

AMAYA'S KEEP

by

Donna McGillivray

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

Amaya's Keep

“...Amaya and Tyler are interesting characters with well-developed personalities. Their relationship progresses at a realistic pace. It is fascinating to watch as the love between them grows and deepens. The sensual tension between them is visible. The supporting characters are well rounded and help to make the storyline more complete. The setting is nicely described and befitting to the storyline. Ms. McGillivray is a talented author who has penned a terrific tale that I would definitely recommend to other readers. *Amaya's Keep* is sure to appeal to those who enjoy their romance with a Scottish flavor.”

Susan White, Reviewer for Karen Find Out About New Books
Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

“...Ms. Swanson has written a magical book that sparks the imagination and immerses the reader into a colorful world. I loved every moment of reading about Amaya's dream castle and the love between Amaya and Tyler. This book is filled so much with colorful characters and descriptive details that I did not want to put it down. Thank you for a magical journey.”

Laura, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

“*Amaya's Keep* was a magnificently tender and charming story to curl up and read. I loved each and every character in this story from Amaya to the patrons of Amaya's Keep.

I loved every step through this book and I was totally engrossed in it from start to finish. This is a book that I recommend because not only does it entail romance and love of life but it also features a ghost that cares so deeply for his granddaughter that he finds it hard to leave her.”

Sheryl for eCataRomance reviews

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family for their constant love, support, and encouragement.

Chapter 1

Amaya Mayberry was in the middle of an important financial meeting with the heads of one of the most prominent advertising agencies in Chicago, when her life tripped from reality to fantasy in the blink of death.

While heading that board meeting, she was interrupted by her administrative assistant. Mrs. Anderson cracked the door and stuck her head in. "Ms. Mayberry, you have a phone call."

Annoyed her meeting had been interrupted, she spoke sharply. "Tell whoever it is I'll call them back."

Mrs. Anderson shook her head. "Ms. Mayberry, it's your mother. I think you had better take it in my office."

Amaya made her apologies and left the room. She spoke very few words. "Oh, no!" Her face went ashen and she leaned on the desk for support as her legs began to buckle. "Yes, I'm on my way."

Composing herself, Amaya thanked Mrs. Anderson and gave her instructions to inform the board members that her grandfather had passed away and she was leaving immediately. She grabbed her briefcase and purse and hurried out the door.

Amaya had always enjoyed coming to Mississippi to visit her granddaddy and had recently submitted her request for a two week vacation for her annual visit, but this trip was unexpected and rushed.

* * * *

Now here she was in a rental car, driving from the airport to her grandfather's home where she would wait for her parents, who had gotten a later flight out and wouldn't arrive until the following morning. *Granddaddy is dead! What on earth am I going to do without him?* He had always been her best friend and confidant. Having grown up first in Zion and then Lake Forest, Illinois, she had spent every summer since she started school in Mississippi with her grandparents, and then her granddaddy after her grandma died. With both her parents being practicing attorneys, they were happy to have Amaya cared for by people who loved her. She would miss him so much. "If only I had planned my vacation sooner," she berated herself aloud, "I would have been here for him."

Amaya arrived at the old white farmhouse very late at night to find Granddaddy's nearest neighbor waiting up for her with hot coffee and a meal. Friends and neighbors had been bringing food, coffee and cold drinks to the house all day for Amaya, her parents, and the guests who would drop by. Homemade pies and cakes, rolls and brownies covered the counter, and the refrigerator was filled to overflowing with salads, dips and dishes waiting to be heated.

"I want to extend my condolences, Amaya. Your grandfather was a wonderful friend and neighbor," said Mrs. Woodrow.

Tears touched Amaya's eyes and she pushed her plate away and thanked Mrs. Woodrow, then insisted she go home to get some rest. "I'll be fine. Mom and Dad will be here first thing in the morning."

"I can stay with you tonight if you want company, Amaya. I don't mind at all."

"That won't be necessary, Mrs. Woodrow, I'm very tired. I think I'll just take a bath and go to bed." After seeing Mrs. Woodrow to the door, Amaya climbed the threadbare carpet covering the stairs, eased into the old-fashioned claw foot tub and cried her eyes out.

* * * *

Making coffee and nibbling on a roll, Amaya was relieved the night was over and her parents would arrive today. The eerie silence of the empty house and knowing she would never see her granddaddy again had made sleep impossible as she had tossed and turned and waited for the first light of day.

When the knock sounded on the door, Amaya rushed to open it. Expecting her parents or another neighbor laden with food, she was surprised to see a gentleman standing on the porch with briefcase in hand.

"Hello, may I help you?"

"Yes, Miss Mayberry, I am James Lowry, your grandfather's attorney. I have been instructed to meet with you and your parents as soon as possible."

This annoyed Amaya, but she ushered him in and offered him coffee. "Mr. Lowry, this isn't the best time to meet with us. My parents will be arriving at any moment and we have a lot of arrangements to make. Could this possibly wait until after the funeral?"

Mr. Lowry sipped his coffee and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "I am sorry to intrude, Miss Mayberry, but I have explicit instructions from your grandfather. I am to read the will as soon as your parents arrive."

"That's ridiculous; all Granddaddy had was this farm and maybe a few dollars in the bank. What could possibly be so important that it can't wait?"

"I can't say at the moment, but if it wouldn't be an intrusion, may I wait for your parents?"

Amaya waved away any more objections and poured more coffee. "Have you known my grandfather long, Mr. Lowry?"

"Oh my, yes. I have been his attorney for twenty-three years. I knew him well."

"Really?" quizzed Amaya. She wondered what on earth her granddaddy would need an attorney for, but only nodded and made small talk with the gentleman until she heard her parents come up the drive.

After Jeffery and Helen Mayberry had unloaded the car and refreshed themselves, they sat down for coffee with Mr. Lowry. "Well," questioned Helen, "what's so urgent you must see us now? We're very tired and my father has just passed away. I would think you could have waited a few days before disturbing us."

"I am sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Mayberry, but like I told your daughter, this was your father's request, not mine. He left a video tape for you to watch, and I was instructed to make sure you saw it the moment you arrived."

Amaya looked at her mother, "A video tape! Granddaddy didn't even own a video camera. This is ridiculous!"

"I assure you, it isn't." Mr. Lowry pulled the tape out of his briefcase. "I'm prepared whenever you're ready."

Helen looked at her husband and then her daughter. "I suppose we'd better get it over with. We have a lot of arrangements to make today."

When they were seated in the parlor, Mr. Lowry put the tape in the machine and clicked the button on the remote. Tears streamed from Helen's eyes as she saw her father sitting in his favorite chair smiling at the group.

“Helen, Jeffery, Amaya,” he began, “I asked Mr. Lowry to show you this tape, because I have something important to tell you. It’s about my papa, so here goes.” Barney MacTavish adjusted himself in his seat and continued.

“Helen, your grandpa, my papa, left some money to me when he died and I’ve had to make arrangements to pass it on. Now, I really didn’t know where this money came from, but rumor had it Papa had sheltered some gangsters and he was paid dearly for it. Then there was a rumor of bootlegged moonshine, but the story Ma told was that Papa went to Alaska and discovered a gold mine and sold it. Of course, we weren’t allowed to talk of it and Ma didn’t tell me that until after Papa died. I do remember him being gone all one summer and sort of remember being told he was in Alaska, so that’s the story I chose to believe at the time.

“Anyway, Papa never cared much for money and that was the way I was raised, so until he died, I didn’t know he was a wealthy man. Papa left me a considerable amount of money and this house I live in. Not caring much for money myself, but having a real good business head, I just invested what Papa left me and let it grow. I always provided for my family and Imogene never complained, so I figured she was happy with what we had. Of course, we did dip into it every now and then. Any man in his right mind knows you can’t make a decent living growing cotton, but I always enjoyed farming. It gave me pleasure to work the fields, to turn tiny seeds into cotton bolls, then to harvest it and see it be turned into so many uses.

“Helen, you know your mama’s love was her garden. I remember watching her plant the crocus, daffodils and tulips and her delight each spring when new yellowish-green shoots would poke out of the earth and grow to favor

us with beauty. Then roses in the summer and mums in the fall. What a comfort it was to sit there on the porch with my wife, knowing she provided this beauty for me to come home to after a hard day in the fields.”

Barney sighed and rubbed his temple before he spoke again.

“I guess I’m getting a little off track here with my remembrances, but I don’t have long to live, and knowing that, I enjoy reflecting on the good things God gave me and my family, but now, back to the money. Like I said, I did some investing and, lo and behold, I made some wise choices. I turned that fifteen million two hundred thousand dollars that my papa left me into over fifty million, not counting the stocks and bonds I haven’t done anything with for a while, but Amaya, you can keep an eye on those.”

Mr. Lowry clicked the button on the remote to stop the tape when Helen fainted. Jeffery barely had time to catch her before she fell off the chair and onto the floor.

Amaya ran to the kitchen for a glass of water and sprinkled a few drops in her mother’s face. Helen woke with a moan and looked around to orient herself to her surroundings.

“Did he say fifty million dollars?”

“Now, Mom, you know Granddaddy was kidding. There’s no way he had that kind of money. Just you wait, in a few minutes, he’ll tell us it was all a joke and leave the farm to one of us.” She stroked her mother’s head as Jeffery cradled his wife in his arms.

“That’s right, Helen,” he said. “It’s a joke.”

Helen nodded her head and raised herself back to the chair. “Of course it is,” she said warily, “but when did Papa develop a sense of humor?”

Mr. Lowry stood in front of the television set and spoke with authority. "Prepare yourselves, Mr. and Mrs. Mayberry, Miss Mayberry. This is no joke. He does have the money and it's at the First National Bank."

Helen gasped and took a sip of water. Jeffery's eyes opened wide and his mouth hung open. Amaya merely smiled and whispered to the room. "Who would have thought?"

Mr. Lowry clicked the button to turn the tape back on. Barney MacTavish looked tired, but straightened in his chair and continued his oration.

"Now here I am, preparing to die, and I have all this money to deal with. Like I said, I've never needed much money, but since I have it and I'm going to die, I need to prepare a will. I bought this video camera and had the man show me how to use it so I could tell you what I intend to do.

"Helen, as my only child, I'm leaving you ten million dollars and the farm to do with as you wish. My one request is you don't squander it away and have nothing to show for it. That husband of yours is a fine man and I think a lot of him. I expect the two of you will put the money to good use. I am sorry I didn't tell you I was sick, but I didn't want you worrying and hovering over me. You needed to be living your own life.

"Next, I want to tell you, Helen, I've left you a personal tape to view when you get back home. Meanwhile, your Aunt Linda has also been provided for. She took real good care of my Imogene before she died, and since Linda was her only sister, I've made sure she'll be set for life. You'll see her at the funeral, but I didn't want her here today. She has her own movie to watch.

“Now, Amaya, I want to tell you how much I always loved the way you called me Granddaddy. You said it was because you loved me like you did your daddy and that I was grand. Such a sophisticated word for so little a girl. Anyway, I never knew what you thought was so grand about me, but I loved it.”

Barney took on a dreamy expression and his tired eyes lit up. “Amaya, do you remember when you were little and I built you that little castle playhouse? How you loved playing with that, and remember how I read the book *Cinderella* to you almost every night you were here? I still have that castle in the attic and I go up every once in a while and remember how you enjoyed it.”

Amaya's eyes grew misty remembering along with her granddaddy and she nodded to the screen as Barney continued.

“Here I go rambling again.” Barney ran his hand over his face and through his hair. “Now, Amaya, I want you to remember our ancestors. I told you when I built that little castle that you were English and Scottish on my side of the family and Irish and Indian on your grandma's. I see my Imogene in you with your coal black hair and beautiful face, and it pleases me.

“I remember ever since you were little, you had an interest in how money worked. Me having a business mind, I was always going over the stock market pages of the paper and you would ask me about it. Over the years, we learned a lot about how money is invested and reinvested. When you graduated from college with a degree in business, I was so proud to see that although you had your grandma's beauty, you had my brain. So now, Amaya, I have a surprise for you. I made a film for you and made arrangements for you to see it the day after you lay my body to rest. Mr.

Lowry will guide you, so I'll leave it to him. I love you, Amaya and Helen, and yes, even you, Jeffery. You all go on living and loving and take care of yourselves, but don't grieve for me too much. I lived a long life and the way I wanted. I have no regrets.

"Bye now."

Mr. Lowry clicked the tape off. "Are there any questions?"

The group sat staring at Mr. Lowry for so long, the silence seemed deafening. When Amaya gained control, she said, "Mr. Lowry, I'm sure we'll have a lot of questions, but right now, I think we need time to absorb the reality of this."

"Yes, of course, Miss Mayberry." He handed her a card. "Here are my office and home phone numbers. Call if you need me. I'll go now and see you at the funeral day after tomorrow."

Helen nodded when he picked up his briefcase to leave, while Jeffery rose to shake hands with the attorney. Walking him to the door, Amaya asked, "Is this all true, Mr. Lowry?"

"It certainly is, Miss Mayberry, as you'll see the day after the funeral. You grandfather was an eccentric old man, but I liked and respected him."

"Thank you." Amaya took his hand to shake, watched from the porch until the man was out of sight, and then went to inspect her grandmother's flower beds. For the first time in her life, she bent down to inspect the yellowish-green shoots poking out of the earth and her eyes misted as she remembered her grandma and how many hours she'd spent planting and weeding in these very beds. Soon, the whole front of the house would be in bloom, along with the entire backyard, except for a small pathway

leading to the fields and around the house. After her death, Granddaddy had made certain his wife's flowers flourished each year.

* * * *

For two more days, friends and neighbors stopped at the house with food and beverages.

The day of the funeral was difficult, as they always are. After the service at the cemetery, most all of Granddaddy's friends and neighbors returned to the house, where the women heated food and placed it on the long dining room table for a meal and conversation, as was customary in the South.

It was evening before the last guest left for home, leaving only Helen, Jeffery and Amaya in the parlor. Having seen the video two days before, inheriting ten million dollars was a pleasant surprise for Helen, but it didn't take away the pain of losing her father. Even though she was now a wealthy woman, Helen had a responsibility to her clients and a trial starting the day after tomorrow in Chicago, so she and Jeffery prepared their bags to leave the following morning.

Amaya planned to stay on for the week. Granddaddy had said he had a surprise for her, but she was to wait until the following day to see the video. The surprise wasn't important, but she was looking forward to seeing Granddaddy's dear face on the screen and hearing his voice once again. Whatever he had in mind, she was certain he'd left her some money, which she didn't need but would accept, because it was what her granddaddy wanted.

Amaya climbed the stairs to the attic, where she found her castle sitting in the middle of the floor with the raven-haired Barbie doll wearing a princess crown perched in the turret, and Ken, as Prince Charming, below the window, as

if begging her to come down. Tears filled her eyes as she remembered the days and years of pleasure this castle had given her. When she found her bed and drifted off to sleep, dreams of white knights and the prince of the land asking for her hand kept her company during the night.

* * * *

The following morning, Mr. Lowry arrived shortly after Amaya's parents left and asked her to come with him.

"Where are we going, Mr. Lowry? I can watch Granddaddy's video here as well as anywhere."

"Yes you can, Miss Mayberry, but Mr. MacTavish left instructions for me to follow to the letter. I must insist you come with me."

Amaya, dressed in blue jeans and her Illinois State University sweatshirt, hadn't planned to leave the house, but grabbed her purse and jacket and silently went to the car. "Mr. Lowry, why all the secrecy? Where are we going?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Mayberry..."

"Amaya, please. I would prefer you call me Amaya."

"Very well, Amaya, your grandfather did say he had a surprise for you. I'm to reveal that surprise. It's all explained in the video you'll watch shortly."

Amaya leaned back and looked out the window. It was obvious Mr. Lowry wasn't going to tell her anything. She might as well enjoy the scenery. Relaxing for the first time in days, Amaya drifted off in a light sleep and dozed until she felt the car pull to a stop. Looking out the window, she saw nothing but trees in every direction. It appeared they were in the middle of a forest.

"Amaya, you need to wake up now, we're almost there."

“What are we doing in the middle of the woods?” she asked. Amaya would have been frightened, but in her heart, she knew her granddaddy would never entrust her to someone who would do her harm.

Mr. Lowry pulled the car back onto the asphalt road and said, “Amaya, you need to pay attention. Your surprise is right around this next curve.”

A small smile encouraged her and she thought, *what a kind gentleman Mr. Lowry is in his gray suit and pale yellow tie with matching gray hair*. He had a stocky build and looked more like he belonged in the hardware business than in an attorney’s office. As he rounded the curve, Amaya gasped.

She saw a wall of red brick and the words AMAYA’S KEEP arched above the open ornate metal gate. Standing tall in the distance, she could make out a red brick building, but this was no ordinary building. It was a castle, and as they approached, she saw the walls and turrets and balconies, along with the moat and water drifting lazily underneath the bridge. Mr. Lowry stopped the car on a real, honest-to-goodness drawbridge for a better look and to give Amaya a few moments to absorb the exterior before taking her inside.

Amaya sat dazed and stared at the building, which in her estimation had at least three floors, besides the attics and all the European-influenced turrets, spires and balconies. The tall windows and ornate carvings stood out against the red brick of the building. “What on earth?”

Mr. Lowry smiled again. He appeared excited to be the one to deliver this surprise to her. “This is it, Amaya. This is your surprise. Let’s go in and you can hear it from Barney yourself.”

Amaya was speechless as Mr. Lowry drove the car across the bridge and down the tan brick driveway. He

stopped in front of the steps leading to the entrance, where at least twenty people were lined up to greet her.

Amaya hesitated as Mr. Lowry held the car door open for her. "What...Mr. Lowry?"

"Your staff, Amaya."

"My what?"

Mr. Lowry took her arm and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "It will be all right, Amaya, come."

Resisting the numb feeling overwhelming her, Amaya allowed him to lead her to the steps and managed to nod as she passed by each staff member, then went quietly inside. She was led to a rather small room by castle standards, off what she assumed was the main drawing room. After seating her in a deep blue velvet-covered Elizabethan chair, Mr. Lowry sat opposite Amaya on its twin. A woman brought in a silver tray with a teapot and a dish of cakes and cookies. She set it down on the table between them, poured a cup of tea and handed it to Amaya. "Drink this, ma'am; it will help make you feel better."

Amaya took the cup and automatically lifted it to her lips. It did taste good and after a few sips, she was able to look Mr. Lowry in the eye. "I think I need to see that video now. What on earth has Granddaddy done?"

"Yes, Amaya, we'll just go to your personal sitting room. You have a television set up there." He led her up a long curving flight of stairs, then another flight to the third floor and down two long halls. The sitting room was large and fully furnished in comfortable, modern furniture with a door leading somewhere else, but Amaya didn't open that door. She sat on the coffee-colored leather sofa and stared at the blank screen until Mr. Lowry clicked the remote control to start the tape.

Barney MacTavish had a huge smile on his face and was rubbing his hands together with glee. Then he spoke.

“Well, Amaya, how do you like your castle? I promised you a surprise and I hope you like it, because I’ve spent the last three years getting it built. I want you to know this brain tumor they say I have has caused me a lot of trouble. When I first started getting the headaches, I had a lot of troubled dreams, thinking my Imogene was still alive and I had lost her, or wondering if when you die, is that the end, or is there a place to go and will I find my Imogene waiting there for me? I guess I decided I wanted to believe Imogene would be there waiting, and that just made me anxious to get to her. So anyway, when I got to the doctor and he sent me off to Memphis to get all those tests and they told me I was going to die, I had another worry. There was all that money I had piled up in the bank, and what was I going to do with it?”

Barney paused and sipped from a mug. Amaya watched her granddaddy sadly, and waited patiently for him to continue.

“I pondered on that for some time. I figured I could give it to you and your mama, but that wasn’t going to be much fun. Knowing you were a lot like me, I figured you would just put it to work and watch it grow, and how much fun would that be? Then one day after I had been in the attic looking at your little castle, it dawned on me that if I built you a castle, you might like it, and it sure would be an adventure for the both of us. I would get to build it, and you would get to have it. So, I set about getting it done.”

Barney sat reflectively for a moment, and then continued.

“I’m getting tired now, so I won’t go into detail, but there are conditions attached to your inheritance. I’m going

to have Mr. Lowry write it all down for you, and I'll leave it to him to make sure you get it. Just always remember I love you and want what is best for you. You read the letter and decide for yourself."

Again, Barney paused. To Amaya, he looked exhausted and it hurt to see her strong, vital granddaddy so worn out.

"I'm going to get off now, Amaya. I love you and please take care of yourself and find happiness."

When the screen went snowy and she heard the click of the remote, Amaya lifted her tear-glistened eyes to Mr. Lowry. He pulled out an envelope and handed it to her, along with a small box. Amaya opened the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper and began to read.

Dear Amaya,

I built this castle for your pleasure. I would like for you to have fun with it and try to think of living here as an adventure. You have always been a princess to me, so I think this is where you belong.

My wishes are that you live in the castle for one year, starting now. While you're here, I want you to start a business of your own. You're too smart to work for someone else and I have faith that you can do anything your heart desires.

I have provided a full staff and paid all their wages for the year. I've also left an allowance for the expenses to run Amaya's Keep.

If you choose to do this, all the money left will go to you alone. If you choose not to, the money will go to your mother and the castle will rot around itself in time, never to be used by anyone.

Amaya, go with your heart and find what you want out of life, and, if you are lucky, you may find your

Prince Charming and give me lots of little great-grandbabies to watch over.

Remember, I will always be with you in spirit, so don't hesitate to talk to me if you feel the need or desire.

Your loving granddaddy,

Barney MacTavish

Amaya laid the letter aside and said aloud, "Oh, Granddaddy, what in that brain tumor influenced mind have you done?"

Mr. Lowry remained quiet, giving Amaya time to absorb the information.

Amaya held the box in her hand and suddenly felt as though she would suffocate if she didn't get out of this room. She ran out the door, down the halls and down two flights of stairs to stop outside the double doors of the front entrance, gasping for breath and sobbing with all her heart. She slid down to sit on the top step and held her face in her hands as she sobbed and wailed and asked again, "Granddaddy, what have you done? Why didn't someone try to stop you?"

The butler stood at the door and Amaya's personal assistant stood off to the side of the stairs, both keeping an eye on the grieving girl and ready if she needed assistance. Amaya sobbed for a good quarter hour before the housekeeper stepped out with a brandy snifter of the amber liquid and silently handed it to her, along with a clean handkerchief.

Amaya lifted her head and nodded thanks to the woman. "I'm all right, really, thank you. This is just such a shock."

"Yes, ma'am, would you like to come in now?"

"I'll just sit here a while, if you don't mind." Amaya wiped her face, blew her nose and took a sip. The brandy burned her throat, but after a few minutes, it helped calm her down. Amaya knew this was the work of an ill mind and she could contest the will if she chose with a good probability of winning, but if this is what her grandfather wanted for her, how could she possibly turn him down?

As she sat on the step and gazed into the distance, she saw trees everywhere. She had no idea where this castle was located, only that it was somewhere in Mississippi, but for now, it didn't matter. *One thing at a time.*

It was a comfort to her to know her grandfather had spent the last three years of his life working on this for her, so how could she turn him down, especially in death? The decision was made as easily as choosing a slice of pie for dessert.

Returning to the foyer, she found Mr. Lowry waiting.

"We have some things to discuss now," he said, taking her arm again. "Lunch is ready, shall we go in?"

Amaya smiled at Mr. Lowry, then erupted in laughter. "Look at this! Isn't it the most gorgeous castle you've ever seen? Yes, let's go in to lunch. Definitely!"

Amaya sat at the head of a forty-foot table set with linen, crystal and china, while she wore faded blue jeans and a tattered sweatshirt. She giggled and said to Mr. Lowry, "You should have warned me. I'm a bit underdressed."

He smiled, "But then it wouldn't have been a surprise now, would it?"

Nibbling at her chicken salad, Amaya asked, "When do I have to take up residence here?"

Mr. Lowry put down his napkin. "You already have," and he nodded at her in conformation.

"You're kidding, right?" she asked in shock and indignation. "I have a job and an apartment. I left my car in Chicago. I have to return for a while. How about if I move in next month?"

Mr. Lowry became quite serious. "No, that won't do at all. If you accept the terms of your grandfather's will, you have to start immediately. I have a man waiting in your office to inform them you won't be returning and a mover in front of your apartment. I also have a driver waiting for word to drive your car down. You just have to accept the terms, and I make the phone calls."

"But you can't do that!"

"Oh but I can, and I will. Are you accepting the terms of your grandfather's will, Amaya, or not?" For the first time since meeting Mr. Lowry, his words were harsh.

Amaya was stunned. Here she was in a castle somewhere in the backwoods of Mississippi, which she hadn't known anything about a few hours ago, and she was expected to move in, right this minute! She almost felt like a prisoner. She left the table and walked into first one room, then another. The nerve of him telling her she couldn't go back home to give her boss notice or pack her things. *Who did he think he was?* Then she remembered. It wasn't Mr. Lowry, it was her granddaddy and he was a man that had loved her unconditionally all her life and never asked for anything in return. Amaya spoke aloud as if her grandfather were in the room with her. "Well, Granddaddy, it looks like you got your wish. I'm here, and here I'll stay for the year. I hope Grandma is there with you now, Granddaddy, scolding you for rushing me." She pushed a tress of hair behind her ear and looked heavenward in confusion before she returned to the dining room. When she sat down and began to finish her lunch,

she noticed a red tulip petal that had drifted down the table from the centerpiece to rest beside her plate.

“Are you all right, Amaya?”

“Yes, Mr. Lowry, I certainly am. You had better finish your lunch if you’re going to get those calls made. As for me, I’m going to explore my new home!” A smile crossed her face and carried to her eyes. “This is going to be an adventure, isn’t it?”

Mr. Lowry pointed to the box resting beside Amaya’s dish. In all the excitement, she’d forgotten about it. She twisted open the latch and raised the lid. Inside was a complete set of blueprints of the castle and grounds, a large set of keys and a tiny box, which she lifted out last. Inside that box lay a solid gold ring with a raised imprint of the castle, Amaya’s Keep, surrounded by emeralds, her birthstone. She slipped the ring on her finger and was not at all surprised when it fit perfectly. Gazing at the ring, tears filled her eyes. She wiped at her cheek with the linen napkin as one tear spilled out and ran down her face.

“There’s an inscription, Amaya. You might want to read it.”

Amaya slipped the ring back off her finger and held it to the light of the chandelier and read, “Find your Prince Charming here.”

She hung her head and spoke to her grandfather silently, “Oh, Granddaddy, what are your plans for me?”

Mr. Lowry rose from the table. “Thank you for lunch, but I must be going now.”

“What do you mean, you must be going? What am I supposed to do while you’re gone?” Amaya rose and taking Mr. Lowry’s arm, she followed him to the entrance, practically holding him back.

“Amaya, I don’t think you fully understand what’s expected of you,” he said. “This is your home now. Run it.”

All of a sudden, Amaya felt frightened as Mr. Lowry held out his hand to shake hers. “It will be all right, Amaya. You’re an adult and have a complete staff of servants. I left a copy of the will, along with the videotape, on the table in the foyer. I plan to overnight express a copy to your parents as soon as I return to my office to make the calls concerning your employment and belongings. Also, I will be available anytime you need me. My card is in the folder. Call me if you have any questions.”

Amaya shook his hand and reluctantly opened the door for him. “Thank you, Mr. Lowry. I think.”

He smiled at her again and nodded. “I’ll be in touch with you soon.”

Amaya watched as her butler, who had been hovering in the background, closed the door. He was a tall man and overly thin. He was dressed in a black formal suit and bow tie. His hair was gray and he appeared to be in his sixties. Hesitating in the foyer, she asked him, “What’s your name?”

“Niles Jordan, ma’am. Can I be of service?”

“Yes, Niles, can you tell me who’s in charge of the staff?”

“Yes, ma’am,” and he went on to explain that the cook, Laurie Barker, was responsible for the kitchen help and the housekeeper, Melinda Booth, the household maids. He was in charge of the gardener and oversaw the stable hands, as well as keeping inventory and household accounts, “With your inspection, naturally, ma’am.”

“Stables,” cried Amaya. “I have stables?”

“Oh yes, ma’am. You have twenty-five of the finest thoroughbred horses available.”

"Oh my God," she whined, and put her hand to her forehead.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

Amaya was lost in thought. *I have servants, lots of servants, a stable and stable hands. What do I do now?*

Niles stood ramrod straight, awaiting her instructions. He was English born and bred, but had immigrated to America as a young man. He'd worked for several very influential families and was preparing for retirement when this job opportunity came his way. It wasn't the outrageous salary that lured him to accept this position. It was the story behind the castle that intrigued him.

"Okay, Niles, I guess the first thing I have to do is figure out what's going on here. Could you get me a notepad and arrange for each member of the staff to see me in my sitting room one at a time, as soon as possible?"

"Yes, ma'am," and he tipped his chin and turned, preparing to leave.

"Oh, Niles?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Could you manage to find someone to get me a diet cola?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said and walked away, grinning after he turned. Niles suspected this lady was going to be a pleasure to work for.

Amaya found her way back to the comfortable sitting room and opened the door she had seen earlier. A huge, four-poster bed was arranged in an alcove in one corner with peach satin bedcovers and fine lace hanging from rods at the top and pulled around the bed as old-fashioned mosquito netting might have been years ago. There was a dresser and dressing table, along with a small desk, all in Louis XIV style. Cream-colored lace sheers hung on the

windows and heavy drapes of the same shade of peach as the bed coverings hung at the sides, ready to be closed if she desired. An ornate rug covered the floor, leaving a foot of hardwood exposed on all sides. The ceiling was high and decorated with princesses and fairies, which were both tasteful and gaudy. Amaya looked and laughed and looked some more. At the back of the room, hidden behind a screen, she found yet another door, which led to a large bathroom with gold faucets and marble counters. She shook her head at the extravagant, rich trimmings and laughed out loud.

"Ma'am," spoke the maid, holding the tray with a glass of soda, "is something wrong?"

Amaya shook her head. "Oh, no. I was just enjoying the décor." She picked up the glass and took a deep swallow. "Thank you. Please send Niles up."

"Yes, ma'am, right away."

Niles arrived carrying a leather notebook with a notepad inside and a gold pen. "Will this do, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you, Niles, please sit down."

Sitting down opposite her, Niles answered Amaya's questions knowledgeably. He told her the staff resided in the west wing on the third floor, with the exception of the gardener, Mr. Anderson, who had a cottage for himself, his wife, who was the laundress, and their son, Johnny, who helped with the gardening. The gentleman in charge of running the stables, Mr. Sykes, and his hands resided in the bunkhouse.

Several more questions were answered involving the location of the castle and the nearest town and how far away they were from civilization. Amaya was pleased to hear she had neighbors within five miles of her property line and a small town seven miles beyond that.

When she'd exhausted her most pressing questions, she asked Niles to send the housekeeper in and requested that he and the staff address her as Miss Amaya, explaining that Miss Mayberry was much too formal to be used in her residence. Amaya had interviewed the housekeeper, Melinda, and several of the maids, when a young maid named Essie entered. The maid hesitated. "Ma'am, there is someone here to see you."

"Really, who is it?"

"She gave the name of Linda Billings, ma'am."

"Aunt Linda!" Amaya shouted as she ran out of the room, through the halls and down the stairs.

When Amaya saw her Aunt Linda seated in the drawing room, she couldn't stop herself from grabbing her relative up and hugging the woman fiercely. "Aunt Linda, I'm so glad you're here. I think I'm going out of my mind."

Linda hugged her back, then drew her to the settee and handed her a videotape.

"Oh no! Not another one."

Chapter 2

Linda held out the videotape to Amaya. "This one is mine. I thought you might want to see it."

"I've had almost more than I can absorb today. Please, just tell me what's on it." Amaya looked at her Aunt Linda pleadingly.

"Amaya, you know how much I liked Barney, but I think he had a screw loose. Look at this place, and where did all his money come from? Did you know he left me set for life?"

"I'm glad to hear that, Aunt Linda. As for all this, I have no idea, but I do intend to find out. What I do know, is that I have to stay here for one year and somehow manage to start a business of my own."

"Did he tell you what I have to do?"

"No, what is it? Is it too difficult for you? Surely Granddaddy wouldn't make things too hard for you."

"He left instructions that I was to stay with you for the year, starting right now!"

Amaya grabbed her aunt in a bear hug. "Thank you, thank you. I've been so frightened. I don't know where to begin. This is wonderful. Oh, do you mind terribly?"

“Not at all, I’m glad you’re pleased. I was afraid I would be in your way, and if I don’t stay, I lose my inheritance.”

“How could you be in my way?” Amaya waved a hand around at the vastness of the castle. “I cannot think of anyone I would rather have here with me than you. Come on, let’s find you a room.” Amaya stepped to the door and shouted, “Niles!”

Niles seemed to appear from nowhere. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Niles, this is my aunt, Linda Billings. She’ll be living here with me. I need to find her a room. Would you get Melinda for me, please?”

“Yes, Ms. Amaya.”

When the housekeeper arrived, Amaya explained what she wanted and asked Melinda to assist in finding a room for her aunt.

“Her room is waiting, ma’am. This way, please.”

Now why didn’t that surprise Amaya? She hugged her aunt again and let out a whoop that shocked the housekeeper, and had Niles running to see if she was hurt. Amaya began giggling and infected Linda so they barely made it up the stairs holding onto each other.

Linda Billings was a fine woman and friend to everyone she met. Her sister once described her as everyone’s mother, so it was no surprise Amaya felt so close to her. Having raised her boys and buried her husband, Linda didn’t see the need to remarry, but saw no reason not to have some fun while she was still alive and well, so when she was ordered to stay at Amaya’s Keep for the year in order to keep her inheritance, she couldn’t wait to begin.

Linda’s room wasn’t as huge as Amaya’s, but large by any other standards, and included a sitting room and bath. It was well furnished and tastefully decorated in shades of

blue, which was Linda's favorite color. She and Amaya had collapsed in the side chairs when Essie entered the room with tea. Setting the tray down, Essie asked, "Shall I pour?"

Amaya said, "No, thank you, Essie, you may go."

Linda looked at Amaya inquiringly. "Why, Aunt Linda, we're having tea!"

"Good grief. These little sandwiches are made with cucumbers, of all things. Can you imagine?"

Amaya grew somber. "Aunt Linda, I think Granddaddy wanted us to have the traditional castle experience, but I think I need to speak to the cook. Tea is not my cup of tea!"

Linda laughed at the pun and Amaya suggested they find the kitchen to see what they could do about getting a cup of coffee.

When the ladies ran into Niles on the way, Amaya inquired as to where the kitchen was located.

"Miss Amaya, ma'am, you must not go in there. Tell me what you require and I'll have someone fetch it for you."

"Sorry, Niles, this is my castle and I am going to the kitchen. Are you going to direct me, or do I have to find my own way?"

Niles looked reprovingly at the ladies, but directed them to the kitchen. "Thanks, Niles," Amaya said, and gave him a smile accompanied by a wink.

When Linda and Amaya arrived in the kitchen, a startled cook and three kitchen helpers met them. When they found the coffee pot, poured themselves each a cup and sat down at the kitchen table, they could feel the tension in the air.

"Okay, ladies, come over here and introduce yourselves. I didn't have time to meet everyone today. This is my aunt, Linda Billings."

Laurie Barker introduced herself as the head cook and tried in vain to shoo the ladies out of the kitchen. They also met Nina, Diana and Bethany. After introductions were made, Amaya insisted Laurie get a cup of coffee and sit down with them.

When Laurie hesitated, Amaya said sternly, "I have some things to go over with you, Laurie. Now sit down, please."

Laurie sat, holding onto her coffee mug as though she were afraid to take a drink. "What can I do for you, ma'am? Was there something wrong with the tea?"

"Okay, listen up everyone," Amaya said loudly. "You are to call me Miss Amaya. I don't care for *ma'am*. You can reserve that for my Aunt Linda. Now if the rest of you will excuse us, I would like to speak with Laurie."

The three kitchen helpers scurried out, leaving Laurie in fear for her job. She was a Southern woman and this English/Scottish castle routine was alien to her, but she was trying.

"Now, Laurie, please tell me what you were told was expected of you."

Laurie said that she was to cook for the lady of the house in the manner expected in a castle. She picked up a booklet and two recipe books that had been given to her, one for English food, and the other for Scottish. "It says in here you have tea every afternoon at four with little sandwiches from the recipe book and scones with clotted cream and cakes. I know I'm not familiar with English and Scottish ways, but I have been reading the books, and I can learn. Tell me what you want and I can make it for you."

Linda leaned over and hugged Laurie, who was on the brink of tears. "You poor darling," she soothed. "Don't you worry about it; we'll fix it all up."

Amaya patted Laurie's back and said, "Sure, it's going to be fine. The first thing you need to do is get to know us. I drink coffee and eat one piece of toast with peanut butter for breakfast, so don't plan on making rashers and kidney pie, because I'm not going to eat it. Linda, what about you?"

"I just take a bowl of grits and toast, but I can make that myself."

"Oh no! You can't," cried Laurie. "I'll make it. That's my job. But what about the leg of lamb I was preparing for dinner?"

Amaya gave Laurie a mischievous grin. "Feed it to Niles. I'm sure he'll appreciate it. Do you have time to make a meatloaf and mashed potatoes for dinner? If not, Aunt Linda will make it for me. She always does when I come to see her."

Laurie relaxed and brought the coffee pot to the table as they discussed the meal planning and her general duties, until Amaya rose. "Thank you, Laurie; I've enjoyed visiting with you. One more thing, I haven't had time to go over the terms of my grandfather's will, so if you want to keep on practicing those English and Scottish ways a bit until I get settled, I'd appreciate it. Just don't force them on me for a while." She gave Laurie one of her brightest smiles, and she and Linda climbed the dreaded stairs again.

* * * *

By the time dinner was over and Amaya found her small suitcase waiting in her room, she bathed and slipped into a pair of flannel shorts and a t-shirt to sleep in. She picked up the case to put in the closet and found a complete wardrobe of clothing, none of which were faded jeans or flannel shorts. Amaya was constantly amazed by her grandfather's plans and when she fingered the fine suits, the

silk blouses and the many glamorous evening gowns, she slid to the floor, amused and overwhelmed at the same time.

“Granddaddy, I know you had a plan here, but I’m not quite sure what it is yet. I hope you haven’t gotten me in over my head.”

Amaya hadn’t even been in the castle for a full day, when she found herself talking to her granddaddy as though he were in the room with her. After less than a day, she was questioning her sanity in being here at all, much less agreeing to stay the entire year.

Glancing at the clock and realizing it was only nine at night, Amaya decided she would take a tour of the castle the next day and go over the blueprints tonight to help her find her way around.

Not ready to concentrate on the will, she decided to call her mother in the morning. After all, since her mother was an attorney, she would be able to explain it so Amaya would be able to understand it all. Laying the large blueprints on the floor and leaning over them, she found first her room and then Linda’s. She decided to follow the rooms around to see what came next. Hearing a light knock, Amaya opened the door to find Aunt Linda standing in the hall.

“I couldn’t sleep and wondered how you were doing.”

“I’m just checking out the blueprints for this place. Come in and we’ll do it together. Want some wine?”

Linda was delighted. Being alone in that big room had her a little on edge and after all the excitement of the past couple days, she couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to be alone. Amaya found the intercom system and buzzed the kitchen. When Nina answered, Amaya asked, “Could we have a bottle of wine, please? Whatever you choose, we just want

a drink.” Looking back at her aunt, she removed her finger from the intercom and giggled, “Wine is rather English, isn’t it?”

Linda laughed and settled her round body on the floor to look at the prints, “If it’s not, we’ll dub it English.”

Amaya and Linda sipped their wine and nibbled on cheese and fruit as they went over the blueprints and found so many, many rooms. The entire second floor housed guest rooms and on closer inspection, first Amaya and then Linda, found secret passages, hidden rooms and alcoves. There was even a priest’s room in the library and a chapel next to that. Linda whooped with joy when she found an elevator hidden behind a sliding full-length portrait of Amaya in the lower hall. It rose to the second floor, where it was hidden behind an ornate shelf displaying the MacTavish coat of arms, and to the third, where heavy drapes hid a small sitting area with a table and two chairs. The entire platform slid aside to reveal the elevator doors.

“Look at this, Aunt Linda, Granddaddy must have had a Clue game,” Amaya said as she pointed out four secret passages leading from the kitchen to different areas of the first floor and a whole set of hidden stairs going up to the second and third floors, where more secret passages appeared. They also found the stables and garage, a greenhouse and a labyrinth in the back garden, but the most exciting find of all was the courtyard Linda pointed out. The castle was built in a square with a large open area in the center, surrounded by the building itself. The blueprint showed a rose garden and sitting area, as well as walking paths and a very tall fountain.

“Come on, let’s look.” Amaya ran to the French doors and stepped out on the balcony to look over the railing. Linda followed close behind. What they saw was a garden,

but it was so large, Amaya was awed. This castle had to be enormous to have such a large courtyard in the center of it. They stood together enjoying the night. When a shooting star fell to earth, it gave Amaya cause to ask, "Do you suppose Granddaddy planned that too?"

* * * *

After an amazingly restful night, Amaya enjoyed the simple breakfast Essie brought to her room. Dressing in jeans and a sweater, she sat down to plan her day. First, she wanted to meet the rest of the staff and then after lunch, she was hoping to recruit Aunt Linda to tour the castle.

Asking Linda to sit in while she interviewed the remaining staff, they again congregated in Amaya's sitting room. The first person Niles brought to her came as a shock to Amaya. Tyler MacGregor was a young man she judged to be about her age with shiny, red curls and a strong, virile body. Niles introduced him as her assistant. She shook his hand and motioned for him to sit down. Ignoring his striking appearance and the butterflies racing around in her stomach, she began the interview. "Tyler, did you receive instructions on your duties?"

Tyler smiled, displaying straight white teeth, and his eyes crinkled up in the corners. His Scottish accent was strong and Amaya suspected he was exaggerating it a bit. "Yes, ma'am. I was told to do whatever was required."

"Uh-huh. Well now, what would that be?" Amaya felt a flush spread across her face at his response, but with effort, she managed to control it.

"I don't know, ma'am. I'm prepared and waiting for your instructions."

Laughter bubbled out of Amaya and she bent over in the chair trying to control her outburst, to no avail. After

several minutes of Tyler enjoying watching this beautiful woman lose control, Linda took over.

"Tyler, excuse us, please. We haven't had time to consider our requirements yet."

"I understand," he said as he rose to leave. "I'll just be in my office, playing video poker on the computer until you need me."

Tyler's casual attitude caused Amaya to settle down a bit and she asked, "What office?"

"Oh, I have an office right outside yours," he smiled, knowing she had no idea she even had an office, much less where it was located.

"I suppose Granddaddy has a plan for you too, Tyler. As soon as I finish up here and have lunch, I'll be touring the castle. Tell me where your office is and perhaps I'll interrupt your poker game, or challenge you to a match." She smiled at Tyler and after getting directions, she shook his hand again as she led him to the door. Tyler nodded and left whistling something that sounded like a Gaelic tune.

"He is a looker, Amaya. I think I could find a use for his services," said Linda through gales of laughter.

"Oh, Aunt Linda, you have such a lustful mind," and she too laughed until tears streamed down her face and she had to compose herself before going on with her interviews.

* * * *

After lunch, Amaya's first stop was Tyler's office. Following his directions, she found the solid wall flanked on either side by suits of armor, each complete with scabbard and sheath. She touched the very center of the Scottish coat of arms where the swords crossed, and an invisible door opened to find Tyler, true to his word, playing video poker on the computer.

Inspecting her own office, she found a computer, printer, scanner and fax machine, along with a huge desk, plants and everything she could possibly need for her new business. Since Tyler had nothing to do, she asked him to bring a pad and pencil and tour the castle with her and Linda. "You can take notes for me, and stop calling me ma'am. It's Amaya to you."

Tyler clicked off the game, picked up paper and pen, and led the ladies out of his office.

Amaya pulled out her blueprint and began searching for the office to get her bearings.

Tyler took Linda's arm and began leading her along the hall while Amaya walked alongside. "You won't be needing that, Amaya. I know my way around. I can guide you."

