



MESQUITE
SPRINGS

Book One



OUT *of the* EMBERS

AMANDA CABOT



Out of the Embers

“*Out of the Embers* is part prairie romance, part romantic suspense. I can’t remember when I’ve enjoyed a book more. Amanda Cabot has written an intriguing, chilling mystery and she winds it through the pages of a sweet romance in a way that made me keep turning the pages fast to see what was going to happen next. An absolutely excellent read. And now I’m hungry for oatmeal pecan pie!”

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AMANDA CABOT



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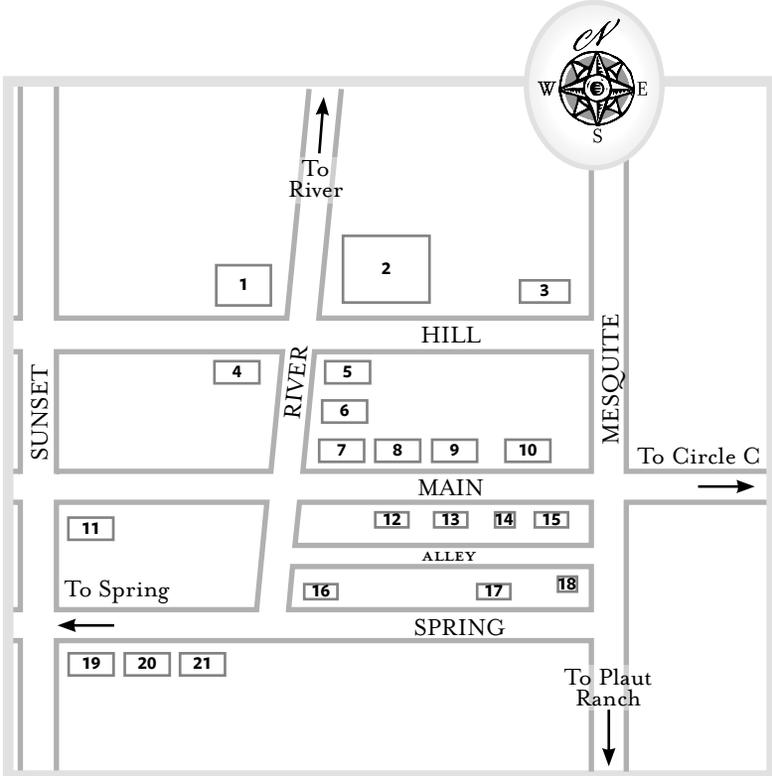
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For Bonnie McKee,
whose love of history and dedication
to its preservation are truly inspiring.

MESQUITE SPRINGS, TX



- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 – Cemetery | 12 – Mercantile |
| 2 – Park | 13 – Polly’s Place and Evelyn’s Home |
| 3 – Widow Lockhart’s House | 14 – Post Office |
| 4 – Downey’s House | 15 – Sheriff’s Office and House |
| 5 – School | 16 – Taylors’ House |
| 6 – Parsonage | 17 – Boardinghouse |
| 7 – Church | 18 – Doc Dawson’s Office and House |
| 8 – Mayor’s Office and House | 19 – Smiths’ House |
| 9 – Sam Plaut’s Law Office | 20 – Blacksmith Shop |
| 10 – Dressmaker’s Shop | 21 – Livery |
| 11 – Saloon | |

C H A P T E R

One

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1855

Someone was watching. Though a shiver of dread made its way down her spine, Evelyn Radcliffe kept a smile fixed on her face. No matter how her skin prickled and how every instinct told her to flick the reins and urge the horse to race forward, she wouldn't do anything to worry the child who sat beside her.

She took a deep breath, then exhaled gradually, trying to slow her pulse, reminding herself that this was not the first time she'd sensed the Watcher. The feeling would diminish when she reached the outskirts of Gilmorton, and by the time she was an hour away, it would have disappeared. It always did. The only thing that made today different was that she was not alone. Today she had a child to protect.

Evelyn took another breath, forcing herself to think about something—anything—other than the danger she'd sensed. It was a beautiful day and an unusually warm one for so close to Christmas. The sun was shining, bringing a genuine smile to her face as she gazed at the now dormant cotton fields that brought so much wealth to this part of Texas. White gold, she'd heard some call it.

