

Independence, Missouri

April, 1841

“Break camp!”

That was not Josiah Blake's voice. Emma Allen turned in the direction of the barked order, stiffened at sight of an imposing figure atop a roan with distinctive spots on its hindquarters. So the autocratic Mr. Thatcher had returned to take command. She had hoped his absence since their arrival at Independence had meant he would not be leading the wagon train after all.

Brass buttons on the front of the once dark blue tunic that stretched across the ex-soldier's shoulders gleamed dully in the early morning light. Pants of lighter blue fabric skimmed over his long legs and disappeared into the knee-high, black boots jammed into his stirrups. He rode forward, began to wend his way through the wagons scattered over the field.

Emma frowned and stepped out of sight at the back of the wagon. Mr. Thatcher did not need to wear the faded blue cavalry uniform to remind people he had been a military officer. It was in his bearing. And in the penetrating gaze of the bright blue eyes that peered out from beneath his broad-brimmed hat. Eyes that looked straight at a person, noticed everything about her—including a lace-trimmed silk gown that was inappropriate garb for an emigrant. Eyes that had unfairly impaled her on their spike of disapproval at that first meeting in St. Louis when he had simply assumed she was William's wife and would be accompanying him on the journey to Oregon country—and judged her accordingly. Had the man bothered to ask, she would have informed him William was her brother and that she was not traveling with the train.

Not then.

But that was before everything in their lives had turned upside down. Emma sighed and stroked Traveler's arched neck. How she had hated telling William that the severe nausea Caroline had developed was not normal for a woman with child. That his wife and the baby she carried were in peril, and would, of a certainty, not survive the journey to Oregon country. Her face tightened. Another prayer unanswered. Another hope shattered. William had to give up his dream of teaching at his friend Mitchel Banning's mission in Oregon country.

Emma glanced at the two wagons sitting side by side, lifted her hand and combed through Traveler's mane with her fingers. How many hours had she sat watching William plan and design the two wagon's interiors—one to hold their personal necessities and provide for Caroline's comfort, the other to carry needed provisions, the teaching materials and provide shelter for Caroline's mother? He had had such faith that things would turn out all right. Misplaced faith. William was, at this moment, aboard one of their Uncle Justin's luxury river steamboats taking his wife home to Philadelphia. And she and Annie—who should not be traveling at all in her injured condition—were—

Traveler tossed his head, snorted. The thud of a horse's hoofs drew near. Stopped. Mr. Thatcher. Emma stood immobile, aware of a sudden tenseness in her breathing, a quickening of her pulse.

“Good morning, Mrs. Allen.”

Emma turned, looked up at Zachary Thatcher sitting so tall and handsome in his saddle and gave him a cool nod of greeting. He was a lean man, muscular and broad of shoulder. But it was not his size,

rather the intensity, the firm, purposeful expression on his weather-darkened face, the aura of strength and authority that emanated from him that produced an antipathy in her. Autocratic men like Zachary Thatcher were the bane of her life, had caused the demise of her dream. She refused to feed this one's vanity by exhibiting the slightest interest in him or what he had to say.

A frown tightened his face, drew his brows together into a V-shaped line. "I see your lead team is not hitched yet. Tell your husband from now on every wagon is to be ready to roll out by first light."

Emma stared up into those judgmental, sky-blue eyes. Clearly Mr. Thatcher expected an acknowledgment. "I will relay your order." Her conscience pricked. She quelled the unease. It was the truth as far as it went. As for the rest, let the pompous Mr. Thatcher who formed his own conclusions believe what he chose.

He glanced toward the second wagon. "I understand your husband hired the oldest Lundquist sons to help him out—drive his wagons, herd the stock and such. Is that right?"

"They have been hired, yes." There was that prick of conscience again. She clenched her hands and yielded to its prompting. "But I must explain that William is not—"

"I have no time for explanations or excuses, Mrs. Allen. Only make sure your husband passes my message on to his drivers. Tomorrow we start traveling at the break of dawn. Any slackers will be left behind to turn back or catch up as best they can." He touched his fingers to his hat's brim and rode off.

