

## **MY GUARDIAN KNIGHT**

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**For information contact:**

Bookbooters.com  
14 Tomstead Road East  
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# CHAPTER ONE

*Clickety clack.....clickety clack.....clickety clack.*  
Amanda Darcy laid her head against the window, the sound of the train soothing her frazzled nerves, and stared sightlessly at the passing scenery. The all-consuming terror that had gripped her this morning upon awakening still plagued her, denying her any rest. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, trying to reassure herself that everything would be fine, but to no avail. She could not fool herself any longer. Avery had found out where she was yet again. When she'd opened her eyes this morning it had been there, the strange premonition that overtook her every time Avery ferreted her out; a premonition that brought panic and terror so forceful she could hardly breathe. So, as always, she had thrown their meager possessions in her suitcase and made a beeline for the train station.

Sighing, Amanda willed her hands to stop trembling. At least she had been smart enough to secure a position as governess in another town this time. Every other time she had run blindly, first finding a town that seemed safe and then searching for a job. It would be better this time, she told herself. Although the Richardsons didn't expect her for another two weeks, she was sure they would be happy to have her come early, since Mrs. Richardson had been so enthusiastic in her letter.

Reaching into her small handbag, Amanda counted the small amount of bills she had left. Twelve dollars and fifty cents. Surely that would last them until they reached their

destination. If she were careful, the money would last. And, the good Lord knew, she had practically had to make an art out of being careful. They *would* get by.

They had to.

She closed her eyes, trying to get some much-needed rest. She had to be alert when the train made its stops, for traveling was a dangerous business for her. Avery had many connections, and well she knew that he would not hesitate to use them to track her down. As a lawman, he had an endless source of deputies at his disposal to carry out any orders he may give. It was a miracle they had evaded him this long.

But she was no fool. The running would stop one day, and with it, her freedom. Possibly even her life.

Brought out of her disturbing thoughts by a soft cough, she gazed down at the child beside her. Sweet little Matthew. In his five short years of life, most of it had been spent running. Sometimes, his mind seemed too old for his slight body, his bravery and intelligence never failing to surprise his mother. Even though their lives were different from the other children he had met, and none too stable, Amanda strove to keep his childhood intact. A five-year-old should not have to worry about his safety and that of his mother. Being five years old was about chasing butterflies, wishing for a pony, pretending to be a cowboy. Amanda was determined that he would not be cheated out of the pleasures of life. Someday, he would have everything that she wished for him.

Yes, someday.

Matthew rubbed his big brown eyes and gazed up at his mother. “Are we there yet, Mama?”

She smiled at him tenderly. “Not yet, Matthew. I bet you’re feeling hungry, aren’t you? I have a yummy apple in

my bag just for you.”

The child happily set about munching the fruit, watching the people around him with curiosity. The train was extremely crowded and noisy, and he was surprised he had been able to nap at all. But now he felt refreshed and full of energy and wanting nothing more than to get up and run the cramps out of his legs. Matthew looked up at his mother. “Do you suppose it will be very long, Mama?”

Amanda squeezed his hand in understanding. “I’m sure I don’t know, sweetheart. Look at your book for a while; it will make the time go by faster. I promise I’ll find you a place to play before we board the next train.”

He nodded, not very satisfied with her answer but knowing it was the best she could do.

Amanda’s heart went out to him. She understood how hard it was for him to sit still for so long. It was hard for her, too. They were not used to this inactivity. Their days usually consisted of Amanda working at whatever job she held at the time and Matthew playing with the children of the household in which she was employed.

“Mama? We sure do ride on trains a lot, don’t we? Do you think, maybe, this could be the last time?”

Amanda quickly schooled the sadness from her eyes. She didn’t have much hope left, but she wouldn’t take what remained of her son’s. “I think, perhaps, that anything is possible, Matthew.”

His little face lit with joy. “I could pray for it, Mama. Miss Paula says anything is possible with the Lord’s help. I’ll ask Him to please make this our last train trip. And since I’ll be talking to Him anyway, I think I’ll ask for a pretty house for you with a great big yard for me, and lots of children to play with. Wouldn’t that be nice, Mama?”

Closing her eyes to hide the tears that threatened, she

simply smiled and ruffled his hair. “That would be lovely, Matthew.” How could he know that she used to hope for a pretty little house all her own? A cute little cottage with a shiny white fence and fields where she could run and play with the many children she had planned to have. But that had been long ago, and she had no such illusions now.

Yes, at least *he* still had hope.

She turned her gaze back out the window, noticing the soft colors of the trees and flowers in bloom. When she’d been a girl, spring had been her favorite season, full of freshness and new beginnings. Now it just mocked her, for she knew there would be no new beginnings for Amanda Darcy. She was in the autumn of her life, careening rapidly towards the winter, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. No matter that she was still young by normal standards, only twenty-one years old. When Avery finally caught up with her, it would all be over.

Amanda tensed as she heard the first squeal of the brakes, sitting ramrod straight and forcing her tired eyes open wide. She must take notice of every passenger that boarded the train to assure herself that they were still safe from Avery’s clutches.

To her immense relief, most of the people on the train disembarked at the station, leaving only a handful of passengers left. The cloying odor of perfumes, stale alcohol, and unwashed bodies began to diminish immediately.

Keeping her eyes trained on the doors, she was surprised to see only a few people board: a couple of little old ladies who smiled kindly as they passed, a young family with two children who Matthew eyed curiously, and a very well dressed young woman with an older chaperone. Amanda breathed a deep sigh of relief and settled back into

her seat, relaxing ever so slightly. There didn't seem to be anything to fear from these people. Now maybe she could catch a bit of sleep until the next stop.

Just before her eyes closed, however, a bag was thrown unceremoniously through the doors and a man jumped onto the train with ease. Amanda jerked to attention. It wasn't Avery, but could it be someone he had sent? Please God, not yet!

She watched him as he spoke with the conductor. He seemed harmless enough. He didn't scan the crowd as if he were looking for anyone; his shoulders weren't tense from the stress of fruitless searching. No, she decided they were still safe. In fact, he was a very handsome man, with wavy dark blond hair that brushed his collar and soft blue eyes that held a twinkle. His smile was genuine, his teeth straight and white, which was quite unusual these days since the majority of men were fond of chewing tobacco.

Amanda let her eyes roam over his lean, tanned form, enjoying with a bit of surprise the interest she was feeling for him. She had never really felt an interest in any man, even Matthew's father.

Especially Matthew's father.

But this man was different, she thought. Amanda put a lot of stock in a person's eyes, for she believed they were the window to the soul, and the stranger's eyes were kind and clear as he continued speaking with the conductor. Suddenly he looked up, meeting her gaze. Amanda smiled politely and looked quickly away, embarrassed. She was drawn to him, though, for some reason, and couldn't keep herself from turning back to him.

As the conversation wound to a close, the conductor clapped him on the back and moved away as the man started down the aisle. It was then that her eyes widened

and she couldn't control the shocked gasp as she saw something that had been hidden by the conductor's large form. Something that struck terror into her heart. A brass pin. The stranger was a lawman, and he was headed straight for her!

She couldn't escape; there was nowhere to go. She watched, mesmerized, as he made his way slowly towards her, and swallowed hard when her eyes fell upon the gun at his side. He stopped right beside Matthew, tipping his hat and saying, "Afternoon, ma'am. Mind if I sit here?"

Amanda tore her eyes from him and turned to look behind her at all the empty seats. Why did he want to sit with her? Why didn't he just arrest her and get it over with? Smiling tremulously, and hoping her fear wasn't too apparent, she said, "Why yes, of course. Please feel free."

The stranger tipped his hat again in thanks, stuffed his bags between the seats, and sat down beside Matthew. The boy smiled up at him shyly, whispering loudly to his mother, "Mama, he's a lawman."

"Yes, I see," she also whispered, surprised that her voice worked at all. Thank goodness Matthew didn't know about Avery.

The lawman turned to Matthew. "Afternoon, sir. May I ask your name?" He held his hand out for the boy to shake.

Matthew shook his hand, straightening proudly and feeling very grown up. "I am Matthew Darcy. Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir."

Amanda watched him touch her son, suppressing the urge to snatch her child away and make a run for it. The air closed in about her, feeling thick, and her chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. The world went black around the edges, and panic threatened to overcome her. She pushed it

away with all her strength and managed to smile as the stranger turned his attention to her. He held out his hand. "Mrs. Darcy, I presume?" he asked with a chuckle.

She placed her dainty fingers onto his, willing the shaking to stop. "Amanda Darcy. Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Sebastian Knight, at your service, ma'am." His hand closed around hers, spreading warmth through her frigid fingers and along her arm. A feeling of peace stole quietly over her, as if through his touch he let her know she had nothing to fear from him. She smiled and removed her hand, feeling the cold return once again.

Amanda settled back in her chair and turned to the window, hoping he would not try to converse with her. She knew she didn't have to worry about Matthew, he never talked to strangers. She let her sleepy eyes droop, telling herself she would rest them for just a moment. And then she promptly fell asleep.

U.S. Marshal Sebastian Knight settled back into his chair, eyeing the small woman who had turned away from him so promptly. She intrigued him, this little woman who sat so straight in her chair that he was tempted to feel for a steel rod beneath her clothing. What in the world had made him sit with her when she so obviously did not welcome his company? He was not the type of man who made a practice of forcing himself on cold young women.

And yet, there was something about her that called out to him. This woman was in trouble. He knew it as surely as he knew his own name. Her dark brown eyes were brimmed with fear and suspicion, and he had not been able to turn away from the need he saw in them. This tiny girl

needed help and, whether she wanted him to or not, he would help her.

Sebastian braved a glance at her, noting her honey blond hair that, he was sure, had been pulled back in a severe chignon, but now mostly tumbled down around her shoulders in charming disarray. It looked so soft he almost reached out to touch it. Smiling ruefully, he tucked his hand safely onto his own lap. The girl was distant and withdrawn enough already, and manhandling her didn't seem to be the way to bring her out of her shell. Laughing at himself, he settled back in his chair for a bit of rest.

Rousing slowly from a peaceful slumber, Amanda momentarily resisted the return of full consciousness, reluctant to let go the oblivion that her nap had brought her. She allowed her eyes to remain closed for a few more precious seconds before the soft murmur of voices beside her penetrated her senses. She sat up quickly, turning a shocked look toward her son. Matthew was *talking* to the stranger who sat next to them. Matthew, who never spoke to anyone, was carrying on an animated conversation with a complete stranger! She had never stopped to think that he might feel safe in the presence of the lawman, as most people naturally would. Sometimes she almost forgot how to think like a normal person. Willing her heart to stop its erratic beating in her chest, she turned to her son, a smile plastered to her lips. "Matthew, let Marshal Knight alone. He might like to rest."

Sebastian smiled at her above the boy's head. "I don't mind, Mrs. Darcy. He's keeping me company. A trip for just one person can be mighty lonely."

"We take lots of trips, don't we, Mama?"

"Yes, son," she managed to say calmly. What else had

he told the marshal? Did he know anything that might get them in trouble? She must work on the assumption that this man knew Avery. To do otherwise would be foolhardy.

Unable to find any other options, Amanda sat back and listened to the conversation between the two males, amazed at how soothing the lawman's voice was. He was like a balm to the senses, and she had never felt two such strongly opposing emotions for a man before. On the one hand, the fact that he was a U.S. Marshal and therefore a possible enemy terrified her; but on the other hand, she felt a strange attraction to him. Oh dear, on top of everything else, was she losing her mind, too?

Just then, he turned his smile on her, and she felt her insides melting. His deep blue eyes twinkled at her, and she realized with awe that he was drawing a smile from her own lips, albeit small, but a smile nonetheless. She couldn't remember the last time someone other than Matthew had had such an effect on her. Who was this man?!

"Your son is most entertaining," he said in that deep, rich voice.

She smiled at Matthew. "You must bring out the best in him, Marshal Knight. He is not usually quite so animated. And he absolutely *never* speaks with strangers."

"I like children," he said, his smiling dimming a bit. "It angers me that so many people believe that a man is incapable of caring for children. If you are big and strong you must be a monster. If you are kind to kids you are not a true man. What a bunch of damned nonsense!"

Amanda's eyes widened. "I didn't mean—"

Sebastian touched her hand, sending a tingling warmth up her arm. Calmness stole over her yet again. "I'm

sorry,” he said with a quiet sigh. “I didn’t mean you are like that. I have a—” he turned away slightly, a rueful smile lighting his features. “I shouldn’t burden you with my problems, Mrs. Darcy, yet I find myself so comfortable in your company. Almost as if we were not the strangers we surely are.”

Goosebumps rose on Amanda’s skin, and she knew she should be wary, knew he may well be her downfall. But sitting here beside him, his hand still touching hers, all she felt was a camaraderie, a closeness she had not felt in so long. “I feel that way, too, Marshal Knight,” she was surprised to find herself answering.

His smile returned. “I think we have each found a friend. Please, call me Sebastian.”

Mortified, she felt a blush creep up her cheeks. “I’m sorry; I don’t think I could do that just yet. We’ve only just met.”

His disappointment was genuine, she was sure. “I have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions. So,” he said quickly, effectively changing the subject, “where are you headed?”

Amanda hedged, not certain she wanted to divulge such information.

“St. Louis,” Matthew spoke up.

Amanda bit her lip hard, barely suppressing a groan. If there were any chance that this man had not been sent after her, she didn’t want to make him suspicious.

“What a coincidence. I’m going to St. Louis, also. Are you meeting your husband, Mrs. Darcy?”

She looked up in surprise, meeting his incredibly blue eyes. Did he know something she didn’t know? Forcing a calm she did not feel, she replied, “No, my husband is gone, Marshal Knight.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, she told her

conscious.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, laying a hand upon hers once again.

Her response was drowned out by the squeal of the brakes. Here we go again, she thought, unconsciously straightening in her chair and focusing her attention on the doors. It took a moment before she noticed that Marshal Knight had touched her arm, trying to claim her attention.

"Mrs. Darcy, this train doesn't go to St. Louis. We'll have to get off at this station and take the next train bound west."

She studied him warily. Was this true, or was it a trick? "I was under the impression that this train went all the way to St. Louis."

"No, ma'am. It goes back east."

She looked around. Indeed, everyone had disembarked but them. Smiling as if her nerves were not stretched to the breaking point, she nodded to him, motioning Matthew ahead of her. Sebastian stood in the aisle waiting for her and, as she went to step out, her foot caught on the chair and she stumbled, pitching face first into the aisle. Quickly, Sebastian's arm snaked out and caught her around the waist, the force of her body slamming against his chest.

She stood for a moment in the shelter of his arms, taking in the masculine smell of his leather vest and the warm musk of his skin. A feeling of safety stole over her and, as if in a daze, she let her head remain on his chest where it had fallen. For the moment, she felt safe and secure, something she had not felt in a very long time, if ever.

The tug from her son's hand brought her back to the present, and she quickly stepped away, nodding her thanks and following Matthew out the door. Once outside,

Sebastian asked them to wait while he made arrangements to take the next train.

“No, Marshal Knight. I can take care of that myself, thank you.”

He smiled. “I’m sure you can, but since I happen to be in need of a ticket myself, it’s no trouble arranging for two more.” With that, he strode off quickly before she could reply.

Amanda looked down at her son. “Oooh! That man exasperates me to no end, Matthew!”

He grinned, dimples flashing. “I like ‘Bastian, Mama. He’s nice to me.”

She sighed. “Yes, he is. I suppose he is very nice to both of us. If only I could trust him,” she said under her breath.

“You can trust him, Mama. He’s a lawman.”

Amanda gazed into Matthew’s eyes, wondering absently if she had ever been so innocent and trusting, and vowing that she would do whatever was necessary to keep his innocence intact.

Sebastian stepped up beside them just then, motioning to a small white clapboard building. “Why don’t we have some supper?” He took Matthew’s hand and charged off, leaving Amanda behind him, outraged. That pretty little restaurant would surely be too expensive for her, and who did he think he was, anyway, to make sudden announcements and take off with her child in tow?

She caught up to them as they were being seated at a table. She sat down and turned on Sebastian, hissing, “I hope you do not consider yourself a gentleman, Marshal Knight, after leaving me alone at the train station like that!”

He smiled. “I never claimed to be a gentleman.”

“And how dare you take off with my son and just

*assume* that I would wish to go with you?!”

His smile deepened and he leaned closer to her, until their noses were but an inch apart. His voice was soft as he said, “If I had simply asked, would you have come with me?”

“No!” she exclaimed sharply.

He leaned back in his chair, triumphant. “And there you have it.” Sebastian turned to the waitress. “Two coffees, please, and a milk for the squirt.”

Amanda was too angry to reply. She flipped open the menu and stared blankly at the pages, silently fuming. It took her a moment to realize that the conversation at the table had continued without her, and her son was giggling at something Sebastian had just said. She sighed wearily. Was she letting her jaded outlook on life affect her opinion of Sebastian, just because he was a lawman? He certainly seemed pleasant enough, although she knew very well that first impressions could be misleading. There had to be something about him, though, if Matthew had taken to him so quickly. She decided to let her petty anger go and enjoy the meal.

When the waitress returned, she not only bore their drinks but food as well. Amanda turned her gaze to Sebastian and he shrugged, grinning. “So I ordered for everyone while you were pouting. I was too hungry to wait.”

Three heaping plates were set before them, each bearing roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, and corn. Amanda’s heart beat wildly in her chest as she thought of the cost of such a meal, but what could she do? The plate had already been set before her, the savory smell tempting her, and she couldn’t make herself send it back in favor of the cheese sandwich she had planned on ordering.

“Do you have a habit of making everyone’s decisions for them, Marshal Knight? For all you know, we may not like roast beef.”

He laughed. “Who doesn’t like roast beef?”

“I like roast beef,” Matthew spoke up, bouncing excitedly in his seat.

Amanda sighed. She picked up her fork and gingerly tasted the mashed potatoes, closing her eyes and savoring the flavor. How long had it been since she’d tasted anything even half this hearty? Most of her meals consisted of cold sandwiches or the daily specials, which invariably tasted like lukewarm paper.

“The next train doesn’t leave until tomorrow morning,” Sebastian said, “so we’ll have to find a place to stay the night.”

Amanda’s heart sank. That was more money she hadn’t expected to spend. If she weren’t careful, she wouldn’t have enough money to reach St. Louis.

“There’s a hotel above this restaurant. Maybe there will be a couple of available rooms.”

She nodded. “Yes, that would be nice.” A hotel this nice would cost a pretty penny, but her pride would not allow her to reveal her poverty to Sebastian. And her longing for a clean, comfortable room outweighed the fear she felt. In fact, the thought buoyed her spirits and she found herself smiling at him across the table.

“Mama, can we find a place to play? On the train you said we could and now we have lots of time before the next train. Can I play?”

She couldn’t help smiling at the excitement in his voice, and her eyes twinkled into his. “I suppose we could find somewhere for you to play after we’ve found a room for the night.”

Matthew bounced up and down in his chair, his happy gaze straying to the door impatiently as the adults talked.

“If you’d like, I can take care of the rooms while you take Matthew outside. He does seem to be a bit anxious to be going.”

“Thank you, but you’ve certainly done quite enough for us already.”

Sebastian grinned. “Suit yourself. I think I’ll give my legs a good stretch, I’m feeling as cooped up as Matthew. Would you like to join me?”

“No, thank you. I saw a little church across the road and thought I’d take him there to play a while.”

With a smile and a nod, he strode across the room to book his accommodations for the night. Amanda noticed, begrudgingly, that he seemed to take a certain brightness away with him. A happy light—like the warm rays of the sunshine—that she hadn’t really noticed until she felt its absence.

Sighing, she rolled her eyes at her own silliness and motioned the waitress over. “I’d like to pay my bill,” she said, reaching for her reticule.

“Don’t worry, ma’am, the gentleman has already taken care of it.”

Amanda glanced across the room in surprise but Sebastian was nowhere to be found. “That man is really good at escaping sticky situations,” she muttered under her breath. “But just wait until I run into him again.”

But her irritated mumbling lacked conviction, and a soft smile creased her pretty pink lips. Taking Matthew by the hand, she hurried over to the reception desk. Amanda smiled at the woman sitting behind the desk. “Hello. I need a room for the night, please.”

The plump woman shook her head, smiling regretfully.

“I’m sorry but I just gave out the last room.”

Amanda sighed. Well, she shouldn’t have expected to have a pretty room in this nice little hotel. “Can you tell me where else I might find a room to rent?”

Again, her response was negative. “There is a festival in town tomorrow and all the rooms are booked solid. Have been for weeks. The gentleman was only able to get a room because we had a cancellation. Miss Mabel decided to stay with her daughter this year. If you ask me, she’s better off here, what with her daughter havin’ all them kids. Seven children and another one due any time now. I told Miss Mabel she’d have much more peace here, but she insisted on helping her family. I only had the one boy, you know, so I don’t know what it’s like to be around so many at one time, but I think they’d drive me plumb crazy! My son owns this business and, since I get lonely at home, he lets me help out here while my husband is at work. He’s such a good boy!”

Amanda listened to the woman’s monologue with a mixture of amusement and depression. Where would they spend the night? She tried to smile. “Thank you for your time.”

As she turned to go, the woman called, “Oh, wait a minute, dear. I just had an idea! Our regular housekeeper is out of town this week. She went to visit her children back east. Sometimes she has to work late, and we keep a place for her so she doesn’t have to walk home after dark. She lives about three miles out of town. You can use her room, if you like.”

“Are you sure she wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not. She doesn’t keep any belongings here.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! I don’t know how to

thank you.”

The woman, who introduced herself as Mrs. Mayberry, motioned Amanda to follow her. “Now, it’s not very big, mind you. The furnishings are a bit scarce, too, but it is a room and better than nothing at all.”

When they reached the door, Amanda asked, “How much do I owe you, Mrs. Mayberry? I’d like to pay up front.”

“Oh, I couldn’t take a dime for this tiny thing! I just wouldn’t feel right about it.”

Amanda clasped her hand. “Thank you so much!”

Mrs. Mayberry walked down the hallway, laughing. Amanda opened the door, not really caring what the room looked like, only that they were lucky enough to get it. Her first glimpse at the room surprised her. It was a bit small, but not exceedingly so, and it was very pretty! The hardwood floors were graced with a light pink rug that matched the walls and the patchwork quilt on the bed. The window and a small table both wore white eyelet, giving the room a fresh, feminine feel. She smiled happily.

“Isn’t this a lovely room, Matthew?”

“Yes, Mama,” he said. “Can we go play now?”

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed in surprise. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I completely forgot. Since you have been so patient we’ll go out right now.”

With one last look at the cozy room, she followed her son out the door. When they stepped onto the porch, Amanda caught a glimpse of Sebastian coming out of the mercantile across the road. He was putting something in his pocket and wearing a wide grin. She wondered fleetingly what he was up to now, but put the thought away as Matthew pulled her toward the little white church.

“Oh, Mama, it has a *swing*,” he exclaimed breathlessly,

breaking into a run. Amanda walked along behind him, smiling at his excitement over such a simple pleasure. She felt a pang deep inside and crushed the urge to run after him and join in the fun. Just because she had never been a carefree child was no reason she should start acting like one now. But, oh, it would feel so good!

Compromising, Amanda picked up her pace a bit and helped him on the swing, pushing him higher and higher, living vicariously through Matthew. How wonderful it must feel to soar through the air like that, she thought longingly.

His giggles and smiles made her laugh, and she realized with a start that she didn't feel quite so bad today. Indeed, she had not had even one thought of Avery since she stepped off the train. But that was dangerous. She could not forget.

But what could it hurt, for just one day? Amanda argued with herself. Didn't she deserve a break from the worry and fear that plagued her every minute, day after day? Couldn't she take just a few stolen moments of pleasure with her son without any worries to ruin their fun?

Amanda watched him glide through the air, laughing gleefully and kicking his feet. His little round face was flushed with happiness, his dark eyes sparkling. How she wished their lives could have been different. All she had ever wanted was a good husband, children to love, and a pretty little house she could call her own. Was that too much to ask? Was she being greedy by asking for all the things she had always longed for and never had? Amanda knew that, because she had no choice, she could live without these things that she wanted so badly. But what about Matthew? He deserved to be happy. He deserved to have everything good in life, all the pleasures, large and

small.

“Mama, look how high I am!”

Amanda was torn from her thoughts by Matthew’s jubilant cry. Tonight, she had a pretty little room in a small, friendly town. Why couldn’t she pretend, for just one night, that she didn’t have Avery hanging over her head? She smiled. Yes, for just one night they would be a normal family.

“Come on, Matthew,” she called, a bright smile gracing her pretty features. “Let’s walk to the mercantile.”

Slowing down a bit, Matthew jumped off the swing and ran to his mother. He took her hand and skipped along beside her as they walked toward the store. “Why are we going to the store, Mama?”

She smiled down at him. “I thought we’d do a bit of window shopping. It’s been a long time since I’ve shopped for enjoyment.”

A ghastly look crossed his face. “You mean you used to *like* shopping, Mama?”

Amanda laughed. “I think you’ll find out, sooner or later, that most women do like it, to some degree.”

“Ugh! I’m glad I’m a boy!”

They hurried across the street to the mercantile and stepped through the door. For a small town, the store was well stocked with a variety of items. Amanda crossed over to the fabric, fingering the delicate prints. They each had only three outfits to wear, and those were old and worn out. What she wouldn’t give to be able to make a new set of clothes for Matthew. Maybe, since Marshal Knight had been so kind to pay for their meal and they didn’t have to pay for their room at the hotel, she could buy a bit of cloth to make him a new shirt. As she checked the price of the cheapest material her heart sank, and she closed her eyes

against the disappointment. She should be used to this by now, she told herself. She should have known better than to hope.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed Sebastian standing outside the shop window. With a bit of a smile, he waved and strode on down the boardwalk. Turning around, Amanda located Matthew looking at a small display of homemade stuffed horses.

“Look, Mama, isn’t this the prettiest horse you’ve ever seen?” His eyes lit with wonder, he held the black animal out for her inspection.

“It is indeed, sweetheart.”

“Can I have it, please?”

Again Amanda checked the price, and again she was sadly disappointed. How could she tell him no? “I’m sorry, Matthew. We have to make our money last until we reach St. Louis, remember?” The look on his face nearly tore her heart out as he tenderly laid the black horse back on the shelf, arranging its legs into a more comfortable position. “How about a piece of licorice?” She asked with false brightness.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I like brown horses better anyway.”

They stepped to the counter and she ordered him one licorice and one piece of rock candy. The mouthwatering aroma of apple dumplings was coming from a room behind the counter, and Amanda commented on it.

“We sell ‘em, ma’am. Twenty five cents a piece.”

Amanda beamed. “May I have two, please?”

Paying for her purchases, she asked Matthew to choose which candy he wanted and put the other away for later. They walked across the street, Matthew happily chomping on his rock candy. Amanda looked for Sebastian, but

didn't see him anywhere. She told herself she didn't care whether he was around or not, but she had been alone so long that his company was more than welcome.

Amanda sat down at one of the tables on the porch and sent Matthew to ask for coffee. Mrs. Mayberry brought the tray out herself, setting out two coffee cups and one cup of milk for Matthew. She placed three plates in the middle of the table. "Is that nice gentleman joining you for dessert?"

"Well, I had hoped so, but I haven't seen him around lately. Has he returned to the hotel?"

"No, that he hasn't. I've been at the reception desk all evening and I've not seen him. He's probably sightseeing about town."

Amanda hid a smile. "I'm sure he'll turn up soon. Thank you for the coffee, Mrs. Mayberry. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh my, no thank you! You're a sweet girl for asking, though. Mighty sweet. Well, you enjoy yourself."

Turning to Matthew, Amanda tucked a napkin in the collar of his shirt and unwrapped his dumpling, cutting it in half and placing the smaller piece on her own plate. As she was finishing, a shadow fell across the table and she looked up in surprise. Sebastian smiled down at her. "May I join you?"

"Of course," she smiled in return as he sat down. "I ordered coffee for you and we brought you an apple dumpling fresh from the oven. It's nothing much, but I wanted to pay you back at least a little for everything you've done for us."

His electric blue eyes darkened and the smile left his face. His voice was a soft caress as he said, "You don't have to pay me back for anything, Amanda. Whatever I have done, I have done because I want to. Seeing the pretty

smile light your face is pleasure enough for me.”

Amanda struggled to breathe, her heart pounding in her chest. No one had ever made her feel so disconcerted, or so happy. He touched her hand, his warmth engulfing her and she wondered vaguely if this were what it felt like to be close to a swoon. She was in such a peaceful state of mind that she didn’t have the heart to reprimand him for using her given name.

“Mama, I’m still hungry. Can I have more?”

Sebastian watched her as she pulled her hand away, slicing her dumpling in half and again giving away the larger piece. No wonder she’s so thin that her dress hangs on her, he thought to himself.

“Were you able to find a room for the night? I’ve heard that there’s a festival tomorrow and I want you to know you’re more than welcome to take mine. I can sleep on the lounge in the lobby.”

Amanda had entertained the thought that Sebastian had been responsible for their luck in finding a free room, but she dismissed it now. “That’s very kind, but Mrs. Mayberry is letting us stay in the housekeeper’s room. It’s quite lovely. How is your room, Marshal Knight?” she asked, eyeing the badge and reminding herself that he could be the enemy.

“Please don’t call me that. After I reach St. Louis, I won’t be a lawman anymore. I’m to drop off some official papers at the jail there and then I’m a free man. Mr. Knight doesn’t suit me, either. It makes me think of my father, and that is a rather unpleasant memory. So, if you could do me this one favor, call me Sebastian.”

She acknowledged his request with a smile and a short nod. “What do you plan to do after you leave St. Louis?”

He stared past her, a faraway look in his eyes. Quietly,

he said, "I'm going home. With any luck, I'll be able to raise horses."

Matthew piped up at that. "I like horses, 'Bastian."

"Oh, that reminds me." Sebastian reached into his pocket and pulled out a little package, which he handed to the boy. "I saw this and thought you might like it."

