

Amelia
and the
Captain

LORI COPELAND



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AMELIA AND THE CAPTAIN

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Sister Amelia McDougal had turned out to be one colossal nuisance. And the last thing Captain Morgan Kane needed was a headache. A female headache. His patience was running thin. This newest delay, though small, had cost him valuable time, and for him time was running out. Why did he happen to be riding by when a jail wagon containing three nuns crossed his path? Even more puzzling, why would a band of youthful braves be terrorizing these particular women?

It seemed the good Lord didn't intend for him to reach Galveston by the end of the week. One delay after another. The horse had thrown a shoe outside Waco. He was forced to go clear to Waxahachie to find a blacksmith because the one in Waco had died. From there he'd run into a terrible storm near Henderson, where he'd been forced to stay the night in a flea-infested hotel. Sometime after midnight he'd joined his horse in the barn, trying to find a dry place to sleep. Early that morning he had ridden through Italy, a horsehair-scattered settlement, and stopped to help a woman carry a mattress out of her house. Seems her husband was ailing and the pad made him sneeze.

The woman had fed Morgan a good dinner of fried catfish and corn bread to repay him for his trouble.

Now the recent Comanche threat had passed, and his thoughts shifted to the immediate problem—what to do with the sister he now had with him. Though the prospect was tempting, he couldn't leave her by the roadside, but it was clear that the young woman harbored a penchant for nature that would drive a sane man up a wall. In the brief time they'd been together, she admired or spoke about her fascination with low-flying birds, blooming flowers, rolling clouds, and glowing sunsets. It appeared that life in general enthralled this sheltered woman.

While Morgan could appreciate spontaneity, the sister's continual flights of fancy shattered his schedule and played havoc with his system of order. Lifting his face, he rolled his eyes when the sister appreciated a clump of weeds she mistook for flowers.

The horse had thrown another shoe and had almost gone lame before Morgan could find a blacksmith. The weather turned unseasonably warm and muggy, and his stomach was complaining loudly. He hadn't taken the risk of stopping for dinner, aware that the Comanche were young and exuberant and had their sights set on the woman.

If the interruptions continued, he would be in danger of missing his meeting with Elizabeth—but that was one appointment he planned to keep regardless of delays.



Sister Amelia McDougal viewed the last few hours as unsettling but far from alarming. If Abigail were here, she would say everything would be just fine. Stop being a worrywart. And she admitted she could worry with the best of them. At first she had been right put out when Comanche swooped down on the jail wagon, but when this nice Union officer rode to her aid and immediately restored calm, her confidence soared. Two additional riders had helped Abigail and Anne-Marie, so there was nothing to be upset about. The savages had

been outwitted. Everything was fine now. And what a lovely early spring day! Sunshine, wildflowers scattered about the fields—it was a blessing to be alive.

Sighing, she admired the considerable breadth of the Yankee's shoulders. The way he sat up tall and straight in his saddle. Very nice. He surely made an admirable sight. Undoubtedly he was taken or had at least a hundred women in love with him—that, or there was something terribly wrong with Texas women.

They had been together more than a day now, and she found him most cordial to her and capable. He was the most organized, masterful man she'd ever met, and she wasn't in a hurry to get home. He escaped those Comanche with hardly a sweat.

When this adventure was over, she was going to introduce him to her sisters, Abigail and Anne-Marie. Meeting such a fine, manly specimen might change her sisters' less-than-charitable feelings for the opposite sex. They would like this particular man. Though the officer was pensive throughout the ordeal, he had treated her with the utmost respect, seeing to her every need as if she were a welcome guest instead of yet another fly in the ointment.

Although they'd only met, Amelia had a hunch that this handsome Yankee took a fancy to her. The intuition hadn't been inspired by anything said or done, but she saw that glint of interest every time he focused those remarkable steel-gray eyes on her. Odd how two strangers seemed to gravitate toward each other. Although her knowledge of men would fit inside a thimble, she was positive this particular man found her interesting, though he would never confess his admiration. Men were intimidated by her nun's disguise, as well they should be. Yet she toyed with the thought of telling this man the truth, that the black cloth and veil were a masquerade—a very clever one, if not for the fact her conscience said it was a shameful camouflage.