Shocked he should say that, she replied, "You do? And just how did you learn your way around so fast?"

"If you don't mind, we can talk about that over tea."

Before Amaya could protest, he led the ladies into the first of many rooms, an enormous ballroom with polished floors and a grandstand for musicians. Chairs and cocktail tables were all along the outside walls, but the icing on the cake was the high ceiling with fairies on it and fluttering down the corners of the wall, all cast from some sort of plaster and painted so they looked real enough to fly.

Amaya knew that by now she shouldn't be surprised by anything she saw in this castle, but she wasn't prepared for the opulence of this room. She looked at Linda, who was making an effort to suppress laughter, and then at Tyler, who merely shrugged his shoulders. Amaya groaned and let her shoulders drop and could only think of her granddaddy and wonder where he came up with these ideas.

Following the hallway, the three next examined the library, billiards and card room, and the parlor. She had

already seen the kitchen and bypassed the laundry and storage areas for the moment. Linda begged off, saying she couldn't walk another step, so Amaya and Tyler rode the elevator to the second floor. Many suites were located on that floor, all similar, but decorated differently, and each with its own private bath and small sitting area. There were four communal studies, if that is what they were to be called, one for each wing. All four contained comfortable leather sofas and chairs, a television, writing desk, phone and computer. Antique tables held lamps and footstools sat with chairs. Magazines were stacked on shelves along with novels, puzzles and games. The very top game in the stack was Clue. Amaya nodded at the game and smiled. "I knew Granddaddy had a Clue game floating around here somewhere, or he wouldn't have built so many secret passages."

"There aren't as many secret passages in the game."

"No, but once he got the idea, he just ran with it."

Pulling a drink from the refrigerator in the corner of the last communal study, Amaya offered a can to Tyler and they sat down.

"That's a lovely name, Amaya. How do you like your castle so far?"

"Thank you, Tyler, but I can't take credit for it. My mother gave it to me."

Tyler nodded, "Lovely, nonetheless. It suits you."

Deciding to ignore that, Amaya said, "How do I like my castle? Hum," she thought a minute as she sipped her drink. "I'm awed. I never in my wildest dreams expected something like this, and to tell you the truth, I don't know what to do with it."

Tyler remained silent and Amaya continued.

"I don't know what Granddaddy was thinking. I had a good job in Chicago and was set for a promotion. I don't think he realized when I walked away without giving notice, I'll have a hell of a time getting another job when this is over."

"Are you sorry you came, Amaya?"

"No, of course not," she answered quickly. "I just wonder how much of this was my grandfather's idea and how much was the product of his brain tumor."

"Does it really matter, if it gave him pleasure at the end of his life?"

Amaya hadn't thought much about that. She'd been blaming all this fantasy on the tumor, but Granddaddy couldn't help that. Now, she realized she agreed with Tyler. "I suppose it doesn't, and if it gave him pleasure, then I'm truly grateful for that, but what am I supposed to do with this place? It should be a hotel!"

"Really, that sounds like a grand idea to me," he remarked casually as he gave her a smile and his crinkly eyes glistened.

Taken aback by Tyler's response, she thought maybe that was what Granddaddy had in mind. "Tell me, Tyler, how did you learn your way around so quickly?"

"I knew your grandfather well. We lived in a trailer here on the grounds from the day he purchased the property and began construction."

"What!" That seemed to be her favorite word these days when nothing made sense and she felt she'd been trapped in the Twilight Zone.

Taking her arm, Tyler gently raised her from the chair. "Come; let's go outside for a walk through the labyrinth." Tyler led her to the hall and pushed on the ring adorning the hand of a princess painted on the wall that resembled

Amaya. Inside, there was a slide, and when Tyler sat and began going down, she followed. Nothing was going to astonish her again for as long as she lived here. Amaya landed on a cushiony pad doubled over in laughter. Tyler took her hand to help her up and led her through the alcove to another wall, which opened to lead directly into Amaya's office. Still holding her hand, Tyler exited by the French doors and walked a stone path to the rear of the castle. Amaya slid her hand out of Tyler's. His touch was warm and felt comfortable, but she didn't want to be on such a personal level with an employee, or someone she had only known for a day.

The labyrinth was built of tall boxwood shrubbery and was neatly trimmed to make up the walls of the maze. The walls twisted and turned in every direction and several led to dead-ends. Reaching the center of the maze took over two hours and Amaya was exhausted, but enlightened.

Tyler had told her he was a distant relative of Barney's and had been sent for from Scotland with the promise of a job paying more than he could refuse. Upon arriving, he was informed of Barney's plans and although they were eccentric, he agreed with Barney that it was a grand adventure. They moved into a trailer on the grounds and lived there while the castle was being built, and only when it was completed and Barney was in severe pain, did he go home to die.

"That's not true; I was here last summer for two weeks."

"Two weeks for the last three years, if I remember correctly. He did go home then, but returned as soon as you left."

Amaya shook her head sadly. Granddaddy had the tumor all that time and hadn't told her or her mother. She

wondered how different things might have turned out if he had.

Going back to the kitchen, Amaya and Tyler sat at the table for coffee and a rest and were soon joined by Linda.

"So, Amaya, what are your plans now?" Tyler was curious about what her thoughts were and had been excited when she mentioned a hotel.

"I need to think right now and I would like to bounce some ideas off Aunt Linda." She nodded at her aunt and sipped her coffee. "I also have a lot more exploring to do."

"We can do that tomorrow. Would you like to see the stables?"

"Yes please. I'd like it if you'd accompany me. I'd also like to explore the grounds. How about you, Aunt Linda? Want to check out the stables?"

"Actually, Amaya, my car arrived today and I'd like to go into town for a few things. I thought I might have lunch at the café with Billie. When I called, he said he would drive up from Pontotoc to meet me."

Aunt Linda wasn't going to give up her gentlemen friends, whether she lived in a castle or not. More than two hours was a long drive for Billie just to eat lunch. Obviously, Aunt Linda had more than that on her mind. Amaya grinned knowingly and asked her to check with Laurie to see if anything was needed from the grocery store.

Amaya had worked so hard right out of college, she found very little time to date. Never having met a man she thought she could be interested in seriously, dating was never really one of her priorities. She was only twenty-seven and had plenty of time. Her career was uppermost in her life. Working for an advertising agency wasn't what she'd wanted, but the money was good and she hoped to

get into the financial market one day with a few years of experience as a business manager.

After her grandfather died, her whole world had been turned upside down. Living in the castle and adjusting to the grandiose lifestyle only money could buy, with servants waiting to fulfill her every wish, Amaya felt confused. On top of all that, there was the ring inscribed, '*Find your Prince Charming here*'.

Amaya wasn't looking for a Prince Charming. What on earth was she to do? Now she had to start a business. How did her grandfather think she was going to start a business out in the middle of the woods near a small farming community? There were no big businesses here. Perhaps he meant for her to start an internet business she could run from the castle. Or, perhaps she could turn Amaya's Keep into a hotel. That seemed the most logical idea. She certainly didn't need all this space and servants for herself and Aunt Linda.

* * * *

Amaya spent the next two weeks orienting herself to her Amaya's Keep. The movers arrived and her car followed behind them. She found she had a garage housing eight cars and two trucks, and was introduced to her driver, William Post, a very handsome young man with suntanned skin and slate-black hair. On first glance, he reminded her of Elvis. One of the vehicles in the garage was a blue four runner and another, a white limousine. All the vehicles in between would serve one purpose or another. It amused her that she'd managed with only one vehicle at a time since she was sixteen, but now Granddaddy thought she needed ten.

She met Mr. Sykes, who ran the stables and the men working for him, Tony, Jimmy and Hank, as well as the

beautiful horses stabled in the barn. She inspected the corral and training grounds and was directed to the riding paths and told the best places to go for a morning ride. Mr. Sykes offered to teach her to ride and she'd gratefully accepted. Plans would be made in the near future to begin her lessons.

She met Mr. and Mrs. Anderson and their son, Johnny. They toured the vegetable garden Johnny was preparing to plant, where he asked Amaya her favorite vegetables so he could grow plenty of them. They also went on a tour of the flowerbeds with sprouts just popping through, and the greenhouse where tulips, roses, daffodils and gardenias were growing profusely. She saw orchards, daisies, mums and many others she couldn't name. She smiled heavenward and mentally noted how happy her grandmother would be that Granddaddy had built this greenhouse for her. Every employee she met, and she'd finally met them all, was kind and pleasant and eager to do her bidding. *Granddaddy was a good judge of character.*

Amaya gazed at the forest in every direction and viewed Amaya's Keep from the entrance gate. She was inspired and pleased with all the detail that went into building her castle. More and more, Amaya had in the back of her mind that this would make a great hotel. With every new and exciting part of Amaya's Keep she found, she searched for a theme to entertain guests, and after dinner, she still had the idea of a hotel on her mind.

Climbing out of the oversized bathtub, she weighed the pros and cons of turning Amaya's Keep into a hotel. She had lots of guest rooms and space for entertaining, but aside from the unusual castle, she would have to find a hook to get people to come. Dressing in shorts and a t-shirt for comfort, she thought maybe her aunt could shed some light

on her dilemma. Pressing the intercom button to Linda's room, she buzzed. Within seconds, a door opened in the wall of Amaya's sitting room and Aunt Linda stood in the doorway of another room housing a computer and all the necessary machines and tools to go with it.

"I found this room and a note saying it was mine.

Barney knew I would miss my computer. He even had my e-mail address installed, although I don't know how he got it. Since he didn't have a computer, I never gave it to him."

Throwing her hands in the air, Amaya beamed. "This is so fun. Have you ever in your life dreamed of such a fantasy coming true?"

"No, and I love it. I'm so glad Barney sent me here. I'm having a ball. Did you want me for something?"

"Yes, I wondered if you had time to chat with me for a bit. I have some ideas."

"Sure, what do you say we ride the elevator down to the kitchen for a piece of that pineapple upside-down cake and coffee?"

"Great!"

Taking a notepad and pen, the two found their way to the kitchen, Amaya still in her shorts and a t-shirt, and Linda in a gown and housecoat. Both were barefooted as they slipped into the kitchen to find Tyler had the same idea.

"Hi," he greeted them. "Come on in, I just made a fresh pot of coffee."

Amaya took two mugs off their hooks and sat down while Linda cut three pieces of cake. "I'm glad we ran across you. I had some ideas for a business I wanted to run by Aunt Linda, and I'd like your advice, too."

Tyler put down his mug. "What's on your mind?"

After pouring coffee, Amaya reminded Tyler that she'd mentioned a hotel the day they met and he'd seemed interested. "What do the two of you think about turning this place into a unique theme hotel?"

Silence filled the room as both Tyler and Linda seemed deep in thought. Finally, Linda answered. "I think it sounds like a good idea, but this must be a very expensive place to run. Do you think a hotel could pay for itself and make you a profit?"

Opening the notepad, Amaya jotted that down. "One thing to consider. Tyler, any thoughts?"

"I think it would be feasible if you could get the right kind of guests. Guests with enough money to pay a good price and a reason they should come here, instead of elsewhere. There are few tourist attractions within hours of this locale."

"What if we make our own attractions?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking of theme vacations. Maybe something to do with the secret passages, the labyrinth or costume balls. I don't know, we could think of something. I worked in advertising for several years; I think I could come up with workable ideas. What about you, Tyler? What did you do before you came here?"

"I worked in public relations. That should be a help once you decide what you want to do."

"Wonderful, and Aunt Linda is a charmer. You haven't met a woman yet that can talk to anyone on any subject imaginable like she can. Aunt Linda, you would be wonderful as Director of Social Activities."

Linda smiled and thanked Amaya. "I hear what you're saying, Amaya, but I don't have any experience in working at all. I don't know what I could contribute."

“Your personality, Aunt Linda. You’ve had that your entire life.”

Drinking coffee and eating cake, the three discussed the idea of turning Amaya’s Keep into a hotel. Ideas were thrown back and forth and bounced off one another. Near midnight, they gave up and arranged to meet the following day with any new ideas they came up with. Amaya told Linda to go on up, she was going to visit the chapel.

Chapter 3

The chapel was a beautiful, serene room. The ceiling was high and peaked and the cherry wood walls were polished to a high sheen. No religious figures were present, but colored glass formed beds of flowers in the stained glass windows. Pews were lined up for seating and an altar for prayer was available, if anyone chose to use it. Fresh flowers sat in large vases on the altar steps, giving off the sweet scent of roses.

Amaya felt at peace in this room. She knew Granddaddy had been thinking of Grandma's garden when he designed this room. Not having been an extremely religious person, she wasn't sure what to do, but she felt if there was anywhere in this castle she would feel comfortable talking to her grandfather, this would be the place.

Sitting on the step near the flowers, she leaned over to smell the fragrant bouquet and began, "Well, Granddaddy, here I am and I'm in an awful dilemma. Oh, by the way, I love my castle. Every day I'm here, I come to appreciate it more and more. The secret passages and hidden rooms are the best. Each new day is an adventure, just like you said it would be, and I'm constantly delighted."

Amaya paused and took a deep breath. “Anyway, here’s my problem. I was thinking of turning Amaya’s Keep into a theme hotel with packages of various entertainments, but I guess I just wanted your thoughts on the subject. It seems like a good idea to me, but I don’t have any themes thought out yet. So if you think it’s a good idea, I would appreciate a sign so I can start working on it. I love you, Granddaddy. Say hi to Grandma for me.”

Amaya left the chapel feeling rather foolish and wondering if indeed, she’d lost her mind. As if her grandfather were actually going to talk to her and tell her what to do! Deciding to sleep on it, she went to bed and instantly fell asleep. When Amaya felt something brush her face, feeling as if she had been lightly kissed, she woke with a start and jumped from the bed. Turning on the light, she searched for a spider or bug. She had thought she would never again be shocked by anything that happened in this castle, but she found she was wrong. Lying on the satin-covered pillow near where her head had been only moments before, lay a pink rose petal. She picked up the petal with trembling fingers and held it to her nose. She could smell the distinct fragrance of the roses she had enjoyed in the chapel. Of course, that was it. A petal had fallen into her hair while she sat on the step talking to her grandfather. Or, maybe not!

It was five in the morning and Amaya was wide-awake with the rose petal still in her hand. She laid it down gently, just in case, and went downstairs to start a pot of coffee, the whole time, ideas were running through her head for turning Amaya’s Keep into a hotel. Taking Laurie’s notepad from the counter, she sipped coffee and made notes until Laurie came in at six.

"Oh my, Miss Amaya, you should have woke me up. I would have made that for you." She rushed around the kitchen preparing toast and putting it on a plate for Amaya.

"Don't be silly, Laurie. Just because I can't sleep doesn't mean you have to get up. I'm a big girl. I can make coffee. Now you sit down here and have a cup with me."

Laurie was grateful for the coffee and did sit with her mistress. Laurie asked if she was ill, but Amaya assured her she wasn't. She had just gotten up earlier than usual. "Tell me, Laurie, do you believe in ghosts?"

"Everybody knows there's no such thing as ghosts. Why would you even ask such a question?"

"Oh, no reason," Amaya answered. She felt foolish now. If she was losing her mind, she didn't want anyone else to know. "I wanted to talk to you about something, Laurie. Have you been cooking any of the recipes in your English and Scottish cookbooks?"

"Oh yes, Miss Amaya, I have. Mostly desserts, mind you, but that leg of lamb went over real well with Niles and the roast beef was a big hit. I've been serving tea to Niles every afternoon and Mr. Tyler joins him most days, except when he's out with you. Did you decide you wanted me to cook them for you?"

"That's wonderful, Laurie. No, what I have in mind is turning this castle into a hotel. Now, I'm not sure yet, but I think it will work. Do you think you could manage afternoon tea and meals for a crowd?"

Laurie sipped her coffee and thought about that for some time. When she finally answered Amaya, she said, "I think I can manage the meals and the tea. Nina likes making the scones and tarts, and the food isn't all that different from what most people eat. It's just prepared a little

differently. I might need a little more help, or time to train these girls a little better.”

“Would you be willing to do that, Laurie, if I decide to go ahead?”

“Oh yes, ma’am. I mean, Miss Amaya. I surely would.”

“Good. Now please don’t tell anyone about this conversation. I still have to think about it and discuss it with my aunt. I’ll let you know as soon as I decide.”

“Yes, ma’am, Miss Amaya.”

Excusing herself, Amaya went to her room to dress. She wanted to go into town today to purchase some personal items, and the prospect of getting out of the castle and seeing real people appealed to her. She dressed in a straight, knee-length skirt of royal blue and a paisley blouse with long sleeves and collar and applied a small amount of make-up. Pulling her hair behind her neck and fastening it with a barrette, she surveyed herself in the mirror. Standing five feet six inches tall and weighing one hundred thirteen pounds, she was pleased with the way she looked.

Her features were much like her grandmother’s, she noticed for the first time, and perhaps she was attractive. From her Indian grandmother, she had inherited her black eyes and high cheekbones. She also had full lips and a long elegant neck, which she often featured by putting her hair up. She’d spent little time being concerned about her looks since high school. She took one last look at her full appearance in the mirror, stepped into a pair of one-inch heels the color of her skirt and grabbed a matching jacket on the way out.

Amaya had asked her aunt to join her, since Linda found her way to town several times a week. Finding the drive too long for Billie to make on a regular basis, Linda visited in the coffee shop and made herself known around

town in an attempt to meet some eligible men her age. It appeared she'd succeeded, because Amaya had heard one or two mentions of a man named Levi that left Linda's cheeks flushed.

After checking with Laurie and Melinda to see if they needed anything from town, she set out with a short list in her own car with Linda beside her giving directions. It took forty minutes to get to the store where Amaya wanted to shop. Walking around inside, Linda spoke to several people and when she introduced them to her niece, they were astonished she was "the" Amaya of Amaya's Keep. Most were curious about her and the castle. Amaya chatted amicably enough to appease them. She'd expected some curiosity, and she always expected pleasant conversation from Southern people. She couldn't drive down a road without being waved at, or walk the sidewalks without someone stopping to talk to her.

Wherever she went, waiting in line while a customer visited with the clerk about her mother's gallbladder or her son's broken arm was expected. That was the way of the South and Amaya found it refreshing after the hustle and bustle of city life in Chicago.

* * * *

Having lunch at the local café, aptly named, Local Café, Amaya spoke and nodded as Linda went about visiting with people. Linda made a special effort to introduce Amaya to a gentleman named Levi Marsh, whom Linda invited to join them for lunch. With a smile on her face, Amaya welcomed Levi and found she enjoyed his company greatly. He was a handsome, elderly man with hair the color of fresh snow and although not tall, was built well for his five feet eight inches. Amaya could see how Linda would

be interested in this man and mentioned they would invite him to the castle in the near future.

Levi said, "It would be an honor, thank you." Linda beamed.

Visiting in town had been good for Amaya. Being away from the castle for the first time in two weeks helped Amaya realize that she wasn't insane, stranded in the middle of nowhere, or being held prisoner by her grandfather's will. That cheered her up immensely. Knowing civilization was a mere forty minutes away, she couldn't wait to get back to Amaya's Keep and meet with Tyler and Linda to get serious about the hotel business.

* * * *

In Amaya's explorations of the castle, she found that next to the chapel, she liked the library the best. It was filled from floor to ceiling with shelves, and each shelf was filled with books on any subject she could imagine. She found novels and great literature, biographies and reference books. There was even a section filled with children's books. The red leather bound volumes on Scotland were beautiful and looked very old. Amaya vowed to read those at the first opportunity. The burgundy leather furniture was new, but looked old, and the tables were antique. All the wood was dark and matched the paneling on the walls. Heavy burgundy drapery hung from the windows and the beautiful, long, sturdy table and chairs at one end of the room was big enough to use during a conference. The leather sofa and armchairs placed before the fireplace looked comfortable for curling up to read on a cool night.

Suggesting that Tyler and Linda join her in the library, they began their meeting. Laurie sent Bethany in with a tray laden with coffee and tea, cakes and cookies. Being from Scotland, Tyler still preferred tea in the afternoon.

When Amaya caught Tyler appraising her, he merely nodded and remarked, "You're looking fine today, but I like you better in your jeans."

Amaya flushed and was lost for words. Why did such a small compliment leave her face blushing and her heart fluttering? Rather than encourage him or embarrass herself, she chose to treat the compliment lightly. "Thank you, Tyler, but let's get on with business."

Tyler gave her his amazing smile and when his eyes crinkled, she could see the devilment in them, put there at her expense. When Amaya began to speak, all thoughts of teasing left Tyler, as he and Linda were astonished at her ideas.

"First of all, I like the idea of turning Amaya's Keep into a hotel, but it will never be self-supporting, because as soon as the novelty of the castle wears off, business will slow down. So, here is what I propose." Amaya kicked off her shoes and began. "I would like to offer four or five three-night packages per month. Guests come for the entertainment, as well as the accommodations. The one thing I want in all the packages is to have a game. That game will consist of guests finding their way through a maze of secret passages and looking for a prize along the way. Each guest will receive a prize, but the winner will be awarded guest of honor at the last evening meal or ball or dance, or whatever we plan, and a gold ring like this one, without the emeralds, of course." Amaya took her ring off and laid it on the table. "This will be an expense, but I think it'll be worth it in the long run. Hopefully, guests will come back time and again until they receive a ring and bring their friends for the same experience.

"As for the entertainment, I propose a mystery dinner, which involves all the guests playing parts or solving the

crime for one package, perhaps a fox hunt for another, we do have all those horses, a costume ball for another and work around the holiday themes like a Halloween costume ball and then maybe get the labyrinth involved in some sort of theme.” Amaya finished her speech and took a sip of coffee just as she heard thunder roll and saw a flash of lightning. “Looks like we’re in for a storm,” she said. “So what do you two think of my ideas?”

Both were awed that Amaya had come up with so many ideas overnight. Linda set her coffee cup down and took the pad Amaya was working from. “Where did you get all these ideas? Have you been thinking about this all along?”

Amaya nibbled on a chocolate chip cookie and said to her aunt, “I think I dreamed them last night. They were just here,” she pointed to her temple, “when I woke up.”

Thanks, Granddaddy.

Then Tyler said, “Amaya, I think you’ve come up with a workable idea. Planning entertainment is ingenious and I think your grandfather would approve.”

Amaya flushed and thanked him, then asked again, “What do you think of the entertainment ideas I came up with? You see, there are so many secret passages, I sometimes feel they *are* the castle, along with the hidden room alcoves, and the main rooms are just a camouflage.”

Tyler smiled at that description and tended to believe the same thing. “I love the idea of the games and the ring as a prize. I also like the guest of honor status. Everyone wants to feel important, and by giving prizes to all participants, everyone will go away compensated for their efforts.”

The rain pelted and thunder roared while lighting streaked through the sky, and still the three were making plans when Bethany came to announce dinner. “So we’re all in agreement then, we are going to open this theme hotel?”

"The decision is yours, Amaya. You are in charge here, but if you want my opinion, I think it is a grand idea. I can't wait to get started."

"Aunt Linda?"

Linda took Amaya's hand and slid the ring back on her finger. "I thought coming to stay with you here in Amaya's Keep was the most exciting thing that could ever happen to me, until now. I agree with Tyler. It will be grand!"

Amaya grinned and said, "Well, Granddaddy, it looks like we're embarking on yet another adventure, thanks to you." Then she took Tyler's arm on one side of her and Linda's on the other and danced them all to the dining room for dinner.

Tyler seated first Linda and then Amaya at the long table and had begun to ease out of the room when Amaya called to him. "Tyler, come here, please." Tyler stepped over to her side and she motioned for him to sit down just as Nina brought the salad in. "Nina, please set a place for Mr. Tyler. He'll be dining with us from now on." She looked at Tyler, "You don't mind, do you? This is a very big table."

Tyler gave her a crinkly-eyed smile and said, "It would be my pleasure, Miss Amaya, Miss Linda."

Linda was delighted to have Tyler at the dinner table. There was nothing she liked more than to have a man around, even if he was young enough to be her grandson. She admired men and always left them feeling flattered and strong and masculine without them ever knowing she was doing it. For Amaya, having Tyler at the table was a treat. He was charming, witty and smart, but more than that, she felt comfortable and at peace in his presence.

The discussion continued over dinner and Amaya planned a meeting for the staff to inform them of her plans

and ask for their ideas. She believed the more minds she had working on this, the better. And if they were willing to work for the hotel's success, they had the right to put their two cents' worth in.

* * * *

Even though it was the end of April, the storm brought a cold front, the rain slashed against the windows and the wind howled. Amaya went to the library after dinner and touched a long match to the kindling in the fireplace and when it began to flame, she added a log. Searching through the books, she found a journal written by Bernard MacTavish. Assuming he was a distant relative, she took it down to read. Snuggling up on the sofa with a lap robe and the journal, a can of diet cola and a bag of miniature candy bars she'd bought while in town, Amaya planned to relax for the remainder of the evening. It had been an eventful and exciting day and she needed to clear her mind by thinking of something other than the castle.

She had barely begun reading what appeared to be a history of the MacTavish Clan when, even though she was sipping her soda and had eaten a chocolate bar, she was overcome with exhaustion and fell asleep with the journal on her chest.

* * * *

It was well past midnight when Tyler found her asleep on the sofa. The fire had died down to embers and he debated whether to wake her or let her sleep. She looked so beautiful lying there, still in her skirt and blouse with her long legs covered by a throw. He felt a flash of heat radiate through his body at the sight of her. Her skirt had slid up just enough to show her firm thighs and the throw covering her legs left her feet exposed. How easy it would be to pull that throw off and enjoy the sight of those long limbs

encased in nylon stockings. He turned away to compose himself. How could he be thinking such things? Amaya was his employer and the granddaughter of a man he had the utmost respect for. He couldn't help admiring her beauty, but he would control the urge to act upon it. He turned again to Amaya. Should he wake her, or let her sleep?

* * * *

Amaya must have sensed someone, because she woke with a start and found Tyler watching her sleep. She wondered how long he'd been in the room.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Amaya, I was just debating if I should wake you and send you on your way to bed."

Removing the journal from her chest, Amaya said, "I must have been more tired than I thought." She rose from the sofa and asked Tyler, "Were you looking for me for a reason?"

"Oh no, I just came in to borrow a book. The storm seems to be keeping me awake."

"That's funny, it seems to have the opposite effect on me." Reaching down to fold the lap robe, Amaya jumped back as if she had seen a rodent. Falling from the robe when she picked it up was a yellow petal, and if Amaya was correct, it came from a daffodil. She dropped the robe and ran into the chapel. There, on the steps, were bouquets of yellow daffodils. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth as Tyler ran in behind her.

"What's wrong with you, has something happened?"

"Did you do this, Tyler?" she accused.

"Did I do what?"

"The flowers, did you put the petal on my robe while I was sleeping?"

"Amaya, I don't know what you're talking about."

When she pointed to the vase of flowers, Tyler said, "Oh, those. The gardener gives them to the housekeeper every day and she puts them in here. What's wrong with that, Amaya? They're a nice touch."

She walked back to the library with Tyler following and picked up the yellow petal. "Did you bring this in here, Tyler?"

"Now why would I do that? I haven't even been in the chapel today. Maybe the housekeeper did the arrangements in here and one fell off. Why is that bothering you so much?"

Tyler's explanation was logical, but in the back of Amaya's mind, she still felt her granddaddy had something to do with it. She apologized to Tyler and said goodnight, then went to her room to finish off the night.

Climbing into bed, she thought she was going to have to keep an eye on that chapel and Tyler in particular. Keeping an eye on Tyler would be no hardship as handsome and charming as he was, with his bright red hair and fair skin, muscles bulging beneath his shirt. But, then again, if Granddaddy was behind the petal, she must be doing the right thing with the castle, and oh, was it exciting. She certainly was embarking on a grand adventure.

Chapter 4

When morning came and Essie brought a breakfast tray, Amaya asked her to send Melinda up. She was just finishing her toast and enjoying the coffee, when Melinda entered her room. "You wanted to see me, Miss Amaya?"

"Yes, I want to have a staff meeting. Can you arrange for Laurie and Niles to meet me in the library, along with yourself, at ten this morning? Also, would you ask Niles to inform Mr. Sykes, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson and William?"

"Yes, Miss Amaya." Melinda hesitated before asking, "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, Melinda. Everything is right. I'm so pleased, and I have lots of plans, but I need your help. I want to talk to all of you at the same time."

Melinda seemed to relax a bit and Amaya continued. "Also, could you ask Laurie to prepare coffee and tea and maybe some sort of snack for the meeting?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Amaya. I'll take care of it before I instruct the maids."

"Thank you, Melinda." When the housekeeper left, Amaya rapped gently on the secret passage to see if Linda was up and about.

When Linda slid the panel open and entered, Amaya told her of the meeting and then buzzed Tyler and asked

him to be there. He had been expecting this meeting, but not quite at ten. He was planning to go to town today, but that could wait. The sooner Amaya got started on the hotel, the sooner they could open, and they had a lot of work to do before that happened.

Amaya then called her mother and told her of her plans and asked her advice regarding the feasibility of the plan. Helen thought it might be the answer to that provision of the will and they discussed the legalities of such a venture. A liquor license was a must and she asked Amaya if the castle was in a dry county, as a large portion of Mississippi was dry. Amaya made notes and promised to call her mother back that evening.

She then called Mr. Lowry and requested he be at the meeting. He told her he would have to juggle some appointments but, yes, he would be there.

* * * *

As each member of the staff entered, Amaya suggested they get coffee or tea and a snack from the sideboard. When they were all present, she called the meeting to order and explained the part of her grandfather's will that required she start a business. Amaya told them what she had in mind and went into some detail about the packages she wanted to offer. She then asked for a vote from the staff on whether they were willing to embark on such a venture. The vote was unanimous, so she continued. "Niles, you're English born, if I'm not mistaken, can you help with the traditions of meals and tea and anything else you can think of?"

Nile's face lit up and he almost had a smile trying to surface on his lips as he stated, "Miss Amaya, this is your castle here in the states. If you want to incorporate English traditions, I can be of help. The main meal of the day is usually served at noon, with tea at four in the afternoon and

dinner at eight, but,” he continued, “if I might make a suggestion, I would alter that to a buffet luncheon, tea in the afternoon at four and then dinner at eight. In America, you have different traditions and I don’t see why you can’t incorporate some of them into the theme. After all, this is not a traditional English castle. I find it encompasses a great deal of Scotland, as well as England and America.”

Amaya was busy taking notes, as was Tyler. “Good suggestion, Niles, I have that down. Now, Mr. Sykes, your thoughts?”

Mr. Sykes was a professional horse man and very protective of his charges. “I like the idea of a hotel, but I hesitate to offer a fox hunt. Your horses are very expensive and of the highest quality breed. I wouldn’t wish to see one hurt by an inexperienced rider. I want to be assured any rider is experienced and knows how to treat a horse. I wouldn’t have any objections to country rides, as long as I could lead to protect the animals in my charge.”

“Point taken, Mr. Sykes.”

“Mrs. Anderson, will you be able to handle the laundry on your own, or will you need help?”

Mrs. Anderson was a pleasant little black woman in her fifties with a generous smile. She was short, slim and looked fragile to Amaya. She didn’t look as though she had the strength to work all day, but as she spoke, Amaya changed her mind. “I like the idea of a hotel, and won’t it be fun to have so many people visiting? As far as the laundry is concerned, I’m a fast worker and very well organized. Whether I can handle it alone, only time will tell. It depends on how many guests you have, and how much linen is used for meals, beds and the kitchen and bath towels. It will also depend on the staff’s requirements of costume or uniform and how much will be dry-cleaned and

how much laundered. Also, I assume the guests won't be using my services. If they do, I'll probably require additional help."

"Thank you, Mrs. Anderson. You have brought up some interesting points. I think we can accommodate you, if needed."

Mr. Anderson spoke up and offered his services in any capacity needed, as well as his son, Johnny's.

"Thank you, Mr. Anderson, I don't have a plan in mind for the two of you just yet, but I am certain we'll need your cooperation."

"Now, Laurie, what do you think? Cooking foods you're not accustomed to will be a challenge. You and I both understand that your department will be vital to the operation of the hotel. Do you think you can manage the food, as well as the baking, cleaning up and serving?"

Laurie smiled at her and said, "I love the idea. This is such an interesting place to live; I imagine people will fight to get a reservation."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence," said Amaya, and then nodded for her to continue.

"I think I can handle the cooking, I've been practicing on Niles."

Niles nodded in Amaya's direction and he praised Laurie's cooking.

Then Laurie went on to say that Nina had been a baker before she came to Amaya's Keep and her talents should be sufficient. "My concern is the serving. I'm not sure I have anyone qualified to do that for a large group. If you could hire one more person to work the parties, I think we can manage."

The next person to speak was Melinda. She informed Amaya that if she changed Essie's position as Amaya's

personal maid, she thought they could handle the house. The guest rooms would have to be on a trial basis. It would depend on how many guests were present at one time and what requirements they had, besides the cleaning, bed changing and turning down. Amaya agreed to accommodate Melinda if she needed more help in caring for the guest rooms. "Anyway," continued Melinda. "I like the idea fine. We are getting a little lazy with only you and Miss Linda to care for. We were beginning to worry you might lay some of us off, so I'm anxious to begin this new venture, and I'm sure my girls are, too."

Amaya assured them all their jobs were secure for the year, as that was her grandfather's wish.

William was the last to be questioned. "William, my thinking is that we could use the limo to pick guests up at the airport and return them after checkout. Are you willing to drive for the hotel? You may also be pulled in to use for errands when we're busy."

"Miss Amaya, I've been here for more than two weeks and all I've done is polish the cars. I can't wait to get behind the wheel of any one of those vehicles. I'm ready and willing to do whatever is required of me to assure that your hotel is successful."

Amaya was pleased with William's enthusiasm and thanked him for his willingness and his good wishes.

"I think," continued William, "that none of you are looking past this first year. If you don't mind my saying so, Miss Amaya, if this venture is successful, you might be willing to stay on permanently, instead of the one year required, which will, hopefully, extend our jobs here with you. Personally, that's my hope."

William's words left Amaya speechless, and as she mulled over what he said, she realized he was right. One

year was the time limit, and she hadn't looked past that to what the future might hold. It surprised her that a young man would be looking to the future, when none of the other staff had mentioned it. "Do you all feel that way?" She looked around the table and saw nods from all. Some shy, some hearty, but all agreed they wanted to stay on at Amaya's Keep. "Thank you," she said. "That is something I need to spend some time thinking about. William, I appreciate you bringing it up. Now I know how you all feel, I'll certainly take it into consideration. That will be all for now. If any of you come up with a brainstorm for a package, or any additional problems you think might arise, please see me about it."

As her employees left the library, Amaya had a lot on her mind. The staff had enlightened her on many issues; especially what William had brought up about her staying on. If the hotel were successful, it would be a shame to close it down after the year was up, if it failed, the decision would be easy.

Amaya and Tyler had a short meeting with Mr. Lowry after everyone else had left the room. Mr. Lowry thought it was the only solution and complimented her on managing to come up with the idea so soon after moving in. When questioned about the operating license for the hotel as well as one for liquor, Mr. Lowry informed her there would be no problem in obtaining either one.

After the meeting was over, Tyler went to town to run errands with Linda close behind to do whatever she did in town, most likely go to the Local Café to visit.

Amaya thought of the turret rooms and the enclosed garden she'd viewed from her balcony. She wanted to explore the garden as well as the four turrets, one at each corner of the castle, but so far, she hadn't found a way to

enter either. With the afternoon free, she decided to spend the rest of the day thinking about all she'd learned at the meeting while searching for an entry to the turret rooms and the center garden. Following the blueprints in detail, she could find no suggestion of entry. There must be a secret passage or a hidden door somewhere. Amaya had previously inspected the turret areas and found no way to get inside. She thought the turrets were for decoration only, but that didn't make sense to her, not when she thought how detailed her grandfather had planned the castle, nor did it explain why she couldn't get into the garden. Tyler was of no help. He either didn't know, or had been instructed by her grandfather not to tell her; this frustrated her to no end. Amaya decided to explore the hidden passages and see what she could find.

She began her search in one of the four passages that led from the kitchen. There were well-lighted halls going in several directions and stairways leading to who knew where, so she tried to be systematic about it. With notepad in hand, she jotted down the first direction she took to see where it led. After what seemed to be a long walk, she found herself in the library in a little Priest's room hidden off to the side by a sliding bookshelf. Making notations, she reentered the passage and continued on her way. The next door she came to gave her direct entrance into the billiards room. As she continued on, Amaya found her way to the ballroom and sitting room and back to the kitchen.

Of course, it couldn't be that simple. She had to investigate the walls of the passages to find a clue that might open a hidden door to one of these rooms. Taking a diet cola from the kitchen, she went back in and climbed a stairway. It seemed to end at the ceiling, going nowhere. Sitting down on the step, she ran her hand over the ceiling,

then the walls to the left and right of her and finally, across the carpeted stair. There, she felt a bump and when she pushed the button, a panel of the ceiling parted, leading her to yet another set of stairs and intricate hallways. By the time she reached the third floor, she found a panel leading into the hall just outside her room. Going into her room to use the bathroom, she realized it was dinnertime and her search would have to wait for another day.

* * * *

After cleaning up, she went downstairs to find Tyler waiting, but Linda was nowhere to be seen.

"Hi, Tyler, have you seen Aunt Linda? She wasn't in her room when I called her."

"Linda went to town right after the meeting this morning. She called about half an hour ago to say she was having dinner with a friend and would be home by nine."

Amaya sat down looking worried. "I don't like her out on that long stretch of road by herself at night. I wish she had come home earlier."

"Don't worry, Amaya, she has a cell phone with her. You have one in your office, too. If you're going to be away, you need to carry it, or let William drive you."

"And who died and made you boss?" That sharp remark left Amaya feeling guilty. It wasn't like her to be rude. "Oops, that was rude. I mean, my welfare doesn't fall into your job description, but I will keep it in mind."

"Touché! Let's not argue, shall we, don't we have more important things to talk about?"

"Yes, of course, Tyler. I'm just edgy. I got so frustrated trying to find the entrance to the garden today and I worry about Aunt Linda. She is sixty-five years old. Anything could happen to her."

"I can understand your worry over Linda, but I'm sure she'll be all right. She appears to be very healthy."

"Yes, she is. Can you enlighten me on why I cannot get into the garden or any of the turret rooms?"

"I'm afraid I cannot help you there, Amaya."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. Does that satisfy you?" What Tyler didn't say was that Barney had requested Amaya enjoy the discovery on her own and he wasn't about to dishonor him by helping her.

Amaya nodded. "Then let's forget it and enjoy our dinner."

After that, dinner was pleasant and they discussed the hotel at length. By the time Nina arrived with dessert, they'd exhausted that conversation. "Tell me, Amaya," asked Tyler, "what do you do for fun?"

Amaya thought about that for a few minutes while she ate the strawberry shortcake on her dish and then said, "I like to read and work crossword puzzles, and believe it or not, I enjoy a game of cribbage or chess."

"We do have a game room; can I challenge you to a game of chess?"

They rose gleefully, Amaya promising to beat his tail off and he, commenting she was up against a master as they went to play. "Winner gets to choose whether we make coffee or tea after the game," Tyler teased.

"You're on," Amaya said, and they shook hands and began serious play.

* * * *

Sipping at his hot coffee, Tyler asked, "Where did you learn to play so well?"

“Granddaddy taught me to play chess when I was seven. We used to play every summer. Those are some of my favorite memories of my time with him.”

“You’ll have to give me another chance to beat you. I underestimated your skill.”

“Anytime, Tyler. Anytime!”

With that, Tyler rose and took his mug to the sink. “May I walk you to your room? I’m off to bed.”

“Thank you, but I want to visit the chapel before going upstairs. I’ll see you in the morning.”

* * * *

Amaya sat on a step in the chapel that had clusters of pots of crocus at either end. She touched a deep blue petal lightly and said, “Granddaddy, we’re making exciting plans and I hope you’re pleased.” She went on to tell him all about her plans for a hotel and the meeting with her staff. She also told him how she’d beat Tyler at chess and thanked him for teaching her so well.

By the time she left the chapel, she was in a good mood and wandered up to her room for a relaxing bath. Before going to bed, she knocked on Linda’s door and was relieved to find her home safely. “I do worry about you, Aunt Linda, when you’re out so late.”

“There’s no need, Amaya. I always tell William where I’m going and when I expect to be back. If I’m over an hour late, he’ll come for me.”

“That’s a relief and an excellent idea. Thanks, Aunt Linda, goodnight.”

* * * *

When Amaya awoke the following morning, she found a deep blue petal lying on the pillow next to her head. She smiled and said, “I take that as a go ahead, Granddaddy,” then went about her business of starting the day.

That morning, a memo went out to the entire staff requesting a logo for Amaya's Keep to be embossed on all correspondence and the vehicles. This would be a contest. The winning logo designer would be given a free day with William to chauffeur him or her around, or if William won, he would get the car of his choice for the day.

The contest went on in earnest for a week. All the designs submitted were unique and different, ranging from simple lettering to elaborate drawings. When the week ended and the difficult decision was made, it was William's design that Amaya and Linda chose, with Tyler in agreement. The boy was a very talented young man. His drawing of Amaya's Keep in miniature and the gold ring with the words, *Amaya's Keep*, in brick red lettering over the ring was perfect. William took the English Roadster out for the day and returned late that night a happy man. He spent all the following day polishing the car he'd spent the day driving.

* * * *

The next few weeks were hectic for the entire staff. William was busy getting the new logo on each vehicle. It was done in letters no bigger than twelve inches total on the limousine and larger on the trucks. The rest were suitably sized for the use of the vehicle.

Laurie spent her days cooking, and as much as Amaya liked burgers, she sat down to meals of potatoes, roast beef and boiled cabbage, or whatever else Laurie put on the table.

Nina spent her days baking and everyone sampled the tarts, cakes, cookies and puddings. Niles and the household staff inventoried the linen, china and silver, making up lists of additional items that would be needed.

Amaya and Tyler spent their time going over the planning of the themes, checking lists of needed supplies, ordering letterhead and going over the budget, while Linda spent much of her time involved in the entertainment area of the plans and still managed to find time for her trips to town.

By the end of the first month, plans were made, licenses received and orders had gone out. It was now the middle of May and Amaya and Tyler were spending their time on an advertising campaign to best promote the castle.

Amaya frequently found time to visit the chapel to keep her granddaddy informed of their plans and was never disappointed, because she always found a fresh flower petal on her bed the morning after each visit. These flower petals kept Amaya's enthusiasm running high, because deep in her heart, she knew her granddaddy was pleased with her plans and progress.

Chapter 5

Finding herself with a free afternoon, Amaya considered the journals she'd found in the library. She was convinced they held some information as to her family ancestry. Finding herself restless after all the preparations being made for the hotel opening, she didn't think she could sit still long enough to read, much less concentrate on the contents of the journals. Instead, she decided to continue her search of the secret passages for entry to the turret rooms and a door to the center garden.

This time, starting on the third floor where she had left off, Amaya went back into the passage from the panel down the hall from her room. Rather than continue down the passage, she turned toward the corner, and there she was able to find a button that opened a panel into a large, round room. Investigating, she found this was the third floor of the west turret, furnished to serve as a sitting room.

"Oh, how lovely. I'll have to find a use for this room," she said aloud as she started down to the second floor, where she was delighted to find a children's playroom, complete with toys, rocking horse and a small table and chairs. She found another room and a passage that led all the way to the east turret, and then back to the third floor for the south and the first floor for the north. This room led to

a hallway that took her to a very visible door, which opened into the garden. Amaya was so pleased to finally wander the garden, she spent several hours there.

What a glorious, safe place for my children to play. She pictured several children running through the paths, all with raven black hair or sparkling red curls. “Now, where did that come from?” she asked.

* * * *

Visiting the chapel each evening, Amaya talked to her grandfather, and as expected, she would find a flower petal somewhere near her person when she woke up, but by now, she was accustomed to them and accepted them as her grandfather’s way of telling her she had done well. Each petal was placed in a bowl on the desk in Amaya’s room, which was rapidly turning into an aromatic reminder of her grandma and granddaddy.

