in her own room without waking her.

For a moment Spence stood beside her looking down at the child. "She's pretty special, isn't she?"

"She is."

"When she gets older, she's going to have bright red hair, just like her mother." Amanda felt the touch of his hand brushing the side of her head before he turned and walked from the room.

Chapter Seventeen

“Mr. Teague, your comments are most inappropriate.” Carrie Nordstrum’s words were stern, but her posture was yielding. At the beginning of the buggy ride her back had been ramrod straight, her chin parallel to the neatly folded, gloved hands in her lap. Now she leaned toward Spence, a smile quivering on her mouth, her eyelashes half-lowered over cornflower blue eyes.

“Miss Nordstrum, I am only noting the truth. Your hair *is* like spun gold, anyone would agree.” He took his cue from her little smile and reached out to touch several strands that had escaped her bun and trailed down the side of her face. “And your skin is like a porcelain doll’s,” he added, tracing his thumb over her jaw.

Carrie’s eyelids closed the rest of the way, signaling her acceptance of his touch. A soft breath exhaled from her parted lips. They were soft, full and completely kissable.

Spence accepted the offer. He pressed his mouth to hers lightly, exploring the terrain with gentle nibbles of his lips. When she didn’t push him away, he pressed more forcefully, slipping his arms around her slender waist and pulling her toward him. He handled her with the ease of many years of practice on countless women.

Because he was a healthy, horny male, his cock responded, swelling and yearning toward Carrie’s femininity. But because Amanda clouded and confused his mind now, he had trouble maintaining an interest in Miss Nordstrum’s charms. It was just as well a proper young lady like Carrie wasn’t going to let him do more than kiss and fondle her a little. Spence feared his erection would flag once more if put to the test. Amanda had ruined him for other women.

Sure enough, after a moment a white-gloved hand came up and pushed against his chest. "Please, Mr. Teague. This isn't seemly."

If Spence had really wanted to bed Miss Nordstrum, he would have said how she'd been in his mind since the moment he arrived in Reederville. He'd have added that her visits to Amanda after the baby's birth had given him hope that she might have come in part to see him. And he would have ended by assuring her that when he agreed to go riding with her today it hadn't been with the intention of kissing her, but her beauty had stolen his senses away and he couldn't resist her charms. He wouldn't have fucked her that afternoon, but sometime within a month, he could've seduced her into bed.

Spence was a master at weaving a spell of words to charm a woman into doing what he wanted. Hadn't he proven that with Amanda?

Amanda, who wouldn't leave his head, day or night.

Amanda, the most colossal mistake of his life.

But he didn't really want to cajole Carrie Nordstrum into having sex. He wanted to be touching and kissing Amanda in the long prairie grass under the bright, blue sky. So when Carrie pushed him away, Spence accepted her rejection.

She seemed disappointed. "Mr. Teague, do you still intend to travel to California when Mr. Baxter is well enough to resume his work?"

"Yes, I expect so." Spence gathered the reins and clucked at the Nordstrum's horse, which was contentedly grazing. More responsive than the recalcitrant Esther, the horse turned the buggy obediently toward home.

"That is a shame. I'd hoped you had come to appreciate the opportunities Kansas has to offer." She gestured at the gently rolling land on either side of them. "There're still a lot of acres for sale, Mr. Teague, plenty of land waiting to be tilled and planted."

Spencer shuddered inside. He didn't intend to set his hand to a plow for the rest of his life. "It is a lovely country," he agreed.

"My father would probably consider selling several established acres for a very reasonable price to the right man," Carrie hinted delicately.

Spence wondered why she had set her sights on him. There were plenty of bachelors in the vicinity of Reederville. Maybe she was attracted to him simply because he was a stranger.

“That is an attractive offer, but the truth is I’m a wandering man. The months I’ve spent here are the most I’ve settled in one place for a long time. I need to move on now.” Spence was amazed. He hadn’t told one lie in his explanation.

She smiled faintly and looked down at her folded hands in her lap. “I understand.” She paused, biting her lower lip then continued. “Have you ever thought about taking a wife with you on your travels? It must be exciting to see so much of the country, moving from place to place.”

Spence was sure she was picturing fancy hotels and restaurants and private train compartments. He smiled. “The reality is a bit different than you imagine I think. It’s a rather hard life, living out of a suitcase.”

“I see.” She fell silent after that and the ride grew awkward.

He was relieved to reach the farm and bid her goodbye, probably for the last time. He gave her a quick peck on the lips. “Thank you for the ride, Miss Nordstrum. I’m sorry if I’ve misled you concerning my intentions.”

She didn’t answer, but took the reins in hand while he climbed down from the buggy. He watched plumes of dust kick up behind the buggy’s wheels as it rolled away.

“Did you have a pleasant ride?” A familiar voice dripping with sarcasm came from behind him.

He turned to find Amanda standing on the front porch, arms folded, gazing down at him disapprovingly.

“Yes. It was lovely.” He sauntered up the steps to face her.

“How could you take advantage of that woman, letting her think you’re going to stay in Reederville when you know you’re leaving?”

“How do you know I took advantage of her?” Spence countered, moving toward her.

“Because someone as particular as Carrie Nordstrum wouldn’t submit to a strange man’s kiss unless she thought there was hope of marriage.” She uncrossed her arms and nervously smoothed her apron down over her dress. “That woman is on the prowl for a fiancé, not a fling.”

“Maybe you don’t know Miss Nordstrum as well as you think you do. Maybe she likes kissing strangers and a fling is exactly what she wants.” It would do Amanda good to imagine he had fish of his own to fry.

“So you admit you’ve been kissing her.” She glared at him. “I knew you hadn’t really changed. I knew it!”

“Whoa! Who said I had changed? And what does that mean, anyway? Changed from what into what?”

Spence stepped even closer, crowding her, maybe trying to intimidate her a little. “You think you know me? Who I am or what I’m like?” He pointed at the house, his voice rising. “And do you think you know everything about your perfect Travis—all his secret thoughts and fantasies? I may be a sinner, but he’s no saint. Darlin’, there’s no way you can contain everything a person *is* in a neat little box with a label. People are a lot of different things at once and life is messy.”

Spence brushed past her, his shoulder bumping against hers as he stalked into the house. He thrilled with righteous indignation, feeling like he’d been reined in for months and was suddenly let loose. He’d done an admirable job up to now, taking whatever Amanda dished out and containing his temper because he’d earned her wrath. But he was done with that now. Screw her and her holier-than-thou attitude and her control over his life. Spencer Teague was nobody’s doormat.



Amanda stood open-mouthed, the words she’d been about to say drying on her tongue as the door swung shut behind him.

He was wrong. Dead wrong! And she was right. She was the injured party here and always had been. Where did he get the nerve to twist the

facts around and accuse her of pigeon-holing people, especially when what she said was true? Spence *was* an untrustworthy, deceitful, selfish, despicable man and Travis a sweet, patient, loving and generous one. It couldn't be any plainer.

He'd flown into a rage because she was right. A liar hates the truth. She was right to speak on Carrie's behalf. The girl might be annoying, catty and snobbish, but she was naïve about Spencer's intentions. It was Amanda's duty to intercept Teague before he could hurt another innocent woman.

Filled with a righteous certainty that God and all that was just, holy or moral was on her side, Amanda strode toward the chicken coop to tend her flock.



Upstairs, Travis heard raised voices floating from the porch to his open bedroom window. Amanda and Spence had moved beyond short-tempered snapping to full-on arguing. It had only been a matter of time. The two of them had been oil and water since Spence arrived, but recently the tension between them had been building. Whenever they were both in Travis's room, he could feel almost palpable vibrations in the air.

This situation couldn't last. Spence would be moving on soon. Travis had to get back on his feet and capable of working again.

He swung his legs off the mattress, clutching the bedpost for support before balancing on his weak legs. He took a few tottering steps across the floor toward the window. He'd been working on walking every day since the casts had been removed, but this was the first day he'd been able to stand completely on his own and take a few steps.

Just then a fit of coughing tore through him. He almost fell as he turned and grabbed for the foot of the bed, doubled over with the force of his coughs. He covered his mouth with a hand and when he pulled it away, flecks of poisonous yellow mucus were spattered on it. Travis

scowled in disgust, limping along the edge of the bed to the nightstand to get a handkerchief.

His legs felt as insubstantial as water. He sagged down on the edge of the bed, exhausted. Sweat trickled down the sides of his face. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

“Hey, I heard you coughing. Are you okay?”

He looked up. Spence stood framed in the doorway.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” Travis snapped.

“Were you walking just now?”

“A little.”

“That’s great.” Spence walked into the room. “You’ll be back to yourself in no time.”

“What were you and Amanda fighting about?” Travis asked bluntly.

He paused a moment. “Carrie Nordstrum. Your wife questions my intentions toward her.”

“And what are they? Your intentions?” He was curious. Was it possible Spence planned to settle in Reederville?

The other man smiled crookedly. “I don’t have any and I told her so. I’ll be on my way soon. It wouldn’t be right to lead her on.”

Travis nodded. He coughed again and wiped his mouth with the handkerchief. “I imagine you’re tired of working in my fields. If there’s anything I can do for you in return... I can give you some traveling money at least and if you write me with your address in California, I’ll send more later.”

Spence frowned and waved a dismissive hand. “No. I told you I’m happy to help out.”

“Why?” Travis looked into his eyes. It was a question that had bothered him for a while. Family was one thing, but this man had gone above and beyond what one could expect from even the closest of relatives.

Spence looked at him for a second then turned away, staring out the open bedroom door. “Maybe because I wasn’t there for my own family when I was needed. I should have taken care of my mother and sisters. My brothers had families of their own to earn for. I was the youngest, the one they counted on to fill daddy’s shoes after he died and see that ma and the girls were provided for. But I left. Maybe I’m trying to make up for that. I don’t know.” He shrugged.

There was more to the story, something Spence was leaving out, but Travis accepted his explanation. “Well, anyway, thanks for all you’ve done.”

Spence glared at him. “Please, you’ve gotta stop thanking me.” His voice was sharp, but a moment later his frown vanished. “Sorry. I’m feeling ornery today. What I mean to say was ‘you’re welcome’. Hey, how’d you like to come downstairs for supper today?”

Travis smiled. “You have no idea how much I’d like to go downstairs—or anyplace besides this room. If I never see these four walls again it will be too soon.”

“All right. You get some rest now and when it’s time, I’ll help you navigate the stairs.” He turned to leave.

“Spence?”

“Yeah?”

“Glad you happened to be passing through when you did, not only because of all your help, but also because you’ve been a real friend. It was good having you around these past months.”

Spence’s mouth twisted into something that looked more like a grimace than a smile. “You, too,” he muttered then was gone.

Travis sighed and collapsed back on the mattress, lifting his aching legs up onto the bed. He never quite knew what Spence was thinking and that mysterious nature reminded him of his brother more than ever. He might never see Stan again, but Spence felt almost like a brother. Hopefully he wouldn’t disappear out west and never write.

Spence and Amanda managed to avoid each other the rest of the afternoon. He found things to do in the barn. She kept close to the house. But as she was preparing supper, she heard the back door slam and a moment later he came into the kitchen.

“Milk’s in the pantry,” he said brusquely as he walked past her to the sink to wash up.

“Thank you,” she replied tartly, taking the lid off the pot of boiling potatoes. Steam rose into her face. She waved it away and stepped back. After waiting until he’d finished at the sink and was heading out of the kitchen, she lifted the heavy pot with a pair of holders and carried it toward the sink.

Halfway across the room she stumbled on a warped floorboard. The boiling water sloshed over the rim onto her hand. She yelled and dropped the pot, dancing backward as hot water splashed everywhere and boiled potatoes rolled across the floor. Pain washed through her and she rushed toward the sink, almost tripping on a potato.

“Jesus, are you all right?” Spence was by her side in an instant, pulling up her wet sleeve to reveal reddened skin. He started pumping water over the burn.

Amanda stuck her forearm and hand under the cold water flowing from the pump. “It’ll be all right.”

“Is there any ointment for this?” He stopped pumping and took her wet arm in his hands, examining her wrist.

Amanda grimaced at the pain. “Bee balm. On the shelf in the pantry.”

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, he was rummaging in the pantry off the kitchen and returned, unscrewing the lid and scooping ointment out of the jar. He smeared it everywhere her skin was red. The fragrant ointment soothed the back of her hand and wrist.

Spence turned her wrist and rubbed more balm on her inner arm. As his fingers skated over her pulse point, Amanda held her breath. Her burns smarted, but weren’t nearly as painful as his touch was pleasurable. She wasn’t really even burned on the inside of her wrist.

However, she didn't tell him that, simply stood silently and relished the feeling of his strong, callused hands moving over her skin. Up. Down. Smoothing sweet, honey-scented balm along her tendons.

Her eyes almost closed. She felt like purring. But when his fingers roamed down onto her palms and began rotating little circles there, her eyes flew open. She stared at him fondling her hand, stroking it erotically as if it were another more intimate part of her body, but she didn't snatch it away.

Spence kept his eyes focused on her hand. It was as if the spell would be broken if their eyes met and they'd have to acknowledge what he was doing. He bent his head, brought her wrist to his mouth and kissed it. His lips lingered on her pulse point then moved to the palm of her hand. His mouth was warm, soft and tickled her flesh.

