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***A Bride for the
General Store***

A SWEET HISTORICAL WESTERN ROMANCE



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A Bride for the General Store

Chapter 1

1873

Amanda Anderson stared out of the window of the train, marveling at how far she can see. Nothing about her life in the city had prepared her for this, and even after several days, it is still shocking.

Oh, how much her life has changed. As she looks at the horizon speeding by, she thinks fondly of when she was a little girl, her mom and dad had been so happy, always smiling and laughing. She still can feel the butterflies in her stomach when her dad had tossed her above his head, and she would squeal in delight. His little bird, he had called her.

When she was 10 years old, her dad had gone to fight in the civil war. She remembered hearing her parents talk about it late at night when they thought she was sleeping. It was his duty, he said. Her mom didn't want him to go and tried over and over to convince him. To no avail.

There wasn't much laughter after that. Her mom tried, but she was lonely and sad and she just couldn't hide it from Amanda. The letters came regularly at first, and her mom would be bright and cheery for several days, but after time, the letters were fewer and farther between. Then one day, an official-looking letter was at the mailbox. Her mom burst into tears before she even opened it, scaring Amanda. It was from her father's commanding officer. Her dad had been killed in battle, and they were very sorry. Her mom was never the same, her eyes were flat and dull, and she cried a lot. Amanda tried to be good, to help out, but her mom just looked at her and cried more. Then one day, Amanda couldn't wake her mom in the morning. She shook her and shook her, yelled and screamed, and she wouldn't wake up. Finally, the neighbors came and told her that her mom had gone to her dad in heaven. She died of heartbreak they said. Amanda didn't understand.

Amanda's mom had a brother and so she had gone to live with her uncle, aunt, and two younger cousins. At first, she thought it would be ok, her uncle was a kind man, and the little girls were sweet. Her aunt was nice enough at the beginning, but it didn't take long for her true personality to come out. She was resentful that Amanda was now living with them. She told Amanda that she was going to have to pitch in and do her share. What that had meant was that Amanda was going to be the scrub girl. She was up early and spent all her days cleaning and scrubbing the house, while her aunt gave the orders. This was unbearable for Amanda, she was used to a happy house, and didn't know how to do the jobs her aunt made her do. Her uncle left for work early and came home late, and so didn't really pay attention to the household affairs, that was for his wife to attend to. Every so often, he would address her to ask her how she was, but her aunt was always present, so Amanda was scared to say anything except that she was okay.

Life settled into everyday drudgery, and Amanda quickly learned her jobs, and also to keep away from her aunt as much as possible. The cook was a cheerful woman, and when she could, she saved treats for Amanda, and a hug if Amanda was overcome and feeling exceptionally sad.

One day just after Amanda turned 18, her uncle came home from work early and called Amanda into his study. Amanda remembered the day like it was yesterday, with every detail burned into her mind. Because this was the day she learned she could be free of her aunt and her life in that house.

Her uncle shared with her that her mom and dad had left a bit of money to her in their wills, which was to be given to her when she turned 18. He said that this was their secret, as his wife didn't know about the money, and Amanda should keep it to herself. He thought that her aunt would demand the inheritance as payment for her keep, and he knew Amanda had worked hard and didn't want that to happen. He also told her about women becoming "Mail Order Brides". She could go out west and start a new life. Hopefully a happy one of her own.

Amanda had gone to the office that her uncle had told her about and signed up. The more she had thought about it, the more excited she got. The woman at the office was so nice and helpful, and it didn't take long to find an advertisement that she thought would be right. A few letters back and forth, and he had offered

to marry her. His name was Robert, Robert Graham. She had accepted and here she was. On a train to St. Louis, Missouri, where her fiancé was to pick her up and take her to her new home in Spring Valley, Missouri. She would be Amanda Graham before she knew it.

Amanda blinked and came back to the present as she felt the train start to slow down. This was it, the last stop. She wasn't sure if she was more excited or scared, but one thing was certain, it had to be a better life than the one she had left.....hadn't it?

Chapter 2

“Good morning Robert” he heard from the front door of the store in her cheery voice, “bread and pies are here”, called Sarah Parsons.

“Good morning Sarah” he called back. Sarah was such a happy person, always chipper, with a good thing to say about everything. And her bread and pies were the best in the county, he was sure. They brought the customers into the store, that was a fact!

"How are things today Robert?"

“All is well Sarah, I have just finished putting up the new shelves over here in the yard goods section. Your suggestion about display made a lot of sense. Now to see if you were right.” He teases.

