



MESQUITE
SPRINGS

Book Three

The SPARK *of*
LOVE

AMANDA CABOT



Praise for *Dreams Rekindled*

“Readers will enjoy the easy pace of this series addition while waiting for the grand finale, and what a finale it turns out to be!”

Interviews and Reviews

“Amanda Cabot’s new novel, *Dreams Rekindled*, is a wonderfully entertaining and inherently absorbing read from cover to cover.”

Midwest Book Reviews

Praise for *Out of the Embers*

“Cabot expertly combines suspense with a pleasant romance to create a moving and uplifting tale.”

Booklist

“Cabot transports readers to 1850s Texas in the enjoyable first installment to her Mesquite Springs series.”

Publishers Weekly

“If you like adventure, drama, danger, mystery, and a clean romance, then this is the book for you.”

Interviews and Reviews

“*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!”

Mary Connealy, author of *Aiming for Love*, book 1 in the *Brides of Hope Mountain* series

Praise for Amanda Cabot

“Broad appeal for fans of historical fiction as well as romance and even westerns.”

Booklist on A Tender Hope

“Filled with complex emotion and beautiful prose.”

Woman’s World Magazine on A Tender Hope

“Another deftly crafted gem of a novel by a true master of the romance genre.”

Midwest Book Review on A Borrowed Dream

Amanda Cabot, *The Spark of Love*

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Books by Amanda Cabot

Historical Romance

MESQUITE SPRINGS SERIES

Out of the Embers

Dreams Rekindled

TEXAS DREAMS SERIES

Paper Roses

Scattered Petals

Tomorrow's Garden

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Summer of Promise

Waiting for Spring

With Autumn's Return

CIMARRON CREEK TRILOGY

A Stolen Heart

A Borrowed Dream

A Tender Hope

Christmas Roses

One Little Word: A Sincerely Yours Novella

Contemporary Romance

TEXAS CROSSROADS SERIES

At Bluebonnet Lake

In Firefly Valley

On Lone Star Trail

MESQUITE
SPRINGS
Book Three



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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cabot, Amanda, 1948- author.

Title: The spark of love / Amanda Cabot.

Description: Grand Rapids : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] |

Series: Mesquite Springs ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020271 | ISBN 9780800735371 | ISBN 9780800741037

(casebound) | ISBN 9781493434138 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3603.A35 S63 2022 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021020271>

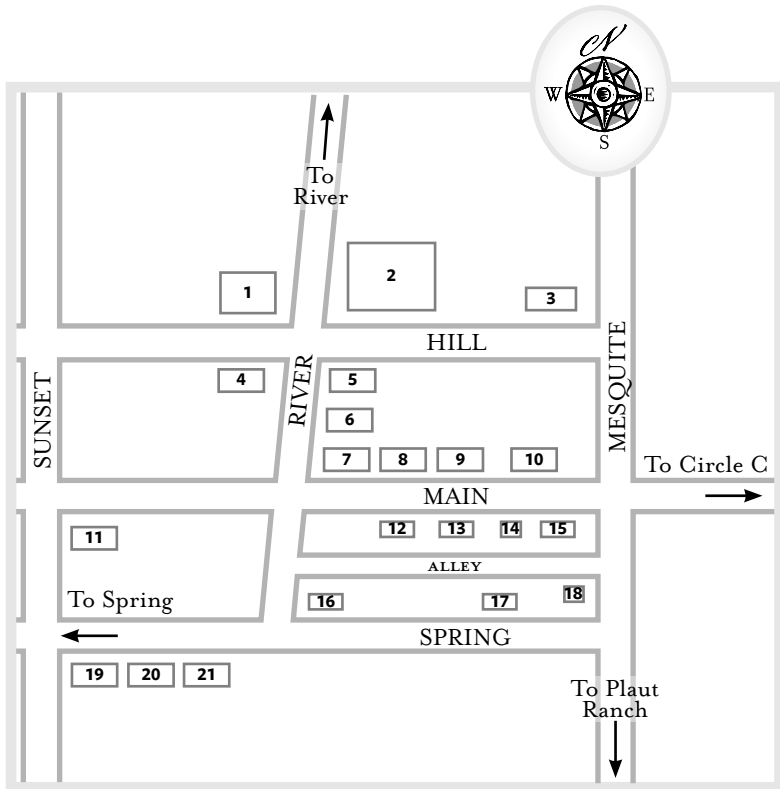
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For Catherine, my first and forever friend.
I'm so glad you're my sister.