Her fingers curled reflexively, as his kisses sent waves of arousal through her body that contrasted with the pain of the burn. Her senses were so heightened, she could hardly tell where pain ended and pleasure began. For a long moment she submitted to his fingers stroking her arm, his mouth nuzzling her palm. Then, just as she was about to finally protest and pull away, Spence let go of her hand.

He straightened and lifted his gaze to her face, but not her eyes. His focus was on her lips. His own mouth parted slightly and he leaned in slowly. There was plenty of time for her to stop it, but she didn't. Her eyes closed and she waited to feel his mouth cover hers.

His lips touched, light as swan's down. His hands cupped her face on either side holding it steady. Angling his head, he opened and closed his mouth gently over her lips—little nibbling kisses that made her fingers and toes clench.

She leaned into his hands, her body yearning toward him. Her hands slid up his chest to grip his shoulders and her mouth opened beneath his.

His hands dropped away from her face. They went around her back and slid down the length, settling at her waist and pulling her tight

against him. He kissed her more deeply still, his wet, warm tongue searching between her lips.

She twined hers around it and her hands went from his shoulders to the back of his neck, holding him to her. Rising up on her toes, she stretched her body against his. Her breasts were smashed against his chest and they tingled as her milk let down, aroused by the stimulation.

For several brief moments, Amanda didn't think at all, she merely responded to sensation and surrendered to her body's needs. Her mouth mashed hungrily against his, her tongue swirling into his mouth, touching him, tasting him. Her fingers delved into the soft hair at the nape of his neck and clutched it. Her body arched into his.

He gripped handfuls of her skirt, pulling her groin up tight against his. His erection was a huge, hard bulge between them. It rubbed her crotch through layers of bloomers, petticoat and skirt and she wanted more.

It had been months since she'd been physical with Travis and her body betrayed her now. She let Spence thrust against her, stimulating her sex. Her hips arched forward to meet the insistent pressure.

A distant sound intruded on her consciousness and Amanda's closed eyes flew open. It was a quiet rasping cough floating down from upstairs. She unlaced her fingers from Spence's hair, broke away from his kiss and pushed her hands against his chest, knocking him away from her, breaking his grip on her buttocks. "No!" She hit his hard chest with her palms as she stepped back. "What are you doing? What do you think you're doing?"

Spence let go when she protested. His hands dropped to his sides and clenched. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes you did. You meant to do exactly what you did." She crossed her arms over her chest protectively. "What is the matter with you?"

"I wasn't the only one kissing." His voice was low and angry. "You can stop laying all the blame on me."

She had no answer to that so she did the only thing she could think of to do. She slapped him across the face, hard. His head snapped to the

side and almost immediately a red handprint marked his cheek. “You’re unbelievable. First you take advantage of that Nordstrum woman then you try to play games with me.”

“It’s not a game.” Spence glared at her. “You know it isn’t. There’s something between us. Trying to pretend it’s not there isn’t working anymore.”

“Then you should go.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you can’t keep your hands and your...your mouth off me!”

“Keep your voice down. He’ll hear.” He glanced at the kitchen door then back to her.

Her lips compressed in a tight line and her jaw clenched as she tried to find words to fight Teague. She wanted him off the farm, out of their lives, before everything blew up. “Maybe I am physically attracted to you,” she finally whispered. “But I don’t love you. I could never love a man like you. There’s nothing good or decent about you. You’re worthless.”

“Never said I wasn’t,” he said lightly, but something flickered in his eyes as though her dart had struck a mark. She was glad. She wanted to hurt him as much as he’d once hurt her.

There was a moment of dead silence then he cleared his throat. “Well then, guess I’d better get my worthless ass upstairs and help your sainted husband down to dinner. He wanted to surprise you tonight by coming to the dining room, so try and act surprised.” He walked past her from the room.

She stood there feeling a whirlpool of emotions swirling inside her. The self-righteous hatred she’d once felt for Spence was diminished now by the realization she’d played her own part in what transpired between them—even back in Kansas City. The pure admiration and deep affection she felt for Travis seemed colorless compared to the strength of her fiery reactions, both positive and negative, to Spence. Her perfect home with husband and child seemed to be collapsing around her. Amanda no longer knew what she felt or thought or believed about anything. Her

body pulled her one way, her mind another and what her heart felt she couldn't begin to figure out.

But she did know one thing: sitting down to a meal with Travis and Spence, especially after what had just happened, was going to be the most uncomfortable dining experience of her life.



Spencer paused on the stairs halfway between one landing and the other. He needed to breathe and clear his head before he faced Travis. God, he'd never meant for this to get so complicated. With every good intention in the world, he'd come here to apologize to Amanda and fix what he'd done wrong and now he seemed to have made things worse. His life was spiraling out of his control and he hated the intense emotions that filled him.

No longer skimming along on the surface of life, he'd somehow managed to get his ankle caught in a trap of caring for other people and now he was being dragged under.

With a long exhale, he resumed his ascent up the stairs and knocked lightly on Travis's door before entering the room.

"How are you doing?" he asked automatically, while his inner voice whispered, *Hey, guess what, I just kissed your wife. Would've fucked her, too, if she'd let me.*

"All right." Travis was sitting on the edge of the bed, his face white as milk. He looked anything but all right.

Spence hurried to his side and helped him rise. His arm supported his back and he pulled Travis's arm around his neck hauling him to his feet. Even reduced by illness and fever, Travis was a big man. They swayed together like a pair of Saturday night drunks while Travis got his balance then shuffled slowly across the floor to the hall.

At the top of the stairs, Spence hesitated. "Wait a minute." The last thing he wanted was to lose control of and have Travis tumble down the stairs with no banister. Placing Travis between him and the wall so the

other man could keep balance with one hand, they started down the stairs. Carefully, painstaking step by step, they made it to the bottom of the staircase.

Travis was gasping for breath and had to rest. Spence could hear his breath rattling in and out of his lungs. It sounded alarming and made him wonder if Dr. Litton knew what the hell he was doing. Whatever elixir he'd been giving Travis clearly wasn't doing anything useful. "Better?" he asked after the other man's breathing had eased.

He nodded and they resumed walking to the dining room table. Unhooking Travis's arm from around his neck, Spence eased him down onto a chair.

Amanda came out of the kitchen. "Travis! What a wonderful surprise!" She moved around the table and bent to kiss his cheek.

He looked up at her. "Spence already told you he was bringing me down, didn't he? You're not much of an actress."

"Yes. It's still a nice surprise though." She smiled and brushed his hair back from his forehead, checking his temperature as she did so. She kissed his lips before straightening.

Travis held onto her hand a moment before letting it go.

Spence felt a surge of irritation as he watched their loving exchange. He turned away and took his seat across the table from Travis.

"Let me get the meal." Amanda hurried out of the room and was soon trotting back and forth with table settings and dishes of food. Spence considered helping her, but was still too angry to see her alone in the kitchen even for a few seconds.

"Smells delicious." Travis leaned toward the tureen of stew and inhaled the steam rising from it.

"It's just stew again." She gathered their plates and dished up mashed potatoes and stew. "But I did make a dried apple pie for dessert."

Spence muttered his thanks as he accepted his plate. He picked up his fork, grateful for the distraction of food. He didn't plan to look up from his plate for the rest of the meal.

“Why don’t we have a prayer first?” Travis said.

Spence set his fork back down.

“Of course,” Amanda said. “Wonderful idea.”

If she said “wonderful” in that fake, chipper tone one more time Travis was going to know something was up. Following their example, Spence folded his hands.

“Lord, thank you for your blessings and the bounty of our table. Thank you for helping us through this difficult time by sending a friend to help out. May we use our gifts of health and prosperity to the greater glory of Your name. Amen.” Travis beamed at Amanda and Spence then reached for his glass of milk.

What health? What prosperity? You don’t have either. Spence thought. *What “friend”?* He imagined how Travis would hate him if he knew the truth and his appetite fled. He picked up his fork and poked at the food on his plate.



Travis wasn’t really hungry, but he tried to eat some of what Amanda had prepared. She’d worked so hard on it. As he chewed a mouthful of potatoes and gravy, he noticed that neither Spence nor Amanda was eating much either. Like a three-year-old, Spence was creating a sort of dam of mashed potatoes to hold the gravy back from his piece of bread and butter. Amanda stabbed a few bites of carrot and peas then sat quietly gazing at her fork.

The tension in the room was thick. Travis realized that both Spence and Amanda had rarely been in his room with him at the same time. He hadn’t realized until this afternoon’s blow up that their dislike for each other had escalated this much.

“Good meal,” he commented, trying to thaw the silence.

“Thank you,” Amanda replied.

Spence was now eating his food mechanically, working his way through everything on his plate, but without any evidence of enjoyment. He obviously wanted the meal finished so he could be excused.

Travis looked at Amanda in time to see her dart a glance at Spence. Her jaw was tight and her lips thinned in disapproval. Her attention snapped back to her own plate and she finally ate the forkful of vegetables.

Again Travis looked at Spence...then at Amanda. His gaze shot back and forth between them as a realization began to unfold deep inside him. Maybe it had been there all along and he was only now ready to admit it. Like a rumbling freight engine the idea grew louder and took on mass and shape until it burst into Travis's mind, clear, certain and inarguable. Spence and Amanda were attracted to each other; that was why they appeared to hate each other so much.

He examined Spence's frown, Amanda's tense mouth and without any more proof than that he was convinced he was right. How could he have been so blind for so long? Spence may be Amanda's cousin, but only a second cousin and they'd never met before his appearance in Reederville. He was a stranger to her; a handsome, slightly dangerous and therefore intriguing stranger. And Amanda was beautiful. Travis gazed at his wife. Who wouldn't fall in love with her?

They were two healthy young people living in the same house and fighting their growing desire and Travis was the ignorant cripple lying up in the bedroom thinking everything was fine. Then a new thought dawned. Had they fought their desires or succumbed to them? Maybe the sudden increased tension was because something had happened. Oh God! His stomach rolled as the possibility of betrayal swept over him and his eyes shot back and forth between them.

What should he do with this sudden knowledge? He couldn't confront them with vague suspicions and unfounded beliefs. And even if he had undeniable proof, he didn't know if he wanted to bring this situation into the light. Nothing would ever be the same if he did. What he wanted was

to have his health improve so he could win back Amanda's love and Spencer could move on to wherever he was going next.

Travis wiped his napkin across his mouth and placed it in his lap. There was absolutely nothing he could do right now but get through this awkward meal as quickly as possible.

The ache in his neck, which was constant now and worse since he'd begun having coughing fits that tensed his neck and shoulders, flared into a sharper pain. Travis reached over his shoulder and kneaded his neck at the base of his skull.

Amanda looked up. "Are you having a pain?"

He was sick of her inquiring about his health. It felt like he hadn't talked about anything but his physical condition for months. "It's okay, just a little sore." She needn't know that the pain was always there. "But, I don't really feel like eating. I'm sorry. After all the preparation you've put into it."

Amanda waved his apology away. "That's all right. Do you want to go back upstairs and rest?"

He nodded.

Spence set down his fork and rose. He came around the table and helped him to his feet.

Travis couldn't stand the thought of leaning on this man, this possible betrayer. He looked into his face. Spence stared back, inscrutable as always and Travis wondered what secrets were hidden behind his concerned blue eyes. His stomach lurched again as a mental picture of the pair of them together...kissing...maybe worse, flashed in his mind.

Grabbing hold of the edge of the table, he pulled away. "Let me try to do it myself."

"You don't even have a crutch," Amanda protested.

Travis took a wobbly step and another, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other without falling and refusing to allow any more fevered imaginings to cloud his brain. One more step and he started to

sway. Spence was right beside him, grabbing his arm. Amanda flanked him on the other side, putting her arm around his waist. Travis felt as weak and dependant as Lydia and just as liable to burst into tears of frustration.

As if cued by his thought, the baby sleeping upstairs began to wail. Muffled, angry cries drifted down the stairs.

Amanda looked across Travis to Spence. "Do you have him?"

"Yes."

She moved ahead of the two men up the stairs to get the baby.

Travis was left leaning on the man who was in love with his wife. "I can do this," he gritted through his teeth, trying to move away from Spence and hobble toward the stairs.

"I know." There was no trace of condescension in his tone. "But I'll be right behind you, all right?"

Like an arthritic old man, Travis slowly climbed the stairs.

Spence followed, only occasionally steadying him with a hand on his arm.

By the time Travis reached his bed, he was drenched with sweat and the edge of his vision darkened. He sat heavily on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. A moment later he felt Spence unlacing his shoes and removing them.

"Don't." Travis pulled his feet away, opened his eyes and looked down at the other man. "I don't need your help anymore." He held Spence's gaze and added gravely, "Neither does Amanda. We don't need you."

With no more words than that his message was clear. Knowledge of Travis's newfound understanding passed silently between the two men with no accusations made.

Spence nodded. His gaze lowered to the floor and he rose to his feet. "All right." He stood a few seconds longer. "Goodbye then." He walked from the room.

Travis began the slow, painstaking process of undressing, putting on his nightshirt and getting into bed. He pretended to sleep when Amanda

came in to put out the lamp and to kiss him good night. He continued to lie sleepless as hours ticked past.

Late at night, long past midnight, he heard faint noises coming from downstairs. He lay quiet and listened to the sound of Spence moving around the living room then walking to the front door. The door closed with a sharp click.