“What’s wrong?”

Evelyn turned toward the girl who looked enough like her to be her sister. Polly’s hair was silver blonde rather than Evelyn’s golden and her eyes were a lighter shade of blue, but she had the same oval face and a nose whose tip flared ever so slightly, just as Evelyn’s did. Besides the difference in their ages, Evelyn’s skin was unmarred, while a prominent strawberry red birthmark on her left cheek destroyed Polly’s hopes of beauty.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Evelyn wished the child weren’t so sensitive. “I’m just anxious to get home.” Logansville was three hours away, far enough that the Watcher had never followed her. But Polly didn’t need to know about the Watcher. Evelyn tickled the girl’s nose. “You know Hilda can’t be trusted to heat stew without scorching it.”

The distraction appeared to have worked, for Polly giggled. “She’s a bad cook. Buster spit out the oatmeal she gave him ’cuz it had lumps. Big lumps.”

Lumpy oatmeal was a better topic than the fear that engulfed Evelyn almost every time she came to Gilmorton. Mrs. Folger had told her she needed to confront her fears. That was one of the reasons she insisted Evelyn be the one to make these trips. But Mrs. Folger didn’t know that even ten years later, Evelyn could not bear to look at the building she’d once called home and that she detoured to avoid that block of Main Street. Mrs. Folger scoffed at the idea that someone was watching, calling it nonsense, but Evelyn knew better. Someone *was* watching, and it terrified her.

The tension that had coiled inside Evelyn began to release as the town disappeared from view. She wouldn’t have come to Gilmorton if she had had a choice, but unless she was willing to be gone for more than a day each time she made a delivery, there were no other outlets for the lace the children made. The owner of the mercantile gave her a fair price for their handicrafts. Today there’d even been enough money left over after she’d bought provisions

that Evelyn had been able to purchase a piece of candy for each child. That would make Christmas morning special.

“When you’re a little older, I’ll teach you how to make oatmeal.”

Evelyn laid a hand on Polly’s shoulder, wanting contact with the child who’d become so dear to her in the month since she’d arrived at the orphanage. Arrived? She’d been deposited on the front step as if she were no more important than the piles of clothing some parishioners left when their children had outgrown them. Like worn dresses and overalls, Polly had been discarded.

Unaware of the turns Evelyn’s thoughts had taken, Polly grinned. “I know how. I watched you. You gotta stir, stir, stir.”

“That’s right. You’re a smart girl.”

“My daddy said that too. He said I was the smartest girl in the whole county and that I was worth more than a thousand bales of cotton.”

Polly’s smile turned upside down, reminding Evelyn of the story she’d told about her father being put in a box in the ground. Evelyn was all too familiar with those boxes, but she’d been fortunate enough to have her parents with her for thirteen years before the night when everything changed. Polly was only six, or so she said.

Think about Polly, Evelyn told herself, not the night when it had rained hard enough to muffle her screams from passersby. The sheriff had told her he’d arrested and hanged the man responsible. He’d assured her she had no reason to fear, and yet she did. Ten years wasn’t long enough to erase the memories, particularly when she could feel someone watching her.

“I miss my daddy.” Tears welled in Polly’s eyes. “I want him to come back.”

“I know you do.”

Despite her nod, tears began to trickle down Polly’s cheeks. “Buster said some girls get new daddies. He said people come looking for good little girls.” She looked up at Evelyn, pleading in her eyes. “I’ve been good, haven’t I?”

“You’ve been very good,” Evelyn reassured her. But that wouldn’t be enough. Three couples had come to the orphanage since Polly’s arrival, and all three had been unwilling to adopt a child with such a prominent birthmark.

“It’s Satan’s mark,” one woman had announced. When she’d heard that, Evelyn had been tempted to gouge the woman’s cheek and give her her own mark.

“I want a new daddy.” Polly was nothing if not persistent. Persistent and stubborn. No matter how many times Evelyn and Mrs. Folger asked, she refused to tell them her last name. “I can’t,” she insisted. “I can’t.”

Evelyn made a show of looking in every direction. “I don’t see any daddies here. Maybe if we sing, someone will hear us.”

