

*Protecting Amy* © 2004 by Susan Page Davis  
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## Chapter 1

Get my daughter out of here.” Major Travis’s words came out tight and stark, and T.R. Barkley eyed him silently.

As a civilian scout for the army, Barkley was used to being ordered around, but this time was different. The major was nervous, and with good reason.

“I’ll give you two men. I can’t honestly spare them, but you’ve got to get her through to Fort Laramie.” Travis swung around and faced him, the cords on his uniform fluttering.

“Sir, I’ll get through faster with your message if I go alone.”

“You’ve got to take Amy,” Travis insisted, his blue eyes adamant. “Nothing good is going to happen here. You know that.”

Barkley lowered his gaze. He had just come in from three weeks of reconnoitering, and he did know. He’d informed the commanding officer himself. The Indians were gathering, making tentative peace among tribes who were traditional enemies. The tribes that had traded freely at the fort had become sullen and hostile, but until Barkley confirmed it, Travis had not believed they would make a concerted attack with the aim of removing the white man’s garrison from Fort Bridger. Barkley had made the best count he could, gathered every scrap of information, then hurried back to the fort.

“Might be best to just pull back,” he suggested.

“Abandon the fort?” Travis paced angrily to the window that looked out on the parade ground. “I have orders, Barkley. The government just bought this fort from civilians and made it a military installation. It’s taken a lot of effort to bring it up to our standards. Washington would not be happy if I gave it up within months of establishing the outpost here. I’m to hold this position no matter what.”

The scout ran his hand through his beard. “No offense, Major, but those orders were written a long time ago by men who had no clear view of the situation.”

Travis’s eyes narrowed. He was near retirement, Barkley guessed. Fifty, at least. The word around the barracks was that if the major could hold Fort Bridger for a year, they’d discharge him honorably with a pension. And he’d done that for eight months, but the way Barkley saw it now, the major had little chance of living out the week.

“Get Amy away from here tonight,” Travis demanded. “You know it’s her

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best chance. If she stays here. . .” He didn’t need to say more. His eyes pleaded.

Barkley nodded in resignation. “All right, as soon as it’s dark. Give her a good horse, and tell her to pack light.”

“Thank you. I won’t forget this.”

Barkley could only hope the man wouldn’t have a tragic reason to remember and regret.

He left the major’s office and went out the gate to the bank of the Blacks Fork. There wasn’t time to go home. He’d bathe in the river and shave here then sleep for a few hours in the barracks. When dusk fell, he would be in the saddle again.

But this time he wouldn’t be creeping alone toward the Indian camps, outfoxing the foxes to learn their ways. He’d be flying toward Fort Laramie with a desperate call for reinforcements and with Travis’s precious daughter.

He didn’t like it. Travis ought not to have brought her here in the first place. Fort Laramie was one thing, but Fort Bridger was a small post 350 miles to the west and had no amenities. The wives of two other officers had come out in April for two months’ visit, but they had left eight weeks ago. Travis, a widower, had brought his youngest daughter out. He’d been away from home nearly a year and craved his family. But he should have sent her back to Laramie when the other women went.

Barkley rarely saw Amy Travis. He only went to the fort when the major needed him. He had a cabin five miles away, where he lived alone. He’d been only a boy when his family came with one of the first wagon trains through the Green River Valley in 1845. His mother became very ill on the trail, and when they arrived at Jim Bridger’s trading post, his father decided to stop right there, in Indian territory, and build a homestead within a few miles of the post, or the fort, as Jim Bridger styled it. Bridger himself was still at the fort then, and Barkley’s father became friends with the legendary mountain man.

The Indians generally had a good relationship with Bridger and clustered around the fort to trade. For several years, wagon trains heading for California and Oregon stopped there to rest and trade. Now they mostly bypassed Fort Bridger, taking a cutoff farther north, making directly for Fort Hall, but some still came this way, taking the Mormon Trail.

Somehow the Barkleys’ homestead, hidden in a peaceful little valley, had been ignored by hostiles. T.R. Barkley thought Jim Bridger’s proximity and rapport with the natives had protected his family, and for thirteen years they had lived unmolested. Once or twice his father had had problems with pilfering and had learned to lock up his stock and tools, but for the most part, the Barkleys were left alone. When Bridger sold the fort to the Mormons and moved on to bigger adventures, the climate had changed around the outpost.