Travis imagined Spence walking the dark road all the way to Reederville. He pictured him on the stagecoach heading out of town then on a train headed west. He saw Spence all the way into his uncertain future and despite everything that he knew or suspected, Travis wished him well.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning when Amanda realized Spence was gone she was both relieved and angry. He'd done the right thing by leaving. It was what she'd told him to do and yet she couldn't help feeling enraged that he'd deserted her without a word—again. Without even a note this time.

On the heels of her relief and anger came dismay as she suddenly realized how dependant she'd become on him to take care of so many things. That morning she fed Lydia and left her in Travis's care while she went out to the barn to tend to the animals.

Travis seemed unsurprised by his departure. He simply nodded when she told him Spence had left. "I suspect he's been anxious to move on for a while now. We'll make do without him. I'll be back on my feet soon." He jiggled the crying baby in one arm as he looked at Amanda. "We'll be all right."

The comment sounded almost like a question. "Yes. We will," she agreed firmly. She leaned to kiss and hug him. "Hold her up a little higher," she instructed as Lydia continued to yell. "She doesn't like lying on her back. She wants to be upright and see everything."

It was true. The baby's strong neck already supported her head. Even when Amanda placed her on her stomach to sleep, Lydia lifted her head and tried to look around.

When Travis changed her position, she calmed immediately. Amanda stroked the soft reddish-brown fuzz growing in on top of her daughter's head. "I'll be back soon," she promised then left.

As she pitched hay, filled mangers and water troughs and milked the cow, Amanda thought about Spence. "He could have at least told me he

was leaving,” she complained to Millie as she squeezed her teat. “Given me some warning and said goodbye. Didn’t he even want to see Lydia one last time?”

The cow lowed and shifted as she tugged too hard.

“It’s for the best. He had to go sometime.” She tried to picture herself and Travis resuming their life as it was before Spence came, with Travis whole and healthy again. Then she added Lydia to the picture. It was going to be wonderful. They would be a happy family and eventually Amanda wouldn’t even remember the few months that Spencer Teague had stayed with them. Someday maybe she could even forget he might be Lydia’s daddy.

“I hated him anyway.” She took the milk bucket from beneath the cow and hung the milking stool back on the wall. She poured the cats their portion of the foaming milk and watched them push for position. The big, striped tom dominated the pan leaving the others to array themselves around him as best they could.

Amanda frowned at the overbearing barn cat and pushed him away from the milk with her foot. “You’re too fat. Leave some for the others.”

The cat looked up at her. His black pupils dilated to fill most of his yellow eyes, giving him the innocent air of a kitten.

Amanda scowled at him. “I know your type. Think you can barge in and take whatever you want. Selfish, that’s what you are.” As she walked away, the incorrigible tom instantly shouldered his way back to the milk pan.

As she moved through the day, accomplishing as many tasks as she could around the farm while caring for Lydia and Travis, she thought about how Spence had weaseled his way into her life. She’d never meant to come to depend on him as she had over these past months and she had certainly never meant to begin to almost like him.

That evening as she sat quietly by Travis’s bedside mending a pair of pants, Amanda had the crazy urge to tell him everything. It would feel so good to lay the truth out for Travis. They could rebuild their marriage on a ground of trust instead of a bed of lies. But considering the

repercussions, she knew she could never reveal her secret. It might ease her conscience a little, but it would only hurt him.

She lay her sewing aside. “Would you like me to read to you for a bit?”

Travis opened his eyes and drew a rattling breath, which set him coughing again. “Yes, that’d be nice.”

Amanda returned to their old favorite, Kipling’s *Twice Told Tales*, and soon transported them to the exotic, spicy land of India. But Travis’s rough breathing was an ominous backdrop to the stories. She was worried and wondered if she should ride to town tomorrow and fetch Dr. Litton again.

But later when she closed the book and rose to check his temperature, Amanda realized she might need to go for Dr. Litton immediately. Travis’s forehead was slick with sweat and hot as an oven. He must be cooled down immediately.

As she rushed from the room to get cold water,, Lydia started crying for her next meal. Amanda had no choice but to ignore the baby and go make a mustard plaster for Travis’s chest and get cool water to bathe his face and body. She berated herself for taking so long to think of making a poultice. She should have noticed sooner he was getting so bad.

While she moved around the kitchen, Lydia’s wail called her like a siren. Her breasts leaked in response to the baby’s cries. Amanda wondered if it was too late for home remedies. Maybe she should abandon them, saddle Esther and race for the doctor. She had no idea what was the best thing to do. She’d had no experience caring for sick people and didn’t know if Travis’s cough was as serious as it sounded. Dr. Litton hadn’t seemed too concerned on his last visit, but then Travis hadn’t been this bad before. But how could she leave her baby hungry and wailing while she made the trip to town and back?

For one moment, Amanda allowed herself to stand still in the middle of the kitchen, fighting the urge to sob or panic. The teakettle shrieked on the stove, Lydia wailed in her cradle and a deep, wet cough rattled from Travis’s chest.

Closing her eyes tight, she prayed to God for the strength to handle everything, to make the right decision, to heal her husband, to give her just a little help.

Then she opened her eyes and went back to concocting the poultice for Travis's chest.



Spence wished he'd had the balls to go up to Amanda's room and take one last look at Lydia before he had left. He hadn't realized he'd become so attached to the kid. He'd only left the farm a couple of days ago and already he missed her...and her mother. Travis, too, come right down to it. Jesus, how had things gotten so fucked up?

He tried to settle himself more comfortably on the hard seat of the train compartment. The back was too erect and the seat stuffed stiff with horsehair. There was no comfortable position possible. He'd never minded this before. He loved boarding a train, the sensation of the engine pulling away from the station whisking him off to a new town, a new adventure. Now traveling seemed exhausting. Racing toward an unexplored destination felt lonely instead of exciting.

Tucking his jacket behind his back and neck, Spence crossed his arms over his chest, tilted his hat over his eyes to try to catch a few minutes of sleep. But the rocking of the railroad car, which usually lulled him into a stupor, did not bring him rest this afternoon.

"Mama, no!" a little voice shrieked. "I have to go potty now!"

"He took my horsie. Make him give it back," another childish voice chimed in with the first in screeching disharmony.

"Children, sit still. Get out from under the seat, Samuel and give Charity her horse back." A frazzled feminine voice struggled to maintain calm, but sounded ready to scream.

"Mother. I'm trying to read my book," an older child complained. "Can't they be quiet and take naps?"

Spence slid to the edge of his seat and looked down the aisle at the family sitting halfway up the compartment. All he could see of the mother was the back of her hat, dark hair straggling out from under the brim and the top of her baby's head, resting on her shoulder. She leaned down to address whichever child sat beside her. A moment later a pixie face popped up above the seat and small fingers clutched the back as the same child stared at Spence. Dark eyes blinked and regarded him with interest.

He wagged his fingers in response and the child disappeared below the seat again.

Across from the mother and the two smaller children sat a boy of about twelve, frowning as he tried to concentrate on his book. A little girl sitting next to him kept jostling his arm as she twisted around in the seat. Her older brother finally slammed the book shut in disgust and stared out the window.

Spence saw the woman's hand offering a small stuffed horse to the girl, who took it and clutched it to her chest. She kissed the toy pony then stuck out her tongue at her brother, Samuel in the seat across from her.

"How long before we get to Bixby?" The older brother at the window turned toward his mother. "Will we have to wait at the station or will Dad be waiting there for us?"

"I'm not sure, Peter. Please, would you pick up your sister's horse?"

He sighed extravagantly and bent to pick up the horse from the floor. He shoved it at her hard, knocking it into her chest. The little girl seized the horse again and went through the cuddling and kissing process all over again. Peter rolled his eyes and turned back to the window again.

Spence thought the kid was a little shit and needed a whap upside the head. The boy reminded him of himself at that age, a bad-tempered little pissant.

Young Samuel poked his head up over the seat again, checking on Spence. This time Spence pulled a face to entertain him.

The boy stared then dropped down below the seat again, but was back in a few seconds for another look. He laughed this time when Spence swelled out his cheeks and crossed his eyes.

He entertained the kid to help the mother out for a little while, before sliding back toward the window, signaling an end to the game. Once more he drew his hat down over his eyes and tried to sleep. This time he dozed a little and woke with a start when the train pulled into the next junction.

Spence noticed a man waiting on the platform as the train came to a stop. He paced alongside the track, scanning the windows of the cars, looking for familiar faces. Spence figured it must be the father of the family in his compartment.

The mother of the little brood of children stood and tried to gather together her possessions. She held the baby on one hip and slung a bag over her other shoulder. It banged into the side of Charity's head as the little girl clung to her mother's skirts trying to get her attention. Elder brother Peter gathered his book and another bag then pushed past his mother and smaller siblings, heading for the front of the car.

"Peter, wait. Help me." His mother called, but he was gone.

Little Samuel scooted past her trying to run after his big brother, but she grabbed him by the back of the collar, pulling him up short. Meanwhile Charity was sobbing loudly and rubbing her head where the bag had hit her.

Spence decided it was time to intervene. He walked up the aisle. "Can I help you?"

The woman turned around. Her face was pink and sweating. Her hair straggled down from its hairpins. The baby clinging to her chose that moment to burst into tears of sympathy with little Charity and the noise was deafening.

"Can I carry something or hold one of your young ones' hands?" Spence asked politely.

"Oh." The woman only hesitated a moment. Her eyes quickly assessed him and evidently found him trustworthy. "Thank you."

A second later, Spence was gripping two sweaty little fists. He walked down the aisle flanked by Charity on one side and Samuel on the other. The boy dragged on his hand trying to hurry him to the exit. The girl was so stunned at being handed off to a stranger that she forgot to cry and stared up at Spence.

He followed the children's mother through the door to the folding stairs leading down to the station platform.

A man waited there. He swept the woman, baby, bag and all into his arms before her feet could hit the platform. He hugged her tight, knocking her hat even more askew and kissed her soundly on the mouth.

"Oh Charlie!" the woman cried when he released her from his kiss. She threw her free arm around him and hugged him hard, while the baby between them struggled and cried some more.

Spence descended the steps with the two little ones and continued to hold their hands tight, although Samuel struggled to break free, until their parents were ready to notice them.

"Don't forget your packages," he teased, guiding the little ones in front of him and toward the embracing couple. He let go and Charity shot like a magnet toward her mother while Samuel gravitated to his father.

In the background, Spence noticed Peter walking at the edge of the platform examining the town of Bixby. He didn't look impressed.

"Thank you, sir. You were a great help." The woman smiled at him. Her husband looked at Spence curiously.

"No problem, ma'am. You looked like you were a little overwhelmed."

"I was." Her smile grew wider. "But not anymore, now I've got Charlie back." She looked up at her husband and squeezed his hand tight.

The man smiled back at her then nodded an acknowledgement at Spence. "Thank you." He turned around and called, "Peter, come over here, son and help with the bags. You should be a better help to your mother than this."

Peter sauntered up, a sullen twist to his mouth. "It doesn't look like much."

"Well, it's home now, boy, so I expect you'll get used to it. Now I want you to go over there to the porter and make sure he's got all the bags you brought on the train. Can you do that?"

"I guess." The boy sighed.

"I'm counting on you." The father caught his son's eyes and regarded him gravely, sending a message. "Do you understand me?"

Peter stopped sulking and straightened up. "All right." He walked off to do as his father had bid.

The man turned to Spence and offered his hand to shake. "Thanks again for helping my wife. It's not easy handling a passel of little ones."

His wife chimed in. "Do you have any children of your own, Mr. ...?"

"Teague. Spencer Teague," he replied then paused a moment before answering. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I have a little girl. She's almost a month old."

"Oh, how sweet! They're darling before they start to talk." The woman smiled then turned back to her husband.

Spence could see it was time for him to leave. Besides, the train would be departing soon and he had to get back on it. "Well, goodbye and good luck." He nodded at the parents and winked at Samuel before climbing the stairs to the train.

He returned to his seat and slid over to the window to watch the little family group as they moved down the platform to their pile of luggage. Spence noticed the father checking that everything was there without letting his son see him do so. The father ruffled Peter's hair and patted him on the back. Spence imagined he was telling him what a good job he'd done.

His stomach knotted as the little girl, Charity, lifted her arms and her daddy swept her up in a big hug. Tears prickled his eyes and he brushed a hand impatiently across them. As the train began its slow pull out of

the station, the family on the platform receded. Spence craned his neck to look back at them one last time.

He thought about the woman struggling to manage those kids on her own and it reminded him of Amanda trying to take care of a farm, a sick husband and new baby by herself. Spence realized his service to the Baxters wasn't finished, not until Travis was fully well and able to take over again. He'd convinced himself he was doing the right thing removing himself from temptation, but now realized he'd been running from responsibility once more. Whether Travis wanted his help or not, he needed it and he was going to get it.

Spence bolted from his seat and grabbed his bag from the overhead compartment. He ran to the front of the compartment and the swaying platform between cars. Already the train had gathered speed, moving past the station and open ground lay on either side.

Without hesitation, he jumped, hit the dirt in a crouch, lost his balance and fell to his knees, hands braced against the ground. He got up and dusted himself off then retrieved the bag he'd dropped before heading back to the station to buy a return ticket to Kansas City.

Chapter Nineteen

Amanda Baxter's husband was dying. Dr. Litton had told her gently there was nothing more to be done. Travis's every rasping breath could be his last. The downward turn in his health had been swift, his breathing growing steadily more labored with each passing hour. She sat by his bedside, holding his hand and listening to each labored inhale and exhale.