As Polly’s eyes brightened, Evelyn smiled. Singing would be a good distraction for both of them. And so they sang song after song. Neither of them could carry a tune, but that didn’t bother them or Reginald. Evelyn imagined the gelding twitching his ears in time to their singing, and her spirits rose with each mile they traveled. Polly was once again cheerful, there was no rain in sight, and it would be another month before she had to return to Gilmorton—three reasons to give thanks.

Her smile was as bright as Polly’s until she saw it. It was only the slightest of limps, and yet Evelyn knew something was wrong. Unwilling to take any chances, she stopped the wagon and climbed out. A quick look at Reginald’s front right leg confirmed her fears.

“What’s wrong?” Polly asked for the second time since they’d left Gilmorton.

“Reginald’s lost a shoe.”

Peering over the side of the wagon, Polly grinned. “I’ll find it.”

Evelyn shook her head. “You need to stay in the wagon.” Though the sun was past its zenith, the day was still warm enough that snakes could be out, and ever-curious Polly might reach for one. Evelyn glanced at Reginald’s hoof one last time. There was

no choice. She wouldn't risk permanent injury by having him pull the wagon all the way to Logansville.

"We're going back to Gilmorton." As much as she wished otherwise, it was closer.

"Okay." Polly watched wide-eyed as Evelyn unhooked the wagon. "What are you doing?"

"We need to leave the wagon here." Even though it meant that anyone coming by could steal the contents, she had to take the chance. "Reginald can't pull it until he gets a new shoe."

Evelyn lifted Polly out of the wagon and placed her on the horse's back. "Hold on to the harness."

Normally agreeable Polly turned petulant. "I wanna walk with you."

Evelyn wouldn't argue. "All right, but when you get tired, Reginald will be glad to carry you." The horse was exceptionally good with children, which was fortunate, given the number who called the orphanage home.

"This is fun!" Polly exclaimed as she began to skip down the road. It was no longer fun by the time they reached Gilmorton. Polly was tired and fussy. To make matters worse, the blacksmith was in the middle of shoeing another horse and told Evelyn it would be at least half an hour before he could see to Reginald.

"Whoever shod this horse the last time deserves to be shot," the blacksmith said when he was finally able to inspect the gelding's hoof. "He didn't know what he was doin'."

Evelyn tried not to sigh. Mrs. Folger had wanted to give Buster a chance, claiming he had an aptitude for caring for horses, but it appeared that the matron had been mistaken. "Did he do any permanent damage?"

"Nah." The blacksmith scraped a rough edge off the hoof. "Just be sure to bring Reginald here next time he needs a shoe. He may be gettin' on in years, but he's a fine piece of horseflesh."

Evelyn and Polly rode the fine piece of horseflesh back to the

wagon. Fortunately, the contents were all there. Unfortunately, the delays meant that they'd be very late arriving home. In all likelihood, everyone would be asleep, even Mrs. Folger. The matron wouldn't be pleased, but at least Evelyn hadn't lost the supplies she'd purchased today.

Darkness had fallen long before they reached Logansville, and Polly—worn out by the walking as well as the excitement of the day—slept on the bench next to Evelyn. Though she stirred occasionally, each time she did, she drifted back to sleep. This time, however, she sat up, rubbed her eyes, and pinched her nose.

“What's that smell?”

Evelyn sniffed. “It's smoke.” She squinted, looking for the source of the odor, but saw nothing.

“Phew! I don't like that.”

“I don't either, but we're almost home.” Though it was late, someone must be burning trash. “It won't smell as bad once we're indoors.”

Evelyn had already decided to let Polly sleep with her tonight rather than risk waking the other girls. That prospect, along with the promise that she could help stir the oatmeal tomorrow morning, had buoyed Polly's spirits when the only supper Evelyn could offer her had been the cheese and bread she'd purchased while waiting for the blacksmith. Though Gilmorton had a restaurant, that was one place Evelyn would not enter no matter how hungry she might be. When they reached the orphanage, she would warm some milk for Polly.

They were almost there. Within half an hour, Evelyn would have Reginald in his stall and Polly in her bed. The horse tossed his head, perhaps disturbed by the smoke that had intensified.