MESQUITE SPRINGS, TX



- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 - Cemetery | 11 - Saloon |
| 2 - Park | 12 - Mercantile |
| 3 - King's Hotel | 13 - Polly's Place |
| 4 - Downeys' House/Alexandra's Home | 14 - Post Office |
| 5 - School | 15 - Sheriff's Office and House |
| 6 - Parsonage | 16 - <i>Chronicle</i> Office/Dorothy and Brandon's House |
| 7 - Church | 17 - Boardinghouse |
| 8 - Mayor's Office/Wyatt and Evelyn's House | 18 - Doc Dawson's Office and House |
| 9 - Sam Plaut's Law Office/Sam and Gabe's Home | 19 - Smiths' House |
| 10 - Dressmaker's Shop | 20 - Blacksmith Shop |
| | 21 - Livery |

C H A P T E R

One

APRIL 1857

She had to leave.

Alexandra Tarkington tried to bite back her anger as she removed the tray from the smaller of her trunks, laying it carefully on the floor. This shouldn't be happening, but it was. Though she was grateful today was her maid's half day and she wouldn't have to deflect Bridget's curiosity, Alexandra had never before packed a trunk or even a valise. Then again, she'd never before been forced to flee.

"What are you doing?"

She looked up, startled by her great-aunt's approach. Aunt Helen was showing signs of her seventy-one years and moved slowly, but the sound of her cane on the hardwood floors should have alerted Alexandra. It *would* have alerted her if she hadn't been so preoccupied.

"Tell me, child."

Alexandra winced at the final word. Aunt Helen might believe she was still a child who needed to be protected, but the truth was, Helen was the one who needed protection. While she might seem formidable to those who sought her favor, Helen Cameron's bones

were fragile. If Franklin resorted to the physical violence he had threatened and Aunt Helen tried to protect Alexandra, she might be injured. Alexandra couldn't take that chance.

"I'm going to the Springs." Once Alexandra left New York, her aunt would be safe.

"Because of Franklin." Aunt Helen made it a statement, not a question.

"Yes," she admitted, "but how did you know?"

Her aunt wrinkled her nose as she settled onto a chair. "I may be hard of hearing, but I'm not deaf, and he was shouting." She leaned forward and laid her hand on Alexandra's. "No matter what he threatens, Franklin can't touch your trust. Your grandmother hired the best attorneys in the city to make sure your mother and now you were protected. Even after you marry, the money is yours, not your husband's. You can use it, but you can't give it to him. It can only go to your daughter. Still, after hearing Franklin last night, I think you're wise to get away for a while."

Though she knew that, Alexandra railed at the necessity. "I hate feeling like I'm running away."

She'd heard whispers that Franklin was a violent man, but she hadn't believed them. Until last night, he'd been a perfect gentleman. Until last night.

"You're being wise," Aunt Helen repeated, making Alexandra wonder if she'd overheard Franklin's threats. "Besides, your cousin will enjoy your company. It's been a long time since you and Opal were together."

"That's true." Alexandra hated deception, but her aunt would be safer if she believed that the springs Alexandra planned to visit were Saratoga, not Mesquite. The charade wouldn't last forever, but it should give her enough time to reach Texas. Even if Franklin discovered where she'd gone, he wouldn't follow her, not when he realized Papa would be there to defend her.

Alexandra took a deep breath, wishing she could believe that, but the assurance she sought was overwhelmed by the memory

of Franklin's fury. Tamping down the fear that threatened her composure, she tried to smile.

"Don't worry if I don't write. I imagine I'll be so busy I won't have much time." If she didn't receive a letter, Aunt Helen could honestly say she didn't know where Alexandra had gone if Franklin asked. *When* Franklin asked. Alexandra was certain he would.

Once again, Aunt Helen inclined her head, her gesture as regal as her coronet of braids. "Especially if you find new things to paint. You're taking your watercolors, aren't you?"