Each morning, Amaya and Tyler met in the kitchen for breakfast and were always joined by Linda. They started their day recapping the accomplishments of the day before and planning the upcoming work. Appreciating her aunt’s talent for entertainment, Linda was put in charge of the five packages to be offered. Linda’s talents far exceeded everyone’s expectations, including her own. Linda had developed four, three-day packages to advertise on opening. In each package, there would be the game and quest for the Amaya’s Keep ring.

The game consisted of each guest, or couple if they preferred, receiving a map of the secret passages and hidden rooms and alcoves. In each marked area, the player was to find an object, and upon completing their search, would return with twelve objects. Each player in the game would be able to choose which twelve objects to put in their bag from the many hidden in the passages on a first come, first

choice basis. To ease the congestion at the beginning of the game, each player would start in a different area of the castle to begin their search. At the end of the game, an envelope would be opened, which would award the ring to the bearer of the object depicted on the card in the envelope.

“This game takes place on the second day,” explained Linda, “with the winner being guest of honor at dinner on the third evening, where a small ceremony will be held and the ring presented. Each guest will receive a plaque of participation and their choice of one of the twelve objects they gathered as a memento. With the game being played in this fashion, the winner will always change because no one will know which object to choose.” Linda had thought of hiding the ring, but decided that once the ring was found, the game would end, which wasn’t her intention. Linda was adamant that the game be played out in its entirety and Amaya agreed.

The first day of each package was unscheduled with many choices of entertainment available. There would be supervised horseback riding, game tournaments, a trip through the labyrinth and a tour of the castle and grounds, or just taking it easy, getting acquainted with the other guests, or preparing their strategy for the game.

“The third evening will determine the price of the package,” continued Linda. “One package will be a dress ball for which a band will be hired. One will be a period costume ball and another, the mystery dinner you suggested, Amaya, with volunteer guests playing the characters, and the remaining guests figuring out who committed the murder. The fourth package I’ve put together is a medieval dinner eaten in the old-fashioned way, with minimal utensils and lots of finger foods, such as

turkey legs, roasted potatoes and tankards of ale. This package will also include a joust, which Mr. Sykes has assured me he can arrange.”

“That’s wonderful, Aunt Linda. You are so imaginative. What do you think, Tyler?”

“I think you have a treasure in your aunt and her plans are wonderful and unique.”

Linda blushed and thanked both Amaya and Tyler.

* * * *

With the fifth package yet to be invented, a contest again went up for grabs to the staff. With the same prize offered, one day off with William as chauffeur for the day in whichever vehicle the winner chose.

Waiting for the results of the contest, other arrangements had to be made. Tyler had contacted some of the most elite magazines across the country and several in England, Scotland and Ireland, as well as some European countries he was still considering. He’d also hired radio and television time to advertise this “Most Unique Castle Adventure”, which is how Amaya chose to refer to the packages. Hotel, in her opinion, was too common. They were selling entertainment, not lodging.

With all the past business talked over and agreed upon, they went over their list of to-dos. Tyler was to follow up with the supplier on the objects for the games. They had agreed that no more than twenty-five guests would be accepted for each package and they needed twelve objects for each player to collect, which presented a challenge not to repeat any object for each game. A knight in shining armor was at the top of the list followed by a horse, then a king, queen, princess and prince. A candle, a fireplace and a coat of arms were also selected. A drawbridge was named and a turret with a tower room, as well as a labyrinth. With

three hundred separate objects needed, another contest went out to the entire staff and Amaya was richly rewarded. Nina was a fan of historical romance novels and appeared well versed on the subject. She came in first with sixty-three suggestions, of which forty-seven were accepted and she won the day with William as chauffeur.

* * * *

Within two weeks, Tyler's supplier had delivered three hundred miniature objects molded of pewter and upon inspection, the supplier was given an order for four more sets with many more to follow, if the Castle was successful.

Amaya contacted a jeweler and managed to get a great rate on the rings, if purchased in quantity. Knowing she would need several sizes, she placed a large order, again with more to follow if the hotel was successful. Realizing later this would be a wasted expense if too many rings of one size were ordered, she proposed they take a ring size when reservations were made. Linda suggested this would also keep the guests in anticipation while waiting the date of their visit.

With most of the details arranged, Amaya, Linda and Tyler planned for a July fifteenth opening, which would be advertised on radio and television. The magazines required more notice. They didn't expect a large turnout to begin with, but had hopes the guests would relate their experiences in a favorable light, bringing more curious customers.

* * * *

Amaya had begun her riding lessons in late April and caught on rather fast. After the morning briefings, she would take her favorite horse, Cinderella, out for a ride, and before long, she invited Tyler to ride on Prince

Charming and accompany her each morning for an hour before work resumed.

Amaya and Tyler were falling into a comfortable camaraderie. They found they worked well together and rarely disagreed. All ideas and decisions were put before the board of three, and were discussed and accepted, or thrown out on a majority. Aside from their constant contact working, Amaya and Tyler were exploring a friendship. They played cribbage and chess and once in a while, could rope a staff member or two into a Clue game. They went riding regularly and seemed to enjoy each other's company. Amaya was happier and more content and was having more fun than she'd ever had in her life. Living at Amaya's Keep and planning the business was so exciting, that many nights, she found her way to the kitchen because she couldn't clear her mind to sleep. The realization that she could make her fantasy come true astonished her. She could have this castle and the ring and she could give others the experience of a lifetime. People rarely got to live their fantasy as she was doing, and that excited her so much, she wanted to give her guests more. What fun she was having!

* * * *

When the time limit elapsed, Laurie came in winner of the fifth package, which she named "The Princess Wedding". A real wedding in a fairy tale castle could be put on easily with a honeymoon of catering to the bride and groom. Room was available for many members of the wedding party and close family to stay over. The hotel in town would be able to accommodate the remainder of the guests. Of course, the game would be played by all the guests that booked to stay on a few days after the wedding. The chapel was roomy enough to accommodate one

hundred and fifty guests and Nina could bake the wedding cake. Help would be brought in for the reception.

Laurie spent her day off with William chauffeuring her to Alabama to visit her sister.

* * * *

When Tyler invited Amaya out to dinner on the last day of May, she was pleasantly surprised and eager. Thinking back, she hadn't left the castle in more than a week. It was time to get out. Amaya dressed in a simple black and burgundy print shift with high-heeled sandals and a rope of pearls at her neck. She wore her Amaya's Keep ring on her finger and tiny emeralds at her ears. Her hair fell free around her head with only a silver headband to keep it off her face. A touch of makeup and red lipstick brought out the beauty of her European/Indian complexion. Tyler was astonished when she walked down the stairs. Never had he seen a woman so lovely and never had he imagined Amaya looking so beautiful. Oh, he always knew Amaya was beautiful, in a natural healthy way, but not this glamorous, cover girl model beauty. She absolutely took his breath away.

Riding into town, Amaya remarked, "This is so nice of you, Tyler. I really needed to get out for a while."

"It's my pleasure, Amaya. We've both been working too hard. I thought we could do with a break, and it's no fun going out alone."

They spent a pleasant early evening dining in the nearest steakhouse. Tyler held her close as they danced to the country western music and was disappointed when they had to leave.

* * * *

They arrived back at the castle by ten.

When Amaya entered the dark foyer, she said,
“Something must be wrong. Where’s Niles?”

Suddenly, the lights came on and Amaya was led to the ballroom. There, the entire staff began singing “Happy Birthday” and she saw the cake Nina had made for her. Amaya had been so busy with preparations for the hotel, she’d forgotten her own birthday. Toasts were made and cake was eaten, gifts were opened and conversation flowed. As the party ended, Tyler walked Amaya to her room, kissed her gently on the cheek and in a strong Scottish brogue, he said, “Happy Birthday, my lassie,” and reluctantly turned, went down the hall, and disappeared.

Amaya flushed and entered her room. She’d never spent a happier birthday and had never been with so many people she admired, respected and liked. What a wonderful day it had been for her. She quickly changed into shorts and a t-shirt and ran to the elevator. When she arrived at the chapel, she sat down on the step as she always did, this time, next to a large vase of pink roses and said,
“Granddaddy, thank you so much for what you’ve given me. I’ve never been happier or more excited. I hope you can hear me because my feelings are too encompassing not to share them with you. Thank you and you too, Grandma. I love you both.”

* * * *

As Amaya lay in bed that night, she still felt Tyler’s body next to hers as they had danced and her cheek still felt warm from Tyler’s goodnight kiss. She touched her fingers to her cheek and wished Tyler had taken her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. What a ridiculous thought that was. After all, they were related in some fashion, but she hadn’t pursued that subject and didn’t know how distant the family

tie was, but she did know she'd definitely been out of circulation too long.

When Amaya awoke the following morning, she found one whole, long-stemmed, thorn-free, pink rose lying on the bed next to her head. She sat up and held the rose to her nose to sample the sweet fragrance and buzzed the maid for a vase. This one wouldn't go into the dish of petals for a while.

* * * *

Tyler had left Amaya at her door with a brief kiss. His body ached to take her in his arms, but he knew that was out of the question. Dancing was as close as he was going to get to her body. He went to his room and was awake half the night wondering what it would feel like to kiss Amaya with all the passion he was feeling. They were definitely spending too much time together!

* * * *

With opening day only six weeks away, Amaya had a lot to do and no time to dwell on her personal life. At breakfast, she approached Tyler and Linda with the idea of an open house for the neighboring town. After all, Southerners were very hospitable people, and if she was to have a business in this community, she needed the cooperation and approval of the townspeople. Aunt Linda had mentioned many times how curious her friends and acquaintances were to see the castle and learn about it. Amaya also knew most of their guests would be out-of-towners and she personally didn't feel it was fair to the community to ignore their curiosity. "So, what do you think?"

Linda answered first and with little hesitation. "I think it is important to make Amaya's Keep part of the community and an open house would be the very thing."

"I agree," said Tyler. "Where I come from in Scotland, it would be considered rude if you thought yourself above the people of the community and didn't show your hospitality. What did you have in mind?"

"I thought an open house all afternoon and a dance in the backyard in the evening. We could hire a band of Scottish bagpipers and an English singer for the afternoon and a local country band for dancing in the evening. Lots of food and drinks. Any suggestions?" She looked first to Linda, and then to Tyler.

They discussed ideas at length and when Bethany poured coffee, Amaya asked her to sit down for a minute. "If we have this open house, Bethany, what would you suggest we serve for food?"

Bethany was quick. She rattled off several dishes, including a few roast turkeys and baked hams, along with mashed potatoes and pinto beans, plus an assortment of salads and lots of desserts. She added that beer or ale to drink and soft drinks along with coffee would do well. There were very few hot tea drinkers Bethany knew, but sweetened iced tea was a favored cool drink in the South.

Amaya hadn't spent much time talking with Bethany and was surprised at her enthusiasm and detailed list of foods. When Bethany informed her that she'd worked for a caterer in Memphis for several years, Amaya realized she would prove to be a great asset to the kitchen. So far, Bethany had spent most of her time washing dishes and cleaning up after Laurie and Nina. With this new revelation and Laurie's approval, it was decided to make Bethany cook's assistant, leaving Nina with the baking. Amaya would hire a new helper to work in the kitchen.

* * * *

As the days rolled by and the television and radio advertisements played on the air, reservations began trickling in for July and August. One wedding was planned for August and all the packages had at least one reservation.

Open house was scheduled for June twenty-seventh. Amaya had visited the Mayor of Washburn Springs personally to invite him and his family, as well as the Chief of Police and the other local dignitaries. All had accepted and notices were posted all over town. Tyler had flown to Jackson and invited Governor Torbou of Mississippi, and to Amaya's pleasure, he accepted for himself and his family. It seemed word of the castle had reached all the way to Jackson. According to Linda, the whole town was in a state of excitement and anxious to visit the castle, meet Amaya and hear about the hotel. They were in for a good turnout.

* * * *

When Amaya visited the chapel again on the evening before the open house to tell her granddaddy about all the preparations being made, she felt content. What a wonderful life she was having and she owed it all to him, and the following morning, she awoke to find a morning glory petal lying on her bed, and could have sworn that she felt a kiss on her forehead during the night.

Chapter 6

Amaya's Keep was ready for the open house. The entire staff had been preparing for a week. The castle was shining clean, the grounds immaculate and food and drink prepared. Roast turkey and baked ham, roast beef and seafood were the main courses. Potatoes were cooked and kept hot, salads were made and so many desserts, no one would possibly be able to sample them all. The kitchen staff had exceeded Amaya's expectations.

Amaya, dressed in a royal blue silk suit and matching shoes, was beautiful and sophisticated. Linda wore a silk dress in teal that flattered her rotund figure. Tyler appeared in his clan kilt, which delighted and amused Amaya as well as the rest of the staff.

The bagpipers were weaving a fine tune through the castle from the grand ballroom and an English vocalist sang the tunes of her country in the lounge, which Amaya had appropriately named, The Pub.

The Governor of the State of Mississippi had been invited to arrive early and so was the first to appear at the door with his family. Amaya and Aunt Linda greeted them warmly and since Tyler had met Governor Torbou, he shook his hand and invited him into The Pub for a drink. Amaya offered Mrs. Torbou a private tour of the castle

while Linda took the children outside to the miniature English style carnival, which had been set up for this occasion, and was being supervised by William and Johnny.

No sooner had Amaya finished the brief tour, than the mayor and the chief of police arrived with their families, and then it seemed that no one in the community had missed coming to Amaya's Keep. The crowd was large, but well behaved. Most of the children played at the carnival, while teenagers wandered through the labyrinth in hopes of stealing a kiss and the adults were occupied touring the castle, playing darts in The Pub, visiting the stables and greenhouse or sampling food. Many young couples were enjoying the bagpipe music and when a lively tune was played, they were dancing and laughing. When Amaya stopped back in the ballroom early that afternoon, the band was teaching a dance called Brody's Fancy to a group of festive couples while they laughed and erred and tried again.

Amaya slipped into the kitchen to catch her breath for a moment and found Tyler helping Laurie dish up more food. Amaya had spoken to each person who arrived, answered questions and showed off her castle, while Tyler entertained the masses with stories in a strong Scottish brogue and drank ale while toasting the town, the mayor, the governor, the castle and anyone else present. Linda was her charming self, visiting with the townspeople and making the dignitaries feel welcome. She was having the time of her life. Linda liked nothing more than to visit and she was getting her chance today. She was also proving to Amaya, without even realizing it, how well she could handle the title of Social Director.

Now taking a much-needed break, Amaya sat at the table and kicked off her shoes as she asked, "How's it going,

everyone?”

All began to chatter at once about how well the food had been received and how much they had gone through. When Bethany, Nina and Diana carried out more food to the vast tables flanking the dining room, Tyler took a cup of coffee and joined Amaya.

“It appears you have a success on your hands. I didn’t expect such a turnout. How are you holding up?”

“Wonderful,” she answered. “I’m so excited. This really is a party. So many people, and they seem to be enjoying themselves. The children love the carnival and the older children appear to be roaming everywhere. I’ve met so many nice people today. I can’t believe we pulled it off.”

“Well, it’s not over yet. We still have the dance this evening and a few to sober up or send William to drive home, but all in all, I’d say you’ve done well.”

“We have done well. Not one of us could have accomplished this on our own. We make a good team, don’t we? By the way, your kilt is a nice touch.”

Having had too much ale and not enough food, Tyler was rapidly losing his inhibitions and that was the reason for the coffee stop in the kitchen. Nevertheless, with a smile on his face and his eyes crinkling at the corners, he rose and tilting Amaya’s chin with his hand, he kissed her rosy red lips just a minute longer than he should have, and then, with coffee in hand, left Amaya to return to his duties.

The kiss meant nothing. Too much ale and too much satisfaction with the success of the open house, but Amaya flushed red at the heat that spread through her body with Tyler’s kiss. She wasn’t used to such a reaction from a kiss. Had she been isolated for too long from society and dating, or was she just enjoying the success of the day and vulnerable to Tyler’s kiss, as she would have been to any

man at the moment? She didn't have time to consider this, for she was called to duty as the country western band, The Mississippi Mudrunners, began to set up for the evening dance and some of the guests were leaving to go home and put their children to bed.

When the band began playing, Linda was the first to approach the dance floor with her friend, Levi. They danced the two-step for several minutes before the crowd joined in, and before long, there was little room left on the dance floor. Amaya was surprised at her aunt's grace and watched Linda and Levi with pleasure until the tune ended and another began. This one was a slow waltz, and Amaya was asked to dance by a very handsome gentleman, who introduced himself as Garrett Tudor.

Garrett was a local farmer with big blue eyes and short sandy hair. He was dressed in blue jeans and a western shirt, complete with pearl snaps for buttons, and cowboy boots. From their conversation, Amaya learned he was widowed, thirty-three years old and had been born on his farm. He had left only long enough to go to agricultural school. He was very charming and Amaya felt comfortable in his arms. She was having a fine time dancing, until the music stopped and another tune started.

This time, it was Governor Torbou who claimed her, and as she glanced over his shoulder to scan the crowd, she saw Tyler dancing with a buxom young woman, who was smiling at him with adoration. Amaya felt a twinge of jealousy, and then dismissed it when she noticed Garrett dancing with an elderly woman, who for all the world looked rapt at his attention. Amaya smiled to herself. What a nice group of people this town harbored. She thanked Governor Torbou for the dance and went in search of a cold drink just as she heard a scream from the shadows of the

dance floor.

By the time Amaya found where the disturbance had come from, the area was crowded with guests, as well as Tyler and Linda. A young woman was being offered a drink as she leaned against a tree, her face ashen white and her hands trembling.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Amaya spoke loudly and several people began talking at once. She heard mention of a scream and a ghost with others nodding and trying to explain.

"Excuse me," she asked, "would someone please see if there's a doctor in the group? The rest of you, please go back to your dancing, I would like to speak to the young lady."

The crowd reluctantly eased away and Amaya led the woman to a clearing and sat with her on a bench. "What's your name?"

The woman gulped her water and whispered, "Debbie Tate."

"Okay, Debbie, tell me what happened to you."

Debbie sipped more water and said in a shaky voice, "I thought I saw a ghost."

"Oh, Debbie, I'm so sorry you were frightened, but this castle is too new to have a ghost. I'm the only person to have lived here, and as you can see, I'm alive and well. You must have seen a shadow and were startled by it."

When the doctor arrived with his bag, Debbie told him she was fine and had only been startled. Nevertheless, he insisted on checking her pulse and blood pressure before he was satisfied she was well.

With the doctor gone, she said to Amaya, "I know you're right. What I think happened is that I had two glasses of ale and I don't usually drink. I am sorry for the

commotion. I'm fine now."

"That's good to hear. I would certainly hate for your first experience with us to be a bad one. We're very happy here. Perhaps you disturbed a young couple in a private moment."

"I'm sure that's all it was. I've had such a lovely time here tonight."

As the two chatted, Amaya learned that Debbie was a single mother raising her son on the wages she earned as a part-time waitress. This had been her first night out since her husband had deserted her. The marriage had never been a success and she was happy to be single again, even though the financial worries were difficult.

"Have you had any experience in household work?" Amaya asked Debbie.

When Debbie said she was the oldest of seven children and had been her mother's right-hand in raising her siblings, cleaning, cooking and doing laundry, Amaya asked her to come back the following day for a job interview if she was interested in working in the kitchen or laundry. With the hotel opening in a few weeks, she explained she was going to hire extra help.

Debbie was so delighted, the color returned to her face and she beamed with happiness. "I won't let you down, Miss Amaya, if you decide to hire me. I'm a good worker."

"I'm sure you are," replied Amaya.

"Now that I've recovered from my scare, I need to get my son and take him home to bed." Debbie thanked Amaya profusely for the opportunity of an interview and left a happy woman.

When Amaya finally arrived at the long table that held refreshments, she met yet another attractive young man. He introduced himself as Ray Turner and asked for the next

dance. She nodded and walked with Ray to the side of the yard and stepped up onto the large patio filled with pots of greenery and benches. As they sat down, Ray asked Amaya about the castle and if she enjoyed living here and how she liked the town. He seemed bent on finding out how she felt about being in Mississippi. He'd heard the rumors about the will and was convinced she was ordered to be here according to its terms. Amaya was pleased to discuss the castle. She told Ray how content she'd been living here and how much she loved her castle and looked forward to opening the hotel, which by now was common knowledge in the nearby town. When the music began, Amaya led Ray back to the band and to the floor where they danced easily.

As the evening wore on and the last dance of the night began with a slow song, Tyler claimed Amaya, and holding her close, they moved with the music without saying a word. He merely held her in his arms, as if comforting her or himself. Amaya felt secure in Tyler's arms and she could smell the ale and cigar smoke, along with the scent of other women he'd danced with. What a confusing variety of odors to mix, but she didn't mind. He looked so handsome in his kilt, and at that moment, she was proud to be in his arms for the last dance. Overcome with exhaustion, she lay her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes and followed his lead until the dance ended and she had to stand on her own two feet again.

After the band announced the end of the party, Amaya, Linda and Tyler stood on the steps at the front of Amaya's Keep and shook hands with all the parting guests and thanked them for coming.

When the last guest had finally departed, Amaya went to her room for a hot bath before talking to her granddaddy.

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Lying in the oversized, ornate tub, Amaya began to feel reinvigorated as she thought about how well the party had gone and all the people she'd met. She'd danced twice with both Garret and Ray. Both were very handsome men and Amaya felt attractive for the first time in a long while. It was obvious to her that they were both interested in more than the castle, Garrett more so than Ray. He appeared nonchalant about her home and appeared to enjoy her company, while Ray seemed intrigued by the castle as well as attracted to her. She felt a warm glow of femininity as she remembered the dancing and how good it felt to be in the arms of a man. It had been quite some time, perhaps too long, she reflected, but dancing with Tyler had been the best. She felt at home in his arms and a warm glow passed over her again as she thought about it.

Feeling better after her bath, Amaya donned her usual shorts and t-shirt and ran down the hall humming a tune from the band, and on impulse, hopped on the wide, curving banister. She slid all the way down, only to hop on the next one leading to the first floor and do the same. Red-faced and happy, she jumped off and two-stepped all the way to the chapel.

* * * *

Tyler stood in the shadows with a wide grin on his face watching Amaya playfully slide down the banisters and dance along the hall. When she was out of sight, he slipped into the kitchen for a cup of hot tea. Tired as he was, the excitement of the day had him too wound up to sleep and he was delighted with Amaya's joviality. She was a very serious woman and he was pleased to see her happy and enjoying herself.

Linda joined him and poured a cup of coffee, insisting

Laurie sit down and rest. The kitchen staff had been going from early morning and was still cleaning up.

By the time Amaya finished talking to her granddaddy and joined the others in the kitchen, Laurie was dismissing her girls. "Laurie," Amaya said, "tell your staff they have the day off tomorrow. We can all feed ourselves. That goes for you, too."

The three girls thanked her profusely while Laurie was hesitant, insisting she had work to do, but Amaya was insistent. "I've given everyone the day off, except the stable hands and they're taking turns. You've all earned it and I won't take no for an answer."

Laurie acquiesced and left the kitchen.

"That goes for you as well, Tyler and Aunt Linda. Take the day off. We can manage on our own, anyone who wishes to stay in the castle, that is."

Tyler thanked her and asked, "So what are you doing tomorrow? Will you also be taking the day off?"

Amaya sipped her tea and nibbled on a cream puff left from the party. "I haven't had time to think about it yet, but yes, maybe I will take the day off and go to a movie and out to eat. Maybe do some shopping. What about you, what will you do?"

"I think I'll go fishing at the dam. I haven't been fishing for some time and may not get another chance for a while. Do you know we received three reservations today while the party was going on?"

"Really, I haven't looked. That's wonderful." A glow flushed Amaya's face again with the excitement of reservations. It appeared this venture was getting off to a good start. As they lingered at the table, Linda said she would spend her free day with Levi, since he wanted to show her his home.

“Ah-ha,” said Amaya with a twinkle in her eye. “It seems you and Levi are getting rather chummy. Want to tell us about it?” she teased.

Linda blushed and said there was nothing to tell. “He’s a friend, that’s all. You didn’t expect me to give up my gentlemen friends when I moved in here, did you?”

“Never!” Amaya laughed and continued, “I should be so lucky.”

* * * *

Tyler had nothing to say to that as he excused himself to go to his room. He was confident Amaya could have any man she chose, she just didn’t know it. With her beauty and grace, humor and charm, there wasn’t a man in the world that wouldn’t be captivated by her. What made Amaya the most attractive was the fact she wasn’t aware of it. Tyler didn’t think Amaya ever focused on herself enough to realize she was a beautiful, sexy, desirable woman as well as being intelligent, thoughtful and kind. She was a rare breed indeed, and the man who was fortunate enough to win her love would be the luckiest man on earth.

* * * *

When Amaya woke to prepare for her day off, she found a blue bachelor button flower on her bed. She smiled when she picked it up and twirled it in her fingers. “Now, Granddaddy, what on earth is this one for? Couldn’t you have chosen something a little less telling?” Dropping the small flower in the vase she now kept permanently ready, she went about her business.

Her first chore was to call Debbie and arrange to go to her home for the interview. Then getting dressed in comfortable jeans and a peasant shirt, she headed for her old, reliable car.

* * * *

Driving into town was a pleasure for Amaya as she glanced at the trees and foliage. The kudzu that grew wild and untamed along the side of the road was interspersed with wildflowers that gave her peace and reminded her of her grandmother. What beautiful country this was and so different from the city she'd lived and worked in. *How could anyone go back to that life once they'd experienced this serenity and beauty? What will the year bring? Will I be willing to remain here? Will I make a success of this hotel, or will I choose to return to the city and my former dreams?* She mused about that for several miles and then decided to leave it to fate. A smile formed on her lips at that thought. Fate was something she had never believed in. She believed she made her own fate. Now it seemed she was prepared to leave her life to fate and live day by day, for the time being anyway. Turning on the radio, she sang the rest of the way into town accompanied by the music filtering out of her speakers and wafting out the open window of her car.

* * * *

Her first stop was the Local Café for toast and coffee, and as she relaxed in the red booth with duct tape covering a tear in the vinyl, she was startled when Garrett asked to join her.

"Of course. I'd love some company. Please, sit down."

Garrett sat opposite Amaya and stretched his long legs to the side. When the waitress poured coffee, he ordered an omelet with ham and cheese. "May I say how lovely you look this morning? Have you recovered from your party last night?"

"Oh yes, it was a wonderful party. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Very much, but the highlight of the evening was dancing with you."

Amaya smiled at Garrett. He was very obviously flirting with her and it brought a slight flush to her face. It was pleasant for a woman to be given the attentions of a handsome man and she was no exception. They chatted amicably during breakfast until Amaya realized the time. "I have to go, I have an appointment in twenty minutes," she said as she rose and dug through her purse for money. "It was so nice having breakfast with you, Garrett."

"This is on me," he said as he took the bill and held it. "What are you doing after your appointment, Amaya?"

Again Amaya smiled her generous smile that displayed the twinkle in her eyes. "I've taken the day off. I plan to go to a movie, then do some shopping and have dinner. I haven't played hooky since I moved here."

Garrett walked Amaya to the door. "Would you like some company this afternoon? I feel like playing hooky myself." He grinned a brilliant toothy smile and glared into her eyes mischievously.

Amaya accepted and they made plans to meet back at the restaurant at twelve thirty. There was no theater in town and the nearest one was an hour away. *What the heck, it'll be an adventure*, and as she drove out of the parking lot, she realized her life was now one big adventure due to her granddaddy, and she thanked him for his gift.

* * * *

When Amaya pulled into the drive of Debbie's home, she found the small house nothing more than a shack. The white paint had washed away after years of neglect and the front porch was sagging and missing the bottom step, but even in this condition, the yard was neatly mowed and trimmed with flowerbeds boldly blooming. Amaya felt a pang of sympathy for this young woman. The inside too, was neglected, but neat and tidy and she could see where

Debbie had painted and decorated the three rooms she lived in with her son. The heater looked dangerous to Amaya with its stove pipe running up the wall and several grates missing from the wood-burning heater.

A little boy of about four greeted her at the door, followed closely by his mother. Amaya was offered coffee, which she accepted. After a few minutes of getting acquainted with little Brandon, the boy was sent to watch television while the adults sat at the kitchen table.

"Debbie, the position I have open at this time is vague. I really don't know where I need to use you, but I do know I need more help. Is there any position in particular that you wish?"

Debbie looked around her small home and shook her head. "I need a dependable job and a steady paycheck. I'm willing to do whatever you want done. You see, I'm a fast learner." Debbie blushed slightly at giving herself a compliment. "I can cook and clean. I know how to do laundry and am a hard worker. I promise, if you hire me, I won't let you down."

"You certainly have the right attitude, Debbie, but I would like to ask you a few questions. First of all, it's illegal for me to ask personal questions, so if you choose not to answer, it won't affect whether I hire you or not. Do you understand?"

Debbie nodded and waited.

"My questions are, how old are you, do you have day care for Brandon and do you own this home?"

Debbie didn't expect to have the questions fired at her all at once, so she took a little time to get her thoughts together as she sipped on her coffee. "I'm twenty-four years old. I don't have day care for my son, but I'm sure I can arrange it, and no, I don't own this house. I rent on a

month-to-month basis.”

“Good, now most of my employees live at the castle. I think we can arrange for your son to take the nursery and for you to have the adjoining room and bath, if you are agreeable to relocation. How do you feel about that?”

Debbie sighed and felt a weight lifting from her shoulders at the burden of trying to support her son, pay rent and buy groceries. “Oh, that’s wonderful,” she exclaimed. Then her face fell. “How would I manage with Brandon? I don’t think I can find anyone to drive to Amaya’s Keep every day to watch him, and it’s a long way to and from town.”

Amaya nibbled at a brownie from the dish Debbie had prepared and thought for a moment. “Well, maybe we could take turns with him. Let me talk to my staff and see what we can work out. By the way, you’re hired,” she grinned. “I think it would be nice to have a child in the castle, don’t you?”

Tears glistened in Debbie’s eyes and one moist drop fell and ran down her cheek as she hastily used her napkin to swipe it away. “I would love that.”

They talked about salary and benefits and Amaya asked Brandon if he would like to live in her castle. Before she left the happy mother and son, she made arrangements for them to visit the castle to look over their rooms the following afternoon.

Chapter 7

Having dinner after the movie was very enjoyable for Amaya. She hadn't been on a date in a long time and with Garrett's constant flirting, she did consider it one. Garrett was a good companion. He was funny and kind and very polite. How long had it been since a man had opened her car door for her? After eating lobster and steak while listening to country music, she was enjoying the rich, sweet taste of fruit and the crusty batter of peach cobbler when Garrett spoke again.

"What was all the commotion last night when that young lady screamed?"

"It was nothing. Apparently, she isn't a drinker and she had a couple glasses of ale. Then while wandering the yard, she must have startled a young couple because she thought she'd seen a ghost. Can you imagine?"

"A ghost? How interesting."

"Not really. I explained to her it would be impossible for the castle to have a ghost since I'm the original tenant. She really felt foolish after she settled down."

"What a shame. I rather like the idea of a ghost," said Garrett with humor.

Amaya remained silent and ate another bite of her peach cobbler. She liked the idea of a ghost herself. She

hoped it was Granddaddy because he was so kind and gentle. He would add ambiance to the castle and always be near her. How selfish she was, to ask for that. She had enough, and she closed her eyes and again thanked her grandfather. Tonight, she would have a nice long talk with him.

“Have I lost your attention, Amaya? I didn’t realize I was so boring.” He grinned and looked into her eyes. He was constantly looking into her eyes, as if he could read her mood by watching them.

Amaya felt a romantic flush and quickly looked away. “Of course you’re not boring. I was just thinking of our ghost. It might be nice to have a friendly ghost around, don’t you think?”

“Yes, indeed it would. Very interesting. Would you care to dance?”

Garrett held Amaya a little too close and although she liked him, she felt he was rushing her. Pulling back, she began to talk of idle things to draw his attention away from her. By ten o’clock, she was tired and with the long drive ahead, suggested they end the evening.

When they reached her car, Garrett insisted on following her home. He wasn’t comfortable with her making that long drive so late at night. Amaya felt she was capable of getting herself home, but to avoid a disagreement and allow Garrett his male protectiveness, she acquiesced. When she pulled into the garage, Garrett stopped his car and walked her to the door of Amaya’s Keep. As he bent to kiss her, she turned her cheek, discouraging him slightly, then thanked him for a wonderful day and said goodnight.

Garrett took the kiss on the cheek with good humor, bid her goodnight and was off. Amaya had a lot to think about tonight. She’d enjoyed Garrett’s company immensely

but wasn't accustomed to rushing into sexual relationships, and had the feeling that was what Garrett wanted. Well, she would bide her time and make sure he understood the rules before she allowed herself the pleasure of his company again.

* * * *

This particular evening, the flowers in the chapel were potted violets grouped together on each step. Amaya fingered the delicate purple flowers and sat down to address her grandfather. She told him all about her day. She told him if he was indeed her very own ghost, she was delighted to have him, but she didn't want him watching over her at the expense of spending time with Grandma. She also reminded him that he needed to be more careful not to frighten her guests. With all the current news out, she spoke of her reservations about the opening of the hotel and how afraid she was that it wouldn't be successful. Finally, she thanked him again for Amaya's Keep and told him what a change for the better it had made in her life. How peaceful and serene her new home was and what lovely people he had chosen to work for her.

By the time she was ready to leave, she felt tears glistening in her eyes, tears that she tried to wipe away with the backs of her hands before she gave in and let them flow. She missed her grandfather so much and she wondered if she had lost her mind by getting caught up in the fantasy of living in a castle and actually believing that her grandfather was there with her. Not to mention the fact that he continually left her flower petals, and on occasion, a complete flower. Deciding she was happy, if insane, she chose not to worry about it at the moment and just savor the happiness Granddaddy had brought into her life. She'd enjoyed a lovely day and wouldn't spoil it with tears,

doubts and fears.

With the hour so late, Amaya bypassed the kitchen and went straight to her room.

* * * *

When she awoke the following morning, she found, to her delight, a tiny bouquet of violets tied with a peach ribbon, but while brushing her hair, she found one bachelor button, so wilted, the petals drooped when she picked it up. Astonished, Amaya laid the flower down and paced the floor. *What have I done to displease Granddaddy? Oh my*, she thought, as she realized the significance of the wilted bachelor button. *Is he discouraging my friendship with Garrett?* "Now, Granddaddy," she spoke to the air, "I know I said Garrett was a bit too romantic, but I really enjoyed his company. How can you be so judgmental?" She slipped on a pair of sneakers and as she laced and tied one shoe, she shook her head and thought she really was going insane!

Dismissing her paranoia, she tied the other sneaker and went to the kitchen, where she found Linda. "Good morning, Aunt Linda. Did you have a nice time yesterday?"

"Yes I did, but I think Levi is getting too serious. He actually hinted at marriage while he was showing me around his place. Mercy! Marriage is the last thing I want from him, or anyone."

"Oh my, Aunt Linda. What are you going to do?"

"Just discourage him and accept one of the dates I turned down while Levi and I were spending so much time together. I think he'll get the message. If he persists, I'll just have to tell him the truth. I like his company, but marriage is not in my plans for the future."

Linda never ceased to amuse Amaya. She always managed to handle her men, of whom she was never in short supply. If one didn't turn out to please her, there was

always another one around the corner waiting. She wished she had some of her aunt's personality. Not for finding men, but for knowing what she wanted in a man and going after it. How nice it was to have Aunt Linda here with her.

"I hired a new girl to work for us, Aunt Linda."

Just as she finished her sentence, Tyler walked in and said, "What's that?" He smiled at Amaya and to her embarrassment, she felt her cheeks grow hot and was sure her face was red as that familiar flush crept over her whenever he was near. Why hadn't she felt that while dancing with Garrett? "You have a new employee? You haven't decided to replace me, have you?"

"Sit down, Tyler," she said. "You know better than that." By the time he'd poured his coffee and joined them, Amaya had composed herself and continued. "As I was saying, Aunt Linda, and you too, Tyler, I've hired a new employee. I was thinking of using her and Essie to clean the guest rooms and then have her help in the kitchen in the afternoons. What do you think?"

Linda replied first. "Well, tell us about her first and then I'll let know you what I think."

Looking over at Tyler, she saw him nod in agreement and so she went on. She told them of the conditions she found the woman and her son living in and their conversation. She ended by telling them she'd hired Debbie and offered them the nursery.

Neither spoke, as Amaya looked around at first Linda and then Tyler. "What!"

"Go on," said Tyler. "What else?"

"Nothing else!"

"Nothing. What is she going to do with the boy while she's working?" asked Linda.

"Oh, that. I haven't quite figured that out yet. I

thought maybe we could all take turns keeping an eye on him.”

“Amaya, you can’t mean that,” said Linda. “What are we going to do with a little boy all day long? We all have responsibilities.”

“I know, but I just couldn’t turn her down. You should see what she’s living in. It wouldn’t be so bad for an adult, but that little boy deserves better than that. Tyler, do you have any suggestions?”

Tyler couldn’t help smiling at Amaya’s generosity. “Actually, I have two. We could hire a nanny and let Debbie pay for part of it out of her salary, or we could hire a nanny and pay for it ourselves, then use the nanny to watch over Brandon, as well as look after any children brought here as guests with their parents.”

“Isn’t that an expense we don’t need right now, on top of all the other expenses of opening this hotel?” asked Linda.

While they were discussing the expense of hiring a nanny, Laurie interrupted. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Yes, of course, Laurie, what is it?”

“Well, I don’t like to spread rumors, but everyone will know sooner or later. I have a niece that’s twenty-three years old and just out of college. She got involved with this guy at work and got herself pregnant before she found out he was married. Now she wants to keep the baby. I know she would work for room and board and just a small salary.”

“Really!” came Amaya’s reply. “The poor girl. But does she like children?”

“She really does, and is so good with them. She started babysitting when she was thirteen and was always booked up.”

When Linda and Tyler both said, “Let’s meet her,” at

the same time, Amaya laughed and nodded.

"Arrange for us to meet with her, if she's interested, Laurie," said Amaya.

Laurie thanked the three and went on about her business and Amaya said, "You see, things have a way of working out for the best."

"Well, all I can say is that Debbie had better be a good employee to bring two babies into the nursery," replied Linda, shaking her head.

"I'm sure she'll be fine. Amaya is as good a judge of character as was her grandfather."

"Why thank you, Tyler. That's quite a compliment, and, Aunt Linda, you know you love children. Why are you being so negative?"

"You are right, Amaya, I do. I'm just a little overwhelmed with all that's going on right now. I am sorry. I agree with Tyler. You are a good judge of character and I'm sure it will all work out fine."

With that settled, they talked of their day off and the opening of the hotel in so short a time. Reservations were coming in and the one that surprised them all was Governor Torbou. He had made reservations for himself, his wife and children. Apparently, Mrs. Torbou had been fascinated with the castle and couldn't wait to try for the ring.

"There you go," remarked Amaya smugly. "The governor is bringing his children. We have a job for the nanny already."

"Looks like you win this one," said Tyler. "Now we need to go over the reservations and see where we stand. Meet you in the office in fifteen minutes?"

Amaya nodded and relaxed with her coffee. Before she finished the cup, Laurie asked if two o'clock this afternoon would be a good time to meet Heather Peterson, her niece.

Amaya said that would be fine and headed for the office with Linda following. By the time the three had put in a good morning in the office and then finished lunch, Aunt Linda begged off any more work to run into town. She said she needed some personal items, but Amaya suspected she was looking for a date with someone other than Levi. She certainly got around. Amaya smiled and nodded for her to go ahead. Before Linda could leave, Niles came in with a beautiful bouquet of red roses and asked, "Where would you like these, Miss Amaya?"

"I don't know, Niles, who usually tends to the flower arrangements?"

"These are not from the greenhouse, Miss Amaya, they just arrived for you."

Amaya was shocked. Who could possibly have sent her roses? *Why, Garrett of course.* She reached inside the bouquet and pulled out the card.

Thanks for a wonderful day of hooky.

There was no signature. She blushed and directed Niles to have them put in her sitting room.

With her typical curiosity, Linda asked, "Who sent those? Is there something you aren't telling me, Amaya?"

Amaya didn't want her aunt to get the wrong idea, so she tried to minimize the whole thing. "I ran into Garret Long in town yesterday and we went to a movie and dinner. That's all there is to it. The flowers are lovely, aren't they?"

Linda teased Amaya about having a boyfriend and the more Amaya denied it, the more Linda teased. Finally, she told her aunt to go to town or get to work, and Linda left, laughing all the way down the foyer and out the door.

* * * *

Tyler sat at the dining room table seeming to ignore

the flowers. So Amaya was dating. Why did he feel a twinge of jealousy at the thought of Amaya in another man's arms? She was way out of his reach with all her millions and Amaya's Keep. Yes, he was from a prominent family and yes, he had a good future in the public relations business when this position ended, but even so, he was of what some in Scotland would call a "lower class" compared to Amaya. His future would never stack up to Amaya's inheritance. So, what did it matter? He wasn't in love with Amaya; he merely liked and admired her. She was fun and smart, kind and generous. He was still amazed she hired Debbie and was in the process of finding a nanny. Debbie's employment would probably cost them more than they paid her, and it was a kind gesture, but two children in the castle to feed? Tyler smiled at the thought. A little boy to run the halls and hide in passages and get into mischief. A baby crying in the night and a frazzled mother tending to a fever and cold, colic and diapers. That appealed to Tyler and he looked forward to it. With the nursery on the third floor, none of the guests should be disturbed.

So Amaya was dating, he frowned again. Perhaps he'd better get a social life of his own if he was to tolerate watching Amaya with her men. Yes, he would ask Charlene out very soon. Tyler had met her at the open house and she was indeed beautiful, with golden hair and a buxom figure. She did appear interested in him and open to an invitation. He hadn't considered it then, but under the circumstances, now was the time.

* * * *

Debbie arrived at one-thirty with Brandon. Amaya invited Tyler to join them for tea and to meet Debbie and Brandon. They visited briefly as Tyler fell head over heels for the little boy who was so disciplined his behavior

appeared abnormal. "Tell me, Brandon, are you always such a good boy?" he asked.

Brandon swallowed the rest of his cookie and said, "Mommy said I have to behave today because she needs this job and if I'm not good, Miss Amaya might not let us live here."

Tyler was relieved. No four-year-old boy should be that well behaved, sitting politely at the table while the adults talked. "That's good, Brandon, you need to behave, but why don't we go explore the castle while the ladies talk?"

Brandon jumped up with enthusiasm and grabbed Tyler's hand. He only stopped momentarily to look back and ask, "Can I, Mommy?"

Debbie nodded and watched the two go off, Tyler displaying as much enthusiasm as Brandon.

* * * *

Amaya explained what she wanted Debbie to do and stalled over tea until Heather arrived. With introductions made, she included Debbie in the interview process, much to Debbie's surprise. When Amaya was satisfied that Heather would work out, she sent Niles to find Brandon. Niles smiled after he turned away from the three ladies. He was amazed every day with Amaya, but this was something he hadn't seen in her before. The motherly instinct that came from women when anywhere near a child was amazing, and as he watched Amaya, he could see it took all her self-restraint to keep from asking to feel the baby growing inside Heather. Niles liked Amaya from the first, but each day that passed, he gained more and more respect for her. Bringing two women and two children into the castle was unnecessary with so many women out there anxious to work at Amaya's Keep. It was Amaya's heart

that brought these women to her for employment and care.

* * * *

When Brandon returned, Amaya turned Heather loose with him while she took Debbie up to see their rooms. With Heather joining the nursery crew, Amaya suggested Debbie take a room two doors down from the nursery and give the adjoining room to Heather, as she would need it for the baby. Brandon could have the nursery room until the baby came, then take a room adjoining Debbie's. Debbie was hesitant until Amaya pulled out her persuader, the secret passage that ran from Debbie's room to the nursery where Brandon would be sleeping. Debbie was pleased and excited. She had her very own secret passage to her son and he to her. Wouldn't Brandon love that?

* * * *

Tyler watched Amaya and admired her skill in questioning Debbie and Heather, bringing out the passion in both women and finding the talents she was looking for in hiring the two, but what he enjoyed the most was watching her behavior with Brandon and the protectiveness she displayed for Heather right from the start.