Matthew tore into the paper, pulling out a brown horse like the one he'd seen in the mercantile. He looked up at Sebastian, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Thank you, 'Bastian! How'd you know I like brown best? Mama, can I go over there and play with it?"

Amanda blinked hard, willing the tears from her eyes as she nodded to him. That must have been what she'd seen Sebastian put in his pocket before she took Matthew to swing. With an iron will she gained control of her emotions and asked, "How did you know Matthew likes horses?"

He shrugged. "He told me on the train."

"When we were in the store he asked for a horse, but I—" her voice broke. "Thank you," she managed to whisper.

But Sebastian wasn't paying attention to her; he was watching Matthew with a smile. Thanking God for small favors, she hurriedly wiped her eyes and poured some more coffee from the pot Mrs. Mayberry had left. She sipped the strong brew, idly watching the passersby. How nice, to sit on a pretty porch while the sun bent over the horizon, watching her son play happily. A soft breeze rustled her hair and she put a hand to it, realizing that she hadn't combed it since she'd run out that morning. How she must look!

Sebastian stood reluctantly. "The train comes pretty early in the morning; we'd best turn in for the night."

She motioned for Matthew to join them. “I’ll meet you here in the morning.”

He turned to walk through the door, but halted at her softly spoken words. “Sebastian. I’ve enjoyed your company today.”

Sensing that for some reason this was hard for her to say, he simply nodded politely and went on his way.

That night as Amanda lay awake in the cozy bed, Matthew curled up beside her, she wondered about Sebastian. Her first instinct was to steer clear of him, but she felt inexplicably drawn to him. She knew that many people weren’t what they first appeared to be, but Sebastian was different somehow. His kindness was genuine, she was sure. And Matthew, who had never taken well to strangers, absolutely worshipped the man.

She only wished she knew if he could be trusted. She’d been so overly cautious for so long, she wasn’t sure what was real and what was imagined anymore. She knew that if she continued to travel with him, she could be walking into a trap. But on the other hand, she honestly could not see Sebastian doing anything to hurt them. Or anyone else, for that matter.

Much later she finally fell asleep, content to be in a clean bed with her child nestled safely in her arms.

## CHAPTER TWO

Amanda stepped out onto the porch early the next day to the soft songs of the birds and the sweet smell of a fresh spring morning. She smiled as she saw Sebastian climbing the stairs. He must have been to the train station already to check on the arrival time. “Good morning, Sebastian,” she called, a good night’s sleep putting her in good spirits.

He grinned when he heard her call his name. He bowed playfully before her. “Good morning, Amanda.” Her name from his lips was like a caress, and warmth spread through her.

“Have you been to the train station?”

He nodded. “Our train has been delayed for at least one day. It’s having some engine problems and all the other trains are booked. Looks like we’ll be here for a while longer.”

Amanda fought down a rush of panic. “I really need to get to St. Louis.”

He shrugged. “I do, too. But since we have no choice we might as well make the best of the situation. There’s a festival today, why not enjoy ourselves?”

*Yes, why not?* She thought to herself.

“Would you care to join me for breakfast?”

Matthew jumped up and down. “Can we Mama, can we?”

Amanda nodded silently, telling herself that it would be silly to sit at two different tables in the same dining

room. She denied the growing attraction she was feeling for Sebastian, and tried not to worry about the fact that he was a lawman. After St. Louis she'd never see him again, so what harm could a few days of fun do? They were sorely in need of some entertainment, and Matthew had never been to a festival. It was high time he had the chance.

As Amanda sat opposite him at the table, Sebastian noticed that she had taken the time to put up her honey blond hair and the dress she was wearing today was much more attractive than the loose fitting one from yesterday. The dark blue printed with tiny pink flowers suited her well.

Sebastian reluctantly looked away as Matthew claimed his attention, talking nonstop about the little brown horse he clutched tightly in his hands. Was this the only toy the boy had? Surely not, for Amanda seemed like the type of mother who would indulge her child. Of course, if money were the object, there were plenty of things that could be made from scraps around the house. She was certainly a mystery. Sebastian grinned. He'd always had a fondness for mysteries!

Matthew taught his horse to prance about the table while Sebastian turned his attention to Amanda. "I'd be honored to escort you to the festival, Amanda. It's been a long time since I've taken time away from work to relax and enjoy myself. The way I see it, a day off is way past due and if I have to spend it alone I'll just end up feeling sorry for myself. Say you'll come with me."

Amanda laughed. "You've missed your calling, Sebastian. You should have been a lawyer. I'm sure you could charm any jury into believing anything you wanted them to."

Sebastian's eyes darkened a bit, and Amanda wondered at the sadness she saw in them. "My days of trying to influence anyone's opinion are long over. I'm much happier just to live and let live. I guess I've become the easy going type," he said ruefully.

Amanda smiled. "I don't suppose being mellow is anything to be ashamed of, Sebastian."

"I guess not," he grumbled, a scowl lining his face.

Amanda allowed herself a frown. Although she'd not known him very long, she had come to think of Sebastian as a light shining through darkness. His bright smile and light-hearted attitude seeped through her fear and made her feel warm and safe. The patience and friendship he'd given Matthew were priceless to her, and she'd wondered once or twice if he were even capable of a frown.

Amanda pulled herself up short. When had she stopped thinking of him as a possible enemy and started looking upon him as a friend? He was a *lawman*, for goodness sakes! He could even now be plotting ways to push her into Avery's clutches.

Her fingers shook slightly as she took a sip of her coffee. What was she thinking? Except for that one time, she had always been a good judge of character. Hadn't Miss Annabelle always asked her to sit in on meetings so she could get Amanda's opinion of the businessmen? And, she thought proudly, she had never been wrong. Every man she had deemed trustworthy had proven to be so.

It was just that one time that she had made a mistake. Such a big mistake! But she'd been young and was so eager to start a life of her own that she hadn't paid attention to her instincts.

But that was a long time ago. And even though her head told her he could be against her, her heart knew he

wasn't. His kindness was too genuine. His eyes weren't hooded, but a clear, deep blue that twinkled merrily.

"Amanda?" She jerked her head up at the sound of two voices calling her name. Sebastian and Matthew were staring at her. "We've been trying to get your attention for a full five minutes. Where were you?"

"Were you sleeping with your eyes open, Mama?" Matthew chided.

She laughed. "I suppose I was. What were you trying to tell me?"

"Your food's getting cold."

She looked down in surprise at a plate of steaming biscuits and gravy. Sebastian must have ordered for her again, but she didn't recall the waitress taking their order or bringing the plates to the table. She must have been deep in thought, indeed!

She ate silently, savoring the good food but, more than that, the animated conversation that ensued between Sebastian and her son. Matthew, always a quiet child, seemed to blossom under Sebastian's attentions. His eyes sparkled brightly and his smile seemed to light the room. She smiled as Matthew was telling a particularly exciting story, holding his arms wide and demonstrating the wings of a bird. Suddenly, he lost his balance and tipped to the side, heading straight for the hard wood floor. Before Amanda could even react, Sebastian's strong arm shot out and grabbed the boy's shoulder, steadying him. Amanda smiled her thanks, but the near fall didn't even interrupt Matthew's chatter. She sighed, wondering what her life would have been like had she found someone like Sebastian years ago. Would every day be spent like today, with warm conversation and smiles that were never strained, never forced? Would the underlying contentment she felt today

extend over the years, their friendship growing stronger with every day they faced together? Would he smile at her like that every morning when she woke up and every night before she went to bed?

Amanda closed her eyes and berated herself for her thoughts. Just because every glance from his deep blue eyes made her insides turn to liquid was no reason to daydream for something she couldn't have. She knew what she must do, and she would do it—eventually. She had taken this one day from her worries to enjoy life with her son, but she could not fool herself into thinking that she could ever have a future with Sebastian. Indeed, with any man. How could she when she had no future herself? When her past caught up with her, her life would be finished. She could only pray that she was able to find a good home for Matthew before that happened.

Sebastian studied Amanda over the rim of his coffee cup while he half-listened to Matthew's chatter. She ate silently, smiling at Matthew from time to time, but it was obvious she was not aware of what he was saying. She had retreated deep inside herself, for some reason or another.

The woman was an enigma. It was apparent to him that she was unsure whether she could trust him or not. One moment, like on the train, she seemed openly fearful and unapproachable. Then in the next moment, like last night, she was warm and friendly. Now Sebastian knew, indeed had known from the beginning, that she was running from something. As a lawman, he'd learned how to discern a situation simply by gazing into an outlaw's eyes. The same fear and desperation was evident in Amanda.

He wanted to help her. After years of chasing outlaws and dealing with every kind of scenario a marshal could imagine, oftentimes helplessly watching the guilty walk and

the innocent punished, he'd had enough of trying to aid his fellow man. All he'd wanted to do was go back home to Marissa. But now, he had the inexplicable urge to protect Matthew and Amanda from whatever it was that so terrified her.

It was a long ride to St. Louis. Maybe he could drag the information out of her before their arrival.

Setting his cup down, he stood and held his hand out to Matthew. "Are you ready to see the festival?"

Matthew jumped off the chair, placing his hand trustingly in Sebastian's. Smiling at Amanda, Sebastian held out his arm, "Shall we?"

After a slight hesitation, she accepted his offer and placed her hand lightly on his arm. For a fraction of a second she felt lightheaded, so great was her reaction to Sebastian's touch. That unexplainable warmth and peace stole over her as it always did whenever they made contact of any sort.

Matthew raced out the door and jumped down the steps to the ground below. "Look, Mama, there's lots of people down the street! Oooh, I smell something yummy. Let's go see. Come on!" he urged as the older couple followed at a slower pace.

Although she knew she should, Amanda just could not force herself to let loose of Sebastian. He strode confidently beside her; his attention focused once again on Matthew. She glanced up at him through lowered lashes. Oh, but he was a sight to behold! Just then, he looked down at her, causing warmth to suffuse her middle. What was wrong with her? She'd never felt like this before, as if her whole being suddenly came alive whenever her eyes met his.

Sebastian motioned toward a small group of ponies.

“Can Matthew ride one?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s never ridden before. I don’t think it’s safe.”

“I’ll stay with him,” he assured her.

Amanda nodded, then sighed in irritation as he walked away to help the child mount. She had a sinking feeling that she would agree to anything that man suggested as long as their bodies were joined at some point. It was only once the contact was broken that her sense came back to her, and with it all her fear and distrust.

She watched closely as Sebastian lifted Matthew onto the pony and held him around the waist, walking along beside them as the animal swayed back and forth, slowly plodding along. The look of pure pleasure on her son’s sweet face was enough to make her forget her misgivings and enjoy his fun. She leaned against the fence that corralled the docile ponies and watched. Sebastian always kept his strong hands within inches of the boy’s waist, leaning down now and again to softly murmur instructions and encouragement.

It was not lost on Amanda the way her son looked to Sebastian for guidance, devotedly hanging on his every word. She had the feeling she could have stood atop the fence and sang “America the Beautiful” at the top of her lungs and neither of them would even notice. Sebastian confused her. He was a lawman. A handsome, tall, incredibly strong and muscular lawman. He should have scared the daylights out of her. He *did* scare the daylights out of her, when she had all her senses about her. If only he wouldn’t touch her she would be fine. Even the slightest brush of his hand could send a liquid fire into the very heart of her, leaving such a luscious feeling of security that she almost wished she could hold onto him forever.

She smiled as Sebastian lifted Matthew off the horse and he came running to her. "Did you see me, Mama? Did you see me ride the horse?!" His little face was flushed and his brown eyes sparkled with delight.

"I did see, sweetheart. You did a fine job."

He nodded. "'Bastian says I'm a natural. Right, 'Bastian?'"

He strode up behind the boy. "That's right. I've seen many a man that couldn't sit a horse as well as you."

Beaming, Matthew skipped off in search of another activity to participate in. Once again, Sebastian offered his arm and, once again, Amanda accepted it. She smiled secretly at the warmth that spread through her limbs. "It was kind of you to help him and give him such high praise."

Sebastian smiled down at her, his deep blue eyes full of mirth. "I told him the truth. Half the men in the army couldn't ride a horse as well as that boy. He's something to be proud of."

"You were in the army?"

The laughter in his eyes dimmed a bit. "I was. A long time ago."

"In the war?" she asked softly.

Sebastian turned his head, effectively shielding his eyes from her view. "Yes," he said curtly, picking up his stride as if trying to outrun the questions.

"Which side were you on?"

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the street and turned his troubled gaze on her. "Does it matter? After five damned years can it really matter which side I fought for?"

She met his hard gaze without flinching, studying the mixed emotions hidden there. "No," she whispered. "No,

it doesn't."

They resumed their walk, a silence descending upon them. Amanda wondered at the sadness he hid deep inside himself. He must have witnessed horrible things, and she admired him for the cheerful disposition he could still maintain when so many other soldiers had become bitter shells of their former selves.

It didn't take him long to resume his former attitude, for a moment later he was standing in line with Matthew to sign up for various afternoon activities. Every now and then his fingers would stealthily poke the boy in the ribs, sending him into gales of laughter.

Amanda stood at a quilting booth, sipping lemonade Sebastian had given her and admiring the handiwork of the many multi-colored quilts. It was while she was eyeing one in particular that a woman smiled at her from inside the booth. "Hello. I couldn't help noticing your boy over there. He's a cute little guy."

Amanda smiled. "Why, thank you."

"It looks like they're signing up for quite a few activities."

"Yes, I suppose they are. They both seem to be full of energy today."

"That child looks just like his daddy. You caught yourself a handsome one, ma'am."

Amanda followed the woman's look, smiling as her eyes lit upon Sebastian. She decided not to correct the lady's wrong assumption. At that moment he turned to look for her and their gazes locked. He grinned at her, and she couldn't help but smile in return. She was beginning to think there was something special about that man.

The woman in the booth claimed her attention. "Are you new in town, ma'am?"

“Just passing through,” she smiled. “Our train was delayed.”

“Where are you headed?”

“St. ...Paul,” Amanda hedged, belatedly remembering the threat of Avery.

“I hope you have a nice time in our little town.”

“Thank you,” she said, walking away quickly. She knew Avery would find her trail, but she wasn’t about to make it easy for him. Without thought she headed straight for Sebastian and the comfort she knew she could find from him.

She found him huddled together with her son, efficiently binding their legs together for the three-legged race. He smiled up at her while his fingers worked to finish the knots in the rope. “There you are. You’re just in time to see us win a race, right Matt?”

“Yep!” her son squealed. “We’re the fastest in the West!”

Sebastian laughed. “Well, I don’t know about that, but we have determination on our side. We can’t lose in front of such a pretty lady as your mother, now can we? Her beauty will inspire us.”

Amanda’s cheeks turned a deep crimson as she fought the laughter that bubbled up inside her and spilled out despite her best efforts. A smile remained on her face as she watched the pair hobble over to the starting line with a large group of others. At the signal, several of the participants fell to the ground right on the starting line. But not her team. Oh no, they were moving down the field as if they strode about tied together every day. Nary a man could catch up to them, let alone pass, and when they finally reached the finish line, they fell in a heap to the ground, Matthew landing squarely on Sebastian’s chest.

Amanda stepped forward in concern but resumed her position when she saw them simultaneously hold up the ribbon that had broken as they'd passed it. Applause peppered the crowd of onlookers, and the team claimed their blue ribbons and swaggered over to her, proud as punch of the prizes pinned to their shirts.

She made a big fuss over them, claiming never to have seen anything quite so exquisite in all her life.

"What would you like to do, Amanda?"

"Oh, anything is fine with me. I'm just enjoying the lovely day."

Sebastian glanced around and, spotting a row of gaming booths, urged his companions forward. He stopped abruptly before the first one, eyeing the selection of prizes. "What do I have to do to win one?" he asked.

The man in the booth held out two balls and pointed to a stack of three bottles. "Knock 'em down," he said curtly.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed as he regarded the situation. The bottles were large and made of thick glass, and he'd bet his last dime one of them was glued to the table they stood on. The balls the man handed him were lightweight, stacking the odds against him. He sighed, glancing up at the prize he'd set his sights on. He glanced down at the boy. "What do you think, squirt?"

Matthew jumped up and down. "Knock 'em down, Bastian! You're the strongest in the whole world!"

Sebastian grinned, a warmth spreading through him at the child's confidence in him. He paid the man, took the first ball, and threw it at the bottles. It hit the top edge and bounced back at him. Again he took aim, estimating the best spot, and threw with all his considerable strength. The bottles toppled to the ground, bringing a shocked look from the owner of the booth. Sebastian pointed to the prize he

wanted and, once it was his, turned it over to Amanda.

Her dark brown eyes widened in surprise and her pretty pink mouth fell open. "Sebastian, you can't mean to give me your prize. There are many things for a man over there. Look at that handsome hat."

"I have a hat."

"Well, that spittoon then."

He grinned. "I don't chew tobacco."

She sighed as he stepped up to her and placed the deep blue velvet bonnet on her head. The color was a perfect match to her dress, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a new one. So she smiled up at him as he tied the ribbon beneath her chin and thanked him politely. He was standing so close she could smell the soap on his skin. His electric blue eyes had gone dark and serious as he inched a bit closer to her. Her breathing turned shallow as she lost herself in the moment, waiting for him to kiss her. She could feel his warm coffee scented breath as it gently caressed her cheek. Unconsciously she licked her lips.

Sebastian watched her as if in slow motion, the tip of her pink tongue sliding along the smoothness of her lips, and he felt as if he were falling. And he longed for his own tongue to feel the softness of that mouth, to trail light kisses along her sweet cheek down her neck...

With a sigh and not a small amount of effort, he tore his gaze away from hers and began walking down the street, pulling her closer to him with the arm he'd left about her waist. "I don't know what it is about you, Amanda," he murmured, "but I feel like I've known you forever. It doesn't matter to me that I met you a scant two days ago," he continued in a low voice, his eyes trained on Matthew in the distance, "for friendship can't be measured by time."

They walked along in silence for a while, Amanda

fighting the emotions within her. After a long moment and much thought, she said quietly, “It’s been a very long time since I had a friend.”

Sebastian must have understood that it was difficult for her to allow even that small bit of information about herself to be divulged, for he remained quiet as he strode by her side. It felt good, they both thought, to be in the presence of someone you didn’t have to impress, or hide from. To be free to be yourself.

Sebastian continued to participate in the activities with Matthew while Amanda watched with a happiness that rivaled any she’d ever felt before. Not that she had ever had the chance to be really “happy”, she reminded herself ruefully. Matthew had been the only person in whom she’d found joy, and Amanda had believed he’d always be the only one. Now here was Sebastian, effortlessly bringing smiles and even laughter to lips that had been too somber for too long. She didn’t really know him, and yet she’d never felt closer to anyone than she did to him.

She sighed, berating herself. What a mess I’ve made of my life! To even daydream about a life with Sebastian is wrong. And stupid. And you’ll only hurt yourself more in the long run if you allow your imagination to run away with you. Look at you—you’re already half in love with him—

Amanda’s thoughts came to a crashing halt. She hadn’t just actually thought that, had she? Sebastian was a kind person, and good company, but *love*? Ridiculous. You don’t fall in love with someone you’ve known only two days, even if he is the kindest, most understanding man you’ve ever known.

Pushing her thoughts aside, she smiled as Matthew led Sebastian straight to her. “Mama, look what I won! ‘Bastian helped me, but I won it all by myself. Well,

almost by myself. Look!”

Amanda thought she'd faint when she glanced down at the prize her son was displaying so proudly. A toy marshal's badge was pinned to his shirt. She felt the blood drain from her face, but kept a cheerful smile pasted to her lips for his sake. “How nice, Matthew,” she managed to expel through lips stiff as ice.

“It's just like ‘Bastian's, Mama! I can be a lawman, too!”

Amanda swayed before catching herself and inserting the steel rod into her spine as she always did. She forced some color back into her cheeks and ruffled her son's hair, not daring to glance at Sebastian for fear he had seen her reaction.

A woman's squealing brought her attention around just in time to see the lady attach herself to Sebastian's muscular arm, screaming loud enough to wake the dead. “Marshal look, over there. You have to help my husband! He's going to get himself killed! That man just pulled a gun on him. You have to help him!”

Sebastian set the screaming woman from him and ordered his friends to stay put before striding determinedly toward the two men circling each other, weapons drawn. Amanda wrapped her arms around her son and watched in fear as Sebastian stepped into the line of fire. She could see him talking and knew he was trying to calm the men down enough to diffuse the situation. The screaming woman sank to the ground at Amanda's feet, sniffing pitifully. She looked up, her blue eyes wide with tears. “We've only been married two weeks. We're on our way to St. Louis to catch a wagon train west. I begged him not to go into the saloon. Nothing good ever came from a saloon, but he said he'd be just a minute. His brother is already out west

holding our claim, and he promised to bring him a bottle of good brandy. I don't know what happened in there, but they came out wielding weapons." She dissolved into tears and clung to Amanda's legs.

She patted the other woman's shoulder, still trying to keep an eye on Sebastian. "I'm sure he'll be fine. Sebastian will see that no harm comes to your husband," she promised, praying that she was right.

When she glanced back, she heaved a sigh of relief as the man to Sebastian's right holstered his weapon and turned to walk away. The other fellow, however, had other ideas and trained the gun on the retreating man's back.

Two shots resounded through the small town.

The woman's screams became earth shattering and she flung herself against Amanda's legs. As her knees buckled, they landed in a heap on the ground. Without his mother's arms to restrict him, Matthew ran toward the action.

Amanda called his name, trying to scramble away from the grief-stricken woman clawing at her. Their skirts became tangled, and the more she fought the more entangled they became. Frustrated, furious, and full of fear, she gave a great pull and broke free, the force of which nearly knocked her to the ground again. She regained her footing through sheer determination and ran toward her son. When she reached him, he was standing, as Sebastian had ordered, with his back turned to the grisly scene and any view he might be inclined to take covered by the lawman's broad form. Amanda fell to her knees and grasped her son, assuring herself that he had come to no harm.

He squirmed in her arms. "Mama, you can't hug a lawman in front of the whole town!"

She peppered a few more kisses over his chubby pink

cheeks and forced herself to release him. Only then did she glance toward Sebastian. He stood straight in the midst of the turmoil, the only voice of reason in a crowd that had grown hysterical. He issued orders, answered questions and calmed the overwrought townspeople. Even the town sheriff practically ran to do Sebastian's bidding.

She watched him in action, her throat constricted by the thought of how close he had come to being harmed. But on the other hand, she couldn't help but be proud of him. *This* was what a lawman was supposed to be like, she guessed.

As she scanned the crowd to see where the hysterical wife had gone, her eyes quite accidentally encountered the body of the fallen gunman. She turned quickly, but not soon enough in her estimation. Heaving a deep sigh to calm her nerves, she then noticed the overwrought woman being led away by her husband. At least that had turned out well, she thought.

After the excitement had died down and Sebastian had redirected the attention of the onlookers, he turned to her with a weak smile. "I'm sorry you had to witness that, Amanda. I tried to keep the boy away. Did he see anything?"

She smiled reassuringly and touched his arm, this time trying to send him the warm feelings that his touch always brought to her. "No, he's fine. He's playing over there under that tree. How are you?"

He looked at her questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she started slowly, unsure of herself, "it was upsetting enough to see something so horrible. It must have been increased a hundredfold for you, being in the midst of it as you were."

He shrugged. "That's my job. It's what I do."

“You do it remarkably well.”

Sebastian glanced at her in surprise. “Are my ears deceiving me or are you paying me a compliment?”

Her smile grew. “I do believe it was the latter.”

“Well, let’s see if we can’t rustle up another gunfight so I can show my prowess.”

“Oh please,” she said, gripping her stomach, “I don’t think I could take it!”

“What do you say we find something to eat? We had an early breakfast and now it’s way past lunch.”

Nodding in agreement, they collected Matthew and headed toward the enticing smells coming from down the road.

They chose a small booth sporting ads promising mouth-watering ham and beans and cornbread. They ordered three huge bowls and sat down on some bales of hay strewn about for that purpose. A few feet away a fiddler was tuning his instrument and the trio sat back, enjoying their food and anticipating the music to come. As they were finishing their dinner, the band started up with a merry tune and some of the people began to dance. Matthew got right into the middle of it and danced until his little face turned red and his breath was coming in short gasps. He collapsed next to his mother and laid his head in her lap, his chest heaving. When he could finally speak, he turned to her with shining eyes and said, “Did you see me, Mama? I was dancing just like everybody else! And that lady over there asked me to escort her in the next round!”

Amanda glanced over to see a lady with a kind, grandmotherly look about her waving to Matthew. She smiled and sent him off for more merrymaking. An early evening breeze ruffled her hair and she turned her face into it, enjoying the soft, cool feel. Sebastian touched her

shoulder and she looked him askance, wondering at the warmth that lingered on her skin where his hand had been.

“May I have this dance?” he asked softly.

“What?” she asked, shocked. “I don’t dance, Sebastian.”

“Why not?” he grinned. “Come on, let’s have some fun.”

He grabbed her hand and urged her to her feet, taking her firmly into his arms. As their bodies connected she knew she would not deny him this one dance, not when her whole body felt at once numb and tingling from the contact. Contentment stole over her and she sighed, releasing herself to it. His hand rubbed a light circle on her back as they swayed to and fro. She had never claimed to be a very graceful dancer, but Sebastian required almost no help as he led her through the steps. She was aware of every point where his body met hers, every touch, every caress. She could smell the warm, fresh scent of him, could feel his heart beating with hers.

All of a sudden the set was over, the dancers clapping. Without asking for consent, Sebastian whisked her into the next dance, a bit faster, and they danced and laughed the night away.

Later, after the festival had been cleaned up and there was no sign left of it they sat on the porch to the hotel watching the stars and the bright, full moon. Matthew, completely tuckered out, had fallen asleep some time ago with his head resting on Amanda’s lap. The couple sat close together, sometimes talking, sometimes enjoying a comfortable silence. The smell of early honeysuckle drifted on the breeze. They were both reluctant to end what had been such a wonderful day, even though they knew the morning would come early, and with it, the train. Amanda

dreaded that, so she inhaled the sweet smell and let her breath out in a sigh.

“Well, I suppose it’s time to head in,” Sebastian said.

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

He scooped Matthew effortlessly into his arms and carried him upstairs to their small room. He gently placed the child onto the bed and returned to the door where Amanda waited for him. Without a word he took her face in his hands and looked deeply into her dark brown eyes. The moment he walked out that door the spell would be broken and the day they had just spent would be only a memory. He resisted that with every fiber of his being, but the built-in logic won out and so he placed a soft kiss on her forehead and strode quickly away.

Amanda crawled into bed beside her son, wrapping her arms securely about him, and smiled to remember the day’s activities. On that thought, she drifted into a sleep blessed with sweet dreams.

## CHAPTER THREE

The next morning dawned bright and early, finding Amanda in a foul mood. She stood desolately before the vanity as she was putting her hair into a tight bun, her face pale and pinched. Their short vacation was over. Their journey continued, and it was time to face her troubles once again. The noisy trains, the crowded stations, always looking over her shoulder in fear of finding Avery a step behind her. And the way she constantly, fervently, and hopelessly sought a way out of the mess she'd made of her life. It was all back on her now and, after her short reprieve, felt even heavier than it had before.

Amanda pulled her bun tight with a sigh and a glance toward where Matthew still slept on the bed. Her features softened momentarily and she resisted the urge to crawl back under the covers with him and fall into the comfort of sleep. Instead, she woke him and helped him dress before ushering him out the door. She took one last look at the pretty pink room with the crisp eyelet curtains and closed the door softly behind her.

In the hallway, she bumped into the hysterical woman from the night before. The other lady grasped her hand and said, "I don't know how to thank you and Marshal Knight for helping us yesterday. If it weren't for you my Justin would surely have been injured. I just wanted to let you know that your kindness is appreciated and if you ever need anything, I'll be there for you. I've written down my address and, although I won't be there for some time yet, my brother-in-law is there and will help you with anything you need."

Amanda smiled. "That's very thoughtful, but—"

"Please take it. This is all I have to give."

"Thank you very much," Amanda said, deeply touched.

They bid farewell and Amanda continued downstairs to find Sebastian sipping coffee on the porch. "Good morning!" he called. "Would you like some coffee?"

She shook her head and sank into the chair, waiting for Matthew to have his breakfast. "I would have ordered something for you but I wasn't sure when you'd come down."

She shrugged. "Thank you, but I'm not hungry anyway."

Sebastian struck up a conversation with Matthew and Amanda stared past them to the scenic view of the town. She felt numb, she thought, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She'd had a slight taste of what life could be like and she didn't want to go back to the fear and the longing that was so much a part of her real life.

Damn Avery! Damn him for bringing her to this! He had never cared for her, so why was he still punishing her for leaving? And why did the punishment have to be so thorough, so final?

When the boys were finished with their meal, she followed them to the train station dejectedly, searching the face of every passerby to make sure she had not been found. She felt relatively secure, since she still hadn't had *the feeling*. As far as she knew, he had no clue where she was, but she would take no chances.

They filed onto the train and she wasn't a bit surprised when Sebastian sat down beside them as if he belonged there. She had half a mind to tell him he should sit somewhere else, but stopped when she realized that she wanted him there. That without his calming presence she

may very well fall off the edge that she teetered on daily. Was it just her imagination or was she even closer to that edge than usual?

The whistle blew and the train started off. Amanda was busy studying the people on board and listened with half an ear to Matthew's excited chatter as he bounced in his seat beside the window. She was so intent on her own thoughts that she didn't notice Sebastian watching her with concern.

"Amanda?" he asked, touching her shoulder.

She jumped with a gasp, almost screaming with shock. When she realized who had called her she took a deep, calming breath and closed her eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," she said with false brightness. "I'm just fine. Maybe a little tired, that's all."

"You seem upset about something. Would you like to talk about it?"

"No, really, I'm fine. I suppose I stayed up too late last night."

His smile was gentle as it lit upon her. "Why don't you try to sleep some. I can keep an eye on Matthew."

She nodded and laid her head back against the seat, wondering vaguely when she had come to trust him so completely that she would entrust her son to him. With a sigh, she drifted into dreamland.

