

Text Order Bride

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This story was revised in on January 12, 2012. In this 15,000 word short story, Amanda, a home making teacher from Texas, believes that love has passed her by. She agrees to start communicating with someone her friend knows in Wisconsin, because she wants children, not because she believes that there is love out there waiting for her.

When, after two months of communicating, Jason proposes, she agrees, thinking it is her last chance for a husband and children. Love doesn't enter into it. Will Jason be able to convince her otherwise?

This is an adult only romance, not a Christian romance.

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Chapter 1

As she was sitting at her kitchen table grading papers, Amanda heard the tune that signaled she had a text message. Picking up her phone, she quickly glanced at the readout. The number was unfamiliar. She clicked on the message to read it. “Stephanie gave me your number. She said you might be interested in texting with a lonely farmer.”

Amanda read the message again, and a slow smile spread across her face. Stephanie had told her that there was a man in her church that she thought would be perfect for her. This must be him. She quickly keyed in a reply. “I think I would be interested in texting a lonely farmer, but only if you tell me your name.”

Stephanie had been her roommate at the small Christian college she attended. After graduation, Stephanie had moved to Wisconsin, with her preacher husband, Bob, to plant a church. They now had four children, two boys and two girls.

Jason was surprised at how quickly he got the alert signaling he’d received a reply text. He picked up his phone holding his breath. Would she be interested? He tapped the phone and the message appeared. His face lit up with a grin. He tapped out a response and sent it on.

He had surprised himself by agreeing to text Amanda, his pastor’s wife’s friend. He lived in a sparsely populated area of Wisconsin, and just didn’t have time to go out and meet women. When Stephanie had suggested her friend might be interested in marriage, he took her number, but didn’t think he’d ever actually do anything with it. He’d gotten in early this evening, and as he’d sat on his couch, vegetating in front of the television, he’d thought about how nice it would be to not be alone anymore. So he’d dug the number out of his wallet and sent a text.

Amanda picked up the phone again. She’d barely had time to get one paper graded before he’d responded. “I’m Jason. I understand you live in Texas? What do you do there?”

She grinned and her fingers flew across the screen as she answered. “I do live in Texas about an hour south of Dallas/Fort Worth. I’m a homemaking teacher. Where do you live?”

The answer came back quickly. "Stratford, Wisconsin. Small town not far from Wausau, if you've ever heard of that."

Amanda hadn't, so she opened up her laptop and Googled it. It was barely more than a crook in the highway, but that was fine. It wasn't like she was marrying the man. She was texting him. "And you're a farmer? What kind of farming?"

"Lol. Dairy, of course. I'm a Wisconsin farmer."

She grinned. "Do you like farming?" She pushed the papers aside. She could grade papers tomorrow night. It was Friday night after all. She did a little more searching on the town Jason lived in.

"I really don't know anything else. I even studied agriculture in college. Do you like teaching?"

She thought about that. She'd been teaching for ten years now, and wasn't sure how she felt about it anymore. "Sometimes. Sometimes not. I'm at a point where I need a change." She hadn't really realized that before he'd asked.

"I understand. Have you had your spring break yet?"

"We just got back this week. The kids are all wiggly and don't want to learn."

"Lol. I'm glad the cows don't get that way."

"Do you teach the cows?" She smiled to herself as she typed that, wondering what his response would be.

"Not typically. I wish I could sometimes."

"What would you teach them if you could?"

Jason grinned as he read the question. What *would* he teach those silly cows? "I'd teach them to read so they'd understand why I keep having the vet give them shots."

Amanda laughed out loud at the thought of cows reading. She'd never had a full conversation by text message before. She didn't know the abbreviations or the jargon. She hated not typing out the full words

anyway. It looked like Jason was the same. Should she ask him to call her? Would that be too forward? “That would be interesting, I think. If you manage to do that, would you come to Texas and teach my students how to sit still?”

“I keep trying to imagine your words spoken with a Texas drawl. Do you say y’all a lot?”

She smiled. “Not a lot. It is a pretty common word around here, you know. I’m trying to imagine a Wisconsin accent when you text, but I’m not sure I’d know one if I heard one.”

He read the words and smiled. How would she react if he just called? It was late, but he knew she was up. He had her number. Would she mind? He took a deep breath and threw caution to the wind, clicking the button to call her instead of sending her another text.

She jumped when her phone rang instead of signaling a text. She’d put his name with his number, so she knew it was him. Why was she so nervous? She put the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Amanda?”

“Yes. Hi, Jason.”

“Hi there. I had to hear your voice for myself. I hope that’s okay.” His voice was deep and his accent sounded strange. They certainly hadn’t sounded like that on *Happy Days*.

“It’s fine. I almost asked you to call, but I was afraid I would seem too pushy.”

He laughed softly. Her voice didn’t have as strong of a Southern drawl as he’d expected. “You should have. I wouldn’t have minded.” He paused for a moment unsure of what to say now that she was on the phone. “So tell me what you look like, Amanda.”

She sighed. Here was the killer. In her experience, men liked tiny women. She was an Amazon. “I have blond hair and blue eyes. I’m thin.” She trailed off after that. “What about you?”

“Brown hair. Brown eyes. Pretty boring really. How tall are you?” He sent up a silent prayer that she wasn’t a tiny little thing. He was way too tall to mess with a girl like that.

“Here’s where you quit talking to me,” she said sadly. “I’m six foot two.” She waited for him to tell her he wasn’t interested in keeping the conversation going.

“Really?” He couldn’t keep the excitement out of his voice. “I’m six six.”

“Are you serious? You’re actually taller than me?” She knew that she probably sounded like an idiot she was so excited.

“I’m serious. I’ve got to meet you now. You need to fly up here and spend a weekend with Stephanie so I can meet you.”

She smiled. “I might be able to do that. After school is out, of course.”

“How ‘bout tomorrow instead?”

She laughed softly. “That’s probably not going to work.”

“Darn. You can’t blame a man for trying, right?”

“I guess not. I wish you’d called me a few weeks ago. I probably could have gone up during spring break.” She hadn’t done anything else. “Do you always have such terrible timing?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I do. Always. I’m cursed!”

They talked long into the night. When he finally glanced at the clock and realized it was after midnight, he mentally kicked himself. He had to work tomorrow, Saturday or not. “I really have to go. The cows need to be milked bright and early.”

“I understand. I really enjoyed talking to you, though,” she said honestly. She was going to be sad to hang up.

“I enjoyed talking to you, too. May I keep texting you? Maybe call again?”

She smiled. “I’d really like that.”

“I’ll text you tomorrow. G’night.”

Amanda set her phone down with a smile. She felt like a girl in high school with her first boyfriend. She thought. She'd never had that first boyfriend in high school. She'd seen how her friends had reacted, though. She knew all the symptoms, and she was feeling them. Yeah, it was just a few texts and a phone call, but they hadn't had a problem thinking of things to say. Maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't always be alone. She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Saturday was errand day for Amanda. With everything she did, she found herself wondering what Jason was up to. Was he working? Eating lunch? Doing his grocery shopping?

She finished grading papers early in the day, and had her lesson plan done for the following week. She ate her dinner alone, as usual, and this time, she didn't mind it as much as she usually did.

Amanda had moved back to the small town she'd grown up in after college. Her mother had been ill, and she'd felt that it was her duty, as an only child, to take care of her. She'd loved her mother, and nursing her for the last two years of her life hadn't been a burden. After her mother's death, she'd thought about moving somewhere else, but where? Everyone she knew, and everything she knew was centered in that small town.

She knew she needed to make a fresh start. As she ate, she decided that this would be her last year teaching in Maypearl. She was going to find somewhere else to live and just start over. She would let the principal know on Monday and start sending out resumes. There was a school somewhere just right for her.

She had just finished washing the dishes when her phone beeped to signal a text message. She almost danced over to where her phone lay on the table. "Hey, did Jason ever contact you?"

Amanda sighed. She'd hoped it was from Jason. She quickly keyed, "Yeah. We spent hours talking last night."

Stephanie simply replied with, "Woohoo!"

Amanda grabbed a book from the shelf in her bedroom and padded into the bathroom. She ran herself a hot bubble bath, carefully setting her phone on the floor beside the tub. She didn't want it to get wet, but she wanted to be able to respond if he called or texted.