* * * *

When Amaya showed Heather to her room the following day and insisted she rest for a while before getting settled, she relieved both young ladies of Brandon while she personally took him to meet the staff. This also gave Debbie an opportunity to get settled in. Inviting Tyler along, she carried Brandon in her arms down the stairs and into the kitchen for cookies and milk and to meet Laurie and her girls. After introducing Brandon to the household staff and Niles, she put him down and held his hand as they walked outside to see the stables and the horses and even arranged riding lessons on the gentlest horse Mr. Sykes had, with his

mother's approval, of course. When Brandon began to yawn, Tyler carried him back indoors and Amaya took him upstairs for a nap. There she found Debbie helping Heather unpack and as the two young women chatted happily, Amaya knew she had made the right decision in hiring them. Heather put Brandon down for a nap and sat with him until he fell asleep. Yes, Amaya felt good. She had done these women a good service and would receive their loyalty in return.

Volunteer teachers appeared all over the castle. Diana offered to teach Brandon to read and Niles offered world history to Brandon while Heather rested in the afternoon. Laurie invited him to the kitchen for tea each day, which consisted of milk, cookies and company and Mr. Sykes was excited about teaching him to ride. It appeared the staff had taken Heather under their wing, as well as Brandon.

* * * *

With a routine falling into place and Debbie proving to be a great asset to the castle, to Amaya's amazement, Heather had taken over the job of sewing while Brandon was riding or with his tutors. She sewed linen napkins with the Amaya's Keep logo in one corner. She also sewed the logo on the tablecloths with precise stitches in each corner and still had time to teach the young boy to spell and draw and give him lots of love and adventure inside and outside the castle. She was proving to be extremely talented in many areas and was a natural born mother. She may have made a mistake in allowing herself to get pregnant, but she would be an excellent mother.

Each time Amaya visited the chapel to speak to her grandfather, she found a flower petal the following morning, but on the day she moved Debbie, Brandon and Heather into the castle, Amaya found a pink rose. For

Amaya, that was her grandfather's blessing. In her heart, she felt her grandfather was with her, and since she told no one of the flowers or her nighttime visits from her grandfather, there was no one to dispute the fact.

Chapter 8

Being happy and excited was easy for Amaya. With the castle opening the following day, she had been busy and constantly working on improving the fantasy she would provide for her guests. With the addition of a child in the house, no matter how busy she was, she sought Brandon out for a half hour or so to visit or show him a secret passage or just share cookies and milk.

She also found time to check on Heather daily, making sure she was taking her vitamins and seeing her doctor on schedule. Amaya made a point of sending Laurie with Heather to the doctor. She didn't want to take any chances that Heather would conceal any problems she might be having, but she was in excellent health.

Laurie also made extra time for her niece. Every evening as Heather sat sewing in the rocking chair of the nursery, Laurie would bring tea and snacks and they would catch up on their day, plan a layette or pick out baby names to be added or tossed from the list. Laurie was very protective of her only sister's daughter. Laurie's sister lived more than four hours away, so Laurie felt it her responsibility to look after Heather and keep her mother informed of her progress.

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The entire staff had been working non-stop in preparation of opening day. William met their first guests at the airport, a young man and woman from Vermont, and coming in on the next flight was an elderly man from California. The young couple was on a short vacation but the gentleman was here for the adventure. Another couple had arrived the evening before and had spent the night in a hotel near the airport. Picking them up on the way out, William found the last couple to be middle-aged and also there for the adventure. With five guests in the limousine, he drove back to the castle, answering questions all the way. They asked the history of the castle, the object of the game, and many, many more questions. William found he was enjoying the company of the first guests and the drives to and from the airport. This wouldn't be a hardship at all. The guests were so eager and excited; it was not hard to get caught up in the fantasy.

This was a mid-priced package, and as Amaya went over the reservations and totaled the numbers, she had thirty-three people in twenty rooms. They were almost completely filled. The money wouldn't put them in the black, but it was an excellent start. There was a good deal of interest in the castle and many bookings for other packages, even though the magazine advertisements were barely coming out.

Tallying the guest list, Amaya found two single women sharing one room and one with her own room. Upon meeting the two young women, she found they were enthralled with the romance of the castle, while the other woman, Jane Shadow, appeared to be in her mid-fifties and was an engineer whose interest ran to the secret passages and architecture.

The gentleman from California, Thomas Wright, was a

retired science teacher and out for adventure.

The other couples were mostly in the thirty-something and up category and married, looking for a unique getaway.

Linda greeted all the guests as they came in and after their initial introductions to Amaya and Tyler, she managed to offer conversation to each guest in the area they were interested in. Amaya was always astounded at Linda's knowledge. For a woman that married right out of high school with no additional formal education, she was an avid reader of history and a trivia nut. Well versed on most subjects, she was doing her job extremely well. Tyler gave all the guests an initial tour of the castle, saving the secret passages for the game and by dinnertime, they were all getting acquainted and speculating on the passages. Many were pleased to meet Governor Torbou and his family. What a nice opening to have someone of his esteem as a guest.

Mr. Wright managed to seat himself next to Miss Shadow for dinner and Amaya found them absorbed in conversation. *Wouldn't it be nice to have a romance develop at the castle for their opening?* She would watch the couple with interest.

Tyler sat quietly at the table going over the activities of the day in his mind. He had watched Amaya treat each guest with welcome and interest. She'd mingled the entire day with first one, and then another, while in between, she chased from the kitchen to the household staff, the stables and the garden, making sure every detail was taken care of.

Five children had arrived and been put in Heather's care. She had planned the entire three days filled with activity from tours of secret passages on the day after the games, to the stables for rides and walks in the woods to pick wildflowers. She had dinner with the children in the

nursery and had drawn up an itinerary of their activities for the parents so they could be found at any time of day or night.

The first day had been successful with the guests getting acquainted with each other and the castle. The Pub was a favorite of the men, where they could be found drinking ale and playing darts. Many had wandered into the game room for billiards and Amaya was pleased to see one young couple absorbed in a game of chess. The women were entranced with the décor and furniture of the castle. The silk drapery and period furniture had the women chatting and redecorating their own homes. Several of the couples had found their way to the labyrinth and were laughing and shouting for help as they became lost. One of the stable hands, Tony, had been given the responsibility of making sure none of the guests got lost in the maze, and was on hand to give hints and directions along with cold drinks, without leading them out unless they specifically asked him to.

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With Amaya sitting at the head of the long table and Tyler at the other end, Linda sat in the middle to assist in keeping the conversation flowing. Tyler had an unobstructed view of Amaya in her emerald green silk dress. Her hair was piled high on her head with diamonds at her throat and she looked like a princess in any story or real life. She took his breath away just looking at her. Dating Charlene had been enjoyable, but each time he was out with her or kissed her goodnight, his thoughts were with Amaya and on the evening she accepted a date with Garrett, Tyler found himself restless and unable to concentrate his interest on a book or television show until she returned home.

Recognizing that he was becoming too attached to and

possessive of Amaya, Tyler hoped he could get a handle on it, because he didn't want to leave the castle, but he knew in his heart that he couldn't stay if she became involved with another man. The pain would be too great. His being in love with Amaya had never occurred to him. That was out of the question. He was fond of her and didn't want to share her with another man, of that he was certain, but love was not an option he had even considered. Perhaps he was in for a surprise when it did occur to him!

* * * *

The following morning, all the guests were excited and eager to begin the game. Conversation flowed as they served themselves breakfast that had been laid out on the sideboard in the large ornate dining room. The meal was a mixture of American, English and Scottish foods, and while Amaya noticed that most of the guests preferred the fruit, ham and eggs or muffins and jam, a considerable amount of traditional European foods were being sampled. She made a mental note to write that down and joined her guests.

All were dressed casually today, including Amaya in jeans, but she did manage to find a shirt a little dressier than her regular t-shirt. Linda wore slacks and a shirt but Tyler, true to form, showed up in his kilt, as he had the day before. The guests seemed to enjoy his dress, which pleased him. Having been raised in Scotland and gone to college in England and then continued to the United States to complete his education, he was capable of portraying a citizen of each of the countries. Seeing that the guests liked his kilt, he put on his strong Scottish accent and wore his costume proudly.

When the rules of the game were explained and each guest or couple had chosen the secret passage in which they were to begin, they were given instructions on how to

enter and exit along with a map of the route, and the game was on. All guests would trace the same route, but starting them at different entries would ease the crowd to manageable groups. Amaya entered a passage, as did Tyler, William and Mr. Sykes. They were to wander their assigned section of the passage and be prepared for any emergency. The guests were laughing and playing and finally a shout was heard when Miss Shadow announced she had found a prize. This encouraged the others and the passages were a bustle of activity. The game lasted several hours before the last guest exited with his or her purple velvet bag of treasures. There was much speculation on which guest would be the winner before it would be announced at dinner. Meanwhile, tea was served and most of the men chose scotch or ale while most of the women drank tea and ate the scones and petit fours, and if for only a few hours, they secretly lived the fantasy past of a castle tradition.

* * * *

Dinner that evening was exciting with a traditional English dinner of roast beef, boiled potatoes and carrots, along with a variety of salads, breads and desserts. Large trays were carried out to the table for each guest to choose from. Amaya was pleased to see her staff in their black uniforms, starched white aprons and beribboned hats serving as though they had been doing so for years.

Over dessert, the envelope was produced and all the guests were asked to inspect it as they had before the game began. Each guest had written his or her initials on the envelope and upon inspection each agreed that the red Amaya's Keep seal in wax was still intact and that it hadn't been tampered with.

Each guest held his or her velvet bag of treasures and when Amaya opened the envelope, she pulled out a card

bearing the picture of a knight in shining armor. A middle-aged woman sat with her husband as they inspected the contents of their bag and when she pulled out the knight, she shouted with glee.

"I have it, I have it!" The entire table of remaining guests appeared at first disappointed, but it didn't take long before they were applauding Mrs. Kitcher and congratulating her on her find.

Mr. Kitcher kissed his wife on the cheek and handed the knight back to her, and said, "For my wife, the most beautiful princess of all." With that statement, a round of applause again deafened the room at the romantic gesture.

It was then announced that Mrs. Kitcher would be the guest of honor at the costume ball the following evening.

* * * *

Amaya waited fifteen minutes outside the chapel for a pair of guests to leave and said a quick prayer before she entered and sat on the step with the pots of petunias to visit her grandfather. She told him how exciting the day had been. By the time she left, Amaya was exhausted.

She retired to her sitting room with Linda as they hashed over the entire day. They both felt it was a success and looked forward to the following day. Linda then excused herself. Just as she was ready to push the secret button that led to her computer room, Amaya heard a knock on the door. "Come in," she shouted, and was surprised to see Tyler enter with two cans of diet cola.

"Linda, would you like a soda?" he offered. He hadn't anticipated seeing her in Amaya's sitting room and had only brought two cans.

"No, thank you, Tyler. I'm on my way out. I need to check my e-mail and get in some bingo with my internet friends."

Amaya took the cola and turned to her aunt. "Do you really have friends you talk to on the internet?"

"I certainly do. In fact, if you check your reservations, you will meet one in just a few weeks. A Mr. Shamus MacDougall. He lives in Scotland."

Amaya was aghast. "Really!"

"Oh yes, I have friends all over the world I chat with, but Shamus and I have become friendlier than most. He wants to meet me and I thought this was the safest place to meet a stranger. He offered to book a package, so I was delighted to see that he followed through."

Amaya just shook her head and told her to let Shamus know they were all looking forward to meeting him.

Linda replied, "Will do," and left the room.

When Amaya motioned for Tyler to sit down next to her, he joined her thankfully. He was tired after the active day, but like Amaya, he was too wound up with the excitement of their success to sleep.

"Do you believe Aunt Linda? She actually has a gentleman coming from Scotland to meet her here."

Tyler grinned. "I don't know about Linda, but you'll love Shamus. He is a charming old fellow."

"You know him!"

"On yes, Shamus and I go a long way back. In fact, he resides in an old family castle called Whispering Hills and is always visiting other castles. He likes to compare and judge, but he's pleasant and never rude. Finding a brand new castle in the states occupied by a young woman would fascinate him to no end. Meeting your Aunt Linda will just be the icing on the cake for him. He is quite a ladies man for his years."

"How do you know him?"

"Did I not say? We come from the same village. His

sons and I got into quite a bit of mischief in our youth. I still count his sons as my best friends in all the world.”

“How exciting. I can’t wait to meet the man who lives in a castle in Scotland and is the father of the sons who became your friends. I might learn a lot about you while he’s visiting,” she said playfully.

“Not too much, I hope,” replied Tyler with a wicked grin on his face.

Changing the subject, Amaya asked Tyler, “Are you ready for the ball tomorrow?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, that’s why I came to see you. I wanted to ask if you would allow me to be your escort for dinner and the dance. What do you say?”

Amaya felt that all too familiar flush spread throughout her body and forced herself to act relaxed and casual. “I would love to, kind sir. What costume have you chosen?”

“Prince Charming, naturally. You are going to be Cinderella, aren’t you?”

“Now how did you know that? I haven’t told a soul except...oh, of course, Aunt Linda.”

“My favorite spy. Yes I wheedled it out of her. Anyway, we will represent the castle at its best as Cinderella and Prince Charming. I understand Linda is dressing as Queen Margaret.”

“She will be a beautiful queen. I helped her pick out the costume myself. I’m really looking forward to this ball. It being our first.”

Tyler and Amaya fell into a comfortable conversation while speculating on the following days’ events. There was to be horseback riding for those interested and a Clue game marathon, which to Amaya’s pleasure, twelve people had signed up for. The remaining guests had chosen to go it on their own with walks in the woods and exploring the

labyrinth. After an early tea, the guests would be free to rest and prepare for dinner and the ball. When Tyler realized it was nearing midnight, he bade Amaya goodnight and went off to his room.

Amaya prepared for bed and then crawled between the peach satin sheets and turned out the light. She'd enjoyed Tyler's company, and even though he'd arrived in her room in jeans and a sport shirt, she couldn't get the vision of him wearing his kilt out of her mind. She'd watched earlier as he walked across the room and glimpsed his legs as he sat. Not only did he have a bright mane of red hair on his head, but his strong muscular legs were covered as well. Amaya couldn't help but imagine a thick layer of red curls on his chest and longed to run her fingers through it. That disturbing thought kept her awake and restless long into the night, and in the back of her mind, she wondered why she never had that primitive urge with Garrett.

There was something about Garrett that disturbed her. Under all that charm and politeness, she sensed a dark quality about him. She didn't understand why he became so still when he hinted he would like to be invited to the ball as her escort. Even though he was coldly polite about her refusal when she explained this wasn't a social event for her, but a job, she felt the tension in the air. Maybe Garrett wasn't the man he seemed, and if not, maybe she should sever that relationship. She was getting rather uncomfortable with his persistent romantic nature anyway. Yes, that was something to think about. But she needed to be wary of her feelings for Tyler as well. Amaya thought she'd better steer her interests to other male companions. Tyler was her employee and a distant relative of some sort. Not the man she should be fantasizing about. Maybe she would call Ray Turner and invite him out. He seemed like a

nice enough man.

Just as Amaya dozed off, she heard a scream from somewhere in the castle, and when she ran out of her room, Niles was there. He informed her it was on the second floor. They both rushed to the elevator, meeting Tyler at the door. By the time they found the cause of the disturbance, which was Miss Shadow, she appeared to be in good hands. Mr. Wright had taken her to the lounge on that wing and was plying her with brandy. It seemed Miss Shadow had left her room to look for a late night snack and had seen a ghost at the end of the hall.

"He just walked right through the wall at the end of the corridor." Ms. Shadow shuddered.

It took quite some time for Amaya to convince Miss Shadow that the castle was too new to have a ghost and perhaps she had seen a lightning bolt, as it had started to pour down rain, and in the end, Miss Shadow, like Debbie before her, was calmed and returned to her bed for the remainder of the night. Saying goodnight to Tyler, Niles and the other guests who were gathered in the hall, Amaya returned to her room.

"Granddaddy, how could you?" she chastised. "You nearly frightened Miss Shadow to death. You are going to have to be more careful with your wanderings." That sounded ridiculous, even to Amaya, but she had no doubt Granddaddy was behind the scares. Once she could explain away, but twice was proof enough for her. So far, she hadn't voiced her suspicions to Linda or Tyler for fear they would think her insane, but maybe, just maybe, she ought to confide in someone.

Falling asleep, Amaya didn't dream of guests or ghosts, but dreamed of running her hands through that heavy layer of curls she imagined on Tyler's chest, and when she woke

the following morning, she found a perfect purple petunia and a live and healthy blue bachelor button lying on the pillow beside her head.

“Oh, Granddaddy, these flowers are lovely, but if you can appear to my guests, you need to figure out how to talk to me. I have the feeling you want me to become romantically involved with Tyler and don’t you see what a mistake that would be?” Amaya shook her head in confusion and readied herself for the day.

Chapter 9

The last day of this package at the castle was going well. The guests enjoyed their horseback ride through the woods led by Mr. Sykes and followed by Tony, but the most pleasure for Amaya was the Clue game marathon. Those playing took it very seriously and many shouts of joy were heard as a guest gained a clue or won a game. The final winner, Mr. Fallbrook, was awarded a Clue game marathon plaque and the metal rope used to kill Ms. Scarlet. Tea was served to a happy group and then all went off to rest or play with their children or to prepare for the ball.

When dinnertime arrived, Amaya, Linda and Tyler greeted each guest at the door, where Mrs. Kitcher was seated on the throne as guest of honor with her husband beside her. They were dressed delightfully as Robin Hood and Maid Marian. The Governor and his wife, who were costumed as King Henry the VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, sat at the head table with their hosts. After dinner, a plaque was awarded to Mrs. Kitcher as the winner of the game, and then Tyler knelt before her in his Prince Charming costume and kissed her hand before placing the perfectly sized Amaya's Keep ring on her finger. With that accomplished, the dancing began. Many kings and

queens twirled the floor along with princesses and knights. Archers and highwaymen were present as well. Ms. Shadow was in the arms of Mr. Wright; she dressed as a ladies maid while he was garbed in a kilt of green plaid.

Amaya sat in her princess costume admiring the dancers and wondering again how all this had happened, the money and castle, the wonderful staff and the games. She was lost in thought watching the dancers float across the floor when Tyler knelt before her.

"May I have this last dance of the evening, Princess Cinderella?"

Startled out of her daydreaming, Amaya hadn't realized the evening was at a close. She smiled down at Tyler. "Get up, you fool, you look ridiculous."

"Not until you consent to honor me with the last dance," he grinned and his eyes crinkled as he spoke in his deep Scottish brogue.

Amaya began to giggle and took his hand as she rose and waited for Tyler to lead her to the floor. "You are the silliest person I have ever met, Tyler MacGregor. Now sweep me off my feet."

He did just that, taking her in his arms and waltzing across the floor as the giggles evaporated and were replaced by a sigh of contentment. Being in Tyler's arms was as close to being home as she had ever felt with her parents or her granddaddy. She didn't take the time to analyze this feeling; instead she chose to savor the moment. She laid her head on the shoulder of Prince Charming and for a few brief moments, felt like the Princess Cinderella her granddaddy had intended for her.

By the end of the evening when all the guests had retired and Amaya had spoken to her granddaddy and soaked in the bath, she collapsed in her bed and didn't even

hear the gentle knock on her door until it was repeated several times.

Looking at the clock and seeing the digital numbers that read six minutes past ten, Amaya leaped out of bed and ran to the door. "Good grief," she moaned as she let Linda in, "why on earth didn't someone wake me?"

Linda watched as Amaya ran around the room digging out underwear and choosing a silk suit for her appearance to say goodbye to her guests. "That is exactly what I'm doing, Amaya. Are you all right? You never oversleep."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Aunt Linda, I guess I was just tired from all the excitement. I'm fine, really."

"Okay, I'll see you downstairs. Essie is on her way up with fresh coffee."

"God love Essie. Thanks, Aunt Linda. I'm just going to jump in the shower. Be down in half an hour."

* * * *

Amaya stood at the door as her first guest departed into the stormy morning. The rain slashed through the trees and thunder rolled overhead. Scarecrow arms of lightning streaked the sky and trees swayed in the wind. She stepped out on the porch to warn the waiting William to drive carefully and remained nearby to see off the last guest.

It was close to one before Amaya found time to eat. Having her meals at the kitchen table with Linda and Tyler was becoming a habit. Amaya and Linda were both more comfortable in the kitchen than the large formal dining room. When Tyler realized this was becoming a ritual, he kindly told Amaya that she was interrupting the meals of the staff, who also consumed their meals at the kitchen table. For a few days, Amaya retreated to the dining room with her Aunt Linda and Tyler, until Niles sought her out.

"Pardon me for my impertinence, Miss Amaya, but the

staff and I would like to invite you and Madam Linda to join us for our meals in the kitchen.” He hesitated when Amaya remained quiet. “That is, of course, ma’am, if it would be comfortable for you.”

Amaya was so pleased, she involuntarily hugged the butler and kissed him on the cheek. When she felt his body stiffen and saw the blush creeping over his cheeks, she released him immediately. She supposed one wasn’t supposed to hug and kiss a formal English butler. Gaining control of the giggle threatening to escape, Amaya took a step back and said, “I would love that, Niles, as will my aunt. Thank you, and thank the staff for me, please.”

* * * *

Niles nodded formally and if Amaya had turned back around when she left, she would have seen the smile on Niles’ face and the loving caress of his cheek where she had kissed him. Oh yes, Nile was enjoying working for this lovely young lady. She was so refreshing and young. *Almost like a daughter*. If he had a daughter, he would hope she would be as charming and real as this young lady.

* * * *

Amaya’s staff appeared to enjoy having the mistress of the castle around and was constantly entertained by Linda. Amaya and her aunt were delighted to have company for meals and before long, the staff relaxed and were able to laugh and joke as though they were all one big happy family.

By one o’clock, when Amaya went looking for food, she encountered several of her staff sitting around the table finishing off their lunch. She poured coffee and sat down, but before she could speak to anyone, Melinda looked at Amaya and spoke. “Excuse me for minding your business, Miss Amaya, but you don’t look too well. Do you have a fever?”

Amaya took a drink of her coffee and shook her head. "No, really, I'm alright, just cold. It's the storm outside. Do we have a problem with the heat?"

Tyler put his hand on Amaya's forehead. "It's July, Amaya, you have a fever. Melinda, please get Miss Amaya to bed while I call for a doctor."

Linda intercepted Melinda in a kind but bossy tone. "I'll take her, Melinda; you get a thermometer and bring up some juice and a fresh picture of water."

* * * *

Tyler had already retreated to his office in search of a doctor that made house calls. Fortunately, Dr. Gabriel was off for the morning and agreed to come to the castle. While waiting for the doctor to arrive, Debbie came down the stairs in a hurry and met Tyler going up. "Oh, Tyler, I think Brandon has chickenpox. He came into my room last night with a fever and this morning he has spots all over his little body."

Tyler rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. "Well now," he said, "keep him away from Heather, just in case. We don't want her ill. You take care of him. I have a doctor on the way."

"But how did you know?"

Tyler just grinned and asked, "Do you suppose, Debbie, that Miss Amaya didn't have chickenpox as a child?"

Debbie returned his smile and then suddenly became sober. "Is Miss Amaya ill? Oh my goodness, she'll fire me for bringing it into the house."

Tyler assured her that she wouldn't be fired and ordered her to tend to her child while assuring her the doctor would see him as soon as he arrived.

After knocking on Amaya's door, Tyler was welcomed

by Linda. He stood grinning at Amaya, who huddled under the covers in misery. "What are you laughing at, you fool? Just get out of here and leave me alone."

"Oh, I will indeed, just as soon as you tell me if you've ever had the chickenpox," he said, while trying in vain to hide the laugh, but failing as it was all too present in his eyes.

Amaya groaned and shook her head. "Why would you think I have chickenpox? Do I have spots?"

"Not yet, but if little Brandon is any indication, you soon will. He's in his mother's room as we speak scratching his belly."

Another groan escaped Amaya's lips as she rolled over and lifted her arms for a look. No spots in sight, yet!

"I just came up to tell you Dr. Gabriel is on his way. I'll have him look in on Brandon first, and then send him to you. Rest, Amaya, you're going to be fine," said Tyler as he left the room grinning boldly now that his back was turned to Amaya.

When Dr. Gabriel discovered he had two patients instead of one, he wasn't surprised to see that Amaya had chickenpox as well as Brandon, since there was an outbreak in town. He warned Amaya that, as an adult, this childhood illness would most likely be harder on her than Brandon and ordered her to stay in bed, rest and drink plenty of fluids. Oatmeal baths and calamine lotion were also prescribed as comfort for the two.

Linda, having made the rounds of the staff, was pleased to hear all had suffered chickenpox as children, relaxed and tended to her niece. Amaya ran a raging fever for two days and nights and suffered delirium, talking about Granddaddy and Tyler and nonsensical things as the spots began appearing in massive doses. Every part of her body was

covered.

By day, Tyler ran the castle and each evening, he relieved Linda to sleep in Amaya's sitting room and care for her, if needed. He held cold cloths on her forehead and administered the medication the doctor ordered. Tyler held her hand as she rambled on about first one thing and then another. She talked about her granddaddy a great deal and at one point opened her eyes and told Tyler she loved him. Tyler knew that was the rambling of an ill person, but his heart leapt with joy for a few seconds just hearing the words. Dr. Gabriel came daily to see her and announced he was putting her in the hospital if she didn't improve by morning.

Linda and Tyler agreed that perhaps Amaya should be in the hospital, but when Amaya woke at four in the morning, her fever was gone. She was covered with pink lotion and itched terribly, but the first thing she asked Tyler when he heard her stir and went in to her was, "How is Brandon?"

Tyler couldn't help himself. He gave in to a crinkly-faced grin and kissed Amaya on her spotty forehead. "We were so worried about you. How are you feeling?"

"Tired and itchy," she said as she began to scratch her arm. "How is Brandon?" she repeated.

Tyler removed the offending hand from her arm and dabbed lotion on the spot that itched. "Brandon is fine. His fever is gone and he's chomping at the bit to get up and around."

"Oh, that is good. Could I have something to eat? I'm so hungry."

"You should be. You've slept for two days and nights." Tyler pushed a button on the intercom and told Linda that Amaya was awake, fever free and starving.

"I'll just go to the kitchen for some tea and something light to eat. Tell her to give me fifteen minutes."

Amaya turned her head and saw the time. "Is it four in the morning or afternoon?"

"Morning, why?"

"I didn't mean to wake you and Aunt Linda. Oh, what are you doing here at this hour?"

"I hope you don't mind, but I've been sleeping in your sitting room. Just in case you needed something," he said. "You've been very ill."

Rising from her pillow, Amaya attempted to stand, felt lightheaded and sat down again. Tyler leaned her against the pillow and propped another behind her head. "Take it easy now, you need to rest."

"I need to go to the bathroom, Tyler. Can you help me to the door?"

"Just hold on a minute." Tyler ran all the way down the stairs and into the kitchen. "Linda, you need to help Amaya to the bathroom. I'll finish this and bring it up. And hurry!"

Linda rushed out to the elevator murmuring, "My goodness. I'll bet she does."

By the time Tyler arrived with the tea, toast and scrambled eggs, the whole castle was awakened. Melinda had rapped gently on the door and inquired as to Amaya's health to inform the rest of the staff. When she heard the news, she wished Amaya a speedy recovery, telling her they were all so worried, and left as abruptly as she had come.

When Tyler arrived with breakfast, Linda had seen to Amaya's needs and was preparing an oatmeal bath for her. As soon as Tyler was satisfied that Amaya's needs were met, he retired to his room and napped for a few hours.

* * * *

Bathed, covered with Calamine lotion and in a clean

pair of shorts and t-shirt, Amaya drifted off to sleep again and didn't wake until Dr. Gabriel arrived.

"It looks like you've been through the worst of it. I'm so relieved. I feared you might dehydrate and need hospitalization."

"Was it really that bad, Dr. Gabriel?"

"You ran a very high fever for several days, but you should be feeling better now. Just keep taking the baths several times a day and cover those spots with lotion. I'll check back with you in a day or two."

"Thank you, Dr. Gabriel."

Linda brought Amaya her lunch and visited as Amaya ate heartily. "I didn't know a person could get so hungry, Aunt Linda. Thank you. This is delicious," she said of the vegetable beef soup and crackers Laurie had prepared, along with the vanilla pudding topped with whipped cream.

"You can thank Laurie for that. I just brought it up. Now, how are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. The bath was wonderful. It's just this infernal itching that's so bad and I really am afraid to look in the mirror."

"I suggest you don't, not for a few days," said Linda, teasing her niece. "You do look a sight between the spots and the lotion."

Amaya groaned and pushed the empty tray from her lap. "I'm bored. Can you ask Tyler to bring my laptop up here? I'd like to check the reservations."

"Back to work already, I think not! The doctor said rest and that is exactly what you are going to do, at least for the rest of today."

An annoyed groan came from Amaya and she shooed her aunt out of the room. Before she had time to call Tyler herself, she'd fallen asleep again.

* * * *

By morning, Amaya's boredom level was rising and being forbidden to leave her bed, she asked that Brandon be brought to her room. "Perhaps we can entertain each other for a while."

With Brandon in Amaya's company, the room was a beehive of activity. One staff member after another wandered in to see them and most found time to read a book to Brandon or bring ice cream for the invalids. Sesame Street played on the television Tyler had moved from the sitting room to the bedroom. Having chickenpox should have been a miserable time for Amaya, but after the initial illness, having Brandon in her room kept her mind off the itching and she found herself laughing and playing with the child with great joy. She also came to appreciate the people that worked for her. Each one managed to give her comfort and make light of the fact she looked like a clown with pink spots of calamine lotion dotted all over her face and arms. Stories were told and friendships were bonded. These people were no longer just her employees, but her friends and family. They genuinely cared for her and little Brandon.

Debbie was worried Brandon would get on Amaya's nerves, but with each day, the two became closer and closer and when Debbie entered the room to find Brandon curled up in Amaya's arms as the two napped, she smiled and knew she was worrying for nothing. Amaya truly cared for her son and was getting as much comfort from him as she gave.

* * * *

Tyler kept a close eye on Amaya and in the evenings when Brandon went back to his mother's room and Amaya had bathed, he joined her for dinner in her room. Oh, he made a big pretense of going over the castle activities and

called these meals dinner meetings. She ate off a tray while sitting up in bed, he was at the foot, sitting cross-legged in front of his tray, but the truth was, he enjoyed being with Amaya and wanted her to be comfortable. Some evenings, he would catch her scratching her arm or lifting her hand toward her face and he would find the offending spot and cover it with lotion. They played chess and Clue and gin rummy and talked. He even brought her laptop up and went over the next scheduled party. On one such evening, Amaya asked Tyler why he hadn't hired a nurse to care for her at night, instead of taking on the task himself.

"Before your grandfather passed away, he made me promise I would look after you for the year you were at Amaya's Keep. I could never go back on my word. Besides, it was no trouble at all. You were so ill, you couldn't even argue with me, though you did call me a fool once or twice. You are very fond of that word," he teased as his eyes crinkled and a broad grin spread over his face.

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Amaya slapped at his leg and blushed, then changed the subject. Having Tyler care for her meant a lot to Amaya, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

The next party was scheduled for ten days time and hopefully, Amaya would be rid of her spots by then. This one was to be an old world medieval theme and Amaya had been looking forward to it. Tyler reported the jousting was being rehearsed daily and going well. He brought the menu up to her room and they discussed the different foods that were to be eaten, mostly by hand, the rushes that would be spread across the floor of the dining room and the costume of the day. Amaya was particularly interested in meeting Shamus MacDougall. Maybe she would learn something from him about her granddaddy's family, but if Aunt Linda

was interested in him, she wanted to get to know this man.

Amaya hadn't been to the chapel for most of the week, so in the early morning hours, she wasn't surprised to wake from a kiss on her forehead. The pink carnation was a welcome sight and she twirled it in her fingers and had a long talk with her granddaddy at three in the morning before she fell asleep again, happy and content.

* * * *

The doctor visited daily and with no symptoms present but the spots, Amaya and Brandon were allowed to get up out of bed and resume a reasonably normal life.

So attached to Brandon had Amaya come, it was not an uncommon sight to see him on the floor of her office playing trucks or building with his blocks. In the short time of their shared illness, they had become fast friends and instead of calling her Miss Amaya, she was now addressed as Aunt Amaya. The first time Debbie heard her son use Aunt Amaya, she began scolding him, but was quickly interrupted by Amaya. "I did ask Brandon if he would like to call me Aunt Amaya, if you don't mind. We've become very close," she explained to Debbie.

Debbie smiled proudly at her son and ruffled his hair, then looked at Amaya. "Yes, we would be honored," she said and a little tear left her eye and rolled down her cheek.

Amaya waved her on her way, realizing Debbie was embarrassed by her emotional state and began to play trucks with the boy.

By now, Brandon had been turned back over to Heather for his regular care, although he was most often seen shadowing Amaya or his mother while Heather was kept busy sewing and mending and even helping with the laundry. None of these jobs were her responsibility, but she chose to help wherever she could. Many hours were still

spent with Brandon, teaching and bathing and dressing and entertaining. She was fast becoming a valuable employee and was delighted when Amaya brought her several notes received from the recent guests whose children she had taken care of. Although two were reported to have come down with chickenpox shortly after returning home, the notes were very complimentary. All of the guests who wrote were pleased with the overall experience, but the glowing tributes to the daycare the children had received put a warm glow in Heather's heart and gave her the boost in confidence she needed as a single mother-to-be.

* * * *

With the guests arriving in two days, Amaya and Tyler were rushing to get the castle ready. All the staff had their duties. Mr. Sykes was drying greenery in the sun and storing it in the barn for the dining room floor and backyard festivities, while the hired performers practiced their jousting. Laurie was busy with her menu and shopping and taking time out for Heather's doctor appointments. Melinda and her girls found pewter dishes and candlesticks, which Tyler had ordered and stored in the cabinet. Heather found burlap in the feed store in town and prepared a large raw yardage for tablecloths and cut squares for disposable napkins. The grounds were being manicured and the back area was given rustic overtones for the dance/party for the winner of the game and ring.

Amaya inspected her face in the mirror daily and on the day before the guests were to arrive, she found one barely noticeable blemish. Smiling in the mirror, she applied a dab of foundation and was pleased to see she would be able to greet her guests with a clean, spot-free face. She felt wonderful. All the excitement of the next party blasted through her as she ran down the stairs and headed for the

kitchen. "Are we ready?" she shouted in the kitchen with glee.

All the staff began talking at once. Most were prepared. Laurie was worried her menu would not be compatible with the times, but Amaya assured her most of the guests wouldn't be the wiser. If by chance one were, they would get input for the next time. That relieved Laurie as she poured over her notes and listened to the next person detail their progress. By the time Amaya ate toast and was on her second cup of coffee, Tyler and Linda were the only ones left at the table.

"I just got a call from a group in England," he said to both Amaya and Linda. "The gentleman I spoke with is the secretary of the Hunter and Hound Society. They want to know if we will book a fox hunt."

"Tyler," she asked, "what did you tell them?"

"I said I would have to talk to Mr. Sykes about it and get back to them. I think you should know they offered an astronomical amount of money for the opportunity and agreed to fly their hounds over."

"What kind of money are we talking about?"

Tyler glanced around the room and spotted Laurie and Nina working nearby. He wrote a figure on his notepad and turned it to Amaya and Linda in turn. "What do you think?"

"Good grief, that's a lot just for a hunt they could have at home. I wonder why?"

Tyler went on to explain that this club was made up of some of the wealthiest families in England and they made a habit of going from country to country for their hunts. When a member read about Amaya's Keep, they had a meeting and agreed to make an offer. They wanted to schedule it in late August or early September.

Amaya looked at Linda and Linda said she didn't see

how Amaya could turn it down.

"I think our first order of the day will be a meeting with Mr. Sykes. Linda, will you call the stables and ask him to meet with us in the library at ten?"

"Sure will," she said and left the table to make the call.

Mr. Sykes arrived right on time and was ushered into the library by Niles, given a cup of coffee and offered a Danish roll. Amaya, Linda and Tyler were already seated. When Amaya told Mr. Sykes of the offer, he was apprehensive, but after explaining that the club members were all seasoned riders and belonged to a highly regarded hunt club, he acquiesced on the condition he be allowed to ride with the leader to look after his horses.

"We'll call and make that condition part of the agreement, Mr. Sykes. Then it's settled. Tyler, when do we have available?"

Tyler took out his pocket calendar and flipped through the months. "September fourth through the seventh would be fine. Do you want me to call, or will you, Amaya?"

"I think I will. I want to be confident they understand how we feel about our horses and find out if they want the game."

The call was made and the plans were finalized and the ring sizes given. It would be a party of eighteen with two wives and an adult daughter, who would not be riding, for a total of twenty-one guests. Meeting Tyler later in the afternoon, she told him of the plans and then put it aside to prepare for the following day.

* * * *

William was on his way to the airport to pick up guests, the first trip of three he would make that day. Laurie was peeling carrots and cleaning celery for finger food. Little cakes were baked and sugared, while Melinda

stewed over the reeds that were being strewn all over her clean dining room floor. For a neat person, this was difficult for her, even though she knew it was necessary. Brandon followed Amaya to the garden and they spent half an hour tossing a ball until she had to hurry and change for the arrival of her guests. Brandon was relegated to the nursery.

* * * *

On William's third trip to the airport, Linda tagged along. The flight they were meeting held only one guest, Shamus MacDougall, and Linda wanted to greet him personally. She thought the ride to the castle in the limo would give them time alone to get acquainted before the festivities began.

As Shamus walked into the terminal from the plane, Linda recognized him immediately. How could she not? He was over six feet tall with a ruddy complexion and a large but sound build topped off by shocking red hair. She greeted him immediately and taking his arm, led him to the luggage area, all the while asking if he had a pleasant trip and how was the weather when he left home compared to here. Shamus smiled and his eyes twinkled while he answered questions and he walked tall, proud to have Linda on his arm.

* * * *

As it turned out, Shamus was a very interesting character and when Amaya met him, she was confident she wanted to find some time to spend alone with him. There was so much she wanted to know about her grandfather's family and Shamus seemed the perfect person to tell her. If it turned out he didn't know the family, perhaps he could guide her in research on her own. *No matter, this is one man I want to get to know better.* She just felt it. It was as though they had met before somewhere, sometime, and were best

of friends. Unfortunately, Amaya had other guests and other responsibilities and Tyler had abducted Shamus to The Pub for a tankard of ale and to mull over good times. Shamus had also felt that connection Amaya was experiencing. A feeling of having known her all her life. After Linda retired that first evening and Amaya ran into him in the hall and invited him down to the library for tea or whiskey, he agreed anxiously, saying, "I would appreciate a little nip. It has been a tiring day."

Sitting on the soft leather sofa, Amaya asked Shamus about himself and his country. "My ancestors are from Scotland, would you know the name MacTavish?"

Shamus wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and put the whiskey glass down. "Aye, I would. The MacTavish is a rare old clan and happen to be neighbors of mine."

Amaya looked aghast. "Really! Could you tell me a little about them?"

"Aye, I would be happy to, if you can wait. I had meant to inquire if I could stay on an extra day or two to visit with young Tyler and perhaps to get to know your aunt a little better. She is a charming creature. Perhaps we could have a nice talk then. Would that be permissible?"

Amaya was nodding her head before Shamus finished his sentence. "I would love that, Mr. MacDougall. Stay as long as you wish."

Shamus tipped his glass and finished the whiskey, "Then if you will excuse me, I will retire and look forward to the excitement ahead." With that, Shamus stood and left the room.

Amaya sat on, wondering about this man she felt so close to. Would he be able to tell her anything about her ancestors and would he make a good houseguest? No matter, he deserved time with Tyler and Linda and she

would make him welcome. Leaving the library, she went to the chapel to have her evening talk with her granddaddy and when she awoke the following morning, a beautiful buttercup lay on her pillow.

Chapter 10

The majority of guests Amaya had greeted appeared to be young professionals all looking for an adventure out of the norm, with the exception of Shamus MacDougall and a middle-aged couple, who were accompanied by their son and his wife. Needless to say, there was a lot of noise in the castle with the ale drinkers, labyrinth explorers and roamers, all exclaiming over the suits of armor, the coat of arms and distinctive European atmosphere. Couples played darts and chess and drank ale while enjoying the pipers weave their tunes and listened attentively as Tyler retold amusing stories of his Scottish relations in between sips of ale.

Amaya had slipped iced tea into her tankard and joined Tyler at the bar. The more she listened to his stories, the more fascinated she became. During a lull, she asked Tyler about his family and if they had always lived in Scotland. "I seem to be wondering more and more about Scotland and my ancestors. I suppose it is because of the castle, but the longer I stay here, the more at home I feel in this atmosphere. Is that strange, do you think?"

"Not at all strange, Amaya. It is part of your heritage. Why don't you begin working on a family history?"

"Yes, of course, if I could ever find the time. I had

hoped Shamus could tell me something or direct me where to start.”

“That he probably could. He has lived in Scotland all his life.”

“What about you, Tyler? You said you were a distant relative of my family. Can’t you tell me anything?”

Tyler nodded. “I suppose I could fill you in somewhat, but it will have to wait, as I’ve a job to do here.” He turned to answer a question from a young wife, who had her arm looped in the crook of her husband’s. Amaya was called away by Laurie, fretting again over the food, but not before she took one quick peek at the muscles in Tyler’s legs and the red curls showing between his high socks and the bottom of his kilt.

* * * *

There were only two extra children in the nursery during this party and Heather had arranged for riding lessons for them while Brandon trotted off on his pony, accompanied by Tony. The children were in high spirits when she brought them back for dinner in the nursery and a quiet evening.

Dinner was a success that first evening with the guests pumping Amaya and Tyler about the game the following day. Linda was busy entertaining Shamus, while he appeared delighted with her company. There was much excitement over the Amaya’s Keep ring to be won and the young women admired the one Amaya wore. When she told them the prize ring was a replica of her own, minus the emeralds, the excitement level rose. Speculating on who the winner would be, all were shocked the next day when it turned out to be the mother of the young couple, who had brought their parents to this party. Mrs. Parks was delighted and couldn’t wait to be the guest of honor at

dinner and receive her ring. Patty, her daughter, while congratulating her mom on winning the game, said, "Well, we'll just have to come back and try again. I can't wait." Her husband nodded approvingly and dinner broke up.

It was after midnight when the last guest retired to his room. He had imbibed a bit too much ale and the jovial young man had to be led to his waiting wife by Tyler.

* * * *

Amaya found Shamus sitting on the step in the chapel when she went to visit her grandfather. "Oh, excuse me, Mr. MacDougall; I didn't realize anyone was in here." She turned to go, but Shamus stopped her.

"Please, don't leave. I was only talking to the wife and Barney."

Amaya's mouth fell open and she was speechless.

"Ah, I see you do not believe!"

Amaya regained her composure and replied. "Yes, of course I believe. I just didn't think anyone else would."

"I had a nice chat with my wife after Barney left. She's happy I'm here and enjoying myself. I told her all about the game and how pleased I am to see Tyler again."

"What do you mean, after Barney left?" she questioned.

"Barney was sitting right here on the step holding a yellow flower from this bouquet when I came in." He gestured to the large vase of yellow roses. "We had a nice visit. Do you not believe me?"

Still in shock, Amaya found it hard to put her feelings into words. She sat slowly down on the step next to Shamus. "It's just that...that, I thought I was crazy. You see, I talk with Granddaddy most evenings and he usually leaves a flower in my room at night, but I've never seen him, although I have had some guests frightened by his wanderings. That sounds insane, doesn't it, Mr.

MacDougall?"

Shamus laughed, "Not at all, and please, call me Shamus. We are family, you know."

"What! Are we related?"

"It goes back a long way, long before your grandfather and I. Several generations, in fact, but yes, we are cousins of some sort, or I'm an uncle many times removed. I'm not certain, but if you care to know, I believe your grandfather had journals of the family history. As best I can remember, my grandfather's great-grandfather married a girl from Barney's clan. I suppose that would make us very distant cousins."