Sebastian watched Amanda as she slept. Tenderness spread through him at the sight of her and he knew he'd like nothing more than to protect her from whatever it was that troubled her. Her actions seemed to tell him that she may be in more trouble than he'd first suspected. The way she watched everyone, suspicion evident in her eyes,

conveyed to him the fact that she was running from someone. The dejected slump to her shoulders and sadness in her eyes made him think she didn't have much hope of outrunning her aggressor.

What would it be like to see her pretty smile on a regular basis, without the guarded look in her deep brown doe eyes? To see those eyes shine with happiness? Would the almost black color lighten to a warm chocolate brown?

Every time she turned her gaze on him he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. Since this was something he'd never experienced before, he was unsure how to handle it. If he offered his help too soon, he might very well scare her off. On the other hand, if he waited too long, his help might come too late.

The woman was an enigma. He prided himself on being a good judge of character, and all his instincts told him that Amanda was a good person. But he couldn't quite read her as well as he could read most people. It was as if she held her true personality back and only allowed a portion of herself to show. Sebastian was very interested in finding out what the *real* Amanda Darcy was like.

He yawned and glanced toward Matthew, who had fallen asleep against his mother's arm. With a thankful sigh, he let his own head sink back and fell fast asleep.

Amanda woke up, for the first time in years, feeling peaceful and refreshed. Her sleep-dulled mind grasped to find the reason for this unfamiliar feeling, and she smiled as she turned her head and realized it was pillowed upon Sebastian's hard arm. So that was it, she thought dreamily, Sebastian's calming presence. Since he was still asleep, she laid her head gently on his shoulder for a moment, glorying in the feel of having someone else beside her.

With him here, she didn't feel so alone, so desperately lonely.

With a sigh she sat up and glanced at Matthew, who was still sound asleep. Through the window she could see rain pouring down in torrents from a dark gray sky. A furious wind whipped the trees this way and that like strings of limp spaghetti. A fitting way to resume her trip to St. Louis, she thought ruefully. Just as she was considering dozing off again, a jerk beside her brought her up short. Sebastian's head was thrashing from side to side and he was mumbling ferociously. The scowl on his face could have frightened the devil himself, and his muscles were rock hard with tension. Amanda couldn't understand what he was saying, but she got the feeling this was more than just a bad dream. She watched him in confusion for a while, uncertain what she could do to help him. Finally in sympathy she laid her hand on his arm. Immediately he sat up straight and turned to her, his blue eyes wild. She gasped involuntarily and he turned away from her.

She didn't say anything, unsure whether or not he was still asleep. His thrashing had quieted, and he sat still as stone, staring straight ahead. Amanda laid her hand on his, and he looked at her then, the wildness gone from his eyes but replaced with an infinite sorrow that brought tears to her own eyes. "I had the dream, didn't I?" he asked quietly.

Amanda said nothing, but gazed at him through eyes full of understanding. She didn't need to confirm what had happened, he already knew. "Would you like to talk about it?"

He shook his head, daring a look at the people around him and found to his great relief that most of them were asleep and unaware of the demons that plagued him. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Every time he

thought he was over the guilt the dream came again, reminding him of the horrible thing he had done. He would never be free of it. Never. His conscience would not allow it.

“Sebastian?”

His eyes found hers reluctantly. Out of all the people aboard why did it have to be Amanda who witnessed his nightmare? She’d certainly think less of him now.

“Talk to me,” she urged in a quiet voice. “Tell me what happened so you can free the demons that torment you.”

A dark, fierce look came over his handsome face, his eyes burning into hers. “I’ll not tell you, Amanda, of the horrible, unforgivable things I have done,” he said hoarsely. “When our paths part in St. Louis, I’d rather you still think of me with fondness.”

“I know you, Sebastian. You are a kind, understanding man and I’m sure that nothing you tell me would make me believe otherwise.

“Was it the war?” she asked softly.

Sebastian swallowed over the lump in his throat, his hands beginning to shake as he realized he couldn’t stop himself from speaking. He started in a low voice, tight with tension and pain. He stared straight ahead, unable to meet her gaze.

“When I was five years old I left Mississippi and went to live with my Grandma. My parents had never had much interest in me and so it was the logical choice, I guess. My father was a very strict military man who cared about nothing but his career and keeping the appearance of a wealthy military officer. My mother was only concerned with what his money could buy her. So they shipped me off to Grandma’s house, which was probably the only good

thing they ever did for me. They visited me once when I was eleven, but other than that they stayed away.

“Grandma was wonderful. She was my father’s mother and appalled at the way I had been treated. I think she tried to make up for them by trying extra hard to make me feel special. Under her influence, I learned how to be kind and thoughtful, for she was always lending a helping hand to anyone who needed one.” A small smile touched his lips. “As I grew up I became involved with one of the girls from town. Misty spent so much time at our place Grandma practically adopted her. We planned to be married, but then the war started and I felt it was my duty to join. Having lived in Illinois most of my life I felt no kinship to my southern roots and so I fought for what I believed in. I fought for the Union. Misty swore she’d wait for me.

“I spent long, hard years in the Army. Everything you can imagine from wet, freezing temperatures to sweltering heat. Sometimes we ate, sometimes we went without. I was obsessed, in those days, with beating the pants off the south. I don’t know what happened to me in those years, but I didn’t simply want to win. I wanted to beat them into the ground and I did everything I could to see that that happened. I always knew, in the back of my mind, that my father was out there somewhere. That someday we may come together at opposite ends of a battlefield. That never happened.

“Right after I was promoted to Captain I was wounded at Gettysburg and sent home to recuperate. It took a few months to regain my strength, and I was ready to return to battle. This was something I was good at, pulverizing the other troops. So you can imagine my anger when I was informed I would be stationed in Alton, Illinois, my

hometown. I appealed to every superior officer I could find, but I was not allowed to return to battle.

“So I reported to the Confederate prison in Alton and immediately hated it. The walls were gray with dirt and grime, no splash of color anywhere but the American Flag, which of course was hated by the prisoners.

“The prison smelled worse than anything I could describe to you. Even the breezes coming off the Mississippi River couldn’t alleviate the stench. Disease ran rampant and smallpox was feared by each and every one of us. During one such epidemic many of the infected prisoners were taken to a small island on the Mississippi in an attempt to control the spreading.

“The worst part for me came one evening when a group of rebels were brought in. I inspected them as I always did and looked up to see my father standing before me. He was extremely thin and his uniform was torn to shreds. Still, that damned triumphant look was in his eyes. The same look he’d always given me as a child. ‘You’ll never be as good as me, boy,’ he used to say.

“For a moment I was dumbfounded, but then I continued my inspection as if I’d never met him. I remember he laughed coldly. ‘Joined up with the Yanks did you, boy? I should have expected as much. Never could count on you to do the right thing.’ Still I ignored him and sent him to a cell.

“From that day forward my life was a living hell. He did everything he could to make me miserable, as if I hadn’t been already. Any time I walked by he’d call out obscenities at me. There was no way I could avoid him because I was in charge of guarding that side of the prison. The longer he was there the more trouble he caused. He yelled and hollered and got the other rebs riled up. They

had to be subdued daily. Every day I dreaded being on duty and every night I was so exhausted and angry all I could do was fall into bed and pray for sleep that never came.

“One day I was headed down to stop the commotion that by now was commonplace when I heard someone shout ‘escapee’. I drew my weapon as I turned and shot the man down off the wall exactly as I’d been trained to do. I meant only to graze his shoulder to bring him down, but he’d taken a final desperate leap and the bullet penetrated his chest. As I ran over to the fallen soldier, I couldn’t believe my eyes. I stopped before him, my gun falling from my nerveless hands into the holster. I stared. I couldn’t help it. On his last breath he opened his cold eyes and sneered at me. ‘Never could do anything right, could you, boy?’

“I was stunned. I had single-handedly killed my own father.

“The next day we received word that the war was over. I was awarded a commendation for preventing an escape and was honorably discharged. I went home to Grandma and Misty and expected life to return to normal.”

Sebastian laughed ruefully. “I should have known better than to think four years in the Army in active wartime wouldn’t change me. I wasn’t happy anymore. I was restless and pursued by the guilt of what I had done. I tried to work out my demons by plowing Grandma’s fields and raising crops. I succeeded and made her a pretty penny but I still didn’t feel any better. Misty had changed in the long years I had been gone. True to her word, she had waited for me. But she was as miserable in our small hometown as I was. She came to me one night and told me she was moving to a big city because she wanted to be a dancer. Knowing it would be the last time we’d be together our emotions got the better of us and we... well, we were

intimate. She left the next morning and I left shortly after that, thinking that if I became a lawman I could do some good for the world and somehow by performing good deeds I could free myself of my guilt. I visited Grandma as often as I could so she wouldn't be lonely. But then she took in an orphan and she got along fine without me, too. Of course I still visited, but not near as often, and the last time I was there she was ill. I stayed with her until she passed away, and I know she knew how much I loved her, but the guilt of not being there more for her was hard to take. So I decided to get my life in order, leave my job, and take over her small farm in Illinois."

Sebastian chuckled, still not looking at her. "And there you have it. My life story."

Amanda was speechless. She had no idea what to say to him. What do you say to a man who sees himself as a failure? She placed her hand on his arm. "Sebastian, none of these things are your fault. You've done the best you could and, given the situations you've been in, you've done quite well."

Sebastian took a deep breath and held it for a moment, releasing it slowly through his lips. When he turned toward her, his eyes were bright. "I don't know what came over me. I have never told another living soul what I've just told you. Not Grandma, not Misty, not anyone. I swore to myself I never would." He grasped her hand. "Thank you for listening and not hating me for the things I've done."

"Oh, Sebastian," she said softly, feeling a deep tenderness for him. "No one hates you but yourself. You did what had to be done, and sometimes there are consequences that are unforeseen. But believe me when I say that it takes a strong man to do what he has to do and still be able to function afterward. I don't hate you. I

admire you.”

He bent his head, clutching Amanda’s hand to his solid chest. Needing to give him comfort, she laid her head against his shoulder and squeezed his hand. And this was how Matthew found them when he woke from his nap.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The interminable hours on the train ticked away slowly for the trio headed for St. Louis. For Amanda, the monotony was broken by only two things: one, searching the faces of all the new passengers; and two, conversation with Sebastian and her new friends, Justin and Sharon Mahoney.

Amanda was surprised to see the couple from the gunfight at the festival aboard the same train. They had struck up a quick friendship and were finding that they had much in common.

Since his confession, Sebastian and Amanda felt a bond growing between them that neither of them wanted to admit. Once they reached St. Louis, they would go their separate ways and very likely never see each other again. Neither one wanted to make the parting more difficult than it already would be. So why did they say nothing when the Mahoneys assumed they were a married couple?

Amanda found herself relaxing a bit with Sebastian always there beside her, finding comfort and security in him. This man was special, she realized more and more with each day that passed. He had strength, in mind and in body, which she greatly admired. But he also possessed a sensitive nature that allowed him to interact with her son on a child's level. He was amazing, this lawman that she had been so afraid of when they'd met. Now, she didn't know what she'd do without him. Amanda had never had someone make her feel safe and secure, and she was finding that she'd sorely miss it when it was gone.

In her dreams, Sebastian was there for her to lean on,

to take comfort from, and, well, she blushed to think what else he was there for. But only in her dreams could she let him get that close to her. Only in her dreams could she allow herself to depend on another person for anything. Because no matter how strong, sensitive, and understanding Sebastian was, he was still a lawman. And she was still a woman on the run.

Amanda glanced at her sleeping son curled up on Sebastian's lap, one arm around his waist and the other clutching his horse. The lawman met her gaze and smiled. She turned her head before he could see the tears fall.

And so, one by one, the days finally passed. Amanda could hardly believe it when they pulled into the station in St. Louis. She was down to two dollars and fifty cents, and she shuddered to think what would have happened to them if Sebastian hadn't helped them so much. She would miss him. Never in her life had she missed anyone, but she knew without a doubt that she would miss him. His quiet confidence always made her feel safe, and now she would have to return to doing everything herself.

And yet, a part of herself was also looking forward to her new position as governess for the Richardsons. She always preferred being a governess rather than a maid. There were many more privileges with such a job, and she thoroughly enjoyed working with children and giving Matthew someone to play with.

The trio left the train together, Amanda treading carefully to make sure she wasn't being watched. They stepped out of the station into the brilliant sunshine and she gasped at her first view of St. Louis. She had seen big cities before, but nothing compared to these large buildings vaulting toward the sky. It was magnificent!

Sebastian turned to her reluctantly. "I guess this is where we say goodbye."

Amanda looked into his bright blue eyes. "Yes, I suppose it is. I want to thank you for all you've done to help us—"

He put his finger to her soft pink lips. "I have done nothing. You have allowed me to exorcise my demons and let go of some of the guilt I've been carrying all these years. I can't even begin to thank you."

They stared at one another for so long that Matthew became restless and pulled on Sebastian's sleeve. "C'mon, 'Bastian, I'm hungry. Let's have lunch."

"Well, maybe we could—"

"No," Amanda shook her head firmly. "This is difficult enough. Prolonging it will only make it harder."

His disappointment was evident, but he agreed with her. Bending down, he hugged Matthew to him. "I've had fun with you, Squirt. Take care of your mother, okay? She needs someone strong like you to help her."

Matthew's eyes teared up. "Where are you going, 'Bastian?"

His eyes met Amanda's, shock registering with the knowledge that neither one of them had thought to tell the child they would be parting company. His heart squeezed painfully as the boy's arms clutched his neck, his little voice begging him not to go.

Firmly, Sebastian set Matthew from him. "You have to be strong, Matthew. I'll miss you as much as you'll miss me, but your mother and I are going to different places. Don't worry, maybe I can visit sometimes. My home isn't too far from here."

This seemed to satisfy him somewhat, and Sebastian stood up and took Amanda in his arms. He bent down and

kissed her soft, sweet lips, turned quickly, and walked away without looking back.

Taking a moment to recover, Amanda took her pouting son by the hand and led him to the hotel she was supposed to report to before going on to the Richardsons' house. She pushed back her sadness at the loss of Sebastian and walked up to the desk with a smile. "Hello. My name is Amanda Darcy and I'm to work for the Richardsons. You have an envelope with my instructions, I believe?"

"Just one moment," the man said and disappeared behind a door. He returned with an envelope and she thanked him.

Walking out into the lovely day, she sat down on a bench and gave Matthew a snack to tide him over until dinner. She opened the envelope and was surprised to find ten dollars. Tucking it quickly into her reticule, she opened the letter that accompanied it.

"Dear Mrs. Darcy," it began, "I am sorry to tell you that we no longer require your services. A family emergency in our hometown has called us away and we don't know how long it will be until we return, if indeed we return at all. I have enclosed ten dollars to compensate you for your trip and am sure you will find adequate work, St. Louis being such a large place. Best of luck, Mrs. Richardson."

Amanda's eyes closed against the harsh reality that she was still without a job. She had no money and no prospects of earning more. Where would they stay until she found a job? That could take days, even weeks! How would she feed her son? She had always been strong willed and determined, but this was the last straw. What could she do now? She'd come all this way depending on that job! How could they go away and leave her with a measly ten

dollars?!

Amanda stared straight ahead, aware of nothing but her own problems. She didn't see the many people who passed by her, throwing curious looks her way. She didn't see the storm clouds that rushed to cover the sun, and didn't feel the drops of rain that soon began to fall.

Sebastian walked out of the barbershop and headed to the mercantile. As he stepped off the boardwalk he noticed Amanda and Matthew sitting across the street. He quelled the urge to go over to them, knowing that if the first goodbye had been so gut wrenching, a second would be almost impossible. So he continued on his way, picking up the special supplies that he would need for home that he would not be able to get in Alton.

An hour later he noticed the storm clouds as he strode away from the store. Unable to stop himself, he glanced across the street to where his friends had been and was surprised to find them still sitting there. Upon closer inspection, he could see the dejected look on Amanda's face and hear Matthew's frightened chatter. He had no idea what was wrong, but nothing was going to stop him from finding out!

He made his way quickly across the crowded street and waved. Matthew ran to him and wrapped his little arms about Sebastian's legs. "What happened?"

The small boy shook his head. "I don't know. Mama's sad and she won't talk. She only stares and I don't know what to do!"

Taking his hand firmly, Sebastian walked over to Amanda and knelt before her. "Amanda?" he called softly. She seemed not to see him. "Amanda, what's the matter? Talk to me." There was still no response. Noticing the

crumpled paper lying on her lap, he picked it up and read it, barely feeling the rain that wet the words and made them run together.

“Oh, you poor girl,” he murmured, putting his arm around her and urging her to her feet. She gave no protest but still did not return from her trance-like state. “Come along, Matthew. I’m taking you to my hotel room.”

Laying Amanda on his bed, he then turned his attention to Matthew. “Here son, let’s get those wet clothes off you.” He took a clean shirt from his own bag and, after drying him off, slid the soft cotton over the boy’s head. “I bet you’re tired after such a long day, huh?”

Matthew nodded, his big dark eyes full of fear. “Is Mama okay?”

He pulled Matthew onto his lap. “Your mother has had news that was a bit shocking to her and she’s trying to find a way to cope with it. I promise I’ll talk to her and help her to feel better. Do you trust me?” Again he nodded. Sebastian placed some blankets on the floor in the corner of the room and settled Matthew upon them, watching as he curled up and fell fast asleep.

With a sigh he set about relieving Amanda of her clothes. His fingers shaking, he unbuttoned her bodice and stripped the wet clothing away from her warm skin. He had hoped he wouldn’t have to put himself through the torture of removing her unmentionables, but they were soaked through and so he made quick work of ridding her of them, also. He clothed her in another of his soft cotton shirts and tried unsuccessfully to quiet the desire raging through his body. Although he had tried his best not to look, such a task was impossible, and he found that her body was even lovelier than he had imagined.

He sat on the side of the bed and took her cold hand in his, rubbing until some warmth returned. After what seemed an eternity, she opened her eyes and looked at him, actually seeing him for the first time. She didn't question how she had gotten there, or why Sebastian was once again in their company. No, she was too relieved to see him to wonder why.

"Oh Sebastian," she said softly, tears gathering in her lovely dark eyes, "what am I going to do? I have no job, no prospects, and no money. I'm afraid. Oh, I am so afraid that I can't do it anymore. I'm tired of trying. It's time I finally gave up."

Scowling fiercely, he grabbed her shoulders tightly and shook her. "I don't ever want to hear you talk like that again, do you hear me? You have a little boy counting on you. Don't give up so easily."

She laughed humorlessly. "I'm tired of fighting. I always knew this day would come and finally it has. I've no more spirit left. No choices, nowhere to turn."

Sebastian turned away, seemingly deep in thought. When he turned back to her, he was smiling. "I can help you, Amanda."

She touched his cheek. "No, you can't. I thank you for trying, but no matter how much I want to lean on you I can't—" She broke off suddenly, eyeing him thoughtfully.

He stood up, running a hand through his hair. "It's time for truth, Amanda Darcy. I know, have known from the beginning, actually, that you are running from something. Don't bother trying to deny it, your every action gives you away. The way you move from job to job, trying to save enough money, I assume, to move far away where you won't have to run anymore. I want to help you, and I need to know the truth here and now so I can."

“You’re right, you can help me,” she said, sitting up in bed and skirting the issue of *why* she was on the run. “All these years, moving from one place to another, I haven’t been trying to save money so I could find a permanent hide-out. I know that is impossible. I have hired myself out as governess and maid time and again not for money, but in the hopes of finding a home for Matthew. I have searched high and low for a family that I could trust to take Matthew in and treat him as their own. But in all the time I’ve been out there in the cold, hard world, I’ve only met one person who I could trust to love him. You.”

Sebastian was floored. He felt as though he’d been kicked in the gut. The only emotion he could feel took hold of him and filled every cell in his body. Gone was the sympathy he’d felt for her being alone. Gone was the admiration he bestowed upon her for taking care of her child in the best way she knew how. All he could feel now was rage. Hot, blinding rage.

He stepped back from the bed, fisting his hands so he wouldn’t hurt her. “How could you possibly even consider dumping that child in someone else’s lap? Look at him!” he bellowed, pointing to the small bundle in the corner. “He loves you! He needs you! And, after you push him out of your life, what do *you* plan to do?!”

Tears formed in Amanda’s eyes. She could barely look at him, his anger was so potent. “Turn myself in,” she whispered.

He sank into the chair by the bed, his legs suddenly too weary to support him. “What did you do?” he demanded.

“Sebastian, there is no reason for me to tell you. I am a wanted woman who has been running from the law for too many years. If you take Matthew for me then, when I’ve finally been caught, he won’t have to bear the

repercussions.”

“How can you say that? He’ll have no mother.”

“But at least he’ll have someone to love him. And he won’t have to see me carted away to jail.”

“How bad is it? How long are you looking at?”

She smiled fearfully. “I can say with strong conviction that I am sure I will hang.”

Energy returned to his legs with such force that his chair slid across the room as he stood. “I’ll not let that happen!”

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me, Sebastian, but you can do nothing about this. If you take Matthew, at least I can meet my punishment knowing that my son is well taken care of.”

“I can help you.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Are you guilty of this crime you supposedly committed?”

“Yes!”

He leaned down until his face was barely an inch from hers, and she thought she’d never seen eyes so hard. “Let me tell you something, Amanda Darcy. Over the past two weeks I have gotten to know you well, and I refuse to believe that you would do anything that would cause you to hang. Now, whether you like it or not, you *will* tell me what happened. Everything. And, mark my words, *I will help you!*”

She stared up at him, wondering if she were physically capable of uttering the words that would turn him against her. She had never told another soul what had happened, and had never planned to. She jumped when he barked “Now!” in a tone that would brook no argument.

Her hands shook as she began to speak. “I grew up in

an orphanage. It wasn't so bad there, the ladies were nice to me, but I had no feeling of belonging. I was the town outcast and laughingstock because, unlike the other girls in the orphanage, everyone knew who my parents were. The ladies tried to shield me from the worst of the gossip, but even children hear what's being said on the street, so by the time I was five I knew that my mother was the town's prettiest, and youngest, prostitute and my father was the town drunk. My mother had been but fifteen when I was born and couldn't take care of me. She could barely take care of herself. Even so, I used to watch her when she walked down the street, hoping against hope that she would change her mind and take me away with her. Of course that never happened, and eventually I stopped wishing it would.

"So I grew up in the orphanage and all I wanted in life was a good husband, many children around me, and a pretty little house." She laughed. "My three wishes. So when Avery passed through town and gave me some attention, I followed him like a lost puppy. They tried to tell me he was no good, but I wouldn't listen. I wanted someone I could belong to. I was fifteen when we were married and moved to a small one-room shack a long way from my hometown. Almost immediately he began treating me badly. I wasn't a wife to him, I was a slave. I was there to cook, clean, and, well, please him in any way he wanted. And, believe me, there were many different ways he liked to be 'pleased'." She shuddered.

"Matthew was born less than a year after we'd been married and that's when he started beating me. Right after Matthew had his first birthday he was playing on the floor while I cooked dinner. Quite accidentally he knocked Avery's glass over and brandy spilled all over the place. I turned to pick up the baby but I was too far away. Almost

in slow motion I saw Avery lift his fist toward my child.” She looked up at him then. “I didn’t think, Sebastian, I just did whatever I could to save my child. He was so small, I knew he wouldn’t survive one of Avery’s beatings. So I picked up the fireplace poker, the end of which had been laying too close to the fireplace, and hit him over the head. It must have been very hot, because as it slid off his head, it burned a whole through the shirt on his shoulder. I’ll never forget the smell of charred skin.

“I grabbed Matthew and the bag I knew Avery kept some money in and ran. After I boarded that first train and looked to see how much money I had I found our marriage certificate, which was quite fraudulent. That’s when I found out I was never even married to him. All I knew was that I had to hide until I could find a safe place for my son. I never dreamed it would take this long. So, I’m wanted for attempted murder.

“I’m sorry to drag you into all this, and I tried not to speak to you when we met, but you were so kind to us, and we’ve had so little kindness.”

When he didn’t speak, she looked up to see his reaction. He was glaring down at her. “Your name is not really Amanda Darcy, is it?”

“No,” she whispered. “My name is Amanda Higgins. Well, it would have been had I actually been married to him.”

Sebastian began pacing. “Avery Higgins,” he growled. “I should have known.”

“You know Avery?”

“Unfortunately. He tried to pay me to find his runaway wife.”

Amanda laughed hysterically, afraid she was losing touch with reality. “And you found me anyway. Do you

know when I first met you I thought you'd been sent by him?"

"Amanda, you have done nothing wrong. He deserves everything you gave him and more. He is the most corrupt official I have ever seen. Avery Higgins is one of the reasons I left my job. The man is evil. He is the largest criminal in Boston. Every US Marshal is searching for him, and yet he's right under their noses. He covers his tracks too well. I found out he was the criminal we'd been searching for, but I had no way to prove it. I'm so *tired* of seeing innocent people suffer because the criminals are too hard to catch." He turned to her. "I will help you, Amanda, but I need your help, too."

"To catch Avery?"

"No, sweetheart, I'm looking forward to doing that myself. Remember when I told you about Misty? I found out, just a few months ago, that the little girl my grandma took in was Misty's child. Misty's—and mine. I'd known the child all her life, spending a lot of time with her when I visited Grandma. I loved her and planned to take care of her when Grandma passed on, but it wasn't until the day she died that I found out Marissa is my daughter. I stayed with her for a week, and then the orphanage took her away from me. They claimed that a single father has no idea how to raise a little girl. Ha! Like it's better for her to live in an orphanage where no one cares about her! Anyway, I'm heading back to my hometown to try to win custody of her. If you go back with me, we can help each other."

"How?"

"We'll pretend we're married. You and Matthew can take my name and you'll have security. I promise I won't let Avery hurt either of you. I already have a plan forming to take him out of commission. And I can get my little girl

back if I have a wife to help take care of her. Please, Amanda, we'll both get the help we need."

Amanda took a deep breath. "Just sit still and let Avery find me? What about the charges against me?"

"When I uncover what he's done you won't have to worry about those charges. They're bogus anyway. The only way he'd be able to punish you for them is if he bribes the judge, something he does frequently. Can you trust me? If you go with me and take care of Marissa like a little girl should be taken care of, can you trust me to worry about Avery? I know how to get him."

"I do trust you, Sebastian."

His heart swelled. "You'll do it, then?"

She smiled at him. "I'll do it. I must admit," she added shyly, "that I was very depressed at the thought of losing your friendship."

He crossed the room and crushed her to him in a bruising hug. "Give me one year, Amanda, and then you can have your life back, free and clear. And I'll have my daughter."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sebastian awoke the next morning to the sound of Amanda feverishly throwing her belongings into her small bag. He jumped up from the chair where he'd slept and grabbed her arms. "Amanda? What is it?"

She tried to shake him off. "Let go of me, Sebastian, I have to go. I have to get out of here!"

He gave her a gentle shake. "What about last night? You said you'd help me. What about Matthew and Marissa?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't do it. Don't you understand? He's found me! Avery knows where I am!"

"So? You knew he'd find you sooner or later. Wait a minute, how do you know he's found you? Did you see him?"

"No! I don't have to see him to know he's coming. I had *the feeling*! This morning when I woke up I had the feeling that he knows where we are."

"Amanda, be reasonable. There is no way you could know—"

"Shut up!" she said, slapping his hard chest. "Sometimes I know things, and I'm telling you he knows where I am and he'll be coming to find me!"

"Okay, just calm down. Do you remember what we talked about last night? I can protect you from him. I know Avery Higgins and I know his weaknesses. You have to trust me, Amanda. We can make this work, but we have to do it together. Otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life on the run, and that's no way to live. And think of Matthew. If you come with me we can give him the kind of family life you've always wanted for him, and for yourself.

Take that step, sweetheart, and I promise when it's all over you won't regret it."

"What if something happens?"

"What alternative do you have? If you don't come with me you had planned on turning yourself in to the law for something you aren't guilty of and facing the hangman. Can anything be worse?"

"Well, when you put it that way—" she said uncertainly.

"Good! Now let's get the squirt up and go buy a horse and carriage to take us home." He turned away from her, hiding the relief he felt.

By the time they were at the mercantile loading the supplies into their new carriage, Amanda felt much calmer. "Amanda, I need to run over to the hardware store for a minute. Why don't you see if there is anything that you like here. St. Louis has a much better selection than Alton. I want you to get enough material for three new outfits a piece for you and the children. If you can't find what you like here there'll be plenty of time to look at home." With a wave, he took Matthew by the hand and headed toward the hardware store, leaving Amanda gaping behind him.

*Well, she thought, no sense standing here staring after my 'husband'! I have shopping to do!*

Her mood considerably lighter, she stepped into the mercantile and headed straight for the material, fingering several colors she would like for Matthew, but they were all too expensive. She joined the boys at the hardware store. Sebastian looked up in surprise. "Did you find everything already?"

"No, it's all very expensive. I thought I'd wait until we reached Alton and see if the prices are any better there."

Sebastian laughed. “Don’t worry about how much money you spend, I can take care of it. Now march over there and get whatever your little heart desires.”

With a smile brighter than he’d ever seen on her, she reached up to kiss his cheek and practically skipped back to the store. Sebastian glanced down at Matthew. “Your mother is beyond beautiful when she smiles, you know that?”

It felt like Christmas to Amanda as she rummaged happily through the bolts of material. She chose solid colors for Matthew, making sure she bought enough so she could make Sebastian something, as well. For herself and Marissa, she chose pretty calicos. On a whim, she added a few yards of ribbon for the child she had yet to meet. When Sebastian joined her some time later, she was waiting on the porch, her packages at her feet, her face pink with excitement.

Sebastian smiled at her, enjoying the happy look on her pretty face, and feeling proud that he had helped put it there. “I see you were able to make a few selections,” he chuckled. “We can buy the rest of the supplies we need in Alton.”

Amanda was taken aback. “I bought enough cloth for everyone already.”

“Well, you might find something you like better.” He winked at her. “I’m not a pauper, Amanda, so if there is anything you need, or even anything you *want*, then get it. You deserve to have a few things for yourself.”

