

## Chapter 1

Mississippi River, Arkansas, 1830

The blackness pulled at her. It wouldn't take her. She clawed at it. Demanding air. Getting none. Her lungs screamed. A silent scream.

Mon Dieu! Help me! Somebody help me!

She kicked, her legs tangled in her skirts. She had to find the light. She had to find the air.

She burst upward. Air brushed her face and she gasped. Darkness and coldness still surrounded her, but air filled her lungs. She gulped it in. Peering into the darkness, she looked for something solid. She slipped downward. With frantic, quick kicks, she pushed her head above the water that wanted to take her.

As she slipped beneath the water again, her feet hit the bottom. She pushed upward and swam toward shore.

Gaining the bank, she crawled up it. She wasn't drowned. Cold. So very cold, but she'd escaped the water that had suffocated her. She dug her fingers into the muck, refusing to be pulled back, and rested.

The river sucked at her skirts, pulling her back to its depths as her face pressed against the mud, caking her nose and mouth. She inched forward, then slumped. The water lapped at her feet. She dug at the mud blocking her air and spit, trying to remove the gritty taste from her mouth. "Yeech." A shiver ran through her. Inching her way from the river, she managed to sit. Her chest and head ached.

She couldn't take in a breath because her corset cut into her. She coughed, retching up water.

Pushing a strand of wet hair back from her face, she looked out at the river. It didn't seem so wide here. The water lapped gently on the shore, seemingly mild and beckoning, offering no harm. Moments before it had dragged at her, wanting to drown her. Wanting to keep her with it always.

The wind caressed her and she shivered, coldness boring into her bones as her wet clothes clung to her. Only luck had kept her from being taken to the depths of the river by her skirts and petticoats. The shivering took hold of her and she couldn't stop shaking. She closed her eyes against the river, against the fear that had torn at her as the murky water tugged at her, not letting her breathe.

Shivering, she looked down at her feet. Her big toe poked out of one of her gold slippers. Streaks of dark gold from her underskirt bled through her light yellow silk overskirt. The white flowers edging the scallops of the overskirt became multicolored.

Tucking her feet beneath her skirts, she looked around, seeing nothing but brush and a row of tall oaks lining the edge of the river to her right. A mallard duck quacked at her before slipping into the water. She pushed back another strand of hair. Where was she?

The river could be the Mississippi, but the width belied that fact. She coughed

again and leaned over. She wiped her mouth on her wet sleeve, smearing the dye. The throbbing in her head increased. Reaching up, she pulled back a hand covered with mud and blood. She cringed. She needed something to wash her head, but the river had claimed all but what she wore.

She couldn't sit forever on the river bank. Cold and wet, hunger plagued her. She needed to find shelter, but she'd seen nothing indicating civilization. The coldness increased. Was the shore any better than the river? Would she die, alone and lost?

A shadow flitted across her skirt. She jumped and screamed, pushing her hand against her racing heart.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to scare ya."

She looked at a small boy with eyes the color of smoke and brown hair curling around his ears. A smear of dirt slashed across his cheek. "I did not hear you walk up."

A grin split the boy's face. "My pa taught me to walk real quiet like an Indian so nobody'd hear me."

She shivered and wrapped her arms around her. The coldness grew worse as the wind blew off the water. "You did a fine job." A spark of hope kindled inside her. Where a little boy roamed, other people couldn't be far. At least they might offer her shelter and dry clothing.

Then she could figure where she would go.

Where she'd been going.

Once her head pounded a little less.

"Hey, Pa, over here." The boy waved his arms over his head. "I'm Jacob Monroe, ma'am."

"Very pleased to meet you, Jacob Monroe."

She heard a giggling sound behind her and turned to look up at a man, a larger version of Jacob, only without the dirt. Instead, his upper lip sported a bushy mustache of brown streaked with blond. Muscles bulged against his shirt sleeves. The man stared at her for several seconds and goosebumps raced up her arms. Grabbing at the torn bodice of her dress, she pulled it over her camisole streaked with mud and gold dye.

He hunkered down next to her. The giggling continued, issuing from behind him. "You all right, miss?"

"I do not believe I have broken anything." She gave him a half smile. His nearness fogged her mind more and she could hardly breathe. Her heart seemed to forget to beat. "I appear to be lost."

"And soaked to the skin." He smiled at her, his eyes lighting up. "We'd best get you back to our home and dry you out before you catch your death. Then we can see about getting you back to where you belong."

She nodded, then choked, leaned over and retched again. Heat crept up her face. Until this man appeared, she hadn't minded so much being sick.

"Pa, is she all right?" Jacob asked.