"Why didn't I know about you? Do I have more relatives in Scotland?"

"Yes indeed, many, many kin. You should come to visit sometime."

Amaya sat for a long time digesting this information and finally Shamus rose to leave. "I will leave you with your thoughts, lassie, goodnight."

"Wait, Shamus. Are you related to Tyler, too?"

"No, 'twas the other side of the family he comes from. Find your grandfather's journals and read them. They'll explain everything." Shamus strolled out of the chapel without a backward glance.

He was certainly an imposing man, but gentle and kind as well. She liked him, that was a fact, and she looked forward to visiting with him after the other guests left. In the meantime, she needed to get those journals out and start reading, but that would also have to wait. Tomorrow was a big day and she needed her rest.

Amaya had just reached the second floor, when she heard the scream. She ran the last few steps up to the hall and when she heard the scream again, she identified the

door and knocked. Mr. Michaels shouted, "Come in," and Amaya entered. There she found Mrs. Michaels hunched on the bed with her feet pulled up beneath her.

"I saw a ghost, I swear I did."

This time, it took Amaya more than an hour and a snifter of brandy to calm the young woman down and explain, again, that the castle was too new to have ghosts. When her husband chastised his wife and told her she'd had too much to drink that evening, he dismissed Amaya. Mrs. Michaels had sufficiently calmed and nodded in agreement that she had indeed consumed too much alcohol.

Amaya left, grateful for Mr. Michaels' help, and went to her room. "My goodness, Granddaddy, why are you trying to frighten off my guests? Does the hotel not please you, or what?" she muttered as she ran the water for her bath.

* * * *

When Amaya woke, she found a yellow rose on her pillow, just as she'd expected. "Oh, Granddaddy, how many secrets have you kept, and how many more surprises do you have in store for me, and why on earth are you wandering the castle at night scaring my guests half to death?" She placed the flower in her vase and readied herself for the day.

The costume she would be wearing this evening was waiting on a hanger. The daughter of the nobility who owned the castle was to be her role for the evening and Tyler was to be her betrothed, arranged by her father. That thought brought a smile to Amaya's lips and she looked forward to sitting at the table with Tyler at her side. The jousting and music would also be fun. She'd done her research and the evening would be as original as she could get it, right down to the traveling entertainers that would

roam singing and juggling, dancing and doing acrobatics. This was a Scottish night. The pipers would be playing and the men drinking heartily. The women would be blushing and flirting, if all went as planned.

Much gossip had spread about Mrs. Michaels' ghost and Amaya did her best to deny its existence, while reassuring her guests they were safe in the castle. By the time they all arrived for dinner and the festivities, the ghost was forgotten.

* * * *

Tyler escorted Mrs. Parks to the head of the table in the seat of honor and knelt before her, placing the ring on her finger and kissing her hand. Cheers went up and dinner was served. Turkey legs and chunks of ham were placed in the center of the table, along with whole roasted chickens. Little boiled potatoes and corn on the cob was brought out, along with hunks of fresh bread and trays of asparagus. The manners at the table were atrocious as the men heartily chewed on meat and wiped their mouths with the burlap napkins. The women were daintier but did manage to consume an adequate amount of food amidst much laughter. When dinner was over, they all walked down to the corral and sat on makeshift benches to watch the jousting.

Much ale and whiskey was consumed and more than one guest tottered off to bed with the help of a spouse. By the time the mansion grew quiet, Amaya was in the chapel talking to Granddaddy. She again admonished him for frightening her guests and told him all about the party. She told him about the chat she had with Shamus and admitted her growing interest in the MacTavish family, and when she woke up in the morning, she found a purple flower petal she didn't recognize and two maroon, leather-bound

journals lying on the pillow next to where her head had been.

Amaya picked up the first book and turned it over in her hand before opening it. When she did lift the cover, she saw that it was empty. Opening the second journal, she saw the words written in large bold letters:

The MacTavish Clan History
By Xavier William MacTavish
First Earl of Ivan's Brook
In the year of our Lord, 1654

Amaya perched on the edge of her bed and began reading and hadn't stirred from that spot when she heard a knock on her door. She called for her visitor to come in and looked at the clock. It was after eight and she wasn't even dressed. When Linda came in and stood staring at her, she said, "Good morning, Aunt Linda."

"Are you sick again, Amaya?"

"No, I was just reading."

"Well, put that book down and get dressed. You have guests for breakfast who are leaving today."

"Oh, oh my gosh. I forgot. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be down."

"What are you reading that's so interesting, Amaya, that you forgot your job?" she chastised.

Amaya jumped from the bed and headed for the shower. "I'll tell you later. Tell Laurie to wait for me."

When Amaya got downstairs, the food was all laid out on the sideboard and she put away thoughts of her grandfather to visit with her guests. According to the majority of the visitors, the dinner and jousting was the highlight of the weekend, next to the game, of course.

There were many compliments and promises to return to try for the ring again before she walked her last guest to the waiting limo. She breathed a happy sigh of relief when she closed the door and went to the kitchen for coffee, where she encountered Tyler. "So far, so good. These parties are going well, don't you think, Tyler?"

"Yes, and good morning to you. I'm pleased. The profit hasn't arrived yet, but I do believe you will break even after the wedding and fox hunt."

Shamus entered the kitchen and interrupted. "Did I hear you mention a fox hunt?"

"Good morning, Shamus. Yes, we're hosting a foxhunt in September. Isn't that interesting?"

"Indeed it is. Tell me all about it."

"There really isn't much to tell, Shamus. We were asked to host a hunt and with all our fine horses, we agreed. I'm looking forward to it."

Tyler made a date with Shamus for early evening and excused himself to go do some work.

Amaya offered Shamus coffee. He settled for tea and sat down.

"I wanted to talk to you, Shamus. When I woke this morning, I found two journals on my pillow. One was blank and the other was the history of the MacTavish Clan."

Shamus smiled and said, "It appears your grandfather is tired of waiting for you to find the journals and is rushing you a bit. I imagine the empty one is for your generation."

"I suppose so, but I won't have time to read or write before this evening. What are your plans for the day?"

"Your Aunt Linda has kindly offered to escort me to town for a walk around and a bite of lunch. I do enjoy her company and am looking forward to seeing more of your state. I have been to the east coast and the west coast of

America, but the South is a new experience for me.”

“That’s wonderful, Shamus. I’m sure Aunt Linda will enjoy showing you off to her friends.”

“Aye, she has insisted I wear my kilt. She likes me legs, she does.”

Amaya roared with laughter as Linda swept Shamus away, and then she went to her office to get to work. She found Tyler in his office going over the accounting ledgers on the computer. She stood behind him and watched as the figures totaled and nodded approval. “You’re right, Tyler, we are doing well and the guests seem to enjoy themselves here. I think we’re going to make this castle a success.”

Tyler wanted to tell Amaya the castle would be a success just having her living in it, but he refrained. Instead he asked her, “Are you well, Amaya? You were late coming down this morning.”

“I’m fine, Tyler. I just seem to be developing a great interest in my grandfather’s family. I was reading a journal of the MacTavish Clan history and lost track of time.”

“Interesting,” he said. “What brought all this on?”

“I really don’t know. Sometimes, I think my grandfather wants me to find out about his family and meeting Shamus and finding we were distantly related, brought the notion to the forefront of my mind. When I found the journal, I just couldn’t put it down.”

* * * *

Tyler nodded and changed the subject. He could have told her that was her grandfather’s wish, but it wasn’t his place. Barney left the journals for Amaya to find and read in her own time and Tyler wouldn’t betray Barney by interfering. Instead, he said, “I heard a commotion last night and this morning I overheard several people talking about Mrs. Michaels seeing a ghost last night. Is that what

happened?"

"Yes, Tyler, I'm afraid it is. You know, I think Granddaddy is haunting this castle. Do you suppose he doesn't want it used as a hotel?"

"You are kidding, right?"

"No, Tyler," Amaya said exasperated. "I am not kidding. What other explanation can you give me? Every party we've had here had an uninvited guest. This ghost appears to someone each time. Who else could it be but Granddaddy?"

Tyler just shook his head. He found it difficult to believe that Amaya thought her grandfather was a ghost. It pleased him in a way. It proved her Scottish heritage to him. He'd been finding signs of Barney in the castle since the day Amaya moved in, but he hadn't said anything about it. He felt it was between him and Barney. If Barney wanted others to be aware of him, Tyler was certain he would manage without Tyler's help. Apparently, Barney did want the guests to know him, and that was all right, too. Foreigners flock to haunted places. This would be good for business. From the talk this morning, he was sure that word would spread and bring many new guests out of curiosity, in hopes of seeing the famous ghost of Amaya's Keep.

"I have no idea, Amaya. If your grandfather is haunting the castle, so be it. After all, he did build it. Who has a better right?" And that was the end of the discussion.

* * * *

Amaya went to her desk and opened her computer, but was unable to concentrate. After several attempts to place an order for two sets of castle icons for the games coming up, she stopped and addressed Tyler. "Are you upset with me, Tyler?"

Tyler was stunned she would think that. "Of course

not. What makes you think so?"

"You seem to be sharp with me and I don't understand why. If there is a problem, please, let's talk it out."

"I'm so sorry. The truth is, having Shamus here reminds me of my homeland and I miss my family."

Amaya was relieved and inquired, "Do you have a lot of family in Scotland?"

Rubbing his chin, Tyler leaned across his desk to look into Amaya's eyes. "Aye, I have a father and mother and my four brothers and two sisters."

"How wonderful. Why didn't you tell me about your family? Why don't we arrange a vacation for you?"

"I can't go yet. The requirements of my employment are that I stay by your side until the year is up. I can wait to see my family. They're well and happy."

"Hmm, I wasn't aware of that," she said, but an idea formed in her mind as quickly as a light bulb going on over her head. Instead she asked, "What time are you meeting up with Shamus this evening?"

"I thought I would take him out for ribs and beer around seven. Hey, why don't you come with us? We'll ask Linda and make a party of it."

"No, you need to spend time alone with him. Why don't you convince him to stay on for a few days and we can do that on Saturday?"

"Excellent idea. I'll convince him or my name isn't Tyler MacGregor. Thank you, Amaya."

Amaya laughed. "I really want to get to know this man who is a distant relative of mine, besides, I really like him."

"Then it's settled. Now let's get these orders in and go over the details of the next party. What's it to be?"

Amaya ordered the icons and a few rings and talked over the details of the next party, then went in search of

Brandon.

She took him out for a walk around the back and visited the greenhouse and watched him attempt to climb a tree until he looked so tired, she took him back to Nanny Heather for a nap.

With Tyler and Shamus gone for the evening, Amaya and Linda had a quiet dinner in her sitting room. Linda babbled on about Shamus and how kind and mannerly he was. She didn't fail to express her admiration of his smile and eyes, his body and beard. Amaya laughed at her over this latest conquest and changed the subject.

"Aunt Linda, I had a talk with Tyler today and he said he really misses his family back in Scotland. I was wondering if we could find out who they are and invite them here for a private party and reunion. We'll pay for the airfare if they can get together and come. Did you know he has four brothers and two sisters?"

Linda wiped her mouth with the napkin and put it down. "That is such a good idea. Tyler would love it and wouldn't it be an adventure to have a party made up of all Scottish guests? Do we have a slot open when we can arrange it?"

"Let's check." She rose and grabbed Linda by the hand and led her to the elevator.

"How will we find out who his family is?"

"You forget, Aunt Linda, I have his personnel file!" She laughed and trotted into her office with Linda in tow. It didn't take long to find Tyler's family and for Amaya to make the phone call. His mother was a charming woman and delighted with the prospect of coming to America and seeing her son. She read off a list of family. It seemed there was Ian, a single man of thirty-two and the eldest MacGregor son, Andrew and his young bride, then Johnny

and Sean, who were young men still in college. The one sister, Margaret, was married with two children and Elizabeth had one little girl. That made a total of fourteen. Amaya was delighted. If these people were anything at all like Tyler, they would be welcome guests in her castle. Mrs. MacGregor agreed to talk to the family and would have a decision by the end of the week. Amaya whooped with delight when she hung up the phone and repeated the conversation to her aunt.

Linda was quiet and thoughtful as she took a bite of peach pie and sipped her coffee.

"What are you thinking, Aunt Linda? You're awfully quiet?"

Linda hemmed and hawed and then tentatively spoke. "Amaya, why are you doing this for Tyler?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I just wondered why you're doing this for Tyler. It's a huge expense and will take several days of your time. Why are you doing this?"

Putting her fork down, Amaya sighed. "I don't know, Aunt Linda. I like him and feel bad because he's missing his family. He worked with Granddaddy for three years before he died and probably hasn't seen them much. I just wanted to do something nice for him, and I certainly can afford it."

"I was just wondering if maybe you were becoming emotionally involved with Tyler. He is a handsome, charming hunk of man," she winked and smiled at Amaya.

"That's nonsense. We are related, you know!"

"Oh yes, about as close as you and Shamus are. If we all went back six or seven generations, I'm sure we would be surprised by what we found."

"You're just being silly, Aunt Linda. You and your romantic mind, you read romance into every friendship."

I'm going to bed. Do you want to ride up with me?"

"Sure," she answered.

* * * *

On Saturday evening, Tyler, Shamus, Amaya and Linda drove into town for a dinner of fried catfish and then wandered around the town square, where a craft fair was going on. Linda spoke to many people and always introduced Shamus. She was very proud of the man on her arm and wanted to show him off. After all, how many times did these people get to meet a real Scotsman wearing a kilt? Amaya walked next to Tyler and didn't even flinch when he took her hand to lead her through a crowded aisle and forgot to let it go when they had passed. Linda picked up on that with delight. Love was definitely blooming.

For the next few days, Amaya grew very close to Shamus and found she enjoyed his company more and more. They managed to find time to visit each day, but she soon realized he was a very stubborn Scotsman. No matter how she prodded and pried, she could get no more information from him about her family. It looked like she would have to find time for those journals if she ever wanted her questions answered.

When Shamus left for the airport, she sent Tyler to drive him so he could say goodbye. Amaya went to her office and called Scotland. When she hung up, she sought out Linda. "Well," she said, "the plans are made, but Tyler's parents refused to allow me to pay for their airfare. She said, and I quote, 'Twill no be a burden, lassie'." She smiled. "I scheduled them for the weekend after the wedding. That's three weeks. Isn't this exciting? Tyler will be so surprised."

Linda smiled knowingly and said, "Yes, it will be great fun. You better have a staff meeting while Tyler is gone to

clue them in if you want to have food and rooms ready.”

They did just that and the entire staff was cooperative. The plans were made and the surprise was in the making.

Taking an early evening, Amaya sat in bed with the journal in her lap. She read about the heritage of her ancestors. It appeared that the MacTavish Clan were very wealthy landowners and lived in a castle called *The MacTavish Keep*. *So that was where Granddaddy got the name for my castle. How interesting.* She continued reading who begat who and who had lived and who had died. Marriages were recorded from as far back as old Xavier could find and ended with the years of this writing. All in all, it was a rather boring book, but she didn't give up. Running down the stairs, she entered the library and began her search. She found six more journals, all dated and numbered. She took the second journal with her and stopped for a diet soft drink in the kitchen. She sat alone at the table reading until her eyelids began to droop and she went up to bed and laid the journal aside to finish another day.

Chapter 11

With the wedding party only days away, Amaya had taken several calls from the nervous mother of the bride and was busy putting the final touches on the bridal suite. She had taken the unused master suite, which was the largest in the castle, and had a sideboard put in with a small refrigerator and mini bar, a coffee pot and room for snacks so the happy couple wouldn't have to leave the room unless they so desired. Heather embroidered towels and sheets with pink hearts and yards and yards of silk and lace adorned the bed and windows. Essie was appointed their personal servant, delivering meals and answering the intercom, tidying up if requested and anything else the couple required.

* * * *

The wedding took place on the evening of the wedding party's arrival and was so beautiful, Amaya had tears in her eyes. Tyler smiled thoughtfully at her and handed her a clean handkerchief. When the groom's brother and best man toasted the couple at the reception, a cheer went up demanding a kiss, which was given. The party danced and sang and the bride threw her garter and flower bouquet, as was traditional at most weddings, and in the wee hours of the morning, Tyler walked Amaya to her door and leaned

down to kiss her cheek, but he hadn't anticipated the emotion he was feeling because it took all his self-control to step back instead of pulling her into his arms and kissing her passionately.

As Tyler lay in bed, thoughts were swirling through his head. *This is getting so difficult. I really should look up a date and expand on my female companionship. Amaya and I are spending entirely too much time alone together.* A romantic involvement wasn't acceptable as long as he was Amaya's employee and so he vowed to make an effort to get out more. Why did this make him so unhappy?

* * * *

Pleased with the wedding, Amaya lay in bed smiling. She touched her cheek where Tyler had placed his lips and felt the hot flush that often came over her when he was near. She knew she didn't have the time for a relationship and Tyler wasn't the person she should be thinking of. She had more important things to occupy her mind. She had two more days with the wedding party and then four days until Tyler's family would arrive. With that, she picked up the second journal and began to read.

This journal was dated seventeen ninety-two and as the first, was filled with begets and marriages and deaths. It also described the hills and valleys, the lochs and the castle her ancestors lived in. *Finally, something interesting.* The description of the castle reminded her of her own Amaya's keep. She smiled and again thought of her granddaddy and now knew where he had gotten his ideas. The secret passages were noted along with the family life. It appeared they had strong family ties and were well revered in Scotland. A mention was made of money, which in Amaya's impression, was a great deal. This family owned a lot of properties and homes and sheep.

When she woke in the morning, the journal lay across her chest, along with an orchid from the wedding bouquet.

The game was successful and at dinner that evening, the bride's brother happily announced that since he had no wife, he wanted a ring to fit on his right pinkie finger.

The bride and groom hadn't been seen the entire day but did show up for dinner, flushed and happy on the last evening where Amaya asked Raymond to kneel at her feet. She took the sword of her clan off the wall where it had been hanging and dubbed him the first knight of Amaya's Keep, since he was the first male to accept the ring. She then kissed him on the cheek and placed the ring on his finger. Ray was boisterous with excitement as the party cheered for him and admired the ring, calling him Sir Raymond of Amaya's Keep for the remainder of the evening.

"That was a nice touch, Amaya," said Tyler. "When did you think of that?"

She smiled and said, "Only moments before the ceremony. I thought it would be fun."

"It was a big hit; I hope you plan to make a habit of it. A castle can use all the knights it can get." His eyes crinkled up when he grinned and he winked at her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

She took his arm and led him to The Pub, where the English vocalist was singing love songs quietly in the background.

Knowing she had to have an excuse for preparing another party, she said to Tyler, "I talked to my parents this morning and they're coming for a visit on Thursday."

"I'm so happy for you, Amaya. They haven't seen the castle yet, have they?"

"No, my mother was tied up with a difficult murder

case and couldn't get away. They're leaving from here to take a cruise around the world. She said it was time to enjoy some of that money her dad left her before she settled back into work. She also wanted to look into turning Granddaddy's farm into a home for abused children and women. I like that idea, don't you?"

"Very admirable, I look forward to getting to know your parents."

Amaya had to get Tyler out of the house on Thursday afternoon when his family arrived. She arranged for a meeting with Mayor Montgomery of Washburn Springs to give him a check as the castle's donation toward the restoration of the courthouse. Her one stipulation was that he meet with Tyler instead of herself and keep him busy for the afternoon. With a donation the size of Amaya's, the mayor was happy to agree.

As was expected, one of the guests, this time, the mother of the bride, was heard screaming in the night. Granddaddy had made his rounds, walked through the wall and frightened the poor woman into a faint. After convincing her she had been dreaming, the woman accepted the explanation, and the rest of the night was calm.

The bride and groom left happily with a host of compliments on everything from the wedding to the bridal suite.

Amaya took a deep breath and entered the kitchen. She found she always retreated to the kitchen when her last guest left after a party and today was no exception. She sipped her coffee and tried in vain to find a way to get rid of Tyler for the afternoon. She needed time for last minute details. It was hard to plan so much with Tyler living in the castle and it seemed he spent as much time there as she did. Why was it that the entire staff was so content at the castle,

they only went out when it was necessary? Well, with the exception of Linda, who made her near daily trek to the Local Café in town to visit.

Nina solved her problem by crying out and when Amaya turned, she saw a pool of blood running from Nina's fingers. She had cut herself with a knife. After inspecting the wound, Amaya was certain no real damage was done, but a few stitches were in order. She summoned Tyler and asked him to escort Nina to the doctor. That gave Amaya the time she needed, but she was unhappy with the circumstances.

Tyler agreed to fill in for Amaya at the meeting with the mayor and deliver the check, since her parents were coming and she didn't want to be gone when they arrived. Hopefully, she would have three or four hours to welcome her guests before Tyler returned to the castle.

William left in the limo, followed by Tony in the SUV and Bethany in the Cadillac. It would take three vehicles to accommodate the entire MacGregor clan. Amaya's parents had flown into a small nearby airport and rented a car. They were due any minute.

When the doorbell rang, Amaya bypassed Niles and greeted her parents with a long hug each and words of happiness at their arrival. They were astonished at the sight ahead of them when they saw the castle for the first time, and over coffee and sandwiches, they talked and talked. Amaya asked Linda to give her parents a tour while she prepared herself for Tyler's family, who would be arriving within the half hour if their plane was on schedule.

"Oh, Mom, I'm so glad you're here. I'm really nervous about meeting Tyler's family for the first time."

"Dear, why would you be nervous? You've had several parties already. Were you this on edge with each of those?"

Helen asked with concern.

"No, no I wasn't. I really enjoy the parties and games and meeting new people. You're right, Mom, I have no need to be nervous at all."

Helen eyed her daughter and shoed her up the stairs to change and went with Linda on her tour.

Amaya greeted her guests warmly and when Tyler arrived, two little boys met him at the door where they had been waiting impatiently and annoying Niles. "Uncle Tyler, Uncle Tyler!" they shouted in unison and leaped for his waist. Tyler was barely able to catch the twins and haul them in his arms as he gasped in surprise.

"Edward, Daniel, what are you rascals doing here? Where is your da?"

Each boy took one of Tyler's hands and ran dragging him along to the parlor where he was greeted by his parents and family. His mother held him and cried and his father shook his hand and then pulled him into a bear hug. The brothers and sisters and in-laws hugged and shook hands and the men clapped each other on the back. Beams of happiness radiated from Tyler's smile and his mischievous eyes. He looked so much like his father, strong and powerful, yet kind and gentle, but he had his mother's full mouth and smile.

Tyler was introduced to Amaya's parents and they all sat down to catch up on each other's lives and get acquainted. They drank whiskey and ale and toasts were made. The children laughed and played and crawled all over Tyler, but he just ruffled their hair and went on with his visit. Amaya watched the family reunite wistfully and was happy she had made this happen.

Bethany interrupted the noise to announce dinner and the festivities continued. After the children were settled in

the nursery for the night, one by one, everyone left the group to go to bed. It had been a long flight and an exhausting day.

Walking between her parents and locked arm in arm with both, Amaya escorted them to their suite. Linda had retired earlier, feigning exhaustion. "Did you enjoy the evening or were you as overwhelmed as I was?" asked Amaya to neither one in particular.

Her father spoke first. "A little of both, I would say, wouldn't you, dear?"

"I certainly was overwhelmed, but they're such charming people. I especially like Mrs. MacGregor. She's so warm and pleasant."

"What did you think of Tyler, Dad? Do you like him?"

"Let's see. He loves his parents and seems to like children. He's certainly patient with them. His family adores him, and that speaks a lot for a man. Yes, I think I like him, especially his laugh. He's free with his laugh and doesn't mind the teasing and taunting one always gets from brothers."

"I like the way he speaks so admirably of you, Amaya, and seeing him with his family, I think he's a respectable young fellow. He's a good man, from what I've seen," said Helen.

Relief swept over Amaya. She so wanted her parents to like Tyler. Why that was, she wasn't certain, but she liked him so much, she couldn't bear for her parents to dislike him. She said goodnight at their door and went in search of the chapel.

She needed to talk to her grandfather before she retired for the night.

"Can I buy you a cup of tea?"

"Oh, Tyler, you startled me. What are you doing up so

late?"

"I was looking for you. Ma told me that you planned this visit. I want to thank you. You couldn't have done anything to please me more."

"I enjoyed doing it and your family is so wonderful. I've enjoyed their company so much."

"You are a brave lassie to take on the whole of the MacGregor Clan at once. I'm glad you liked them. Tea or coffee?"

"Wine I think. I am really wound up and need to relax. Shall we take a bottle to the library?"

"That's a fine idea." Tyler took Amaya's arm and escorted her to the library and onto the sofa. He sat beside her and stretched out his long legs and leaned back his head. "What an amazing thing to have happen. All my brothers and sisters and Ma and Da, not to mention the children, here all at the same time."

"It was worth it to see the look on your face, Tyler. Surprises are hard to pull off. We did a bang up job on this one." Amaya curled her feet under her and leaned back.

Before she realized what had happened, Tyler was gently waking her. The light was shining in the tall windows and Amaya said. "What time is it?"

"It's after six. It seems we fell asleep and slept on the sofa all night. Can you get up and share a pot of coffee with me?"

"I have to get dressed before your family comes down. They're sure to think we slept together."

"But we did, Amaya, just not in the traditional sense."

His eyes were too happy for so early in the morning.

"Come, I'll take you through a passage to your room. No one will be the wiser."

Before following Tyler into the passage behind the

bookshelf, she turned and pointed her finger and shook it in his face. "No one, I repeat, no one will ever know about this. Is that clear?"

A broad smile covered Tyler's face and his eyes crinkled up as he put his arm around Amaya's waist and led her through the passage and up the stairs. "Your honor is safe with me, lassie. You're too wealthy to want the likes of me."

"And just what is that supposed to mean, you fool?" she glared at Tyler, anger in her eyes.

Tyler put his finger to her lips. "Quiet now, you are grumpy when you wake, are you not?"

Amaya puffed up and remained silent as she pulled away from Tyler and went into her room. *Of all the arrogance, telling me to be quiet.* She stomped to the bathroom and ran a hot shower. By the time she sat down for breakfast, her mood was considerably improved and she put a smile on her face for both families and enjoyed the meal.

After breakfast, Helen asked her daughter for some time to talk. While her dad, Tyler's dad and two of the boys went riding, Amaya and her mother took coffee and tea to the library.

"I love your castle, Amaya. I can't imagine what Dad was thinking when he built it, but it is charming, and you look as though you're thriving here."

"Oh, Mom, you have no idea. I just love it. And you know Granddaddy was right. If he had left me the money, I would only have invested it and watched it grow. This is so much fun and the hotel parties are gaining in popularity. We're nearly booked until Christmas and have a few reservations for New Year's Eve."

"I'm so happy for you. Now, what I wanted to talk about was the rest of the stocks Dad left in your care. Have

you been keeping up with them?”

“Yes, Mom, I keep an eye on them, and Mr. Lowry is great. He keeps me informed as well.”

“Well, I was under the impression those stocks were included in his estate. Apparently not, though. There’s over a half billion dollars lying there for you. What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know, Mom. Do you need more? I can’t believe Granddaddy left that all to me. It should be yours for me to inherit.”

Helen went to her daughter and hugged her. “Oh, my dear, of course not. Your father and I have been very successful and the interest alone on that ten million is enough for a lot of luxuries. No one needs that much money. It must have been a burden for Dad. I just wondered, that’s all. It is a great deal of money.”

“It sure is. I don’t know, Mom, I want to leave trusts for my children, if and when I have them, and after that, I guess I’ll have to wait and see. I kind of have my hands full with the castle right now.”

“I’ll bet you do. Anyway, we’re putting one hundred thousand dollars in the farm to start-up. I wondered if you would like to contribute to that and help me find someone local to run it.”

“I’ll match your contribution and look around. I may have someone for you. When do you plan to open it?”

“Probably after the first of the year. Do you think you can find someone by then?”

“I think so, I have someone in mind, but it will be after the first of the year before she’s available. I’ll keep you informed.”

Helen nodded and after she invited Linda in, the remainder of their visit was spent on family and catching

up. Amaya asked about their trip around the world and asked if they would be visiting Scotland. She was becoming very anxious to find out about her ancestors.

Helen said, "Amaya, Linda and I know a lot about Mom's Cherokee Indian and Irish background. She told us all about her family, and I remember meeting my grandparents once when I was little. We really should do a genealogy on the family, from Mom's side while Amaya works on the MacTavish side."

"That's an excellent idea. I'll get started on it as soon as this year is up," said Linda. "We can e-mail info back and forth if you can find time to help."

"Sounds good to me. Dad never said much," Helen continued, "except that he was Scottish and English. I didn't think much about it until he built you this castle. That stirred my curiosity. Unfortunately, I don't even know what part of Scotland Dad came from and our cruise doesn't extend to Scotland."

"I've been doing some research on my own," said Amaya, "and have found some journals in the library I've been reading, but for the most part, all I've learned is who begat who." She smiled at her mother and the conversation ended when her dad arrived with Tyler and Mr. MacGregor.

* * * *

Tyler was enjoying his family and was seen with one or the other of them at all times. They rode, walked in the garden and told tales in the pub. Tyler was even seen wrestling in the back of the castle with his older brother, with shouts of encouragement from the younger boys. The children played with Brandon, except for the little girl who was six months old and still being nursed by her mother. Nanny Heather was a big hit with the children and parents

alike. Ian especially seemed to spend a lot of time with her and her charges. It was difficult to figure out if he just loved the children, or if he was becoming interested in Heather as well.

Tyler sought Amaya out and invited her to join him and his parents for dinner in a neighboring town. Since her parents had left, she accepted happily and was ready and dressed beautifully in a yellow sheath and strap heels.

Mrs. MacGregor watched her son as he watched Amaya walk down the stairs with her hair piled on top of her head and just a hint of make-up.

All too soon, the MacGregor Clan visit came to a close and Amaya had a party scheduled for nine days away.

* * * *

The castle resumed its daily routine and the planning of the next party.

As far as Amaya knew, Granddaddy hadn't made an appearance while the MacGregor's were visiting and the evening they left, she visited the chapel to thank him for not disrupting their visit. She told him how much she'd enjoyed visiting with her parents and meeting Tyler's family, and the following morning when she awoke, a bright red rose lay on her pillow and the second journal she hadn't finished reading.

Chapter 12

The mystery dinner guests were to arrive on the following Thursday and on the Sunday before, Amaya was summoned to Debbie's room.

"Do I look alright to go to the fair with William?"

"You look lovely, Debbie. Why are you fretting so? It is just an outing."

"Oh no, ma'am. I haven't been on a date in over a year. Not since my husband left."

"Well, let me see. The crop pants are great, the shirt matches nicely and the sneakers compliment the rest. Your hair is shiny and clean, but the make-up, hum, maybe you could use a lighter shade of lipstick. Something with a little orange instead of pink. That would suit your complexion better."

"I don't have any that color; oh, I just know I'm going to mess this up, and I truly like William."

"Come, we'll go to my room. I have just the thing, but you need to realize that William has seen you working in the kitchen with no lipstick and up to your elbows in dishwater. He likes you for who you are, not only your beauty."

"I'm not beautiful. Roy used to tell me all the time I was plain."

"Debbie," she scolded, "Roy must be a very insecure person to have to put you down like that. You're a beautiful woman. Just look in the mirror, and you have a figure to die for. Here," she turned her to the mirror. "Look."

Debbie eyed herself in the mirror and turned this way and that. "I guess I do look pretty good. I hadn't noticed."

"Don't ever get involved with a man that makes you feel unattractive or incapable. You deserve better than that."

As Debbie went in search of her son for their outing, she turned at the door, "Thank you, Miss Amaya. I appreciate your help. You're such a kind person."

Going back down to her office, Amaya was astonished by what Debbie had told her. *How could a man care for a woman and treat her that way?* Debbie was better off without him. Maybe William would see the beauty in that young woman. She certainly hoped so.

* * * *

The mystery dinner party was the largest they had booked so far. Forty guests occupying twenty rooms. Several women agreed to share a room in order to attend this party. It was also the least costly to attend, as the expenses were minimal. The game would be held on the second day, as usual, and the mystery would take place at dinner, with several of the guests already appointed parts in the play with scripts faxed to them to study. The remainder of the guests would be detectives to solve the crime. Again, a scroll was prepared to add the winner's name when the party was over.

This was to be a traditional English castle mystery event with fish and chips for lunch and roast leg of lamb and boiled potatoes and cabbage for dinner. This was exciting for Amaya. She'd always enjoyed a good Agatha Christie

book and was looking forward to the mystery dinner. The fox hunt would be following close behind. With all the work, she hadn't found the time to call Ray Turner for a date, as she'd intended. She was content now with the way things were and didn't miss the dates. She was too happy and busy to waste her time with men she had no real interest in.

Of course, there was always Tyler, right there in the castle to provide his companionship. She had all the comforts of marriage, minus the responsibility and the sex. Amaya felt embarrassed and flushed just thinking of Tyler and sex in the same thought and dismissed it. That was something she couldn't afford to let enter into her mind. She was afraid if she did, she wouldn't want to let it go. Tyler was becoming a very important part of her life and she wasn't sure how she felt about that. So far, she'd avoided thinking about it, but she knew that sooner or later, she would have to examine her feelings and face them.

* * * *

Heather was growing big with her child and when she came to the kitchen for a snack, she was wearing maternity clothes for the first time. Niles handed her a letter and when she looked at the envelope, it was from Scotland. She slipped the envelope in her pocket and took the tray with her out of the kitchen.

Niles knew the letter was from Ian MacGregor. He'd noticed how entranced the young man had been with Heather and was pleased to see that he hadn't brushed her aside when he left. Niles had quickly become fond of Heather as he watched her care for Brandon and the children of the castle's guests, and also found time to sew and mend and help with the laundry. In her condition, he

worried she was doing too much, so he kept an eye on her. If she began to look tired, Niles was not above bringing it to the attention of Miss Amaya. What Niles didn't know was that Tyler, Amaya, Linda, Laurie and the rest of the staff were doing the same thing. Little Heather was being well looked after.

* * * *

Tyler received daily e-mails from Ian concerning Heather and he answered each one with daily updates. Today, he would tell Ian she was in maternity clothes and would be seeing the doctor next week. He would keep Ian informed. After a few weeks of this, Tyler talked it over with Amaya and offered Ian a job in the stables during the fox hunt with no salary, and Amaya invited him to stay on as a houseguest after the hunt for as long as he liked.

Ian excitedly accepted and would be arriving very soon. Heather wasn't aware of this, but as interested as Ian was in Heather, he needed to spend more time with her and see what her feelings were. Tyler knew his brother well enough to know he would accept the child as his own. At the age of thirty-two, Ian had never been interested in any other girl seriously. If he cared enough for Heather that he was willing to come to America and work in the stables for free when he was a degreed engineer in partnership with his father, he was serious about this young woman. Mr. MacGregor had fallen in love at first sight with Ian's mother and encouraged him to go to America and leave the running of the business to him. He knew his firstborn well enough to know he'd fallen head over heels in love.

* * * *

The castle was bustling with activity on Monday when Linda's son Greg arrived unexpectedly. He was worried about his mother and wanted to see where she was living.

Linda and Amaya greeted him with hugs and kisses and he was placed in the room next to his mother and invited to stay for the mystery dinner. Greg declined, saying he had to leave on Wednesday.

Linda was excused from work and told to entertain her son. They spent many hours together. They went into town for lunch and Greg brought her pictures of his son and daughter and promised to return with his family for Thanksgiving, if that was all right with Amaya. Amaya was delighted and asked him to invite his brothers and their families as well. Greg promised to talk to them and e-mail his mother to confirm.

Linda was working non-stop on the games and dinner to catch up for the time she had spent with Greg. Amaya had covered for her, but she was determined to go over every detail herself to be certain they were ready. And they were!

* * * *

The guests arrived and were a mixture of every age, the eldest boasting she was seventy-eight and the youngest, except for the children, was an eighteen-year-old young man right out of high school. There were nine children this trip and Amaya recruited William to assist in their care. She felt nine children plus Brandon might prove to be too tiring for Heather. William loved children and he had more free time than anyone at the castle, so he was happy to take on the responsibility.

Amaya suggested William take the older children on a tour of the upper floor passages and a run through the turret rooms with snacks and colds drinks supplied along the way, which turned out to be very popular and was therefore to be included in all the future children's visits. A run through the labyrinth was also suggested. Debbie was

excused in the evenings to assist Heather with the younger children.

The party went off as planned and a young single woman in her early twenties won the ring and Jennifer Forbes became the guest of honor at the mystery dinner on the last evening.

The guests participating as actors in the mystery took their roles seriously and were found rehearsing for hours the day of the party. When the lights went out and the candles were lit, seventy-eight year old Mrs. Anderson was found on the floor, dead, apparently of a stab wound to the heart.

Much fun was had as the guests watched the drama unfold with a raging thunderstorm in the background. That was a lucky coincidence and added to the ambience of the evening.

When a middle-aged couple jointly agreed that Wilbert, the heir to the dead woman's fortune had slipped in through a secret passage to stab his great aunt, and then returned through the passage to emerge on the other side of the room to appear innocent, they solved the murder and were awarded the Amaya's Keep official Scotland Yard detective award, and both names were placed on the awarded scroll.

After the last guest was driven to the airport, Amaya was exhausted. That had been a large party in the castle with a lot of talking, smiling and answering questions for her. Linda had also been very busy, so she put out the word that all staff was to again take the following day off. The fox hunt had been squeezed in between the mystery dinner and the next game, which was to be a singles weekend at the request of several guests. Time for the staff to play would be short.

* * * *

Tyler found Amaya sipping a diet cola in the library that evening. "May I join you?" he asked. He was rewarded with a nod and pat on the sofa next to her. She pointed to the sideboard for him to get a drink, which he did, and sat down.

"That was some party, Amaya," he said. "I'm exhausted."

"Me too. I don't know if we want to book that many people again with so many children."

"I agree, but it was very popular. Did you have fun?"

"I always have fun with the guests," she said wistfully. "Living here is like a fantasy. I work very hard, but it seems more like playing. Preparing for the parties excites me like a teenager planning a sleepover. I hope it never gets to be a job for me."

"I've felt that from the first day I came here. It's a grand adventure, like traveling the world or going on safari. Each day is full of wonder and surprise. Like the singles dinner dance party, we didn't even have to invent that one. After a few requests and we advertised, women were calling in to get reservations and the young men were anxious to meet a whole room of young women."

"It is sort of like a singles dance, isn't it? Now when did we get in the business of romance?" Amaya leaned her head back and sighed.

"Don't you dare go to sleep. I won't have you puffing up at me because we spent the night together in here," Tyler teased and shook her awake.

Amaya sat straight up and punched Tyler on the arm. "Oh, you fool, what makes you think I want to spend the night with you anywhere?"

With the corners of his eyes crinkled and a broad grin,

Tyler said, "Well, we certainly did and you did puff up over it."

Becoming haughty, Amaya said, "I was just embarrassed. I didn't want your parents to get the wrong idea."

"Spending the night with you, lassie, is not something I would ever be embarrassed about."

"Oh, you!" She cuffed him again on the shoulder and he winced. "Tell me about Ian. When is he coming?"

"Ian will be here in time for the fox hunt, which by the way, no children are attending. That should give Heather a break."

"Good, does he have experience with horses?"

"Aye, he does. My father keeps a stable in Scotland. He can ride with the best of them."

"Your family are rather well off, aren't they, Tyler? I offered to pay for the airfare when they came to visit, but your mother refused."

"We aren't poor people," he said.

Amaya was embarrassed now. "Oh, I didn't mean to imply that you were, Tyler. It's just that I issued the invitation, so I thought I would pay."

"Don't fret yourself, lassie, I understand, but as it stands, my father is Laird of a substantial castle of his own. My brother Ian, being the firstborn son, will inherit."

"Tell me about your castle."

* * * *

And he did. He talked about the gray stones and the turrets, the vast land and lochs, sheep and fields of grain and on and on until Amaya did fall asleep, but this time, Tyler woke her gently and sent her on her way to bed, after which Tyler sat for a long time wishing he were joining her. Amaya had definitely found the place in his heart reserved

for love and there was nothing he could do about it. Leaving the castle was not an option, as he couldn't bear to part from her, and staying on was going to be the biggest challenge of his life. Yes, his family was wealthy, but nowhere near as wealthy as Amaya, and Ian being the eldest, the majority of his father's estate would pass down to him. Tyler would be left with a substantial allowance and his career in public relations. Although he was successful, he felt that wasn't enough to offer this woman who had stolen his heart and just happened to be a billionaire.

* * * *

Coming into the kitchen with Laurie, Heather beamed with happiness.

"What's up, Heather? You're absolutely radiant today."

"I just came back from the doctor." She handed Amaya a little photograph. "That's my little girl you're looking at."

Hugs and congratulations went around the kitchen. A little girl was coming to the castle and Heather was seated at the table and given a large glass of milk and a piece of cherry pie. "I seem to be starving all the time now," she said as she put her fork down. "The doctor says my weight is okay, though. I've only gained thirteen pounds with two months to go. I have to admit, I am a little nervous about raising a baby on my own."

"Oh, don't be, Heather. We'll all be here for you and the little one." Amaya hoped that was true, but with Ian's attention focused on Heather, she wondered if she would lose this girl to Scotland.

A tear rolled down Heather's cheek and she blushed and wiped it away. "I seem to cry at the drop of the hat, too. I'm sorry."

Laurie sat with Heather and reassured her that she had nothing to worry about, and Amaya told Heather she'd

arranged for Heather's mother to come and stay at the castle when the time came, so she could be with her.

That little tear erupted into a full-fledged river and Laurie took Heather to her room. *How lucky she was to have such friends and family.* Amaya had gone above and beyond what any employer would have done for the girl, and after crying her eyes out, she came back down to thank Amaya personally.

Debbie had also been a great comfort. Raising a child alone was difficult at best, but Amaya's Keep was the best place in the world to be, she told Heather. With all the men working there, Brandon had the male influence in his life and a very large extended family. She was certain Heather and her baby would receive the same.

* * * *

Ian arrived several days before the guests were to arrive for the fox hunt and Tyler hugged him warmly and patted him on the back. From there, Ian couldn't wait to find Heather. He hoped she would greet him with open arms. She was shy at first when she saw him, but didn't refuse when he asked her to go for a walk with him.

Ian told Heather he'd come back to America because he wanted to get to know her better. He told her he had feelings for her he didn't want to dismiss and hoped they could spend some time getting to know one another.

Heather confessed she had feelings for him and was happy he had come back.

They strolled hand in hand around the castle yards until Ian reminded Heather that she should stop and rest. He took her into the castle to the nursery, propped her feet on an ottoman and rang for tea.

No one in the castle seemed to notice that Ian, a stable hand, had taken over Heather's care and walked about the

castle as though he owned it.

Heather, on the other hand, tried in vain to stop him each time he rang the kitchen for drinks or snacks or invited her out for a drive without first getting permission for her to leave. Brandon was Ian's only concern and he always made sure, if they didn't take the boy with them, that he was well cared for by someone in the castle.

Amaya had given him free run of Amaya's Keep as long as he didn't neglect his duties in the stables. The amount of money received for the fox hunt made this a very important party and Mr. Sykes had been fretting over his horses ever since the party had been planned.

Ian was as good as his word. He worked hard and long preparing for the fox hunt, caring for the animals and cleaning out stalls. He fed the horses and rode them for exercise along with Tony, and when one mare came up lame, he brought it to Mr. Sykes' attention, who promptly called for the vet and made a report to Amaya.

* * * *

"The mare will be fine, Miss Amaya, but she won't be riding in the fox hunt. We have enough without her. A few days rest and some liniment and she'll be fine."

"Thanks, Mr. Sykes, for keeping me informed. By the way, how is Ian working out?"

"He's doing a fine job. Right now, I have him working on the kennel for the hounds that will be arriving this evening. I plan to put up their caretaker in the bunkhouse, if that's agreeable with you."

"Yes, of course, thank you for thinking of it. I had forgotten."

"Not to worry, Tyler suggested the arrangement."

"Good, please keep me informed of Lightning Star's progress."