“Oh, this is lovely,” Amelia admitted when they made camp the second evening. It was uncanny how the man knew how to please a woman. How could he have known that she favored clearings beside wooded streams? Gurgling water, mossy stones.

Her escort quietly sidestepped her and then sidestepped her again as he went about making camp.

“Oh, here, let me do that,” she scolded when she noticed he was doing all the work.

“No, if you’ll just step aside—”

“I insist.” Taking the branches from his arms, she smiled. “Now, you do whatever you need to do. I’ll gather wood.”

Sidestepping her a third time, he returned to his large auburn stallion to rummage through the saddlebags. “Hope you don’t mind hardtack and jerky.”

“You don’t have bacon?” The only reason she and her sisters were in the mercantile yesterday was to help themselves to a few strips of bacon and some fruit. The store had an abundance of fruit and meat. Surely a few slices of bacon and three oranges would never be missed. And they wouldn’t have if the clerk hadn’t had eagle eyes and caught them in the process.

Kane’s voice brought her back to the present. “No bacon. Hardtack and jerky.”

“Eat without me,” she said cheerily. “I only eat bacon.”

Morgan Kane glanced up. “Bacon?”

“Well, mostly bacon. Sometimes, if I get hungry enough, I’ll eat ham. But I love bacon.” Humming beneath her breath, she scurried around the clearing, gathering small branches to feed the fire.



“Where is the nearest port?” When darkness fell, Amelia huddled closer to the fire’s warmth. “Why is the fire so small?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?”

Her gaze roamed the campsite, and she was aware that she was chattering like a magpie. She’d always been chatty and never good at directions. She hadn’t known east from west the entire day. Before she knew it, another question slipped out. “Are we going anywhere in particular?” She had a right to inquire—her safety was in this man’s hands.

“Nearest port is Galveston.” He pitched the remainder of his coffee, focusing on the steam that rose from the ground. “I was on my way there when I encountered the jail wagon. We should be there by midmorning tomorrow.”

She waited for him to ask the inevitable—why she was in the jail wagon—but apparently his impeccable manners prevented the inquiry.

Her eyes traced his tall stature. He was two heads taller than she. “What’s in Galveston?”

“I have business there, but you will book passage home.”

“I have no funds.”

“I will be honored to pay for your passage.”

“That is very kind of you.” Her intuition was intact; he *did* find her attractive. Shame on him. For all he knew she *was* a nun. “What is your business?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Oh.” She fell silent. Then she gave an understanding nod. “Secretive business.” With the Civil War raging, most anyone was at risk of danger. She’d heard the mission sisters pray continually for the war to end and for brothers, fathers, and sons to go home. Peace would reign. Everyone was plumb worn out from the savagery.

“I’m sorry, Sister. I don’t talk about missions.” Stretching, he smothered a yawn. “I suggest we turn in. It’s been a long day.”

She nodded. “You said I can accompany you to the port?”

“It seems the only logical choice at this point. The war has brought all sort of riffraff to the streets. It’s not safe for a woman to travel alone.”

Tipping her head up to the sky, she sighed. “It’s a perfectly heavenly night. I hate for it to end.”

He huddled deeper into his frock coat. “I was thinking it’s unseasonably cold for late March.”

“Just look at those stars. Have you ever seen anything lovelier? The sight is worth a little discomfort.” Winter was clearly drawing to an end, and spring couldn’t be far behind, but tonight—tonight was perfect. Or was his company so stimulating that she hated for the evening

and the rescue to end? She frowned, finding the fact that she hesitated to leave a man's company strange. Very strange indeed. What would Abigail say if she knew that her sister was actually swooning over a *man*? She shook her head. Exhaustion fogged her brain. A good night's sleep would take care of her girlish fancies.