Barkley’s family had changed, too. His parents were dead now, and his sister,

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Rebecca, had married a lieutenant and gone east. His older brother, Richard, was dead; his horse had fallen on him. Young Matt had joined the army and was back at Fort Laramie. If he went to beg Major Lynde for troops to relieve Major Travis, chances were that Matt would be among them.

Returning to the fort after he'd washed himself, Barkley was leading his horse across the parade ground when a flash of color drew his eye. Amy Travis was coming out of the major's quarters, a small house under the wall of the fort. Her deep plum-colored skirt swirled around her as she walked quickly toward her father's office. It was hot, and she wore a white shirtwaist without the formality of a jacket. Her hair was hidden under a lavender bonnet. He'd never been close enough to see her eyes, but he guessed they were blue like her father's.

He'd heard she was a wild thing, always wanting to be out riding the prairie. Her father became exasperated, having to detail men to watch her. She was reputed to be a phenomenal horsewoman and a half-decent shot with a rifle. Barkley didn't know. He usually made a point of staying away from women.

He'd seen her once, across the parade ground, when a chaplain had passed through and held a worship service for the garrison. Amy Travis had sat demurely beside her father that day on one of the benches carried out from the mess hall. She kept her eyes downcast. He'd glimpsed her profile, solemn and earnest beneath the brim of her bonnet. He wasn't sure whether she was beautiful or not, but he liked the way she looked, and he knew she affected him in a way no other woman ever had. That disturbed him. He had stayed away from the fort for weeks afterward.

Which woman was the real Amy Travis? The subdued angel or the rash daredevil?

The sight of her now made him stop in his tracks. Two troopers walked past him, toward the barracks, momentarily blocking his view of her. How could they carry on with their routine while she was in sight? Maybe they feared her father's wrath, or maybe they were just used to her presence.

Miss Travis didn't look toward him, and he let his gaze linger as she walked. If she wasn't beautiful, she was striking at least. That uneasy feeling returned, but it wasn't unpleasant. Barkley felt a pang of regret as she disappeared through the door to her father's office.

"So, T.R., you're back."

He jumped and turned his head. Corporal Jim Markheim was leaning on the doorjamb at the entrance to the barracks.

"Jim," Barkley said in acknowledgment.

"Just admiring the view?" Markheim asked with a chuckle.

Barkley felt his face warm beneath his tan, and he tugged at Buck's reins. He'd have enough time later to decide whether or not Amy Travis was pretty.

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He still didn't like taking her with him. She would slow him down and perhaps endanger his mission, but it seemed he had no choice.

"Can I get a shave around here?" he asked, looping Buck's reins around the hitching post and reaching for his saddlebag.

Markheim shrugged. "It's dry, T.R. Don't know as we'd ought to spare the water for a dirt clod like you."

"The well's dry?" Barkley asked. That would be bad news with the attack coming.

"No, I'm pulling your leg. The water level's low, but that well has never gone dry yet, so they say."

Barkley nodded. His older brother had helped dig that well seven years ago. The occupants of Fort Bridger could always get plenty of water from the Blacks Fork, but in the event of a siege, the well would be crucial.

He fingered the damp whiskers on his chin. "Well, I reckon I'll get shaved then."

"Better wash your clothes, too." Markheim held his nose and grimaced as Barkley pushed past him.

"I won't go," Amy said flatly. She was annoyed to the edge of anger. She'd been separated from her father much of her life as the army sent him from one assignment to another, and she didn't want to leave him now.

He stood up, returning her glare. "Yes, you most certainly will. I was a fool to keep you here this long. It was selfish of me. Now I have to send three good men to make sure you make it safely to civilization."

"You don't need to do any such thing. I want to stay with you, Father."

"I've told you: The situation has deteriorated to the point where that is no longer possible."

"Do you honestly think they're going to attack the fort?"

"Yes, I do. Our civilian scout says they are, and he knows what's what when it comes to Indians."

"But surely you don't think those savages can overpower the fort? You can repulse them."

"It all depends." Her father frowned and studied the map on the wall behind his desk.

"On what?" Amy stepped closer to him. His gravity was beginning to worry her. She'd never before heard him suggest that his outfit might not survive an Indian attack.

"On how many there are of them and how soon we can get reinforcements."

"You're asking Major Lynde for reinforcements from Fort Laramie?" The garrison at Fort Bridger was only fifty men strong at the moment, hardened cavalry troopers. Most had served at Fort Laramie or one of the other western

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forts before being assigned at Bridger, but still, fifty men seemed inadequate, Amy thought, if an attack was likely.