Ladies from the church were there in shifts, taking care of Lydia and carrying up steaming pans of water to humidify the room. They stopped changing poultices on Travis's chest after the doctor had said it was no longer worthwhile, but the women brought cool compresses for Amanda to bathe his face and body. They brought food and cajoled her into eating a little bit. When it was necessary, they brought Lydia to be nursed.

Amanda was hardly aware of the ladies bustling around her. She couldn't stop looking at Travis's pale face against the pillow. His eyelashes were stark against his white cheeks and she wondered if his eyes would ever open again and look on her with recognition. The thought of never getting a chance to say goodbye was frightening. It had all happened so quickly. She wasn't prepared.

It had been two days since Travis's decline had spurred her to fetch Dr. Litton in the dead of night. It seemed like two years. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't sat here beside his bed, holding his hand and watching his chest rise and fall.

She was exhausted, but wouldn't go rest in the other room despite the women's assurances they would wake her if anything changed. Her chin dipped to her chest as she nodded off, but she woke with a start

when there was a change in Travis's breathing. Her eyes flew open to find him looking back at her. "You're awake!"

He smiled faintly. "Hello." His voice sounded like rusty metal.

Amanda poured a cup of water from the pitcher, held his head up and put the cup to his lips.

Travis managed to swallow a little then lifted his hand, signaling he'd had enough.

She lowered his head to the pillow again and stroked his hair away from his forehead.

"Lydia?"

"You want to see her? I'll get her." She bent to kiss him then went downstairs to get the baby from whoever was tending her. Carrie Nordstrum sat on the sofa, holding the crying infant in her arms, trying to distract her with a rattle. She looked relieved when Amanda entered the room. "I can't seem to please her," she said, handing her the baby.

"Thank you for taking care of her." She held Lydia to her shoulder, rubbing her back and the child calmed. "All of you have done so much and been such a comfort to me. Thank you."

Tears shone in Carrie's eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispered as if Travis had already passed.

Amanda nodded and turned away. There was nothing more to say.

She brought the baby upstairs and was relieved to find Travis still awake. His shadowed eyes lit up as they rested on Lydia, but he didn't reach for her as he would usually do.

Holding the baby so he could see her, she rattled on about the most recent clever thing Lydia had done. She talked to entertain Travis and to distract them both from the knowledge that he would probably not live to see Lydia take her first step or speak her first words.

Amanda kept a smile on her face and a cheerful tone in her voice, although her heart was breaking to see him struggle for breath. But finally she could think of nothing else to say and fell silent.

He appeared ready to fall asleep again. His eyelids were half closed when suddenly he opened them and looked at Amanda. "Love you," he croaked.

"I love you, too." She felt her lips trembling, but forced her chin to firm and smiled for her husband. Swallowing her tears, she steadied her voice and repeated it. "I love you, too, Travis."

The soft sound of a footstep on the floor came from behind her, but she barely noticed it. She was used to the women coming and going from the room.

Travis's gaze moved past her, focusing over her shoulder at the person who'd entered.

There was another footstep and Amanda realized the tread was too heavy for a woman. She turned, expecting to see Dr. Litton and froze when she was confronted with Spencer Teague instead. Her mouth dropped open, but she was too astonished to speak.

Spence glanced at her and Lydia then back to Travis. "I...came back. It seemed like you might still need some help and I thought..." He trailed off, gazing at Travis. Spence's eyes held shock as he took in the deterioration in his condition.

Amanda knew how he felt. Travis looked half dead already. His skin was pale and translucent. Purple smudges shadowed his eyes and his facial bones were prominent.

Spence walked hesitantly toward the bed, cleared his throat and continued, "I'm sorry you're doing so poorly."

Amanda dragged her gaze from Spence and turned toward Travis again.

He was staring at the other man with an unreadable mix of emotions chasing across his face. He lifted his hand off the bed, beckoning Spence forward.

Amanda's heart felt like a small, hard, lump of lead as she noted how fragile Travis's hand had become.

“Come here.” Travis’s bloodless lips formed the words, but little sound came out between the jagged breaths that tore in and out of his lungs.

Spence moved in close, bending toward the sick man so he wouldn’t have to raise his voice. “What can I do? Let me know. I’ll do whatever you need.”

“I want...” Travis went into a coughing fit that shook his body.

Spence moved to his side and lifted his upper body so he could breathe better. Amanda offered him water. As the coughing subsided, Travis gasped for breath and sipped a little water.

“Don’t talk. Rest. I’ll be here when you wake up. You can ask me then.”

Travis shook his head once. “No. Now,” he rasped. “I want you to take care of Amanda and Lydia.”

Spence glanced quickly at Amanda then back at Travis. “Of course. But are you sure? I don’t know if I’m the right person to...”

Travis frowned. “Yes, you are. I wouldn’t trust them to anyone else.”

Spence hesitated another moment before nodding. “All right, I will. I promise.”

Travis swallowed. “Good,” he whispered. His eyelids fluttered then closed.

Spence laid him back against the pillow and rose to stand staring down at Travis.

Amanda sat in her chair, holding the baby in one arm and Travis’s hand in the other.

After a moment Spence said, “Here, let me take her.” He held out his hands for Lydia.

Amanda gratefully surrendered the sleepy baby. Lydia’s head lolled and her lower lip stuck out as he received her into his arms. A bubble of drool popped on her lips and he smiled as he wiped it away with his thumb. He lifted the baby up to his chest and held her close, jiggling her a little.

Amanda turned her attention back to Travis. She held both of his chilly hands in hers and closed her eyes to pray for him. As she begged God to release him from his pain, she was dimly aware of Spence pacing the room, walking to the window and back again. The sound of his boots on the hardwood floor was comforting. She rested her forehead against her arms and closed her eyes, continuing to clutch Travis's hands.

When she awoke, it was because something had changed. She opened her eyes and sat up, recognizing what was different. The light in the room had faded to gray and Travis had stopped fighting for breath. She stared at his quiet face, not a muscle twitching beneath his skin and knew there was no spark of life left in him. Slowly she released his slack fingers and withdrew her hands.

Amanda looked across the bed at Spence. He'd brought a second chair into the room and sat in it, still as a statue in the shadows. Lydia was no longer in his arms. He must have put her in her cradle. His face was impassive as he stared at Travis. After a moment his gaze met Amanda's. "He was the best man I've ever known. I'm sorry."

She nodded and looked at Travis again. Her skin felt cold and her insides numb. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her body.

Spence got up and came around the bed. He put a blanket around her shoulders and rested his hands there for second. He squeezed her shoulders lightly then returned to his chair on the opposite side of the bed.

Together they sat in silent vigil over Travis while the night grew darker.



As the next few days passed, Amanda felt like she was moving through a dream from which she couldn't wake up. There was no time to breathe or think. She had to make basic decisions, accomplish tasks and answer questions. Perhaps it was for the best. Thinking about deeper things wasn't something she was prepared to do at the moment.

Reederville had no undertaker so the job of washing and preparing Travis's body for burial fell to her. It was common for a relative to help with this intimate service, but neither Travis nor Amanda had relatives nearby.

Spence offered to help.

She stared at him, feeling she should refuse. Everything about him including the kiss they'd shared was an affront to her husband's memory.

"I liked him, Amanda. He was the kind of man I wished I'd had for a brother. Please, let me help."

Because she was exhausted and because she didn't want to rely on the church ladies' help yet again, she agreed.

They worked together in silence, lifting, washing and changing Travis as they had throughout the months of his illness for the last time.

Later that evening, Amanda stood in her black dress beside his body laid out on the dining room table, while people filed past. They squeezed her hand and murmured condolences before moving on.

Amanda slept with Lydia beside her that night. She cuddled her child close, listening to her breathe and make little sounds in her sleep. Tears finally came and she sobbed quietly, holding back so she wouldn't wake the baby.

The next day, she stood beside the open grave and watched the pallbearers lower the ready-made coffin Spence had bought in town down into the pit. She tossed in her handful of dirt then moved away, Spence's palm pressing against her lower back.

Later, she stood beside a table laden with food, accepting more condolences and gazing blindly at the sad faces.

"You should eat, dear. You must have something." Mrs. Jamison urged a plate into her hands.

The quiet, respectful murmur of voices grew louder as neighbors visited and shared their news. Amanda couldn't make out one word. The buzz of voices sounded like a swarm of bees. Her mind was unfocused,

fragmented. Odd details caught and held her attention. She couldn't stop staring at the tiny stuffed bird perched on Molly Edwards' hat.

"Have you had something to drink?" Mrs. Kirkpatrick took away her barely-touched plate and pressed a steaming cup into her hands. "I think a little hot toddy is in order on such a mournful day."

Amanda sipped. The fiery liquid burned down her throat and settled in her stomach. It radiated heat like a little coal oil stove. She was so tired. She wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and lay down.

Again she felt Spence's hand at her back, smelled his familiar scent as he came up beside her. "Had enough? I don't think anyone would fault you if you went upstairs for a rest. Use Lydia as an excuse."

She sipped her drink and almost smiled at the unbelievable irony of Spencer Teague taking her place at Travis's wake to accept condolences on her behalf.

"Go ahead." He took her drink from her hand.

Obediently, Amanda moved toward the stairs. People parted before her as if she was a ship cutting through waves.

She went up to what had become her room over the past months—Travis's old bedroom. Curling up under the covers, she breathed a sigh of relief at being out from under the community's scrutiny. She closed her eyes and in moments was deeply asleep.

She woke to a hand shaking her shoulder and Lydia's wail.

"Wake up. She needs to eat." Spence's low voice prodded her. He sat on the edge of the bed and put Lydia in her arms when she reached for her.

As she reached to open the front of her nightgown, she realized she was still wearing her black dress. She fumbled with the long row of buttons.

Spence moved her hands aside and began to unfasten them for her. There was nothing sexual in his gesture. He unbuttoned the whole row then took Lydia from her arms and laid her kicking and crying on the

foot of the bed. He helped Amanda out of her dress and petticoat then loosened and removed her corset. When she was clad only in her chemise and bloomers, he helped her back under the covers and handed her the baby, who was now screaming and shaking with fury at the delay.

Amanda took her daughter and held her close, unlacing the front of her chemise and guiding her nipple to the baby's seeking mouth. Lydia latched on with an angry, toothless bite and sucked hard. She made guttural grunts and snorting noises as she nursed.

Spence smiled, his teeth flashing in the dim light. "Guess, she was starving, the poor girl."

He continued to sit on the edge of the bed, watching her feed the baby. It wasn't right. She should probably send him away, but it felt good and comfortable having him there. She didn't tell him to go.

"Is everyone gone?" she asked as she moved Lydia to the other breast.

He nodded.

What happens next? She wanted to ask him. She felt very young and uncertain of her future. There were bills to pay, a farm to run, a child to raise and Amanda had no idea how she was supposed to handle all that.

Travis had practically bequeath her to Spence. It would be all too easy to accept his dying wish just to have a man to help her out, but she didn't want to put her trust in Spence. She didn't want to depend on him simply because he was here now. He might not be tomorrow. It wasn't his nature to stick with one person in one place.

Lydia suddenly released her nipple with a loud pop and a burp. Milk dribbled from the corner of her mouth and she turned away from her mother to stare up at Spence with wide, surprised eyes.

"Well, hello," he said. "Are you done being mad at me? I got you what you wanted, didn't I?" He lifted her up to his shoulder and began to rub her back.

"You should put a rag on your shoulder," Amanda cautioned, pulling her chemise back over her breasts.

Lydia let out another loud, wet burp and it was too late. Milk splattered Spence's shirt. He pulled the baby away and craned his neck to the side to examine the damage. "Oh, yeah? I love you, too." Handing her back to Amanda, he took off his shirt and tossed it aside.

Amanda was ashamed to feel warmth bloom in her core at the sight of his biceps, developed from months of hard labor on the farm. She tried not to notice the way his undershirt stretched over his chest muscles. Quickly she looked away. It was so incredibly wrong to be aroused by this man on the day of her husband's funeral. What kind of horrible person was she? What kind of base, sluttish woman? "Thank you for bringing Lydia to me, but will you go now, please?"

He looked at her with a frown. "I was just going to change her and put her in bed for you."

"I'm not sick. I can do it myself," she said briskly. "Thank you."

"Fine." Spence stooped to pick his shirt up off the floor. "Good night then."

"Good night."

Amanda didn't realize she was holding her breath until the door closed behind him and she let it go.

Chapter Twenty

“I’m selling the farm and moving back to Michigan,” Amanda announced to Marilyn Landers as they walked along the edge of a field of wheat. The waving grass was already knee high. The breeze undulated across the open field setting the wheat whispering. She imagined the crop in July, golden yellow instead of spring green and ready for harvest. Travis had explained that the crop was planted in fall and wintered underground, waiting for the warmth and rains of spring to bring it to life. Amanda’s heart felt like the wheat seed in winter, waiting to be wakened, but wondering if it would ever happen, if she’d ever feel alive again.

“You’re sure that’s what you want to do?” Marilyn turned toward Pearl and Tommy racing ahead of them. “You two stay close!”

“I don’t know what else I can do. I can’t manage this farm alone. My aunt telegraphed and asked me to come home. I miss her. I miss my family and feel like I need to be with them right now. I want Lydia to be raised near family.”

Marilyn nodded. She looked down at the ground, past the bulge of her pregnancy. “I can understand that. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help you with everything you went through this winter, but I’m glad we took the kids and saw Mama before she died.”