Blinking back tears, she held out her hand for him to help her into the carriage, and her tears were forgotten as they started their journey. For the first time in her life, she was excited about something. Sebastian was a good man

and, if only for a year, she would have a family. She watched St. Louis disappear as the lovely prairies engulfed them. Matthew watched with wide eyes, too awed by the scene to utter a word. Amanda thought there were certain advantages to riding in a carriage versus a train. For one, there was no noise and awful smells. All she could hear was the clip-clop of the horses and birds singing their praise of the beautiful sunny day. Butterflies flitted randomly through the wildflowers that grew everywhere in profusion. She could smell the flowers, the earth, and the freshness of a clear morning after a cleansing rain. She sighed, thinking she had never seen a finer day.

A warm breeze blew her hair softly about her face, and she was surprised when a majestic view of the Mississippi River suddenly came up before them. The large, muddy river was like nothing she had ever seen before, and she stared in shock and admiration. The waters swirled gently beneath the wind and giant hill-like mounds, which she would later find out were called bluffs, rose almost endlessly toward the sky, sporting a myriad of lovely blooming trees and wildflowers. She could see the small town across the river, and turned a worried frown to Sebastian.

“However will we cross a river such as that?” she asked, her face pale.

He smiled and patted her hand. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, there’s a ferry down yonder.”

She relaxed visibly and the next hour passed quickly as she took in all the sights and sounds of the small river town of Alton, Illinois. Alton sat on a hill—or many hills, she could not tell for sure—but what she saw was very pretty. Sebastian halted the carriage downtown, and they stepped out onto lovely brick streets. As he ushered her to the

mercantile for more supplies, Amanda couldn't help but look at all the neat little buildings sitting in a row along either side of the street. Some were made of brick, some of stone, and others of clapboard, but they all held a kind of pleasant air about them. She smiled, liking the little town.

The bell on the door of the mercantile tinkled merrily as they strode in. A pretty lady behind the counter smiled widely. "Well, Sebastian Knight, long time no see!"

He took her hand in his. "How are you, Natalie?" he asked the older woman.

"I'm very well, thank you," she answered vaguely, eyeing Amanda and Matthew.

"Natalie Amos, I'd like you to meet my wife Amanda and our son, Matthew."

The poor woman looked taken aback. "Why Sebastian, you aren't married!"

He grinned, slipping his arm around Amanda's waist. "There are many things you never knew about me, Natalie," he said evasively.

She bustled around the counter and took Amanda's hand in hers. "Where are my manners?! I'm so happy to meet you, Mrs. Knight! Welcome to our little town. And Matthew, I bet you would like to have a bit of rock candy, wouldn't you?" Matthew hid shyly behind Sebastian's leg as he smiled and held out his chubby little hand for the candy with a whispered thank you. "So how long will you be in town, Sebastian? I believe there are a few rooms to let at the hotel."

"We won't be needing any rooms, Natalie. We've come to claim Marissa and then we're heading home."

"I see. Are you going to farm your grandmother's land again? You were very good at farming, if I remember correctly."

"I'm not sure just yet what I plan to do," he hedged. "Amanda, why don't you collect the things you need while I run to the post office." He strode quickly away, obviously trying to get away from Natalie's questions, with Matthew skipping along behind him.

Amanda was looking at the spices when Natalie came up behind her. "It certainly is nice to meet you, Mrs. Knight."

Amanda smiled at the warm feeling that engulfed her with her new name. "You also, Mrs. Amos."

"You know, I've known Sebastian since he was a boy. His grandma was a very good friend of mine and he practically grew up in my mercantile. I'm glad he's finally found someone. After the war he was very—different—and I'm happy to see the light has returned to his eyes. He's in love with you."

Amanda glanced up sharply from the cinnamon she held in her hand. It was hard not to show how surprised she was at that statement. "He's a good man. I'm lucky to have him."

"So how do you feel about taking in his little girl?"

Amanda's eyes shone with an excitement she could not hide. "I can't wait to meet her! I've always wanted many children."

"Your boy seems to get along fine with Sebastian."

"They are very close. Matthew's own father died shortly after he was born, so Sebastian is the only father he's ever known," she said, repeating the story they had decided to tell everyone.

Moving to the bolts of cloth in an attempt to waylay further questions, Amanda's eyes lit on pretty pink floral calico. "Oh my," she whispered as she reached out to touch it, a vision of a sweet little dress flitting through her

imagination. "I'll take five yards of this, please."

An hour later she sat on the porch of the mercantile with Natalie sipping tea, watching her 'husband' and her son cross the street hand in hand, Matthew's chatter faintly reaching their ears. "They look so much alike," Natalie commented, and Amanda had to agree that they did, funny though it was.

Sebastian took her hand, nodded to Natalie, and hauled her packages over his shoulder. As they pulled away from the mercantile, he turned to her. "Are you ready to go get Marissa?" She nodded. "Amanda, are you sure about this?"

Amanda smiled at him. "I can't find enough words to tell you how excited I am to meet your daughter, Sebastian. I love children."

They pulled up to a huge house that stood at the top of a hill overlooking the river. Amanda was enjoying the view until she felt Sebastian tense beside her. Her eyes moved in the direction his had taken and she immediately saw some grayish buildings completely surrounded by a stone wall. The prison. She touched his arm, and could feel the tension slowly drain out of him. When he looked at her, he was once again in control of his feelings.

He led her up the walk to the door and knocked. A tall, thin woman answered the door. "Well, if it isn't Sebastian Knight. I told you before that I will not relinquish a little girl to live with an unmarried man and I have not changed my mind."

Amanda stepped out from behind him where she had been admiring a small flower garden. "Excuse me, ma'am, but my husband and I have come to take our daughter home with us, if you please."

Shock registered on her bony face. "I would have to

see the marriage license to know if you are telling the truth.”

Amanda calmly took the doctored marriage certificate from her reticule and placed it in the woman’s hands, then snatched it back. “Our daughter, please,” she stated firmly.

The woman opened the door and let them into a foyer, where she told them to wait. The house was warm and clean and pictures of healthy children littered the wall. “She’s good with children,” he chuckled, “just very disapproving of me. Everyone knows now that Marissa is my daughter, but no one knows who her mother is, and they’ve gotten the wrong idea about me, I guess.”

“I see,” she said, a twinkle in her eyes.

They looked up at a sound by the staircase. The prettiest little girl Amanda had ever seen stood on the last step, her little mouth shaped in an O. She had long, curling black hair and her blue eyes were just like her father’s. She was tiny for a four-year-old, Amanda thought, but it only added to her beauty. Sebastian knelt down and she flew into his arms, giggling happily. “I knew you’d come back! I knew you would!”

Sebastian stood up with her in his arms. “I have someone for you to meet. This is my wife Amanda and she’ll be coming home with us.” He looked around. “Where’s Matthew?” He spotted the child hiding behind his mother’s skirts, and he scooped him up in his other arm. “And this is Matthew, your new brother.”

The little girl’s eyes widened and the children smiled shyly at each other. Without a word, he took Marissa’s small bag of belongings from the sour woman and strode out the door, a child in each arm and his wife beside him.

Sebastian settled the kids in the wagon, jumped up beside Amanda, and they started off with a jerk. On the

drive home the adults were quietly contemplating their own thoughts while the children merely studied each other across the wagon. They were once again on the prairie, spotted here and there with small houses. There were fields of corn and wheat blowing gaily in the wind around them. Amanda took a deep breath of the fresh country air and felt some of her tension dissipate. Out here she could almost believe that Avery would never find them. She could close her eyes and pretend that they were a normal family heading home. A warm feeling spread through her and she looked at Sebastian, sitting so straight and proud, clucking now and again to the horses. He caught her look and smiled at her and her heart did a flip, catching her by surprise. She absolutely could *not* fall in love with this man, no matter what! That would be a mistake she could not afford to make.

They rolled down a gentle slope and Sebastian pointed to a small cabin in the distance. "There it is, Amanda. It isn't much, but it's home."

Amanda thought she'd never seen such a cozy little log cabin. She asked him to stop the carriage and he did as she asked, a bewildered look on his face. She climbed down before he knew what she was about and turned to the kids, helping them down. Before he could blink, she took each of them by the hand and began to run across the field toward the house, all three of them laughing gleefully. All Amanda could think was that her three wishes had finally been granted, ironically at a time when she thought her life was over. It didn't even matter that she could only have it for one year because it was so much more than she had ever thought she could have. Finally, to have a good man beside her, a pretty little house, and children to love. It was all she'd ever wanted.

Sebastian was rooted to the spot as he watched her lovely hair—which had come loose as usual—flowing behind her as she ran. He could hear her laughter and see the gentle way she leaned down to speak to the children and start them laughing again. He noticed the way her faded blue dress swished provocatively around pretty ankles that he was able to glimpse slightly as her dress moved to and fro. He sighed, wondering how he would be able to keep his hands off her for the next year.

Clucking softly to the horses, he reached the porch at the same time as they did, and was surprised to see her fall to the ground in exhaustion with the children. He jumped down and stood over the three of them, arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head in amusement. Amanda gazed up at him with eyes full of a happiness that had never been there before, and he had to turn quickly in the guise of tending the horses so she wouldn't see the emotion she had caused in him.

Amanda watched him take the horses to the barn and stood up, brushing grass off her skirt. She told the children to stay close to the house and walked inside to explore her new home. When she opened the door, a strong musty smell wafted over her. Crinkling her nose, she opened the windows and turned around to look. It was a pretty little room with a stone fireplace dominating one wall and a small stove stood in the corner. A table and chairs graced the center of the room and the windows were dressed in lovely curtains. There was a door on either side of the fireplace, and Amanda first went through the door to the left. The masculine air left no doubt in her mind that this was Sebastian's room. It was sparsely furnished with a large bed sporting a beautiful quilt and a trunk and washstand. Leaving quickly, she went to the other door and

knew that this had been Marissa's room, and probably also grandma's. There were two beds side to side, a small nightstand between them with only a lamp on it, and a pretty rug stretching across the floor at the foot of the beds. Very homey, she decided.

It was getting late, and Amanda knew she didn't have much time to finish what needed to be done before nightfall, so she pushed up her sleeves and went to work. First, she stripped the beds and hung the bedclothes on the line in the back of the house to air out. Then she went to the root cellar and brought a few things up for a quick supper. When Sebastian came in with the children in tow, supper was on the table and the sheets and quilts had been returned to the beds, smelling of summer sunshine.

Sebastian smiled and sat down at the table. Amanda filled their bowls and joined him. "I'm sorry there isn't much tonight, but I promise I'll have more on the table from now on."

Sebastian eyed the bowls of soup and big chunks of cheese. "It looks good to me."

"I was surprised to find so much in the root cellar. I love to cook, and there are so many canned goods I didn't even have enough time to go through them all!"

"Grandma liked to can the food she grew during the summer. Her recipes are all here if you'd like to try them. This soup is great, Amanda. I didn't know you could cook, too," he teased.

"Well, I only had time to throw this together quickly, but I'll be able to do a better job of it from now on."

The children were so tired from their eventful day that they almost fell asleep in their soup bowls, so Amanda washed them and helped them change clothes before scooting them off to bed. She tucked Marissa in bed and

then turned to Matthew, who was already asleep, his chubby cheek resting on his hand, his horse cuddled closely to him. Turning down the light, she left the room and found Sebastian sitting in a chair before the fireplace. "They're both sleeping," she said quietly, starting to clean some of the built up dust from the room.

"Come sit down with me for a while," he asked. She sat beside him, feeling a bit nervous and shy now that the children had gone to bed and they were alone. "I want to thank you for coming with me, Amanda. For the first time since Marissa was taken from me, I don't have a knot of guilt eating at me. I know she's safe in bed where she belongs and I can take care of her."

"I should be thanking you, Sebastian. You're saving me from Avery and, even besides that, you're giving me everything I've ever wanted. Now I have a little girl to care for, too, and a pretty little house."

He glanced around. "I'm glad you like the house. When I was growing up Grandma and I lived in a much smaller place. We both liked to have room, so I built her this house. It isn't anything fancy, but at least we both had a room to ourselves. When I left she refused to use my room for anything. She said this was my house, and my room would always be waiting for me whenever I was ready to return home. It's been a long time, but here I am."

"I think it's a lovely house, Sebastian, and I thank you for sharing it with me."

He stared at her for a long time, and after a while she began to fidget. "Have I ever told you how pretty you are?" he asked softly.

"Me?" she asked stupidly.

His grin lit up the room. "You pull your hair up so tight in the morning and by evening it's curling softly

around your face. No Amanda, don't fix it. I like it that way. It makes you look—sweet and feminine. I have this need to touch it, to see how soft it is,” he murmured.

Amanda was lost in his eyes. She felt more than heard his words and she was mesmerized by the hushed tone of his voice. He reached out and almost reverently touched her hair, sliding his hand down the side of her head tenderly to rest at the nape of her neck. Unable to resist any longer, he pulled her toward him and touched his lips to hers, sucking in his breath at the surge of electricity that shot through him. She felt it too, for her eyes were wide with astonishment. He tried it again, welcoming the shock to his senses as their lips met softly. He deepened the kiss and it never even occurred to Amanda to try and stop him. No, it felt much too good. His other hand came up to caress her arm and he licked her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue.

Amanda broke away with a gasp. She turned away from him, trying to bring her breathing under control and failing miserably. She looked up at him as he began stroking her back reassuringly. “Are you okay?” he murmured.

She nodded. “Sebastian?” she asked hesitantly. “What just happened, well, has never happened to me before. Am I supposed to feel so—”

“Unsettled, shaky, breathless?” At her nod he grinned. “You are supposed to feel all that and more, Amanda, much more.”

“Even though I have a child, I'm not—well, what I mean to say is that I haven't really—”

He put a finger to her lips. “I know you aren't experienced in the ways of love, sweetheart, and even though we are ‘married’ now I want you to know I don't expect that from you, although I feel an irresistible

attraction to you. I won't take advantage of you. In fact, I think I'll sleep out here tonight."

"No, I'll not deprive you of your bed! We are both adults and I trust you. We can share."

This seemed to shock him beyond all reason and she laughed. "I do believe I've scandalized you, Sebastian! But really, it would be silly for either one of us to sleep on the floor when there is such a *large*, comfortable bed in the other room, don't you agree?"

"It just so happens I do agree. Why don't you go on and change while I check on the children? I'll be there soon."

Amanda stepped into the room and sighed, wondering what she had gotten herself into. She hurriedly shucked off her clothes and donned a high-necked, faded pink cotton nightgown and climbed between the covers. Oh, the bed was so comfortable she could hardly keep her eyes open and she let them droop. So when Sebastian entered the room he thought she was asleep, but as he began undressing she shamelessly opened her eyes a slit to watch him. He took off everything but his underwear and turned toward the bed. Amanda almost sighed aloud at the strong muscles outlined in his body. When she felt him crawl under the covers beside her she used the guise of sleep and curled up to him, sliding her head onto his chest. She could hear his steady heartbeat and his not so steady breathing as he brought his arm around to snuggle her against him. Never had she felt so safe as she did now in the cocoon of his embrace. Sighing contentedly, she let herself drift off to sleep.

## CHAPTER SIX

When Amanda awoke the next morning the sun was just peeking over the horizon and there was no sign of Sebastian. Rising from the bed, she cherished the happy feeling that still warmed her heart. She didn't remember a time when she had looked forward to the start of a new day, but she did today. It would be a lovely warm summer day and she would enjoy it to the best of her ability. Donning her favorite blue dress, she made her way into the dusty kitchen and took out the eggs she had brought from town. As she was putting the plates on the table two sleepy children sat down and Sebastian came in from outside, his hair wet and smelling clean as the outdoors. She smiled at him, immediately noticing the absence of the badge that proclaimed him to be a U.S. Marshal. His gun belt, however, was riding on his hip as always, gun intact.

"Don't be alarmed if you see some men ride up today, Amanda. I'm expecting quite a few deliveries this week, so there will probably be a lot of people coming and going. If they stop here at the house just send them to the barn. I have so much to do to get it ready I'll more than likely be spending my entire week there and in the stable."

Amanda glanced up, fork poised halfway to her mouth. "What stable?"

Sebastian grinned. "The stable I'll be building at the end of the week. Have I never told you what I plan to do with this old place?"

"I thought you were going to farm it. You said you were very good at it."

Shrugging, he said, "I don't like farming. Of course

I'll plant enough for us to eat and to bring in a bit of extra money, but it's not where my heart is. I want to raise horses. I want to breed them and train them and maybe even race them."

"What a wonderful idea! Did you hear that, kids, we're going to have horses! Sometimes you really amaze me, Sebastian Knight!"

"Well, I'd better get started if I want to have it finished by the end of the week."

Matthew jumped up. "Bastian, can I help you? I want to get ready for the horses, too."

"You bet you can help me, Squirt!"

Amanda watched her two men strut out the door and laughed. "Can you believe them, Marissa?"

The little girl stared up at Amanda with wide blue eyes. How hard it must be for the poor little girl to have lost her whole family and have a new one thrust upon her. Holding her hand out, she said, "Why don't we get you dressed, Marissa, and after I have everything cleaned up you can help me make a pie for dessert tonight."

Her eyes lit up and she shyly followed her new mother into the bedroom. As Amanda slipped a little yellow dress over her head, she said, "Grandma used to let me help her make pies, too. Papa says Grandma went to Heaven." She paused thoughtfully as Amanda brushed her hair and tied a yellow ribbon in it. "Amanda, do you know where Heaven is? I need to tell Grandma I love her."

Fighting tears, Amanda hauled the little girl close to her. "I'm sure your grandma knows just how much you love her, honey. We can only go to Heaven when God calls us there, way up in the beautiful sky. But if you talk to your grandma, I'm sure she can hear you."

"Do you think she can? I thought so, but at the

orphanage Prissy said she couldn't. Prissy is the oldest and thinks she knows everything, and she told me I was being a baby for thinking grandma could hear me."

"Now don't you worry about Prissy. You just do what you think is right, and if it helps you any, I believe she can hear you."

Smiling, Marissa took one of her little dolls out on the porch to play and Amanda got to work on the neglected cabin. She took the rugs out and gave them a good shake before pinning them to the line to air out. She swept and scrubbed the wood floors until they shone. She cleaned all the soot from the fireplace and stove and washed the grime from the windows so that the sun brightened even the farthest corners of the room. When the house was gleaming, she brought Marissa in and together they baked bread and peach pie and threw together a small lunch to take out to their men.

They stepped into the barn, pausing so their eyes could become accustomed to the dimness, and called out for Sebastian and Matthew. When Sebastian saw them he smiled and mentioned that he knew of a perfect place for a picnic. The children ran excitedly ahead as they crossed behind the barn to a small creek that ran through their property. Dropping down beneath a large oak tree, they waited for Amanda to hand out the cheese sandwiches she had made with the freshly baked bread. Munching happily, they all lounged against the tree and enjoyed the lovely day. It was with reluctance that Sebastian headed off back to work and Amanda returned to the house.

That evening, just as the sun was about to set, Matthew and Sebastian were strolling home across the prairie when Matthew caught sight of a baby bunny. "Look at that 'Bastian! A baby bunny! Can I pet it?"

“If you can catch it,” he said, chuckling.

Matthew set off at a run and chased the poor little rabbit all the way back to a small copse of young trees. By the time he came back he was winded and his face was beet red. “Couldn’t catch it, huh?”

Matthew glared at him as he tried to catch his breath. “Why didn’t you tell me I couldn’t catch it?”

Sebastian ruffled his hair as they continued on their way. “Because some things you have to learn on your own. I’ll tell you what: If you start bringing a carrot out each day and show the bunny you won’t hurt it, maybe he’ll learn to trust you enough to let you pet him.”

“But that’ll take forever!” he whined.

Sebastian stomped his boots off at the door to the cabin. “But wouldn’t it be worth it?” he asked as the boy followed him thoughtfully through the door.

Sebastian stopped abruptly just inside, the changes Amanda had made, along with the sumptuous smells of supper, all hitting him at the same time. He looked around at the clean, cozily lit room, his daughter setting the table and his ‘wife’ standing over a pot at the stove. All at once he felt as if he’d finally come home. Ushering Matthew before him they cleaned up and took their places at the table as steaming plates of chicken and dumplings were set before them. Sebastian ate quietly, gazing thoughtfully at his new family and the transformed little cabin. A feeling of belonging surrounded him and filled a void he hadn’t realized was there. He smiled at Amanda, and she returned his smile sweetly.

“Guess what we found in the field, Mama?”

“What did you find, sweetheart?”

“You can tell her, ‘Bastian. We found a *bunny*, Mama! Not just any old bunny but a little *baby* bunny! It was so

pretty and I tried to catch it but it ran too fast!”

Amanda graced Sebastian with an angelic look before turning back to her son. “That’s wonderful! Maybe next time you can pet him.”

Matthew nodded emphatically before continuing to munch on his chicken and dumplings. Marissa was quiet, as Sebastian assured Amanda she had always been. “I’ll be starting on the stable tomorrow since I was able to get the barn fixed earlier than I expected.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“I’ll be pretty busy for the next several days and I won’t always be able to take Matthew with me. I’ll try to watch for my deliveries so they won’t disturb you.”

Amanda smiled. “Don’t worry about it, I don’t mind.”

“Once I get the stables up and stocked I can begin working with the horses. I plan to train them myself but I may need to hire someone for help every now and then.”

Amanda looked worried. “So these horses will be wild?”

“Not exactly. There’s nothing for you to worry about, for the most part they’ll be tame, but in need of more extensive training for a variety of different purposes.”

“I see. Should we keep to the house, then?”

“Absolutely not. As long as you stay on the opposite side of the fence they’ll not hurt you.”

“Can I ride horses with you, Bastian?”

“Maybe once everything has settled down here, Squirt.”

“Can I ride horses too, Papa?”

Startled, Sebastian’s gaze flew to his daughter. Although she had found out at the same time he did that he was her father, she had still always called him by his name. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he touched her sweet

cheek with his finger. "Of course, Marissa."

Marissa's bright blue eyes pierced the adults. Sometimes a child of few words, she made what she said count. "Papa, Matthew calls Amanda 'mama'. May I?"

Sebastian gripped the table tightly to control the flow of emotions coursing through him. Clearing his throat, he said, "I think that's something you should ask Amanda."

Marissa's wide eyes met Amanda's, which were threatening to swim with tears. "Amanda, may I call you Mama? I never had a mama before."

Amanda looked up at Sebastian to try and read his reaction, but the moment her eyes met his she knew it had been a mistake. Although he tried to hide it, she could see the emotion flare in his eyes. Nodding slowly, she managed a smile for Marissa's sake. "I would love that, Marissa," she said softly.

Not to be outdone, Matthew leaned across the table. "Mama, does this mean I can call 'Bastian Papa? Does it?"

They looked at each other and read so easily the deep longing for family in the other's eyes. They nodded simultaneously, and Matthew jumped off his chair and skipped around the room happily. Relieved to have the mood lightened, Amanda laughed and bid the boy to return to his seat. The rest of the meal was conducted in thoughtful silence, with Matthew's ever-present chatter.

That night, Amanda again changed and crawled into bed while Sebastian was busy outside. When he came in, he smiled at her and blew out the candle. He undressed and slipped into bed beside her, careful to keep several inches between them. They were still and quiet for several moments before Sebastian murmured, "Amanda, I could tell you were upset by what Marissa said at supper, and I want you to know I won't blame you if you don't feel

comfortable allowing her to call you mama. I can only speak for myself, but the thought of Matthew wanting me to be his father fills me with pride.”

Amanda laid her hand on his arm. “No, Sebastian, I love Marissa, but I can’t help wondering if what we’re doing is wrong. We are four people who have never had the kind of family we wanted, and now all of a sudden it’s been miraculously bestowed on us. What happens to Matthew and Marissa when it’s time for me to leave? Should we allow it to become so emotional when we know it won’t end in happily ever after?”

Sebastian placed his hands behind his head and gazed up at the ceiling. “Do we ever know what will happen in the future, Amanda? We set out on this adventure with a plan, but there is no guarantee that everything will be how we want it. Neither one of us planned for the children to become so attached to us so quickly, but it happened. I think we should just let things progress as they will and take it one step at a time. As for leaving, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Amanda nodded, glad for the cover of darkness so he couldn’t see her chin quiver at the thought of losing her new found family. She was surprised when he leaned over and kissed her cheek softly, then moved slightly until their lips met in a chaste kiss meant to comfort. Amanda slipped her hands up his back, holding tightly to his broad shoulders. Sebastian deepened the kiss, literally feeling as if he were melting into her. His hands roamed of their own free will, lightly caressing her soft skin through the cotton of her nightgown. He nibbled at the delicate place behind her ear, causing a stream of delicious shivers to overtake her. Loosening the braid that held her hair captive, he rubbed his lightly whiskered cheek against the silky

softness, as he'd wanted to do so many times. He inhaled the scent of her, smiling at the added aroma of cinnamon. His hand slid over the small mound of her tummy and naturally progressed to the softness of her breast. Amanda gasped at the contact, and Sebastian snatched his hand away, almost as if he'd been burned. Indeed, his hand was throbbing from the short, heated contact he'd had with her and now ached painfully to be replaced. But reality returned, and with it his conscience. Sighing raggedly, he drew her into his arms, lying woodenly beside her. "Go to sleep, Amanda," he rasped into the darkness.

Amanda's eyes welled with tears that she refused to let fall. What was wrong with her that he didn't want her? Was it something she had done or his damnable sense of honor that kept them physically apart? Amanda wanted to be a real wife to him, whether the marriage was legal or not meant nothing to her. But how could she tell him she wanted him without seeming like a loose woman? Sebastian was an honorable man and would probably think less of her if she offered herself to him. Able to bear almost anything else, she knew she could never bear to see disappointment in his eyes because of her. She sighed, unconsciously playing with the hair on his chest until his fingers closed over hers. She sighed again, knowing she had a long night ahead of her.

Amanda was putting breakfast on the table the next morning when Sebastian walked through the door, again with wet hair. "Did you take another bath in the creek?" she teased, trying to ease the dark mood she sensed he was in.

His electric blue eyes gazed into hers humorlessly for a moment before he sat down at the table. "I've been in need

of a splash of cold water these last few mornings,” he muttered.

Amanda was not so naive that she didn’t know what he meant, and she blushed ferociously. The meal was eaten in silence; even Matthew didn’t have much to say. When Sebastian stood up to leave, he jumped out of his chair. “Can I go with you, Papa?”

“Not today, Matthew.”

The child watched him walk out the door before turning to his mother with a pout. “I wanted to go!”

“I know you did, sweetheart, but Sebastian told you that he would be doing dangerous work and you couldn’t go with him.”

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“Why don’t you take Marissa out and find your little bunny. You can each take one carrot to lay out for him.”

Brightening somewhat, Matthew took the small girl by the hand and led her from the house, oblivious to the adoring look she bestowed upon him. It would do him good to be a big brother, Amanda thought happily as she started washing the dishes. So intent were her thoughts that she didn’t hear Sebastian come in the door. When he touched her arm she was so surprised that she dropped the plate she was cleaning into the water and immediately they were covered with bubbles. Afraid he would be angry, she looked up at him only to see his blue eyes twinkling down at her. She lowered her gaze and burst into laughter at the sight he made, his face covered in a beard of bubbles. Taking a clean towel from the table, she gently dried his face for him, watching in fascination as his eyes darkened more with every touch of her finger.

Amanda set the towel down nervously. “So what brings you back to the house so early?” she asked, returning

to the dishes.

Sebastian grasped her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I'm sorry, Amanda. I'm sorry for what I did last night and how I behaved this morning."

"No, Sebastian, I—"

He put a finger to her soft lips. "Shhh. I want you to know you can trust me."

"I—"

"I brought you here so we could help each other, not so I could take advantage of you. If you want me to sleep in the barn from now on I'll understand."

"No! You don't have to—"

"I have to get back out to the stable. I'll see you tonight." Turning abruptly, he strode out the door.

"Ooooh!" she cried in frustration. "If that man had let me get a word in edgewise he would learn that I already trust him!" she fumed, giving in to her temper and kicking the table leg.

The summer days blended together one much the same as the other. The children became very close and, after a few weeks, Matthew's bunny came to trust him so much that more often than not he was seen riding on the child's shoulders. The relationship between the adults was more complicated, but still pretty easy going, for the most part. Amanda worked the house and the garden during the day and sewed fervently every night. Sebastian spent most of his days working on the stables, taking the children with him whenever he could. When the stables were finally done and stocked with horses, he began to train them, and the children would sometimes lay in the soft grass and watch him work.

One day just as Amanda was sitting down for a cup of

tea there was a knock on the door. She sighed, by now growing tired of all the deliveries. When she opened the door, she stood dumbfounded for a moment before throwing her arms around the woman standing at her door. "Sharon Mahoney, where on earth did you come from? Come share a cup of tea with me and tell me all about it!"

Sharon laughed gaily and followed her friend inside the cozy cottage. Accepting a cup of tea, she said, "When we reached St. Louis my brother-in-law was waiting for us at the train station. He said that he'd lost our claim out west to squatters and didn't have the time or the energy to fight them for it. He said he'd remembered what a nice town Alton was and decided that we'd be just as happy here, so he bought some land and, I must admit, it is wonderful! A small creek runs through our property and, well, I suppose you know that since it seems our land adjoins yours. I honestly was just coming over to borrow a cup of sugar from our neighbors until I could get to town and buy some more. I was stunned to see you at the door!"

The children walked in at that time and Amanda called them over. "Sharon, I'm sure you remember Matthew? This is his sister, Marissa."

They exchanged greetings and Matthew asked permission to visit their father before racing Marissa out the door. "Have you been to church yet, Amanda?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I haven't. We had planned on going tomorrow, though. Will we see you there?"

"Yes, most definitely. The minister is wonderful and I have met the most interesting people there." She frowned. "Mrs. Amos is rather nosy, though."

Amanda laughed. "I have had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Amos, and I can say with conviction that nosy doesn't even begin to describe it! Her heart is in the right place,

though,” she said softly, remembering what the woman had said about Sebastian being in love with her.