One problem averted. Lightning Star would be fine, but Brandon wouldn't be happy to be barred from the stables for a while. No matter, with the fox hunt going on, she had instructed Heather and Debbie to keep him close at hand. She didn't want him to get underfoot with the horses or in the path of a hound that might not be friendly.

* * * *

When the guests arrived, she found a whole group of middle-aged Englishmen out for a good time. They kept the ale and whiskey flowing and ate heartily. Amaya really enjoyed sitting in The Pub and listening to the stories of past hunts and watching the dart games the gentlemen bet heavily on and the arm wrestling matches.

Even the appearance of Granddaddy to one of the gentlemen, Mr. Fine, did nothing but cause excitement among the guests. There was no need for Amaya to deny his existence because the entire club wanted so badly to believe it. Her only answer was that it must be her granddaddy. He liked to keep an eye on her.

With the absence of all but two wives, the one daughter tried to appear snobbish and make demands, but Amaya put her in her place immediately, reminding her that she was a guest in her home and she was expected to treat the servants with respect. After that first incident, Rose was content to inspect the castle and was particularly intrigued by the passages. She was richly rewarded when her father won the game and turned his ring over to her.

The fox hunt went off as planned and the men came back in good humor after the fox had been released to again run wild. It had been treed and that was the end of the hunt. The Hunt Club had brought their own prize of a silver cup for the winner, so the castle had very little expense for the exorbitant amount of money they had been paid.

Mr. Sykes reported that all the horses were in good health and no worse for wear for the experience. In fact, he said, he thought the horses enjoyed the experience, and when the last guest left and the hounds were trucked to the airport, Amaya was pleased. "That was a good experience, Linda, don't you think? There really was very little work involved for the money we were paid. They practically took care of themselves."

"Yes, and Mr. Moore was a nice addition to the group. I really enjoyed his company. He promised to keep in touch with me by e-mail."

"Oh, Aunt Linda, you do have a way with the men. It's a pity I didn't inherit some of your charm."

"You did," said Tyler. He hadn't meant to speak aloud, but the words were spoken before he realized it. He bent his head and sipped his tea.

Amaya looked at Tyler and could think of nothing to say. That was a nice compliment but she'd never been involved with a man seriously, much less dated as many as her Aunt Linda. *Where did that comment come from?* Instead of elaborating on the subject, she asked Tyler, "What did you think of the fox hunt party?"

"I wish we could have more. This party is going to put us in the black on the ledger and that includes the salaries your staff have been paid. From now on, Amaya's Keep is a profitable business."

* * * *

While going through the mail in her office, Amaya opened a note in a pretty blue envelope. She read through the message, then called Linda and Tyler into her office.

"Do you remember Miss Shadow from our first party?"

Both nodded and waited for Amaya to continue.

"It seems she and Mr. Wright, you remember him, he

hovered over Miss Shadow the entire time they were here. Well, it seems Miss Shadow and Mr. Wright have been keeping company and are to be married at Christmas time. They want to have the wedding here."

Amaya jumped up and danced a little two-step around her office. Tyler and Linda joined her, dancing arm in arm while Tyler whistled a tune.

Collapsing in the chair, Amaya said, "This is so exciting. Can you imagine a romance starting right here, and we get to have the wedding. Linda, call her and find out the dates so we can fit it in. Oh, and offer them the bridal suite as our gift to the couple."

Linda left the room, reminding Amaya that after the call, she would be going into town.

"Are you man hunting again, Aunt Linda?" she asked with a mischievous grin on her face.

Linda turned at the door. "I don't have to hunt. They seem to find me easily enough," and with that, she turned and walked away.

"Can you believe her? She is sixty-five years old."

"I think it's refreshing," he said with a happy grin on his face and his green eyes crinkling up at the corners. "You really are doing well, Amaya. I have to agree, this is exciting. We might even get a wedding out of our singles dance party."

"Yes, we're doing well, Tyler." Amaya grew quiet and appeared deep in thought.

"What are you thinking, lassie? You've gone close-mouthed on me."

Amaya pulled her thoughts back to Tyler. "I was just wondering, did you ever think you would be responsible for giving people so much pleasure? Everyone that comes here leaves happy. We haven't had a single complaint in the

months we've been in business."

"I think you and your aunt are charming women, and who wouldn't want to spend a few days in a castle with the likes of you two?"

"Oh, Tyler, you know better than that. I couldn't have made this happen without Granddaddy's imagination in building this castle and hiring you to help me. You know that!"

"Yes, and speaking of your grandfather, I got a call this morning."

"From who?"

"It seems the news has spread that you have a ghost here in the castle and a group of paranormal researchers want to set up their equipment here to catch him."

"That's ridiculous," said Amaya, puffing up in indignation. "How could they think I would put up with that? What did you tell them?"

"I said, as far as I knew there was no ghost haunting Amaya's Keep and we weren't interested in their research."

"Good for you. The nerve of some people! What made them think we had a ghost, anyway?"

"It seems that Mr. Fine, you know, from the fox hunt, told his story to a friend who told it to a friend, and so on, and that's not all."

"What do you mean, that's not all?"

"We've had seven reservations this morning alone for any party available, all claiming they hope to see the ghost."

"Good Lord, what did you tell them?"

"That as far as knew, we didn't have a ghost. But that didn't stop the reservations from coming in. I took tentative reservations. I thought we could squeeze a party in between the four we have scheduled for October. What do you think?"

"I think...I don't know what to think. Let's go over the schedule and see if we can plan another mystery dinner, or at least have a talk with Granddaddy. I don't know if his wanderings are a good thing or not."

"Do you actually believe your grandfather is haunting the castle?"

Amaya was exasperated with all this talk of a ghost. "Yes, Tyler. I do think Granddaddy is haunting us and right now, I don't care who knows it. He is certainly bringing in business."

"You don't have to get sharp with me, Amaya. I never discounted the fact."

"Really, do you believe in him?"

"Aye, I do. I see you going to the chapel every evening and Shamus told me he talked to him. I see signs of your grandfather everywhere. Did you not think I would believe?"

"I...I don't know. I thought I was insane. He leaves me flowers almost every night. I do talk to him most evenings, but he's never answered me or appeared to me."

"He doesn't appear to me either, but he leaves signs. Little things like moving a pencil or taking a file from the cabinet and leaving it on my desk. I like to think he's here with us. He enjoyed so much building Amaya's Keep for you."

A tear fell from Amaya's eye and rolled down her cheek. "I'm so pleased, you have no idea. If Granddaddy is haunting us, he is the gentlest ghost I've ever heard of. How do you think we should handle this with the guests?"

"I think I would deny it with a twinkle in my eye and make some reference to the fact your grandfather would never do such a thing. That way, the guests will continue to believe, but you won't have admitted it. Ghosts are much

more intriguing when you deny their existence, even though they have been seen by others.”

Smiling, Amaya just shook her head and invited Tyler into the kitchen for a snack. “Isn’t this the most fun you’ve ever had in your life, Tyler?”

“Aye, it is,” he answered, taking her arm and leading her out of the office.

Chapter 13

October blew in with rain and cold weather. The trees had turned color and were shedding their leaves of red and gold. The woods had thinned with the absence of foliage and the sky remained dreary for days.

Amaya, Tyler and Linda were busy planning parties with indoor activities and Tony had cut his arm when he bumped the wall and knocked a sickle off to fall on him. The gash would heal, but required sixteen stitches and was very painful, which limited his duties in the barn. Ian volunteered to take over those responsibilities Tony couldn't fulfill. He was again busy, but found time for Heather every evening, and from the looks of it, a romance was in full bloom.

With the problem of Tony's duties solved, the castle turned back to the games. The first of the month was a dinner dance with a Clue game marathon and dart championship game planned. The game would, of course, be played and a formal dance would end the party.

Following close behind was the medieval dinner weekend, minus the jousting. Entertainment would have to be planned to replace it. Then the mystery dinner and singles weekend Tyler had squeezed in. The highlight of the month would be the Halloween Costume Ball. The castle

would have to be decorated appropriately for that, so little time was left for the staff.

Amaya had yet to find time to read her grandfather's journals. Her ancestry research would have to wait until the holidays. Amaya planned only two parties for November. The last two weeks of the month were free and all the staff was told they could take a four-day weekend if they wanted to have dinner with their families. Those choosing to stay at the castle would be included in Thanksgiving dinner. Laurie would be staying on and her sister, Heather's mother, would be arriving for Thanksgiving and would remain for the birth of the baby. Amaya's parents were coming for a few days, as well as Linda's family, who were coming from Memphis, Tuscaloosa, and Jackson.

The same schedule held for December. Two parties, one of which was Miss Shadow and Mr. Wright's wedding, and the remainder of the month was reserved for family, with the exception of New Year's Eve. A huge party was planned and all the staff would be in attendance. New Year's Eve was an expensive party for the guests and Amaya wanted it to be special. She had yet to come up with a theme, but she thought something urban and elegant would be appropriate. Perhaps she would hire a large band in the Glen Miller style and make it a forties theme. She would put Tyler on that immediately. Getting a band at the last minute would be impossible.

The weather was strange this year and the cold, rainy days turned warm and pleasant, and then back to cold. The wind blew and the rain fell, then the sun would come out and warm the earth. It was on a warm, sunny day after a week of overcast skies, Amaya asked Tyler to go for a ride with her.

"Sure, where are we going?"

"To the stables. You know, Tyler, I've ridden down the same trail many times, but today, I'd like to explore my property."

"That sounds like a grand idea to me. Let me get a jacket."

Amaya met Tyler in the front entrance and together they walked to the stables. "Where would you like to ride today?"

"I don't know. I just feel like escaping the castle to see what's out there. I've lived here for months and not been beyond that trail."

"Then let me lead. I know every inch of the grounds."

Amaya seemed melancholy today and Tyler wanted her to be content, so he led her around the stables to the beginnings of the woods. There, they skirted the trees and rode for miles along the edge. Finally, Tyler led his horse into a grove of trees that came out at the edge of a large field.

"Tyler, stop! I didn't know this was here." She dismounted and led her horse along behind her to a small stream and offered Cinderella water. Tyler did the same with Prince Charming. "This is so open. What were Granddaddy's plans for this area?"

Tyler waved his arm around the vast expanse of barren field. "This field is filled with wildflowers from spring to fall. Daisies and jack-in-the-pulpits, violets and buttercups all live here, along with a hundred other varieties. Even wild mustard and iris. It's a beautiful sight."

"Oh, Tyler, why didn't you show it to me when it was in bloom?"

"I wanted to, several times, but we've been so busy. Your grandfather left this section of your property untouched forever. I think it's a tribute to your

grandmother.”

“I can’t wait to see it in the spring.” Without warning, tears erupted from Amaya’s eyes and she sat on the ground sobbing.

Joining her on the ground, Tyler took her into his arms. “What’s the matter, lassie? Now tell me what’s bothering you,” he soothed.

“Oh, Tyler,” Amaya said through her sobs, “I’m so tired. One party after another with no let-up.” The tears opened a dam of feelings and Amaya poured them out. “I’ve been trying to read Granddaddy’s journals for months and haven’t had time. Every time I open one, I fall asleep, and I’m twenty-six. I want to start thinking about marriage and children. Just watching Heather grow with her little girl and having Brandon follow me around the house makes me ache for a child of my own. I want time. Time to feel and live and love. Oh, Tyler, that sounds silly, even to me.” She wiped at her face with the sleeve of her jacket. “I’m sorry.”

Not knowing what to say, Tyler took his handkerchief and wiped at her cheeks. “Now, now, lassie, don’t go upsetting yourself. What is it you really want?”

“I don’t know.” By now, Amaya had composed herself and was feeling foolish. “I guess I’m just tired. Forgive me. I didn’t bring you out here to watch me make a fool of myself.”

“That’s what friends are for, Amaya. Are you sorry you came to Amaya’s Keep?”

“No, never!” she exclaimed. “I love it here. I just don’t know what’s wrong with me today. I’ll be all right now. It’s just that sometimes, I feel like I’m caught up in Granddaddy’s fantasy and the real world is passing me by.”

“The real world is what you make of it, Amaya. You only have six months left here, and then you can go back to

your world, if you choose.”

“We’ll see. I truly love it here, but it is hard to watch other people getting on with their lives. I just know Ian is going to marry Heather and take her and the baby away from us. And then there are all the people at the parties. They come, enjoy the fun and then go home to their real lives. This is my home and I don’t feel like I have a real life.”

“Maybe you need a man in your life, Amaya. What happened to that Garret fellow? I haven’t seen him around for a long time.”

“No, he was too possessive.”

“Is there anyone else? What about that fellow from the mystery dinner that kept flirting with you?” Tyler hid a grin but the twinkle in his eyes gave him away.

Amaya laughed and waved her hand in front of her face. “Did you know he was twenty-two years old and flirting with every woman in the castle? He was just a kid right out of college, who apparently lives with his parents.”

“It seems I have cheered you, lassie. Will you be all right now?”

“Yes, of course,” and she stood to mount her horse.

Tyler thought he should have suggested she find herself a date, but he couldn’t. He had become too attached to Amaya to want to see her in the arms of another man. So he kept quiet.

Turning, Amaya said, “Tyler, are you dating someone?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“I just wondered. How do you manage living here without a social life? Don’t you get lonely for a wife and family?”

Tyler stood holding the reins of his horse, “Aye, lassie that I do. How many children do you want, Amaya?”

With that, she smiled. It comforted her to think of the children she would one day have. "Oh, scads. Four, six, I want a house full. And you?"

"A house full would suit me fine. I don't think a woman is ever lovelier than when she's with child or curled up with one sleeping. There's something about motherhood that brings out the beauty in a woman."

"Oh, you don't have feelings for Heather, do you?"

That question shocked Tyler. "No, I've never thought of her in that way. She is a lovely girl, but not what I'm looking for."

"Aha, and just what are you looking for, Tyler?"

He didn't know how to answer that question. Amaya was what he had in mind, but she was definitely off limits to him. "I have her in my mind. She's smart and pretty and fun. She's impulsive, loves children and very adventuresome. What kind of man are you looking for, Amaya?"

Amaya lifted her arm over the saddle on her horse and thought. "Someone kind and loving who likes children. He must be playful and have a good sense of humor. He has to be a great father, and if he were handsome, that wouldn't hurt a bit. I would like beautiful children." She grinned and winked at Tyler.

"What about money. Doesn't he have to have a lot of money?"

"I'm surprised at you, Tyler. Money is a thing. Love is a feeling and a commitment. Money has nothing to do with it. How could you think such a thing?"

"Hum," was his only response.

* * * *

Amaya had described Tyler and as the words came out, she knew it. Best to change the subject. "I need to get back.

Thank you for everything, Tyler. I promise not to burden you with my tears again.”

“Any time, lassie. I’ll always be here for you,” and he mounted his steed and they rode home silently, each lost in their own thoughts of love and marriage and children and each other.

* * * *

The first party in October went off without a hitch and Granddaddy made his usual appearance. This event was no longer frightening because each guest had secretly hoped to see him. A young mother became very popular when she saw him walk the hall and disappear into the wall. The ring was awarded and a lonely bachelor of forty-eight was knighted to the castle. Heather was six weeks away from her due date with Ian hovering over her, along with the rest of the staff.

After that first party in October, she was officially put on maternity leave and spent her time between sewing for her baby and being the object of Ian’s affections. Debbie was appointed the temporary Nanny and William offered to fill in for her in the kitchen. He said he’d worked as a waiter and dishwasher while in high school and could handle the task. Tony also offered to help in any capacity he was capable while his arm healed. Amaya gratefully accepted William’s offer, but declined Tony’s. She told him he was to concentrate on healing and wouldn’t allow him to do anything that would jeopardize or prolong that.

All was going well. The next party was only days away and they were overbooked. Two single men had agreed to share a room in order to be allowed to attend.

Rushes were prepared and ready to place on the floor of the dining room and The Pub, as there would be little outdoor activity. A few guests had signed up for horseback

riding, pending the weather, but most were content with darts and arm wrestling. A family of four, parents and two teenagers, had requested a hike in the woods. Tony was happy to oblige, that was one task he could take on easily, again, pending the weather.

* * * *

The guests arrived on a cloudy day with no rain in sight that held for the entire three days. Even though the wind was cold, riding was enjoyed and the hikers were joined by several singles and spent hours in the woods bundled up in their winter wear. When the hikers returned, hot toddies were served by the fireplace to the adults and hot chocolate for the teens.

The hikers were a joyful group and when one got up to play the piano; one of the men began singing *Country Road* and most of the guests joined in. It was an enjoyable evening for Amaya as she and Tyler joined in the singing. Even Linda was heard in the background in her perfectly beautiful voice harmonizing with Mr. Short, who was her latest conquest.

When Tyler found Amaya in the kitchen, he asked, "How are you holding up, Amaya?"

Holding her head with her fist and sipping coffee, she answered. "I'm fine. This was a lovely evening, wasn't it?"

"Aye, it was. It never occurred to me to have a singalong. Maybe we should make that part of the evenings."

"I like that idea. I suppose we'll have to feel our guests out, but I think I enjoyed that more than any entertainment we've had in the past."

"You're not too tired, Amaya?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"The last time we went riding, you said you were

tired.”

“Oh, that. I was just feeling sorry for myself. I really am fine.”

“I’m glad. We do have a few days to rest before the next party. You ought to take some time off. Perhaps read those journals.”

Nodding, she said, “I’ll tell you what, I’ll take the day after this party, if you will. Do you want to spend the day with me?”

“I would like that. Where shall we go?”

The two were interrupted when Ian entered the kitchen. “Glad I found you. I was looking for a telephone.”

“It’s almost one in the morning. Who on earth are you going to call at this hour?” asked Amaya.

Ian poured coffee and sat at the table. “Tyler, Amaya, I want to ask Heather to be my bride.”

“That’s wonderful, Ian,” said Amaya.

Tyler shook his brother’s hand. “Aye, brother, she’ll make you a good wife. So you’re calling Da and Ma to ask permission, are ye?”

“I thought I might run it by them. If she is to be a part of the family and bring a wee one along, I want to see how they feel about it.”

“They’ll be pleased, brother, but you should call. Use the phone in the library.”

Amaya stood and hugged Ian. “You had better be good to her, Ian, or I will personally come to Scotland and bring her home.”

Ian laughed heartily. “That I will, Miss Amaya. You have no reason to worry.”

Ian hurried off to make his call and Tyler repeated his question. “So, what shall we do with our day off?”

“I haven’t thought about it. Let’s just get in the car and

see where we end up.”

“Sounds like a grand idea to me.”

“Oh, Tyler, Ian can’t take Heather away until after the baby comes. It would be too hard a trip for her right now.”

“I’m certain Ian is aware of that, but I’ll have a talk with him if it pleases you.”

“Yes, do. I want to be with her when the baby comes.”

“I know,” he said, and he took her hand to help her rise from her chair. “Now let me walk you to your room. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Walking out of the kitchen and down the hall, Ian again appeared. “It’s a go,” he said. “We’ll be married as soon as I can ask her and set a date.”

“You mean you haven’t asked her yet? How do you know she’ll marry you?”

“Aye, she will. I’m going now to gently wake her up, with your permission, and give her this ring.” He pulled a box out of his pocket and displayed a five-carat emerald cut diamond. “Do you think she’ll like it?”

“Ian, it’s exquisite. If she doesn’t want it, offer it to me.” She kissed him on the cheek and warned him not to keep Heather long. The pregnant woman needed her rest.

Ian promised to be quick and walked with Tyler and Amaya up the stairs. Ian veered off to see Heather, and Tyler left Amaya at her door with a kiss on her forehead. She had been to the chapel earlier and was exhausted.

It had been a long day, and when she awoke in the morning, a purple aster lay on the pillow beside her head. Amaya smiled and placed the flower in the vase and went to ready herself for the day. This was the final day of the party and she was anxious to get down to greet her guests.

Heather had said yes to Ian and when Amaya entered the kitchen, a crowd had gathered around her to admire the

ring.

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Ian and Heather's engagement party was postponed until the following evening after the guests had gone, and was a fabulous family-style dinner with all the staff sitting at the dining room table. Platters of fried chicken and potatoes and gravy were put on the table, as well as biscuits, vegetables and a salad. Nina had baked a cake in their honor and written "Happy Engagement" on the top, surrounded by flowers. The couple answered questions and chatted gaily at the dinner party. Assured by Heather this was what she wanted, and not just a marriage of convenience to provide a father for her baby, Amaya was happy for the couple.

After dinner, she invited Heather, Tyler, Linda and Ian to the library for coffee and tea. There, she inquired as to what their plans were.

Ian was the first to speak as he held Heather's hand. "I would like to stay on here until the wedding, if you can put up with me, Amaya."

Amaya waved away any discussion on that. "Of course you can. But when do you plan to be married?"

It was Heather who answered Amaya. "Ian insists we marry before the baby comes. He wants to give her his name. We were hoping you could find time for us to have a simple wedding in the chapel on November fifteenth."

"How does the schedule look, Tyler, Linda?" Amaya asked both in turn.

"The last party in November ends on the eleventh and without another scheduled until the first week of December," replied Tyler. "I think we can manage it."

"I have nothing planned," said Linda, "until Thanksgiving, when the boys bring their families for the

weekend. That sounds good to me.”

“Then we’ll plan it. Nina can bake the cake and I’m sure Laurie will plan the food and Mr. Anderson the flowers,” said Amaya, already making plans. “When is your mother coming, Heather?”

“Not until the twentieth, but I can call her.”

“Good, Ian, are your parents coming?”

“Not now, we’re planning to have a wedding in the church when we go to Scotland. Heather has agreed to raise our children in the church. This ceremony is to give the lassie my name legally. We’re going for our blood tests tomorrow after I finish my chores.”

“It sounds like you have it all planned out, brother. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Tyler. We plan to go home to Scotland for Christmas, if Heather is up to traveling.”

Amaya breathed a sigh of relief. “Then you won’t be taking Heather away before the baby comes?”

“I could no do that to her mother. We’ll be here, if you can put up with me for that long, if not, we’ll get a room in the hotel.”

“You’re staying here, Ian, and I won’t hear another word about it. You can trade rooms with Debbie after the wedding and leave the nursery to her. I suppose we’ll leave her there. She’s very good with the children.” Sad as she was to have Heather leave, Amaya was pleased she would have a good man to care for her and the baby.

When Heather left to call her mother and Ian went back to the bunkhouse, Amaya was left with Linda and Tyler. She inquired as to what her aunt had planned for the following day.

“Since you gave me the day off, I’m going to drive to Pontotoc to see some of my friends and spend the night. I’ll

be back by noon.”

“That’s a long drive, Linda,” said Tyler. Why don’t you let William drive you?”

“Maybe, if Debbie and Brandon can come along. They can spend the night at my house.”

“Ask them, Aunt Linda. It would probably do them good to get away for a day a two.” And so it was planned. The four would leave in the morning, and then Linda excused herself to get packed before she went to bed.

As Amaya stoked the fire in the fireplace, Tyler said, “I believe we were making plans to escape the castle for the day before my brother decided to get himself married. Are you still up for it?”

“Oh, yes. I’m looking forward to it. How far are you willing to go?”

“To the ends of the earth, if that’s what you want.” Tyler spoke with humor, but he was serious. Whatever Amaya wanted was what he wanted for her.

She smiled and nodded. “It’s not the end of the earth, and I have to call Mr. Lowry to see if I can go, but I would like to go to Memphis for a couple days.” Amaya’s face reddened and she became excited when she told Tyler what she wanted to do. “I want to get a layette for Heather and a wedding gift, go to the science museum and a nightclub. We could stay at the Peabody, and I hear they have a great restaurant in the hotel. Or we could explore the city for a hot dog stand.” She grinned wickedly at Tyler, who smiled with amusement at Amaya.

Imagine the variety of activities. Going to a museum and then a blues club and shopping for baby clothes. It sounded exciting and Tyler couldn’t wait to go. “Go make your call and see if your grandfather will allow you to take a few days away. Meanwhile, I’ll call the Peabody. Two

rooms, right?”

“Right!”

Mr. Lowry gave Amaya the go-ahead and Tyler managed to get two rooms. October was off-season, so they did have a few rooms available.

When Amaya told her grandfather she was going away with Tyler and how excited she was to get a few days off, she felt his presence in the room and when she woke in the morning, a perfect red rose lay on her pillow.

Chapter 14

The day was overcast and the dark clouds hanging low threatened to erupt into a storm, but Amaya didn't care. She was packed and on her way to Memphis with Tyler for two days. The castle was left in Ian's capable hands. Tyler had his cell phone so they could be reached, if needed. The date of the mystery dinner was two days after Amaya and Tyler returned, but Linda would be back the following day to get that together. She'd proven to be a great asset to Amaya's business and Amaya didn't know how she would manage without Linda beside her.

It was a long drive to Memphis, but Amaya enjoyed it immensely and Tyler was in good humor as well. They laughed and talked about inconsequential things and sang to the music on the radio. The time flew by and before Amaya realized it, they were in Memphis.

When they arrived at the hotel and were shown to their rooms, Amaya found an adjoining locked door between them. She could handle that. Coming back from the bathroom after freshening up, she hurried Tyler out the door. She was as anxious as a child to get on with the fun.

First, they went for a late lunch in the dining room of the hotel and then were off shopping. Amaya dragged Tyler to several baby and children's stores, buying tiny gowns and

pajamas, blankets and sweaters and dresses. Sheets and quilts were also purchased, along with more dresses. Tyler laughed at Amaya when she picked up a yellow ruffled dress with white bows on the sleeves. "Look in your bag, Amaya," he said through his laughter, "you already have that one."

Amazed at herself for getting so carried away and amused by Tyler's laughing at her, she put the dress down and picked up the same dress in an eighteen month size, the other being a six month. "This is too pretty to grow out of," she stated and took out her wallet to pay the cashier.

"Oh look, Tyler, aren't these the most precious little shoes you've ever seen?" Amaya fingered the black patent leather shoes dreamily.

"You better throw those in, too. You'll never forgive yourself if you don't."

Amaya kept the shoes and paid for her purchase. Tyler had chosen a beautiful photo album and baby book and had found a mobile with pastel fairies hanging from it to give to his brother and his bride. He paid the cashier and left carrying his shopping bags and half of Amaya's.

They were loaded down with packages when they trudged down the street to the waiting car, while the wind whipped at Amaya's hair and tore at their jackets. Tyler piled the purchases in the trunk of the car and headed back to the Peabody.

"What do you want to do tonight, Amaya?" he asked, maneuvering the car into the left turn lane.

"If the rain holds off, I'd like to stroll down Beale Street and pop in at a blues nightclub."

"That sounds good to me. Let's go back to the hotel to freshen up and have some tea before we set out again."

"Buy me a cup of coffee and it's a deal."

Before they even got out of the car, the rain began pouring, thunder cracked and within seconds, lightning streaked through the sky. Tyler took Amaya's hand and raced for the Peabody and didn't release it as he led her to the elevator.

"Maybe we'd better hit Beale Street tomorrow," Tyler said, wiping his face with his hand and raking the water from his hair to spill down his back.

Laughing, Amaya said, "Much as I love running through the rain and becoming soaking wet in less than a minute, I have to agree with you. I'll call room service for coffee while we dry off."

After Amaya had showered and put on flannel pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt, she unlocked and opened the door adjoining the two rooms and called out. "Are you decent, Tyler?"

"Come on in. The coffee's hot." Amaya found Tyler in faded jeans and a t-shirt, sitting on the bed sipping his coffee and looking like he had just walked out of the shower himself. "Have a seat."

Amaya looked from the chairs and table across the room to the king-sized bed Tyler sat on and decided there was room for two. She poured a cup of coffee and climbed up on the bed next to him. "So, what do we do now?" she asked.

"Why don't we rent a movie and sit right here and watch it?"

"That sounds like a plan." She flipped through the channels until she found the movie rental and deciding between them to watch a comedy, she followed the instructions and the movie started. They watched and laughed and drank coffee and laughed some more. When the movie ended, Amaya wiped the tears from her eyes and

laughed even more as they talked over the funniest scenes until it was dinnertime and they were both famished.

"I'm not opposed to another movie and room service, or," he hesitated, "we could dress and go down to dinner."

"Another movie and room service," Amaya stated quickly. "I've never had so much fun with a man. I think you are my best friend." She made that statement without thinking, but wasn't sorry. She did have fun with him and he was the best of friends to her.

"I feel the same way, Amaya. My experience with women is that if you spend time with them, they automatically assume you want their bodies or they want a permanent relationship. You're so easy to be with, not that I would turn down the body if it was offered." He grinned wickedly and his eyes crinkled up as he teased her, and she jabbed him in the arm with her fist.

"That's what I love about you, Tyler, you always know what to say to get right to a girl's heart." They laughed together and Amaya told Tyler to find another movie while she ordered dinner. When he told her he wanted steak and fries, she went to her room to place the order and visit the bathroom.

They ate dinner at the little table sitting in front of the window, which gave them a stunning view of the beautifully landscaped grounds and then resumed their positions on the bed to watch another movie. This one was a suspense-filled *sit on the edge of your seat* drama, which required them to pay close attention, but Amaya couldn't concentrate on this film. Her mind was going over the events of the day. The shopping and the little things she'd picked out for Heather's little girl and the fun she'd had with Tyler, arguing over the mobile because she wanted to buy it, him teasing her about buying the store out and running through the rain with him

holding her hand and not letting go of it once they were in the elevator. She felt comfortable with Tyler. It would be so easy for her to turn to him now and roll into his arms and make love until morning. With that thought disturbing her, she turned her mind back to the movie, but had lost so much she couldn't catch up. Instead, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes, and was sound asleep before the movie ended, dreaming of making love to Tyler.

* * * *

Tyler clicked off the television and looked down at Amaya sleeping. He smiled and watched. She had the most beautiful face with those dark eyes and all that black as coal hair streaming over her neck and shoulder. Her lips were ripe and inviting, slightly parted as though they were just waiting to be kissed. He leaned over her face and thought just another two inches and he could put his lips on hers and taste the ripe strawberry color for just a moment. Just long enough to stop the wondering of what she would taste like, feel like. It didn't matter that his senses were running away from him, he had to get a hold of himself and get her out of his room before he acted on his impulse. Raising his head, he gently tapped her shoulder and said, "Amaya, time to get up."

Amaya answered, "Tyler," in a soft smooth dreamy voice and rolled over to throw her arm over his waist.

"Oh shit," he cursed under his breath. "What am I going to do now? Amaya," he shook her shoulder and said again, "time to wake up, princess."

This time, she flopped her leg over his and snuggled into his chest.

Tyler felt the beginnings of an erection and willed it to go away as he leaned back on his pillow and raked his hand through his hair. *I'll just go to sleep*, he decided and closed his

eyes. Minute after minute of laying with Amaya stretched over him seemed like hours. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself to go to sleep. When he could stand it no longer, he put his arm around her shoulder and lowered his head to sniff her hair. Aye, this is comforting and likely the closest he would ever get to holding Amaya in his arms. He relaxed and fell into the luxury of feeling her breath on his arm and her hair tickling his chin.

Tyler dozed and woke, dozed and woke until the wee hours of the morning, when he thought he had to either make love to Amaya or get the hell out of his room. He was tempted, but didn't act. Instead, he slid out from under her and tiptoed into her room. It was still a long time before he fell asleep and the waiting was misery, because Amaya was still in his bed, so close and so tempting, and when he could stand it no longer, he clambered out of bed and walked to the adjoining door and turned the lock. Sleep came easier after he put that barrier between them.

* * * *

When Amaya woke in Tyler's bed, she was stunned. What had she done last night and where was Tyler? She sat up trying to remember what had happened the evening before, but all she could remember was watching a movie. The movie. That was it. She had fallen asleep watching the movie. So how did she end up sleeping with Tyler? When she sat up and tried to orient her thoughts, she realized she was still wearing the clothes she had on the night before and was on top of the covers. "Tyler," she shouted. "Where are you?"

Tyler was still asleep and didn't answer immediately and when he didn't, Amaya got up out of bed and checked the bathroom. He wasn't there either. *Where the hell was he?*

She picked up the phone and ordered coffee to be sent

up and headed for her room. When she found the door locked she rattled the handle and yelled, "Tyler, are you in there, you fool?"

When Tyler turned the lock and opened the door, Amaya put her hand to her mouth and gasped. There stood Tyler in his Joe Boxers, red curls dusting his chest and tapering down to disappear in the waistband of his shorts, only to come out the other end, covering his legs, all bold and strong and sensuous.

"What the hell happened here last night?" she demanded.

"Ah, lassie, we made mad passionate love four, no five times before I left you to rest. I could use a little of that rest now myself."

When she doubled her fist and aimed right for his stomach, he caught her tiny wrist in his massive hand and held it suspended in the air. "Now, now, you are testy in the morning, aren't you?"

"Oh, you..."

Just as a tap on the other door was heard, Tyler had lowered his mouth to within brushing distance of Amaya's. He raised his lips and touched her forehead with them and released her. Grabbing his pants to cover his threatening erection, he said, "Now, Amaya, go see what you can do about getting us some coffee, will you?"

Amaya stumbled into Tyler's room and opened the door. "Coffee, thank God," she mumbled and scurried around for a tip to give the young girl. She poured a cup, sat at the table overlooking the grounds and took a hearty drink. He had been going to kiss her, she just knew it. If the knock hadn't interrupted them, he would have. Oh, how she longed for that kiss and had been longing for it for quite some time. She knew it was better that he hadn't, after all,

they did work together and she was, technically his boss, but she would love to feel his lips on hers. Frustrated and disturbed, Amaya kept her eyes on her cup when Tyler came and poured his own coffee and sat down opposite her.

"Are you better now, lassie?"

"What do you mean?" she scowled.

"Well, in my experience, you aren't much fun until you've had your morning coffee."

She waved her hand across her face and took another drink. "I was just disoriented. I didn't expect to wake up in your bed." Slowly, she raised her eyes and looked him in the face. If he was enjoying her discomfort, he hid it well.

"For what it's worth, you fell asleep during the movie. When I couldn't wake you, I slipped into your bed. That's all there is to it."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Tyler." She wanted to say something to explain her mood, but all she could think of were her dreams of Tyler holding her while she slept and then waking her to kisses and touching and love. She flushed and hid her face again. "I guess I was just embarrassed," she said to cover her blush. "Could we start over again? Good morning, Tyler, did you sleep well?" she asked with a grin.

Tyler tried for control, but he just couldn't help himself. "I would have slept better, but I knew you were in the next room and it was very tempting to join you." The 'very' was pronounced in a strong Scottish accent and he smiled, causing his eyes to crinkle and Amaya blushed, but decided to let it go.

"Are you up for the museum today?"

"I can't wait. Tyler poured another cup of coffee and rose. Let me get showered," he grinned then and added, "we worked up quite a sweat last night between us," and as Amaya rose to deck him, he ran across the room laughing

and spilling coffee all the way to the bathroom.

Amaya laughed too and took her coffee to her own room and shook her head. *He was a fool, but a charming one.*

* * * *

They had breakfast at a waffle house near the museum and spent most of the day wandering around looking at the exhibits and chatting. *Conversation was easy with Tyler*, Amaya thought, and she enjoyed his company. They teased and laughed and tried out the experiments offered, until Amaya said, "I need a pair of shoes. Would you mind going to the mall?"

"I'm game for anything you wish to do, lassie." He grinned that wicked grin and she fisted her hand to cuff him. "Now, now, lassie. Save your violent tendencies for the mornings. I don't think I can handle a full day of it."

Giggling, Amaya said, "Maybe we need to stop off for a cup of coffee and an early dinner before we go to the mall."

"If I can have a cup of tea, let's go. That waffle I had for breakfast was gone hours ago."

Amaya nodded, turned to the door and Tyler took her hand in his and led her out. She was no longer startled when he held her hand, in fact, she enjoyed it, so when he led the way, she strolled along beside him.

They ate in the noisy food court of the mall, feasting on pizza slices and french fries topped off by ice cream cones from Dairy Queen for dessert. Amaya found the perfect fitting Nike's, then told Tyler she was finished and ready to go. They returned to the Peabody to freshen up before hitting Beale Street and the blues club.

It was a small, old club with wooden floors and ambiance. Luckily for Amaya, a famous musician had made a rare stop in the club after one of his tours and was on stage singing with a few friends in a jam session. She gaped

when she saw him there in the crowded room and stood at the bar and listened, enraptured as the music flowed. She watched with awe and chuckled at the antics of the group on stage. They played and sang and told stories and when the musician left for the bathroom and passed right by her, he shook her hand and thanked her for coming to his club.

For the first time in her life, she was speechless. Tyler watched her attentively, then followed the man to the bathroom and before the evening was over, he presented Amaya with the star, who kissed her cheek and gave her an autographed picture of himself. It was inscribed, "To Amaya, a beautiful lady and one of my biggest fans." They chatted for a while and before he left, he told Amaya he would try to see her at Amaya's Keep in January. He was hoping he would have time to book a mystery dinner party.

"How did you do that, Tyler? I can't believe it. He wants to come to my castle. How did that happen?" Amaya was rambling, but she was unable to stop. "What did he say about booking a party? I can't believe it."

"Slow down, lassie," he said, as he took her hand and walked with her down Beale Street. "We had a little chat in the men's room."

Amaya stopped and turned to Tyler. "You did this. You did this for me." She grabbed him in a hug and placed her lips on his in a "thank you" kiss. They were standing on the sidewalk just down the street from the blues club, kissing passionately.

Amaya pulled out of his arms, stunned and weak in the knees. "I'm sorry," she said weakly and turned, leaning into a lamppost.

"I'm not sorry, but I think we've had enough for tonight," Tyler said soberly and then turned to humor. "If I had known a photograph would make you so passionate, I

would have been leaving them on your doorstep regularly.”

Amaya appreciated the humor. In the condition she was in, it helped to lighten the mood and take her mind off that kiss and the deeper thoughts weaving through her mind that she wanted to continue where they had left off as soon as they returned to the hotel.

Amaya said goodnight to Tyler at her door and went in to pack for their trip home in the morning. Oh, how she wished she could visit the chapel tonight and discuss this with her granddaddy. It was disturbing to be so attracted to the man with all the other things she had to do. Maybe this trip had been a mistake, or maybe, secretly, she'd hoped something would happen. Oh, she just didn't know, but she winced when she heard the lock click on the adjoining door and heard the water running in Tyler's shower. It was a long time before she fell asleep that night.

* * * *

The trip home was hours of driving and Amaya clicked on the radio to avoid conversation. When Tyler finally spoke just twenty miles from the castle, she was relieved. “Amaya, about last night...”

“It's okay, Tyler. I think I just had too much to drink and I was so happy...”

“Right, that's what I was going to say. Let's not let it spoil the fun we had.”

“No, of course not,” and she cuffed him gently on the shoulder. “I did have a wonderful time and thank you for the picture.” She was giving Tyler a history of the musician when they pulled into the long drive of the castle and crossed the drawbridge over the moat.

They had gotten past the discomfort and were absorbed in conversation within minutes of their return.

Heather oohed and aahed over the layette Amaya had

bought and the gifts from Tyler. Ian had a big grin on his face too. "It looks like my firstborn will be spoiled rotten," he said matter-of-factly and Heather beamed as she looked with love into Ian's eyes.

How easily he had accepted Heather's unborn child as his own. *He must be one hell of a man*, Amaya thought, and smiled at the two of them looking so happy together.

It had been a fun and memorable weekend for Amaya but she was anxious to see her staff, especially Debbie and Brandon to see how their little visit with Aunt Linda had gone. She'd missed her aunt and many times while she shopped, she wished Aunt Linda had been there to inspect the garment or admire it with her. Tyler had done his best and truth to be told, he was fun to be with no matter what they did, but she was happy to see her aunt and told her so at the first opportunity.

When she and Tyler had told all the stories of their trip, they got down to work. Neither mentioned a word of Amaya falling asleep in Tyler's bed or the passionate kiss they had shared. Best not to dwell on that.

By the time evening came and they had dinner, Amaya was more tired than she had been in a long time. Bypassing the conversations and chess games, the coffee and tea, she readied herself for bed and went down to the chapel to visit her grandfather. Granddaddy had been on her mind all day and she couldn't wait to tell him about her fun trip and the confusing feelings that continued to grow where Tyler was concerned.

Walking anxiously into the chapel, Amaya leaned down to admire the faded rust colored mums in large pots on the steps and sat down. She thought how, even though she'd had a wonderful time in Memphis, she'd missed Amaya's Keep and wished with all her heart she could hug her

granddaddy and tell him just how happy she was to be home.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to hug, sweetheart, but just knowing you want to, fills my soul with happiness."

Amaya jerked around and almost fainted when she saw her granddaddy sitting next to her on the step. She looked away and took a deep breath and when she turned back, he was still there. "Oh, Granddaddy, you startled me. Are you really here, or am I just wishing you here?"

"I'm here. How are you, Amaya?"

Tears filled her eyes and she nodded because she was so full of emotion, she couldn't speak. She swallowed hard and then tried again. "I'm so happy to see you, Granddaddy. I love my castle and living here has brought me more joy than I ever dreamed possible."

"I am glad, Amaya. You look pretty today."

Amaya blushed as she always did when someone complimented her. "What do you think of my turning Amaya's Keep into a hotel?"

"I like it. You know, Amaya, I watch the people that come here. I see a young mother walking around the grounds or down the trail and I wonder if she's upset or unhappy. Then I look into her heart and I see a happy woman who loves her husband and children with all her heart. She walks around enjoying the scenery and solitude because she's so busy with her family, she rarely has time alone to collect her thoughts and appreciate the blessings she's been given. Then I see a young man who works too hard to build his career and hasn't taken time to make a family yet and I realize he's a lonely person. The games for him are enjoyable, but more than that is the socializing he's doing here. Then there's the middle-aged woman that attaches herself to your aunt because she lives alone and is

lonely, and Linda is such a friend to everyone. And there's the young man looking for the comfort of parents because his are too busy to appreciate him, and he finds a welcome ear in her. Your aunt is a wonderful woman, Amaya."

"I know that, but you see all that in my guests? You think I'm doing a good thing with the parties?"

"Oh yes, and when you brought Heather here and Debbie and Brandon, I was so proud of you. You can't imagine. That was a wonderful thing you did for those ladies and that little boy. He sure is a good little boy, isn't he?"

"Granddaddy, I love them all. I'll miss Heather and that baby, but I know Ian will be good to them. He's head over heels in love with her and already thinks of the baby as his own."

"That's as it should be. He's a good man. So is Tyler." He made that statement and remained quiet. He knew Amaya needed to talk about that, so he left her room to get started.

"Yes," she whispered. "He surely is. I wanted to talk to you about him, Granddaddy. In the time we've been working together, I feel like I've found my best friend. He's so kind and decent and I like him so much." Amaya waited for her grandfather to say something, anything, but he didn't, so she went on. "He's funny and fun, playful and serious and really smart. I don't know what I would do without him."

"Do you suppose your feelings are stronger than just liking when it comes to Tyler, Amaya?"

"I don't know, Granddaddy, I have to think about that."

"He is a good man, Amaya. That's a good place to start with your thinking."

“Hum,” she murmured. “Tell me why you’ve been frightening my guests. Is there a reason you’re walking the halls, Granddaddy?”

“Just having a bit of fun! I enjoy the excitement. I have to go now, sweetheart. You read those journals and keep up with the parties. You’re doing a fine job and I’m proud of you.”

“I will, Granddaddy. When will I see you again?” Amaya turned to face him, but he was gone. She sat a long time on the step wondering why her granddaddy had chosen tonight to let her see him. Perhaps he knew how much she needed to see him tonight or, perhaps, he had always been there and she just hadn’t looked hard enough, and when she woke in the morning, there on her bed lay a large, faded rust colored mum.

Chapter 15

The mystery dinner party was going well. The weather had turned very cold but the guests were in good humor and a few young people had even braved the cold to traipse through the labyrinth, although most stayed indoors. The English soloist, Jane, sat at the piano singing tunes of murder and mayhem, death and misery. Guests roamed the castle carrying tankards of ale and a few were throwing darts, but most were searching for a glimpse of the ghost they had come to see. Tyler was dressed in his kilt telling little mystery stories and entertaining the group gathered in The Pub. Amaya and Linda were each leading a tour of the main floor of the castle, minus the secret passages. Those were to be saved until the game the following morning. Laurie had William busy in the kitchen as Debbie and Brandon entertained the four children belonging to the guests.