She was about a chapter into her book when her phone signaled another text. She picked it up and read the screen. “Hi there. What are you up to?”

Her thumbs tapped out her response. “Just reading a book. You?”

It wasn't a full minute after she sent the message before her phone rang. “Hello?”

“What book?” Jason asked.

She smiled. “It's an Amish fiction book that was recommended by a woman at my church.”

“Is it any good?”

“Yeah, so far. I'm only about a chapter into it.” She tried really hard to stay still in the water so that he wouldn't hear the splashes. She didn't really want him to know she was talking to him from the bathtub.

An hour later they were still talking. Not about anything important, just chatting and getting to know one another better. Her water was so cold she started to shiver. She needed to either add hot water or get out. She decided to get out of the tub and hoped that he wouldn't hear her. She moved slowly to a standing position and towed off before stepping out of the water. He was talking about how he'd come to own his family's farm, so she knew she had a minute.

As she stepped out, he stopped talking. “Why do I hear water?” he asked.

Darn. She should have muted it before getting out. “Um...yeah. Probably.”

“Are you washing dishes?”

“No.”

“Why did I hear water?”

She sighed. She wasn't going to lie to him. “I was getting out of the bathtub,” she admitted, her face flaming red.

He was silent for a moment. “You were in the tub the whole time we’ve been talking?”

“Yeah.”

“Now why don’t we have video chat?”

She laughed softly. “Sorry. I should have told you right away and called you back.”

He grinned. He could almost hear her blush. He couldn’t believe there was a woman in her thirties left in this country who could blush. It was refreshing to say the least. “I’m just teasing you. It’s fine.”

She pulled on a bathrobe and went into her bedroom to sit on the bed and talk. She lived in the house she’d grown up in, and had taken over her mother’s old bedroom when she died. Her father had died when she was a small child.

“I don’t mind being teased as long as it’s not about how tall I am,” she told him honestly.

He chuckled softly. “I’m the last one to tease you about your height. I think it’s great.” He paused for a moment, and then said, “I really hope I get to meet you.”

She smiled to herself. She was hoping for the same thing. Easter was coming up in a couple of weeks. “I could fly up there and spend Easter weekend with Stephanie,” she suggested. “She’s been inviting me for years.”

He settled back on the couch and crossed his feet. He loved that idea. “Seriously? You’d do that?”

She thought about it. “Yeah, I would. I could get a sub for the Thursday before and fly up Wednesday night. That way we could have Thursday, Friday and Saturday together. I’d have to fly home after Easter services on Sunday.”

“I’ll pay for your ticket,” he offered.

She shook her head. “No way. I don’t want to feel like I’m indebted to you in any way. I’ll buy the ticket and spend the weekend with my friend. We can see if we hit it off in person as much as we do on the phone.”

“I’d like that a lot.”

She stood up and walked into the living room to search for flights on her laptop. “What would be the best airport for me to fly into?”

“Madison. I could have my friend Steve do the milking that night, and meet you myself.”

“And take me to Stephanie’s house?” she asked. She was more than willing to meet him, but she wasn’t ready to stay in a house alone with a man she’d never met in person.

“Absolutely.”

She typed in the information to fly from D/FW to Madison. She had several friends who would have no problem driving her to the D/FW airport. She found a non-stop and pulled out a credit card, booking it immediately. She knew she should ask Stephanie first, but she could easily get a hotel if she needed to. With no house payment, and a decent salary, she had a good savings account.

“What’s your email address?” she asked. “I’ll email you the flight information.”

“You already booked it?” he asked.

“I had to do it before I lost my nerve.”

He laughed softly. “I understand. I’m really excited that I’m going to get to meet you.”

“Me too.” She smiled to herself, thinking about how excited she was about it. “I’ll have to call Stephanie tomorrow and let her know I’m making a surprise visit.”

He grinned. “I’ll let her know at church in the morning.”

“That sounds good to me.”

He glanced at the clock. “Wow. It’s getting late. We’ll talk again, but for now, I need to go to bed so I can get up in the morning for milking.”

“Okay. It was nice talking to you.”

“You too. G’night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter 2

Amanda looked around the Madison airport. Was he here? They'd been chatting on Facebook as well as talking on the phone every evening, so she was pretty sure she could recognize him. She felt her phone buzz in her pocket and looked down to read the text. "I'm next to baggage claim. Where are you?"

She had stepped away from baggage claim so walked back in that direction. She wanted to spot him before he saw her, so she didn't text him back. There he was. A full head taller than almost everyone else, he was easy to spot. She saw him looking out over the crowd trying to find her. Finally, his eyes settled on her and he smiled. He took the three steps toward her. "Amanda?" he asked.

She nodded, unable to find her voice. He spread his arms wide and she dropped her suitcase and went into them hugging him happily. "It's nice to meet you," she mumbled against his shoulder.

He picked up her bags and carried them toward the door. "It's already seven. Did they feed you on the plane?" he asked.

"No. Just a pack of pretzels. I'm starving!"

He led her out the door to his truck, putting the suitcases behind the seat. "What sounds good for dinner?"

She climbed into the passenger side. She was glad she'd worn jeans. It would have been tough climbing into the cab in the slim skirt she'd had on for work that day. "I don't know what there is to eat here. Why don't you take me some place you enjoy?"

He thought about that for a minute. His favorite place to eat was a Mexican restaurant, but he was sure she ate a lot of Mexican in Texas. "Hmm...how about pizza?"

"Sounds good. Anything sounds good right about now."

He drove along the highway and pulled into a small pizza place that he'd been to many times with his parents over the years. They went in and sat in a booth. He took her hand in his as they looked at the menu. Once

they'd decided on a pizza with the works, he sat back and just looked at her. "I'm so glad you're here."

She smiled. "Me, too. Although, I have to admit, I was really nervous about meeting you."

He laughed. "No reason to be nervous around me. I'm just a country boy."

How could she help but be nervous though? She'd never had a boyfriend in her life, and his big brown eyes were making her heart melt. Would he find her attractive? Or would he get bored with her once he'd realized that in person she was so shy she could barely speak? Could she even force herself to speak?

"So are you going to show me your farm sometime this weekend?" she asked.

"Stephanie is planning on bringing you out to my place on Friday morning. She wants to spend tomorrow with you while the two older kids will be in school."

"That sounds good. I'd like to see your home."

"Well, don't expect anything fancy. It's just a farmhouse. It's been in my family forever." His thumb caressed her hand while they talked.

Amanda was nervous with him, yes, but found herself extremely attracted to him. She was surprised she could be so turned on by the touch of a man's hand on hers. What would it be like to kiss him? She found herself staring at his mouth. Would she have the courage to kiss him? Or would she turn and run?

The waitress came by then with their drinks.

He watched her face as she sipped her soft drink. What was it about her that was so attractive to him? Sure, she was tall, and he loved tall women, but what else? She certainly wasn't the prettiest girl he'd ever met. He loved her intelligence and her sense of humor. He'd enjoyed their conversations together. He loved that she seemed so completely innocent.

"It's a three hour drive back to Stratford. We probably won't make it to Stephanie's until around eleven or so."

“She’s expecting me to be late,” she told him with a grin. “She said she’d be waiting up in her pajamas and we’d pretend we were roommates again.”

He laughed. “How long have you two been friends?”

“Fourteen years. We were roommates all through college, and became best friends. I hate it that it’s been ten years since we’ve seen each other. We keep up through email and Facebook, of course, but it’s just not the same. I’m really excited about seeing her and Bob and meeting the kids.”

“She was bouncing off the walls when we talked at church on Sunday. She’s really excited that you’re visiting.”

Amanda smiled. “We talked for a minute or two last night, and she sounded like she was going insane.”

Their waitress dropped the pizza at the table and went off to get refills for each of them. Jason let go of her hand so they could eat. She was surprised by how easily she was talking to him.

After he’d paid for their meal, they went back out to the truck. Instead of starting it immediately, he turned to her. “All the while we were eating, all I could think about was one thing,” he whispered staring at her lips.

She turned to face him on the seat. “What’s that?”

“Kissing you,” he whispered slowly lowering his head toward hers. He gave her plenty of time to back away if she didn’t want this kiss.

She turned her face up toward his and met his lips with her own. The kiss was quick and chaste, barely a brush of their mouths together. He pulled back and smiled at her. “I had to get that out of the way. All I could think about was how you’d taste.”

