

twenty

Annalisa rolled over and stretched in the sunshine that streamed across her bed. She opened her eyes and pushed herself to a sitting position. The little alarm clock beside her bed showed ten o'clock.

She jumped to her feet, then looked down. Why had she slept in her clothes? Memories of the day before pounded into her sleep-numbed mind like a herd of stampeding cattle.

The last thing she remembered was sitting beside Cade on the couch. She must have dozed off. Her sandals were on the floor by the bed, so apparently he'd carried her in and taken her shoes off.

She sat back down on the edge of the bed. A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in."

The door opened slowly, and Aunt Gertie, her hands laden with a tray, eased into the room. Bacon, eggs, biscuits, sausage, French toast, juice, and milk weighed the platter down. The older woman transferred her burden to the antique dresser and turned to Annalisa with a smile.

"Did you have to make breakfast? I'm sorry."

Aunt Gertie shook her head and grinned. "Cade insisted on fixing it himself. He took the boys on out to the barn, but I told him I'd listen for when you woke up and bring it to you." Tears filled her eyes, and she leaned forward to embrace Annalisa. "I'm so glad you're home."

"Me too." She returned the woman's hug.

“I’d better get out of here and let you eat in peace.”

“You sure you don’t want to share this food?” Annalisa arched an eyebrow at the tray. “I’d say there’s more than enough.”

Aunt Gertie shook her head. “Thanks, anyway, Hon. I’ve already had breakfast. I’m going to go listen to my radio program while I finish my coffee.”

After the woman left, Annalisa fell back across the bed and lay there basking in the sunshine. She almost laughed as she remembered asking God to give her the courage to do what she needed to do. She’d meant so she’d be brave enough to fight for Amy, but he’d given her the courage to walk away, instead.

Now, in the bright light of day, she had lingering doubts. For seven years, she’d had one goal, and overnight, it was gone. The few minutes she’d heard Amy’s voice and watched her laugh and play were infinitely precious, but abysmally short. Deep down, though, Annalisa knew she’d made the right choice.

Dear God, thank You so much for giving me courage and granting me a tiny bit of wisdom. And, Father? Thank You for bringing me home to Cade. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Annalisa hurriedly ate and then showered. When she got to the kitchen all was quiet. She could hear Aunt Gertie’s radio program playing in the den. The dishes had been cleaned up and the counter was clear, except for a white envelope with her name on it.

She tore into it with trembling hands. What was that cowboy up to now?

Meet me in our secret garden—C.

Anticipation raced through her. “I’m going outside,” she

called to Aunt Gertie.

“Okay, Dear,” the woman called back from the den.

Annalisa soaked in the familiar surroundings as she walked out to the rose garden. She slipped quietly around the barn, so she wouldn’t run into anyone. The last thing she wanted was to be detained.

She pushed open the white gate and stared at the group assembled on the swing. Juan, Tim, and Matthew, sat side-by-side, broad grins on their faces. When she approached them, Juan cleared his throat. “Welcome,” he said and nudged Tim, who giggled.

“Home,” Tim said and nudged Matthew.

Annalisa realized with horror they expected Matthew to say something. What could she do to ease the awkwardness for him? Where was Cade?

The redheaded boy’s grin never faltered, though, as Annalisa looked on in dismay. “Annalisa,” he finished proudly.

“Matthew!” He stood and hugged her. She looked at Tim and Juan. “Thank you. . .” Tears sprang to her eyes. “Thank you all.”

“We’ve got something to ask you.” Tim jumped out of the swing and began to scamper around her excitedly.

“Hold on there, Buddy.” Cade’s deep voice came from behind Annalisa. “I’ll take it from here.”

The three boys each gave Cade a high-five on the way out of the gate.

Annalisa sat down in the swing. “Cade, why didn’t you tell me Matthew was talking?”

“Hmm. . .when was I supposed to do that? Before or after you fell asleep last night?”