Amanda reached over and rubbed her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s life, isn’t it?” Marilyn looked up at her with glistening eyes and a wavering smile. “People come and go. Nothing lasts.”

Amanda thought of all that had happened to her in less than a year’s time. She’d married, had a child, lost a husband...and she’d known the

touch of two very different men. Certainly she'd foreseen none of that last spring as she walked along the beach gazing at the lake and wondering if she would ever find love and a family of her own.

"No, I guess it doesn't," she said.

"What about Spencer?" Marilyn asked.

"What about him?"

"Will he go with you?"

"No. Why should he?" Amanda looked straight ahead at Pearl and Tommy, crouching in the grass at the edge of the field, examining something they'd found.

"I hated Teague on sight when I met him, knowing the horrible thing he'd done to you. But I've watched him work hard on the farm, care for the baby and show complete respect for you as a widow. It seems he truly cares for you and Lydia, but, more important, I think you care for him, too."

"I can't believe it," Amanda exploded, whirling to face her friend. "He's gotten to you, too! That's what he does. He has some kind of insidious charm that absolutely no one can resist. He worms his way in and people trust him, but he always disappoints them. He's like a child. You can only hold his interest so long then he gets bored and moves onto something else. How I could I place my future and Lydia's in the hands of such a man?" She laughed harshly. "Can you imagine it? Traveling from one town to the next, staying in hotel rooms above a bar while he plays cards all night or runs some kind of scam to cheat people out of their money. Never knowing if we'll be forced to grab our things and take the next train out of town. There is no kind of family life with a man like him. It's impossible."

She raged on, expressing all the thoughts she'd kept to herself over the past weeks. "And what about when Lydia is old enough to learn about her father? What will I tell her—that her real daddy's dead and she just happens to look exactly like Mama's second husband? Then comes the inevitable day when Spence decides he's bored with us and leaves us stranded in a hotel room for which he hasn't even paid the bill, while he

goes off with some floozy he's picked up in a tavern." Amanda crossed her arms angrily and glared at Marilyn. "No. No thank you. I don't need Spencer Teague in my life."

"Clearly you've thought about this just a little bit." Marilyn's voice trembled with laughter.

"It's not funny! How can you laugh? I'm trying to decide my entire future."

She instantly suppressed her mirth. "No. Of course, you're right. It's not funny." Marilyn turned and walked forward again.

Amanda fell in step beside her.

"But, have you ever considered that Spence might have changed? Maybe he isn't the same man you met last summer."

"I can't believe you're defending him!"

"I know. Neither can I. Maybe you're right and he does have an almost magical power to charm people."

"Mama, Mama, look!" Tommy came running toward them, a big box turtle clutched in both hands. "Look what we found." He raced up to them and stopped short, panting and sweating. "Isn't it neat? Can we keep him?" The shy, little lad Amanda had met last summer had grown a head taller and turned into a loud, confident boy.

Marilyn bent over and touched the turtle's shell. "It's amazing, Tommy, but I think we have to leave him here."

"Aw, Mama!"

"He has his own business to attend to. How would you like it if a giant swooped in, grabbed you up and carried you off to his house?"

Pearl came puffing up behind her brother. "Can we? Can we keep him, Mama?" She parroted Tommy.

"Fraid not, Pearlie Mae. You can look at him for a while, but then you have to let him go." Marilyn straightened, ignoring her children's further begging and they gave up and carried the turtle back to the spot they'd found it to let it go.

She turned back to Amanda. “I have one question for you. Who’s watching Lydia while we’re taking this walk?”

“You know Spence is.” She frowned.

Marilyn didn’t say anything else, but lifted her brows.

“Just because he’s good with the baby doesn’t mean he’ll be a good father, or husband, in the long run. He’s Spencer Teague!” She searched for words to explain what that meant. “He’s like that painted turtle. You can admire the pretty markings and poke at it with a stick for a while, but eventually you have to let it go on its way.”

Marilyn laughed aloud this time. “Spence is *not* a turtle. Maybe a fox, a little sneaky and able to find a way inside any hen house, but definitely not a turtle.”

“And do you think I really want to be with a man who sneaks into hen houses?”

“Point taken, but all I’m saying is that love changes people. They can become better than they ever thought they could be. Maybe Spence has become somebody you can trust.” Marilyn slipped her arm through Amanda’s and hugged it. They walked along, their steps in sync. “Or maybe I’m completely foolish. I’d hate to be the one to steer you in the wrong direction. You should do what your heart tells you to. If you feel like going back to your aunt and uncle then you should do it, but I’m going to miss you terribly. It’s been wonderful having you live nearby. I’d imagined our kids playing together as the years went on.”

“I’ll miss you, too. We could never stay here as a family anyway. I couldn’t suddenly up and marry my ‘cousin’.”

“He’s your second cousin. That’s legal,” Marilyn teased.

They talked and walked in the bright spring sunshine and Amanda realized how like a sister Marilyn had become to her. She would miss some things about Reederville, but she knew she couldn’t stay.



During the days as she went through the motions of life, it was easier to see the logical course of her future—return to her family, raise her child and maybe someday find a husband who'd accept a widow and her daughter. At night, lying in bed, listening to spring breeze rattle her windowpane, she wasn't so sure of her decisions.

She still slept in the smaller bedroom. It was unthinkable to sleep in the bed in which Travis had spent so many hours suffering and where he'd died.

And Spencer remained on the couch. Through the dark spaces of the house, she was aware of him and wondered if he was sleepless, too, lying there thinking of her. She knew he wanted to be with her. He might not be capable of long term responsibility and caring, but for now there was a fire for her burning hot inside him, which she could feel every time he was near and even when he wasn't. It awoke an answering blaze inside her, a blaze she tried to quench as she rolled over to her side with a sigh.

A soft whimpering came from Lydia's cradle. It was almost time for her to nurse. Amanda decided to intercept before the whimpers turned to wails. She got up and lifted her from her crib. "Shh, sweet girl. Mama's here." Climbing back in bed, she laid the baby beside her, unbuttoned the front of her nightgown and held her close.

Lydia latched on and the quiet was broken by the wet smacking sounds she made. It was cozy and peaceful, lying in bed, cuddling the warm, sleepy baby. And it was lonely. Knowing Lydia's life rested in her hands made her feel frightened and overwhelmed. A child was a big responsibility for two people to share, let alone one.

When Lydia was finished, Amanda changed her diaper and laid her back in her crib then gazed at her small, sleeping form for several minutes.

The wind shook the window in its casement and she walked over to look out at the night. The bright, white moonlight illuminated the landscape then dimmed as clouds scudded across its pale face. From the window Amanda could see the family plot up on the rise where Travis's body lay beside his parents and grandparents. The moon shone on the

five headstones. The earth over his grave was a dark blot next to the waving grass covering the others.

Amanda was wide-awake. She knew if she lay down she wouldn't be able to sleep. After ensuring the baby was sound asleep, she slipped out of the room and downstairs to the kitchen. Grabbing her coat off the hook in the back entry, she let herself out of the house.

The grass under her feet was cold and damp. Wind whipped her hair across her face and filled her lungs with fresh coolness. Hugging her coat around her, she ran across the yard and up the low rise toward the lone cottonwood tree that guarded the Baxter family.

There was no fence demarcating the area, only the headstones with their names and dates. Amanda knelt beside her husband's grave and traced her finger over the carving in the stone. The grooves were sharp and fresh, not yet smoothed low by time and the elements like the others.

Travis Baxter — 1865-1894

The stone was rough against her palm, the earth soft beneath her knees. She felt wetness soaking through her nightgown to her legs.

"I miss you," she said aloud. "I love you." Her heart ached so badly it was hard to draw breath. For once she let her tears flow freely. The wind dried them instantly on her face, leaving a stiff residue of salt behind. "I can't abide by your wishes, Travis. I won't allow Spence to look after Lydia and me, to become a part of our lives. He's not who you think he is. If you'd known the truth, you never would have asked it."

She dropped her hand to her lap and closed her eyes, but could still see the shape of the pale stone inside her eyelids. "I'm sorry. I lied to you all along. I was a terrible person when you were nothing but good to me. I wish I'd told you the truth, but I don't know how I could have or when."

Her hands folded and her monologue became a prayer of sorts. "Please forgive me. Help me to do the right thing, to make the right decisions for Lydia...and for myself." She squeezed her hands together tightly and her eyelids even tighter as she continued to silently ask for guidance.

When she opened her eyes again, she leaned forward to touch the headstone one last time before rising to her feet. Something caught her attention at the base of the stone. It was a small, square shape, half-buried in the dirt. Amanda brushed the dirt away and picked up the colorful object—Spence’s pack of playing cards.

She weighed it in her hand as she pictured him coming here to place it on the grave. It was a small token, which showed Spence’s declaration of friendship for Travis was real. In her heart, she’d known the two men shared a bond, but this little offering proved it. He had admired Travis and cared for him as a friend.

She recalled one particular afternoon, when she walked past Travis’s bedroom and paused in the hallway to observe the two men laughing and talking while Spencer dealt cards. Again her heart gave a lurch and she wondered how much twisting and contracting it could take before it broke.

Placing the deck of cards back against the stone, she brushed the dirt from her hands and rose to walk from the grave.

Back in the house, Amanda washed her hands at the kitchen sink then headed for the stairs. As she crossed the dining room, Spence’s silhouette, a dark shape against the even darker shadows of the living room behind him, stood in the doorway. “Everything all right?” His husky murmur sent a shiver up her spine. She should have been accustomed to the timbre of his voice by now, but it always aroused her.

“Yes. I couldn’t sleep. I took a walk.” She set her foot on the bottom step.

A floorboard creaked as he came into the room and approached her. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I said it before, but...I’m really sorry about Travis.”

Amanda nodded and took another step. She paused on the stairs and turned to face Spence.

He stood below her, looking up at her. His brow shadowed his eyes so she couldn’t see or read them. “What are you going to do now?”

Her skin prickled all over from his nearness. She wished she was still wearing her coat to cover her thin lawn nightgown. "I'm going to sell this place. I'm going back to my family in Michigan."

He stood less than two feet away from her. She felt the heat of his body and couldn't stop herself imagining that heat wrapped all around her. She swallowed hard. "What are *you* going to do?" She tried to make the words conversational, as if she was talking to a casual acquaintance.

After a pause, Spence said, "I could go with you. Make sure you get home safely."

Amanda gazed down into his shadowed face and the eyes she couldn't see. It was easier to say what she had to when she couldn't look into his sparkling blue eyes. "No, you couldn't. That's not going to happen."

There was another long pause then he stepped back in surrender. "All right. Call me if you need anything." He retreated into the living room.

Amanda released her hands, which were clenching the fabric of her nightgown and continued on upstairs. She doubted she'd sleep much that night.



Spence lifted the last of Amanda's baggage onto the back of the wagon. The farm, the house and all its contents had been sold to a family from Wichita. They'd been thrilled to have the furniture, dishes and tools they needed included in the price. Amanda had been much too generous. She could've auctioned off the contents of the house and barn then sold the property and house separately, but she was anxious to be finished with it and move on. The excitement of the young couple as they'd viewed the house and land had tipped the scales in their favor. Spence could see that their hopefulness about their future moved her.

He'd tried to suggest she wait and think before making any rash decisions while she was still in mourning, but Amanda had shut him

down. “Why is this any of your concern? Is this your property? Is this your land?” She stared at him without blinking until Spence looked away.

He was fulfilling his oath to Travis, taking care of Amanda and Lydia as much as Amanda would let him. It was something he would’ve done anyway, but it felt better knowing he had Travis’s blessing. In that brief moment their eyes had locked, a message had been exchanged and Spence understood that Travis was giving him permission to love her, too. But he couldn’t help her if she didn’t want his help and he couldn’t hold her if she didn’t choose to be held.

Right now all Amanda required of him was carrying boxes and bags and looking after Lydia. When they reached Kansas City, she’d made it clear they would go their separate ways.

“It wouldn’t be right,” she’d told him when he again offered to escort her home to Michigan. “I release you from what Travis asked you to do. I don’t need looking after.”

“Maybe I want to look after you and Lydia.” He gave Amanda a look that said he’d like to be much more than her traveling companion.

“Don’t you see how wrong...?” She shook her head impatiently. “No. You wouldn’t. I’m a widow. I loved my husband and it would be disrespectful to his memory. You can never take his place in my life. I don’t want you to go any farther than the train station then you can get on with your life and I’ll return to my family.”

He’d wanted to protest, to point out that Lydia was half his and he shouldn’t be denied the right to ever see her again. But considering the strange nature of his relationship with Amanda, he knew he had no paternal rights—or any rights at all. His place in their lives, or lack of, would be completely determined by Amanda.

Spence hadn’t repeated his offer in the days since the conversation, but planned to talk to her again before they reached Kansas City. The idea of walking away from Amanda and Lydia was unthinkable. They’d become lodged in him like pebbles stuck in the tread of a shoe and he couldn’t get them out of his heart.

Fastening the tailgate on the wagon, he checked that the luggage was secure. "That's everything," he announced as she came out onto the front porch with Lydia in her arms. "The stage leaves at two. We'd better get moving."

Amanda shaded her eyes and scanned the fields and farmyard one last time. Her gaze lingered on the family burial plot in the shade of the lone cottonwood tree.

Even from a distance, Spence could see the grave where Travis was buried had already grown over green, but the man would never fade away for Spence. Getting to know him and trying to fill his big shoes, had changed him in profound ways. He wished Travis well, wherever he was now.