Sharon smiled. “I shouldn’t be so petty, she is a very nice woman. Oh, but she asks so *very* many questions!”

Amanda poured them each another cup of tea. “I’m so glad you’ll be our neighbors. We’ve been so busy working around here that we haven’t gotten back to town even once since we arrived.”

“Well, it’s certainly been time well spent. You have a lovely home, Amanda.”

Amanda glanced lovingly around her home with a smile. “I’m very happy here. Honestly, Sharon, I’ve never been happier in my life.”

Sebastian chose that moment to walk in the door, causing Amanda to nearly choke on her tea. “It’s nice to see you again, Sharon. Matthew told me you’re living near us now.”

Amanda poured him a cup of tea and placed it in his hands. His smile was tender as it lit upon her.

“And yourself. I see you are no longer wearing your badge.”

“That part of my life is behind me. We’re raising horses now.”

“Wonderful! Justin was just saying this morning that he needs a good horse, maybe I can bring him over?”

“Anytime.”

After Sebastian returned to work, Sharon winked at Amanda. “I can see why you’re so happy,” she teased.

Amanda blushed. “Well, it was so nice visiting with you, Amanda. I hope to see you tomorrow.”

Sunday dawned bright and early with a beautiful blue sky and a cool breeze to ward off the summer heat.

Amanda dressed in the new yellow dress she had made for herself and set out the clothes she had made as a surprise for Sebastian. After a hurried breakfast, she ushered the children into their bedroom and, with a happy heart, put on the clothes she had lovingly made for them. Marissa was clad in a pretty pink calico dress, which sported a ruffle along the bottom and Amanda pulled her dark, curling hair back with a long pink satin ribbon. For Matthew she had made deep blue trousers and a shirt of powder blue.

By the time Amanda brought the children out Sebastian was standing by the wagon waiting for them. She stopped at the sight of him, feeling as if she could hardly get a breath. Since the first day they had come home, he had taken to wearing denim pants and work shirts, and Amanda thought he looked wonderful in them. But now, seeing him in the charcoal gray trousers and crisp white shirt she herself had made for him, he looked devastatingly handsome. She barely controlled the urge to run to him and fling herself into his arms.

“Amanda, you look beautiful,” he said softly, seemingly as surprised at her appearance as she was with his. “And,” he motioned to himself, “thank you for the new clothes.”

“What about me, Papa, do I look pretty?” Marissa piped up.

He grinned, swinging her up into his arms. “You’re prettier than a princess, my dear. And Matthew is quite pretty, himself.”

Matthew’s mouth dropped open and he turned to his mother. “Mama, did you hear what Papa called me? I’m not pretty. I’m not a *girl*, Papa!” he said with disgust.

Sebastian only laughed as he lifted him into the wagon. He turned to Amanda, and their eyes locked. His thumb

caressed her hand as he stared into her eyes with deep longing. "My lady," he murmured, "your carriage awaits."

Amanda said nothing, her whole body tingling at the slight contact. As they started off toward Alton, Sebastian said, "Yellow is a good color for you."

She smiled wistfully. "I've never had a yellow dress before. It's my favorite color, and I've always wanted one, but—" her voice drifted off.

"You should have a dozen yellow dresses. It makes your hair glow all the more and softens your lovely dark eyes."

Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heart, she knew she couldn't utter a word just then if her life depended on it. He was always so attentive, so tender and caring. Why then did he lay still as a board every night, keeping as much space between them as possible? And why, no matter how far apart they started out, she always woke up in the morning enfolded in his arms? The man drove her crazy trying to figure him out!

They entered the church just as the first song was beginning and Amanda soon had her hands full trying to keep the children, used to running outside all day, from fidgeting. By the time the sermon was over and the last song finished, she was ready to usher Matthew and Marissa outside to run off their energy. Of course, the line moved slowly through the doors, and she was forced to explain, for the tenth time, exactly why they had had to come to church instead of staying home to chase butterflies. Finally out in the sunshine, she ordered the children to go play and she collapsed onto the bed of the wagon.

Sebastian chuckled. "The little imps were full of gusto this morning."

"Yes, they were," she retorted saucily, "and between

the two of them fidgeting and you pulling at your collar as if you've never worn a shirt before I certainly had my hands full! We've barely stepped out of the building and I see you've already undone your top two buttons!" As she finished her rampage her eyes fell to the top of his shirt, a tiny glimpse of hair peeking over the loosened buttons, his hard muscles evident beneath the thin material. She swallowed and turned away, certain she would be going to hell for having such impure thoughts on church property.

Amanda walked over to where Sharon stood under a shade tree, waving gaily. Sebastian accompanied her, tucking her hand possessively into the crook of his arm. The men talked business while the women chattered and watched the children play. "I hope we have a baby soon," Sharon said wistfully. "Maybe Matthew and Marissa can come over to our house sometimes?"

"That would be lovely, if you're sure they wouldn't be too much of a bother."

"I can promise you that there's nothing they could do to bother me. Children are such a joy."

Amanda smiled, feeling blessed with good fortune. Her only wish now was that she could have a future with her family, a future that included all the days of the rest of her life. They were everything she had ever wanted, these three people who had become more important to her than life itself. If only she could find a way to make them hers forever.

The Mahoneys, including Justin's brother Jake, invited them for dinner and they accepted eagerly. It was nice to have friends, Amanda thought that evening as she put the children to bed. They had spent the better part of the afternoon laughing and having a good time. Amanda had helped Sharon prepare dinner, Sebastian was given a tour of

their property, and the kids played outside with a puppy. All in all, it had been a wonderful time, and already Amanda was busy planning to have them over to her house next Sunday.

When Sebastian finally came in from checking the horses Amanda was sitting on the bed brushing her hair, a thoughtful look on her face. He took the brush from her hands and began stroking her honey blond hair. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking how much fun I had today,” she replied. “I never knew just having dinner with another couple could be so enjoyable. I want to invite them here next week.”

“Okay,” he said, concentrating more on the texture of her hair than on the words she spoke.

“I can do that? You don’t mind?”

“Why would I mind? This is your house, too, you can invite anyone you like.”

Amanda looked up at him with such an angelic smile he felt his insides turn to molten lava. “Amanda,” he said hoarsely, touching her cheek with his finger. He kissed her lips softly before striding determinedly to the door. “I have some work I forgot to do. Get some sleep.”

Dumbfounded, she watched him walk out the door. “Ooooh, that man makes me so *mad*,” she fumed, throwing the brush at the bedroom door.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Sebastian knelt on the ground one sunny day, hammer in hand, nails strewn around him, contemplating how best to fix the rails of the fence. He picked up the hammer, smiling when he saw Matthew come up beside him. “Hey Squirt, where’s your little shadow?”

“She’s helping Mama bake pies today. Can I stay with you?”

He nodded as he began driving the nails into the wood. Matthew climbed up to sit on a secure middle rail, dangling his arms over the top one and fixing Sebastian with a troubled gaze. “Do you like my mama?”

“Of course I do,” he laughed. “What makes you ask a question like that?”

“Well, sometimes I see you kiss, and I know that’s a good thing because of the way Mama smiles. But, I’ve been thinking, you don’t really kiss very much and sometimes Mama watches you with a sad look on her face when you’re not looking.”

Concentrating more deeply than necessary on the fence rail, Sebastian replied, “You really shouldn’t worry about the relationship between me and your mother. That’s for us to work out.”

“I know. But she’s never been happy like this before and I want her to be happy. I’m scared that if you don’t like her we’ll have to go away and she’ll be sad again.

“Papa, I don’t ever want her to be sad again.”

Sebastian's gut wrenched painfully. He set the tools down, giving Matthew his full attention. "Can I share something with you, Matthew? But I'll need your word of honor that you'll not tell your mother." The child nodded solemnly and Sebastian continued quietly, "I love her."

Matthew's eyes lit up and he threw himself into Sebastian's arms, knocking them both backwards. "That's great! All you have to do is tell her and—"

Sebastian sat up, keeping Matthew on his lap. "Listen to me, son. If I came right out and told your mother something like that, it would scare her off. Sometimes people find it hard to trust other people, and I have to earn your mother's trust before I let her know how I feel. I must show her I am worthy of her trust. Does that make sense to you?"

Matthew thought for a minute. "Like when I left the carrots for my baby bunny and after days and *days* he finally knew I wouldn't hurt him?"

Sebastian was stunned at the child's perception. "Exactly like that. Only with people, it takes a bit longer."

Matthew frowned. "How do you know, Papa? How can you tell when someone trusts you?"

Gazing at him thoughtfully, he muttered, "That's what I'd like to know, Matthew. That's what I'd like to know."

When Sebastian finished his work, they walked side by side back to the house. Amanda was just putting supper on the table, and he admired how pretty she looked in her new blue and yellow calico dress. How hard the nights had become for him, lying next to her, so close yet so far away, wanting to touch her and hold her as if she were really his wife. Every night he found it more and more difficult to keep his hands from her soft body, and on various occasions he'd stepped over the line, kissing her until he

thought he'd explode from wanting her. The minute he saw her, every time he saw her, desire raged white hot through his body. He'd have to start sleeping in the barn, he told himself sternly time and time again, only to return to the bed with her and the sweet agony of longing.

"Sebastian?" he heard her say. "Sebastian, please pass the salt." Her request finally got through to him, and he passed the salt across the table. Quite accidentally, their fingers touched, and lightning shot through his veins. Evidently Amanda reacted the same way, and they both snatched their hands away, watching helplessly as the salt tumbled to the table, fortunately missing all the food but making a mess of the entire table.

They were unaware of the bewildered looks their children bestowed upon them. Matthew shrugged and Marissa giggled. The couple ate silently, the tension between them tangible in the air. The kids excused themselves and went to their bedroom to play. Amanda automatically began clearing the dishes, her mind on her still trembling hand and the strong effect Sebastian had on her. Sebastian wiped the table and grabbed the newspaper, *The Alton Telegraph*, staring at it as if he were actually able to see the words. From the corner of his eye he watched Amanda work, admiring the sway of her hips as she moved from one task to another. After she finished, she handed him a cup of tea as she did every night. Yet again when their fingers touched the cup fell crashing to the floor. With a muttered curse, Sebastian threw his chair aside and slammed out of the house. Amanda sighed dejectedly as she cleaned the mess off the floor certain that tonight would be the night he'd decide to stay in the barn.

She put the children to bed and slowly changed her clothes, donning a new white nightgown. The soft cotton

didn't make her feel any better, and she sat in the middle of the bed brushing her hair thoughtfully. Finally, after waiting so long she was sure he must already be asleep, she doused the lamp and climbed beneath the covers. The moon was full and shining gently through her window. She tried closing her eyes, but sleep would not come, so she stared at the ceiling and tried to figure out a way to tell Sebastian how she felt about him.

So it surprised her some time later to hear him come through the door. She turned to look at him, wondering where he had been and what he'd been doing. Was he thinking the same thoughts as she was? He smiled at her and said quietly, "Did I wake you?"

"No," she admitted ruefully, "I couldn't sleep. I was afraid you weren't coming back in tonight."

He climbed into bed beside her, tension clinging to him like a second skin. He didn't want to tell her that he'd planned on taking a cold dip in the creek and spending the night in the barn, but she'd been too much on his mind.

Amanda raised herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. He said nothing, but she could tell the moment his control snapped. His arm snaked around her neck and pulled her head down to his, kissing her with a passion that she had only guessed was held inside him. He ran his hands through her silky hair, whispering loving words in her ear. He kissed a path of fire down her throat while his hands caressed her back, and she knew she'd never felt anything so exquisite. His fingers trembling, he slowly unbuttoned the nightgown down to her waist, his fingers inching toward her aching breast. When they finally touched, Amanda felt light-headed with pleasure, hoping this moment would never end. Now his lips were at her throat, and as they moved lower she thought she might die

from the wanting. She felt his breath on her breast a split second before his tongue licked her sensitive nipple, drawing a surprised cry of pleasure from her. Never had she felt anything so wildly intoxicating, so thoroughly stirring.

Tearing himself away with a groan, Sebastian sat up, running an unsteady hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Amanda."

She jumped off the bed, her forwardness surprising even herself. "Don't you dare, Sebastian Knight, don't you *dare* apologize to me again! I can't bear to hear it."

"But I am sorry, sweetheart. I promised I would not take advantage of you—"

"Who asked you?! Who asked you to make such a promise? We're living as husband and wife; *of course* we'd want to carry it on to the next level. It's only natural to feel this way, but your damnable sense of honor keeps getting in the way!"

All Sebastian could think about was how lovely she looked standing beside the bed, her face flushed, her gown gaping open to expose her lovely form. "But we aren't really husband and wife, now are we?" he said quietly.

Amanda burst into tears. She was angry with herself for giving in to her emotions and angry at Sebastian for bringing them out in the first place. "I don't care! All I know is that I have never been happier than I am here with you, and I want to consume every morsel of happiness that I can before I have to leave."

Suddenly he was standing beside her, gently placing her head against his hard chest, rubbing circles on her back while tucking her hair behind her ear. "I swear I didn't know you felt this way, sweetheart."

She looked up at him, tears streaking her face, and he

finally read the trust in her eyes that had been there for quite some time. Tenderly, he kissed her salty tears away and smoothed the hair back from her forehead. Their lips met in a fusion so pure it shook him clear down to his toes. Driven onward, he moved to nip at the sweetness of her delicate neck and smooth, soft shoulder. Her skin was cool and silky, inviting him to touch, taste, and drink in the sweet nectar of her.

Amanda clung to him as if her life depended on it, and indeed at the moment she felt as if it did. His warm, wonderful lips were moving over her slowly, creating delicious sensations deep inside of her. She sighed against his lips, melting against him even as she returned his kisses with a passion she had never known she possessed.

They were each lost in the moment, both of them succumbing to the one thing they had searched for their entire lives and had given up on finding: someone to love who would love them in return. They clung to each other, silently nourishing the hunger that raged within their souls. And when they finally came together as one, the earth shook and the heavens exploding around them, the ache in their hearts was replaced with a peace and joy to rival any other.

Much later, as the rooster crowed the dawn of a new day, Sebastian lay quietly in bed beside Amanda, her head pillowed on his chest. He stroked her hair, dreading climbing from the warm bed and the sweetness of holding her in his arms. He couldn't keep the smile from his lips as he gazed down upon her soft form. Maybe, he thought to himself, she would grow fond enough of him that, when the time came, she wouldn't want to leave. He would give her the freedom of choice. After all, he had promised that once the year was up she would have her life back, free and

clear.

Free and clear. Damn, but he was an idiot.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Mama, Marissa wants to know if we can go to Sharon’s house today.”

Amanda smiled at him. “Marissa wants to know, does she?”

He nodded emphatically. “It was Marissa’s idea, honestly. Wasn’t it?” he asked his sister indignantly.

“It was my idea, Mama. I promise Matthew doesn’t want to go just because he knows Sharon is making blackberry jam today and she said we could have some if we come over. Really, it was all my idea.”

Amanda glanced over at Sebastian, who was barely able to hide his mirth from the kids. Her heart warmed at the twinkle in his eyes as he returned her gaze. “Well, I’m not sure,” she teased. “You have been over there often lately. I certainly wouldn’t want to be a bother to the Mahoneys.”

They jumped up and down simultaneously. “No, Mama,” Matthew objected, “they like us to come over. Sharon said we could come as often as we like.”

“That’s right, she did,” Marissa piped up. “And she has the prettiest little puppy named Butterscotch that let’s me hold her like a baby and—”

“What do you say, Mama?” Sebastian laughed. “Can they go visit their friends?”

Amanda’s smile lit up the room. “Go on, but behave yourselves,” she called to their rapidly retreating forms. She was watching them run across the field when Sebastian came up behind her, wrapping his arms about her waist. “What do you want, Mr. Knight?”

He chuckled near her ear. “I must be overworked, I’m

feeling a bit tired. Would you care to join me for a nap?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Amanda nodded. "I'll be along in a minute, I just want to make sure the kids get there safely. Sharon always hangs her orange blanket on the clothesline when they arrive so I know they are safe. As soon as they leave, she takes it down."

"I'll be waiting," he whispered in that deep, wonderful voice.

The minute she saw the orange blanket waving in the breeze Amanda headed toward the bedroom. Sebastian was already tucked beneath the covers waiting for her. She smiled at him, shedding her clothes slowly. He sucked in a deep breath when she climbed in beside him, their bare skin igniting like wildfire when they touched. Their coupling was slow and intense, each gaining knowledge of the other's wants and needs. Afterwards, they spent a long time just enjoying being together, wrapped in a cocoon of warmth and tenderness.

Sebastian dressed with reluctance and returned to his chores at the stable as Amanda gathered the clothes to be laundered in the stream. She had just pulled the first shirt from the water when a prickly heat began at the back of her neck and worked its way down her spine. In her mind's eye she saw a flash of danger that took her breath away. Dropping the laundry, she grabbed her skirts up high and began running up the hill toward the stable, calling breathlessly for Sebastian. When she finally reached her destination, he wasn't in the corral as she expected. Trying to ignore the pain in her side, she rushed into the stable, her voice hoarse from shouting.

Sebastian turned from the stall he was cleaning, a concerned frown on his handsome face. "Amanda! What's

happened?”

She shook her head, grabbing his hand and urging him out the door. “I had a feeling. The children are in danger. Hurry, we have to save them.”

“Where are they?”

“I don't know exactly, but we must hurry to find them.”

“Amanda, be reasonable. You can't know—”

Hurt, angry, and frightened beyond belief, she started off without him. “Do you even know where they are?” he asked as he caught up with her.

“No,” she grated.

Just then they heard the voices of their children, calling out for help. Amanda didn't see the stunned look Sebastian sent her as she began running toward the sound, her blood chilling as she stopped short at the sight that met her eyes. Matthew was standing on the ground, his little arms stretched out toward a branch about seven feet up. Amanda followed their path fearfully until her eyes lit upon Marissa, hanging haphazardly, desperately trying to hold on. Surprisingly, the girl didn't seem to be afraid of falling. Her eyes were trained on something above her, something Amanda couldn't yet see—

Amanda sucked in her breath, clamping both hands over her mouth to stifle a scream. Neither of the children knew they were there. Matthew was trying to handle everything, his arms raised as if to catch his sister if she fell. Marissa was too shocked to move, her eyes never leaving the large snake that inched its way toward her little body.

Sebastian assessed the situation. He pulled his gun from the holster and aimed, knowing without a doubt that if he shot without warning Marissa would surely fall to the ground. He made his way slowly, stealthily, toward the

tree, making no sound, until he was directly under his daughter. Amanda and Matthew stood by quietly watching in horror, praying fervently that everything would turn out all right.

Sebastian took aim just as the snake opened its monstrous jaw, and the sound that shattered the air was deafening. Almost simultaneously, the snake split into many pieces and Marissa fell from the tree, landing safely in her father's free arm. Amanda ran to them, gathering both of the children in her arms, covering them with kisses as well as the hot tears that streamed down her face.

Pulling her gently to her feet, Sebastian sent the kids on ahead of them to the cabin. Ironically, now that the danger was past, they weren't nearly as frightened as their parents seemed to be. Sebastian put his arms around her and, his back against the tree, sank to the ground. He held her while she cried, stroking her back and murmuring comforting words in her ear. When she finally calmed down, they began the short walk home hand in hand.

"I'm sorry," Sebastian said quietly.

Amanda glanced up in surprise. "What can you possibly be sorry for? You saved the children."

He shook his head, denial ready on his lips. "No. I didn't even believe you, Amanda. I only followed along to humor you. I can't even begin to describe the way I felt when I saw Matthew and Marissa—"

Amanda turned to him, putting a hand to his cheek tenderly. "No one has ever believed in my premonitions. I don't blame you for that, Sebastian. You may not have believed me, but you came anyway. And you are the one who saved them. I knew they were in danger, but what could I have done?"

"You are stronger than you give yourself credit for.

You would have—”

“Stop it. All the would-haves in the world aren't going to change what really happened. Be happy that you saved them.” She smiled saucily. “And, from now on, learn to trust my instincts.”

Amanda took his hand and urged him into the house where they found the children busy setting the table for supper and begging for “just a quick snack”. Amanda laughed, relieved that they weren't as traumatized as she was!

## CHAPTER NINE

One evening, just as the leaves began to change colors, Sebastian announced at the supper table that he would be going out of town for a few days. Amanda looked up from her plate, her appetite gone. "We can't come with you?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, I'll be able to ride faster on horseback than I could with a carriage. I really need to get this done as soon as possible."

"I don't like your tone or the worry I see in your eyes, Sebastian. Where are you going?"

"Look at that, you sound just like a real wife," he tried to joke, succeeding only in alienating her.

Amanda stood up abruptly, taking her plate to the washbasin and scrubbing ruthlessly. She felt Sebastian behind her, his hand rubbing her back, and she stiffened her spine as she jerked away from him. "We'll talk about this after the kids are in bed," he murmured. "I have some work to do in the stable, I'll be back in a while."

Amanda didn't acknowledge that she had heard him, and he walked out the door, wondering what he had done wrong.

Amanda washed every surface in the cabin until it shone, then gave the children a bath before the warmth of the fire and put them to bed. When all was quiet, she sat before the hearth, her sewing in her lap, and stared into the flames. Her soft pink cotton nightgown protected her from the cool night, but the chill surrounding her heart was not so easily dismissed. Sebastian's tense manner worried her, and the fact that he wouldn't discuss where he was going. His lame attempt at a joke only served to hurt her fragile

feelings.

Sebastian walked in and sat in the chair beside her. Her heart turned over when she saw his handsome face, his damp hair shining in the candlelight. "I think it's growing too cold to still be bathing in the creek, Sebastian."

He ignored her remark. "I'll just be going to St. Louis, Amanda. I'll be gone two, three days at the most. I've already asked Justin to keep an eye on you, and I've hired one of his farm hands to stay in the stable while I'm gone. Sharon invited you to stay with them if you don't feel comfortable staying here alone. I swear I'll take care of my business as soon as possible and come home. This is something that must be done."

Amanda rubbed her eyes wearily. "I'm not upset that you have to go. I'm upset, Sebastian, because you refuse to share with me the reason you are going. Don't bother telling me it's routine business, either, because I know better. Whatever it is must be very urgent and not a little dangerous. If you don't want to tell me, then don't, but you can't expect me to be happy about it. I don't understand how you can trust me with your child but you cannot trust me with a little information."

Sebastian sighed in defeat. "I've had a private investigator checking out all my leads on Avery Higgins, and he has some information for me. Papers, he claims, that will be enough evidence to put Higgins away for a very long time, if not forever. I need to get them now, so I can go over them and show them to my contacts. There are very few U.S. Marshals that I *know* can be trusted. I have to take care of this now, while the trail is hot. I promised you your life back, Amanda, and I mean to keep that promise."

Her life back, Amanda thought. What kind of life

would it be without Sebastian in it?

"I'm not asking that you like it, only that you understand."

She nodded. "I do. I want him to be put away where he can never harm another person. I know what he's done to me, but I have a feeling that you know of things he's done that are far worse. We have to stop him, Sebastian. When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. My investigator can't stay long, and once I've made sure the papers are authentic I have to get them to the office."

Amanda felt as if the breath had been knocked from her. Tomorrow morning. For two or three days. She had never missed anyone before, but she knew she'd miss him. Who was she kidding? She missed him already!

"Be careful, Sebastian, Avery is a monster."

He took her hand in his tracing circles in her palm, and raised his electric blue eyes to gaze at her. "Don't worry about me, sweetheart, I have too much waiting for me at home to let anything happen."

She allowed herself to be coaxed into his arms, soaking up the warmth from his embrace to ward against the icy fear that settled deep inside of her. She wondered if she would ever see him again after tomorrow, but comforted herself with the knowledge that she still had not had *the feeling*. That, at least, was a good sign. And yet she wondered what was taking Avery so long to find her this time, when she knew he had tracked her as far as St. Louis.

Sebastian's lips at her temple made her forget her thoughts as he swept her off her feet and carried her to their bedroom, placing her gently beneath the warm covers and his much warmer body. She let her fears float away on wave upon wave of titillating sensation, clinging to the man

that she had come to love above everything else except, perhaps, their children. His touch paid attention to every inch of her soft skin, driving her mad with desire. She watched the play of emotion in his eyes as they turned from bright electric blue to the deepest indigo. He smiled before his lips once again claimed hers and, with a muted gasp, they became one. Amanda felt as if she had never been complete before this moment, as if she may never be again. So she clung to him, her arms around his broad shoulders, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, wanting to carry this feeling into eternity, but knowing it would be short-lived.

Sebastian lifted himself to the bed beside her and pulled her into the security of his arms. His breathing was ragged as he stroked her back absently. He knew only one thing: Avery Higgins threatened his whole world, and he had to do something about it. He had promised Amanda he'd give her her life back, and he had to keep his word. He realized that once she was set free from her past she would also be free from him, and may very well choose to leave. But if he didn't take care of Avery then he wouldn't even have the chance to try and persuade her to stay. And he *must* persuade her to stay, for he was realizing more with every passing day that his heart and soul now resided within the palms of her hands, and he could never be truly happy without her.

Sebastian snuggled closer to her, the faint smell of cinnamon still clinging to her hair from the apple pie she'd baked this afternoon, and finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

He rose early, before dawn, and quietly gathered his things. He kissed her softly on the forehead, and, with one

last look, reluctantly left the cozy warmth of the house.

Amanda turned from the stove, her face red from the heat, and smiled at the children while she placed their plates before them. "So what do you plan to do today?"

Matthew piped up. "I'm gonna play with my baby bunny, if I can find him. Mama, how come I don't see him as much anymore?"

"Well, it's getting a bit colder and he probably stays home with his mama so he can be warm," she smiled. "Marissa, what do you want to do today?"

Marissa's little bottom lip stuck out in a pout and she glared at Matthew. "I wanted to dress the bunny up in the new dolly dress you made me but *Matthew* won't let me."

"Boys do not dress in pink frilly dresses, *Marissa*," he spouted indignantly.

"How do you know it's a boy, anyhow? You think you're so much smarter than me, but you're just a dumb *boy*."

"That's enough, children," Amanda stated firmly. "Marissa, you really shouldn't try to put dresses on wild animals, you could be hurt. Now both of you run along and play nicely together while I finish my chores in here. If we have time later we'll search out some apple trees and I'll make apple dumplings."

The children ran out and Amanda continued her cleaning, humming all the while. Two or three days wasn't really so long, she told herself. Sebastian would be back before she knew it. If she kept busy the time would go by all that much faster. So she cleaned the house until it sparkled and then went searching for apples with the children. Afterwards she baked apple dumplings and sugar cookies, and the trio trudged across the field to share their

goodies with their neighbors.

Matthew and Marissa immediately engrossed themselves with the little tan puppy, and Sharon made some tea to go with the baked goods. The women sat at the table, contented to keep each other company while they watched the kids play on the floor.

“So how are you getting along without Sebastian?” Sharon wondered.

Amanda laughed a bit. “So far, so good, I suppose. The house feels a bit empty without him, though.”

“You and the children are more than welcome to spend the night with us, Amanda. It would be fun.”

“Thank you, but we'll be fine at home. I know how to contact you if the need arises, but I do appreciate the offer. You've been a good friend to me, Sharon.”

Sharon hurriedly blinked the moisture from her eyes and hugged her friend tightly. “If you won't spend the night, will you at least stay to supper? There's more than enough for everyone.”

Amanda agreed with a smile, and the two women busied themselves with preparations for dinner. Much later, her children in tow, Amanda started again across the field, admiring the way the setting sun turned everything to gold. The sight of the cozy house in the distance filled her with warmth, and she hurried forward, Matthew and Marissa following along sleepily behind her. The sun dipped yet lower, throwing long shadows on the field, and creating a chilliness in the air that reminded her autumn was upon them. She shivered, grabbed two little hands, and made a game of running the rest of the way home, laughing all the while.

Later that night she sat before the fire, the children tucked safely in bed, and enjoyed a hot cup of tea.

Although it was nearing midnight, she was far from sleepy, so she took out the sewing she had planned as Christmas presents for Sebastian and the children. She wondered if she would be here Christmas morning to see them open their presents, or if they would be plucked from beneath a lonely tree. Amanda had no doubt that Sebastian would take care of Avery. She had come to trust him so implicitly that she would follow him to the ends of the earth, if only he'd ask her. But such thoughts were pure folly, for she knew when their promises to each other had been fulfilled, she would again be traveling on her way, just as she always did. Only this time she would be running from nothing except memories of a husband and daughter that could never be hers. Where would she even go? She could settle in Alton, of course, but knew deep down that if she had to leave Sebastian, she would need to go far away, where the likelihood of ever running into him again would be nonexistent. And what about poor Matthew? He had blossomed under Sebastian's patient influence, how could she so cruelly yank him from the arms of the only father he had ever known?

Closing her eyes against the imminent pain, her heart felt wrenched from her breast at the thought of leaving sweet little Marissa. What were they to do? She sighed sadly, suddenly unable to maintain the excitement of working on Christmas presents. So she put her sewing away and went to bed, where she tossed and turned for what seemed like hours before getting back up and making more tea. She sat at the kitchen table, her hands wrapped around the warmth of her cup, and silently berated herself for allowing such disturbing thoughts to spoil her happiness. She had vowed that this short time they had together would not be dampened by her tendency to worry

about the future. Like Sebastian said, the future would take care of itself, and there was no way they could know what would happen. Worrying about it would only make her unhappy and possibly ruin this, the happiest time of her life.

On that thought, she pushed her half-full cup away and laid her head upon her arms on the table, promptly falling asleep.

Sebastian sat in the dingy diner, sipping a cup of extremely strong coffee, and staring at the man across from him. "So what exactly are you telling me, John?" he asked of his private investigator. "I thought you had some papers to show me, and you're rambling on about one thing or another, but skirting the issue of the information you promised. Do you, or do you not, have what I need?" he grated.

John raised an eyebrow and half-smiled at his client. "I do. I was merely trying to tell you that I am hot on the trail of happenings that will make what we have so far look like child's play. I had hoped to have some evidence for you today, but was unable to procure it."