When her tour ended, Amaya sat watching Tyler as she sipped her hot chocolate and admired the strong muscles in his legs. The kiss they had shared on the street in Memphis was fresh in her mind and she thought it might remain there for a long time to come. The passion she had experienced with that kiss awed her. Of all the men she had dated and kissed and more, she had never been so out of control. If

Tyler had wanted to have sex right there in the street, she wondered if she would have been capable of stopping herself. What was it Granddaddy had said to her? *He is a good man, and maybe you more than just like him.* Was he giving her his blessing, or warning her away? Hum. If the former were true, how did Tyler feel about her? He was always kissing her forehead or taking her hand. Were those friendly gestures, or was he interested in her as well? Either way, she was an adult and didn't need her grandfather's permission to explore the possibilities, and perhaps, that's exactly what she should do.

Linda interrupted her thoughts for a private conversation. They walked to the drawing room and Linda asked, "Amaya, how are you responding to the questions about our ghost? Some of the guests are asking questions I don't know how to answer."

"I'm taking the advice of a friend. I tell them we don't have a ghost with a smile and a wink and hint rather broadly that it's my grandfather. That seems to pique their curiosity and stop the questions."

"You don't seriously believe..."

"Oh, yes I do. Granddaddy is as real to me now as he was when he was alive."

At her Aunt Linda's shocked expression, she teased. "Don't you believe in ghosts, Aunt Linda?"

"No, do you really believe that?"

"I talk to him every night in the chapel. If you want a visit from him, you need to go in there some time."

"I don't believe a word of it, but I'll do it, just to prove you wrong." She shook her head as though Amaya were playing a practical joke on her. "So you want me to deny, but hint that we have a ghost?"

"Oh yes, it brings reservations in," and she smiled at

her aunt. "Now tell me, how's your love life?" Changing the subject to men was always the way to distract Linda.

"Didn't I tell you? I got a note from Shamus. He's planning to come back for New Year's Eve. I think he's already made his reservation, and he said to tell you to get reading. What did he mean by that?"

"I know what he means and I intend to do just that as soon as the Halloween party is over. How are the guests doing?"

"Good, I think. Other than what we just discussed. I do have a Mr. Lewis following me around. He is a nice enough man, but he doesn't realize I have a job to do here. He's trying to monopolize my time. Oh, there he is now, I have to go. See you later in the kitchen?"

Laughing, Amaya said, "Yes, in the kitchen," and left to make sure everything was in place for the following day.

Waking up in the middle of the night was becoming routine for Amaya when Granddaddy did his roaming and surprised another guest. He was very active this week and she supposed it was because he had gotten wind that a lot of the guests were looking for him. During the game and searching for the object that would award the winner a ring, more guests were heard searching for a ghost than the winning icon.

All of which only helped to build up the excitement and suspense for the mystery dinner the following evening. Several screams were heard when the lights went off and a victim was murdered. After the candles were lit, the guests calmed down to watch the performance and try to uncover the murderer. When it was solved, the guests settled in The Pub and game room. Miss Jenkins was in the center of a group, talking excitedly about winning the ring and saying how anxious she was for dinner the following evening when

it would be presented to her.

It was an enjoyable dinner and Amaya received many compliments on the game and mystery performed. More questions were asked regarding Amaya's ghost, but she kept to her story until the last guest had retired for the night.

She then visited her grandfather again in the chapel and found Linda talking away. She waited for her to leave and laughed when Linda told her with indignation there was no one in the chapel and Amaya had made that up.

After visiting the chapel, Amaya was disappointed her granddaddy didn't talk to her as he had before, but she admired the flowers and told him how her day had gone and asked him directly what he thought of her and Tyler having a romantic involvement. She then went to the kitchen to find Linda and saw Tyler as well. They were drinking coffee and tea and eating leftover chocolate cake. "I hope you saved me some of that," she said. "I'm starving for chocolate."

Tyler had already cut a piece and passed the plate over to her. "Do you think I'd forget you, lassie?"

Amaya flushed and thanked him without answering his question, and poured a cup of coffee.

"How's this party going so far?" Amaya looked first to Linda, then Tyler.

"I think it's going well. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with your ghost," Linda snorted, "but that only seems to add to the excitement of the party. I've acquired another gentleman friend to add to my e-mail list." Linda gave them a lusty look.

"You mean Mr. Lewis. He's a nice looking man. Where is he from?" Amaya wanted to know.

"Austin, Texas. Seems he's in oil and has a passion for mystery books. He told me this was the most exciting

evening he's had in years. He especially liked being the victim. And he says he'll be back very soon for another mystery party. How about that?"

"Wow, wonderful," said Amaya. "Didn't you say Shamus was coming back, too? You had better schedule them for different parties. If you keep this up, you're going to need a secretary just to keep your men separated, Aunt Linda."

Linda blushed and Tyler laughed. "When is Shamus coming back, Linda?" he asked.

"New Year's Eve. He has asked me to be his date for the dance. I hope you don't mind that I said yes."

"Not a problem, Aunt Linda. How long is he staying this time?"

"He said he was going to try to get a reservation for ten days, if you would accept it."

"Good, I really like that old man. Tell him to come and stay as long as he likes."

"Will do, now, I need some computer time. I'll see you in the morning." She rose and left Amaya alone with Tyler.

"You seem to be very close with your aunt. Has it always been that way?"

"Oh, yes. I spent all my summers with my grandparents and after Grandma died, Aunt Linda would pick me up every Sunday afternoon." Amaya got a dreamy look on her face and leaned her head on her fist. "We would go out for dinner and I would spend the night with her, then in the morning, we went for breakfast at the café. Aunt Linda doesn't eat a lot, but she sure does like to socialize. After that, we would go shopping and then back to the café for lunch and more visiting. She knows everyone in town, from the mayor to the plumber. I never came

home without a new dress and a doll or toy. Whatever I wanted.” Amaya sighed. Just remembering those visits with Aunt Linda made her happy and content.

“Let me walk you to your room before you fall asleep on the table,” Tyler teased.

Amaya roused and took the hand he held out for her. *He’s holding my hand again. I like it.* “Tyler, why did you kiss me in Memphis?”

He led her out of the kitchen and to the elevator. “If I remember correctly, lassie, you kissed me.”

“Oh,” she looked up at him through eyes lowered and ready for sleep. “I know, but you know what I mean.”

“Aye, I do. Because you let me,” he stated and kissed her on the forehead and turned her toward her door. “Goodnight, Amaya.”

* * * *

Turning Amaya to her door was the only way he could prevent himself from taking her in his arms and kissing her again. He’d never felt so close to another person before and the thought of letting her go into that room without him was agonizing. If he didn’t get a handle on his feelings, he knew he would either have to leave or marry the girl, if she would have him. He couldn’t stand the thought of being away from her, but being so close, working with her every day and socializing in the evenings was tearing him to shreds. Should he make an advance toward her, or discuss it with her, or...or what? Try to get a handle on it. So far, he had done just that, but it was getting harder and harder as each day passed. He turned on the cold water and stepped into the shower with a groan. A man could get pneumonia showering in cold water day after day, he grumbled.

* * * *

Granddaddy made his usual appearance during the

night and this time, Amaya avoided the scene for as long as she could. It was three thirty in the morning and the noise was enough to wake the ghost, if he had been sleeping. As she walked down the stairs, she saw a group of men and women ahead of her. "Is everything alright?" she asked.

Several turned and one man spoke. "Jim here saw your grandfather in the hall and watched him walk through the wall. We thought we might find a drink and investigate."

Having a party at three thirty in the morning was not in her plans, but she said as nicely as she could. "There's nothing to investigate, gentlemen, but come down and we'll have a drink. You see, if Jim thought he saw a ghost, he's gone now. It will do you no good to search for him. Did anyone else see him?"

They all shook their heads.

She poured the brandy and sat on a stool. "I don't believe we have a ghost, but of the few that claim they have seen him, according to each of them, he came, he went, and that was the end of it. He won't be hanging around here waiting for you to uncover him somewhere, that is, if we had a ghost, which we don't."

A few comments were made and others wore disappointed looks, but Amaya was able to give them drinks and usher them back to bed saying they needed their rest for the following day and, if by chance there was a ghost, which she did not believe in, he would more than likely appear while they were tucked away in bed.

Many claimed to have seen Granddaddy in the night, but Amaya was sure they had talked themselves into believing it and would surely spread the word once they were home. Well, if that was what it took to get more reservations, she was happy to have them talk themselves into seeing an apparition, but after several nights of being

awakened by ghost hunting guests, when the last guest had departed, Amaya was exhausted.

* * * *

One day for the staff to rest, then preparations had to be made for the singles party and dinner dance Tyler had squeezed in between games. This was to be an interesting party. Guests were arriving from Australia, Tibet, England and Ireland, as well as China and the United States. Never before had they had so many countries represented and Amaya thought if this kept up, she could hold the Miss Universe pageant right here at Amaya's Keep. Tyler and Linda laughed heartily when she told them as much. The good thing was no children were expected so Debbie would be free to assist with the guests while William helped in the kitchen. Heather could remain in the nursery on the chance that Brandon woke. From what Amaya could see Debbie was spending her evenings with Brandon and William. They seemed to be getting very close and she wouldn't be surprised if another wedding was announced soon.

Tony was healing nicely and back in the stables full-time, which left Ian to spend most of his days with Heather. They had gotten their marriage license and were now just waiting for the wedding and the baby. Heather's mother would be arriving in less than three weeks and would be staying until after the birth of her first grandchild, when Heather would be leaving with Ian to make her home in Scotland.

Linda's family would be coming for Thanksgiving to stay for four days, so the reprieve from the games and parties would be taken up with other guests, but Amaya had vowed to read the journals on her grandfather's family come hell or high water.

The weather was very cold and rain drizzled down

threatening to make snow, which was a rarity in Mississippi. Amaya kept the fireplace in the library aglow and she and Tyler and Linda had moved their nightly coffee and tea to the sofa and chairs in front of the fire.

The singles party was interesting, but not what Amaya had expected. The male to female ratio was pretty even, with a couple extra women. Most were pairing off for hours at a time, getting to know one another and then, she noticed, the pairs would split and move on to another. The Pub was the favorite meeting ground and much soft talking was done over glasses of wine with the women made up their prettiest and the men making an effort to do the correct thing. On the second day after the game, Amaya noticed a more casual atmosphere. Many signed up for the Clue game marathon and those that didn't, played darts or chess. A few visited the stables to see the horses and one couple asked permission to tour the nursery. She was studying botany, she said, and was very interested in seeing how the nursery was run. The gentleman appeared bored, but eager to please as he concentrated on all the questions and answers. They parted shortly after returning to the house and Amaya saw the young man with another woman that he appeared very interested in.

Amaya wasn't sure what she'd expected of this weekend, perhaps a lot of kissing and cuddling and pairing off, but contrary to her belief, the men and women seem to be judging and circling around each other, taking mental notes to be used as follow up later. It was interesting to see so many nationalities blending together. All in all, she thought it had gone quite well, except for Richard Dimes, who had set his hat on Amaya. As tactfully as possible, she steered him to another female companion, but he always returned, charming and handsome and full of the devil.

Before he left with William for the airport to return to Australia, he begged Amaya to marry him and take him away from all that! She laughed with him and promised to call him when she decided she could no longer live without him.

Tyler took this all in stride while fighting off an amorous female who seemed to be here for a three-day relationship. The whole staff laughed over Amaya and Tyler's courtships after the guests had gone home and Amaya said she didn't know how Linda handled all her men friends at her age. Amaya had been exhausted with just the one.

It was now seven days until Halloween and the entire staff was rushing to decorate for the holiday festivities. Each room on the first floor would be decorated with spooks and ghosts, goblins and witches. Spider webs would be draped in the corners and Mr. Sykes and Mr. Anderson, at his son Johnny's suggestion, had gotten together and made a fake cemetery on the backgrounds with witty epitaphs and spooky surroundings. Black cats and bats dotted the graveyard and surrounding trees, along with ghosts and fake spiders and snakes. It was an impressive sight.

The secret passages used for the game were being decorated as a haunted house with horror at every turn, but the guests were warned ahead of time. The little tokens collected for the game would be resting on fake bloody hands and atop skulls and various other body parts. Dracula, Frankenstein, zombies and mummies were placed in strategic locations to startle and frighten. All in all, Amaya was pleased with the décor. It had been an expense, but the guests were paying dearly for the experience.

A scavenger hunt was arranged in the passages connecting the turret rooms for the children with candy

hidden all along the way. Each child had a list of candy bars and treats to collect and after the hunt they would have their trick or treat candy. This was Amaya's idea and she enjoyed that more than any other plan they had made for the holiday. No child should be prevented from getting his or her treats for Halloween, even if they were out in the middle of the woods on an adult vacation.

* * * *

When a car arrived on the eve of Amaya's guests' arrival, she thought perhaps a guest had arrived early, but when Niles announced her parents, she was delighted. She jumped with joy and enfolded her mother in her arms. "When did you get back?" she cried. "Oh, Daddy, how I have missed you both," and she moved to hug him fiercely.

Amaya continued to babble on until Helen stopped her with a hand held up in front of her. "Slow down, dear, we'll tell you all about it. Now, we just got back to New York last night and flew out this morning. We wanted to spend a few days with you before going back to Chicago, if it is not inconvenient for you."

"This is wonderful, come see Aunt Linda. I'm so excited. Of course you can stay as long as you want."

"No parties this week?" her father asked.

"Yes, actually, we are having our first annual Halloween Costume Ball, but you can stay and enjoy it with us." Amaya waved her hand around at the decorations. "Don't you just love it?"

"Yes, indeed. Do you have room for us?" Helen inquired.

"We'll give you the bridal suite," she laughed, "actually, it's the master bedroom suite, but we made it over for a wedding party. You'll love it. Come in and have some coffee or a drink. Niles will see to your luggage."

With that comment, Niles nodded and stepped to the door. Just then, Ian entered and went with Niles to help.

"There's so much I have to tell you," Amaya said as she ushered her parents to The Pub and poured whiskey with a dash of water for her dad and a glass of white wine for her mother.

Linda joined them with hugs all around and they chatted about the sights Jeffery and Helen had seen in London, Paris and Rome. Helen told of Rome and Venice and then the conversation changed to Amaya's happenings. The wedding planned for Heather and Ian was a main topic of conversation, as was Debbie and William's dating regularly. Antics were told of events of the many parties they'd hosted since they'd opened the hotel. When the conversation got around to the farm, Amaya was very interested in the progress.

Helen said she would be ready to hire someone to run the farm for abused and neglected children and women soon after the first of the year. Again she asked Amaya if she had any suggestions and invited her to tour the site before they returned to Chicago. Amaya said she would be delighted and they made plans for the day after her Halloween guests departed. Tyler and Linda were also invited and Amaya suggested they take Debbie, Brandon and William. Helen nodded and didn't question her. She was tired from the long exciting trip and wanted to freshen up, so Amaya had Melinda show them to their room and ordered them to rest until dinner. Essie was dispatched to unpack for them and see to any needs they might have. "Love you, Mom, Dad. I'm so glad you're here."

Linda and Amaya remained in the pub. "Can you come up with costumes for Mom and Dad, Aunt Linda?"

"I think so. I'll talk to Heather and Mrs. Anderson this

afternoon about ideas and go into town for fabric. I think between us, we can make something. You know, Mrs. Anderson is very talented with the needle. She helped me make my costume and she did Brandon's."

"Great. Now that's settled, I want to talk to you about something."

"You look intrigued, Amaya. What's on your mind?"

"What do you think about offering the running of the farm to Debbie and William?"

"Hum. I think she can handle it. She is very good with Brandon and she mothers little Heather. I think she's a wise choice. I don't know if William will want to leave though."

"I think William will go wherever Debbie goes. Just between you and me, I think we'll have another wedding announcement soon." Amaya smiled dreamily. "Want to make a bet. Winner gets a quarter and a cola?"

"I think that's one bet I'm sure to lose." She laughed heartily. "Amaya, I am the princess of romance, not you. How do you know they're not just having a fling?"

"William devotes too much time to Brandon. If he were only interested in Debbie, he wouldn't take such pains to be with the boy."

"You're right about that, but being with the boy, as you say, is no hardship for William. They spent the night at my house while you were gone and he's truly fond of Brandon."

"I know. I guess I inherited some of your romantic nature to have noticed the romance budding so soon."

Linda sipped her drink and wiped a drop away from the table with her napkin. "Now I have something to talk to you about."

"Okay, shoot." Amaya nibbled on a peanut and waited.

"I received an e-mail from my friend, Bertha, in

Pontotoc. You remember her, don't you?"

"Lives down the street and runs the flower shop, doesn't she?"

"Yes, that's her. We've been friends for years and years. Anyway, her neighbor's daughter got herself beat up by her husband in Atlanta and came home to her mother, pregnant. Bertha wondered if you could help her."

"Well, knowing you, Aunt Linda, you already have plans. What are they?" Amaya grinned and took her aunt's hand in hers.

"We need a new nanny. I hesitated to mention it, but if you're going to offer Debbie the farm, we will have to get someone."

"I don't know. Do you know anything about this girl?"

"Not a lot, but Bertha does, and I would trust anything she told me. Bertha wouldn't have asked me if she didn't know this woman was a good Christian girl."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-three. She and her husband ran a motel in Atlanta until he got messed up with some people and starting using drugs. He became very violent."

"Okay, have her come down and talk to me. I don't want any trouble here with that husband, though."

"You don't have to worry about that. He was busted selling drugs and is in jail for the next eight years."

"Good, that's where he belongs. Now, are you sure the girl wasn't involved in any of this?"

"As sure as I can be. Bertha knows her mother well and I've met Jessica a few times. That's her name, Jessica Weldon."

For dinner that evening, Amaya suggested to Laurie that she prepare a buffet dinner and set it out on the sideboard in the dining room. Amaya, her parents and

Linda disappeared into the library with their plates and sat at the long table. They spent several hours catching up and when her parents and Linda retired for the night, Amaya visited her granddaddy, as always, and then went to her room, and when she woke the following morning, a beautiful gardenia lay on her pillow.

* * * *

Amaya was up early in preparation for her party. Waking to the sun shining put her in good spirits and although it was cold, she took the opportunity for a short ride on Cinderella. She hadn't asked Tyler to join her today, but was pleased to see that he was in the stables readying himself to mount Prince Charming. They rode into the chilly dawn and raced down the path. Amaya lost her cap and her hair flew in the wind and whipped in her face. It was exhilarating.

After her ride, she dressed appropriately and waited to greet her guests. The first two families William delivered were young couples. One had a daughter and the other a son and daughter. All were under the age of nine and so cute. Amaya greeted them warmly and they were shown to their rooms. Two couples came together in a rental car and then more and more arrived. The Governor was the last to arrive with his family. He was becoming a regular here and Amaya was pleased. Amaya recruited her parents to help entertain. Helen was in charge of guided tours and visiting with as many as possible and Jeffery was put in charge of the Clue Game marathon.

Tyler showed up, as usual, in his red plaid kilt and sat in The Pub telling scary stories as the bagpipers wafted out a mournful tune in the ballroom. Many compliments were received on the decorations and the children waited impatiently for the scavenger hunt. This was the first time

Amaya's parents had attended a party and they were enthralled with the excitement of it. Her mother beamed as she visited Governor Torbou and his wife and sipped sherry with a group of young people. The game was the most popular topic of conversation and all were vying for the coveted Amaya's Keep ring. The costume ball came in a close second as everyone discussed what they would be wearing.

Linda was busy with an older gentleman, who seemed to be entranced by her. Amaya only smiled. Linda wouldn't neglect her duties to flirt, but with her parents picking up the slack, she chose a few moments to enjoy the company of the gentleman from Nebraska.

The game the following day was hilarious. People were running and screaming, laughing and hollering. Most thought it was the best haunted house they had ever been in. Of course, it required a lot of effort. The whole stable staff and gardener's son were hidden in the passages dropping swords and spiders. Bats flew overhead by way of a mechanical contrivance developed by Ian, the recent engineer houseguest. Moans and groans were heard and chains rattled, but the biggest delight was when Granddaddy made his appearance and walked the entire length of the hall and disappeared in the wall. He repeated his antics until every participant had seen him.

The dance began with *The Monster Mash* and escalated from there. Brenda Bilking was delighted to receive a kiss from the kneeling Count Dracula, who placed the Amaya's Keep ring on her finger.

By the time the last guest had left, Amaya was in heaven. "This was the best party we've ever had," she said to her mother.

"Amaya, you are a genius. I've never had so much fun,

even in London and Paris. This party was fabulous. How do you think all this up?"

She didn't want to tell her mother that she'd been chatting with Granddaddy nightly, so she just smiled and hugged her mother. "I dreamed the idea," she said, "and then had a lot of help from my staff. Did you really like it?"

"Yes, yes. Is it going to be profitable?"

"It already is. You cannot imagine how much money people will pay for a diversion, and I love making their fantasies come true."

"I'm so happy for you, dear. Your father kept me up half the night raving about the game and party."

"That's the nicest thing you could say. I cannot imagine going back to the impersonal life I had before."

"Do you mean that, Amaya? Are you going to stay on and make this your home?"

Amaya didn't realize she was going to say that. She'd never even admitted to herself that she never wanted to leave. But apparently, subconsciously, she knew it all along. "Yes, Mom, I think I will. I love it here."

* * * *

Amaya went to bed happy that night and when she woke the following morning, a whole bouquet of assorted fall flowers was sitting where her little vase had stood the night before.

The visit to the farm was jolting for Amaya. The worn, faded paint had been redone in a beautiful white with green shutters and door. A large ell had been added with several more rooms and two new bathrooms. The kitchen had been remodeled and a new modern stove and refrigerator had been installed, along with a microwave and convection oven. When her mother and father showed her around and detailed the plans, she was pleased. Her grandfather would

be so happy.

The gardens were tilled and prepared for planting vegetables in the spring. The apple, pear and peach trees were fed and pruned. They would raise a lot of their own food with each adult and child having a responsibility. When they were ready, jobs would be found for the women and they would be assisted in moving on with their lives, healthy and happy. The children would be given foster care for as long as needed, or until they turned eighteen. It was a wonderful plan and Amaya was very proud of her parents and told them so.

When she suggested Debbie and William run the farm, Helen was satisfied they would do the job well. Debbie was already making suggestions, while William explored the yards and fields with Brandon at his side. Amaya and her parents still had to talk to Debbie and William to see how they felt about it, and they would do that this evening.

* * * *

After dinner, Amaya summoned Debbie and William to the library. They found Helen and Jeffery and Amaya sitting at the long table and were told to help themselves to refreshments on the sideboard and join them.

Debbie was nervous. She was afraid Amaya was unhappy with her seeing William in her free time and terrified she would lose her home at Amaya's Keep. It had changed her life when she moved into the castle, and Brandon had never been happier.

William reached under the table and squeezed Debbie's hand.

"Debbie, my parents and I took you to the farm today for a reason. We have a proposition for you and William. How do you feel about taking over the running of the farm?"

When Debbie stuttered and stammered, William spoke. "That's an interesting idea. Would you like to tell us a little bit more about it?"

Helen explained they would be house parents and take on the raising of children, shelter and support the abused women that came, and be responsible for the entire running of the farm. "Do you think you can do that, William?"

William was now speechless. He sat silently with thoughts running through his head.

When Debbie regained her voice she asked, "Do you think I can do that, Miss Amaya?"

"I know you can, Debbie. You love children, you're an excellent cook and you have a lot of qualities you don't realize. You've given Heather more than you know with your support and encouragement. You'll also have help if you need it, depending on how many occupants are in the house. You will have a counselor at your disposal for the women and children and any questions. A visiting nurse and social worker will be around weekly and will also be available by phone."

Debbie nodded with each point Amaya brought up and then William spoke. "And what would be my responsibilities?"

Jeffery answered this question. "You will be assisting Debbie with the children as their foster father. You'll also run the farm, grow your own vegetables and harvest fruit from the trees and vines. You'll maintain the property and house, and most importantly, you'll love the children and show the women that not all men are brutal. You will be a role model, as well as a manager. You will also have the counselor available to you and a security guard in place to prevent intrusion by angered husbands and parents. What do you think?"

William listened intently, then answered Jeffery. "First of all, you need to know I have asked Debbie to be my wife. We were planning to tell you soon anyway. Secondly, I think I can do that, and I know Debbie can." He looked over at her, "She's a wonderful woman and as full of love and understanding as anyone I've ever met. She reminds me of my mom."

Congratulations were passed around the table and Helen told the couple to think it over for a day or two before they gave her an answer. "Also, if you take the positions, it would be nice if you married before April first, the official opening day for the farm."

William shook hands all around and Debbie said how she appreciated the faith they all had in her and they left the room hand in hand.

Chapter 16

It was two days after the visit to the farm and Jeffery and Helen were preparing to leave when William and Debbie asked to speak with them.

Sitting at the table in the library, William said, "Mr. and Mrs. Mayberry, Debbie and I have talked it over, and with Miss Amaya's permission, we'd like to accept your offer. You do understand that I have a contract here until March first. Is that convenient for you?"

Jeffery shook hands with William and Debbie. "We're happy to have you. The farm won't be opening until April. I think that will give you sufficient time to honor your obligation here and prepare for the opening. Helen?"

"Yes, of course. Welcome." She shook hands with William and gave Debbie a brief hug. "You will both be required to take physical and psychological examinations, but I'm sure you'll pass with flying colors. I'll be sending the required paperwork and you can arrange your appointments at your convenience. Thank you both, and please invite us to the wedding. We would love to come."

William and Debbie each said thank you and Amaya's parents went back to their packing.

Amaya and Linda saw Helen and Jeffery off at the door after reminding them they were expected for Thanksgiving

dinner.

* * * *

With her parents gone and the next party four days away, Amaya decided that today would be a perfect time to read the journals. Informing the staff she would be in her room, she took lunch on a tray and got in the elevator with all the journals left in the library. She started reading, and as she did, she found a reference to Tyler's family as far back as the late seventeen hundreds. *So that was how they were related.* Cousins by a marriage of her distant relation to his. She read more about the castle the family lived in and how it had been passed down to the eldest son for generation after generation. By dinnertime, she had gotten to the fourth journal and discovered the birth of her great grandfather. Granddaddy's father.

She took a break and went downstairs for dinner and some human contact before returning to her room to continue her heritage lesson.

"What have you been doing all day, Amaya? We missed you around here."

"Oh, hi, Tyler. I've been reading the family journals. Fascinating stuff. Lots of begets."

Tyler laughed and offered her a glass of wine. "Want to take a break, or are you rushing back?"

"A break would be nice. Are you up for a game of cribbage?"

I certainly am."

"Better yet, why don't you come up and read with me? I've already found our connection through some very great, great, great-aunts and uncles."

"I would like that, but are you sure you want to share this with me?"

"I can't think of anyone I would rather share it with.

Come on, and bring the wine.”

When they got to Amaya's sitting room, Tyler looked around for evidence of her day of reading, and found none. She motioned him into her bedroom, where the journals were strewn all over her bed. “Looks cozy,” he said. “So this is what you've been doing all day. Lying around, reading in bed.”

“It's as good a place as any. Come on.” She smoothed the spread, moved the journals aside and patted the bed for him to sit.

Tyler hesitated, then he rounded the bed and sat against the pillow opposite her.

They took turns reading to each other. Amaya enjoyed listening to Tyler's voice as he again described the castle and grounds and the family that lived in it. The birth of her great, great-grandfather was a highly celebrated occasion, him being the firstborn, and Tyler went on to read of three more sons and four daughters.

“Oh my, can you imagine having eight children? I said I wanted a big family, but to think of being pregnant for eight years. That's unbelievable.”

“My parent's had seven of us and I never heard Ma complain. I suppose it depends on how you feel about it.”

“There is that, too. Your mother certainly seemed happy enough when she was here and she has kept her figure and beauty. After all, giving birth is a normal, natural process. Hum! Well, go on, Tyler.”

He finished the first half of the journal where it told about the children growing up and how two of the boys had died at an early age from some unknown disease. When his voice tired, he handed the journal to Amaya and poured more wine. “Your turn to read. I'll just stay here quietly and listen. It is an interesting read, isn't it?”

"I think so. I wonder why Granddaddy never told my mom and me about all this."

Tyler nudged her on the shoulder. "Perhaps if you read, we'll find out."

She punched him lightly and said, "Okay, okay, I'm reading."

Great-granddaddy, Bernard Bryan Xavier Anthony MacTavish, was the eldest son, and as such was expected to take a bride and become Laird of the land when his father passed away. Bernard was a very intelligent man, but he was also strong-willed and independent. He'd been chastised many times for working in the fields or puttering in the barns or out riding when he was expected to attend a social function. As the eldest son, it was his obligation to learn the business of running the castle and all the land and properties, but Bernard wasn't in the least interested.

The break from his family had occurred on Bernard's twenty-fifth birthday, when he was expected to become engaged to a young girl his father had selected for him as a suitable wife, and raise a son to carry on the MacTavish name.

Bernard would have none of it. He was in love with the gardener's daughter and no amount of persuading would change his mind. She was a lovely, English born girl he'd known most of his life, but his father said she was beneath him in class, and he wouldn't allow the marriage.

Bernard pleaded with his father to allow him to marry the girl, but his father was stubborn. The girl he'd chosen for his son was of the proper breeding, and Bernard would marry her, or be disowned.

"Tyler, do you believe that! How could he be so cruel? Poor Great-granddaddy."

"Tis an interesting story, Amaya. Shall I continue?"

"No. I want a few minutes to absorb this. Why don't we find some coffee and dessert?"

"If it's tea you're offering, I say yes."

"Done!" Amaya climbed off the bed and headed for the door. Tyler caught up with her and took her hand. "Let's walk the stairs. We have been sitting for a while."

Tyler started some fresh coffee and Amaya put the pot on to boil for tea. They found brownies and chocolate ice cream and were indulging themselves when Linda and Niles came in.

"Hi, please join us," said Amaya. "Niles, I hope you're planning to take a day off now that we have a couple days to rest."

"I hadn't thought about it," he replied. "But perhaps I will, after the next party."

"Very well, Niles, but we can manage without you for a day or two, not that it will be easy." She winked at him and placed her hand over his. "You are invaluable to us, but a rest would do you good. You don't get out often enough."

Niles nodded, and Amaya and Tyler excused themselves. "We have work to do. See you both tomorrow."

Back in her room, Amaya listened while Tyler read. This journal was written by Bernard and it told how he'd eloped with the gardener's daughter and brought his bride to America. He'd sold some of his possessions and managed to get to Mississippi and put some money down on a farm, prepared to raise cotton. His wife, Margaret, was so angry with his family for disallowing the marriage, she would not have them spoken of in her home.

"So that's why we didn't know. My great-grandma wouldn't allow it. But Bernard wrote it all down for future generations. Isn't this exciting, Tyler?"

“Yes indeed, very interesting.”

“How do you feel about arranged marriages? Wasn’t that cruel of Bernard’s father?”

“It was the custom of the times, but no way for a man or woman to have to live.” He said that sincerely.

That prompted Amaya to tell him how sweet she thought he was and leaned over to kiss his cheek.

At which point, he instantly put his hand behind her head and pulled her closer for a deep, hard kiss. As quickly as he began, Tyler pulled away and jumped off the bed. “I can’t stand this anymore!”

Amaya looked shocked and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Tyler. You don’t have to read with me.”

Tyler’s face turned red and his eyes narrowed as a furrow dipped between them. He stood with his feet apart and pushed the curls off his face. “I love reading with you, Amaya. I love that you have more money than you’ll ever need, yet you shop at discount stores and wear faded jeans and t-shirts when you could be dressed in designer silks by the most renowned fashion designers.” He was on a roll now and couldn’t stop. “I love the way you bring people into the castle and make jobs for them and how you treat your staff with respect and dignity. I love watching you ride down the banisters and dance through the halls. I love you, Amaya! I just can’t stand living in this castle and spending every day loving you like I do and not having you.” Tyler turned away in embarrassment and his shoulders slouched. “What am I to do, Amaya?”

Amaya had been shocked, but by the time Tyler finished his speech, she was smiling. She pushed the journals off the bed and fluffed the pillows. “Why don’t you come here and show me how much you love me, Tyler?” She patted the bed and began pulling her sweatshirt over her

head.

“Don’t tease me, Amaya. I can’t handle any more of it.”

She rose on her knees and was unfastening her jeans. “I’m not teasing you, Tyler. Just wondering what took you so long. I’ve loved you from the start. How could you not know that?”

Tyler watched her undress and stood firmly where he was. “I’m not good enough for you, Amaya. I will never have the wealth you do.”

Amaya stopped undressing with her jeans hugging her ankles, and scowled at Tyler. “How dare you say that about the man I love! And how dare you bring money into this conversation. You’re as bad as Bernard’s father.” She took a deep breath and continued. “I love the way you respect me and the way you tease me. I love the way you look after everyone in the castle. I love the way you interact with your family and love them so much. I love what you did for Granddaddy and how you made me feel capable when I was so scared and insecure. I love the way you hold my hand and kiss my forehead or cheek and that you call me lassie. Now get yourself over here and make love to me, or are you planning to make me wait until after our wedding?” Having exhausted her anger and frustration, she smiled shyly at Tyler and whispered. “Am I taking too much for granted?”

Tyler walked to the bed and pulled the jeans off Amaya’s ankles. “You sure make a pretty picture with your pants falling down.” He took her in his arms and lost all sense of reason and sanity. Amaya groaned and fell back on the bed, naked except for her skimpy panties, and held her arms out to him.

Tyler undressed quickly and Amaya was finally able to

feel those golden red curls dusting his chest. Their lovemaking would have been quick and passionate, but it was too good for that. Each time one peaked, they backed off to prolong the experience.

Amaya inspected every inch of Tyler, running her hands over his back, down his legs and she even cupped the family jewels while tasting his erection, which left Tyler shuddering and so close to release that he had to stop her. He plundered Amaya's mouth and ran his tongue over her neck and into the valley between her breasts before he took one into his mouth to suckle. Amaya moaned and raked her nails down his back. He lowered his lips to her stomach, then her legs and when he parted her, his mouth found the sweet taste of honey he had craved for so long. Amaya gasped as she savored the feel of him there, and when she shuddered, he moved inside her and stroked until they were both seeing the planets in the heavens as they flew higher and higher in ecstasy.

Tyler rolled over but held Amaya close, so as not to leave her body. "And how many children did you say you would be wanting, lassie?"

Amaya caressed his cheek with light shinning from her eyes and a smile of contentment on her mouth. Her face was flushed and little beads of perspiration dotted her forehead. "Oh, scads," she answered dreamily.

"Then I had better get a ring on your finger. I come from *verra* fertile stock and I would not want you saying your vows with a rounded belly."

Amaya cuffed him on the shoulder and laughed. "Confident, aren't you?"

Tyler's eyes crinkled and his teeth shined through his smile. "Justifiably so. I do have six brothers and sisters. So, when shall we say our vows?"

Amaya pulled away and sat up, wiping her forehead with the sheet. "You are serious, aren't you?"

"Aye," he said.

Without a moment's hesitation, she said, "Thanksgiving. All my family will be here for the holiday. Can you get yours here in time?"

"I'll do my best," he murmured, as he took her mouth with his and began making love to her again. This time, quickly and ravenously.

* * * *

When Amaya woke, it was still dark outside but the light in her room continued to glow, as they hadn't taken the time to turn it off. She found Tyler leaning over her, elbow on the bed, resting his chin on his fist. "I love being with you, lassie. Why did we wait so long?"

"You're a slave driver, and I just didn't have time," she teased. "But you can bet I'll make time from now on."

The sun rose on this cold November day and lightened the sky as they lay talking about their future and pausing occasionally to make love again. It was eight in the morning before Amaya slipped out of bed as Tyler dozed. She showered and dressed and woke him with a kiss on his hairy chest. "You'd better go now. I'm not sure I want the entire castle knowing we slept together."

"I think not. I'm going to stand at the top of the stairs and shout down that I have been thoroughly made love to and committed to marriage, all in the space of a few hours." His eyes twinkled and he grinned wickedly at her.

She, on the other hand, couldn't fault him. She wanted to shout it from the rooftops and announce it via satellite television to the world. She strode out of the room, planted herself at the top of the stairs and yelled, "Listen up, everyone. I'm to be married to Tyler at Thanksgiving."

Niles smiled broadly and climbed the stairs to meet Amaya, just as Tyler had managed to pull on his pants and shirt and join her. He stood in his bare feet as Niles shook Tyler's hand and uncharacteristically hugged Amaya. "Congratulations, you make a perfect match," he said, and with that, Niles went back down the stairs. Tyler just stood shaking his head. When he regained his senses, he smiled and hugged Amaya close and held her there while the rest of the staff came running to congratulate them.

Linda stood back until everyone had left, then hugged her niece and Tyler. "It's about time," was all she said.

When Ian came in from the stables and heard the news, he patted his brother on the back and hugged him. "You better call Ma and Da. They'll want to know."

They ate breakfast amid all the excitement and for the first time in a while, Amaya feasted on bacon and eggs, hash browns and biscuits. She was ravenous! When they finished, she told Tyler, "You better call your parents to see if they can come and I'll tell mine."

Tyler nodded and kissed Amaya thoroughly before heading to the library.

Within twenty minutes, Amaya was running into the library just as Tyler was coming out. She ran into his arms and he hugged her fiercely. "They're all coming. Ma said she would see to it."

"My parents are ecstatic and can't wait. I told them the twenty-sixth. The day after Thanksgiving."

Tyler kissed her as though he couldn't get enough, until Niles interrupted them.

"Ahum." He made the noise in his throat to get their attention. "There is a young lady here to see you, Miss Amaya."

Amaya wasn't expecting anyone, but said, "Show her

into my office, Niles.” She shrugged her shoulders at Tyler, gave him a quick kiss and went in search of her visitor.

The young woman looked tired and had dark circles under her eyes. She was too thin and looked sad or broken. She introduced herself as Jessica Parker, and said she was here to apply for the position of nanny. Amaya was shocked. She had forgotten all about her. She gathered her thoughts and invited Jessica to her sitting room. After asking Niles to summon Tyler, Heather, Linda, Debbie and Brandon to her sitting room, she requested he see Laurie about refreshments.

When all were gathered drinking coffee or tea and eating the cookies Laurie had provided, Amaya gathered Brandon onto her lap and began the interview. She explained that Debbie had taken over the position temporarily as she would be leaving for a new position in March. She introduced Brandon to Jessica and after a few minutes of interaction, she sent him to the kitchen to visit Laurie.

Tyler rose and took Brandon’s hand. “You won’t be needing me for this, Amaya. I’ll just take Brandon to the stables for a ride.”

She smiled and he kissed her lightly on the cheek and left the room.

Amaya wanted Tyler to feel included in the decisions of running Amaya’s Keep, but he was self-confident enough not to need to be there. He trusted her judgment, and it was enough that she’d included him. He knew she would never hold it over his head that she owned the castle, but they would work as partners, and that was enough for him.

“I wanted you to meet Brandon, Jessica, because he lives here in the castle and is Debbie’s son. You will be responsible for his care, as well as the care of our guest’s

children. How do you feel about that?"

"Miss Amaya, I love children. I like to see the sparkle in their eyes when they discover something new or the pride when they learn a new accomplishment. I like to sing them to sleep and read stories, and hold them when they're sad." Jessica blushed a beet red. "Excuse me, please. I didn't mean to go on so. You see, I'm the oldest with three little sisters. They're growing up now, but I've always cared for them while my mother worked. I assure you I can do the job, happily."

Amaya was pleased with Jessica's answer but she still had to go into the abuse and drug use of her husband. "I understand you've had a pretty rough time for a while. Would you care to tell me about it?"

Jessica told the story about her husband. He'd been such a nice man. They had dated all through high school and married the same month they graduated. "I don't know what came over him. I suppose it started when we moved to Atlanta and took over the motel. Larry was a nice guy, but the pressure of running the business became too much for him. We hadn't been there long before he started going out at night, and wouldn't come back until morning. He wouldn't talk to me about it. I was working myself sick trying to do it all. When I found a bag of powder in his dresser drawer, I questioned him about it. He denied it, but I suspected it was cocaine. He was going through money like water. One Sunday morning, I was on my way to church when I became sick to my stomach and returned home. I found him in the bathroom snorting the powder. When I confronted him, he became violent and beat me up." Jessica sniffed and wiped at her eyes, then took a deep breath.

Amaya knew this was hard for Jessica, but if she was to

trust her with children, she had to know.

"Anyway," Jessica said, after taking a drink of her tea, "I managed to get to the hospital after he stormed out. They taped up my ribs and put a few stitches over my eye. They cleaned up the scrapes and scratches, and then told me I was pregnant." Jessica took another deep breath and a sip of tea. "I never went back. I called my mother and she arranged for a flight back home. My pastor picked me up at the hospital and took me to the airport. The next day, Larry was arrested for selling drugs and the following week, he was sentenced to eight years in prison. I filed for divorce the day after I got back home."

Jessica was finished. There was nothing more she could say, and if being married to Larry kept her from getting this job, there was nothing she could do about it.

Amaya called for Ian and asked him to take Jessica out to the stables to visit with Brandon. She wanted to discuss the interview with Debbie, Heather and Linda.

The four women discussed the situation and, Linda said, "Jessica was a decent woman who had some bad luck" and voted to hire her. Debbie felt she could trust her with Brandon. She'd been impressed when she talked about caring for children, and could see the hurt in her eyes at the abuse her husband had inflicted on her. Heather added that she knew what it was like to be pregnant without a husband to support her, and coming to Amaya's Keep had been her salvation. She liked Jessica and felt she could be trusted. That left Amaya to make the final decision. She excused herself and went in search of Tyler. She found him in the stables watching Jessica teach Brandon how to skip. He had a smile on his face, and when Amaya looked at him questioningly, he put his arm around her waist and hugged her close. "Aye, she will do fine, lassie."

Inviting Jessica back into the house, she took her to her office. "Will you fill these out, please?" she asked, as she handed the papers to her.

Jessica took the papers and looked at Amaya. Amaya smiled and said, "Oh, by the way, you're hired. How soon can you move in?"

Jessica cried. That was the only thing she could do. She sat on the chair with her hands over her face and sobbed. Amaya knelt before her and took the girl in her arms. "It will be all right now, Jessica. We will care for you."

Wiping her eyes on the tissues Amaya offered and sipping the tea she'd ordered for the girl, Jessica spoke. "I am so sorry. I just need this job so bad. Mom has her hands full with my sisters and I need to pay my divorce lawyer and save some money to pay for the baby. Please, forgive me. I promise not to let that interfere with my duties here. It's just been so hard to take."

"I understand that, Jessica, and we will help you all we can. You'll be getting health insurance that will pay for your care and my mother is an attorney. I'm sure she can help you with the divorce. If you don't have joint assets, you can file on your own for under a hundred dollars."

Jessica beamed. "Really, I had no idea." She sobered then and lowered her voice. "I never thought I would need to know."

Amaya patted her hand and asked again, "When can you move in? We have a party in a few days and I could use you for it."

"My mom could bring me after she gets off work tomorrow, if that's okay."

"I take it you don't have a car?"

"No, I borrowed my mom's today. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. Write down directions for me and I'll have

William pick you up tomorrow around, let's say noon."

"I'll be ready." Jessica filled out the paperwork and Amaya took her to the garage to meet William. "William will be picking you up tomorrow to bring you home." She gave Jessica a brief hug and walked her to her car. Before going back inside, she stopped again at the garage. "William, Jessica has had a rough time lately. Take Debbie with you and pick her up in the limo, and make sure there are soft drinks and snacks. Oh, and tell her to let Debbie know if she needs to stop to use a restroom. She's pregnant." Amaya smiled and walked away. That girl needed a little goodness in her life right now and the limo ride would be a good start.

Chapter 17

All smiles, Jessica arrived and fell in love with the nursery on sight. Amaya had forgotten to give her a tour when she'd interviewed her. Amaya had Nina bring her a tray for lunch and left her to get settled in. When she returned a few hours later, she found Jessica with Brandon on her lap, reading him a story, while Debbie and Heather listened attentively. When Brandon fell asleep, she put him in his bed and began unpacking. Debbie and Heather pitched in, and Amaya noticed how few clothes Jessica had.