She blushed. She’d never even been kissed before. She was certain she’d done it all wrong, but wasn’t certain how to ask. “And?”

“Well, a lot like pizza,” he answered with a grin.

She laughed. “That would make sense.”

He started the truck and they headed north toward Stratford. His hand met hers on the seat between them squeezing it tightly.

It was a few minutes after eleven when he pulled into Stephanie's driveway. He had just turned to kiss her goodnight, when the front door flew open and Stephanie came running out in her pajamas, bathrobe and slippers.

Amanda gave him a quick grin and opened the door, running to her friend. They hugged tightly. Stephanie had put on some weight over the years after giving birth to four children. Amanda was as slim as ever. Stephanie was a full foot shorter than Amanda and as dark as Amanda was fair. In college they'd joked that by putting pieces of the two of them together, any man could make his ideal woman.

Jason watched the women hug and removed her suitcases. "Where do you want these?" he asked.

Stephanie pulled away from Amanda with tears in her eyes. She led them both inside. "The boys are sleeping on the floor in the living room while you're here. They think it's a great adventure. I thought you'd be more comfortable in their room."

"That sounds good. Thanks."

They walked around sleeping bodies to the hallway. "Right through here," she said.

Jason carried the bags in and set them down. "Stephanie's not sharing you tomorrow, so I'll see you Friday morning," he said with a wink.

Amanda blushed and nodded. "I'm looking forward to it."

He didn't try to kiss her in front of Stephanie and for that she was grateful. "G'night."

"Thanks for picking me up at the airport," she said.

"My pleasure."

He walked toward the front door and Stephanie hurried after him and locked the door. She went back to Amanda and sat on one of the boy's beds while Amanda collapsed on the other.

"What do you think now that you've met him?" Stephanie asked.

Amanda grinned. "I think he's sexy and fun. I can't wait to get to know him better."

"I knew you'd like him!"

"You were right. I just hope he likes me as much as I like him."

Stephanie shook her head. "Of course he does. Who wouldn't?"

Amanda laughed. "Every other man I've met in my life."

"That's not true! I saw some guys looking at you in the cafeteria in college."

"Yeah, until I stood up and they realized they would have to stand on a ladder to kiss me." She sighed. She knew that she had no chance with a man like Jason, but it was fun to pretend for a few days. "What do you know about Jason's past? Has he had a long parade of women?"

Stephanie bit her lip like she was debating whether or not to tell her something.

"Spill it, Steph! I'm your best friend. If you know something you're not telling me, I'm going to have to hurt you."

Stephanie sighed. "He was dating a woman a while back. He was completely devoted to her."

"She was gorgeous right? Like something right out of a fashion magazine? That's the kind of girl I see Jason with. He's too good-looking for someone like me."

Stephanie nodded. "She really was pretty. Anyway, rumor had it Jason had already bought a ring, and one day she was gone."

"Gone? Like dead gone? Or like left gone?"

"She left. We found out later that she decided to move to Chicago with some guy she met online. Turns out he had more money than Jason."

Amanda sighed. "Sounds like a real winner."

"She was. Trust me. Anyway, Jason is looking for someone honest and trustworthy who won't do that to him."

“Does he still love her?”

“No clue. I don’t think he’d take her back if she came crawling on her knees, but I don’t know if he loves her.”

Amanda shrugged. “Okay. I guess I can deal with that.” She hoped she could anyway.

“I wouldn’t have had him text you if I’d thought he was still hung up on her.”

“I know. I’m sure I’m just being silly.” She decided to change the subject. “I’m quitting my job.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ve lived in Maypearl, TX my whole life except for four years of college. It’s time for me to make a change. I’m sending out resumes to see where I want to go. I’m going to put my house up for sale in May and just see what happens.”

Stephanie gaped at her. “That’s not like you. Are you going to try and stay in Texas?”

Amanda shrugged. “I’ve sent resumes to thirteen different states, Texas included. I’m going wherever I’m offered a job that looks good.”

“Wow.”

“I just can’t stay there anymore. I’ll probably try to find another small town, but I’ve just got to leave Maypearl. I mean, I don’t have anything against it, but I need a change. I find that I’m short with my students lately, and it’s because I’m feeling so restless.” She paused for a moment looking down at her hands. “I feel like my life is passing me by. I want kids so badly, but I’ve never even had a steady boyfriend. I’ve seriously thought about going to a sperm bank.”

Stephanie’s eyes were huge at her friend’s words. “Give Jason a chance. I really think he wants a life with you.”

Amanda sighed. “I’m not going to hang all my hopes for the future on a man I met today. We’ll see what happens, but I’m going to make plans anyway.”

Stephanie nodded. "I think I understand." She paused for a moment. "I really hope it works out for you, though. I'd love to see you move here."

Amanda nodded. "We'll see. I'd love to live near you, too."

"I've got to get to bed. I need to be up at six to get the kids ready for school," Stephanie said. "I thought we could spend tomorrow exploring the area. We could go to some local parks, maybe eat lunch out, that type of thing."

"Okay. I'm up for anything."

"I know you and Jason are going to spend the day together on Friday, but I made plans for him to come to dinner on Saturday night. I thought maybe you'd like to spend some time with another couple and their brood."

Amanda laughed. "That sounds wonderful. Maybe I won't be so tongue-tied if it's not just the two of us."

Stephanie stood and hugged Amanda tight. "I'm so glad you're here." She pointed out the bathroom and then headed off to her room.

Amanda sank down onto the bed. She was happy to be there finally, but nervous too. Jason was everything she'd hoped for and more. But would she measure up in his eyes?

Chapter 3

The day with Stephanie flew by. They laughed and joked and generally felt as if they'd never parted. Amanda enjoyed meeting her friend's children, and did her best to hide the envy she felt. Stephanie knew, though.

She ate dinner with Bob and Stephanie and their two boys and two girls that evening. The boys were nine and seven and the girls were six and four. She found Bob and Stephanie to be strict but fun parents. The kids were constantly laughing and having a good time.

Bob wasn't working on Friday, so it was just Stephanie and Amanda in the mini-van on the way to Jason's farm. Stephanie navigated the two lane highways like she'd been driving them all her life. Although it was early April, there was still a chill in the air, and Amanda wore a light jacket. She'd dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with an old pair of cowboy boots for the day. Jason had warned her that she might spend some of the day trudging through mud as he showed her around.

Stephanie slowed the van down and pulled into a long driveway that was lined with trees. Amanda couldn't see a house up ahead, but knew they had to be close. "Are we almost there?"

They turned a corner and stopped in front of a large, white, wooden house. The front of the house was covered by a screened-in porch. She smiled as she saw how old it was. This house would have some history.

When they pulled up, Stephanie honked the horn instead of getting out and knocking on the door. "He's probably in the barn or somewhere on the property," Stephanie explained at Amanda's quizzical look.

Jason came from around the side of the house. He had mud splattered all over his jeans and wore an old flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up at the elbows. He smiled down at Stephanie. "Thanks for bringing her. I'll take her back after dinner tonight."

"Okay. Have a great day!" Stephanie climbed into her van and drove away.

After she'd driven off, Amanda gave Jason a shy look. "Hey."

He smiled. "Hi there." He walked closer and bent down to brush her lips with his. "I'm glad you're here."

She wished she felt as confident as he seemed. "Me too."

He took her hand in his, and pulled her toward the house. "You can leave your purse in the kitchen. You won't need it while we wander around."

He led her up to the porch and opened the door for her, letting her precede him inside to take a look around. There was a wooden porch swing that she immediately dropped into setting it swinging with her foot. She looked up and saw that Jason was watching her for a reaction to his home.

"I love this porch! I can see you sitting out here in the evenings relaxing."

"My parents were out here every evening in the summer. Dad would be bone tired, but he always took the time to sit with Mom, because she loved it so much," he said. "Are you ready to go in and see it?"

She laughed softly. "I've been ready since I got off that plane. I know you said you're the fifth generation to own it. Did your ancestors build it, or did they buy it?"

"My great-great-grandfather bought the land when he was just a teenager. He built a small log cabin on it, and the rest of the house was added on in pieces. What I use as a mud room was the log cabin. He brought my great-great-grandmother here after they were married. My great-grandfather and grandfather were both born in this house," he told her.