Silence stretched. She focused on the sky. Finally, "Captain?"

"Yes, Sister."

"My veil is caught on the hook of my collar. I can't lower my head."

He set his coffee cup aside and moved to help. Seconds later she was freed.

"Thank you." She flashed a grin and gazed up at him. "About your offer. It's very kind of you to pay my way to Mercy Flats, but I have no way to reimburse you—"

"Please, Sister." He lifted his hand in protest. "I would consider it an honor to provide your meals and safe return to Mercy Flats, but may I be so bold as to ask why you and your sisters were in a jail wagon?" His gaze focused on her black veil and white collar and the heavy cross hanging around her neck.

She felt heat rise to her cheeks. He'd dared to ask the inevitable, and the first prick of conscience hit her. He was so nice, and she was being so dishonest about her presence here. She had a niggling hunch that if she told this man the truth about her and her sisters' misconduct, he would walk away and leave her to the dangers he'd just said she faced. Best to stay silent about her private life. At least for now. Until they reached Galveston.

Focusing on the fire, she measured her response. Actually, she had little choice in the matter. She was penniless, and traveling alone would be poor judgment. She felt safe with this man, sheltered and protected. She couldn't have a more honorable escort, cool in the face of adversity, reserved, competent—but would he be so accommodating if she told him why she had been in that wagon?

"Why I was in the wagon is a rather long story, sir, and I realize you are weary from the long day." She changed the subject. "Are you from around here?"

“Washington.”

“Oh, really?” She sat up straighter. “Have you ever met a president?”

“Washington Territory.”

“Well, that’s nice too. I’ve never been anywhere, but I’d like to travel someday—see the world. Is Washington far from here?” *You’re babbling again, Amelia. Shush!*

“A fair distance.”

Her gaze traced the width of his shoulders beneath the slightly rumpled double-breasted frock coat, and she heaved a mental sigh. The North surely must be bursting with pride to have a man like him on its side.

Over the years, she’d watched the Union troops going about their business and developed a certain admiration for the men. To be fair, the Confederacy had its share of notable specimens, but the handsome Northerners drew her. Their rugged spirit intrigued her, though she’d never breathed a word of her interest to anyone.

Abigail and Anne-Marie would say she was foolish for thinking any man worthy of second notice, but Amelia didn’t agree. Men of every age whom she’d seen sitting straight and tall in the saddle weren’t all that disagreeable.

Her eyes returned to Morgan Kane’s tall form as he warmed his backside by the fire.

“My home is here in Texas.”

“Yes, I believe you mentioned that. Mercy Flats.”

“It’s a tiny border town somewhere near here. I live in a convent—San Miguel—with the other nuns and my two sisters. I’m not sure how far away. Not as far as Washington Territory, I’m certain, but not close.” She was never a good judge of direction or distance. “There’s not a whole lot in Mercy Flats except wind and dust.” For once she felt she had his complete attention. “I was very young when I was brought to the convent—an infant. The only thing I remember about my parents was my mother’s eyes. They were as gentle as a fawn’s.”

Her conscience pounded her. He was such an interesting companion. So nice, in fact, she suddenly felt compelled to be truthful with

him. She knew he might find her admission startling, at best somewhat annoying, but she couldn't let him go on thinking she was actually a nun. The charade seemed almost sinful now that she thought about it. "Captain..."

His thoughts apparently returned to their earlier exchange. "No fruit? You only eat bacon?"

"Maybe an orange or a peach once in a while."

"Apples?"

"They hurt my stomach."

Moments stretched into even longer minutes as darkness settled like a mantle around them.

"Captain?"

Covering a yawn, he stood up to stretch his long torso. "Yes, Sister?"

"There's something I must confess."

From the turn of expression on his face, she gathered that the prospect of listening to a long, dreary confession didn't catch his interest. The bedroll undoubtedly held more appeal.