“Oh I’m right, never doubt it!” she shoots back, smiling.

“Haha, no ma’am, I never do!”

Another customer came into the General Store, and as Robert turned to help them out, Sarah arranged her bread and pies in the display area that she had asked Robert to make. She was very happy for this arrangement she had with Robert, but it was actually Ashley, Robert’s wife, or rather late wife, that had started the partnership.

As she starts to think about the past, Pete, her husband booms from the front door. “Sarah, where are you at? I have to get to the livery, so if you want a ride home, now’s the time”

“Coming Pete, good-bye Robert” Sarah waves at Robert as she rushes by.

"Oh, Pete," she says as she climbs in the wagon, "I was just thinking about poor Robert as I was arranging my baking this morning. Do you know that it has been two years since Ashley passed? Time for that man to be thinking to the future, and not the past. He is such a gem, he deserves some happiness!"

“He’s a good man Sarah, that’s a fact, but it’s not our place to be telling him when he should get another wife. He loved Ashley, they were childhood sweethearts if you remember?”

The Mail Order Bride, Amanda was her name, was the only thing that Robert could think about for the last several days. She would be on her way west right now, in fact, the day after tomorrow he was to pick her up at the train station in St. Louis.

“What was I thinking” he muttered out loud. “To be talked into marrying someone that I don’t even know. How can I do that to Ashley? I will never, ever love again!”

He had gone back and forth over this for all of the six months that he had been corresponding with Amanda Anderson. Rationally it made sense. It was a business partnership he thought. She gets to come out here for a new life and an opportunity and I get some help with the store. Simple!

“So then why do I feel guilty?” he said aloud to the empty store. “I am not deceiving anyone. I never wrote anything about love or children in my letters, so she must understand, right?”

Silence was the answer to his question. Robert locked up the store and stomped upstairs to have another lonely supper and then do some paperwork for the store before bed. His mood was black as he finished up and blew out the lantern.

“oh – oh” Amanda stammered in shock. What kind of man can’t come and get his fiancé from the train, she wondered to herself. As she looked past Sarah Parsons, she saw Pete, looking uncomfortable with a small smile on his face.

"How do you do Ma'am," he said, nodding.

“Hello” Amanda responded quietly.

“Well, let’s collect your trunks and be on the way” chattered Sarah, “we have a couple of hours travel to get back to Spring Valley, and it’s best if we get home before dark.”

The trio collected Amanda’s belongings and Pete loaded them up on the wagon. Sarah talked non-stop all the way home, telling her everything there was to know about Spring Valley and the people that lived there. She learned more in that ride than she had in all of the letters from Robert. Amanda was thankful for the constant chatter, as it gave her some time to think. She just wasn’t sure what she thought about being left at the train station for someone else to pick up like she wasn’t important. The more she thought about it, the angrier and more hurt she felt.

When they arrived in Spring Valley, the Parsons’ drove straight to their home and jumped down.

“Welcome to our home dear” Sarah turned to open the door.

“Your home? I thought that I would meet Robert today.” Amanda questioned.

“Well, no my dear. Robert thought it would be best if you stayed the night with us, and you met in the morning.” Sarah said, not meeting Amanda’s eyes.

“He did? Well ok.” Amanda tried not to let the hurt show in her face, but she was pretty sure she failed.

Sarah showed her to a pretty little bedroom that used to be her daughter’s.

“Why don’t you freshen up dear and then come and have some supper with us. You must be starving!”

“Actually, if it’s alright with you, I’ll just turn in. It’s been an exhausting trip”

“Of course, of course, just tuck in and if there is anything you need, just call”

“Sarah, you know that I believe that people need to mind their business, but in this case, I agree with you. That young man needs a talking to!” And out the door he went.

Sarah always stayed for a chat and talked to everyone who came into the store when she was there. Sarah also updated Amanda on the gossip about everyone, which sometimes made Amanda giggle. Sarah knew everything about everybody it seemed.

The customers were all curious when they see her behind the counter. The word is out of course that Robert has a new wife, so the store became a bit busier than usual, with everyone “dropping in” to pick up a little something and say hi. Some are very friendly and some are just downright rude. It does give Robert and Amanda something to talk about over supper. Some nights Amanda has Robert in stitches at how she describes some of the snoopy people who come to check her out. Most nights though, Robert is quiet, and answers her questions with one-word replies.