"I'm sure she is. Just swallowed too much water." He took out his handkerchief and wiped her mouth. "I'm Cooper Monroe and this is Megan." He twisted to the left.

She smiled at the baby bouncing and kicking in a carrier fastened to his back. She sighed. Of course. He was a married man and the fact he was ever so handsome was not a thought on which she should dwell. Though the quivering in the pit of her stomach refused to listen to her mind. "I would be most grateful if you could take me to town once I have dried my clothing." What did she have to offer for his service?

She touched her neck and felt a necklace. Surely it would be worth enough to buy

her help. She looked at Cooper. "I shall gladly give my ring to your wife for your help."

His eyes clouded as he looked at her. "My wife died nine months ago."

"I am sorry." She blinked and looked away, not wanting to intrude on the pain showing in his eyes. Her heart skipped several beats. He was a widower. One who brought silly notions to her mind of being held in his arms and his mustache tickling her lip. Undoubtedly she'd swallowed too much water.

"I don't need payment for helping. Out here we help each other. Otherwise we don't survive." He reached out a hand to her.

She rose and wobbled, her legs not wanting to hold her. He put an arm around her back and swept her into his arms. Warm spots formed where his arms touched her.

"You cannot carry me."

"It's not that far."

Heat radiated from him. She wanted to soak up his warmth to stop her shivering, both body and soul. She wanted to crawl inside him. She wanted forever to be in his arms.

"I thought we was goin' rabbit hunting." Jacob's bottom lip turned down.

"As soon as we get her dried out. After all we promised Maura rabbit stew for supper." Cooper strode across the marshy land near the water's edge.

"I'm goin' get a big rabbit for Maura." Jacob fell into step next to his father.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

"Don't be rude, Jacob. She might have a reason for not telling us her name."

"She knows our names." Jacob frowned.

"He's right. It was rude of me not to offer my name. After all, you rescued me."

She shifted her arm around his neck, careful not to grab Megan's head. The edges of his

hair tickled her arm and made it tingle. She looked at his mouth and wondered what it would be like to have his mustache tickle her lips. "I am...I am..." She glanced away at the brush and the trees as Cooper walked. A gray fox climbing a tree stopped to watch them pass.

She looked into the fox's eyes. Fear crept toward her and she clung to Cooper to keep it at bay. The fog in her mind seemed to thicken. "I don't seem to remember my name."

"How can she not know her name?" Jacob kicked a rock and it sailed down the path.

Cooper stopped and set her on her feet for a minute. "You hit your head?"

She nodded.

Running his fingers over her scalp made her cringe. "Yep." He nodded. "We'll get you home and dress that wound. After a good sleep, you'll remember who you are."

A sigh rattled through her. She hoped so. She looked into his eyes as if he held the information she needed, but she couldn't remember anything before being on the riverbank. Who was she? Where had she come from? Why was she in the river?

Hot tears scalded her eyes. She trembled from the cold and her head hurt, and she wanted to know who she was. She clutched him. The warmth within his arms held the fear at bay. She rested her head against his shoulder and pushed all thoughts away except how he smelled and the strength of his arms.

Cooper reached for the blue china bowl of stew and scooped some into Jacob's bowl, then onto his own blue china plate. He passed the bowl to Arnou, the young black man who sat next to him. He glanced around the table wondering where the woman was,

but not wanting to seem anxious. He'd take her to town tomorrow to hunt for her family. The feel of her body against him would fade as would his remembrance of her beauty. Though even as he wait for her, his body remembered hers pressed against his. Heat rushed through him and his body responded in a way it hadn't for a long time. He shifted his napkin in his lap and pulled his chair closer to the table. He didn't want Arnou to realize he was acting like a randy youngster.

Arnou, dressed in a blue wool shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose muscled arms, took the bowl and set it beside his plate on the bright red tablecloth. White teeth flashed when he smiled. "Coop, you gonna hire someone to help with the planting?"

Cooper reached for the bread plate and put a piece on his plate and Jacob's. He glanced back at the doorway, waiting for the woman to appear, hoping she would join them for supper. He suppressed a sigh. "I have to. The two of us can't put in that extra field without help."

Maura, Arnou's mother, spooned a mouthful of stew into Megan's mouth. Her black hair was streaked with white. A fine dusting of flour covered one cheek. "That white man came by today looking for work. Hickory he calls hisself." She wiped the child's face.

"I don't like his kind around here. Don't want him near the children." Cooper took a bite of the stew and chewed, looking at the empty chair at the table. She was probably resting. Besides, he didn't need the grief of having a woman in his life, but his body didn't seem to want to listen to him. An ache deep within him declared his need to hold her, to feel her pressed against him again.