She stood up and waited for him to open the door. She noticed that he hadn't bothered to lock it while he was out on the farm. She loved that about living in the country. Even in her small town they felt the need to lock the doors.

Once they were inside the living room, and she looked around. She could see some small changes that she'd make if it were hers. She'd make some curtains and some throw pillows to soften up the look of the room. For the most part, though, she was thrilled with what was there.

He showed her the mud room, which lived up to its name well. He'd obviously not bothered with cleaning the floor in here for a long time. It was an unfinished looking room. It connected to a bathroom, which in turn,

connected to the kitchen. “I always come in this way after working so that I can just strip off and shower as I come in.” There was a laundry chute in the bathroom that he told her emptied into a laundry bin in the basement where the washer and dryer were.

There were five bedrooms total, and three baths. Some things could use to be updated, but for the most part she loved it. Jason seemed to be relatively neat. There was nothing just thrown on the floor, and no dishes in the sink, but he obviously wasn't one for doing a lot of real cleaning. The floors needed to be vacuumed and mopped well. The counters needed a good scrubbing and the oven probably hadn't been cleaned since his parents had moved away.

“So what do you think?” he asked.

“I love it. I love older houses because they have so much character. You've lived here your whole life, right?”

“Except when I was in school in Madison.”

“I've lived in the same house my whole life, too. My parents bought it when they were first married.”

He nodded. “I can't imagine living anywhere else.”

She smiled. She hadn't talked to him about her plans of leaving Maypearl. She didn't want him to think he was the reason she was quitting her job, because he wasn't. She really didn't think things would work out between them.

“Would you like to see the farm?”

“I'd love to.”

He took her hand and led her out through the mudroom. The barn was back behind the house and he took her there first. Several of the cows were in the barn, while others were out in the pasture behind it.

“Why do you keep some in the barn and some outside?” she asked.

“The ones in the barn are due to give birth at any time. The ones outside have either already given birth or aren't going to this year.”

“Can you milk a cow while she’s pregnant?”

“Yup. In fact, cows need to have babies every year to keep giving milk.”

“I didn’t know that.”

He smiled. He liked being able to teach her little things about his life here. They walked a lot of the land. It was a huge farm spanning over 200 acres. He grew his own feed for the cattle that he raised, so the summer months were busier than the winter months.

He talked steadily about the business of farming as they walked. He explained how the small dairy farm was going the way of the dinosaur. He obviously loved his farm and his job.

“I grew up working this farm. My younger brothers and sisters have all moved off. None of my brothers wanted the farm. I was the only one who did, which is probably good. Mom and Dad moved off to Florida several years back. Dad’s arthritis couldn’t handle the cold or the work anymore, so he’s down there selling life insurance now.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Three brothers and two sisters. Only three of us are still in Wisconsin. One of my sisters married a farmer down near Madison. The other is living over in Wausau. She’s married, but doesn’t have any kids yet.”

“Big family! I’m an only. It must have been fun growing up with all those playmates on a farm like this.”

He laughed. “It was. I’d like to have kids to pass the farm down to.” He stopped and looked at her. “Do you want kids?”

She nodded. “I’d love to have a dozen kids.”

He smiled and wrapped his arm around her waist starting to walk again. “Sounds good to me.”

They walked along in comfortable silence for a minute before she asked the question burning in her mind. “Why were you interested in getting to know a woman from another state that you’d never met?”

He thought for a moment about how to best phrase his answer. “Honestly? There were several reasons. I wanted someone who had an impeccable character to start with. Stephanie vouched so highly for you that I was able to trust you before I ever met you.”

She could understand that. “Okay. What were the other reasons?”

He sighed. “I’m ready to have a family. I thought I’d found the perfect woman, and she took off. I didn’t want to have to start over from square one. I wanted to meet someone else, who felt they were ready to start married life, and would be more amenable to a quick wedding.”

“Stephanie told you I was willing to get married quick?” she asked. She knew she’d talked about how unsettled she felt, and how much she wanted kids in some of the emails she’d sent Stephanie, but she hadn’t realized just how much Stephanie had read between the lines.

“Yeah. Does it bother you she told me that?”

Amanda shrugged. “I’m not sure. I mean, it’s true, but it feels funny to know that you knew that before we ever spoke.” She kicked at a clump of dirt on the ground. “What other reasons?”

“I don’t really have time for a real courtship to use an old-fashioned word. I work a whole lot of hours, and don’t want to have to drive somewhere to see a girl all that often. I mean, I know every girl in these parts. I don’t want to have to drive all the way to Madison three times a week to see some girl. Does that make any sense?”

She nodded. “It makes a lot of sense. With me, you can talk if you have time, or not talk if you don’t. You have to pick up the phone, but don’t have to make the long drives. Well, except this weekend, of course.”

He stopped walking and turned to her. “This weekend was necessary for me. I needed to meet you and find out if we were compatible. I think we are. What do you think?”

She looked up into his big brown eyes. She was already half in love with him. What could she say? “Yeah, I think we are.”

He smiled. “I’m glad.” He cupped her face in both hands and leaned slowly toward her, brushing her lips with his. When she leaned toward him,

he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her more firmly against him. His tongue traced the line of her lips, and she parted them, giving him access to her mouth.

She wrapped both arms around his neck and pressed herself up against him. How had she lived all her life without his kisses?

After a moment, he broke off the kiss. Both of them were breathing heavily as they faced one another. Her cheeks were tinged pink with embarrassment, but she wouldn't turn away from him. "What would you think about getting married this summer?" he asked.

Her eyes grew wide as she stared at him for a minute. "This summer? Like August?"

He smiled. "I'm thinking more like June. When is school out?"

She swallowed. "The last week in May."

"How about the first Saturday in June then?"

Was this what she wanted? She wanted a family. She needed a change so desperately. But was that enough reason to marry? If she agreed, they wouldn't see each other again until right before the wedding. She'd have no time to get to know him or to get used to his kisses.

"I wasn't expecting you to ask me that. Not yet, anyway," she said honestly.

He smiled, his thumb rubbing her lower lip. "I don't want to wait. I want you in my life."

She stared into his eyes. She wanted to say yes. She really did. She just wasn't sure if she was ready to agree. Shouldn't she know him better first?

He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers again. "Please?"

She rested her head on his shoulder. Why was she even debating with herself? She wanted children, and so did he. She found him incredibly attractive. Why not? She lifted her head up and nodded. "Yeah. I'll marry you."

"Really?"

She smiled. "Really."

He kissed her again quickly, and slipped his arm around her as they walked back toward the house talking as they went.

She told him that she'd already resigned her position with her school, knowing that she was going to do something outside of her small town. "I'm not sure if I even want to keep teaching. I have some money saved. Enough that I could take a year off and it wouldn't hurt me too badly. I'll probably apply at Stratford High, but I'm not even sure yet. Maybe I can just teach some quilting classes or something."

"I make enough that you don't have to work if you don't want to. I'd probably rather you didn't once we have kids, but we can talk about that later."

She shrugged. "Maybe I'll spend a year not working and see if I can handle it. I may go insane."

He laughed. "Hopefully not. I'm sure you could sub if nothing else."

She nodded. "That may be the best solution. If I sub, I can work when I want and not work when I don't want to. I'll call the school system here on my break on Monday and see if I can get an application. Or check out their website. I'm sure it'll have the information I need."

"I'd like to see you with something to do if you want to do it. You might get bored just being a farmer's wife."

She laughed. "I doubt it. I'd love to get involved in the church. Maybe work with the children's ministry. That's always been a passion of mine. There are so many books I want to catch up on. I love to quilt. I enjoy making quilts and selling them. I don't get bored."

He grinned. "Sounds good to me."

They were nearing the house by this time, and he suggested they drive into town for lunch. "I'd invite you to eat with me, but honestly? There's nothing fit to eat in my house. I pretty much live off of sandwiches and microwave dinners. Oh, and frozen burritos. I've never been much of a cook."

"I love to cook. That's part of the reason I became a homemaking teacher."

They went inside so she could get her purse from the counter, and got into his truck. “The church isn’t big, but it’s big enough for a small wedding. Do you want Bob to marry us?” he asked.

“He’s the only minister we both know, so yeah, he’s it. I’ll talk to Stephanie about it. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to take care of most of the plans for me. She loves bossing people around. We can email about flower arrangements and that kind of thing.”