One evening, Amanda had one customer that she had to ask Robert about.

“Robert?”

“Yes, what is it?” he replied, looking up from his paperwork.

“I wanted to talk to you about one customer that came in today. He gave me a very uneasy feeling. Just the way he was looking around and asking odd questions. His name was Tom Hardy.”

“Oh Tom Hardy is nothing to worry about, he’s just a bit off”

“I don’t know, it was like he was asking about the weaknesses of the store, to see if I would tell him something he shouldn’t know.”

“I said he’s nothing to worry about Amanda, just drop it please!”

Amanda turned away, hurt by Robert’s sharp words once again.

“Ohhhh”, Amanda moans, sitting up slowly. She stays sitting for a minute, as the store spins round in front of her. “What happened?” she says out loud.

Then it all comes back to her in a rush. It was Tom, Tom Hardy, she was sure of it. “What was he doing in our store,” she thinks. I have to tell Robert was her next thought as she got slowly to her feet.

“Robert, Robert” she calls as she makes her way to the rear of the store and the stairs to the apartment. She is just at the door when it bursts open.

“Amanda! What are you doing down here?” Robert exclaims, surprised to see her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, Robert" and Amanda collapses in Robert's arms, unconscious again.

When Amanda wakes up again, she finds herself on the settee in the apartment, with Robert leaning over her worriedly mopping her face with a cool cloth.

“Are you okay? What happened? Why were you downstairs?” Why is your head bleeding, did you fall?”

“My head is bleeding?”

All of Robert’s questions made her head spin faster, and she focused on the last thing he said.

“Yes it’s bleeding, just over your ear”

“Well, because I was hit on the head by someone in the store. Robert, I think it was Tom Hardy.”

“What do you mean, in the store? Why was someone in the store, and why were you there?”

Well, not too long after you left, I heard something downstairs. It got quiet, so I didn’t pay it any more attention, and then after a while, there was a crash in the store. I thought maybe you had come home and were there and had dropped something, so I went down to see if I could help. But it wasn’t you Robert, I called out, and I’m sure I saw a man at the end of the counter, but then there was a step behind me and I spun around, just in time to get hit on the head. I am sure I saw Tom’s face though.

Chapter 6

The next day Amanda spent most of the day in bed at Robert's insistence. He was very caring and solicitous, even though she felt much better, she didn't want to hurt his feelings. Also, if she was being honest with herself, she was enjoying having him take care of her.

By the middle of the afternoon, Amanda could not stay in bed any longer, so she decided to get up and start supper. She tried to tread lightly, so Robert wouldn't suspect that she was up and about and rush upstairs to insist she go back to bed.

"Amanda, what do you think you are doing?" Robert exclaimed as he quietly opened the apartment door, thinking she was sleeping.

"Oh Robert, I just couldn't stay laying down a moment longer! I feel much better, I really do. Look, I made your favorite, pot roast with carrots and potatoes." Amanda said quickly, hoping to distract him.

"That sounds superb my dear, but I insist that you sit down and I'll serve. You had quite the knock last night, and I just don't want you to overdo it!"

"Okay", she replied, taking her seat.

After dinner and dishes were finished, the couple sat companionably, each reading their latest book. Suddenly Robert looked up.

"Oh no! I was supposed to go to help Pete again this evening, and I totally forgot to tell him that I wasn't going to make it."

"Of course, you should go" Amanda exclaimed, "I am just fine for a couple of hours here. Just lock the door after you."

"If you are sure. I don't like to let Pete down when he is counting on me."

"Of course, I'm sure. This book is a good one, the time will pass quickly."

As Robert gets his coat on to go, he turns around and bends over Amanda to kiss her on her forehead.

"See you shortly."

The door clicks shut and Amanda hears the lock turn, but she hardly notices as she touches her forehead, wondering what the kisses mean. Could he be starting to care for her?

Amanda wakes slowly, still half sleeping, until she realizes that she smells smoke. Smoke? From where? As she opens the door to the apartment, the stairwell is heavy with smoke. Amanda runs down the stairs and sees someone running down the alley. With no time to think, she starts screaming for help, while at the same time looking for water to try and douse the flames in the front of the store. The neighbors heard her, and within minutes, they had a bucket brigade organized to put the fire out.

As Robert turns the corner, he sees fire at the end of the street and quickly realizes that it's his store.

"Amanda, Amanda" he starts hollering as he dashes down the street.

Amanda heard him and came running down the street towards him, with soot on her clothes and her face.