Amanda straightened the brim of her little straw hat with the black velvet ribbon, adjusted Lydia on her hip then lifted her skirt in her other hand and walked down the steps.

Spence took the baby while she climbed into the wagon then handed Lydia up to her. He jumped up and sat beside her on the bench, gathering the reins and getting Esther moving toward town one last time. After today the old horse would belong to the family from Wichita. Ted Landers was riding into town with Spence and Amanda so he could bring the horse and wagon back. In Reederville they'd catch the stage to Kansas City.

With Ted riding in the wagon beside them on the ride to town, there was no chance for Spence to talk privately with Amanda. After they'd bid Ted goodbye, bought their tickets and unloaded her luggage, the stage had arrived. There was no possibility of discussing something so intimate as they jostled over bumpy roads, packed into the coach with several strangers.

At the Kansas City station, Amanda's bags and chest were unloaded once more. Spence hired a driver to transport everything to the train depot. By the time this was accomplished, her train was almost due.

Spence felt a growing sense of panic as time catapulted forward and he'd still found no opportunity to plead his case with Amanda. He kept

silent as she purchased tickets for herself and Lydia, somehow hoping she'd ask for three instead of two, but she didn't.

He accompanied her outside the depot, where she walked to the bench on which he'd first seen her and sat.

Up to now, she'd kept her attention focused on everything except Spence, not meeting his eyes and apparently trying to pretend he didn't exist. Now, finally, she looked up at him, but not into his eyes. Her gaze settled somewhere in the vicinity of his left shoulder. "Thank you for helping with the luggage. We'll be fine now. You don't have to wait with us." Her voice seemed a little choked when she added, "Please don't."

"All right then...goodbye." He ached to pull her up off the bench and into his arms, to cling to her and keep her close to him as long as possible. Instead, he reached a finger out to touch Lydia's face. The baby grabbed it in her little fist. He shook her hand then pried his finger out of her grip.

Spence took a step back. He felt his moment to say something, to get her to reconsider was slipping away, but didn't know how to stop it. "Goodbye," he repeated.

Amanda nodded. "Thank you for helping out these past months," she said stiffly. "I'll always appreciate how you cared for Travis."

He waited a few more seconds, hoping her tight jaw would unclench and she'd ask him to stay, but she sat staring down the empty track.

There was nothing for him to do but walk away. The drum of his boot heels as he left Amanda and Lydia behind sounded like the clang of the door slamming shut on his prison cell in Lexington. Each step away from them felt like a year added to his sentence.

Spence only walked about a hundred yards before he stopped. His chest ached so much he could hardly draw breath. He couldn't do this. He looked back over his shoulder at Amanda sitting on the bench. She held Lydia on her lap facing her, resting against her arms and looking up into her face. They were involved in an intimate, one-sided conversation.

He stood and stared. He couldn't leave them, but Amanda had made it clear she didn't want him. God, he would give anything if he could go

back and change the way they'd met. But how could he have done things differently and still have met Amanda? If he hadn't pretended to be Travis Baxter that day at the station, she never would've spoken to him at all. Spence couldn't regret what he'd done nor could he condone it. It was a double-edged sword.

Words from his last serious conversation with Amanda echoed in his mind. *You can never take Travis's place in my life.* An idea struck him. He examined the idea from every angle looking for flaws. It wasn't a particularly great idea, but it was all that came to him. If she didn't want him as a substitute for Travis, maybe she would accept him as himself.

Squaring his shoulders, he brushed off his clothes, set his hat straight on his head and sauntered toward Amanda. His heart raced as he approached her and stopped right in front of her, blocking the sunlight. "Hello, ma'am."

She looked up, shading her eyes with one hand as she'd done the first time he spoke to her. "What? Please, don't make this any harder than it already is."

Spence took a deep breath and stuck out his hand. "I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Spencer Teague. I saw you sitting here on this bench and thought how pretty you looked with your red hair shining in the sun. I may not be the man you're waiting to meet, but I'd like to get to know you better, if that'd be all right."

For a long moment his hand hung there waiting for her response.

Amanda's gaze moved from his face down to his hand. She stared at it as eons of time ticked past.

"Well, Mr. Teague," she finally said. "I'd need to know a little more about you and your background before we could strike up an acquaintance. It's highly improper, a stranger approaching me this way."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm aware of that, but with no one to make formal introductions for us, it's the best I could do." Spence fought the urge to drop his hand to his side and continued to hold it steady, waiting for her to take it. "I heard a saying once, 'A stranger is a friend you haven't met yet'," he offered.

Her chin lowered. The brim of her hat hid most of her face from his view, but he saw the corners of her mouth twitch.

“There’s another expression, ‘To err is human...’” he added. “Which could make you divine if you’ll follow it to its conclusion.”

She shook her head and a soft puff of laughter burst from her lips.

“Please, Amanda.” He turned his hand from a sideways offer of a handshake to palm up and begging.

She sighed and reached out her hand to grasp his.

Curling his fingers around it, he pulled her to her feet. Then he enfolded her and Lydia in his arms. Amanda’s body was so warm and soft and she smelled so good, he couldn’t stop himself bending to kiss her. Their hat brims knocked together. Spence swept his off his head and tossed it to the ground, angled his head sideways and leaned in to press his lips to hers. He heard her soft sigh just before he covered her mouth.

The kiss was hot and sweet and all the more exciting because he’d almost lost her. He was damn sure never going to let her go now. He wrapped his arms around her even tighter and rubbed her warm back with both hands. Between them, Lydia gave a muffled whine and wiggled against his chest.

His lips moved soft and searching over Amanda’s, opening and closing, inviting hers to do the same. His tongue swept over her lips lightly then teased between them.

She responded to his kiss briefly before pulling away to whisper, “Don’t rush me, Spence.”

“All right.” He hugged her, stifling the urge to plunder her mouth until she realized she belonged to him now. Releasing her, he backed off a step then bent to kiss the top of Lydia’s fuzzy head.

The baby’s head bobbed and she tilted her face up to see him. He rested his forehead against hers and Lydia reached for his face, grabbing his nose.

“Ow!” He disengaged her pinching fingers, tears springing to his eyes.

Amanda laughed. The musical sound was like clear water running over stones in a brook. A surge of exultant joy swelled in his heart. This was really happening. They were his family now, for better or worse.

Just then a distant train whistle blew signaling its approach. The engine steamed into view far down the tracks.

“Shall I buy a ticket?” he asked. “Can I come with you to Michigan?”

Amanda blew out a breath as she stared at the oncoming train. “You make things so difficult! How am I supposed to explain going to Kansas to marry one man and coming home with a different one less than a month after my husband’s funeral?”

Spence stooped, picked up his hat, dusted it off and put it back on his head. He frowned as he tried to come up with a solution. “I could be Travis’s cousin escorting you home.”

Amanda scowled and shook her head. “You’re incapable of telling the truth, aren’t you?”

“All right then, I could wait somewhere nearby while you visit your relatives and you could introduce me later...as someone you just met. That’s hardly a lie.”

She tilted up her chin and studied his face, her hazel eyes solemn. “And what happens after that? Do you whisk me and Lydia off someplace or do we settle near my family?”

“Do you want me to whisk you off? Where do you want to be, Amanda?”

“I don’t know. It’s too much to think about all at once.”

“Then don’t. You said not to rush you and I won’t. Stop trying to plan so far ahead and control everything. Let your life unfold.” Spence put an arm around her waist and leaned to kiss her temple. A thrill went through him at the knowledge that she would now let him do those things.

The train whistle blew much louder and closer this time. Lydia jerked at the shrieking sound. She opened her mouth and began to wail. Her cries carried on much longer than the short burst of the whistle.

Amanda jiggled her and patted her back trying to calm her down.

Spence put his hands over the baby's ears before the whistle blew a second time as the racketing wheels drew near. "Shh, little girl. It's all right." He released her ears and bent to look into her face, trying to get her attention. Lydia's eyes were squinted into angry slits and her face was turning bright red.

"Hey!" he said sharply.

She stopped screaming long enough to stare at him.

"Don't be afraid. You're going on an adventure."

Chapter Twenty-one

San Francisco 1898

Spence woke, yawned and stretched. He stared up at the ceiling overhead and noted that he needed to repair the plaster before the cracks fanning across it got worse. He closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into the cocoon of blankets and against the warm body beside him. He was in no hurry to get up and start the day. However...he turned his head on the pillow to look at the tangled red curls on the other pillow...there was a nice way he could start the day right here in bed.

He rolled onto his side and pulled the covers back to reveal Amanda's shoulders and back, dressed in a long, white, cotton nightgown. That would have to come off. He reached under the covers, found the hem and pulled it up over his wife's hips. He uncovered her back and pushed the material up to her shoulders.

Amanda moaned in protest and reached sleepily for the blanket. "Cold. Don't."

Burrowing under the covers, he placed a kiss between her shoulder blades and ran his tongue lightly down her spine while stroking the long expanse of her back with his hands. Her skin was soft and silky under his palms and tasted like Amanda against the tip of his tongue. When he reached the swell of her ass, he pushed her underwear off its generous curves and continued to sample her sleep-scented flesh.

Amanda moaned and wiggled again, but without the protest this time. She lifted her hips off the bed, offering her rear to his exploration.

Spence kissed all over the globes of her buttocks then parted them and ran his tongue down the groove between.

She gasped and arched toward him. “You’re so bad, Spencer.”

He chuckled as he stripped the underwear down her legs and off her feet. He got trapped in the tangle of sheets for a moment, but finally emerged tousle-haired up near the pillows.

Amanda’s face was turned toward him. “Do we have time for this?”

“Yes. There’s always time for this.” He took hold of the nightgown and started to tug it over her head.

“Just a minute. You’re choking me.” Amanda unbuttoned it and it slid easily off her.

“I keep telling you, if you slept naked this wouldn’t be a problem.”

She pushed back the wild hair from her face and laughed. “One of us has to have a sense of decorum.” She dove under the covers and in a moment Spence felt her warm mouth encircling his cock and her hand gripping him tightly.

His eyes rolled back and he groaned in pleasure. He reclined against the pillows and let her tend to him for a while. Amanda knew exactly how he liked it, a perk he hadn’t counted on when choosing to stick to one woman for the rest of his life. Before they’d married, he’d experienced a moment of panic at the idea of not only the lifetime commitment, but the fact he would never have a different woman again—unless he cheated on Amanda, which of course he never intended to do. It turned out not to be difficult at all.

He closed his eyes and surrendered to her hot mouth and stroking fingers. She cupped his balls and fondled them then slid her index finger back along the sensitive strip of flesh behind his scrotum. Her fingernail tickled along toward his anus then circled the puckered hole sending delicious chills through him. She continued to suck hard on the head of his cock then Amanda did the thing he liked best of all, his secret fantasy she’d discovered.

She pulled her mouth off his cock and wrapped a great handful of her silky hair around it. Spence tossed the covers back to watch as she moved the long red tresses up and down his shaft. The sight of it even

more than the sensation aroused him terribly. He watched in fascination as Amanda pumped her fist and looked up at him with a seductive smile.

“Did you remember to lock the door?” she asked.

“Hnh? Oh, yeah, of course,” he lied, arching toward her.

She let go of his stiff cock and it flopped hard against his belly. “No you didn’t. Go lock it.”

With a groan of annoyance, Spence rolled out of bed and padded across the floor to the door. He turned back to the bed. “Satisfied?” Then his breath caught as he beheld the beauty of his wife, sprawled across the rumpled bed, her arms up above her head gripping the bars of the brass headboard, her legs flung carelessly open displaying her plump pussy. Amanda’s eyes invited him to feast.

He crossed the room in two strides and jumped onto the bed between her legs. Suspending himself above her, he planted a quick kiss on her mouth. “I love waking up with you,” he whispered, looking down into her eyes.

Amanda smiled and tilted her head back slightly to offer her throat.

Spence descended on it. He kissed and licked up and down the tendons of her neck then traveled down her chest to suckle at her full breasts. He toyed with one magenta nipple then the other, squeezing, twisting, pulling and sucking while she moaned and arched beneath him.



Amanda had discovered rough treatment of her breasts spurred her to ecstasy quicker than cake rises. Spence was the master of her body’s secrets. He knew exactly where and how to touch and how forceful to get. This morning as he mauled her hard nipples until she cried out, Amanda had a sudden memory of Travis and his gentle ways in bed.

She had loved him and would never forget their brief months together. There was a permanent hollow space in her heart where she kept his image like a shrine. His kindness and loving nature had wrapped around her like a warm blanket, protecting and comforting her.

With Spence, Amanda sometimes felt like she lived in constant friction. He could be as abrasive as sandpaper and as stubborn as an immovable rock. No, not a rock, which was a stationary object. Spence was more like water flowing and insistently making its own path. A river one might temporarily dam or divert, but which would ultimately find its way to its goal—the sea.

But their dissonance was what kept their relationship fresh and interesting and she *never* got tired of him in bed.

She closed her eyes and relaxed against the mattress as he moved down her belly, setting it twitching with his nibbling kisses. Her crotch clenched in anticipation of his touch, but she knew Spence well enough to realize he wouldn't give her what she craved right away.

Her grip on the bedposts tightened. The muscles in her arms grew taut as she forced herself to lie still beneath his mouth.

He kissed around her pubic mound and stroked his hands up and down her thighs, his thumbs tickling the delicate flesh of her inner thighs. He moved a little higher with each caress, but would not touch her pussy yet.