He sighed. “I’m going to have to wear a suit, aren’t I?”

“At least a suit. I’d prefer a tux.”

He nodded. He didn’t want to, but he’d do it. “You gonna wear one of those long white dresses?” he asked.

“Yeah. I should have time to make one between now and then. If I don’t have enough time, I’ll turn my classroom into a sweat shop.”

He laughed. She loved how his deep chuckle filled up the cab of the truck. “That works for me.”

By the time he’d dropped her off that evening, they had talked through the important things. She and Stephanie would worry about the details. He kissed her goodbye in the driveway. “I’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

Chapter 4

Time flew by once Amanda was back home in Texas. She put her house on the market, knowing that she could stay with her friend, Beth, if the house sold before she was ready to move. She got everything packed up and went to work on her dress. Every evening she talked to Jason. They laughed and joked. She felt closer to him every day. And more nervous about marrying him.

She closed on the house the day after school was out, but they gave her three days to vacate. In those three days, she'd be in Wisconsin. She came home after signing the papers and slumped onto the couch. She'd just sold the only home she'd ever known. Was she doing the right thing?

She called Stephanie, and didn't even wait for her to say anything. "House is sold. Everything is packed. Movers are coming tomorrow, and I'll be flying up there. Am I insane?"

Stephanie laughed. "You're not getting nervous are you? Jason's a great guy. You're doing the right thing."

Amanda felt tears prick her eyes. "I'm moving a thousand miles for a man I've met once. Once! My father would kill me."

"It's going to be okay. Everything is ready here. I'll probably be picking you up at the airport on Friday afternoon."

"I thought Jason was picking me up?"

"He's having some tractor issues. He has to get them taken care of before the honeymoon."

Amanda sighed. "Am I even going to get to see him before the wedding?"

"Probably not. You'll get to see him during the wedding, though."

"I'm so nervous. I was hoping he could talk me down from the emotional ledge I'm perched on."

Stephanie smiled as she looked at the phone. Amanda was usually so calm about everything. These pre-wedding jitters were amusing her to no end. "He said he'd call you tonight."

"Well, that's better than nothing, I guess."

After they'd hung up, Amanda went into her bedroom and stroked the dress hanging in her closet. She'd worked so hard on it. She knew that it showed her slim figure off to its best advantage. Hopefully Jason would like it.

Hours later, her phone rang. She checked the caller ID and answered it. She was determined not to sound like a hysterical idiot. "Hey there."

"Hi, sweetheart. How did the closing go today?"

She sighed. "It went well. It's all done. I've sold the only home I've ever known." She dashed the tear off her cheek as she said the words. She'd planned to sell the house anyway. It wasn't his fault, so why was she half mad at him for it?

"You doin' okay?"

"Not really. I'm in the middle of an emotional crisis. I keep asking myself if I'm doing the right thing."

"And how do you answer yourself?"

She laughed. "I don't know. That's the problem. I can't figure that out. It's not that I don't want to marry you. It's really not. It's just that I'm moving so far away from Texas. And I'm going to be having sex with a man I barely know." She put her hand over her mouth as soon as she realized what she'd said. She hadn't meant to bring that up.

"Is that the problem? Are you worried about the wedding night?"

She blushed. "That's part of it."

"Why does that make you so nervous?" he asked.

"Well, it'll be a new experience, and I don't feel like I know you well enough yet. Not really. Maybe we could get married, but wait a week or two?"

He'd figured she was a virgin, but she hadn't come right out and said it until now. "It's going to be okay. I'm not willing to wait, but it's not going to be some horribly traumatic experience. I promise. You'll enjoy it."

She sighed. "I hope so. I know it's not fair to even ask you to wait. I'm sorry. I'm just a little messed up right now. Too many changes too fast."

"There's no need to be sorry. Once we're married, everything will settle down, and things will be easier," he promised.

"I hope so."

Amanda's eyes searched the airport on Friday afternoon. She was glad that Jason wasn't going to meet her. She needed some time with Stephanie before she had a mental breakdown.

Most of her things had been sent ahead, so she only had her overnight bag, one suitcase, and her wedding dress with her. Everything else was already here. Jason had told her the night before that the moving truck had arrived and where he'd put everything. She picked up the only suitcase that she'd checked and searched the people around her again.

She was looking for Stephanie, so was surprised to be caught in a bear hug by Jason. She pulled back and looked up at him her eyes showing her happiness at his presence. "You made it!"

"I couldn't not meet you with how freaked out you sounded the other night. My friend, Steve, is dealing with the tractor."

She grabbed him in another hug. "I'm so glad you came."

He tucked his forefinger under her chin and lifted her face up to his. His lips descended slowly, kissing her softly. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too. I can't believe that we're going to be married at this time tomorrow."

He picked up her suitcase and started toward the truck. She carried her garment bag and her overnight. When they reached the truck, he stowed them behind the seat and they climbed in. He immediately caught her hand and pulled her close, kissing her passionately this time. They were

both panting by the time he broke off the kiss. "I'm looking forward to not stopping at a kiss," he whispered.

She blushed. "I'm really nervous about that."

He smiled, stroking her cheek. "Don't be. It's going to be beautiful." He kissed her one more time before putting the truck in gear. "You hungry?"

"I'm not sure I could eat. Too nervous," she admitted.

"We'll wait 'til we're closer to home then. Stephanie is expecting you for dinner anyway. She has a few last minute details about the wedding she wants to go over."

The drive went quickly with them talking about the last couple of months, and the preparations each had made for the wedding. "I meant to get the house cleaned top to bottom, but well, that hasn't happened," he said. "I'm sorry, but it's a mess."

She shrugged. "I'm not worried about that. I know the spring is a really busy time for you." She'd done a lot of research on dairy farming. She knew that he grew his own feed, so in addition to the calves being born in the spring, he was planting crops. She couldn't expect him to keep an immaculate house at the same time.

By the time they pulled into Stephanie's driveway, she was more relaxed than she'd been in weeks. Seeing him again had reminded her why she'd agreed to marry him in the first place. She wasn't sure that she wouldn't be nervous again in the morning, but for now, she was okay.

He carried in her bags for her, and put them in the boys' room again. Stephanie hugged her tightly and looked at her eyes, trying to determine whether or not she was okay now. She must have been satisfied by what she saw, because she didn't say anything about it.

Jason kissed her softly before leaving. "I'll see you in the morning," he whispered.

"I'll be the one in white."

He smiled and left. He had a lot to do. Taking the time to drive that far wasn't something he should have done, but she'd obviously needed it. She seemed a lot calmer now, and that was what was important.

Amanda enjoyed spending the evening with the kids. Little Avery showed off her flower girl outfit, and showed her just how she was going to drop petals with some torn up paper. Having been an only child, Amanda hadn't been around small children a lot and was thoroughly charmed by the sweet little girl.

They would be doing a reception after the wedding in the fellowship hall at the church. Jason's parents wouldn't be able to make it, but two of his sisters would be there. The wedding had been planned so quickly that people from far away just weren't coming.

As Amanda sat watching Bob with his family, she sincerely hoped that Jason would be as good of a father as Bob was.

They had decided on an eleven am wedding, because she wanted to have some time alone with Jason after the wedding, but before she'd be expected to crawl into bed with him.

When she went to bed at nine that night, she knew that this was the last night she'd be sleeping alone. Tomorrow, she'd be giving her virginity to a man she barely knew. She lay in bed for a long time that night, staring at the wall, trying to imagine what tomorrow would bring. Her degree in home economics prepared her to be a wife in every way but the physical way.

At five minutes after eleven the following morning, Amanda left the bride's room. She wished her father could be there to walk her down the aisle. She had never missed him quite as much as she did facing that long walk down the aisle by herself to a man she barely knew.

She received a cue from Stephanie's friend and slowly walked toward the front of the church. She felt all the eyes on her. She knew she wasn't a raging beauty. She had nice strong features, and wasn't plain, but wasn't really someone who could be called pretty either. She was still nice and slender, with curves in all the right places.

There hadn't been a wedding dress long enough, but she thought now that had been to her advantage. She was able to make this one to show off her figure perfectly. She'd combined two different patterns to get just the right look for her body. The neckline was modest and just hinted at the swell of

her breasts. She'd made the skirt full to make up for what she was lacking in the hips department. The waistline was tight and fit her beautifully.