"Do you have what I asked for?" Sebastian was in a foul temper and was unwilling to play cat and mouse games with his slippery spy. Being away from Amanda and the kids had filled him with a tension that he hadn't anticipated, and a burning need to return home and assure himself that they were safe.

John discreetly pushed a packet of papers across the table, glancing around the room as he did so. Sebastian barely suppressed his annoyance at his companion's dramatics. He opened the envelope and rifled through the documents, finding what he was looking for and nodding his approval. The two men stood and shook hands, with no

one the wiser to the money that was expertly transferred, and strode through the door, each going separate ways. John was off to continue prying into Avery's dark secrets, and Sebastian swaggered determinedly toward the sheriff's office, and the one marshal he knew he could trust.

Amanda jerked her head up when she heard the children's giggles, surprised to see that the sun had already come up. She turned her head slowly, wincing at the pain in her neck as she did so. She must have slept there for quite some time, she mused, indeed must have been totally exhausted to have slept at all, let alone on a table!

The day went much more slowly than the one before, and every five minutes she found herself leaning out the door, straining her eyes to see if Sebastian was coming down the road. Her body ached from her cramped position of the night before, and her mind was befuddled from lack of sleep. Her first instinct was to keep Matthew and Marissa close to home, but when their whining and pleading grated on her last nerve she gave in and let them play in the field. She puttered around the house, trying to do some housework, but gave up when she found herself standing with the broom in her hand doing nothing but gazing out the window. Giving herself a firm lecture, she sat down to mend some clothing. This was much better, she thought, being able to sit down and still get some work done. The beginnings of a smile played on her lips just before she dozed off.

Amanda moaned, fighting her way out of the nightmare that had clutched her mind. She sat up straight in the chair, her sewing falling to the floor, her first thought was to wonder where the children were. She shook her head dazedly, trying to return to full consciousness. She'd

had a bad dream, about Avery—

Amanda jumped up from her chair in a panic. *Oh my God! He knows. Avery knows where I am and he's coming to get me. Where are the children?!*

She ran out the door, stumbling over a rock and falling to the ground, scraping her hand on the very rock that had tripped her as she tried to get up. She called their names, looking wildly across the field toward Sharon's house.

No orange blanket flew on the line today.

She checked the barn, where they liked to pet the dairy cows. She checked the meadow where they usually found the baby bunny. She fearfully wandered the banks of the creek, hoping they hadn't disobeyed to play near the water. Amanda called for them all the while, until her voice was hoarse and her throat was dry as a bone. Leaning against a tree for a moment, she tried in vain to catch her breath. Why could she not find them? Where could they have gone?

What about the horses? Would they have dared to go where Sebastian had forbidden them to ever go alone? She knew the children were curious, Matthew especially, but would he have done something so dangerous?

She began running again, shouting with what remained of her voice. Her eyes scanned the corral but could find no little bodies trying to pet the horses. She went into the stable, which smelled of warm hay and clean horses, but still she had no luck. She left the stable and closed the door behind her, leaning her head against it dejectedly. Where should she go from here? Hadn't she checked every place they liked to play?

The screaming that sounded just behind her made her jump and scream, too. She was relieved to find both Matthew and Marissa completely unharmed. Grabbing

their tiny arms, she knelt on the ground and demanded in what was probably the harshest tone she had ever used with them, “Where have you been? I have been calling and calling for you. Don't you ever wander so far away again, do you hear me?! Anything could have happened to you! Anything!”

*Calm down*, she told herself the minute she realized that her entire body was shaking and the children were crying. *Just get them to the house where you know that they'll be safe*. So she took their hands gently and walked them quickly home, shutting and barring the door behind them. Amanda sat them down at the table and poured three cups of soothing tea before joining them. “Now tell me,” she said, proud of how calm she sounded, “where were you this afternoon?”

Matthew said, “I know you'll be angry, Mama, but—”

“Not angry, sweetheart, but scared half out of my mind. I thought something had happened to you. I thought maybe you were hurt.”

“We just wanted to play hide and seek, and there's nowhere to hide in the fields,” Marissa added.

“So where did you go?”

“Over behind Mr. Mahoney's barn where there are all the trees and farming 'quipment. It was all my idea—”

“It wasn't just Matthew, Mama, I wanted to go, too. I'm sorry we scared you.”

Amanda took a deep breath, reminding herself that they were fine now, and at least they had stayed close to the Mahoneys spread. “Well,” she stated firmly, “I think that you may stay indoors for the rest of the day as punishment for wandering so far without permission. Now go fetch your slates and you can spend the afternoon practicing your numbers.”

For the rest of the day Amanda gave the illusion that she was doing housework as normal, but her thoughts were trained on Sebastian and Avery. She kept the door locked tight, not willing to take any chance, for she had no idea how close Avery really was. True, she had just had *the feeling* this morning, but that only meant he knew where she was. He might be as far away as Mississippi or as close as St. Louis. There was really, of course, no way to know for sure. And as the sun dipped on the horizon and her fears escalated, she reluctantly admitted that there was no hope that Sebastian would be home tonight. So again she gave the children a bath before the fire, read them a story, and tucked them into bed.

And again she sat before the fireplace with a cup of tea, not nearly so soothing this time, and waited for a calm to steal over her that she began to accept would never come. She was cold, from the inside out, and fear had settled like a great weight upon her shoulders.

Was there really any hope? Had she done the right thing by allowing Sebastian to fight her battles for her? Was coming here with him the answer to her prayers or just a stay of execution?

She sighed. At any rate, if she did have to leave with Avery, at least she knew Matthew would be well taken care of and enfolded in the arms of a loving family. Wasn't that all she had asked for, anyway? Amanda laughed bitterly, knowing she should never have dared to hope that her life could end up anywhere except where it had been heading for years. She should have known better than to begin to hope again—

A sound outside interrupted her thoughts, and for a moment she forgot to breathe. *Oh, it was just the wind, you silly goose*, she tried to tell herself, but the fear would not

leave her. She sipped at her tea, not realizing that it had become as cold as the terror that threatened to overcome her.

*You should have gone to Sharon's house, she berated herself. At least there would be someone to protect the children if anything happened to you.*

Attempting to breathe at a somewhat normal level, she resumed rocking in her chair and staring into the fire. Thoughts of the past swam before her eyes, unwanted though they were. She remembered the first time Avery had raised a hand to her. They had only been “married” a few months, and he had exhibited signs of a violent nature but, as optimistic as she used to be, she tried to explain it away. Then, on one of the many nights he had stayed out drinking with his buddies, he had walked through the door of their small shack nearing midnight. Amanda had waited supper as long as she could, then had eaten a small bit, cleaned her mess, and put a plate to keep warm by the fire. By the time Avery came home, she was asleep in bed.

Amanda shuddered as she recalled being pulled from a sound sleep, and the bed, by her hair. Avery was standing over her, bellowing at the top of his voice, about not waiting supper for him. She'd stared at him in shock and bewilderment. “I've kept a plate warm for you by the stove,” she'd said quietly.

This seemed to enrage him even more, and he stalked over to the fire, grabbed the plate, and threw it at her. She was so surprised she didn't even have time to move before it crashed down upon her head, knocking her unconscious. When she'd come to, Avery was gone, and she was lying in a heap on the floor with rotting food and broken glass all around her.

Amanda sighed. After all these years, she was certain

that his rage knew no bounds, and he would not stop until he had found her. She wasn't even entirely sure that he would deliver her to the authorities. Probably he would kill her himself. He was like that.

Running a hand through her hair, she stood up with determination. She was not a girl anymore, too frightened to stand up for herself. No, she was a woman now, a woman who had managed to keep one step ahead of Avery for many years. He may be smart, but he had yet to prove that he was smarter than she was. She had a family to protect, by God, and she would not let them down!

Setting her cup down absentmindedly, she marched into the bedroom and retrieved Sebastian's spare pistol from high in the rafters, tucking it safely into the pocket of her nightgown. As she passed the fireplace, she grabbed the rifle down from its perch over the mantle and carried it to the table. She pulled a chair over by the stove, directly in front of the door, and hurried to check that all the shutters were drawn tight. She lingered momentarily by the children, their angelic little faces smiling in their sleep. "Sweet dreams," she whispered as she kissed each tiny head.

Back in the kitchen, she reclaimed the guns from the table and settled herself in the chair, blanket pulled warmly around her shoulders, weapons hidden neatly within.

She stared at the door, the coldness of the metal in her hands giving her a slight sense of security. She would protect her children! But two busy days and one sleepless night weighed heavily upon her, and she found her eyes drooping. Through sheer determination, she kept them open, trained unceasingly upon the door.

Every moment seemed like hours, and she found herself beginning to glance toward the window, hoping

against hope that the sun would be peeking over the horizon. She wished fervently that Sebastian would come home today, for she could not sleep during the day with the children awake, and she was sure she could not endure another sleepless night. If only he would come home and hold her tightly while she slept, his warm strength fighting off all her fears and horrible memories. She longed to see his beloved face, to know that he was home safely and, therefore, she too would be safe.

But the minutes ticked away, broken only by the occasional murmur from her slumbering children. She wasn't aware that her feet were falling asleep, and when the numbness spread up her legs, she was too tired to notice. Her fingers still gripped the guns tightly, and she tensed at every sound.

Just as she was sure that morning was close at hand, and her fears began to subside, she heard the faintest nicker of a horse. Surely it could be one of Sebastian's horses in the stable? But if it were, she would have been hearing that all night. Could one of his herd have gotten loose?

Amanda smiled. *Now I know you're losing your mind,* she told herself, *for Sebastian keeps his animals safe and secure with no chance of escape from the stable.*

The neigh came again, closer this time, and Amanda desperately looked toward the window. If it were nearing daylight, she could see who the intruder was. Possibly it was the farm hand from Justin's farm coming to feed the horses? But the night was still black as pitch, without as much as a sliver of moonlight to brighten it.

She put a trembling hand to her brow, digging deep within herself for the courage to fight for her life and those of her loved ones.

The door rattled and she jumped, clutching the pistol

and settling her finger on the trigger. She could do it, she knew she could. Again, the door rattled.

Amanda sat on her chair, overtaken by a strange calm, and watched as the door was continuously pummeled from the other side. She heard a male voice calling to her from the other side, but the strange roaring in her ears prevented her from making out the words. When the wood barring the door began to splinter, she raised the weapon in both hands, as Sebastian had taught her to do, and trained it where she expected Avery's head to appear. Her grip was firm and amazingly steady for everything she had been through, and her pretty brown eyes that Sebastian often likened to melted chocolate had turned dark with fury. She wouldn't let him get away with it again. Never again.

She took a deep breath as the wood gave way and the door swung open and slammed against the wall, setting the dishes to rattling. At the same moment, Amanda cocked the gun. Her eyes started at his boots and made their way up his long legs to stare him straight in the eye. She tried to stand, but her numb legs gave way beneath her and she fell to her knees, the pistol falling to the floor. She looked up, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Sebastian," she said. "Thank God!"

Sebastian swept her poor exhausted body off the floor and strode purposefully across the cabin to their room. He laid her gently on the bed, tucking the covers securely about her, and watched as she fell immediately into a deep sleep. He stroked her hair tenderly, wondering what had happened to make her feel the need to stand guard all night.

Working quickly, he repaired the door and replaced the guns, looked in on the children he had sorely missed, and finally climbed into bed beside Amanda, sliding his arms about her warm waist. Still asleep, she fit her soft body

against his and smiled sweetly, at last getting the rest she needed.

## CHAPTER TEN

By the time Amanda forced her eyes open the next morning, the sun was high in the sky. Feeling much calmer after her long sleep and relieved that Sebastian was home, she hurriedly dressed and pulled her hair into a bun. When she stepped out of the bedroom, Sebastian grinned at her from his place at the stove, where he was attempting to make lunch. She smiled at him and sat down at the table, noticing what a lovely day it was. The sun was shining brightly on fields that had turned golden and trees filled with the colors of fall. She could see the children playing beneath one of the young saplings near the window.

"I told them not to go far," Sebastian said quietly when he saw her watching them.

Amanda brought tormented brown eyes up to meet his bright blue ones, and it took only two long strides for him to cross the room to meet her. He knelt down before her until their eyes met. "Everything will be okay, Amanda. You have my solemn promise."

"Oh, Sebastian," she murmured, "I'm so glad you've come home. I had *the feeling* while you were gone, and then I couldn't find the children, and I'm afraid I panicked until I scared the daylights out of all three of us. He knows where I am, and he'll be on his way to find me, if he isn't already." She took a shuddering breath. "I just wish it would all go away."

He rubbed her cold hands. "We have to wait him out this time, Amanda. You have to let him find you so I can deal with him and get him out of your life once and for all. I know how hard it must be to sit idly by and do nothing,

but I'm here to protect you, and I always will be. I'll not let anything happen to you and the children."

She touched his cheek tenderly. "What did I ever do without you?" she asked softly, wondering when she had fallen so deeply in love with him.

Sebastian stood abruptly, turning his back on her without a word to pull the warmed stew from the stove. She watched him silently, wondering what he was thinking. Did he see the emotion in her eyes? Did he pity her, knowing how difficult it would be for her to walk out of his life feeling the way she did? Or was he simply as uncertain about his feelings as she was about her own?

Setting aside her confusing thoughts, she turned to the open window and called the children in for lunch. A cool breeze blew in, moving softly across her cheeks and through her hair. Amanda closed her eyes, relishing the fresh scent.

Matthew and Marissa scrambled through the door, waited impatiently while Amanda washed their hands, and hopped up onto their chairs. "Matthew said tomorrow we can go to church and have supper at Sharon's house. Can we, Mama? Oh, can we?" Amanda nodded with a smile. "Ooooh, I can't wait to play with Butterscotch! He's the cutest little puppy I ever saw! He likes to lick my fingers," she giggled.

"That's because Sharon gives you rock candy and he licks the sugar from your fingers," her brother told her in a no nonsense tone.

"Is not! Butterscotch licks me because he wants to give me a kiss. Isn't that right, Papa?"

Sebastian tried to hide his smile, but his blue eyes twinkled merrily. "I suspect you are both right, to an extent."

The children eyed each other triumphantly over their steaming plates of stew, each convinced they had won the argument.

The remainder of the day passed quietly. Feeling caged and restless, Amanda took the kids for a walk through the fields and down to the creek, where they hopped and skipped along the banks trying to catch little frogs. She sat down, drew her legs up, and watched them absentmindedly. She couldn't seem to keep her mind off Avery these days. Every noise she heard, every shadow that happened to fall across her path, had her jumping in fear.

Amanda had every confidence that Sebastian could—and would—protect them. But she knew he couldn't be glued to her side every moment of every day, and she refused to live her life attached to him or locked inside the house.

She admitted to herself that if the children were threatened she would not hesitate to take whatever actions necessary to assure their safety. But if she were the only one in danger, she wasn't sure that she could harm another person.

And that was a question that preyed on her mind constantly.

Rising reluctantly, she brushed away her disturbing thoughts and gathered the children for the walk home. It was getting late and she wanted to have supper on the table when Sebastian came in from working with the horses. Amanda hoped her presence here made his life easier, and wished a little more fervently than she would admit that he would come to need her and allow her to stay if—and when—the trouble with Avery was over.

Laughing, she told herself brusquely that no matter

what happened, when her promise and Sebastian's had been fulfilled she would leave this lovely land. She had tentative thoughts of traveling to Boston, but thought that she might instead like to live where it was warm most of the time and where Matthew could play outside and have a happy childhood.

Amanda was brought from her thoughts by Marissa's pitiful wail. "Matthew Knight," she called, "you let go of your sister's pigtails right this instant!"

He obeyed his mother and instead began chasing Marissa toward the house, but Amanda paused, her step slowing. She couldn't believe what she'd just said. It was all too real, this pretend family they had. If she stayed here much longer she would begin to believe that Sebastian and Marissa actually belonged to her. She must remind herself that they did not. This was the one and only place where she had ever felt at home, but that didn't mean she could claim it. Squatter's rights may be allowed upon land, but not on a person's heart.

All through dinner she was very quiet, murmuring absently when Sebastian tried to talk to her, smiling distantly at the children when they demanded her attention. She went through the motions of cleaning and putting Matthew and Marissa to bed, all the while feeling very displaced.

She sat down before the fire as she did every night, but her sewing lay forgotten in her lap. She started when Sebastian walked through the door. He took off his coat, wet from the storm that had sprung up unexpectedly, and said in an offhand manner, "I checked everything outside. There's no sign of trespassing."

"That's good," she answered, unwilling to talk about Avery. Indeed, wishing she would never have to *think* of

him again.

He sat beside her, caressing her cold hands. "You've been very quiet tonight."

She shrugged. "I haven't had much to say."

"Have I done something to make you angry?"

Her brown eyes met his in surprise. "No, of course not." She smiled involuntarily. "Why, did you do something that I should be mad about?"

His finger lightly traced her jaw. "That's better," his deep voice caressed her as much as his touch. "You should smile more often. Your pretty eyes light up and your perfect pink lips tease me beyond temptation." He took a small taste of those same lips, the tip of his tongue tracing the curving softness. "Sometimes when I'm working and I see you outside I can barely control myself from sweeping you off your feet and carrying you into the sweet hay for an afternoon of delightful lovemaking. Every time I look at you, Amanda—*every time*—I want you even more than the moment before. You are constantly on my mind, and I rush home every evening so I can spend a little time with you when *I* am the center of your attention." His finger snaked down her arm, drawing delicious shivers from her. He felt as if a pool of molten lava had suffused his body, consuming him until there was nothing left but this need, this want. "Can I be the center of your attention tonight, my lovely Amanda?"

She smiled impishly, laying a hand on his solid chest. "I'm not sure. You never answered my question."

Chuckling, he swept her up into his arms and kissed her senseless as he moved toward the bedroom. Amanda clung to him, wanting nothing more than for Sebastian to continue with the fiery kisses that set her blood to boiling and chased every thought from her mind except those of his

wondrous passion.

He deposited her gently on the bed, pausing only long enough to remove his gun belt. He lowered himself onto the bed beside her, his strong fingers tangling in her hair and drawing her lips toward his own. Their gazes met, locked, each reading a love in the other's eyes that they were afraid to believe. Sebastian murmured in her ear as he nibbled her neck and divested her of all her clothing. She slowly unbuttoned his shirt, letting the tips of her fingernails trail lightly down his muscular chest, bringing a low moan from her mate. She smiled seductively as she pulled the shirt from the waistband of his pants and ever so slowly unbuckled and slid the belt from the loops. When Sebastian moved to caress her silky skin, she gently set his hands to his sides, intent on being the aggressor this time.

Sebastian lay still, allowing her to rid him of his clothing. He was completely bewildered—not unpleasantly so—that she wouldn't allow him to touch her. Every time her skin came in contact with his he was filled with a heat so intense he had to gasp for breath. He considered himself a man well experienced in the ways of lovemaking, but never before had his senses been simultaneously tormented and soothed as they were now by her lightly stroking fingers. His hands itched to touch her, his lips burned to feel her skin beneath them, but with an iron willpower he held himself in check, waiting for a sign that Amanda was ready for his interaction.

It came but moments later, when she had traced every part of his body and her lips finally met his. The thunder and lightning outside were nothing compared to the tremendous explosion that rocked his body with that one small touch. His arms came around her, bringing that wonderful feeling of warmth and security, and they held

each other so close they seemed to meld into one being. It was as if they had been apart forever and just now found one another again.

The room spun, the earth shook, and fireworks exploded before their eyes as they came together. And for once, to an embittered war veteran and a lonely orphan, the world looked like a beautiful place.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amanda, wearing her prettiest dress, a mint green with a tiny white floral print, stepped off the wagon, Sebastian's hand steadying her. She smiled at him, a bright, happy smile that made his electric blue eyes turn dark with remembrance of the night before. He winked at her before reaching for the children and guiding them toward the church. At the doors they joined Justin and Sharon and sat down in their usual pew. The day was sunny and warm, not an uncommon occurrence for autumn, but one never knew what the temperature would be like from day to day come September. The sermon that day dealt with being forgiving of others.

Amanda squirmed a bit, knowing that she and Sebastian awaited a man that she may very well never be able to forgive. There was still so much that Avery could do to harm them. She prayed that God would understand her reasons for being so unforgiving in this instance, and also asked Him to help her deal with Avery in the best way possible so that he couldn't hurt anyone again.

When the sermon was over, they gathered outside the church, and Amanda noticed that the Mississippi River actually looked pretty when it reflected the deep blue sky. She and Sharon decided to take a walk through town before lunch, and Justin and Sebastian went in search of Mr. Amos to discuss an order they had made.

The women, with Matthew and Marissa in tow, glided along, their good shoes clicking against the brick of the street. The children skipped ahead, laughing gleefully and picking up leaves from the ground to form a multicolored

bouquet for their mother. She smiled fondly at them, touched at the sentiment, and listened with half an ear to Sharon's gossip. She started at the call she received from down the street.

"Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Knight," called Natalie Amos. "I'm so glad I caught up with you both. How do you do, Mrs. Mahoney?"

"Fine, thank you. And yourself?"

"Oh, I was under the weather last week, but not a bit the worse for wear. It's wonderful to be outside on such a glorious day."

"It certainly is," Amanda said, wondering what had put Mrs. Amos in such a good mood.

"I've just had the most marvelous time talking to an old acquaintance of mine. Don't you just love to run into people you haven't seen in a while? Makes the whole world seem like a nicer place, and that's the truth. How are you ladies faring way out there in the country?"

Amanda smiled, deciding against reminding the older woman that they lived a mere five miles from town. "We've been fine, thank you," she replied. "In fact, I've been using Sebastian's grandmother's canning recipes, and I'm afraid I've made way too much." She gave Mrs. Amos the basket she'd been carrying on her arm. "Sebastian told me how much you liked her peach preserves, and I've brought some for you. Now, I'm sure mine aren't as good as Grandma Knight's must have been, but maybe they'll do in a pinch."

Mrs. Amos's eyes welled with tears as she took the offering. "How kind you are, Mrs. Knight, how very kind. It is nice to be reminded of an old friend like this, and I shall treasure these preserves just as I did dear Nettie's. I don't know how to thank you."

Amanda covered the woman's hand with her own. "It's just peach preserves, Mrs. Amos. I wanted to return the kindness you've given to us. Oh, Sharon made her special honey wheat bread for you, too."

Mrs. Amos shook her head, patting the ladies' cheeks as if they were children. "Such wonderful friends I have. Oh, what a glorious day! Thank you so much, girls, I believe I'll head home right now and make this special treat for Mr. Amos and myself."

Sharon and Amanda watched her with amusement as she ambled down the street. "I never guessed such a small gift would make her take on so," Sharon said.

"She and Sebastian's grandmother must have been closer than we thought."

Amanda called to the children and they headed back to the church in search of their men. "Justin and I thought we might have lunch in town today, if you don't mind. His brother hurt himself while chopping firewood yesterday and he's been in a terrible mood. If you ask me, it was nothing but a little bruise, but he carries on as if he chopped his leg off! Anyway, I thought we should steer clear of him for a while.

"Amanda?" Sharon noticed her friend had stopped dead in her tracks, staring at something off in the distance. When Sharon's gaze followed, she found Justin and Sebastian talking to a small woman she had never seen before. "Amanda, are you quite all right?"

Amanda didn't hear her. She felt as if her heart had dropped to her feet. She forced breaths, trying to still the trembling that started in her fingers and spread like wildfire through her body. It was uncanny, that everything that could possibly go wrong in her life did. Maybe she wouldn't have the rest of the year with Sebastian and

Marissa, after all. Maybe she would have only a few more short days with them before she would have to leave.

Forcing deep, slow breaths, she managed to convince herself to calm down and think rationally. This could mean nothing, after all, nothing at all. It could be only a chance meeting, a coincidence. She determinedly schooled her features into a pleasant smile and smoothed the skirt of her dress, happy now that she had worn her favorite one.

“Amanda?” Sharon shook her arm gently. “What’s the matter with you? Why do you look as if you’ve seen a ghost?”

Amanda reassured her friend with a smile. “I’m fine, really. Come along, children, let’s go fetch your father for lunch.” She started off quickly, knowing if she didn’t move now she never would, and missed the puzzled look her friend bestowed on her.

Matthew and Marissa ran ahead, throwing themselves into Sebastian’s arms as if they had not seen him in a week. He laughed and hugged them tightly, introducing them to the beautiful woman he was conversing with. Amanda’s gait was much slower, her stomach knotted tightly into balls of nerves, but she glued that pleasant smile on her face and forced one foot in front of the other until she stood by Sebastian’s side.

She was relieved when he put his arm about her waist, lending her a small bit of the peace she usually felt from his touch. “I’d like you to meet my wife, Amanda. Sweetheart, this is Misty.”

Amanda felt her head reel, even though she had been expecting this introduction. She held her hand out to the woman whose lovely heart-shaped face and dark curling hair were so like Marissa’s. “I’m pleased to meet you, Misty.”

Misty brought her gaze up from where it had settled upon her daughter. Amanda noted with surprise that her light green eyes held no contempt, no censure, but instead a friendly openness. Misty held her hand for a moment, and Amanda felt that her watery smile was genuine. "I'm glad to meet you, Amanda. I'm so happy that—well—" She looked around at all the people still milling about the church. "I heard about Mrs. Knight's passing and wanted to give Sebastian my condolences. I wanted to see for myself that—what I mean to say is—"

"I understand," Amanda interrupted. "We were just about to have lunch. Would you like to join us?" *Now what made you say that*, she berated herself.

"Oh no, I'm just passing through. I'm waiting for the stage, you see, I'm due back in New York very soon."

"The stage doesn't run on Sunday. Please, you must have lunch and stay with us until the stage comes tomorrow."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow in surprise. *Amanda*, she told herself, *I'm beginning to think your troubles are a product of your own stupidity.*

"I wouldn't want to cause you any trouble."

"It's no trouble." Amanda linked her arm through the other woman's and led her down the street, her friends following in confusion. She suddenly felt as if she needed to know this woman, Marissa's mother. A large part of Sebastian's life had been spent with her, and Amanda wanted to glean every tidbit of knowledge about Sebastian so that in the future, when she had to leave him, she would have more to remember than just a few glorious nights in his arms.

At the restaurant, the children insisted on being seated by Amanda and, just by coincidence, Misty and Sebastian

ended up beside each other. Amanda swallowed hard, trying not to wonder about what they were thinking. She concentrated on the children, who were calling her.

“Mama,” Marissa repeated insistently, “I think I want to have chicken soup. But, I don't know. Do you think they make it like you do, Mama, so thick and yummy?”

“I'm sure the soup is very tasty, Marissa. If it's not I promise I'll make you a whole pot tomorrow.”

She kept her head down, answering Marissa's questions quietly, afraid to notice what Misty's reaction might be. She helped the children order and, she was sure, ordered something herself. She sipped tea and listened to the conversation around her, nodded slightly at Sharon's concerned looks, and acted as if everything were right with her world.

Matthew's continual babbling helped to break the ice, and when Amanda finally gained enough courage to meet Misty's eyes, all she saw in them was heartfelt gratitude. With a deep breath, she released all the tension she had been holding and found to her surprise that she was actually beginning to enjoy herself. Misty told them stories about New York, where she sang in various operas, and Amanda began to warm up to the good-natured, amiable woman.

That night, after the children were tucked into bed and Sebastian was doing the evening chores, the two women sat down together, feeling a bit uncomfortable in the silence that ensued. Neither one knew what to say, or where to begin. Amanda busied herself with warming water, but that didn't take long and soon they were sipping hot tea and eyeing one another across the table.

“Amanda, I'm so sorry if I've disturbed you by coming here. I didn't know Sebastian had gotten married, and when

I heard about what happened to Mrs. Knight, well, I had to make sure Marissa was faring well. I'd heard she was in the orphanage and, although I wasn't prepared to actually take her into my own custody, I knew that I had to find a good home for her. I do love her, you understand. I only want what's best for her. I was so young when she was born, and even now I don't feel mature enough to take on the responsibility of another person, even if she is my daughter.

"But I do want her to be happy, and I was willing to take whatever measures necessary to make sure that she was. I can't begin to describe how grateful I am to you for what you've done for Marissa. She clearly loves you, and I'm so relieved that she finally has a mother to care for her." She shook her head. "You must think I'm a terrible person."

Amanda shook her head. "I think you are extremely courageous for doing what you want with your life. From what Sebastian has told me, you've not had it very easy. How can anyone fault you for putting the care of your daughter into the hands of someone as loving as Mrs. Knight must have been? Marissa was very happy with her, you know. And I'd like to think she's happy here with me."

"Well, that much is plain to see. It's important to me that you and Sebastian know I would not have let her remain in that orphanage. I honestly did come here to see to her well being."

"That, too, is plain to see. I'm really glad that you've come, Misty, so I could get to know you. Please feel free to come here whenever you feel the need to see her. Our doors will always be open." *And when I'm gone, maybe you can help Sebastian care for Marissa, and fill the void in her life that I'll be leaving.*

Misty sighed suddenly. "You know, I'm really

surprised that Sebastian moved back here. After the war he was like a caged animal and couldn't get out of town fast enough. He tried to stay, but there were too many bad memories tormenting him at that time. When he told me he was leaving I was relieved because my promise to him was the only thing keeping me here. I was never very happy in such a small town. He seems to have gotten over the pain that kept him away."

Amanda nodded. "I think he is coming to terms with it, but he still has nightmares. I suppose all those years as a traveling lawman made him wish for home. Marissa was the deciding factor, though. Ever since he found out about her, his every action has been in her best interest." Amanda's eyes lit up and she leaned across the table. "Can you tell me something, Misty? What was he like as a boy?"

When Sebastian came in some time later he found them sitting on the floor before the fireplace giggling like schoolgirls. He grinned at the unexpected friendship that had sprung up between them. Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, he asked, "What do you have in those teacups, Amanda?"

This set them off again, and he shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know about you two, but I'm turning in for the night."

Amanda stood up to join him. "Whenever you're ready, Misty, you can sleep in the children's room."

She followed her husband into the bedroom and leaned against the closed door. Smiling impishly, she said, "I found out some things about you tonight that simply shock me, Sebastian Knight."