The door from the parlor opened and he jumped as the young woman paused in the doorway. She wore one of his wife's dresses that hung off her shoulders and hid her

figure. No longer did she look like a bedraggled lady, but more like a farm woman. A beautiful farm woman. Who fit in his arms perfectly. He knew he grinned like a love-sick school boy.

"Join us." Cooper jumped up, nearly knocking his chair over, and walked toward her. She looked so forlorn. He had an urge to sweep her into his arms and reassure her. To kiss her and breath in her ear that all would be well. To hold her and never have to face the lonely nights again.

Maura wiped her hands on her red apron covering her green dress then got another plate from the white glass-fronted cabinet next to the sink. "I would've brung you supper as soon as I got the young 'uns fed."

The young woman smiled and clutched the skirt up so she wouldn't trip on it. Maura had washed her and managed to arrange her raven hair to one side of her head. A white bandage wrapped around her head held the curls in place. Her blue eyes seemed dull. He reached up to caress the side of her face but pulled back his hand. His hand tingled as though he'd had contact with her cheek. The tingle raced through his body and he stepped behind her to hide his reaction to her nearness.

"I can sit at the table and eat." She didn't move from the doorway, wobbling. "I have rested sufficiently for now and do not want to make extra work for you."

Offering her his arm, Cooper steered her toward an empty seat next to Jacob. The warmth of her touch stoked the fire burning within him. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Come along and meet the rest of the family. Maura you met earlier. She tends the children, the house, and now...and now the chickens." His wife had wanted the chickens. Something she could do to add to the family income. He wanted to be shed of them since her death, but Maura insisted they needed the money. She didn't want to

change anything, especially anything to do with Ellen.

"That's Arnou, Maura's son. He helps me in the fields." He shifted the woman's chair forward and returned to the head of the table. No woman but Maura had graced his table since Ellen's passing. This woman was very different than his wife. His wife had worked hard her whole life.

This woman didn't have a callous on her hands. Her silk dress said she came from money. As well as the necklace. It must be worth several times more than his farm. Starbursts of rubies were attached to each other by two rows of diamonds. The largest starburst had been in the middle with three more up each side. Someone must be missing her. Wealthy people took care of their own, and as wealthy as her family had to be, they had to be searching frantically for her.

Taking a bite of his stew, he studied her. She was beautiful, even in the blue cotton dress. The dress made her eyes shine a darker blue, but also made her look like a lost waif in need of protection. Protection he wanted to give, though she probably didn't need it.

He wanted to touch her. Her skin had been soft, and even though she'd been dripping wet, having her pressed against him had created a heat he'd forgotten existed.

Maura scooped some stew onto the plate and placed it in front of the woman before spooning another bite into Megan's mouth. "It you don't hire the likes of Hickory, what are you gonna do?"

"A slave auction's being held in town the end of the week. Thought Arnou and I might go see who we might be able to use." Cooper couldn't pull his gaze from the woman. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, staring from one of them to the next. She looked so lost, so sad. His heart ached for her. His arms ached to hold her.

"We could use two slaves." Arnou reached for his blue china coffee cup.

"Now, Arnou, Coop can't be affording to buy no slaves. He's talking about seeing who's about looking for a job." Maura picked the coffee pot off the black stove and poured a cup, pushing it toward the woman.

He forced himself to look away from the woman and concentrate on the conversation. "Actually, I had in mind buying a worker. Arnou and I have the other cabin built and with the land we cleared this winter, we'll need more help all season."

Maura looked at him, her eyes widening. "Can we afford one, Coop?"

"Yes, Ma." He smiled at the older woman with a touch of gray in her dark hair. Maura mothered them all. Had since the day he'd met her. He really didn't know what he'd do without her.

"One or two?" Arnou took a large bite of stew and looked at Cooper.

"For what I've got saved, one. I pay such a low price for two, they'll be sickly or something."

"Coop, you've got to feed him and care for him. You sure we can afford this?"

Maura set down the spoon with which she'd been feeding Megan and took a sip of her coffee. "It'll cost dearly."

"Are you worried about cooking for another mouth?" Cooper glanced back at the woman who nibbled at her stew as she watched them, her gaze darting from one to another. He wished he could reach over and take her hand to reassure her. He wished the fear in her eyes away, but could do nothing to abate it. He could move to her and scoop her up. The others would think he'd lost his mind.

Maura drew her eyebrows together and glared at him. "Cooper Monroe, you know better. What's another mouth or two."

"Ma, stop fretting. If Coop says he can afford to buy a slave, than he can." Arnou patted his mother's hand, his hand dwarfing hers.

Cooper scooped more stew onto his plate. Scrimping and saving every penny he could, he hoped to expand his farm and build a future for his children. "I planned this. With the new acres and the money we got for last year's crop, everything'll be fine."