"Of course." Alexandra would not consider leaving behind the one thing that had comforted her during the lonely times.

"Well, then, I shan't worry about you." Aunt Helen smiled. "You'll be safe and happy at the Springs."

Alexandra could only hope that was true.



"She's gone!"

Jason Biddle stared at the man who'd been his closest friend from childhood, the man who'd convinced Father there was no reason for him to stay in that horrible place. It wasn't like Franklin to show his anger. Normally, though he seethed inwardly, Franklin maintained a calm exterior. Not today. Today he was pacing his office, reminding Jason of the dogs that raced around the perimeter fence at Serenity House, growling at anyone who dared to walk too close.

"What do you mean, gone?"

"Don't be a simpleton, Jason. Surely you understand the English language." Franklin poured himself a healthy serving of whiskey and emptied it in one swallow. After he laid the glass back on the table, he glared at Jason. "Let me phrase it differently. Alexandra Tarkington, the woman whose fortune was supposed to pay my debts and make me a rich man, has disappeared. Her aunt said she went to the Springs, but no one in Saratoga has seen her."

"I'm sorry to hear that." And even sorrier to be here. Being with

Franklin Beckman on the rare occasions when his anger erupted was not a pleasant experience. Though women had told Jason they admired his muscular body, he was no match for Franklin. The man outweighed him by fifty pounds, and every one of those pounds was pure muscle. The scuffles they'd had over the years had invariably left Jason battered and bloody, and he had no intention of provoking another fight.

"I knew you'd want to help." Apparently, the conciliatory expression he'd feigned had convinced Franklin, because he nodded as if Jason had agreed to do whatever he wanted. "That's why you're here. The chit won't talk to me, but everyone knows you're good at charming the ladies. Find her and talk her into coming back and marrying me."

"What if I can't?" Though Jason had not been introduced to the Tarkington heiress, she was reputed to be a determined woman. If she'd refused Franklin's suit, she must have had a reason.

The scowl that marred Franklin's face deepened. "If she won't marry me, I want her gone. I don't want some other man getting all that money."

"I don't want to sound like a simpleton"—the word rankled, but Jason used it deliberately, knowing it would help placate Franklin—"but how am I supposed to find her?" It was easier to focus on that challenge rather than what he might be expected to do. It was one thing to kill a man when he'd been angry. The cold-blooded murder of a woman was different.

"You always claimed to be the smart one. Prove it. Find her. Convince her I'm the man for her."

"And if I can't?"

"I'll tell the police what happened at Chadds Ford."



"How would you like to be a rich man?"

Sonny stared at the man who knew just how far from rich he was. Even though the man paid him well, it would take Sonny

years—maybe even the rest of his life—to repay his debts. “You know I need money, Mr. Drummond, sir.” The old man liked being addressed that way.

“If you do what I say, we’ll both get what we want. You’ll be able to repay me, and I’ll be one step closer to having it all. I want it all.” The old man pounded his fist on the larger desk, the one he dared not occupy even when his partner was absent, as if a solid thumping would change the fact that he was the junior partner.

“It should be yours. You’re the one behind its success.” Sonny doubted that was true, but he knew Drummond liked to be flattered.

“It will be. Soon. If you do what I say, we’ll both be rich and I’ll be the senior partner.”

Sonny blinked in surprise. The other assignments had brought in some money, but nothing like what Drummond was suggesting. “What do you want me to do?” The sooner he knew, the sooner he could get started.

The old man gazed at the door, though there was no chance his partner would suddenly materialize, then lowered himself into the forbidden chair, propped his feet on the desk, and stared at Sonny, daring him to say something. “The girl’s the first step. Find her, and then here’s what you need to do.” He lowered his voice.

Sonny’s surprise increased, and he started to laugh. He’d done many things for the old man, but never that.



“I heard you’re as good as a Pinkerton.”

“I’ve had my share of successes,” Gabriel Seymour said as he assessed the man seated across the table from him. Four or five inches shorter than his own six feet, the man was blond with eyes several shades lighter blue than his. His clothing was obviously expensive, his cuff links gold. But, despite the outward trappings of wealth, Jason Biddle would blend into any crowd, unnoticed by all but the most astute observers. If Everyman had a face, it would be this one.