Amanda squeezed her eyes shut and arched her body, offering up her throat, her breasts, her entire being to him. Sometimes Spence tied her to the bed, increasing her feeling of surrender, but this morning she would create the sensation for herself. She clenched her fingers around the posts until her nails bit into her palms, pretending that she wasn't allowed to let go of the bed no matter what.

Now his mouth took the place of his hands between her thighs. He licked and nibbled up and down her legs until they shook. His fingers teased apart her labia and his slick, wet tongue began its teasing ascent toward her clitoris.

Amanda was strung tight as a bow, awaiting his touch, but she knew Spence wouldn't give it to her without going through their exchange. Finally, when she couldn't take the tension anymore, she begged. "Please!"

"What do you want?" came the low, sexy murmur.

“You. I want you. Please!” She held her breath and waited.

Spence chuckled and a moment later his mouth covered her clit. He kissed it once then stroked it with the tip of his tongue. Her body jerked at the licks of fire his touch set off in her. He sucked on it hard until she gasped, swirled his tongue around the tiny nerve bundle then slid it down between her folds to her entrance. He delved his tongue deep inside, lapping her juices.

She groaned. Her whole body lifted off the bed as he returned to sucking on her clit while slipping his fingers in and out of her body. Just as she grew mindless with desire and her senses began to unravel and dissolve into a thousand points of light, Spence removed his mouth from her sex and quickly crawled up her body.

He reached between them and positioned his cock at her entrance, pushing inside with a satisfied groan. He pumped in and out, his pubis brushing against her swollen and ready clit with each thrust, giving it the stimulation she needed.

Amanda clung to him, letting go of the bed to grip his shoulders. She wrapped her legs around his hips and lifted her hips to meet each thrust. The repeated contact with her clit spurred her toward ecstasy and in a few brief moments the rising swell inside exploded into a wave of delight. “Ah, God, Spence!” she cried, digging her fingernails into his flesh.

Aroused by her exultation, he increased his pace, grunting and driving into her again and again. His shoulders grew slippery with sweat under her hands.

She clenched her inner muscles around his cock, loving the way it filled her up so completely. She looked into his face, contorted with his efforts, his eyebrows drawn into a scowl, his mouth open and panting. His eyes flickered open and he focused on her with his amazing, vivid blue eyes.

Spence stopped moving for a moment, halting with his cock buried deep inside, letting her know that he really saw her, that he chose only her. The intensity of his eyes was nearly as powerful as the orgasm he’d given her. It moved her deeply. He smiled then resumed thrusting, faster,

harder, deeper until he came with a cry of release. He collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily.

She wrapped her arms around his back and slipped the fingers of one hand up into his hair, cradling the back of his skull, pulling his head down to her shoulder.

“Mm, good,” he murmured against her neck. He kissed her shoulder before rolling over onto his back by her side. Spence threw an arm above his head and rested the other hand limply on her hip.

Amanda recovered her breath for several moments, before turning on her side to cuddle up against him. He snaked his arm around her, drawing her close. She rested her head on his chest, rubbing her hand back and forth lightly over his flushed skin, feeling the rapid beating of his heart. They drowsed together, wrapped in a warm embrace in the soft nest of blankets until she was nearly asleep again.

A hard pounding on the bedroom door jerked her awake. “Mama! Daddy! Let me in!” The steady smacking of a small fist against the wood door signaled that morning could not be avoided.

Spence shifted and loosened his arms from around her. “It’s back. Better go let it in.”

“Why me?” Amanda asked as she picked her nightgown off the floor and slipped it over her head.

“Because I had to get up to lock the door. Besides, I’m not wearing any pants. You want to scar the kid for life?” Spence pulled the covers modestly up to his chest, while she plodded to the door.

She’d barely opened it when a red-headed imp streaked past her to land on the bed in a flying leap. Lydia scrambled up on top of Spence like a monkey.

Amanda laughed as he let out an exaggerated groan. Lydia had a knack for digging her sharp little elbows and feet into a person’s gut or groin when she carelessly clambered over them. The little girl perched on his stomach, a leg on either side and her hands braced against his shoulders as she stared down at him. “Get up, Daddy! It’s late.”

“How do you know? You can’t even tell time yet.”

“Yes, I can. The sun’s up. That means it’s time to open the store.”

Amanda walked back to the bed and perched on the edge, watching her husband and daughter’s morning banter. She might as well have been invisible for all the notice Lydia took of her. She knew the child loved her. It was Mama she called for when she scraped a knee or needed food, but during a typical business day, she was completely Daddy’s girl. Amanda didn’t know if it was normal that their daughter was so mercenary, but the little girl liked nothing better than to help out in the store.

“And what if the sun didn’t come up?” Spence asked. “Would that mean I could lie in bed all day?”

Lydia paused, considering. She looked toward the window where the sky was a rosy pink. “How could the sun not come up? You’re silly, Daddy.” She bounced on top of him. “Get up!”

Spence let out an “oof” of expelled breath as she landed hard on his belly. “The world won’t end if I take a couple more minutes. Give me a break, kid.”

“Customers need things. We have to open the store.” She bounced on him like he was a pony, until her threw her off onto Amanda’s side of the bed with a growl. He rolled over onto his side and began tickling her.

Lydia shrieked, a high-pitched, piercing sound that could set dogs barking a mile away.

After a few seconds, Amanda intervened. “All right. Enough. Time for breakfast.” She stood and scooped the red-faced, giggling girl into her arms. As she carried her from the room, Lydia called over her mother’s shoulder. “Don’t fall back to sleep, Daddy. Get up!”

“I’ve already been up once,” Spence quipped.

Amanda stopped and looked back at him, rolling her eyes.

He wagged his eyebrows, leering at her.

Amanda shook her head and turned away, letting her daughter slip down to the floor and lead her by the hand to the kitchen. This was their special time together each morning. Lydia sat on the counter and talked

at her while Amanda set the coffee to percolate and made oatmeal. Then Lydia sat at the table and continued chattering while she arranged raisins in patterns on the surface of her cereal.

After breakfast, Amanda's time with Lydia was over. Spence would sweep in, grab a cup of coffee, give Amanda a kiss and take the girl away to the general store, which occupied the bottom floor of the building. She enjoyed the quiet mornings cleaning the apartment, cooking or baking as needed then settling down to her writing.

She'd come to realize that while she might not have experienced exotic adventures such as Mr. Kipling's in India, she was fully capable of concocting imaginary journeys for her heroes and heroines. Amanda would have kept her hobby to herself, but Spence forced her out of her privacy by sending some of her stories to a pulp fiction magazine. He didn't tell her what he'd done until he had an issue of the lurid magazine in hand, her story splashed across the pages.

Amanda had cried at the proof of his confidence in her and soon after had embarked on the adventure of completing a full-length novel peopled with pirates and island natives and a beautiful captive Englishwoman. Whether it sold or not, she was happy to have an aspect of her life that was all for her. When housework and caring for her family was out of the way, she could plunge into the adventures that blossomed in her mind and flowed out of her pen onto the paper.

This might not be the life she'd pictured when she used to imagine her future home and family, but she'd never been happier in her life.



“Hey, Teague, you got my special order in yet?” Ezekiel Smith stumped into the store, letting the door fall shut behind him with a bang.

Spence reached on a high shelf to retrieve Smith's brown-paper wrapped parcel. He had to step around Lydia, who was on the floor near his feet behind the counter setting up what looked like an invading army

of thread spools. Spence passed the package over the counter to Ezekiel and the old man pushed some bills across the counter to him.

Spence's little pornography sideline was nobody's business but his own. Amanda certainly need never know. As far as he was concerned, he was doing a service. The pictures or devices he supplied made men very happy and he was keeping a struggling naked model and photographer somewhere in business.

Smith grunted his thanks, tucked the parcel under his coat and limped back out of the store.

Spence watched him go then returned to his task of laying out a display of tinned food. It was selling fast these days as prospectors outfitted themselves with supplies in San Francisco before taking a steamer up to the Alaskan goldfields. A major strike had occurred in Nome and Spence's little family was sitting on a gold mine of their own with no more effort than buying and selling goods. They'd picked the perfect time to move to California.

He finished his arranging then hunkered down on the floor next to Lydia. Oblivious to him, she moved the spools around and held unintelligible conversations between them in her high pitched voice. Spence wondered why—with a shelf full of dolls—she found more entertainment making little people out of thread spools.

“What you got there, kiddo? A family?”

“No, an expossession. These guys are going to the jungle.” She indicated pink, white and blue spools of thread. “And these ones are trying to stop them 'cause they want to get to the gold first.” Lydia pointed to the green and purple spools lying in wait behind a tall can of peas. She looked up at Spence with solemn eyes. “They're very bad men.”

Red pigtailed poked out on either side of her little heart-shaped face and in an instant he was transported back to the haunting dreams that had led him to Amanda. “Sounds like it,” he agreed. “But maybe they have a reason for wanting the gold, too? Maybe they aren't so very bad.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged and returned to her play.

Spence smiled and knocked lightly on top of her head, making her laugh. He stood just as the bell rang and another customer came through the door. "Can I help you?"

A skinny man wearing a black derby and a tailored suit approached the counter, while looking around the store. "I'm heading north and need some supplies." He pulled a paper from his breast pocket and handed it to Spence. "I understand that these items are necessary."

Dollars danced before his eyes as he scanned the extensive list. "Yep, that'll do you. If you want to pick out your clothing, I'll get the dried goods." Spence moved around the store collecting navy beans, flour, rolled oats, yeast, borax and tinned matches. He added a sleeping bag, pup tent and lantern to the pile on the floor.

By the time the would-be prospector had changed his suit jacket to a duck coat, replaced his derby with a cowboy hat and his shoes with heavy boots, he looked a little less like a bank clerk and more like a prospector albeit a greenhorn since he was entirely too clean. "Is that everything?" he asked, setting a pair of buckskin gloves on the counter and looking at the stack of supplies.

"You got a pack horse?"

The would-be prospector scratched the back of his neck. Clearly he hadn't thought about having to carry all of his new possessions.

Spence sighed, anxious not to lose any of the sale, but aware that the man would have to purchase some of these items after he got off the boat in Alaska. "Look, take as much as you can carry onto the boat. The rest you'll have to get in Skagway even though the prices are higher there."

"Oh." The man nodded. "Right."

Spence helped him decide what was absolutely necessary and then added up the purchases. The man pulled an expensive-looking wallet from his pocket and paid the figure without flinching. Spence wondered why someone so well-off was going to seek his fortune in the frozen tundra, but some men were just addicted to taking a gamble.

"It's exciting, isn't it?" The man rested an arm on the counter, ready to chat. "Gold nuggets big as hen's eggs they say, there for the taking."

You can pluck them from the bottom of a stream like you would a pebble.”

“So they say.”

The man waved a hand as though shooin a fly. “But that’s not even the reason I’m going. Your whole life drags along. Nothing ever happens and then there’s something like this—a chance to see mountains and Eskimos and the aurora borealis. Alaska’s the final frontier. I’m going for the adventure, you know?”

Spence nodded, remembering the charge he used to get from moving on when things got too dull, seeing new cities, bedding new women, riding a riverboat one day, a cattle car the next, going wherever the wind took him.

“Adventure in Alaska!” the man repeated, tipping his new cowboy hat back on his head. “Don’t you want to see it?”

Spence felt a tug on his pants leg and glanced down at Lydia.

She held up the green spool of thread. “I decided he’s not a bad guy after all,” she confided.

He grinned and swooped her up in the air before depositing her on the counter, where she kicked the heels of her little shoes against the side of the display case.

“Naw,” he told the prospector. “I’ve got all the adventure I can handle right here.”

About the Author

To learn more about Bonnie Dee, please visit <http://bonniedee.com>.
Send an email to Bonnie Dee at bondav40@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo!
group to keep updated on her new releases.
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bonniedee>

When a man sets out to tame a strong-willed woman, he'd best hang on to his hat.

Taming Eliza Jane

© 2007 Shannon Stacey

Will Martinson, the town doctor, already has a heap of troubles on his plate, what with a pregnant whore, an ailing friend and a sheriff with a bad habit of shooting people. The last thing he needs is a strong hankering for a woman who thinks it's her duty to turn a man's life upside-down.

Eliza Jane Carter is a woman on a mission. She's going to improve the lives of the women in Gardiner, Texas before moving on to the next town. But when her finances take a turn for the worse and her chaperone heads for the hills, Eliza Jane is stranded in a town full of riled up menfolk, a gun-happy sheriff and one handsome doctor who makes her question everything she ever believed about the love between a man and a woman.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Taming Eliza Jane*:

Women, in general, were more of a pain in the ass than a lumpy saddle. And whores, in particular, could drive a sober man to go looking for the bottom of a bottle.

The one between whose thighs Will Martinson currently knelt—a particular favorite of his by the name of Sadie—giggled again, causing her ample breasts to shake. It was more of a distraction than any man could withstand. But Sadie liked baring them, even though he'd told her time and time again he had no need to see them.

“It ain't supposed to tickle, Sadie.”

“I ain’t laughin’ at no tickle. Was laughin’ at your face—so serious and businesslike.”

Will pushed to his feet and flipped Sadie’s skirt down over her splayed thighs. “When were your last courses?”

The amusement drained from the pretty whore’s face. “Do I gotta baby in me, Doc?”