She made eye contact with Jason as she was about halfway to the front of the church. He stood almost a head taller than the men surrounding him, and was definitely built like the linebacker he'd once been. He had a soft smile on his face, and his eyes twinkled at her. She took a deep breath and walked slowly toward the man she'd be spending the rest of her life with.

As she reached the front of the church, he reached out and grasped her hand. She could feel the calluses on his hand as his thumb slowly rubbed across her palm, calming her nervousness. She barely registered what Bob was saying as he talked about the commitment they were making to one another. She turned toward Jason as they made their vows, nervously looking up into his eyes.

It was over quickly. He dipped his head and barely brushed her lips with his own for their first kiss as a married couple. Then they were introduced to the church as Mr. and Mrs. Jason Daugherty.

As they walked to the church toward the reception area, Jason held tightly to her hand. She was almost embarrassed to even look at him. He sensed her nervousness, and pulled her off into a corner for a moment. "You okay, Mandy?"

Her gaze jerked up to his. "No one has called me Mandy in years."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Don't you like it? I've been thinking of you as Mandy for months now." His deep voice sent shivers up her spine.

"No, it's okay. It just surprised me, that's all," she whispered. "I'm okay. Just really nervous."

He brought that strong hand to her cheek and stroked one finger down it. "Don't be. We just have to get through the next couple of hours, and then all will be good."

She laughed softly. "I'm less worried about the next couple of hours than I am about after that."

Stephanie ran over and grabbed them each by the arm pulling them back to the group. “You two have the rest of your lives to be alone together. Today, we all get to celebrate.”

The wedding lunch had been arranged by Stephanie and cooked by many of the women in the church. Amanda ate a little bit of everything, but couldn't have told anyone what she'd eaten. She was too aware of the man at her side to be able to think of anything else.

Chapter 5

It seemed like only five minutes had gone by when it was time to leave. Jason slipped his arm around her shoulders as he guided her toward the door. They ran out of the church while everyone blew bubbles at them. He led her to his pick-up truck and helped her to tuck her dress around her.

As he started to drive out of the parking lot, she quietly asked, "Do you already have my bag in here?"

"Stephanie had me put your overnight bag behind the seats. She said she'd take the wedding gifts and the rest of your stuff to my place."

"Okay. Just wanted to make sure I'd have some clothes to wear other than my wedding gown," she said, thinking of the white nightgown she'd made for that night.

Jason slid his fingers through hers. "Don't worry about that. You won't need clothes. I picked a hotel with room service."

Amanda blushed. "Where is the motel we're going to?"

Jason laughed out loud at her change of subject. "Wausau. They have a really nice hotel in downtown. It's not so far that we'll be driving all day, but far enough that I'll feel like it's a vacation."

"That sounds nice," Amanda was watching his face as they drove. His fingers on hers had little butterflies flying around in her stomach. She still couldn't believe how strong the physical attraction between them was.

"If you want, we can go back to the hotel and change, and maybe take a walk down to the Wisconsin River. It runs right through Wausau and is really pretty along here," he told her.

"That sounds nice," she told him, relieved that he had made some plans for the day that would keep them out of the hotel room.

He pulled up in front of the hotel and helped her down. When they reached the suite, she was amazed. It was hard to believe he would spring for

something so nice. She knew he didn't have a lot of money to waste on things like this. "You went to a lot of expense on this room. Thank you," she said softly.

He walked to her and took her hands in his. "We'll be frugal for the rest of our lives. We only have one wedding night and one honeymoon. It's going to be as special as I can make it." Holding her eyes with his, he slowly lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers.

His kiss sent tingles up her spine. It was just a soft kiss, no tongue, but it was so nice. It made her feel like she was a real bride about to spend the night with the man she loved.

He pulled away to rest his forehead against hers. "I didn't get a chance to tell you that you look absolutely incredible in that dress."

"Thank you," she whispered as she pulled his head down for one more kiss. "I think you look great in your tux."

He hugged her close. "Do you want to get changed and go for that walk, or we can stay here and get started on the wedding night? The choice is yours."

Amanda pulled back. "I think I need a little more time to just be with you first if that's okay. I'm willing to make love tonight, but can we spend the day just getting used to each other first?"

He took a deep breath and smiled down at her, kissing her palm. "Not the choice I was hoping for, but the one I expected."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"There's no need to be sorry. It's only a few more hours. You take the bathroom and I'll change out here. Something casual with tennis shoes if you brought them," he told her.

"I did," she said. "Ummm...I can't get out of this dress by myself. Would you unbutton me?" She turned her back to him.

He stood looking down at the buttons along the back of her dress. There were a dozen tiny buttons from her back all the way down to her waist. "I have no problem undressing you." His hands felt huge and clumsy as he began unfastening each one individually. "Do I need to undo them all?"

“Yeah, I don’t want the dress to tear. I should have thought of that and changed before we left the church. Stephanie would have helped me.”

“But then I would have missed out on the fun.” He dropped a kiss to the top of her back. “Have I told you that I love how tall you are? I hate getting a crick in my neck when I go to kiss a woman. You’re just the perfect size.”

She laughed. “I never expected a man to say that to me. In my experience tall men only like tiny little women. It has always driven me crazy.”

“Not me. I’ve always prayed for an Amazon goddess.”

She felt more and more buttons coming undone. He had to be almost finished. She held the dress to the front of her to make sure that it didn’t fall off. “Amazon goddess? You’re going to be great for my self-esteem!”

“There, that’s all of them.” He eyed her back covered in a thin slip. “You’d better go get changed if you want to go on that walk.” He swallowed hard and reminded himself how nervous she was.

She smiled at him over her shoulder, holding the dress up with one hand, and carried her overnight bag into the bathroom with the other. She quickly changed into jeans and a blouse and put on her socks and shoes. She pulled her hair out of the elaborate twist it was in and let it fall past her shoulders.

Walking out of the bathroom she hung up her dress. Jason was waiting for her in jeans, a t-shirt and tennis shoes. Her fingers actually itched to touch his shoulders. She’d always loved nice broad shoulders.

His eyes swept her from head to toe. “That’s perfect for walking. You ready?” He put the key card to the hotel room onto his key chain and put his hand to the small of her back as he guided her out of the room.

He held her hand as they walked. She’d never truly appreciated hand holding before Jason. When he held her hand, he made her feel like she was protected. She didn’t know from what she felt protected, but it made her feel protected and cared for in a way that she never had before.

She listened as he explained about the Native Americans who had once lived in this part of the state. She, like most other Texans, had never really thought of the rich history of the mid-western states. She was amazed at

all she learned from a short walk. She asked questions about his work as they got closer to the river. She'd been in a small town her entire life, but it had been a town and not a farm. She had never known a dairy farmer. Ranchers, yes, but not dairy farmers.

He talked about the early mornings and late evenings. "I usually hire a couple of boys full time in the summer to help out with the milking and some of the field work. Sometimes they stay on through the school year, but not usually."

He led her to the edge of the river where the whitewater rafting events took place. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. She leaned back against him and said, "It's beautiful. I'm glad you suggested this."

"I can't wait to share all the beautiful things about Wisconsin with you. So many people write us off as just the cheese state, but we're so much more than that," he told her.

"I'm beginning to see that. I wish I would have accepted one of Stephanie's invitations to come up here and visit during the summer," she said.

"Why didn't you?"

"I always made quilts to sell during the summers. I would make up as many crafts as I could, and earn some extra money. I would even give lessons to some of the women in the area," she told him.

"Did you need the money?" he asked.

"Not at all. I made decent money as a teacher, and my parents left me a decent amount. I'm not rich by any means, but I'm comfortable and have a nice savings account," she paused. "I guess the real reason I never came is that I didn't want to see her with Bob and start missing what I was sure I'd never have."

"I can understand that," he told her. "I never really worried about finding someone until about a year ago. I had a girl that I figured I'd eventually marry, but mostly I was too busy working. I sure do understand the loneliness, though. Seeing couples does add to it."

She thought about what he'd said for a moment, glad that he'd understood. "So, how many single people do you think we're making feel lonely by standing here like this?"

He laughed. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I should really show them what they're missing." He moved his hands to her shoulders and turned her to face him. Lowering his head, he kissed her, his tongue probing along the seam of her lips until she opened her mouth for him.