"Can it wait until morning? I am unusually beat tonight."

"No." Her mind was firmly made up now. "It's important that I tell you now." If she waited until morning, she might have second thoughts. And the ruse, with him, was definitely deceitful.

"Very well. What is it?"

"Promise you won't get upset?" The last thing she wanted was to spook him—not here, where she couldn't make out a single thing in the shadows and she was completely at the mercy of his protection.

A slow grin—quite attractive, especially when she spotted the deep cleft in his chin—spread across his weary features. Her gaze shamelessly focused on the fascinating dimple in his left cheek.

"Let me guess. You spotted a great horned owl and neglected to mention it."

He was teasing now. Good sign, since he'd barely cracked a smile since they'd met. "No. I would have mentioned that immediately."

His playful grin fought with an ever-growing mystified expression.

"I don't anger easily, Sister. I should think the past twelve hours have been mute testimony to my tolerance."

Getting slowly to her feet, Amelia lifted her hands to her head and peeled off the tight headdress and veil, freeing a mass of waist-length dark hair. Afraid to face him now, she quickly removed her collar and awaited his response. Would he walk away? Leave her here alone to fend for herself?

When the silence grew more palpable, she mentally braced herself for his reaction, fearing that she had misjudged his character. Was it possible that he would be so furious with her that he would order her to find her way back to Mercy Flats alone?

When the silence stretched, she wanted to cry. Oh, he was angry, and she didn't blame him. He had every right to be furious with her. He had unselfishly risked his life to rescue her because he'd believed that she was a woman of exemplary virtue. Now he could see that she wasn't righteous, that she'd only been pretending. Not that she wasn't basically honorable. She could be when she wanted to be, but she wasn't nun-righteous. Not a single law-abiding McDougal sister could be found in these parts.

"You're furious," she murmured when she couldn't bear the maddening silence a moment longer.

The captain stared at her, those beautiful eyes fastened like shiny spears to her heart. It was dark, but she imagined that if she could see clearly, she would detect a slow burn creeping up his neckline.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

When he spoke, there was no sign of the earlier amusement. "Miss... or is it Mrs.?"

"Oh, Miss. Definitely Miss. I'm not married." That was the whole truth. She'd never met a man she would agree to spend her life with.

"Very little surprises me anymore, but this takes the cake. Why would a single young woman parade around the countryside in a nun's habit when she isn't a nun? That's blasphemous!"

She winced at the piercing tone.

"Do you care to explain your disguise?"

She drew a deep breath. "I'm a thief. The good Lord says it is better to give to the poor than keep everything to yourself."

His brows knit in a tight glower. "A what?"

"Not a *mean* thief," she clarified. "But nevertheless, a thief." She felt awful having to tell him, but in view of the circumstances, it seemed he should know the worst.

"A thief." He irritably shifted his stance.

"Yes. Crooked as a dog's hind leg. I thought you should know."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." A strained smile touched her lips. The admission hadn't been so hard. Actually, he had taken the news quite well.

"My sisters are impostors too—the ones who were in the jail wagon with me."

"Every one is a thief?"

"Not the good sisters who live at the convent. Just me, Abigail, and Anne-Marie."

"Who would be...?"

"My sisters. My blood kin." Goodness, the conversation had gotten so complicated.

"Of course. That's why the three of you were in the jail wagon. Because you're three sister-thieves dressed in nuns' clothing."

She nodded, smiling. "Exactly."

His bark stunned her. "I've squandered twelve hours and risked my mission for a bunch of thieving women?"

Smile fading, she backed up a step. "You said you wouldn't get mad." His face had become rather mottled. Yes, even in the dim campfire light, she could detect the subtle difference in shade. She feared she had strained the man's patience.

He strode around the fire and jerked open the straps on the saddlebags. After fishing inside, he produced a pair of wrinkled overalls and a plaid shirt and pitched the items to her.

"What is this?"