"Robert, the store, oh the store!"

"Amanda, are you all right? Let me look at you." He says frantically. He is so overcome with worry, he touches Amanda's face, hair and hugs her tightly to him. "I don't know what I would have done if I lost you" Robert whispered into her hair.

As Amanda leans back to look at him, Robert bends his head and kisses her deeply, and then gathers her back into his arms, holding tight.

As she didn't know for sure how to react to the kiss, Amanda broke away.

"Robert, I saw someone running down the lane from the store. I had fallen asleep and woke up to the smell of smoke. When I came down the stairs, the fire was started, so I ran outside to call for help. A man was running away Robert. Running towards Tom Hardy's side of town. We have to report this before he does something worse!"

"Yes, it looks like we do," Robert replies thoughtfully.

Chapter 7

Robert and Amanda, Pete, and Sarah worked together cleaning up after the fire. Due to Amanda's quick thinking and quick action, the damage wasn't near as bad as it could have been. They had settled into a comfortable comradery as they worked cleaning and organizing to get the store ready to open again. It was good to have Pete and Sarah's cheerful chatter as a distraction. Neither of them mentioned Robert's actions after the fire, and they were careful to keep a distance between them.

The evening before the store was to reopen, Robert and Amanda were working late. They had cleaned and reorganized, and as they did, Amanda suggested some things for displays and placements that Robert really liked. Seemed she had a good head for retail.

"I'm just going to go get a few more nails for this last display. I'll be right back."

"Sound good," Amanda called, not looking over her shoulder as he left.

Finishing what she was working on, Amanda stood and turned around. And froze. Tom Hardy was standing in the rear entrance with a gun pointed at her.

"You! It's all your fault! Robert was ready to leave until you came along. This store steals all my business. My rightful place in the business community. You are going to have to go!"

"Tom, what are you doing?" Robert calls, shocked by the scene before him.

As Tom swings his gun towards Robert, Amanda picks up a heavy paperweight and throws it at Tom, hitting him right smack in the head. Tom drops like a sack of grain as Amanda yells, "Don't you dare hurt the man I love!"

"Amanda?"

Amanda slowly turns to look at Robert, wide-eyed. "It's true." She whispers, "I love you. I'm sorry, I know you still love your first wife, I just can't help it. I love you."

Robert crosses the distance between them and takes her hands in his.

"I love you too. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize that I can be in love with you and that doesn't mean I didn't love Ashley. I felt so guilty."

“Oh Robert, I know I can’t take Ashley’s place, but maybe I can make my own space in your heart?”

“You already have! Just sneaked in little by little.” Robert grinned down at her.

“I love you, Amanda! I am so excited to spend the rest of my life with you!” and as Robert bent his head, Amanda reached up on her toes to meet his lips with hers.

Just as they broke apart, there was a moan from the floor.

“Oh no, we forgot about Tom!”

Robert rushed over and pulled Tom’s arms behind his back. Get me a length of rope, quickly. Amanda rushed to comply, and Robert had Tom tied hand and foot before he came to full consciousness.

“Run and get the Sheriff and I’ll watch this good for nothing.” Robert directed Amanda.

The Sheriff came straight away and hauled Tom off to jail.

Robert and Amanda both breathed a huge sigh of relief and walked arm and arm up to their apartment to officially start their lives as husband and wife.

Epilogue

Amanda looked up from the counter as she heard Sarah's cheery greeting from the door.

"Your bread and pies, dearies"

"Hi Sarah, how are you this morning?"

"I'm feeling wonderful on this beautiful sunny day. How are you? How's that baby?" Sarah asks as she looks towards Amanda's baby bump.

"We are doing great!" Amanda replies as she rubs her tummy.

"Hi Robert, hi Amanda," Pete calls, following his wife into the store with the second load of baking. "How's everyone today?"

"We're good" Robert and Amanda call back in unison.

All four of them laugh at that.

"We even have the same thoughts" chuckles Robert, coming up behind Amanda to wrap his arms around her.

"What do we need to bring to the Church picnic on Sunday?" wonders Amanda

"It's a potluck dear, so bring your favorite dish. There will be lemonade for everyone. We have tables at the church, so some of the men will set them up before the service." Sarah replies, ticking off the list on her fingers.

As Robert and Pete join the conversation, Amanda looks at her dear friends and leans back into Roberts' arms.

How life has changed in the short year since she's been in Spring Valley.

She was living her "Happily Ever After"



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