Her arms wound around his neck as she kissed him back. Her tongue tangled with his. He tasted so good. She hadn't been expecting this kind of kiss in such a public place, but she was thrilled. She felt tingles up and down her spine. When he broke the kiss, she stared up at him with her lips slightly parted. His lips were redder than before, and his breathing was faster.

"Wow," she whispered. "You're good at that."

He laughed. "I'm glad you think so."

"I'm starting to look at our wedding night with more anticipation than nervousness," she confessed.

"We can go back to the hotel right now and get started on that," he told her with a grin.

"I'm starting to get hungry," she said.

"Yeah, me too, but not for food."

She chuckled softly. "Well, I'm hungry for food. I didn't eat more than four or five bites of lunch. I was too nervous."

"Well, I don't want you passing out, so I guess I'd better feed you," he said with a shake of his head. "There's a little café not far from the hotel. We'll walk back, eat dinner, and then head back up to the room. Will that work for you?"

She glanced at her watch. It was already after five. "That sounds great."

After they'd ordered their meal, they talked quietly about the future, laughing as they made up names for the kids they both hoped to have.

Once they were inside, she asked if she could use the bathroom first. She went in and brushed her teeth and hair and changed into the gown she'd made for that night. It was white satin with spaghetti straps. It went to her knees and hugged her curves. It wasn't see-through, but with the way it clung to her, it might as well have been.

She stood for a moment with her hand on the doorknob, taking deep breaths, and trying to get up the courage to go through that door. After the time they'd spent together, she was sure he wouldn't hurt her. She knew that she was very attracted to him, but she was still about to make love with a man she barely knew. She screwed up her courage and opened the door.

He had opened the bottle of complimentary champagne while he waited. He poured them each a glass, and took the lid off the chocolate covered strawberries that had been part of the honeymoon package. He heard her come out and turned to offer her some of the champagne. Once he spotted her, he tried to speak, but no words would come out.

She stood nervously waiting for him to say something. He just gaped at her. She started to turn back to the bathroom, and he ran across the room and grabbed her arm to stop her.

"You take my breath away," he said.

"I thought you didn't like it," she whispered as she looked down.

He laughed. "I think I like it too much."

He took her hand and led her to the table where he'd set the champagne and strawberries. He picked up a strawberry and fed it to her, watching as a trail of juice escaped her lips. She lifted her hand to wipe it away, but he was faster. He leaned down and licked the trail of juice from her chin to her lips. "Did I miss any?"

She mutely shook her head, startled by his actions.

"Champagne?" he asked her offering a glass.

"No thank you. I don't want anything clouding my memory of tonight."

He set the glass down and turned to her. "I can agree with that wholeheartedly."

He leaned down to kiss her, pulling her body close. She opened her mouth to his and wound her arms around him. She'd been dying to touch his shoulders and chest since she'd first seen him in a t-shirt. She stroked him through the shirt, wishing it weren't in her way. As if he could read her thoughts, he pulled away for a moment, and tugged the shirt over his head throwing it on the floor.

He started to pull her back into his arms, but she put a hand against his chest. "I've been dreaming about touching you since I first saw you at the airport yesterday," she whispered. "I want to see you."

He kicked his shoes off and lay on his back on the bed. "How's that?" he asked.

"Perfect!" She sat on the bed at his side her hands going to his sparsely haired chest. The dark hair was soft and springy. Her hands threaded through it as she explored his muscles with her fingertips. She leaned over him and kissed him lightly, her hands continuing their exploration.

He lay as still as he could to let her get used to touching him. His body was screaming at him to grab her and pull her down on top of him, but he let her have her way. Finally, she leaned down and pressed herself against him, her hands still kneading the muscles of his shoulders. It was obvious she wanted to feel herself against him, so Jason sat up and took the control back from her.

His hands stroked over the satin of her gown, across her back and finally down to cup her breast. His fingers found her nipple, and he gently rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, never breaking the kiss.

Amanda moaned softly, loving the feel of his hands on her body. She wanted them against her bare skin, though. She reached over and pulled down the strap on her left side, and lowered the gown so that he was touching her skin. She then repeated the action on the right.

He pulled away from the kiss to watch her as he played with her nipple. Her breasts were tipped with dark brown nipples. He had thought they would be a soft pink based on her light coloring. The surprise aroused him even more. He used his free hand to unfasten his jeans and lower the zipper. He didn't try to release himself, just knew that the jeans were getting way too tight for him to try to keep them fastened.

She stared down at the opening in his jeans with fascination. She'd actually caused a man to get aroused. That was fascinating in and of itself. She'd always thought of herself as completely without sex appeal. She had a hard time believing that this gorgeous man was hard because of her. She reached down a hand into the opening of his jeans, and immediately drew back at his groan.

"No that was a good sound, Mandy. Touch me. Please." He took her hand and put it back into his jeans.

Her fingers explored the length of him through his boxers. She was surprised at the thickness and the heat coming from him. She pushed his boxers down so that she could feel him without the barrier. She moved her thumb over the tip of his shaft, surprised at the moisture there. She knew technically how all of this worked, but the fact that it was working like it should for her, was a surprise.

He pushed her hand away and surged to his feet, pushing his jeans and boxers off in one swift motion. He took her hand and pulled her to her feet, divesting her of her night gown. She immediately raised her hands to cover herself. "No, I want to see you," he whispered.

She dropped her hands to her sides, standing in front of him, letting her eyes wander down his body. She felt a burning between her legs where the moisture was pooled. Taking a step forward, she lifted her lips to his, her hands starting at his waist and dropping to his butt, caressing the muscles there.

He pulled back the covers and scooped her off her feet, gently laying her on the bed, and following her down. He lay to her side, his hands moving over her breasts and flat stomach. She was so slender, except for her breasts. They had a fullness that surprised him.

He moved his hand down between her legs, which immediately parted to admit him. Slowly he stroked her inner thighs, up to her center, stroking her sensitive nub. "If I do anything you don't like, just let me know," he whispered softly.

She sucked in a breath and let out a quick laugh, "Apparently I like it all. Who knew?"

He grinned and dropped his face to nuzzle her breast while his fingers continued to pluck at her nub. Slowly he pressed one finger inside her, whispering, "I'm glad no one knew. I wouldn't have wanted all those other men touching my Amazon goddess."

She started to move her hips to give him better access. He added another finger. "That feels so good," she told him.

He stroked his fingers in and out a few times, making sure she was ready, and then rolled on top of her. He guided his member to her opening, watching her eyes the whole while. Slowly he began inching it inside her. It was tight. He groaned as he sank the first few inches into her. "I'm trying to go slow, Mandy, but you feel so good."

"You don't have to go slow," she whispered. "Come all the way inside me. Please, Jason, I want to feel all of you."

He took her legs and wrapped them around his hips and pushed hard. He felt her barrier break as he pushed all the way in. "I'm sorry."

She had expected pain, but it was worse than she'd thought it would be. She shook her head at him, "It's not your fault, but can you give me a second? It hurts."

"Do I need to pull out?" he asked, praying silently that she wouldn't make him do that.

"No, the pain is starting to ease up now," she told him. He pulled out just an inch and pushed back in to test her. She wrapped her legs more firmly around his waist. "Mmmm...that feels good."

"Thank God," he whispered softly then began thrusting. He didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't hold still for another moment. He had to make love to her.

He moved in and out at a slow steady pace, watching for any signs of pain on her part. Within seconds she was thrusting with him and starting to pant softly.

Amanda stroked her hands over his back, meeting him thrust for thrust. She could feel the tension building inside her. When her climax came it

wasn't slow and steady, it was blinding. She let out a scream of pleasure which she quickly buried in his shoulder.

As soon as he felt her clenching around him, Jason started thrusting faster toward his own climax. Just a few more thrusts and he was there. He let out a shout and collapsed on top of her. Burying his face in her neck, he fought for control.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she stroked his back soothingly.

He laughed and rolled to his side. "I'm supposed to ask you that, silly girl."

She grinned and stretched. "I'm trying to figure out what I was so nervous about. That was incredible."

He wrapped his arms around her and settled her head onto his shoulder. "We'll have to do that again sometime."

"Sometime very soon," she agreed.