His appearance was ordinary; his demeanor was not. Though Biddle's voice was calm enough that he could have been discussing the weather, his eyes betrayed both fear and anger, telling Gabe he had a personal stake in whatever it was he wanted him to investigate. Gabe's office, which looked more like a parlor, was designed to put his clients at ease, but Biddle's shoulders and neck were tense.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Biddle?"

The man, who'd declined Gabe's offer of coffee, leaned forward. "I want you to find Calvin Tarkington and put him behind bars."

Gabe didn't recognize the name, but that wasn't unusual. The majority of his cases involved average citizens, not men whose names were prominent in society circles or newspaper articles. Whether they were famous, infamous, or somewhere in between, Gabe rarely failed in finding them. That was his job. Prosecuting them was not.

"I'm not a policeman, Mr. Biddle. I'm an investigator." And this man's accent, though he tried to disguise it, was East Coast, setting Gabe's antennae quivering and making him wonder why he'd traveled to Columbus to hire him. Gabe was good at his job, but there were equally good investigators closer to Biddle's home.

Gabe's potential client nodded. "I know that, but if you can find evidence that Tarkington is swindling innocent people, he'll go to jail."

"Possibly." Gabe refused to offer false promises, particularly when he wasn't certain he'd agree to help this man. While Biddle sounded sincere, Gabe's instincts told him this man was hiding something important, and that made him cautious. "I can't guarantee the results of the judicial system. Juries can be convinced to let flagrant criminals go free."

When Biddle indicated his understanding, Gabe continued. "Tell me what you know about Tarkington and why he's important to you."

Biddle's eyes flashed with anger. "He killed my father."

Anger instead of sorrow. Gabe made a mental note of his client's emotion. Anger was understandable, particularly if the killing was recent and Biddle hadn't had time for grief to settle in. But it would, and when it did, it was there to stay. Gabe knew all too well that though the pain would ebb eventually, it would never disappear.

He fixed his gaze on Biddle. "How did Calvin Tarkington murder your father? I thought you said he was a swindler."

"He is. And, no, he didn't pull the trigger, but he might as well have." Biddle's voice, no longer calm, rose as his anger turned to fury. "That lying, swindling, no-count—"

Gabe held up a hand. "I get the idea. What exactly did he do?"

"He convinced my father to invest in a new shipping line. He claimed the shares would double—maybe triple—in value in the first year. That's why only a few men were being invited to invest at the beginning."

Gabe's heart lurched at the painfully familiar story. Substitute "bank" for "shipping line," and you had the scheme that had bankrupted Pa.

"My father invested every penny he owned, then borrowed from his friends." Biddle's face contorted with pain. "He even pawned my mother's jewelry so he could buy more shares."

Fortunately, Pa hadn't gone that far. He'd lost only his own savings in the investment that was supposed to pay for the expensive treatments Ma needed. Rather than let Biddle continue, Gabe completed the story. "It was all a sham. There was no shipping line, and the only person who made money was Calvin Tarkington. No one could prove it, though, because his name wasn't on any of the documents."

Biddle nodded. "Precisely. How did you know?"

Because it was my father's story and the reason I became an investigator. Because schemes like that made me realize that the only way to ensure justice prevails is to help root out dishonesty.

Biddle didn't need to know how closely his story mirrored Gabe's, so Gabe said only, "It's a common enough ploy."

Biddle crossed and uncrossed his legs, then began to tap the floor with one foot. "How common is it for men to shoot themselves because they're ashamed of how gullible they were?"

"I don't know." Pa hadn't done that. He'd simply faded away after Ma's death, losing the will to live along with his wife and his savings. Though not as dramatic as the elder Biddle's suicide, it had still been a tragedy.

"I want justice, Mr. Seymour. I want Calvin Tarkington stopped before he can destroy another family. I want him to rot in jail while he pays for the damage he's already done." Biddle rose and looked down at Gabe. "Will you help me?"

His previous doubts vanished, leaving only one possible answer. Gabe couldn't change what had happened to either his father or Jason Biddle's, but maybe if he stopped Calvin Tarkington from continuing his deceptions, Biddle would be able to put his anger aside, and maybe—just maybe—Gabe would find the peace that had eluded him for so long.

"I'll do my best."