She felt heat creep up her face. “I’m sorry. My eyes wouldn’t stay open. I hope I didn’t miss anything important.”

“Nah.” He grinned and reached in his pocket. “Just this.” When he got down on one knee in front of her, she put her hand over her mouth.

Tears began to pour down her cheeks. “Cade, before I met you I never cried, now I’m just a private waterworks facility.” She laughed through her tears.

“Annalisa Davis, if you’ll do me the honor of becoming my wife, I promise to try to keep your tears to a minimum in the future.” He kissed her palm, and shivers ran up and down her spine. He turned her hand over and slid a diamond and emerald ring onto her finger. “Will you marry me?”

She opened her mouth, but he put his fingers against her lips. “Wait. Before you answer me, I have to tell you something. I’m going to try to adopt the boys. I’ve been talking to social services this morning, and they don’t think there will be a problem. They’re going to call me back. Even Juan’s grandmother says she’s too old to handle him. I think she’d be happy to have him just a couple of weeks in the summer.”

She pushed his hand off her mouth. “Yes!” She tugged on his arm and pulled him up beside her. “You’re offering me a lifetime with the man I love, plus what I’ve been dreaming of for years. . . a family. How could my answer be anything else?”

“You’re a wise girl.” He grinned. “And I am one blessed man. I love you.”

“I love—”

His cell phone rang, and he frowned.

“You too. But, answer it,” she urged. “It could be social services about the adoptions.”

He grinned at her enthusiasm, but flipped the little phone open and sank down beside her in the swing.

“Hello. . . Yes, this is he. . . Yes, she is. Just a minute.”

His eyebrows knitted together, and he wordlessly handed

the phone to Annalisa.

“You’re scaring me,” she whispered as she took the phone. “Hello?” She laid her head against Cade’s chest.

“Hello. This is Red Montgomery, and I think we may have sort of met last night.”

“Yes, that’s right. . .” Her heart thudded. “Listen, I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable.”

“You haven’t made me uncomfortable. If anything has done that, it’s my own conscience. Vicky and I have been praying about you ever since Cade came to visit the other day. When I saw you last night, I could see what anguish you were going through.”

“Mr. Montgomery. . .” Annalisa tried to keep her voice from shaking. “I’ve decided not to pursue custody of Amy. Last night, I realized that wouldn’t be best for her.” Cade brushed her hair lightly with his hand, and his support bolstered her. “Thank you for your prayers.” She started to flip the phone shut, but the man’s voice stopped her.

“Hold on, there! I need to talk to you.” Red sounded confident and sure. She motioned Cade to lean in so they both could hear. “If you don’t object to us going ahead with the adoption, it should be final right away. However, Vicky and I were hoping you’d agree to be a part of our family too. . .even if it’s in an unofficial capacity. We’d like you to be a true sister to Amy.”

Annalisa nodded, but words wouldn’t come. Tears clogged her throat, and she sent a silent plea to Cade. He took the phone from her and wrapped his arm around her. She noticed his own voice was husky with emotion when he spoke.

“Red.” He paused, and she could hear his heartbeat against her ear. “Ah, I understand.” He gently caressed her hair. “Annalisa is overwhelmed, but she’d be thrilled for a chance

to get to know Amy. You may have to extend your family some more to include me, though. She's just agreed to become my wife."

Although she couldn't make out his words, Annalisa could hear the excitement in Red's tone.

"Thanks. We'll call you right away. Best wishes with the adoption."

When Cade finished the phone conversation, they sat for a few minutes, without moving, the only sound coming from Annalisa's little hiccupping sobs. Cade held her until they subsided. "So much for my promise to keep your tears to a minimum."

Her heart filled to overflowing, she gazed up him. "Happy tears don't count."

He pulled her to her feet and enfolded her in his arms. "As long as you keep me updated on the rules, I should still be able to fulfill my promise then," he teased.

As Cade sealed his promise with a tender kiss, Annalisa knew her search for love had finally come to an end.