"Hi, Jessica. Are you getting settled in?"

"Yes, ma'am. These are lovely rooms."

"Thank you. I'd like it if you rested for a while. It has been a busy day for you. Debbie can look after Brandon and if she gets busy, we'll call in William."

"That won't be necessary, I can manage. It's my job."

"I know, but we have a big party coming in the day after tomorrow and there will be five children. William will be helping you with that as well, but I want you rested."

"Very well, thank you, ma'am."

"It's Miss Amaya. I don't care for ma'am. Rest now and you two," she motioned to Debbie and Heather, "get out and leave the girl alone. You can visit another time."

* * * *

The party went well and all the guests left happy. Jessica had proved herself with the children. Amaya received many compliments from the departing guests. Things were settling down well.

Being engaged to Tyler was easy. He went to bed with her each evening and left before the staff was up and about the following morning. Amaya wouldn't have minded him staying, but he felt it wasn't proper to flaunt the fact they were sleeping together.

Niles beamed under his strict English discipline with having another expectant mother to look after. He tried to hide it, but the attention he gave Heather and Jessica was obvious to all the staff. Amaya had always known he was an old softie, but respected his right to try to hide it.

After reading the last two journals, Amaya and Tyler discovered that Bernard had returned to Scotland when his father became gravely ill, and although he wouldn't move back home to accept the title of Laird, he did make peace with his family and was left a great deal of money when his father passed away. Bernard's wife remained angry. She refused to use any of the money, so with the MacTavish business brain, Bernard made investments and watched the money grow and left it to his son, Barney, Amaya's granddaddy.

Barney didn't have a problem with the money, but didn't feel he needed it. He would have liked to take his wife and daughter on trips all over the world, but what Amaya and Helen didn't know, was that Imogene had a nervous problem. Leaving home was torture for her. Just going to a school play or to the grocery store was an ordeal. Barney had always protected her, and only used the money to put his daughter through college, and to help out when

he didn't make enough in the fields. That made sense to Amaya and Helen when they talked on the phone about it. Neither remembered Imogene leaving the house unless it was for a special occasion, like a Christmas play at school. Helen remarked to Amaya that when she graduated from college, she had seen her mother taking medication, but Imogene had insisted it was only aspirin. Helen suspected it was something to calm her nerves.

When Amaya confronted Linda, she said, "Yes, Imogene did have a problem leaving the farm but she did the best she could and she was happy and content. I didn't see any reason to mention it to the two of you. If she'd wanted you to know, she would have told you."

Now the mystery was solved. Barney's journal said he'd gone to Scotland yearly after Imogene passed away. He'd looked up his relatives and when he became ill and decided to build Amaya's Keep, he had already met and admired Tyler. So he brought Tyler to America to help him build his dream for his granddaughter.

Amaya asked Tyler to call a staff meeting, and when all were gathered in the library, Tyler and Amaya stood holding hands at the end of the table. "We have an announcement to make," Amaya said. "First of all, we want to thank you all for being such extraordinary employees. You've served me well. Now Tyler and I are to be married on November twenty-sixth, the day after Thanksgiving." Amaya took a deep breath before continuing. "As you all know, my year at Amaya's Keep will end on March first and Tyler and I have had to decide if we want to remain here or move to Scotland."

She took a sip of water and saw the long faces, the frowns and heard the moans. "So," she said, "we have decided...to stay."

Cheers went up around the table and congratulations were again offered on the engagement. Finally, Tyler raised a hand for silence.

"Amaya and I would like it if you would all stay on with us. The success of Amaya's Keep Hotel has been due to the hard work and dedication of each and every one of you. There will be a decent raise for you all on the anniversary of your employment and we look forward to many, many more parties and continued success."

Amaya quieted them and again began to speak. "We've had a few days to rest, but now we have two weddings and Thanksgiving dinner this month. Heather and Ian will be married on the fifteenth, and the entire MacTavish family will be back for their wedding and will be staying on until after our wedding." She smiled sweetly at Tyler. When several of the staff nodded, Amaya went on. "Aunt Linda has invited her sons and their families for Thanksgiving and my parents will be here as well. Do any of you have a problem with having so many houseguests?"

Many comments were made, but they were all favorable.

"Good! Tyler's parents have gone to a lot of trouble to bring their entire family here for Ian and Tyler's weddings. The boys in school will be cramming to take their exams early in order to leave, so I want you all to be extra kind and helpful. After all," she smiled at the group, "these people are to be my in-laws."

A round of applause was started by Niles and the entire group joined in. "Don't you worry, Miss Amaya, we'll take good care of your family." This came from Melinda, but was reaffirmed by all.

* * * *

Heather's mother, Margaret Peterson, arrived at the

castle the following day and was settled in a room. She was a very nice woman who insisted she be helpful while she was there. Amaya gave her free reign to do whatever she wanted, and on the following morning, Margaret was in the kitchen baking a cake and chatting happily with her sister.

William, Tyler and Ian drove Tyler's family from the airport. The castle bustled with activity and Amaya was in her glory.

She had tea alone in her sitting room with Mrs. MacGregor.

"I wanted some time for us to get better acquainted," she said when they were settled and had poured their tea.

Mrs. MacGregor leaned over the table and took Amaya's hand. "You've nothing to worry about. I find you to be a fine girl and if my son loves you, so will we."

Amaya smiled and rose to hug her future mother-in-law. "I love him so very much, Mrs. MacGregor. I'll take good care of him and make him happy, I promise."

"I'm certain of that. I saw the love in your eyes when I was here before, as well as in my son's."

That was all it took. Amaya was approved of and that pleased her.

Granddaddy no longer left flowers during the night. Amaya supposed it was because Tyler was in her bed, but when she went to her sitting room in the evening, she always found a flower or petal or bouquet. Tyler was as pleased as Amaya and he had gotten in the habit of chatting with Barney on a regular basis. It was nice to have his old friend around to talk to.

Linda was excited about Amaya's wedding. "Why, if I were thirty years younger, I would have been sitting on Tyler's doorstep long before you got the notion. I might have even given up the idea of never getting married again

to have him.”

Amaya laughed with Linda and said she believed if Linda had been thirty years younger, Amaya wouldn't have stood a chance of getting Tyler from her.

“There's something I need to talk to you about, Aunt Linda.”

“What is it, Amaya? Is something wrong?”

“No, something is right. I would like to ask you to be my matron of honor at my wedding.”

“My dear Amaya, I would be honored.” Linda gasped and tears filled her eyes as she enfolded her great-niece into her bosom.

As Linda wiped at her tears with the back of her hand, Amaya said, “There is something else. Tyler and I would like it if you would stay on at the castle after our year is up. Would you consider moving in here permanently? We want you around for us and our children.”

The tears fell freely now, and for the first time in her life, Linda was speechless. Amaya led her to a chair. “I didn't mean to upset you. We just love you so much.”

Linda sniffled and snorted and kissed Amaya on her cheek and held her hands tightly. “Thank you. I can't imagine going back to that empty house again. You have given me so much to live for. A job, a future. All the money Barney left me couldn't make me as happy as staying here at Amaya's Keep.”

“Then it's settled. You can keep your house or sell it, but you're home now.”

* * * *

Tyler and Amaya were just getting in bed when the lights went out. They both put on robes and stumbled down the stairs to see what was happening. Niles found them and handed a flashlight to Tyler. “Sir, Miss Amaya,

our rain has turned to ice and broken the lines. The power is out and the battery powered radio says we're in for a very bad night."

"Amaya, find a seat and wait for me. We have an emergency generator in the basement. Let me get it started and we'll go from there."

Amaya sat and waited in the dark. Several staff members had appeared with flashlights and candles and she told them to sit down with her until Tyler got back.

When the lights came on, dimmed, and brightened again, she smiled. "See, Tyler is fixing it. Let's go in the kitchen and see what the radio says."

Laurie was up making coffee and Mrs. MacGregor made a tray of sandwiches. The radio station's weatherman reported a cold front was coming through and ice was covering the streets. The ice had also broken power and telephone lines all over the county. Residents were advised against attempting any travel, as the roads were dangerous and were only going to get worse as the storm continued to bring ice.

Amaya was used to storms in Chicago, but they had snowplows and salt trucks to melt the ice, bringing travel back to the streets within hours. The South rarely had snow, much less a storm of this caliber. At least they had the generator. That would provide heat and food.

Mr. Sykes came in and informed Amaya he had the generators going in the stables and bunkhouse and he'd been by to check on the Andersons. They, too, had the generator going and were fine, but sent word to summon them if they were needed.

"It looks like everything is under control here. Anyone that wants to go back to bed, feel free to do so," announced Tyler. "In the meantime, I'll be here in the kitchen for a

while if any of you need anything.”

Ian paced the floor nervously. “What about the wedding, Tyler? Will we have to postpone it?”

Tyler pushed back his curls. “We’ll just have to wait and see, brother. It depends on whether the minister can get out here to perform the ceremony. A day or two won’t make much difference at this point.”

“Aye, I suppose not.” He poured a cup of tea and stood sentry duty with Tyler.

By five in the morning, the rain had stopped and Tyler and Ian went upstairs. It had been a long night and they were in for an even longer day. The cold wasn’t expected to ease up for at least forty-eight hours and it was reported the streets remained impassable. All schools were closed and everyone was advised to stay home from work. The hospital would run with a skeleton crew and all non-emergency surgeries were cancelled.

Linda was just coming downstairs. “This is the worst storm I’ve ever seen, and I’ve lived here all my life,” she said to Tyler and Ian. “Is everything under control here?”

“For now, it is. If the rain stays away, it should be over in a couple days. We have plenty of food and supplies, so we’ll be all right. I do worry about the other people though. This could be devastating for some of the families in the community.”

“It surely will, but there’s nothing we can do to help right now, except pray. I’m going to make coffee and start some food. I have a feeling the kitchen will be full today.”

“Thank you, Linda. We’re just going to catch a couple hours sleep. Call us if you need anything.”

Linda found Tyler’s parents in the kitchen and a fresh pot of coffee and hot water for tea. Mrs. MacGregor was busy making scones and listening to the radio.

"The streets are still impassable," said Mr. MacGregor. "It looks like young Ian will be postponing his wedding for a day or two."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. and Mrs. MacGregor, but it can't be helped. If the minister can't get here, there is nothing we can do except make the best of it."

Mrs. MacGregor rolled out the dough. "It will be fine. The children can wait a day or two."

By the time the scones were done, Mr. Sykes and his men had come into the kitchen for coffee and any news. People liked to gather together when there was an emergency and within minutes, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson and Johnny came in. The table was filled with people by the time Amaya came downstairs. She pulled a stool up to the corner of the table and drank her coffee.

Laurie was scrambling eggs and Margaret had bacon, sausage, grits and hash browns cooked. Everyone filled their plates from the stove and found a place to eat. The Anderson's left, and one by one, the stable hands were out the door to tend to the horses. The yard and walks were sheets of ice and moving across it was next to impossible. A few tumbled to the ground, but no one was injured.

Brandon begged to go out to play, but Jessica found ways to entertain him in the nursery. Heather was trying to be brave about the postponement of her wedding.

By ten, Ian and Tyler were down, and most of the staff had wandered out to tend to their chores.

The only ones left in the kitchen were Laurie and her girls, Mr. and Mrs. MacGregor, Linda, Amaya, Tyler and Ian.

When Heather asked Ian to get her a glass of orange juice and he moved away from the table, she leaned over to whisper in Amaya's ear.

"Tyler, would you, Ian and Mr. MacGregor please go check on the stables? I'm really worried about the horses."

Tyler started to protest when he saw the look on Amaya's face, so he gathered his brother and father and led them out the door.

"Okay, everyone, listen up. Heather's water has broken. I want you to get her to bed, Margaret, and you go with her, Laurie. I have to find a way to get a doctor out here." She leaned down to Heather. "Now don't you worry, Heather, I will get you a doctor and it will be alright. I want you to concentrate on what you have to do now. Are you having contractions?"

"No, not yet. Just a little ache in my lower back. Can you send Debbie up? She promised to be with me, and Ian?"

"Good. Fine. You go on upstairs. I'll be up to check on you in a few minutes and I'll send Debbie up. When you're cleaned up and settled, I'll send Ian."

With Heather out of the way, Amaya grabbed a jacket. "I'm going to get Tyler. We have to find a way to get a doctor out here."

"Now, Amaya," said Linda, "calm down. First babies take a while. We'll get help. You get Tyler and Ian and ya'll come up to my computer. I have cable internet, and last I checked it was still working. I'll take care of it."

Amaya rushed to the door and met the men coming in. "Oh, Tyler, Heather's water broke. We have to get a doctor out here somehow. What are we going to do?"

Ian started at a run, but Amaya caught him by the arm. "You can't go up yet. The moms are cleaning her up. We need your help here."

Ian stuttered and stammered until Niles, having heard what was going on, brought him a glass of brandy and forced him to drink it. "Calm down now, boy. You won't

be any help to Heather in the state you're in."

Ian drank. "Okay, what are we going to do?"

"Follow me. Linda said she could get help on the computer. She has cable internet and it's working. Let's see what she has in mind before we panic."

Linda sat at her computer, furiously typing. She was in a bingo room, of all places. Tyler, Amaya, Ian and his father all crowded around and leaned over to read. "I need help. Have any of you heard of the ice storm in MS?" she wrote.

GRTGRNY sent a reply. "Yes, I'm in Memphis. What can I do for you?"

Linda continued to type. "We're forty miles from the nearest hospital and we have a girl in labor. The roads are impassable. We need a doctor. Any suggestions?"

Bluesboat sent the next reply. "How about a helicopter?"

Tyler shouted, "Yes."

Amaya asked, "Can we do that?"

"Hush now, I need to concentrate." Linda continued to type. "GRTGRNY, can you call the airport in Memphis and see if they can send a copter out to pick up the doctor?"

"Hold on a minute while I call," was her reply.

Ian paced the floor and Debbie came to say Heather was in labor and it didn't look like it would be more than a few hours before she was a mother. She told Ian that Heather was asking for him and led him from the room. On the way out, he stopped at the door, "You tell them to bring a minister, too. That little girl is coming into the world a MacGregor."

"Good grief, that boy is a mess," said Mr. MacGregor, but he smiled with satisfaction as his son walked away.

It was a good ten minutes before GRTGRNY sent another reply.

“Visibility is good. Send name of doctor and how to contact. Send directions. They can be there in two or three hours.”

Linda sent another message. “Tell them they have to pick up a minister, too. We have to have a wedding before the baby gets here, and they tell me it won’t be more that a few hours.”

“Will do,” was the reply.

Amaya left to give the information to Heather and Ian while Tyler stayed to give Linda the information to type into the computer.

It was half an hour later and Amaya was back to check on Linda’s progress. No message came through. Linda typed again. “Is there any progress, GRTGRNY? We have anxious people here.”

“I’m on the phone. Wait!”

They waited. Amaya wrung her hands and Tyler took up the pacing for Ian. Mrs. MacGregor reported that Heather was doing fine, but the contractions were thirteen minutes apart. She felt the baby wouldn’t arrive for at least three or four hours. Having had seven of her own, Amaya tended to believe her.

Finally, a message came through. “The pilot has made contact with the Mississippi State Police who, in turn, contacted Dr. Woods and Reverend Smith. Both will be ready when the helicopter arrives. They have to get to the high school parking lot where the helicopter is to land, but both think they can manage. Arrival time, approximately two hours and twenty-five minutes.”

“Thank God.” Linda breathed a sigh of relief and typed back a thank you and said she would be at the computer to keep them updated on Heather’s progress. The messages were flying in with congratulations and good wishes.

"You need to go let Ian know before he has a nervous breakdown, and bring me some coffee, please. I'm exhausted. I feel like I just had a baby myself," said Linda.

Amaya patted Linda on the shoulder and kissed her cheek. "You were great. Those two are going to owe you big time."

* * * *

"Essie, please take coffee and a snack to Aunt Linda in her computer room." Amaya sat at the kitchen table. There was nothing more she could do but have her checkbook ready when the helicopter arrived. Niles sat sipping a brandy. He was nervous and knew he shouldn't be drinking while on duty, but this day was an exception. Amaya patted his hand. "She'll be fine, Niles. The doctor is on his way, along with a minister. Looks like we'll have a wedding today after all."

Niles nodded, and sat at the table. He was staying nearby until he was certain Heather and her baby were safe.

Mr. Sykes came in and poured a cup of coffee. "How's the girl doing?"

"Sit please. We're doing the best we can. We have a helicopter bringing the doctor, but it will be a while before they get here, and, they have to land in the wildflower field. That's the nearest clearing and it's half a mile away.

Mr. Sykes went to the intercom and buzzed the stables. "Tony, find a pair of rubber boots that will fit Tyler, and tape some rough sandpaper on the bottoms. Then take the tractor and pull some firewood out to the cleaning. I'll be there shortly."

Amaya looked at Mr. Sykes quizzically.

"We have to meet them out there and get them to the castle. As quickly as possible."

Niles rose. "I'm going too." With that strong

comment, he left the room and came back with five pairs of rubber boots. "Will these serve your purpose, Mr. Sykes?"

"Yes, get Tyler and anyone else that wants to make the trek down here. We'll fit them for boots and get them ready." He went back to the intercom. "Tony, hold up on the boots. We have some."

Mr. MacGregor insisted on going with Niles and Tyler, so all three men slipped and slid down to the stables. There, Tony taped rough sandpaper to the selected boots and they started across the field, the little tractor following behind.

It had been forty-five minutes since the helicopter had left Memphis and Amaya was on her way up to check on Heather. Mrs. Anderson came in and asked, "How's Heather doing?"

Amaya sat back down and sighed. "I have no idea. We're so worried. She's in a lot of pain, but the contractions were twelve minutes apart last I heard. I wish that doctor would get here."

Mrs. Anderson usually kept to herself, but had come up to the castle today for a purpose. "Miss Amaya, if I can be of any help, I would be glad to."

"I appreciate that, but I don't have any idea what to do."

"If it would help, I could have a look at her. My mother was a midwife and I used to assist her before I got married."

Amaya jumped up and grabbed her hand, dragging her to the stairs. "Why didn't you tell us? Hurry," she said. "Can you tell us how long we have?"

Mrs. Anderson smiled and followed the girl up the stairs. When she walked into the room to Heather breathing through a hard contraction, she said, "Everyone out! I'm going to check the girl."

Amaya stood beside her and nodded as Ian, Debbie and

the moms gaped at the little black woman giving orders. "Mrs. Anderson's mother was a midwife. She knows what she's doing. Now out, all of you."

Mrs. Anderson looked at Amaya and pointed to the door. Amaya went reluctantly.

* * * *

Taking Heather's hand, Mrs. Anderson spoke softly. "Now don't you worry none. I'm going to check and see how far along you are. Is that all right with you?"

Heather nodded and Mrs. Anderson lifted the sheet to examine the girl. "I would say you're about halfway there, girl, and the second half goes faster than the first. You try to relax and we'll have a doctor here before the child comes. Can you do that?"

Again, Heather nodded. "Please, don't leave me," she cried. "I'm so scared."

"Now, child, there's nothing for you to be scared about. We women have been having babies since time began. It hurts a good bit, but it will be over soon. Now you try to rest between the pains and I'll be right back."

She left Heather and went to the hall, "Whichever one of you is the child's mother, I want you to go in there and keep her calm. She's only about halfway ready."

As Margaret went in, Mrs. Anderson put her hand on Ian's arm. "I want you to go down to the kitchen and get some lunch to eat. You won't be any help to the girl right now," and she turned him toward the stairs. "The rest of you, come down with me."

Mrs. Anderson poured a cup of coffee and took a sandwich Laurie had put on a tray and set at the table. "Like I said, Heather is only about halfway there, but the second half goes faster. I'd say we have two or three hours on the high side."

* * * *

Amaya looked at her watch. It was going to be close if Mrs. Anderson was right.

"Mrs. MacGregor, you get the girl a cup of ice chips and Debbie, we'll need clean sheets and a blanket for the baby.

"Miss Amaya, if the doctor doesn't get here, we'll need a pan of warm, sterile water and boiled scissors and string for cutting the cord."

Melinda said she could handle that and went with Debbie. Mrs. MacGregor took the ice to Heather and Mrs. Anderson laid a hand on Ian's arm to keep him in place. "The girl is suffering something fierce. She needs to be able to let out a moan or holler, and she won't do that with you hovering over her. Wait a while before you go back up there."

Ian winced when she mentioned the pain, but agreed to eat lunch.

Amaya went back to Linda's computer room. "How's it going?"

"I got an e-mail from Memphis. The State Police said the doctor and minister were on their way to meet the helicopter. It shouldn't take too long now. Another hour and forty-five minutes, if they're on schedule."

William came into Linda's room with a walkie-talkie. "Here, it's Tyler."

Amaya took the hand-held microphone. "Just push the little button when you talk and let go to hear the answer."

She pushed the button, "Tyler, are you there?" and let go.

"We're in the clearing and waiting to start the fire. How's Heather?"

"Everything is fine, Tyler, just try to get them here as

soon as they arrive.”

William took the receiver back and said, “Tony and I are rigging a flatbed to hook on the back of the tractor to ride them in. We should be there waiting when they land. I’ll keep you informed,” and he signed off.

The entire castle was tense. Everyone sat or ran around, each waiting and worrying in their own way about Heather. Amaya went to the chapel to get away from the chatter.

“Granddaddy, I sure hope you’re putting in a good word up there for Heather. We’re all so worried.” She put her face in her hands and cried softly until she heard his voice.

“Don’t fret, sweetheart. Heather will be fine; you just have to have faith.”

“Oh, Granddaddy,” she looked over and saw him sitting on the step beside her.

“You go now, and have Mr. Anderson fix her up a nice bouquet of flowers to welcome the baby into the world. She sure is going to be a beautiful one.”

“Now how do you know that, Granddaddy?”

“Oh, I know. Go on now and do as I say, and you listen to Mrs. Anderson. You can trust her.”

“Oh, I do, Granddaddy,” and when she started to say thank you, he was gone.

Amaya buzzed the nursery and found Mr. Anderson and asked for a bouquet of flowers for Heather’s room.

“I was sent down to tell you Heather was coming along, but she has time. I’m supposed to check with Tyler. That Mrs. Anderson is a bossy woman,” moaned Ian.

“She’s doing a good job, son,” Mrs. MacGregor said to Ian. “You listen to her.”

Ian hadn’t stopped pacing when Amaya handed him the

walkie-talkie. Tyler reported they were prepared and waiting, though freezing. And wanted to know if anyone could bring them some coffee.

Amaya grew up in Chicago and knew how to get across the ice. She filled a thermos with brandy-laced coffee, put sandwiches in the basket and bundled up. Looking at her watch, she knew the copter should arrive within the hour and took comfort from her grandfather's words. Wearing hiking boots and carrying a stick, she walked and slid the half mile to the clearing.

The men had piled the wood and struck a match to the kindling to start the signal fire. Tyler kissed Amaya and said, "Thank you, Lord, for a good woman. How's Heather?"

"From what Ian said, Mrs. Anderson said she was moving along, but we still have time. I hope that doctor gets here soon." She opened the basket and poured coffee in paper cups and handed out sandwiches. "I'll just stay with you for awhile, if you don't mind."

Tyler put his arm around Amaya and hugged her close and they chatted while Mr. MacGregor tended the fire and Niles paced.

Ian spoke through the walkie-talkie. He sounded hysterical and he stammered the words. "Mrs. Anderson said Heather is getting close. The pains are five minutes apart. Do you see the helicopter?"

His father took the receiver from Tyler. "Not yet, son, but you need to calm down. She's in capable hands."

Ian screamed back. "I'm trying, but this little girl has a mind of her own. Get that doctor here!"

Mr. MacGregor laughed and handed the receiver back to Tyler. "The boy's getting jumpy. I hope the doctor gets here soon."

Niles heard the helicopter before he could see it. "Listen, I think they're coming."

They all cocked their heads and listened.

"Yes," said Tyler. "I hear it."

Shouts went up from the men, William started the tractor and Amaya grabbed the walkie-talkie. "We hear it. I'm coming back to the house. Tell Heather to hold on."

Amaya arrived at the house only a few minutes before Doctor Woods and Reverend Smith. She rushed them both up the stairs. Reverend Smith took Ian aside as Dr. Woods went in to examine Heather. The contractions were coming two minutes apart and Dr. Woods told Reverend Smith that if he was planning a wedding, he needed to get in there.

Tyler raced up the stairs with Mr. MacGregor following close behind. Amaya had gathered the entire MacGregor clan in Heather's room, except for the children. When the minister asked if Heather would take this man, she screamed, "Yes, damn it, just get this over with."

By the time he pronounced them man and wife, Mrs. Anderson had kicked everyone but Ian and Heather's mother out of the room, Heather was pushing for all she was worth.

Little Margaret Amaya Laurie Linda Deborah MacGregor came into the world ninety seconds after Heather became Mrs. Ian MacGregor.

Chapter 18

After Amaya was awarded a peek at the beautiful little girl, she went back to the kitchen with checkbook in hand. Pilot Jessie Carter was a woman in her late thirties. She sat at the table eating a warm plate of food Laurie had served her. When Amaya tried to pay her, she refused. "You see, Miss, I own that helicopter out there, and it's not much, but it's all mine. I rent a little pad at the airport to keep it on and run a little transportation business. I do all right for myself, but people have helped me when I needed it, and I wouldn't feel right about charging for this ride. In an emergency, people have to help each other and that's just what I am doing."

Well, how do I argue with that? The same held true when she tried to pay the reverend and the doctor. None would take her money, even though the minister would be stranded at Amaya's Keep because there was no room in the helicopter for him.

Jessie was taking Heather, the baby, Ian and the doctor to the hospital. Doctor Woods wanted Heather and little Margie to be checked out. Even he would have to get a ride back to Washburn Springs after he turned Heather over to the doctor in Memphis. All three were being inconvenienced, but none would accept payment, even

though it was obvious Amaya could afford it. That was the way of the South and Amaya had to accept it with profuse thanks.

By nightfall, Reverend Smith was settled in a room and Debbie and William went in search of Amaya. They found her in the chapel. Flowers were everywhere in preparation of the wedding that didn't take place there. Amaya looked around and sighed. *All this work and we couldn't make it to the chapel. No matter.* The two were married with their families present. Then she laughed. "I do, damn it," is what Heather had said. Ian took it in his stride. Women were testy while birthing a baby.

"Miss Amaya," Debbie said from the door as she held William's hand, "do you have a minute?"

She motioned for them to come in and they sat in a pew in front of the steps.

"It's just beautiful, isn't it?"

"I was just thinking that myself, Debbie. Isn't it a shame we didn't get to have the wedding in here?"

"That's what we wanted to see you about. William and I have our marriage license. We were planning to slip off one day soon, but with the minister still here...do you think he would marry us?"

"Why that's a fine idea. Is tonight too soon for you?"

"Not at all," said William, and he got a big grin on his face. "The sooner the better."

"What time is it?" She looked at her watch. "It's after seven. Is Brandon still awake?"

"Yes, he had a late nap."

"Good, go get him and yourselves ready and I'll get Reverend Smith and the rest of the staff. Be back here in thirty minutes. Will that be enough time?"

"It will have to be."

William and Debbie ran out of the chapel and Amaya got busy gathering everyone together, including Tyler's complete family. Nina was dispatched to help Debbie dress and Mr. Anderson was sent to make a bridal bouquet. Laurie took cakes and cookies out of the freezer and she and Bethany threw together some canapés.

Tyler was delighted. "What do you say we give them the bridal suite? It was prepared for Ian and Heather."

"Very nice touch, Tyler, my love. Why don't you send Melinda up to check on supplies and make sure everything is ready?"

"I'll do that and meet you back here. Who's going to stand up for them?"

"I don't know. You better send someone to find out."

Tyler was back in short time, "I guess we're best man and maid of honor. You better find a dress to put on while I change into a suit."

"Oh my. I'm gone. Meet you back down here. Wear that blue tie I like."

"Yes, ma'am," and he chuckled. "I'm going to love being married to that woman," he said as he rushed from the room.

* * * *

Debbie caught Amaya on her way up the stairs. "I don't know what to wear. Can you help me?"

Debbie hadn't bought her dress yet for the wedding, so Amaya took her to her room and put her in a long yellow evening dress with little cap sleeves and a flowing skirt. High heels to match were added. Linda brought little white flowers for her hair Mr. Anderson had suggested. Debbie was a picture of beauty.

"I can play the wedding march on the organ, Debbie. I was going to for Heather," said Linda, "if you would like."

"Do you think if I ask Niles to give me away, he would do it?"

"Let's ask." Amaya pressed the intercom. "I need to speak to Niles."

"He's right here, just a minute."

"Okay Debbie, go ahead."

When Debbie asked him to give her away, Amaya could hear the emotion in Niles voice when he said, "The honor would be all mine."

* * * *

Everything was set. Amaya was the first to walk down the aisle, followed by Niles with Debbie looking radiant on his arm. If Amaya had looked, she would have seen a tear glisten Niles' eye, so proud was he. And when the reverend pronounced them man and wife, a happy but exhausted group of people retired to the ballroom to toast the bride and groom before they were escorted to the bridal suite and instructed they had one week to honeymoon.

* * * *

Now, all that was remaining for the month was Thanksgiving dinner and Amaya's own wedding. Amaya went to bed with Tyler to make beautiful love and sleep until morning. It had been an insane day with the ice storm and Heather giving birth, not to mention all the worry over getting a doctor to the castle, and finally William and Debbie getting married.

* * * *

The following two weeks were spent visiting and resting. The ice melted and Ian brought Heather and their daughter home. The reverend was returned to his wife and Debbie and William honeymooned. Amaya was busy preparing for her own wedding. She had splurged on a beautiful white gown of silk and lace with tiny seed pearls

adorning the bodice and a fingertip veil. It was a huge expense, but Amaya justified it by vowing to save it for her daughters. The house was full of people with more expected, but the time gave Amaya a chance to become better acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. MacGregor and the rest of the clan.

Laurie was busy planning Thanksgiving dinner and Melinda was putting the house to rights. Mr. Anderson was nurturing the flowers that would adorn the chapel and the bouquet Amaya would carry.

On the eve of Thanksgiving, Linda's three boys arrived with their wives and children and grandchildren, for a total of fourteen, and Amaya was happy the two girls had consented to be flower girls. Tyler's nephews would be twin ring bearers and his younger brothers would act as ushers. Ian would be Tyler's best man, with Linda, Amaya's matron of honor.

Bagpipers were hired to play a traditional Scottish tune and a vocalist would sing a song while her daughter played the organ.

By the time Amaya's parents arrived, there were close to forty guests in the house, if Heather and little Margie were included as guests.

Thanksgiving dinner would be a feast served in the dining room. Linda, Mrs. MacGregor and Heather's mom all worked in the kitchen to assist Laurie, as two of her three girls had gone to be with their families. Mrs. Anderson was making pumpkin and sweet potatoe pies in her own kitchen.

It was a wonderful day with a lot of laughing and eating and game playing. The boys had recruited players for Clue and the adults played chess and darts. The staff relaxed and became part of the family. There were groups of people in

every room, content and excitedly anticipating the wedding the following day.

* * * *

Amaya hid in her room with her mother and Linda, preparing for her wedding.

Tyler had returned to his own room and was dressing in a black tuxedo, while Ian and his father kept him company.

When the wedding march sounded, Amaya's father took her arm, and after the flower girls and Linda had preceded them, walked his daughter down the aisle and turned her over to Tyler while Ian stood at his side.

Amaya and Tyler said their vows before God and their family and friends and Tyler kissed the bride, before taking her hand to walk back down the aisle.

The reception was held in the ballroom. Governor Torbou and his wife had attended, along with several of Amaya's friends from Chicago and Shamus flew in from Scotland and arrived on the morning of the wedding.

Amaya's Keep was filled to overflowing. The reception was a huge party with eating and dancing and talking and laughing. Amaya threw her bouquet to the women. Jessica caught it and Tony won the garter.

In the early hours of the morning, Tyler took his bride to the honeymoon suite and they made love and talked of the children they would have and made love again. They ate breakfast off trays Essie brought and took a long lingering bath together and made love again. It was early evening before they walked down the stairs, hand in hand, to join their family and friends.

* * * *

On December first, Linda's family departed to return to their homes and the MacGregor's were packed and

waiting to be driven to the airport. The three grooms, Ian, Tyler and William left their brides to drive to the Memphis airport to return the MacGregor's and Shamus to Scotland. Amaya's parents had left earlier to catch their flight. The only guest remaining in the house was Heather's mother, Margaret, and she would stay until Ian took Heather to his home in Scotland. She was missing her daughter and granddaughter already, but was very happy Heather had found such a good man.

* * * *

That evening, Ian took Margaret by the hand and asked her to join him for tea in the library. When she was seated, he told her how much he loved Heather and how he intended to make her happy. "You know I'm an engineer and have a business of my own," he looked at her questioningly.

"Yes, Heather told me all about it."

"What I would like to propose is a life change. I have plenty of money and will inherit my father's castle, and since I know you're alone, how would you feel about coming to Scotland to live?"

Margaret put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, I couldn't."

"It was just a thought," said Ian. "There is a house close to mine I bought last year to let out. It has been remodeled and furnished. It would make a wonderful home for you."

"But...but..."

Ian held up his hand. "I'm not suggesting you give up your home here if you don't want to. But Heather and I would like to have you close by. A girl needs her mother and children need their grandparents." He smiled wickedly at Margaret. "We plan to have many. It would be a great comfort to Heather, and I would like it as well. I can

arrange an allowance for you to cover your expenses and a bit more for foolishness. Will you think about it?"

Margaret didn't know what to say. First her daughter was moving to Scotland, and now she had the opportunity to join her there. "How exciting. But, what would I do there?"

"What do you do here?" he asked sincerely.

"I work for our local doctor. I run his office. I managed to get a leave of absence to be here this month. With the children all in college, his wife is helping him out."

"I can find you a position there if you like, or you can work for me. I have a thriving business and am in need of an office manager. So far, I have been holding up on my own, but Da is ready to retire to part-time and I will need help."

Ian took her hand and led her out of the room. "You think about it, Mother Margaret, then speak to your daughter and let me know. I am sincere. I really would like to have you at home with us."

Margaret kissed Ian on the cheek and thanked him. "I promise I'll think about it." She said and went into the kitchen to talk it over with Laurie.

* * * *

Amaya, Tyler and Linda were busy preparing for the next party. This was a new party and consisted of an entire three days of games. The Clue Marathon was scheduled and a chess tournament, as well as a dart tournament and crossword puzzle contest. Almost the entire guest list had signed up for the monopoly tournament, which had a four hour time limit per team. Scrabble was on the list, along with backgammon. Scrolls were to be awarded to the winner of each tournament and Amaya looked forward to it immensely. The dinner was to be a costume ball, with guests dressing up as their favorite character or the costume

of a token from one of the games they played. The ring, of course, would be awarded at dinner to the winner of the secret passage game.

This party would require very little expense, but the need for supervisors and judges was great. Amaya offered free packages to the Mayor of Washburn Springs and his wife if they would judge a marathon, as well as the Police Chief and Fire Chief, along with their wives. Ian and Tony, William and Debbie would also take part. Amaya and Tyler would oversee and Linda would entertain, as she always did.

The party was a huge success, if noisy, and many winners' scrolls were passed out at dinner.

The costumes were original and amusing. There was Ms. Scarlet along with Colonel Mustard. A young woman was adorned with two square fabrics of dice and a very large man wore the circle of a backgammon token. One slender woman was a pencil; another wore squares that resembled wood with the word Scrabble spelled out, and the winner of the Amaya's Keep ring wore a flat card. On the front was a replica of the game card, *Boardwalk*, and the back, *Park Place*.

* * * *

Miss Shadow and Mr. Wright's wedding was the last party for the month until New Year's Eve and Amaya was putting special attention into the plans. The two had met at her first party at Amaya's Keep and had fallen in love. Amaya wanted them to have a wedding they would never forget. Champaign and caviar were in stock, as well as lobster and crab, shrimp and scallops. Miss Shadow had requested a seafood buffet for her reception.

The bridal suite was dressed extravagantly and was a gift to the bride and groom. They would be the last guests

to share this suite of three rooms. After the first of the year, it was to be turned into the master suite for Amaya and Tyler. She would make other arrangements for a bridal suite.

Miss Shadow and Mr. Wright weren't young people, so it was more important to Amaya to make it special. When a woman waits so long to find her love, it should start out beautifully. And it did. Mr. and Mrs. Wright honeymooned at the castle for three days, and then departed for California. That was to be their home and the new bride was delighted to be moving to the West Coast.

* * * *

Amaya's cola stood untouched on a tray, along with the cookies Laurie had brought in. Tyler had driven Ian, Heather and little Margie to the airport. Heather had made a rapid recovery and Dr. Woods released her to fly home to Scotland. Margaret had returned to Alabama, but not before she informed Amaya and Tyler that she would be moving to Scotland in January.

* * * *

Amaya sat exhausted and in awe of all that had happened in less than a year. Her granddaddy had died and she'd inherited a great deal of money and this fabulous castle, which harbored the ghost of her grandfather. She'd started a business, befriended three women in need and given a permanent home to her aunt. She'd met hundreds of wonderful people and had the best staff in the world to care for her. She'd worried through the ice storm and the birth of a child, who was now her niece, and watched two couples get married she was extremely attached to. With great joy, she'd unraveled the mystery of Granddaddy's heritage. To top all that off, she'd married her Prince Charming, and if all indications were correct, she was

carrying Tyler's child. What an amazing year. Christmas was just around the corner and following that, a New Year's Eve party was planned.

Amaya leaned back and dozed. When she woke, Tyler was kissing her forehead. "Hi, darling. Are you just taking a little snooze?"

"It appears I am." She lifted her arms to encircle Tyler's neck and pulled him down for a long, deep kiss. "I love you, Mr. MacGregor. Sit down; I want to talk to you."

"And I love you, Mrs. MacGregor," he said as he sat beside her, still holding her hand. "Do we have a problem?"

"I don't think so and it's early yet, but I believe we're going to have a baby."

Tyler hugged her and rested his head on her shoulder. If Amaya could have seen his face, she would have found his eyes misting with tears. "I'm so happy. When, how?" he stuttered.

Laughing, Amaya said, "I think you know how and when, well, we have been married for three weeks now, but I believe it was a bit before that. I think we're about five weeks into the nine months."

"I told you I come from *verra* fertile stock, did I not?"

"Oh, aye, you did, my love."

"You are happy about this, are you not, Amaya?"

She leaned into him and snuggled as close as she could get. "I couldn't be happier. I was just thinking about all the adventures we've had this year, and I think we're just beginning the greatest adventure of all."

* * * *

There were Christmas trees all over the castle. Tyler insisted! He took Amaya to the nearest mall to shop for gifts and slipped out of the house to buy her a diamond and emerald necklace as his gift to her.

Laurie and the girls baked until the freezers were full and Amaya insisted everyone in the castle was to take a turn in the kitchen. She wanted a treat from each and every one of them. Laurie, Nina and Bethany were on hand to assist. Brandon made gingerbread cookies with Debbie and William and Amaya was pleased to see William was not averse to rolling out and cutting cookies. He'd become very attached to Brandon.

Amaya was in her glory. She lined the mantelpiece in the library with pine boughs and heavy candles and placed little trees and Santa with his reindeer all along the bookshelves. She had a complete country village set up in the drawing room and a nativity scene as big as life in the ballroom. Christmas was her favorite holiday and when she could stay awake long enough, she was decorating. The pregnancy made her fall asleep at the drop of a hat and she'd experienced a little morning sickness, but she and Jessica consoled each other, so she took it in stride.

The castle was a happy place for Amaya and she couldn't imagine ever going back to the life she'd lived in Chicago. She thanked her granddaddy daily for her new life.

Gifts were passed out and all were gathered at the table for dinner. Christmas was a happy time. When the day ended and she went to the chapel to talk to her granddaddy, she found an unopened gift lying on the step. Her name was on a tag, so she opened it to find a little blue sweater and a blank maroon journal, a replica of the ones in the library of her grandfather's heritage. "So, I'll be having a son, will I, Granddaddy? I couldn't be happier."

* * * *

Not a soul knew how these next events had happened except Amaya and Tyler. When the Reverend Smith went to his church for Christmas morning services, he found a

brand new church bus tied with an enormous red bow, and when Doctor Woods was summoned to his office, there was a brand new, state-of-the-art x-ray machine to replace the old, outdated one he'd been using, also tied with a big red bow. They also knew there was a strong, wonderful woman named Jessie Carter at the airport sitting in her brand new helicopter with a red bow on each blade.

Amaya had been blessed and when one is blessed, it's their responsibility to pass some of that along to others, and so she did, with Granddaddy's blessings, as that was the way of the South.

Epilogue

Ten years had passed as Amaya sat in the garden with Linda and Niles watching her children play as she massaged her large stomach. Her son, Bernard Tyler MacGregor, was climbing a tree while her twin daughters, Imogene and Helen, played in the miniature castle Amaya had moved from the farm to Amaya's Keep. Little Jeffery played in the sandbox Tyler had built.

Niles had retired and purchased a home nearby, but was a frequent visitor to Amaya's Keep and always showed up to assist with the parties.

Debbie and William were successfully running Granddaddy's farm. Although Debbie was unable to bear more children, she and William had adopted two little girls and a boy abandoned at the farm. There were rumors of a female ghost haunting the grounds, but not one child had ever been witness to it. Mostly, it was obvious in the newly weeded gardens and the replanting of flowers in a design that suited Imogene, but William and Debbie were ecstatically happy and welcomed Imogene, always deferring to her wishes where the gardens were concerned.

Jessica and Tony had been married shortly after Jessica had given birth to her son, Thomas, and remained happily married, both working at the castle, Jessica as nanny to the

guests' children and Tony in the stables.

New employees had been hired and Amaya always managed to find an unwed pregnant woman to help her with her own children.

Melinda continued to run the house and Laurie reigned as queen of the kitchen with her original staff.

Ian and Heather were prosperous in Scotland and had three sons after Margie and Heather's mother, Margaret, thrived on running Ian's business office.

With Amaya pregnant and caring for her children, the parties had been scaled down to three a month, which only made them more popular than ever. Amaya's Keep always had a waiting list for its parties.

Granddaddy continued to occupy the castle and frequently visited with Amaya or Tyler in the chapel giving them advice or complimenting them on how well they were running Amaya's Keep and looking after his great-grandchildren.

Linda remained happily at Amaya's Keep and continued her visits to town, but less frequent, and as far as Amaya could tell, Linda held a long distance romance with Shamus, who managed to visit Amaya's Keep every couple months.

Amaya and Tyler were happier than they had ever been in their lives, running the castle and caring for their children, of which there were many. Four now and according to Granddaddy, twin sons on the way at any moment.

When Tyler joined his family in the garden, he bent down to kiss Amaya. "Happy Birthday, lassie," he said as he held out a package. "I was going to wait until the party tonight, but I wanted to give this to you now."

Amaya opened the box to find an emerald and diamond

studded gold bracelet in the box. "Thank you, darling, this is going to be the best birthday ever."

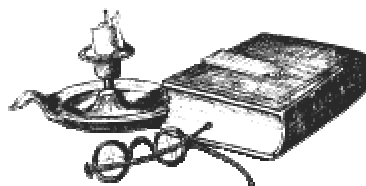
"You've had many fine birthdays, lassie, why is this one going to be the best?"

"Because, my dear, our sons, Niles and Patrick, will be born before this day is over. I think it's time you drove me to the hospital," she said, as she grimaced when a new contraction overcame her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reading has always been my escape from the busy life of being a wife, mother and career woman. Finding myself alone after my children were grown, I began to pursue my passion for writing. *Amaya's Keep* is my first published book and I hope you all find an escape from your busy lives in reading it. Having been raised in the cold country of Zion, Illinois, I opted out for the sunshine of Glendale, Arizona, and like it best when the temperature hits one hundred degrees. I would love to hear from my fans and can be reached at: donnasdesk@cox.net .

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