Chapter 6

Amanda felt almost sad on Monday as she packed up their things to head back to Stratford. She had enjoyed the days of getting to know her husband so much more than she'd ever dreamed she would. While she was happy that they would be starting their lives together, and she would be moving into her new home, she was going to miss having Jason's undivided attention.

Jason walked up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist. "I'm going to miss our little hotel room."

She turned in his arms and rested her head on his shoulder, still marveling that she had the right to touch him this way. "I was just thinking the same thing. I've enjoyed getting to know you with no other obligations."

He nodded. "That's exactly what I mean. I love farming; don't get me wrong. I wouldn't change what I do for anything, but I would have loved to be able to take another week away from everything."

He brushed a quick kiss across her mouth then picked up the bags. She grabbed the garment bags holding her wedding dress and his tuxedo and followed him out to the truck.

They held hands and talked about the community they'd be living in as he drove back. He asked again if she was sure that she felt okay about giving up her job.

"Yeah, if I feel like I want to work, I can always offer a quilting class or something of that nature. They're fun to teach, because the women taking the classes actually want to learn. When I taught high school, even though the classes were electives, it was obvious that most of the girls were just there to get a credit toward graduation. None were really there because they had a strong desire to learn to cook or sew."

Jason nodded thoughtfully. "I can see that. I just don't want you to be sitting around the house with nothing to do."

Amanda laughed. "I really don't think I'll run out of things to do. I'll probably start out by putting my own touches on the house. New curtains,

quilts, and that type of thing. I'm sure I'll be cooking and cleaning on a daily basis. By the time I have the house the way I want it, I'll hopefully be pregnant, and then I can start sewing maternity clothes and baby clothes. And I did put in my application to sub with the Stratford schools."

"My mom always dreaded sewing. Do you really like doing that kind of thing?"

"I didn't when I started out. I first began to sew when I was twelve and could no longer fit into regular sized women's clothes. I'm sure you understand how that goes. Men have the big and tall shops, but women only have plus sized shops, and I'm too slender for those clothes. It was either learn to sew or wear men's clothes for the rest of my life."

"But now you like it?" he asked.

"As I got better at it, I started to like it. I had a lot of fun fixing up my little house in Texas. Some of the moms of the girls I taught hired me to make their prom dresses for them. I even made wedding dresses for some of those girls a few years later," she told him. "It's nice to be able to do something that's appreciated. There's no way I'd have been able to buy an off the rack wedding dress in my size."

"I guess that makes sense," he agreed.

Once they were home, he changed into some work clothes and went out to do the evening's milking while she took inventory in the kitchen to find something that she could cook for dinner that night. There wasn't much to choose from. He hadn't lied about living on frozen dinners, sandwiches, and frozen burritos. It was too late to get any shopping done, but she put it on her mental to-do list for tomorrow. For tonight, they'd have to make do with sandwiches.

As she started scrubbing off the kitchen counters and cleaning out the microwave, she realized that this was the first time she'd been alone for more than ten minutes since the wedding. As she thought back over the last few days, she wondered what the future would hold. She knew she could be content to keep house and make love with Jason every night, but she wasn't sure if she could be truly happy without his love.

She was so deeply in love with him it hurt. Could she love him, and not be loved in return without being miserable?

Before that week, Amanda had no clue how many hours per day a farmer actually worked. Jason explained that summers were the busiest time of the year, but freely admitted that he worked a whole lot of hours no matter what time of year it was. She quickly began to feel like the only time she got to see her husband was when they were eating and when they were making love.

She had never been one to think she needed to be around other people at all times, but the quiet on the farm started messing with her head at times. She made sure that she always kept a list of what they needed from town posted on the refrigerator, and when she needed to see another human, she would head into town, grocery shop, and meet Stephanie for lunch.

They'd been married for around a month, when Amanda realized she was going insane from the quiet again, so she invited Stephanie and the kids out to the farm for lunch that day. When Stephanie arrived without the children, Amanda was thrilled. She'd finally have a chance to talk to her friend privately.

After gushing over all the work done on the house, Stephanie pulled Amanda down onto the couch with her. "Well?" she asked.

"Well what?" asked Amanda.

Stephanie rolled her eyes. "I need to hear how everything is going. You seem happy with Jason."

Amanda blushed. "Jason and I get along great. He's really everything that I was hoping for."

Stephanie smiled brightly. "I was hoping you'd feel that way!"

"Yeah, he's really wonderful." She paused for a moment looking down at her hands. "I just hope I can keep him from finding out how much I love him."

"He is wonderful, and... What?" Stephanie got a confused look on her face as Amanda's words finally sank in. "Why would you not want to love your husband?"

Amanda shook her head staring at the floor.

“Amanda! Why?”

“I honestly don’t think I could stand it if he knew how I felt, and he never had any feelings for me,” she whispered.

Stephanie stared at her. “Why do you think he doesn’t love you?”

Amanda shook her head, tears starting to fall. “No one ever has. I’ve known for years that I’m just one of those people that can be loved by friends, but not romantically.”

“Are you serious?” Stephanie asked incredulously.

Amanda nodded, her head bowed.

“Wow. I had no idea you felt that way.” She was silent for a moment as if searching for the right words. “Amanda, you’ve never really even dated anyone. You scared all the guys off when you could see over the top of their heads. Which one of those numbskulls would have fallen for you?”

Amanda hiccupped a laugh. “Numbskulls?”

“Absolute numbskulls,” Stephanie said adamantly. “Jason isn’t a numbskull. If he wasn’t half in love with you when he asked you to marry him, sight unseen I’ll remind you, then I’d be shocked.”

“Do you really think so?” At Stephanie’s nod, she said, “I hope you’re right.”

Stephanie grinned. “Oh, I’m right.”

The door opened then, and Jason stepped inside. “Oh, hi, Stephanie. I didn’t know you were visiting today.” It had started raining, and he was hoping that he could lure his wife into bed. If he couldn’t work, he might as well be doing something fun.

Stephanie looked at Amanda. “I’m on my way out.”

Jason looked between them. “You don’t have to leave just because I’m here.” He liked Stephanie. Why would she leave?

Stephanie smiled and hugged Amanda. “I’m already gone.”

Jason stood in the middle of the room baffled. He watched as Stephanie left, and Amanda got up and fussed around. “Mandy,” he started reaching out to take her arm. “Were you crying?”

She shook her head and pulled away straightening the pillows on the couch as if it was the most important thing she could do.

“Mandy, stop that!” He grasped both of her arms in his hands. “What’s the matter? Have I done something to offend you? I know I’m working all the time, but it’s raining! I have the afternoon off until milking time.”

“It’s not that,” she mumbled, not meeting his eyes. “I expected you to work all the time. I didn’t come into this marriage blind.”

“Then tell me what it is. I can’t fix something if I’m not aware it’s going on,” he told her. “I hate seeing you cry.”

Amanda took a deep breath. “I was just talking to Stephanie about how I’m afraid I’m falling in love with you.”

He tensed for a moment, thrilled that she had feelings for him, but worried because of the way she’d phrased that. “Would that be the end of the world?”

Amanda shook her head, the tears starting to fall again. “I just hate the idea of having feelings that don’t go both ways. It would be much harder to be in a marriage with love on one side, than it would be to be in a loveless marriage, which is what we signed on for. Does that make any sense at all?”

Jason nodded. “It makes perfect sense. And you’re right. It is hard to be in a marriage with love all on one side. I know. I’ve been there since the day I married you.”

Amanda looked at him in shock, “But, you married me because you wanted kids and we got along so well online and on the phone and stuff. It wasn’t for love.”

Jason shook his head. “Maybe it wasn’t love on your side, but it certainly was on my side. I’d never have asked you to marry me otherwise.”

Amanda smiled and brushed away the last of her tears burying her face against him. “I’m so glad I’m not in this alone. I love you, Jason.”

He laughed and grabbed her in a bear hug. "And I love you, Mandy."

She laughed and kissed his chin. "I'm so glad it rained."

He leaned over to kiss her. "Wanna go upstairs and see my bedroom?"

"It hasn't changed much since this morning," she told him. "I mean, the bed is made now, but that's about it."

"Let's go unmake that bed." He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the stairs.

"Are you going to make it worth my while to have to remake it?" she asked laughingly.

"You bet. And I plan on keeping you in it for long enough that making it again will seem pointless."

"Do you promise?" she asked as he closed the bedroom door to shut out the world.