He turned in the midst of unbuttoning his pants. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Misty filled me in on some things about your

character that I simply can't believe."

"Such as?" he played along, continuing to undress.

"Such as your being a tormentor of little girls. Yes, don't deny it, Misty told me you couldn't walk by a girl without pulling her braids or tweaking her nose. And about the time that you tied her hair ribbons together with those of the girl next to her so that when they stood up their heads knocked together. Or what about when you tacked the hem of your teacher's skirt to the floor and when she stood up her unmentionables were on view for everyone to see. Really, have you no shame?"

Sebastian sat down on the bed, laughing. "I had forgotten about that. In my defense, I had expected her to wear a dress and thought it would be funny if she had to teach from her chair all day. I really got a scolding for that one!" He winced. "The preacher even came out and gave me a stern talking to and I had to clean the blackboards for an entire month, not to mention apologizing to her before the whole class. What a year that was!"

Amanda smiled to see him examining happier memories. "I like Misty. I admit it was a bit of a shock to see her here and I felt a little uncomfortable, even if I'm not really your wife. But now that I know her I feel a real kinship with her."

"I'm glad to hear it. Are you ready for bed?"

She started brushing her hair. "I don't know, I think I'm still a bit too wired to sleep."

Sebastian took the brush and began pulling it gently through her long tresses, and as his lips nibbled at her ear he whispered, "I didn't ask you to sleep."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Sebastian dismounted from the mustang he had been working, tensing as he saw a man slinking around near his house. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he stepped forward in preparation of battle, one hand hovering above the gun holstered against his hip. His blue eyes narrowed, assessing the situation, and the moment he caught the glint of metal in the sunshine the weapon was in his hand, cocked, and pointed straight between the stranger's eyes.

The man raised his hands with a holler that Sebastian recognized, and he re-holstered the gun and turned to take the horse into the stable. He had just finished rubbing down the stallion and strapping on a bag of oats when the intruder entered, pausing to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the dimness.

"Damned if I didn't see my life flash before my eyes, Knight. Thought I was a goner, for sure."

"If you wouldn't sneak around like an alley cat on the prowl making a man think he had reason to defend his family you wouldn't have had so many brushes with death."

The man laughed. "Comes with the territory. Makes for more excitement, you know."

Sebastian didn't share his amusement. "I've had enough excitement to last a lifetime. All I want now is a quiet life full of hard work so I can forget the *excitement*, as you put it, that I've been through."

"Oh, lighten up, Knight. If you can't laugh through the danger, it will certainly eat you alive."

Sebastian sighed. Is that what it was doing to him? Eating him alive? Is that why his gut clenched and he felt

close to vomiting everything he'd eaten for the last ten years every time he heard the word *war* or smelled the combination of rotting flesh and gunpowder? What would he be like in ten more years if he continued this way? A feeble, beaten old man who couldn't put the past away and had lost his present and future because of it?

He forcefully pushed his thoughts aside. "So what's the news, John? What have you uncovered about Higgins?"

"Well, I've not been able to find the slippery bastard since our last meeting. I've trailed him as far as St. Louis, but I don't know where he is right now. You can better believe he's close, though. He's bent on having his revenge on your pretty little lady, and nothing short of death will stop him."

Sebastian felt his chest tighten alarmingly at the thought of Amanda in Avery's clutches. "Well then," he said calmly, "death it must be."

John's eyes widened in surprise. "Come on, Knight, you and I both know that we can't hunt him down like a wild animal. We are officers of the law and therefore must uphold that same law."

"*You* are an officer of the law, my friend, I've turned in my badge. I operate under no such confinements now."

"What about honor?" John had lost all amusement in the situation.

"Honor be damned! I will protect my woman in any means necessary to be sure that she'll never be harmed again. I would expect you to understand that, John, but if you can't then we need no longer work together. I'll take care of this myself."

John held up his hands. "Hold on there, I'm not gonna bail on you, but you have to go about this in an organized

manner. Running off half-cocked never turns out good, and you know that. Remember your training, Sebastian, and allow it to support you. You know what has to be done, and if it ends in his death then so be it, but you can't hunt him down if you expect to have any kind of life after he's gone. Whether you want to admit it or not, your honor holds you in check, and it's a good thing, too, because at this point in time I don't know that I could do it. I'm just as likely to fire the first shot as you are but the fact that we don't makes us better people. If you want your family to be able to look up to you and respect you then you have to do the right thing." He clapped him on the back. "Hard words to swallow, but there they are. It's the truth, buddy, and you know it as well as I."

His jaw clenched, Sebastian stared his long time friend straight in the eye. He fought the burning desire for bloodshed that he had never felt before, even during the war. Ever so slowly he unlocked his fists, relaxed his shoulders and jaw. "I know," he said quietly. "Thanks for bringing me back to reality. We'll wait him out here, then."

"What do you want me to do? I can keep tracking him or I can stay here and lend a hand."

Sebastian grunted thoughtfully. "If you've tracked him as far as St. Louis then he's got to be around here somewhere. He'll be making his move soon, I suspect, and we can use all the help we can get." He grinned. "How do you feel about working with horses?"

"My friend, I'll shovel manure day in and day out if it'll get Avery Higgins put away once and for all."

He handed over a shovel, chuckling, "Thanks for the offer, you can start over there." He pointed to a stall piled with horse waste. "Oh, and I'm sure Amanda would appreciate some of that around her rose bushes."

Rolling his eyes and glaring heatedly, John muttered, "You'll pay me back for this someday, Knight."

Amanda watched Sebastian quizzically as he stomped the mud off his boots at the door. He had just introduced her to John, the new hired help, but she got the feeling he was there for more than the horses. She smiled anyway, inviting the man to share their supper and quickly setting another place at the table. The children were famished and dug into their ham and beans with gusto, but she noticed John ate slowly, savoring each bite.

"This meal is excellent, Mrs. Knight," he said as he buttered his fourth piece of cornbread. "I don't have occasion to taste a home-cooked meal very often, and I appreciate your inviting me."

"You're certainly welcome, John, and you may have all your meals with us if you like."

He grinned at her and felt Sebastian's glare all the way across the table. "Oh calm down, Knight, I've not got designs on your wife. Got a girl back home I'm planning to marry, if she'll have me."

Sebastian choked on his food, throwing his friend a daunting look that he hoped would shut him up. Amanda chose to ignore the comment and turned her attention to the children, who were staring at the stranger in fascination.

John noticed and grinned at them. "Hey there, little ones. Don't look so scared of me, I'm not a grizzly bear!"

Matthew giggled, and Marissa eyed him up and down, wondering whether or not she should like him. He was very big and a bit hairy, but he spoke kindly to them. Mama and Papa seemed to like him, too. Coming to a decision, she smiled shyly at him, receiving a wink in return.

“How is the work coming with the horses?” Amanda asked.

Sebastian's eyes lit up. “The first ones will be ready for sale next week, and I already have two buyers who will be coming to look at them. With John here to help me now, we should be able to train them more rapidly than I expected. We'll have a thriving horse farm before you know it, Amanda.”

John stood up abruptly. “Well, munchkins, why don't you help me wash the dishes for your mama?”

Matthew and Marissa jumped up to do his bidding. “No, no, I can't ask you to do that, John, thanks all the same.”

He held the plate out of her reach. “I insist. You allowed me to be a part of your family dinner and I want to show my appreciation. Why don't you two lovebirds take a walk while we get this done?”

Amanda started to protest but Sebastian took her arm and led her out the door. “You can trust John, sweetheart. I've known him for many years and would trust him with my life. Have done just that, in fact. The kids will be fine with him. Why don't we take a walk along the creek and relax a bit.”

She relented, enjoying the way the sunset turned the multi-colored leaves golden, and as a cool breeze swept by they were showered with hundreds of the flowing leaves like so much confetti. Sebastian took her hand in his and her heart melted. Somehow that small gesture was more touching even than his wonderful lovemaking. He smiled down at her. “It's a lovely evening.”

“Yes it is,” she agreed.

“It feels nice to walk together without any interruptions.”

“Yes.”

“I doubt this warm weather will hold for much longer. We’ve been lucky so far.”

“We certainly have,” she said quietly.

They strolled along in silence, the bubbling of the little creek soothing their frazzled nerves. Amanda wanted to throw herself into his arms and plead with him to let her stay. Sebastian wanted to pull her to him and beg her not to go. As it was, neither of them spoke a word. The sun dipped a little lower, throwing long shadows across the fields. Amanda looked nervously to their little house. “You’re sure the children are all right?”

He gazed into her eyes. “Trust me.”

Her breath caught as she looked up at him, so tall, so handsome, and so unattainable. Would he ever know that he was the *only* person that she had ever been able to trust?

They resumed their walk, each wondering what to say and yet afraid to speak a word. As it got darker yet, Amanda suggested they head home and he reluctantly agreed. Watching her from the corner of his eye, he wondered if she had even considered staying with him. He stopped, turning her to face him. “Amanda, what do you want to do with your life?”

They were very nearly home, and the candlelight shining through the window illuminated her face. She was taken aback by his question, so she answered honestly. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, you must have some plan for your future and Matthew’s.”

“Until we met you we didn’t have a future. I guess I haven’t really given it much thought since we moved here.”

Sebastian was frustrated. He wanted her to stay with him, but it had to be her decision. He didn’t want to forever

wonder if she'd stayed simply because he asked her to. "Have you thought about staying here with us?"

Amanda's head jerked up, and she tried in vain to keep the hope from shining in her eyes. "Would you like us to?"

"I want to know what you want to do."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't want to impose upon your hospitality, we've been here for so long already. But if you would like us to stay—"

He grabbed her shoulders. "Dammit, Amanda, quit being so damned accommodating! What do *you* want?"

Her eyes were wide with longing she dared not show. He wasn't asking her to stay, he was saying she may stay if she wished. He was saying he would take her in and take care of her like a stray dog. She could not bear to be the recipient of his charity any longer than was necessary, and from somewhere deep inside of her she found the courage to decline his offer. Through vocal chords that felt paralyzed with the need to weep, she looked deep into the bright blue eyes that had gone dark with some unknown emotion and spoke quietly. "I thank you kindly for your offer, Sebastian, but I've not decided yet what I will do when our obligations to each other are fulfilled."

His hands slid off her shoulders as easily as if they had turned to ice. He stared at her for a long moment before muttering some excuse and heading off toward the stable, head down and fists clenched.

He couldn't believe it. He had asked her to stay with him and she'd turned him down flat. Out of all the women in the world, he had never thought he'd face rejection from Amanda. Sweet, accommodating, do-everything-everyone-wants-her-to Amanda. He could have allowed her to do it for him. She was on the very verge of saying that she would stay if he wanted her to.

Damn, but he wanted her to.

But what kind of life would they have if she remained out of obligation?

He went straight to the stall of his favorite stallion, the one he had chosen to keep for his own. He stroked his mane and fed the animal a lump of sugar. He sighed, mentally kicking himself for asking her too soon. "I'm an idiot, Ranger," he told the sympathetic horse. "At the end of this mess, whenever that may be, I'll stand stupidly aside and watch the only lady I've truly loved walk out of my life forever. As if that isn't enough, she'll be taking Matthew with her. That boy's as much a son to me as Marissa is my daughter. I should have dropped to my knees and begged her to marry me simply for that reason. I can't imagine this old farm without his constant chatter. Who's going to follow me around all day long asking a million questions a minute?"

Ranger neighed understandingly. "Oh sure, you could follow me around but what kind of things could we talk about?" He leaned his head against the horse's neck. "I'm going to miss that boy. Up until now I had held out every hope that she wouldn't want to go. I thought she had come to like life here, at least she seems happy enough. But what then does she have to compare it to except lonely life in an orphanage or running in fear for her life. I shouldn't have pushed her so early. I should have waited until our lives had settled down *after* Avery was taken care of to broach the subject. Go ahead and tell me, Ranger, I blew the only chance I had.

"Damn!" He kicked a stool, sending it crashing to the other side of the stable. "I *know* she has feelings for me, I can see it in her eyes. It may not be a deep and abiding love, but it's more than many people have in an entire

lifetime. Should I fight for her, Ranger, or let her make up her own mind? Oh hell! I asked and now it's up to her."

The door creaked open and John walked in. "Hey friend. What happened out there with Amanda?"

Sebastian's eyes narrowed, noting that they were evidently on a first name basis already. "I don't want to talk about it.

"Why? What did Amanda say?"

"Nothing. She acted like everything was right with her world, but I could tell she was upset. Kept looking out the window, wondering when you'd come in, I expect. She fed us all a delicious dessert, you should be sorry you missed it. Apple crumb cake, she called it."

Sebastian closed his eyes and leaned against the door. She'd made his favorite dessert.

"A damned shame we ate it all and you won't get any of it."

"Let it go, John," he said quietly.

"She's a fine woman if you ask me. Shouldn't be holed up in the house waiting for her man to come in."

"You've no idea what's going on," Sebastian said through clenched teeth, "and I would appreciate your dropping the subject. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

John grinned. "Why, going to bed, of course. I'm to sleep in the loft."

Nodding, Sebastian strode away, slamming the stable door as he went.

Amanda sat in the middle of the bed brushing her hair, waiting for Sebastian to come in. He usually didn't stay out this late, but she could tell he had been disturbed by their conversation. He was probably just concerned about how

she and Matthew would make it on their own. She knew he did genuinely love her son, and she was sorry to break up such a warm relationship, but it would be just as difficult for her to leave Marissa. She couldn't love that child more if she had been borne from her own body.

For a moment she considered remaining with them, for the sake of the children. But then what would happen if, a year or so down the road, Sebastian found a woman he could fall in love with? She and Matthew would be booted out, anyway, and the pain would only be that much harder to handle. Certainly the temptation to stay was strong, but even stronger still was her sense of self-preservation. She *could not* live with a man who didn't love her, no matter how kind and chivalrous he was, because she would always know that they lived a lie. And having no man at all would be better than having one that wasn't truly hers.

She walked over to the window, staring out at the moon-filled night. How perfect everything looked, how calm and majestic, with the fields swaying softly in the breeze. She would miss this place—

She squinted her eyes at a dim light in the distance, probably candlelight from Sharon's house. Smiling, she felt a warm feeling unfurl inside of her at the thought of her friend. But then, she was just one more person she would have to leave, and spend the rest of her life missing.

It wasn't until much later, just as she was falling asleep, that she realized Sharon's house couldn't be seen from her bedroom window.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amanda smiled sweetly at Sebastian over coffee as the children skipped out the door on their way to Sharon's house. He eyed her warily, sensing that something was up but not quite sure what. "You look beautiful today, Amanda. Why are you all dressed up?"

"Because we are going into Alton today."

He raised an eyebrow. "We are?"

She nodded, her eyes dancing. "I need a few things from Mrs. Amos's store and I've a few errands to run. Please, will you go with me, Sebastian?"

Glancing out the window toward the stable, he said, "Can it wait a day or so? I have a ton of work ahead of me if I'm going to get those horses ready by Wednesday. I've a buyer coming from St. Louis and—" He cut himself off at the disappointment shining in her dark eyes. Sighing, he said, "Give me a minute to change and I'll take you to town."

Her smile restored, she hurriedly busied herself with cleaning up the breakfast dishes. She was on a mission. Sebastian didn't know it, but she planned on helping him with his past as he was helping with hers. She pulled on a warm shawl to ward off the slight chill in the wind and went out to the wagon that she'd asked John to hitch for her, waiting impatiently for Sebastian to join her.

At the store, Mrs. Amos was thrilled to see them. "Those peach preserves were simply delicious, my dear," she told Amanda.

"I'm glad you liked them." She pulled two more jars from her bag. "I've tried my hand at pumpkin butter. Will

you taste them and let me know what you think?"

The woman took them gratefully and said, "I've not had such wonderful baked goods since Sebastian's grandmother passed on."

Beaming with pride, Amanda took her time looking through the fabric, wanting to make each of her loved ones one more new outfit before she had to go. She smiled brightly at Sebastian, asking his opinion, and of course getting the same old "I don't know" answer that men are famous for. She didn't let this bother her, but chose several bolts of cloth and even some ribbons for Marissa's hair. As she paid for her purchases she carried on a quiet conversation with Mrs. Amos, quickly asking for directions before Sebastian could overhear.

When they were seated in the wagon and Sebastian took off down the same road as always, Amanda pointed one street over and said, "Let's take that way this time."

He looked at her quizzically. "What do you want to do that for?"

"I've never been down there," she said innocently. "I want to see more of Alton."

Sighing, he gave in to her reluctantly. As they started down the brick road, she could feel the tension in him intensify with every clop of the horse's hooves. His face became dark and he scowled ferociously. Suddenly she cried, "Stop!"

The wagon jerked to a halt and he turned to her. "Why? What's wrong?"

Amanda quickly jumped to the ground and started up the grassy hill toward the cemetery. "Amanda wait," he called from his perch in the driver's seat. She was surprised he didn't cut his hands, so tightly did he clutch the reins. "What the hell are you doing?"

“Come on, Sebastian!”

His face turned pale and his eyes darkened until they appeared almost black. “I don't know what you are doing, Amanda Knight, but I demand that you get back into this wagon immediately so we can go home.” When she made no move to obey him, he roared, “*Now!*”

She stood her ground, halfway up the hill, waiting for him to face the fear inside himself. It seemed to be very slow in coming, though, and he said through clenched teeth, “I swear if you don't get over here right this minute I'll leave you there and go home without you.”

Amanda watched him, debating on what to do. Had she pushed him too far? Was this more than he could take? She didn't think so. He had forced her to stand and fight her past and it was the best thing she had ever done. It was definitely the most frightening thing she had ever done, but when it was all over with she was sure it would have been worth it. It made sense to her, even if it didn't to him, that what he needed to relieve himself of the guilt from his past was to face it head on. She aimed to help him do that.

“Amanda,” he called warningly.

Motioning for him to follow, she continued walking up the incline, hoping she was doing the right thing. The cemetery where the Confederate soldiers were buried was the last place she wanted to be, but it was necessary. Reaching the top of the hill and acting as if she did this all the time, she began walking along the rows of headstones, looking for Sebastian's father's name. For all she knew, it may not even be here, but she wouldn't stop until she'd searched every single one!

Sebastian stepped up beside her as she began down the second row. He turned her gently toward him. “What are you trying to do, Amanda? What do you think this will

accomplish?"

"You've never been here before, have you?"

He shook his head silently, a pained look in his eyes.

She laid a comforting hand on his muscular chest. "Oh Sebastian, I just want to help you rid yourself of the guilt and bitterness you feel so deep inside." The gaze he bestowed on her was full of surprise. "Of course I can feel how you torture yourself with thoughts of what happened during the war, especially what happened between you and your father. Even after more than five years you still have nightmares where you wake up angry and soaked with sweat.

"Terrible things have happened to you, but it's not your fault. You did what you had to do, what any other Union soldier would have done in your place, and you've been condemning yourself for all this time when you were only doing your job.

"Whose fault was it really, Sebastian?" she asked intensely. "It was *his* fault for trying to escape, and I'm sure that somewhere in that intelligent mind of yours you know that. You did no wrong."

"But he was my father," he whispered.

"Yes, he was your father, a man who never had a kind word for you. He was your father, but he was an escaping Confederate soldier, and had it been any other prisoner in that camp you would not feel so tormented by the memory, now would you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't any other prisoner."

She sighed in exasperation. "Work with me here, Sebastian! Stop embracing the guilt and let it go. Help me find his grave and you can talk to him and make your peace."

He stared at her for an eternity before turning and continuing down the row. When Amanda stepped up beside him, sliding her hand into his for support, he smiled down at her tenderly. This may be the most difficult thing he had ever faced, but at least it would be easier with her help.

Just when they despaired to hope that it would be there, they came upon it. They gazed at it for a long while, each feeling so many deep emotions they couldn't describe them all. Finally, Amanda kissed Sebastian's cheek and said quietly, "I'm going to leave you alone with your father. Speak to him as if he were here, Sebastian. Please, find your peace."

He held her hand until their fingertips slid apart and watched her walk back down the hill. He turned his attention back to his father's final resting place, wondering what he should say or do. The cold white stone seemed to mock him. Sebastian closed his eyes, and his whole life came rushing in on him. The first years of his life were hazy, but the glimpses of memory were not good ones. Later, after he moved to his grandmother's, on the few times his father deigned to visit them, he was downright cruel to his only son, calling him names and making him feel an embarrassment to his family. His grandmother tried to make him feel better, but it is hard, if not impossible, to replace a parent's love. The last time they had seen each other before the war they had actually come to blows when Sebastian had had enough of his taunts. His father, always a large man, had beaten him black and blue.

Sebastian ground his teeth, fighting the flood of memory even as he embraced it as the healing experience it was. He pictured him as he had last seen him, tall as always, but thin to the point of gauntness from lack of food

and nourishment. He could see the last day of the war as clearly as it had been yesterday. He remembered the shout when someone noticed the escape attempt. He'd turned, pointed, fired. He had felt no remorse until it was his father's face staring up at him, a bullet that had come from Sebastian's own gun lodged in his chest.

He asked himself now, for the first time, if he would have felt badly had it been any one of the other prisoners instead. And honestly, he would have to say he would not have. He *had* been doing his job. He was trained to thwart escape and he did so. His father should never have tried to scale that wall. Indeed should have known that it was a useless—

And there was something else he had never considered. Had his father *known* he would not make it? Had he wanted it that way, to die for his cause and rally the Confederate soldiers who had lost all hope?

He knelt on the ground, putting a hand to the cold tombstone. "Father," he said, "I can't claim to have ever understood you. I know you didn't love me, and I can't say I held any fondness for you. We were on opposite battlegrounds our entire lives, I only wish it hadn't happened so literally. I *am* sorry for the way things ended. I always wondered, if I had paused for only one second, what might have happened. Would you still be alive today? And, on the times when I was truthful, I knew you would not be. I was just the first one who reacted. If it hadn't been me it would have been someone else.

"I'm letting you go now. I hope that, wherever you are, you have found your peace. As for me, Amanda just helped me find mine. Goodbye."

He turned, striding quickly toward the wagon and Amanda. He jumped into the seat and jerked the horses

into motion, unable to get out of there fast enough. They drove for a while in silence, and he was aware of the concerned glances Amanda kept throwing his way, but he was unable to say anything just yet. His body was full of old tension that, little by little, seemed to seep out of him. Just before they reached home he smiled down at her. “Thank you” was all he needed to say.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As the days passed by, Amanda could feel the bitterness in Sebastian ebb away, leaving him more relaxed. He probably would have felt even better had the threat of Avery not been over their heads constantly. They kept the kids close to the house, and John and Sebastian found themselves watching the horizon, wondering when Avery would make his move, never doubting that it would be soon. Sebastian suspected that he was close, probably watching them even as they were watching for him.

John was rubbing down the horses one day when Sebastian came into the stable. "Seen anything lately?"

John shook his head. "Can't say as I have. He's a damn slippery bastard."

He nodded. "I just have a feeling that he's right around the corner and I can't figure out why we haven't been able to sniff him out."

"Well, it's not like we've sent a posse out or anything. We agreed to stand our ground and wait, and I still think that's the best way to proceed. He can't be stupid enough to think that we won't be waiting for him."

"No, not stupid, but maybe a bit too confident. I'm banking on that, John. Surprise is on his side; we have no plan of attack. I'm hoping that he'll underestimate us and trip himself up. It's the best I can expect until I come up with something more substantial. Any ideas?"

"No more than the ones we've already discussed. It will come to you, my friend."

"The most important fight of my life, and I can't come up with a plan for action. It's a good thing I retired my badge when I did."

"Now, don't go talking like that. Your mind is blocked with concern for your loved ones, is all. Clear your head and the rest will take care of itself."

Sebastian headed back toward the house, finding Amanda just as she was putting a pie in the oven. "Where are the children?"

"Oh Sebastian, they were driving me crazy asking every five minutes to go to Sharon's, so I finally gave in and sent them on their way."

He glanced out the window. No orange blanket. Pushing down a sense of dread, he kissed her lightly and said, "I've got to run to town for a few things. John will be here if you need anything. Do you feel comfortable staying here or would you like to come with me?"

She smiled at him. "Why wouldn't I feel comfortable staying here? John is outside and Justin isn't very far away." She looked at him more closely. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He glanced around the room, what he was looking for he didn't know. "Maybe I should just stay here."

Amanda laughed. "Don't be silly, Sebastian. Go to town and pick up the things you need. While you're there can you pick up some sugar for me? I only have enough left for today."

He nodded. "If you're sure..."

"I'm sure." She gave him a soft shove. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, holding her close against him. She curled her fingers in his hair, breathing in the fresh scent of him, and wondered at his strange behavior.

"Amanda, I—" he paused, "I shouldn't be gone long," he said and, with one last kiss, strode out the door.

She turned back to the table to start making a fresh loaf of bread, humming a little tune. She felt extraordinarily

good today, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the leaves (those that were left) were glowing in rainbowed splendor. She savored the smell of the bread as she kneaded it, for once not worrying about the day she had to leave and just enjoying the time here. She had just finished setting the hot apple pie on the table and sliding the bread into the oven when she heard a noise at the door. Laughing, she turned toward the sound. "I thought you were—"

Amanda stumbled backwards, unprepared for the sight that met her eyes. Avery stood in the door, bigger than life, looking even more ferocious than she remembered. Even though she hadn't seen him in almost four years she would have known him anywhere. His icy blue eyes were the same, with the mean, mocking look she sometimes still saw in her nightmares. He grinned wickedly, his perfectly clean-cut jaw at a stubborn tilt. She wondered vaguely how she could ever have thought that he was handsome.

"Well, well, well," he drawled, not advancing toward her but maintaining his stance by the door. "If it isn't sweet little Amanda. It's been a long time." He spoke slowly, as if she were too stupid to understand anything more rapid.

Amanda took a deep breath, expecting the fear to rush over her like a waterfall, but all she could feel was a deep, soul-clenching anger at the way he had dominated her life for so long. She said nothing, but regarded him calmly. She knew that he probably expected her to quiver timidly and cower into a corner, but she was a different woman now than she had been then. She was stronger, and she had learned how to survive in the world on her own. No one, not even he, could take that away from her now.

"Cat got your tongue, sweetheart?" He waited for a reply but none was forthcoming. "What, no welcoming

kiss for your husband?"

"You aren't my husband!" she exclaimed before she could think better of it.

"Ah, so you were able to notice the slight irregularity in the marriage license. I didn't think you had that much smarts. Of course, I never thought you could run from me for so long, either. That *is* what you've been doing all these years, isn't it?" he taunted. "Running from me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've merely been following my own way of life instead of succumbing to yours. I don't understand why you would even want to find me, I never meant anything to you."

He laughed again. "I've come for revenge, and I think you know that. You do remember what happened that last night we were together? When you branded me with that hot poker? I was laid up for more than a while. You burned me almost clear to the bone." His grin was wicked. "Would you like to see the scar?"

Amanda couldn't control the shudder of revulsion that ripped through her body.

He studied her for a minute. "You have changed. I don't notice the terror in your eyes that I used to invoke."

She shrugged. "All things must come to an end sometime."

"I don't think so. I still have a few cards up my sleeve, so to speak."

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking what he was talking about, or acting as though his words bothered her. She looked him in the eye silently, avoiding the one thing about him that did still frighten her—the star pinned to his chest. That a man so evil could have so much power was a scary thought indeed. And, if given the chance, she knew he would carry her away from here

kicking and screaming. She also knew that, Avery's status as marshal notwithstanding, she would never make it to the authorities alive. He would deliver his own brand of justice.

Standing up straight, she told herself not to worry. Sebastian wouldn't be gone long, John was just outside, and Justin was very close, also. As long as she could keep him talking she could buy time.

"I can see the wheels spinning in your head, sweetheart. There's no one to help you, you know. You feel safe with all the manpower around here, but I've been watching the place for weeks, and you can be sure that I've taken care of all the loose ends, if you know what I mean." He winked at her.

*He's lying, she told herself. Don't believe anything he says, he's trying to scare you.*

*And it's working!*

"And those brats of yours? I have them, too. I've tied them to each other and put them in the stables with that no good lawman."

Amanda felt pure, bone-chilling panic run rampant through her system, but she was determined for him not to see. She clutched the wall behind her as she fought for control over her emotions. He must have snatched them on their way to Sharon's house. Her back was to the window so she couldn't see if the orange blanket was in place. *Calm down. Try to move around a bit so you can get a look.*

Even if they were tied up, she knew he would have no use for them. He would take her away and Sebastian would somehow find a way to get loose and take care of the children.

"Which one of those kids is mine, anyway?"

She stiffened, wanting desperately to keep his attention

away from Matthew, until the import of the words struck her. She couldn't help it, the urge was simply overwhelming, and she let out a peal of laughter that shook the house. Avery's face darkened with rage, but she didn't care. He advanced on her, but still she laughed, until his fist crashing against the side her head cast her sprawling onto the floor. Suddenly it wasn't quite so funny anymore.

“Well?”

“Do you really not remember whether I had a girl or a boy, Avery? Come on, I'd not expect you to remember a name or a face, but I thought certainly you might recall the gender.”

She was still sitting on the floor, trying her best to ease her way around so when she stood she'd be able to see out the window facing the Mahoney's house. In the guise of grasping a small table to help her stand, Amanda positioned herself toward the rear window. Unfortunately, this put her with her back to Avery, but she when she stood up she was rewarded with a clear view of the Mahoney spread. Her body sagged against the table momentarily, so weak was she from the sight that met her eyes. Avery thought the blow he'd delivered must have been harder than he'd known and made her ill. He smiled at the thought.

Amanda didn't care. She didn't care what he was doing right then, for she was too wrapped up in her own thoughts, and at that moment self-preservation wasn't one of them. She couldn't have cared less what he planned to do with her; the children were first and foremost in her mind because, finally, she could see Sharon's clothesline.

And the ratty old orange blanket had never looked so beautiful to Amanda than it did in that moment, flopping happily in the breeze.

Her confidence restored, she turned around to confront

him, and found that he had advanced and stood mere inches from her. She took a deep breath, trying in vain to clear her foggy mind.