"If we're careful, I'll bet we can get two." Arnou smiled and nodded his head. "I'll poke around. No one'll pay me no mind."

"We'll see when we get there."

Arnou looked at Cooper and took a deep breath. "You thought about talking with Stevens about Ilde."

"You sure you want her for your wife." Was the waif at his table married? She was of an age she should be. Her husband must be frantic.

A pain jolted his heart. Why should he care if she were married? She didn't belong here. Tomorrow she'd be gone and with her the silly fantasies filling his mind and body of holding her and making her his own.

Arnou nodded. "If you don't ask Stevens about buying her soon, he's going to...well, you know." He looked at Jacob.

"Stevens will ask a pretty price for her. She's young and strong." Cooper smiled over the edge of his coffee cup at Arnou. The young man was smitten with Ilde.

"She's a field worker. He won't charge as much as if she were a house slave." Arnou's fork clattered against the plate.

"True enough." Cooper reached for the coffee pot. If he weren't careful, he'd find himself smitten with the strange woman at his table. A forbidden woman. More forbidden than Ilde was to Arnou at the moment.

Maura wiped Megan's mouth and handed the little girl a metal cup of milk.

"Coop can't afford to buy you a wife and himself a field hand."

"Ma, I got the money saved to pay Stevens for Ilde. I'd never expect Coop to buy me a wife." Arnou glared at Maura.

She laughed, a sound that filled the kitchen with warmth. "You sure you want to spend your money on a wife?"

"Yes, Ma." Arnou rolled his eyes.

"Then I can find plenty for her to do to help around here." She kissed her son's cheek. "It'll be nice to have female company again."

"It's settled." Cooper peeked at the woman who sat shrinking into herself, watching them. What did she think of his little family? Did she really not know her name? It didn't matter. Someone missed her and wanted her home. Any other thoughts of her had to be put aside and he must return her to her family. He knew the pain of loss and wouldn't bring that on anyone else.

No matter how much he wanted to hold her again. Or kiss her and sample how she tasted. Better than any of Maura's confections, he was sure. He stifled a groan. Such thinking was not going to help his situation.

He turned back to Arnou. "If you're sure you want to marry Ilde." Marriage held such hopes, then tore the heart to shreds. He didn't want Arnou to suffer heartache if something happened to Ilde, but he couldn't bring him sorrow by denying his request.

Arnou nodded and smiled. "I've been courting her for near six months."

"I told you to stay away from Stevens' place. He'll cause trouble."

"He doesn't even know I've been there. Most nights he's drunk." Arnou reached for the bread and used a piece to wipe the stew from his plate. "That's why you've got to

talk to him. He gets mean when he's drunk. Ilde's been staying out of his way, but if he notices her..."

"I'll go by his place tomorrow."

"Pa, when are you goin' to town?" Jacob set his milk cup down on the table.

Cooper wiped the milk mustache from Jacob's face with a red napkin. "End of the week."

"Can I go?" Jacob's eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Cooper studied him for a moment, then looked at the woman. "We can all go." Maybe he could find someone who knew this woman. He had enough to do in life without having to worry about her. Without her sad eyes begging him to hold and comfort her. Without his lips wanting to kiss hers and see how wonderful she tasted. Without wanting to crush her to him.

She looked up from her plate at Maura. "Are you free people of color?"

"I guess we are." Maura smiled at her. "Now eat up your supper. You're a skinny bit of a thing. You'll waste away in this country."

"I don't believe she's from around here." Cooper studied her face. Pink spots colored her cheeks and she no longer looked ready to faint. In fact she looked more beautiful, more desirable. The ache in his groin grew. He had trouble keeping track of what was being said. "Do you remember anything, Miss?"

Her fork poised near her mouth, she looked at him. "No." She took the bite from the fork and chewed slowly. "No. I remember the water and being on the bank." She set her fork down. "Before that, I do not remember anything."

"How can you forget who you are?" Jacob stared at her.

"She got a big bump." Maura picked up a pie from the hardwood sideboard next

to the sink.

Jacob shifted his gaze to Maura. "I bumped my head before, but I member who I am."

Cooper laughed. "You've bumped your noggin, but not like her. She bumped hers very hard. She's got a bump the size of a melon."

With a lift of her hand, she brushed her fingers across the bandage. She stared over his head as though she tried to remember something, but then shrugged and went back to eating her stew. Such a delicate thing. She'd never stand the ardors of living on a farm. Not a working farm where everyone worked from the moment the sun rose until after it set for the night.

He needed to find out who she was and where she belonged. He needed to get her out of his house now.