As they rounded the final bend in the road, the cause of the smoke was all too clear. The light from the almost full moon revealed the ashes and rubble that were all that was left of the building that had been Evelyn's home for the past ten years. She

stared at the blackened foundation, trying to make sense of something that made no sense. Well aware of the danger fire posed to a frame structure, Mrs. Folger was vigilant about safety. Yet, despite her caution, something had happened. The orphanage was gone.

So were its inhabitants. There should be close to two dozen children swarming around, yet Evelyn saw nothing more than a few men. Though her heart was pounding so violently that she feared it would break through her chest at the realization that she'd lost her home, she clung to the hope that Mrs. Folger and the children had escaped and had been taken in by some of the town's residents. If not . . .

The possibility was too horrible to consider. Her mother had told her not to borrow trouble, and Evelyn wouldn't. Instead, she'd ask the men what had happened. Surely everyone had been saved. But though she tried to convince herself that she would be reunited with the matron and the other orphans, in her heart she knew that was one prayer that would not be answered.

Evelyn bit the inside of her cheek, determined not to let Polly see her fears. But she failed, for the child began to tremble.

"What happened to the 'nage?" Though Polly's diction was far better than one would have expected from the shabby clothing she'd worn when she was abandoned, whoever had taught her hadn't included "orphanage" in her vocabulary.

Evelyn wrapped her arms around Polly and willed her voice to remain steady as she said, "It's gone." And, if what she feared was true, so were Mrs. Folger and the children who had been her family.

As she descended the small hill and approached the front drive, Evelyn saw that the men were wandering around the yard, their casual attitude belying the gravity of the situation.

"Ain't no one left," one called to the others, his voice carrying clearly through the still night air. "Smoke musta got 'em."

No. Oh, dear God, no. It couldn't be true, and yet it was. Once again, she had lost everyone she loved, everyone except the girl

who clung to her, her own fear palpable. Once again, it was night. Once again, she was powerless to change anything, but at least this time it had been an accident.

Evelyn shuddered and said a silent prayer that Polly wouldn't realize the extent of the tragedy. Somehow, she would protect her. Somehow, she would help her recover from all that they had lost in this terrible accident.

"Can't figger it out," another man chimed in. "Who woulda wanted to do 'em in? No mistakin' them kerosene cans, though. Somebody set the fire."

Evelyn gasped, feeling as though she'd been bludgeoned, and for a second everything turned black. The fire wasn't an accident. Someone had deliberately destroyed the orphanage, planning to kill everyone inside. Including her.

"*Where is she?*" The memory of the voice that still haunted Evelyn's dreams echoed through her brain, shattering the fragile peace Mrs. Folger's assurances had created. Tonight proved that she wasn't safe, not even here. Someone wanted to kill the last of the Radcliffes.

Why? That was the question no one had been able to answer ten years ago, the question that had kept Evelyn from leaving the sanctuary the orphanage had promised. Now that promise was shattered.

She closed her eyes as fear and sorrow threatened to overwhelm her. The life she had built was gone, destroyed along with the building that had been her refuge and the people who had become her family. *Oh, God, what should I do?*

The response was immediate. *Leave.*

It was the only answer. She could do nothing for Mrs. Folger and the others, but she could—and she would—do everything in her power to give Polly a safe future. The question was where they should go. Evelyn stared at the stars for a second, then nodded. Gilmorton, the one place she would not consider, was east. Resolutely, she headed west.

“What happened?” Polly asked again, her voice far calmer than Evelyn would have expected. Either the child was too young to understand the magnitude of what had happened, or she’d experienced so much tragedy in her life that she was numb.

“We need a new home.” For the first time, Evelyn gave thanks that Polly had formed no strong attachments to anyone other than her. That would make her transition to a new life easier. While grief had wrapped its tendrils around Evelyn’s heart, squeezing so tightly that she had trouble breathing, Polly seemed to be recovering from her initial shock.

“Okay.” Though the child tightened her grip on Evelyn’s arm, her trembling had stopped. “Where are we going?”

“It’ll be a surprise.” At this point, Evelyn had no idea where she and Polly would find their next home. All she knew was that it had to be far from here, far from whoever had set the fire, far from the Watcher.

Polly was silent for a moment before she said, “It’s okay, Evelyn. You’ll be my mama, and you’ll find me a new daddy.”