Will sighed and closed up his bag. His monthly health checks at the Chicken Coop were usually uneventful. Miss Adele took good care of her girls, and taught them to care for themselves. But he was especially fond of Sadie—a dirt-poor Southern farm girl who’d probably never make it to California no matter how much time she spent on her back—and her expression damn near broke his heart.

“I think you do, Sadie.” And not the first inkling of which of her numerous customers may have fathered it. Not that it mattered. A whore’s bastard was a child only the mother would love.

“How long can I work?”

His fingers tightened on the straps of his medical bag. “You should get on the next stage and go home, sweetheart. I’ll pay your passage if you don’t have enough money tucked away. Tell your folks you had a husband but he got killed.”

A look of revulsion passed over her face. He saw that look a lot if he mentioned *home* during his visits to the Coop. What horrors these girls had been born into that made it preferable to spread their legs for an endless stream of strange men, he couldn’t even begin to guess.

“I asked you,” Sadie insisted, some of the sweetness gone from her voice, “how long can I work?”

Looking down into her pretty hazel eyes, framed by a mass of golden curls, he almost offered to marry her. She’d make a right sweet wife and she could be a proper mother to her baby. And if the people of Gardiner

took issue with their doctor marrying a whore, why they could deliver their own babies and set their own goddamn broken bones.

He took a deep breath and settled his hat on his head. But, *hellfire*, he couldn't save them all.

"I guess until the men ain't willing to pay for you anymore," he replied in a voice heavy with regret.

Will walked out of the Chicken Coop with an aching heart and a gut churning with frustration. The last person he expected to see waiting for him was the sheriff, who usually gave the only whorehouse in town a wide berth.

Adam Caldwell was damn near the best friend Will had ever had, but he could be as much a pain in the ass as the whores at times. He wasn't sure he had the patience for him right now.

The sheriff fell into step beside him on the plank sidewalk. Will knew they made a noticeable pair. Adam was dark and forbidding. Over six feet of sun-darkened muscle, black shirt and a black hat covering long black hair, with unforgiving eyes almost as dark. They all figured there was some Indian in him somewhere, but no man had yet had the balls to ask him outright.

Will himself was as tall, but he was leaner, with an open, friendly air about him. White shirt with cuffs rolled to the elbows tucked into denim pants. His battered, brown Stetson covered sandy hair he kept trimmed off his ears and neck. And the ladies sure did tend to go on about his blue eyes.

The only other things they had in common were the tin stars—Will liked to pin his on his doctoring kit—and the holsters low on their hips. Will Martinson had sworn to preserve life, but he was also the only man Adam trusted to back him up. The sheriff's reputation went a long way

toward keeping the peace, but when there was need for a deputy, Will just told himself there was more than one way to preserve a life.

“Trouble?” Adam finally asked when Will didn’t talk just to fill the silence as he was wont to do.

“Sadie’s with child.”

Adam shrugged. “Can’t help those who don’t wanna be helped, Doc.”

Hell, he knew that. But he wasn’t in the mood to hear it just yet. “Heard at the Coop some woman got off the stage and stayed off.”

It was a rare event for a woman to stay in town, unless her intention was a room at the Chicken Coop. Word of her had spread through Gardiner like wildfire.

“Yup. Ain’t good.”

Will waited for his friend to go on with a growing sense of aggravation. *Hellfire*, he’d had easier conversations with mules. “Why ain’t it good? She somebody you’ve heard of?”

“Yup. Eliza Jane Carter. Likes to ride into town, get the women all riled up about demanding their rights and shit, then she skedaddles.”

“She stayin’ a while?”

“Looks like.”

Will knew his friend was mulling over the woman’s unwelcome presence in his town and her potential for troublemaking, but all he could think about was how the woman could maybe talk some sense into Sadie. Tell her there were better ways for her and her child to make it in the world.

Adam sighed and pushed his hat back on his head. “If the women gettin’ riled up gets the men riled up, we could have us some trouble.”

Damnation. He didn’t need spectacles to see where Adam was heading with this. “Dammit, Adam, I’m a doctor, not a nanny.”

“Better job for you than me. I ain’t so good with diplomacy.”

“Diplomacy? You? Shit, they say you shot a man for calling your horse ugly.”

The sheriff shrugged. “He lived. And my horse ain’t ugly.”

Fact was, Sheriff Caldwell’s gelding was the ugliest son of a bitch to ever stand on four legs. A sane man would have shot the creature just to save his own eyesight. But that horse had speed and stamina the likes of which Will had never seen, and he would run until his heart exploded for Adam. He was loyal in a way Will hadn’t come across even in a good dog, and certainly never in another person. Didn’t change the fact the beast was damn ugly, though. Folks had just gotten real quiet about it.

“I ain’t asking you to marry the woman, Doc. Just keep an eye on her.” When Will hesitated, Adam shrugged again. Hell, he hated that—made Will want to shove the sheriff’s head so far down his neck he could never shrug his shoulders again. “I’d hate for her to cause trouble. Seems a mighty shame to shoot a woman.”

Will laughed at the blatant attempt at blackmail, some of the tension easing from his body. “Even you wouldn’t shoot a woman, you ornery son of a bitch.”

He looked up in time to see a damn fine looking woman step out of the hotel. She was tall and thin, but not so thin she didn’t have rounded breasts and hips that like to make a man’s mouth water. “Is that her?”

“Must be.”

Will smiled and pushed his own hat back a little further on his head. “It *would* be a damn shame to have to shoot her.”

“Yup.”

She liked to get women all riled up about their rights, did she? “Could be she starts causing too much trouble I’ll have to put her over my knee and spank some sense into her.”

And damned if he didn't get so riled up himself he had to walk down the sidewalk with his bag held in front of his crotch like a schoolboy.

Love is the last thing a lone woman in the West should believe in, but the heart doesn't always listen to good sense.

Let Me Love You

© 2007 Mary Wine

With a spirit as wild as the West, Brianna Spencer faces a hard life in the small town of Silver Peak. Her father has not returned from spring hunting, but no way is she listening to anyone who says her father is dead. He's delayed...that's all.

When Sloan McAlister finds Brianna walking the docks to pay down a bank note, she grabs his attention. The docks aren't meant for her caliber of woman. Yet the West is ruled by one thing, the need to survive. Sloan soon finds himself right in the middle of a claim-jumping family that considers Brianna easy prey while her father's out of the picture.

His better judgment says to walk away. But after one stolen kiss, Sloan refuses to do anything of the sort. If she's going warm any man's bed, Brianna will marry him. However, Brianna wants more than his strong arm to back up her father's property. It's his love or nothing.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Let Me Love You*:

He shouldn't touch her.

That thought didn't stick. Sloan wasn't sure it even left a trail as it slipped right out of his brain to make room for the hunger that was doubling in size as he watch Brianna work the last of her coat buttons. A smile touched his lips at the innocent picture she made in the coatroom—she was still wearing her gloves and her fingers were clumsy on the buttons due to the fabric coating her fingers. A silvery giggle escaped her lips as she stopped and tugged her gloves off before stuffing them into a coat pocket. Music floated in on the wind as the light flickered over her smile. She was humming with the fiddle as she shrugged out of her jacket and turned around to place it on a hook.

Brianna had to rise up onto her toes to reach a free hook. The walls already strained under the number of coats and shawls hanging there. It didn't bother her. In fact, it added to the festive atmosphere. A pair of male hands suddenly appeared over hers and plucked her coat from her. A little gasp escaped her lips as sensation rippled along her skin from the contact of bare fingers against bare fingers. It was such a silly thing to notice so intently, but little goose bumps spread along her arms.

Her coat landed on a hook that was sure a whole lot easier for Sloan McAlister to reach with his towering height. Brianna wasn't even certain her head came to the man's shoulders. She turned around and discovered it didn't. Her breath got stuck in her throat as she tipped her chin up to look at his face. It was strange the way her body quivered. On some level, she actually recognized what his skin smelled like and something in her belly jumped at that scent. There was no room to retreat among the coats and wraps. Trapping her, once more close to his frame. The level of awareness she had developed for him was astounding. She felt drawn to him even as her common sense warned her to run.

"Thank you. Guess I should be on time if I want to hang up my coat."

Brianna stared at the way he looked at her. It was an odd detail and her brain insisted on noticing his gaze on her mouth. A shiver raced up her arms, shaking her body hard enough for Sloan to see in the poor light. One corner of his mouth rose slightly as his hand brushed her cheek. The skin-to-skin contact felt so good it was almost exciting. Sloan stepped closer and her foot moved back. The coats wouldn't let her retreat any farther though, forming a soft mountain of fabric that pressed her towards Sloan. His hand moved to her lips where he traced them with his thumb.

Brianna gasped as sensation surged through her. She had no idea her skin could be so aware of a single touch. Her heart raced beneath her corset and her increased respiration drew the warm scent of Sloan's skin deep into her lungs. She'd never imagine that she might like the way any human smelled but tonight, she enjoyed the scent of warm male skin that came with Sloan.

“You’re standing under the mistletoe.”

She lifted her eyes to look for the little green plant and Sloan leaned down to kiss her. She gasped as he slipped an arm around her to hold her in place. Her hands landed on the wide chest that had tempted her since last night. Each fingertip was alive with awareness as he took command of her mouth.

Who could have explained to her that a man’s kiss might burn? Brianna twisted as Sloan’s mouth pressed her lips farther apart and the tip of his tongue gently moved over her lower lip. He didn’t rush the kiss. It was slow and firm, pressing her mouth open by small, steady degrees. She felt the brush of his fingers along the bare nape of her neck as he gently gripped the tender area, tipping her head back to offer her mouth more fully to his. Heat surged through her blood, igniting a need to get even closer to his body. Her fingertips lamented the fabric preventing her from touching him. A deep groan shook his chest before his tongue thrust into her mouth, breeding an answering whimper from her. His tongue stroked hers and pleasure swirled around her brain so thick, thinking was impossible. Brianna was more interested in lifting her tongue to join the dance and Sloan didn’t disappoint her. His tongue twisted with hers as he held her neck in place with that large hand.

A moment later she was free. Sloan stood looking at her with a dark hunger flickering in his eyes. Brianna stared at that emotion as she tried to force her mind to tell her what it was. Her body seemed to understand. Her belly was twisting and her blood racing, but she couldn’t quite form a word to describe the flood of sensations that look brought on. Only one thing she knew for certain: she wanted Sloan to kiss her some more.

And she wanted to kiss him back.

That truth frightened her. She knew so little about this man, yet her body was ready, even eager, to offer up her chastity to him. Brianna lifted a hand to cover her mouth as she stared at the hard desire displayed on his face. Sloan was watching, waiting to see what she did in response to his liberty-taking. A Christmas kiss beneath the mistletoe was a quick press of lips. Not the hungry, ravishing embrace he’d just stolen that

burned through her senses. Her mouth tingled, sparking a hunger that she was quite at a loss as to how to deal with.

She should slap him or find some sharp, insulting comment to lay on his ears for his boldness. Berate him for acting like a cad. But the thing that kept her staring in stunned silence was the fact that she'd enjoyed it. Her body was saying yes and Brianna wasn't a hypocrite, even if she was weak enough to like his kiss. Heat flowed through her like a river. Insane ideas danced across her imagination, tempting her to reach for him and press her own kiss against his mouth. Return his boldness, measure for measure. It wasn't a ladylike notion at all.

Oh, her mother had certainly tried to teach her better, but the heat bleeding across every inch of her skin only proved Brianna was an extremely poor student.

"It's November. Not Christmas."

Sloan nodded as he gripped his belt. "So it is."

He didn't sound repentant, not one bit. Most men would at least offer an apology for stealing such a kiss right in the church entryway. "Told you not to trust any man. I wanted to kiss you, so I did it. The rules don't really matter when I know how to get around them."

"Kissing me was meant as some kind of warning?"

He jerked slightly, and gripped his belt tighter. His gaze moved for a brief moment as he checked either side of them for any approaching company. When his attention was once again centered on her, a warning flared in his dark eyes.

"Kissing you was enjoyable. I liked it so much, you'd better get inside before I forget you're a virgin."

The knuckles on his hands turned white and Brianna shivered. She could see a battle to let her go burning in his dark eyes, like he was arguing against some inner beast to do the right thing and treat her like a lady.

The horrible reality was a part of her didn't want Sloan to win that fight. The light in the hall suddenly lost its beckoning appeal as Brianna fought the desire to let Sloan pull her away into some dark shadow

where they could explore the heat their skin created when they were pressed together. Discover what it was like to be stroked along every part of her body that her dress covered. Her thoughts shocked her as much as they excited her. Forcing her mind to return to the sharper edges of reality, she recalled the face of the last female she'd seen leaving town as a fallen woman. There wouldn't be any reprieve from the judgment of the community and Sloan McAlister didn't strike her as the marrying sort.

“You can stop worrying about me, Mr. McAlister. I heard you just fine and I certainly don't need a man kissing me because he feels sorry for my ignorance. I assure you I can get a kiss without making a man feel pity for me.”

It might not be the wisest thing that had ever rolled out of her mouth, but she wasn't going to scurry into the church with her tail tucked between her legs. The man bred a need inside her to prove she was strong enough to handle anything. She didn't want him to see her as weak.

His eyes flashed dark warning at her before she lifted her chin and turned her back on him. Her neck tightened as she moved through the entryway, unsure if her boots were going to remain on the floor. She'd tossed her words at him like a challenge. No way was she was going to whimper because he'd treated her like a woman.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com