“Yes. I’m sending Barkley. He’ll take you with him and deliver you to Mrs. Lynde. From there, you can go back to your sister in Albany. If things go well here, I’ll send you word. If not. . .”

“Daddy.” She never called him *Daddy* except when she was frightened. It had slipped out, and she saw when he looked at her that he knew she was afraid now.

“I’m sorry, Amy. The truth is, if we don’t get reinforcements fast, things could go badly. I don’t like to frighten you, but there are times when you ought to be afraid.”

Amy sat down hard on her father’s oak chair. She was a tomboy, a daring, fearless girl, or so the boys at home had thought. She would walk a fence rail or ride a bucking mule or jump off the bridge over Walker Stream. In reality, she was scared out of her mind to do any of those things, but she’d felt somehow that she couldn’t let anyone see it. So she gritted her teeth and did them. After a while, taking risks had become a series of exciting adventures instead of terrifying ordeals.

Coming west had been the biggest adventure of all. Since her mother had died, she’d lived with her married sister, Elaine, but when their father was selected as the first commanding officer at Fort Bridger, he sent word that she might join him if she wished.

If she wished! It was wonderful! Elaine had fretted about her traveling alone, but Amy had gone off by stagecoach to Cincinnati and from there had joined the wife of a captain stationed at Fort Laramie. After two months of travel, she’d arrived at Fort Bridger exhausted. It had taken her a week to get her energy and high spirits back. Then her father had had his hands full trying to control her.

She knew she’d stretched his patience to the limit, but when the limit was in sight, she eased off and coddled him. He loved that. She mended his uniforms and brought him coffee at his desk in the middle of the morning. She baked the applesauce cake her mother used to make and knit him a pair of soft, black wool socks.

She stood up and put her hands on his shoulders, fussing with the epaulets. “You ought to have told me sooner.”

“Maybe. I hoped we could smooth things over.”

She straightened her shoulders, knowing there was only one thing she could do to ease his mind. “All right. I’ll go, but only so you won’t worry.”

“Good girl.” He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “You’d just be in the way here.”

“You’ve got to be careful, Father.”

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He laughed ruefully. "I won't give up this fort without a struggle. And if Barkley gets to Laramie in good time, I may have reinforcements before the hostiles make a move."

She nodded, determined not to impede the scout's progress. "There's one thing, though, Father. Please don't make me go back to New York. I'll wait at Fort Laramie, and when it's over, you send for me, and I'll come back."

"Oh, Amy—"

"Please? I've loved being with you. I don't want to give that up."

Her father's eyes were troubled. "I thought it was safe when I brought you here."

"It was. We had a wonderful time together this spring, didn't we, and most of the summer?"

He nodded. "We'll see, my dear."

"Good. I'll wait at Laramie."

"But you must promise to behave, girl. Don't give Major Lynde the headaches you've given me."

She laughed. "I won't. His wife will keep me busy, trying to match me up with the single officers. That's what she did when I came out."

"If only you'd settle down," Travis said in mock exasperation. "I think it will take quite a man to handle you, Amy Margaret."

"Someday, Father."

"Yes. There's plenty of time. Now, you listen to me. Barkley says you must travel light. You're to leave most of your things here. Wear your riding skirt, and take one change of clothing. I'll send the rest of your things when it's safe."

"That old scout said all that? I didn't know he could talk." She laughed, but her father's eyes narrowed.

"You'd be surprised what T.R. Barkley can say when he has a reason to speak. And listen to me, girl. When he tells you something on the trail, you pay attention. He won't waste words, but he knows this territory, and your life is in his hands."

She swallowed and smiled weakly. "Yes, sir. I'll be good."

Travis's eyes softened. "He's a good man, honey. He'll get you through. Now, I've got the supply sergeant packing for you and the escort, other than your personal things. And Amy. . ." He looked keenly at her. "You must promise me you'll take care of Kip."

"Father! You're letting me take Kip?" The joy that spurted up in her was tempered by the realization that he was giving her the swift, valiant horse for a reason. He honestly believed she would be in danger.

"Nothing but the best for you, dear, but don't run him into a chuckhole."

She threw herself into his arms.

"I'll keep him safe for you at Fort Laramie, Father. And I'll be safe, too. When the troops come from Laramie, you'll know I'm all right."