“Enough stalling. It's time to go, Amanda.”

“No.”

His features darkened frighteningly. “I said it's time to go, little girl. I'm not used to being disobeyed. You see this star on my chest? This gives me the legal right to take you in. You are a wanted woman, you know.”

She lifted her chin. “You are a corrupt official and I don't have to go anywhere with you. You made up those charges and soon the whole world will know it.”

“*You tried to murder me!*” he yelled.

“No, I didn't! I tried to protect my child from a madman, and any judge who knew the whole truth would not find me at fault.”

She could tell that her coolness, her very lack of fear, was causing him serious annoyance.

And she was glad.

Now she could have a bit of revenge herself.

“I didn't come here to argue with you. Now you can either walk out that door like a good girl or I can carry you kicking and screaming,” he paused, grinning maliciously, “or perhaps unconscious. It's up to you.”

Amanda searched her mind for a plan but none was forthcoming. “I'm not going with you.”

Before she knew what was happening, his open hand connected with her cheek and she was sent sprawling backwards, landing beside the fireplace. She had enough presence of mind to throw her arms wide, knocking the poker halfway into the fire. It had worked last time, she reasoned groggily as her head met the hard floor. She stared up at Avery who, from her position, seemed to stand

ten feet tall. All she knew was that she had to fight. If she went with him she would surely never see another sunrise.

Grabbing hold of her arm, he jerked her roughly to her feet, her head snapping back painfully.

“Let her go,” Sebastian said from the door, his voice a deadly calm.

Avery turned slowly, still clutching Amanda tightly. “Knight,” he sneered. “I hoped you would get here before we left. I have a few bones to pick with you, too. When I sent you after my wife, I didn't mean for you to set up household with her. I should have known I couldn't trust you to do the job of a *real* man.”

Sebastian dared a glimpse at Amanda, her entire cheek one bright red splotch, white welts outlining where Avery's fingers had connected with her soft skin, and tried unsuccessfully to tamp down his fury to a controllable level. “First of all, you'll remember I refused to do your dirty work, Higgins. And secondly, she's *my* wife now and I'll thank you to take your hands off of her. Or are you afraid to fight with someone your own size? You do seem to prefer the abuse of women and those who are weaker than you. Maybe you don't have enough confidence in your own strength to challenge a man of my build.”

Sebastian's taunts had the desired effect. Avery's grip loosened and he took a step forward, shoving Amanda aside. She tried to steady herself, but the prior blows had made her a bit dizzy, and her shoulder slammed into the wall, sliding like a wet noodle to the floor.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed dangerously as he saw the woman he loved treated so callously. Long years of training prevented him from acting rashly, and he resisted going to her with every fiber of his being, focusing all his attention on Avery. He knew what the man was capable of

and was determined to keep Avery's evil as far from his family as he possibly could.

"I hear you turned in your badge," Avery mocked. "What's the matter, Knight, couldn't handle it?"

"I didn't want to stand around watching you hang innocent people and not be able to do anything about it. I know what you've done, Higgins." His deep voice was low and menacing. "I've given the information to the proper authorities and soon everyone will know what you've done. Then, it will be your neck on the line."

Quick as lightning, Avery pulled his gun. "Drop the weapon, Knight."

Calmly, Sebastian tossed his gun to the ground, sparing a glance at Amanda. She was standing by the fireplace, looking down. When he had a chance to follow her gaze, he understood what she planned to do.

Avery advanced on Sebastian, pointing the gun right between his eyes, smiling coldly.

Standing firmly in place, giving no hint that he felt the slightest bit nervous, Sebastian said, "It doesn't matter what you do to me, the information has already been handed over. There's nothing you can do now but wait. Or run, as you've forced Amanda to do for years."

Amanda cried out, causing Avery to turn toward her and, as he did, she swung the hot poker in an arc, catching him across the middle. Unfortunately, the scalded tip completely missed his body. Sebastian rushed him, but Avery recovered quickly and both men gripped the gun, which was held between their bodies. They stumbled backwards and, when Sebastian's back collided against the table, they tumbled over it and landed on the ground with a thud.

Both men were large and muscular, and neither one

could gain the upper hand as they rolled out the door. Amanda looked on with horror as they fought for control, the gun still held between their bodies, and prayed fervently that Sebastian would be unharmed. She could think of nothing that she could do to help because, even though she now had access to Sebastian's gun, there was no way she could get a clear shot. They were tumbling to and fro, each of them gripping the weapon with both hands, but they were too evenly matched.

She wondered where John was, since he was supposed to be watching out for her and she had not seen hide nor hair of him since this morning. She knew Sebastian would have told him to keep an eye on the house when he left for town, and she thought it was strange that he was nowhere to be seen.

Amanda looked wildly around the cabin, desperately searching for something—anything—that she could use to help Sebastian gain control of Avery, but she could find nothing. A glimpse out the window showed her that, thankfully, Matthew and Marissa were still safe and sound at Sharon's house.

She returned her attention to Sebastian at the same time as she heard the loud report from the gun, and both male bodies that had been grappling on the ground went perfectly still. She screamed, running forward, terrified to the very core of her being that the deep red blood that was beginning to stain the ground flowed from Sebastian's body. She called his name, falling to her knees on the ground beside him, no longer caring about what Avery might do to her. She smoothed the hair from his forehead, placing soft kisses on his cheeks, tears that streamed from her eyes falling to wet his lips.

With a sudden bucking motion, Sebastian knocked

Avery's lifeless body off of him and sat up, smiling at Amanda. She threw herself into his arms and they fell backward to the ground. She didn't care that Avery's blood stained her dress, all that mattered was that Sebastian had come out of it alive.

He kissed her deeply, tenderly feeling her head to make sure she hadn't sustained any serious injuries. "Oh, Sebastian, I—"

She was cut off by a noise that sounded like thunder, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. They sat up and looked toward the sound, surprised to see what looked like an entire army riding quickly toward them.

Sebastian stood up, pulling her with him, and placing an arm around her waist to support her. He smiled at her in reassurance and murmured, "Reinforcements."

Amanda stared in wonder at the dozens of horses that galloped toward them, Avery's lifeless body forgotten. They stopped a few feet before the house, and a large officer dismounted, stepping up to face Sebastian.

Sebastian saluted, and his salute was returned. Then the officer grinned, clapping him on the back. "By the looks of your clothing, I'd say either you're running a slaughterhouse in your spare time, or Avery Higgins arrived here before us."

Motioning behind him, Sebastian said, "I did the best I could. It was either us or him."

The officer nodded. "When I think of what that bastard has gotten away with—" he shook his head, apparently able to find no words strong enough to describe the havoc Avery had wreaked upon innocent people. He shook Sebastian's hand. "It's better this way. Even with the evidence you'd collected against him, there was no way to know whether he would be made to pay or not. Good

work, Knight.

"My apologies to you, Mrs. Knight, for being unable to prevent such a harrowing experience. We've been tracking him for a long time, but he's a slippery fellow."

Amanda nodded, absently scratching at the blood that was drying on her arms. "I am just relieved it is all over." She glanced at Sebastian. "About the warrants out for my arrest—"

The officer held up a hand. "Taken care of. Sebastian told us everything. You are a free woman, Mrs. Knight."

The words rang in her ears like the toll of doom.

Some of the officers slung Avery's body upon a horse and with a wave they headed back from whence they had come.

Taking her hand, Sebastian gently pulled her toward the house, sitting her at the table. "Stay here until I get back," he said tenderly, "I have to find out what happened to John."

"I want to come."

His eyes darkened. "Amanda, I've no idea how I'll find him."

"Still, I want to come. You may need my help."

He relented, holding her hand as they headed quickly toward the stable. There they found John, bound and gagged, and fighting angrily to free himself. When he saw the young couple, and their bedraggled state, he blew out a breath of relief. When he'd been released, he grabbed them both in a bear hug. "He caught me off guard, the son-of-a—"

"It's all over now," Sebastian said. "Go to Sharon's and ask her to keep the kids for the evening."

Turning on his heel, he led his lady back to the house, once again sitting her down at the table. He heated a cup of

tea for her, and while she sipped at it, he silently heated water for a bath. Once the tub was full of steaming water, he helped her undress and eased her down into the warmth. She stared into the fireplace as he shed his clothes and joined her. Amanda leaned back against his hard chest, feeling all the fear and mixed emotions she hadn't had time to while she was dealing with Avery. She laid her head back against his shoulder as he built a soapy lather and gently washed the blood from her tired and aching limbs. He worked the lather into her hair, firmly massaging her scalp until he felt her beginning to relax. Then he held her until the steaming water cooled.

Washing himself quickly, he jumped out of the tub and dried off, then lifted Amanda into his arms, seated her in a chair, and buffed her body with a towel until it looked pink and healthy again. She looked up at him with sad, tired eyes, and he kissed her forehead before carrying her into the bedroom and depositing her under the warm covers. Even though the sun was just beginning to kiss the horizon, he blew out the candle in the bedroom and climbed in next to her, wrapping his arms protectively about her worn-out body. She snuggled against him, and his warmth surrounded her, bringing with it the now familiar feeling of safety and peacefulness that his touch always bestowed upon her. She kissed his bare chest before drifting off into an exhausted slumber.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had been one week since Avery's death, and the euphoria that they had expected to rush in upon them had yet to come. Instead, it seemed as if the battle with the corrupt lawman had only accelerated the end of their time together. Although it hadn't been a year since she'd come to stay with them, Amanda knew with a certainty that made her ill that it was time to move on.

She had wandered around the house this past week, going through the motions of cooking, cleaning, and caring for her family, all the while knowing that it wouldn't last. She was near tears constantly. Every sweet smile from Marissa had her blinking rapidly in an attempt to control her emotions. How could she live without that child? And Sebastian, well, she could hardly even bring herself to look at him, so great was the anguish she felt at the thought of leaving. She couldn't bear the pain any longer. The anticipation of walking away was driving her mad. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, and couldn't think straight any more. What she needed was to get it over with. Put this life behind her so she could begin the healing process.

She was standing at the table chopping carrots for stew when she heard Sebastian talking to her from the bedroom door. Amanda didn't listen to his words, instead letting the sound of his voice wash over her. *Remember how deep and soothing that voice is, Amanda, you'll be hearing it in your dreams for a long time to come.* She didn't say anything, just kept chopping. He walked up behind her, standing but a foot away, making no attempt to touch her. She didn't turn around. They said nothing and, for the first time since

she'd met him, his presence did not make her feel comforted.

She could hear him breathing behind her, and tears clogged her throat, but she bravely fought them down. *You'll have the rest of your life to cry over him*, she reasoned, *there's no need to start now*.

Sebastian didn't know what to say. He had absolutely no hope anymore that she might remain with him. He was afraid that he'd already lost her. He knew how preoccupied she'd been this week, and he knew that she was thinking it was time to leave. He'd try his best to convince her to stay, at least for the rest of the year, but he'd be damned if he'd rush the subject. She was struggling with herself, and he'd just let her struggle and hope that she changed her mind.

She turned around to face him, her eyes bright. "Sebastian—"

He swallowed thickly, turning to leave. "I have work to do out—"

A touch to his arm stopped him, and reluctantly he looked at her, hoping all the misery he felt wasn't written on his features. Her eyes were like dark, melted chocolate, swimming with tears and wide with pain. He could tell she was having a hard time finding the words she needed to say. He loved her. He didn't want to see her suffer.

"You're leaving," he rasped.

She nodded, her throat convulsing.

"But you promised to stay a year. I fulfilled my promise to you, Amanda. What about your promise to me?" *I don't want you to go*, he thought.

"Oh, Sebastian," she sighed, "it just didn't take a year. The entire town knows what a wonderful father you are, and no one would dare take Marissa away from you," her voice cracked at her beloved little girl's name. She gave

him a watery smile. "Mrs. Amos would never allow it, anyway."

*I love you, Amanda; don't leave me*, he wanted to say. So tempting was the thought of dropping to his knees and begging her to marry him that for a moment he could concentrate on nothing but resisting the urge. He had asked her to stay. She had refused. Why, then, did she look so miserable?

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay longer? Amanda, I know you are able to make it on your own, but you are welcome to stay here as long as you like."

His words caused her throat to constrict with tears. *Tell me you love me*, she begged silently. *Tell me that you don't want me to go and I'll stay with you forever! I need to know that you want me. No one has ever wanted me.*

She shook her head, feeling as though it weighed a ton. "You and I both know it's time. Both of our promises have been kept. If there is no reason for me to remain here, I must get on with my life, and you must get on with yours. The longer we put it off the harder it will be—for the children," she added.

He took her hand in his, tracing a path on the palm. "Amanda," he whispered, looking deep into her eyes and shaking his head, "you're already gone. You've been moving around here for days, in some sort of trance, and I've known what was going through your mind. If you think you need to go, then, by all means, do so." He turned on his heel and strode out the door, letting it slam shut behind him.

Amanda didn't know how long she stood there, staring, thinking it might not be all that bad to stay with a man who didn't love her, but at least, liked her.

And then she came to her senses.

That night, after the children were tucked snugly in bed, Sebastian came to Amanda in the bedroom. They stared at each other for long moments and then, she never even knew how it happened, she was in his arms. He was kissing her neck, her cheeks, her eyelids, licking her lips lingeringly, nibbling on the soft flesh beneath her ear.

Amanda clung to him, desperate to have this one last night, hoping against hope that he would suddenly realize that he couldn't live without her. She ran her fingers through his hair, up and down his muscular back, rained kisses on his hard, solid chest that she so loved. *I love you*, she repeated over and over again in her mind, praying that, on some level, he would hear her and reciprocate.

Sebastian lifted her in his arms, kissing her deeply, until she felt as if she were a permanent part of him. Her mind reeled, she could think of nothing but Sebastian and how she would do anything, give *anything*, if only this night would last forever. If only she could make him fall in love with her.

They fell onto the bed, still locked in a passionate embrace, still lost in a pretend world where anything is possible.

Still wishing the other might one day fall in love with them.

Still blind to the fact that their one wish had already been granted.

Amanda cried out as he brought her to the very peak of pleasure, holding him as if she never planned to let him go. And as they spiraled down from the height they had taken each other to, they sought sleep to escape the very depressing depth of reality.

But sleep was as elusive as their dreams.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Amanda stood just outside the door, two small suitcases on the ground beside her, her arm around Matthew's shoulders. Matthew clutched his horse in his arms, his sad eyes locked on Sebastian. Sebastian and Marissa stood just inside the door, their faces partially shaded. They had already said goodbye, hugging the children tightly and promising them a forever love that was comfortless when they knew they would never meet again.

"Are you sure I can't give you a ride to town?" Sebastian asked, his voice thick.

Amanda shook her head quickly. "No. I couldn't bear to say goodbye again."

He nodded, making no attempt to reply. Marissa burst into tears and ran into the house, and Matthew looked at the adults with large, confused eyes that seemed much too old for his young little body. He said nothing, but took his mother's hand and the smaller suitcase and began the walk to town.

They trudged on in silence, Amanda fighting tears and Matthew learning that life is full of disappointment and pain. She refused to show her anguish to her son and tried to talk brightly, but the dull look in his eyes quieted her.

*What a mess you've made of your life, Amanda. Now you've not only hurt yourself but your precious son, too. And probably the only daughter you'll ever have. Just turn around, throw your pride away, and ask Sebastian if you can stay. Just do it!*

But she knew she couldn't. He meant too much to her. If she couldn't be Sebastian's love then she didn't want to be

his anything. Maybe it was selfish, maybe it was needlessly punishing her innocent son, but that was the way it had to be. For once in her life, she wanted it all. But she really *wanted* to have it, not merely *pretend* that she had it like she'd been doing all these months. There was no easy solution. He didn't love her, and she could not accept anything less from him. Maybe one day she would regret leaving. Well, if she were honest with herself, she would have to admit that she already regretted it. But she'd been left no other choice.

Amanda hadn't thought about the way people would react to her in town. Of course, no one knew she was leaving, but she hadn't counted on having to talk to anyone. Wouldn't it just figure that she'd run into Mrs. Amos just before she reached the stagecoach depot?

"Mrs. Knight! How lovely to see you!"

She had to clench her teeth to keep the tears from falling when she heard Mrs. Amos call her. Never again would she hear herself coupled with Sebastian in that way. Reluctantly, she turned and planted a smile on her pale face. "How are you today, Mrs. Amos?"

"I'm quite well. Why do you have those bags? Are you leaving town for a while?"

Amanda nodded. She didn't know what Sebastian would tell their neighbors about her after she'd gone, but she'd just have to play it out the best she could right now. "We're taking a trip," she said, trying not to lie.

"How exciting. You do look a bit peaked though, dear, why don't you come into the shop and I'll fix you some nice hot tea."

"No," she said, much too quickly. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Amos, but we really need to catch the stagecoach."

The older woman hugged her tightly. "I'll miss you

while you're gone.”

Amanda gave a most unladylike sniff as she tried to calm herself. Her eyes penetrated those of her friend as she whispered, “Thank you so much for being such a good friend to me, Mrs. Amos. I'll never forget you.”

And with those words, she grabbed Matthew's hand and raced to the stagecoach, oblivious to the many people who waved and threw smiles her way.

She climbed in and took a seat, holding Matthew closely against her to provide what comfort she could, and watched out the window, as Alton became a tiny blotch on the horizon.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sebastian turned slowly into the house as Amanda walked determinedly away. He glanced at John, who was sitting at the table. "Marissa?" he asked solemnly.

John shook his head slowly. "She hasn't come out of her room, and she won't let me come in." He stood, slapping a hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "If I were you, my friend, I wouldn't let such a good woman get away. Who knows if you'll ever find another who can fill your heart like that one." He strode out the door.

Sebastian walked to the bedroom door and opened it, leaning against the doorjamb and watching his tiny daughter. She was lying on her stomach on the bed, her face turned toward the window, her small body convulsing with sobs. She wouldn't acknowledge his presence, but he knew she was aware of him. "Marissa, do you want to talk about it?"

"No, Papa. Please just leave me alone."

He didn't move, but stayed where he was for a long time, staring at Marissa and thinking of Amanda and Matthew. How could he have let it go this far? It was one thing to help someone, but did he have to make such a rotten mess of everything? Did he have to fall so completely in love with her? Maybe he should have begged her to stay, whether she wanted to or not. She would have done it, if not for him then for the children.

As the sun began to dip over the horizon and shadows darkened the cabin, Sebastian moved around lighting the candles, his mind a million miles away. Everywhere he looked he encountered memories of Amanda. She'd left a

freshly baked pumpkin pie on the table along with enough bread for the rest of the week. There, before the fireplace, was the chair she sat in each and every evening. Her sewing basket was neatly placed next to it on the floor, a piece of cloth peeking from beneath the lid. He bent down in front of it, fingering the texture of the material, imagining her sitting happily with it in her lap while she made beautiful clothing out of the shapeless cloth.

He knocked softly at Marissa's door. "Sweetheart, are you hungry?"

He personally felt as if he may never be hungry again, but with as small as Marissa was, she didn't need to miss any meals. When he received no answer, he walked into the room to find her sound asleep, her pillow wet with tears. He smoothed the damp curls from her cheek and repositioned her pillow so she rested upon a dry spot. He sat down on the bed beside her, wanting to comfort her as much as he needed comfort. Tears burned his eyes, but he pushed them down ferociously. At least he still had Marissa. At least he wasn't completely alone, even if he did feel as if he were.

Kissing her on the cheek, he went back out into the main room and stared out at the moonless night. What could he have done differently? He wondered where she was now. She must have been on the coach for hours by this time. He had held out a small hope that she would change her mind and come back, but he had to be honest with himself and admit that it was way too late for that.

She wasn't coming back.

Sebastian felt as if his heart had been ripped from his chest and torn into tiny shreds right before his eyes, leaving nothing but a deep, dark void that filled his whole being. He would never be whole again. The thought of spending

his entire life without her was earth shattering. But he had to be strong for Marissa. She needed to return to a somewhat normal lifestyle as soon as possible. He would do that for her.

He strode into the bedroom, planning on trying to sleep, but when his tired eyes encountered the bed and he realized he'd half expected to see her sitting in the middle of it, brushing her beautiful hair, he knew he'd get no sleep in here tonight. He shut the door firmly behind him as he left the room.

Feeling exhausted to the very core of his being, he sank down into Amanda's chair and pulled the cloth from the sewing basket, bringing it up to his face. It smelled like her, all happiness and sunshine, and he smiled even as the knife twisted within his chest.

He leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling. It must be midnight by now, but he didn't really care. She was gone, and right now, that was all that he could think about. It was all that mattered. How he wished their relationship had turned out differently. For a while, he had really thought that she was falling in love with him. She was so considerate, always making sure his clothes were clean, cooking special meals and baking desserts that she knew he would like, learning all his grandmother's recipes. She had made his life worthwhile, for what had he had before? Marissa, of course, and he loved his daughter more than anything. But Amanda had made his life *easy*.

No, not easy, exactly. Comfortable, that was it. Comfortable and happy. When he was with her he forgot that he was a bitter war veteran. She made him a better person. Hadn't she helped him make peace with his father's memory? Hadn't she taken the time to make each and every one of them feel special and loved?

Had he been blind all this time? Did she really love him? Maybe, through all the special things she had done for him, she had been trying to show him how she felt? *Did she love him?*

He sighed. *Wishful thinking, Knight. You'd do better to start planning what you'll make Marissa for breakfast. Poor girl hasn't suffered enough, now she has to suffer through your cooking.*

But try as he might, he couldn't get rid of the thought that, maybe, he had just allowed something very special to slip through his fingers.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun was just beginning to come up as Amanda awakened from a short doze. Matthew's head was pillowed on her lap, her dress wet from the tears he had shed all night long. Thank goodness he had finally fallen asleep, he had cried so hard that hiccups had wracked his body for hours. He said nothing to her. Amanda wouldn't have blamed him if he had screamed at her for taking away the only other person who had ever cared about him, but he was silent. Matthew didn't need to speak; his expressive eyes said everything that needed to be said. Her heart went out to him, but she could think of nothing to ease his suffering.

She cuddled him closer to her, gently stroking his hair. She had never felt so wretched in her life. And there in the empty stagecoach, with Matthew asleep and unable to see her, she finally let go the flood of tears that had threatened for days. She sobbed quietly, careful not to disturb Matthew, and grieved for the life that she might have had with Sebastian and Marissa. She didn't know how long she went on like that but, when her body was too exhausted to cry any more, she finally fell into a restless slumber.

Amanda heard the report of gunfire and jumped from sleep. Squinting at the sun, she guessed it was already past noon. Matthew looked up at her with terrified eyes. "What was that, Mama?"

"I don't know, sweetheart."

But she did know. She had heard that sound too many times not to recognize it. Her breathing accelerated, she

tried to hide her fear from her son. Why would anyone be firing a gun way out here? There was only one reasonable answer she could think of—highway robbery.

Matthew tried to peek out the window, but she pulled him back against the seat. She could hear shouting and more gunfire and, suddenly, the stagecoach door was pulled open so furiously that it came completely off the hinges. The sight that met Amanda's eyes was so outrageous that she had to blink twice before she could believe it.

Sebastian was outside the door, mounted on Ranger, looking at her with a fierceness that she had never seen on him before. His sandy hair had been blown wild from the racing winds, his handsome face was stubbled with the beginnings of a beard, and his usually bright blue eyes were as dark as storm clouds before a tornado. He stared at her for the longest time, and she could think of nothing to say. Indeed, she thought she was hallucinating. How could he be here?

Backing Ranger up a few feet, he dismounted in one fluid motion and strode up to the coach, bracing his hands on the jagged hole where the door had been. Still, he spoke no words, just gazed into her surprised eyes. A glance at Matthew showed the boy was too shocked to move, his little jaw dropped in awe. He winked at him and Matthew managed a small smile, but no hope shone in his disillusioned eyes.

Turning his attention back to Amanda, Sebastian found that now that he faced her, his carefully rehearsed speech sped from his mind and he drew a complete blank. All through his wild, non-stop ride while chasing the stagecoach he practiced what he should say to her, had thought of all the right words, but now all he could do is stare at her like some dimwit.

“Sebastian?” she asked softly.

Taking a deep breath, he dove in. “Amanda, I’ve come a long way in a very short time to try to persuade you to come home with me. Marissa is miserable, she won’t come out of her bedroom and she won’t eat a bite. I know you don’t love me, and—” he put a finger to her soft lips when she tried to speak, feeling white hot lightning shoot through his veins. “Please, don’t say anything until I’ve stated my case. I know you don’t love me right now, but if you’ll just come back to us and promise to stay until spring, if you’ll just give me one chance, I’m hoping that my love for you will be enough to make you want to stay forever.” He closed his eyes, whispering, “Please, Amanda, please say you’ll give me this one chance. If by the springtime you haven’t fallen in love with me, then I won’t ask you to stay. But I can’t imagine my life without you.”

Amanda gazed at him. “Are you finished now?”

He nodded, his eyes full of self-doubt and uncertainty. Amanda smiled slowly, allowing him to read her every emotion, before launching herself from the stagecoach into his arms. He smelled of leather, sweat, and horses. He smelled wonderful! She laughed happily as his arms tightened about her, holding her to him as if he would never let her go. She gazed up at him in wonder. “You want me, Sebastian? Do you really *want* me?”

He hugged her against his strong body. “More than I’ve ever wanted anything else in my life, sweetheart. I need you more than food or water; you mean more to me than the very air I breathe. I love you.”

“Oh, Sebastian,” she sighed, tears in her eyes. “I hoped so *fervently* that you would say those words to me, but I never thought I would hear them. How could you ever doubt that I love you? Haven’t I done everything I can to

show you how I feel?"

He grinned sheepishly. "After you left that thought did occur to me, but I was afraid to hope. I let myself drown in misery for a while before I came to my senses and determined I'd rather die than lose what we have together. What do you say? Will you and Matthew climb on Ranger with me and come home? Or, if Alton doesn't agree with you, we can go anywhere you like. You were heading somewhere warmer? I don't care. Wherever you want to go, as long as we can go with you."

At his words, uttered with such heartfelt sincerity, the tears that had threatened overflowed, and she took the handkerchief he offered with a watery smile. "You would come with me, no matter where I wanted to go?"

He cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs caressing her cheeks, and kissed her softly. "I love you so much, Amanda," he said, his voice deep with emotion, "that I would travel to the ends of the earth if that's where you were. I would live in a grass hut, a glass house, or a building made entirely from ice! I don't care. I want to be with you."

She buried her cheek in his shoulder, elated to be back in his embrace and, this time, with no doubts about why he held her and no worries about when she would have to leave. She touched her lips to his sweetly. "Sebastian, I have been many places in my life. *This* is home to me, being in your arms. And I love your house, and our neighbors, and everything about this little town that has made me feel so welcome. I have never belonged anywhere like I do here. Let's go home."

They turned to look at their son, who was peering doubtfully out at them. "Come on, Squirt, we're going home."

Matthew ejected himself from the coach so forcefully that Sebastian stumbled as he caught him, laughing. Carrying him to the horse and putting an arm around Amanda, he said, "I think we've had enough excitement to last us a long while. It's time to go home."

## EPILOGUE

Sebastian, carrying Matthew on his shoulders, smiled at Amanda while the children gazed down the street in awe. The Halloween Parade was just about to begin, and all four of them were standing on the side of Second Street, anxiously awaiting the ghosts and goblins that they would surely encounter. They huddled together, for the weather had finally turned colder, and there was the smell of snow in the air. Amanda clutched Marissa's hand tightly, afraid the child would get lost in the crowd, but she needn't have worried because Marissa was rooted to the ground in anticipation. When the first witches, ghosts, and demons began walking by, the little girl wrapped her hands in Amanda's skirts, but gave no other sign of fear. She laughed gaily when a large man, who she knew to be Justin, dressed as a pumpkin, picked her up and swung her around.

Matthew was talking at the top of his voice, describing everything to Sebastian as if he didn't have eyes to see it for himself. Sebastian smiled down at Amanda and took her hand, laughing at Matthew's antics.

Amanda was overwhelmed with happiness. She glanced down at her new wedding ring, remembering the very real wedding that had taken place in a small church in Alton with all their friends and relatives present. How sweet, the townspeople all said, that the Knights had decided to renew their wedding vows so that their friends could participate. How wonderful, the Knights said, that they didn't have to pretend anymore. They were a real family now, and nothing or no one could take that away from them. And now the children, especially Matthew,

could feel safe in the knowledge that never again would they ever have to worry about either of their parents leaving. Matthew happily gave up the care of his mother into his new father's capable hands when he walked her down the aisle and gave her away at the wedding, now having the time to pursue what five-year-old boys are supposed to—fun and mischief.

Sebastian tugged on Amanda's hand, bringing her closer to him in the guise of trying to keep the cold wind at bay. She smiled up at him, and the heat blazing in his bright blue eyes when he looked at her caused a matching fire to burn in her own. He bent down, his lips on her ear, and whispered, "I love you, Mrs. Knight."

## Author's Note

Although *My Guardian Knight* is an entirely fictional work, Alton, Illinois is a real town. Alton is situated on the banks of the Mississippi River, to the east of St. Louis. The town has been in existence since the 1830's, and many of the things I've mentioned in my book—*The Alton Telegraph*, the Confederate prison and cemetery—are still around today. *The Alton Telegraph* still publishes a daily newspaper that serves many communities in the area. One wall of the Confederate prison still stands today and may be visited by anyone so inclined. This, to me, is really an intense experience.

Along with what I have written about, Alton sports many more historical and tourist attractions, such as the Piasa Bird, Pie Town, historical home tours, and the River Road, which runs from Alton to Grafton and is wedged between the Mississippi River and the beautiful, towering bluffs.

The Halloween parade had not yet begun in 1870, but it is one of the oldest parades in the country, held every Halloween night, and no matter what the weather, it has never been cancelled.

Downtown you will find many antique shops, gift shops, and restaurants. My personal favorite is The Meridian House coffee shop, which has the best coffee and latte I've ever encountered! If you like Chinese food, there is no better place on this earth than Oriental Garden.

I hope you've enjoyed my story and the small synopsis of Alton.