"Change your clothes."

"Why? It's a marvelous disguise—"

“Change your clothes!” His eyes skimmed her with distaste. “Sister. What is the world coming to? Women running around the countryside dressed as nuns, conning innocent people.”

“Just men.”

“Whatever! It’s wrong.”

The gloves were off. She heard it clearly in his tone. She stiffened, terrified to twitch an eye. “You are angry.”

He nodded at the clothing. “Get out of that nun’s habit.”

“Do I offend your faith?”

“You do, madam.”

“I honestly am sorry.” She reached out to shake his hand. It was the least she could do in the awkward situation.

He stared at her extended fingers. Finally, with an impatient sigh, he took her offering and gave it a perfunctory shake. “Change your clothes.”

“I’m sorry about the fib.”

“Now!”

She jumped and backed toward the row of scrub behind her. He hadn’t said he’d accept her apology, but he hadn’t said he wouldn’t. She ducked behind the bushes and unfastened the top hook on her gown. “I can still ride to Galveston with you tomorrow, can’t I?” He wouldn’t leave her here alone, no matter how angry he was with her.

“To Galveston,” he returned, “and not a mile farther.”

“I won’t be a bother. You’ll hardly know I’m around.”

The grunt that followed did nothing to lessen her worry. Until now he’d been reserved and polite, but now that he knew the truth, would he be hostile toward her? Would she lose his protection?

Captain Morgan Kane didn’t know her. Worse yet, it seemed he didn’t want to know her. She’d seen the feeling of betrayal in his eyes, watched his attention turn to sheer disbelief. And no wonder. She would feel exactly the same if someone had tricked her.

When she stepped from the brush, he had changed into denims and a plaid shirt. With his military uniform draped over his arm, he brushed past her with a brief glance. The dashing Northern captain

was gone. Watching his back as he spread his bedroll, she thought he looked like a poor dirt farmer, but when he rose to his full height and turned to face her, she recognized the pride in his military stance. He was still a captain, but not her former captain. The chill in his gaze exposed the degree of her deception.

She swallowed around the rising lump in her throat. His icy regard was difficult to witness, and she had no one but herself to blame.

He tossed a bedroll at her feet. "Turn in. We ride at daybreak." The curt response cut her deeply. A spark of resentment flickered to life. She'd only told him the truth. She could have fooled him forever with her nun's charade, but she'd trusted him with the truth, and this was the thanks she got for honesty?

Her chin lifted, and she brushed the bedroll aside. "You don't need to use that tone of voice with me. I understand instruction." She bent to unroll the pallet next to his. "I understand your disappointment, but I—"

"Go to sleep."

Her jaw dropped open. "I'll have you know, Captain Kane, that I—"

He rolled over and sat up so suddenly that she strangled a cry when his face came perilously close. His eyes bored into hers, and her breath froze in her throat.

"The rules have changed, Sister," he said in a tight voice. "Go to sleep."

He was so close she could see the dark flecks in his eyes. "I truly am sorry for the charade," she whispered. She could feel the heat of his anger, yet she was undeniably drawn to him.

"Go. To. Sleep." Each word came out as if it were a fired pistol. "In the morning I will take you to the docks and pay for your passage to wherever you choose. Tonight I want you to lie down and keep quiet. Is that clear?"

Their gazes locked in a silent duel. She'd never been this close to a man, and the experience intrigued and terrorized her. She liked his scent—woodsyy and manly but in a pleasant way. His hair lay in curly

waves at the base of his neck. His forearms were a bit hairy, and the scant patch she saw above his shirt collar was dark. She had a hunch the captain had broken more than one fair lady's heart.

And she strongly sensed hers wouldn't be one of them.

Her voice cracked. "I understand that you're angry, and you have every right to be, but you could ask a little more nicely."

Without so much as a "Good night," he dismissed her and lay down.

Well, so much for men. If that was his attitude, so be it. Abigail had been right. Men—all men—were worthless.