Tyrant! It was a wonder he did not make the members of the train salute and call him "sir"! Emma glared at Zachary Thatcher's strong, straight back and shoved her conscience firmly aside. She had tried to tell him the truth about William. It was not her fault if he would not take the time to listen.

"Whoa, now, whoa!" Oxen hoofs thumped against the ground—stopped. Chains rattled at the front of the wagon.

Emma hurried forward. "Mr. Lundquist, Mr. Thatcher has returned. He ordered that from now on all wagons are to be hitched up and ready to leave by first light, else they will be left behind. Please inform your brother."

Her hired driver's head dipped. "I'll see to it." He leaned a beefy shoulder against an ox and shoved. "Give over, now!"

Emma left him to his work, glanced around the field. Everywhere she looked men were making last-minute checks of equipment, climbing to wagon seats or taking up their places beside oxen teams. Women and girls were dousing cooking fires, stowing away breakfast paraphernalia and gathering small children into the wagons. All was as she had watched their company practice over the last few days under Josiah Blake's guidance—and yet completely different.

"Form up!"

The words cracked through the cool morning air, sharp as a gunshot. Zachary Thatcher's order was picked up and echoed around the camp. Emma caught her breath and tugged her riding gloves snug. This was it. There was no more time. A tremble rippled through her, shook her hands as she loosed the reins tethering Traveler and led him to the side of the wagon to use the spoke of a wheel as a mounting aid. The light wool fabric of the long, divided skirt of her riding outfit whispered softly as she stepped into the stirrup and settled herself into the strange saddle with the horn on the front. William's saddle. William's horse.

Tears flooded her eyes. Her brother, her staunch protector, the only one of her family who

shared her blood, would soon be out of her life—forced by his wife’s illness to remain at home, while she, who wanted only to return to Philadelphia, traveled with this wagon train bound for Oregon country. Oh, if only William had sold the wagons! But he had kept hoping. And then Annie had declared she would go to Mitchel Banning’s mission and teach in William’s place!

Emma’s shoulder slumped. When Annie would not be dissuaded, her fate had been decided. What choice had she but to come along to care for her injured sister? The sick, hollow feeling she had been fighting for days swelled in her stomach. Would she ever see William again? Or Mother and Papa Doc, who had taken them into their hearts and adopted them so many years ago she could remember no other parents?

Emma blinked to clear her vision, brushed the moisture from her cheeks and focused her attention on the last minute rush of activity to block out the dear, loved faces that floated on her memory. Her heart pounded. Men’s mouths opened wide in shouts she could not hear over the throbbing of her pulse in her ears. Whips snaked through the air over the backs of the teams. Here and there a wagon lurched, began to move. She tensed, counted. William’s wagon—no, her wagon—was to be fourth in line...to what? A primitive, unknown land inhabited by heathen. It was insanity!

“Haw, Baldy! Haw, Bright!”

The command penetrated her anxiety, the roaring in her ears. Emma drew her gaze from the camp, watched the oxen her brother had purchased lean into their yokes and move forward at Garth Lundquist’s bidding. The wagon shuddered and creaked, rolled over the trampled grass. She swallowed hard against a sudden surge of nausea, made certain only the toes of her riding boots showed from beneath the fullness of her long skirts and rode forward beside the wagon. All through the eight-day steamboat journey from St. Louis up the muddy Missouri River to Independence she had managed to hold her apprehension at bay. Even when the steamer had run aground on one of the many sandbars, or when it had been raked by hidden snags, she had maintained her calm. But now...

Now there was no more time.

Emma closed her eyes, took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Still, who could blame her for her fearfulness? She opened her eyes and stared at the western horizon. This was not merely another drill to ensure everyone could drive their wagons and herd their stock on the trail. This was *it*. She was leaving behind family, friends and all of civilization and heading into untold danger. And for what? Someone else’s dream. If Mitchel Banning had not started that mission in Oregon country none of this—

“Haw, Big Boy. Steady on, Scar.”

Emma glanced over her shoulder, watched Garth Lundquist’s brother, Ernst, bring William’s second wagon into line behind hers. Anne’s wagon now. She and her adopted sister were on their own. A tremor snaked through her. Traveler snorted, tossed his head and danced sideways. She leaned forward, patted the arched neck. “It’s all right, boy. Everything is all right.” The horse calmed.

Emma gave him another pat and straightened in the saddle. How lovely it would be if there were someone to reassure her, to ease her fear. Disgust pulled her brows down, stiffened her spine. She had to stop this self-pity that eroded her courage and undermined her purpose. Still...

She halted Traveler and glanced over her shoulder. Perhaps she should try once more—now that the time of departure was upon them—to dissuade Anne from going to Oregon country. Perhaps the reality of the leave-taking had softened Anne’s determination. Perhaps. Hope she could not quite stifle

fluttered in her chest. Emma reined Traveler around, halted and stared as Anne, riding Lady, the bay mare William had bought for Caroline, emerged from behind her wagon. So Anne had, again, ignored her advice. She was supposed to be in the wagon. Abed.

Worry spiraled upward, crowded out every emotion but concern. Anne's face was thin and pale beneath the russet curls that had escaped from beneath the stiff brim of her black bonnet, her body frail and tense in her widow's garb. That she was in discomfort was obvious in her taut face and posture. If only she would give up this madness!

Emma tapped Traveler with her heels and rode to her sister's side. "Annie..." She frowned, changed her tone. She had tried pleading. "Anne, this is your last chance. It will soon be too late to change your mind. As your doctor, I am advising you to reconsider your decision to make this journey. You are not yet recovered from—"

"Do not say it, Emma!"

Anguish flashed across Anne's pale face. Emma's heart squeezed, her professional doctor's facade crumbled. "Oh, Annie, forgive me. I did not mean to—" She stopped, stared at the silencing hand Anne raised between them, the uncontrollable twitching fingers that were the outward sign of Anne's inward suffering. She reached out to touch her sister's arm. It was jerked away.

Emma pulled back. She stared at her younger sister, once so happy and loving, now so grim and distant, and closed her hand in a white-knuckled grip on the reins. All Anne had ever wanted was to marry and have children. But that dream was now as lifeless and cold as the stone that marked her loved ones' graves.

"I know you mean well, Emma. And I do not mean to be sharp with you. It is only—I cannot bear—" Anne's hesitant words stopped on a small gasp. She clutched her side.

Emma took note of Anne's closed eyes, the increased pallor of her skin and clenched her jaw. She could not bring back Phillip and little baby Grace, but she could treat the physical injuries Anne had sustained in the carriage accident that had killed her husband and child. Only not here. Not on a wagon train.

Almighty God, if You can change the heart of a king, You can make Anne change her mind and return home to Philadelphia where Papa Doc and I can properly care for her—where the love of her family can help her over her grief.

Emma shifted in the saddle, closed her heart against the useless words. The prayer would only be heaped atop all the countless others she'd offered that had gone unanswered. She cleared the lump from her throat. "Annie—"

"No!" The black bonnet swept side to side. "I am going on, Emma. I cannot face the...the memories at home." Anne opened her eyes and looked straight into hers. "But I want you to go home, Emma. It is foolish for you to come along, to place yourself in harm's way so that you may doctor me when I no longer care if I live or die." Anne's voice broke. She took a ragged, shallow breath. "Turn around and go home, Emma. You still have your dream. And all you desire awaits you there."

Emma's vision blurred, her throat closed. She looked away from her sister's pain, stared at the wagons that had become the symbols of William's lost hope and Anne's despair—of her own thwarted ambition. Why God? Why could not at least one of us have our dream?

Emma huffed out a breath and squared her shoulders. Pity would help nothing. But the truth

might help Anne. At least it would keep her from feeling guilty. "How I wish that were true, Anne. But though Papa Doc has taught me all he knows of medicine, his patients do not accept me as a doctor. And they never will." The frustration and anger she held buried in her heart boiled up and burned like acid on her tongue. "It is time for me to set aside my foolish dream. I will never be a doctor in Philadelphia or anywhere else. Men will not allow it."