



The Zodiac Series

Sagittarius

Leigh Wyndfield and Blaise Kilgallen

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The Hanging Man

Leigh Wyndfield

Dedication

To Jasmine Haynes and Terri Schaefer--thanks for helping me with this one, ladies! As always, you are amazing!!

Chapter One

The damp, chilly air of Briarlee fortress always made her feel as if she needed to wear her cloak indoors. As if the building itself had slipped past her careful shielding to run icy fingers of disapproval along her body. When she grew older, she came to understand that it was not the fortress that disapproved, feared and hated her, but the people inside it.

In response, Gabriella Etall, third daughter of the King of the Taurus people, spent her life stealing long moments in the sunshine, her face tipped up in joy. She was a practical person, as all Taureans were, but precious moments like these on the parapet outside her room warmed her frozen soul.

Someone had seen her and turned her in for her transgressions. That had to be why she'd been summoned.

Gabriella held up her hand, cupping a ray of light.

She'd been warned. This time would result in serious penalties, no matter how minor the act itself had been. Possibly a stay in the dungeon, where she'd wither and die, her heart cracking in the dank, cold air.

She snorted at herself. *Oh stop being so melodramatic, Gabby! I swear, Melinda is right. You're so theatrical. You can last a fortnight in the dungeon if you had to.*

Taureans weren't, by their very nature, melodramatic and they weren't spontaneous. Her father had accused her of having Sagittarius blood on more than one occasion. The hated Sagittarians, their land bordering the Taurus holdings, always sneaking in and pillaging, were a thorn in her father's side. He'd been systematically smashing them for a year now.

She felt sorry for them. It wasn't a practical feeling, she knew. They had, after all, started the war in the first place. But she'd always been fascinated by the people who her family claimed she was so similar to, men and women with magic just like her own.

She'd long ago convinced herself that Sagittarians must have natural shielding, which would protect her from their emotions if she ever came into contact with them. And how wonderful would it be to stand in the presence of those who were more spontaneous than herself? Just once, she'd like to meet one face to face. Maybe even touch them, since she had so much difficulty touching the people of Briarlee. It had long been one of her biggest wishes.

"Gabriella, you'll be late," Melinda said from behind her, the worry in her voice telling Gabby her fate might be worse than she anticipated.

She pulled the cape around her shoulders and walked, head held high, to hear her punishment. Passing from the sun into the damp, cold darkness, she shivered, but tried to rally. She'd really done it this time, letting the wolf loose from the trap. What had she been thinking? The beast had eaten half a hen house and had been accused of killing lambs and other livestock.

But she'd taken one look into the wolf's haunted eyes, the beast's panic and pain pushing past her shielding, filling her heart, and Gabby knew there wasn't anything to do but let her go. It was plain to see that she was nursing pups. What would happen to them if she didn't return home? Gabby couldn't bear the thought. She was twenty-two years old, but her empath ability made it impossible for her to think responsibility at times. It was so hard to be strong when other people's feelings swirled in the air, as visible to her as the tide to a fisherman.

Pulling back her shoulders and raising her chin, she opened the door to her father's receiving room. The formal red velvet covering the walls and red throne were the only furnishings. It wasn't a room where family conversed and the fact she'd been called here meant only one thing. She had, as her mother once predicted, finally gone too far.

Her father sat with his closest advisors ringing him. The calm set of his regal face belied the swirling temper in his blue eyes and the slight tremble of his frowning lips, telling her he hovered on the edge of a terrible emotional storm. His long, black hair was the only thing Gabby and her father had in common, and that was certainly not enough to save her.

She stopped the required ten paces away and curtsied. Now was not the time to let her manners slip.

"Gabiella Etall," her father said in a tone reserved for formal occasions. "I have judged you and found you unfit to live in this fortress."

Gabby's breath caught. She wasn't going to be sent to the dungeons after all. Relief warred with pain. She might not like Briarlee, but to go someplace else? The thought was so foreign her mind circled in confusion.

"Your rash behavior endangers us all, your constant spontaneous actions showing a total lack of respect for not only your family but for the people of this nation." Her father spat out the word 'spontaneous' as if it was vile.

She knew she was a freak. Since the day she'd been born, she'd been an outcast, trying so hard to fit in, but failing at every turn.

"You will leave tomorrow for the Cloister of the Goddess, where you shall spend five years repenting for your sins."

What? "Father," she said, unable to control herself from speaking. "If I stay there for that long, I'll miss the marriage time." Everyone in Taurus married between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. It was a practical custom, a plan put in place generations ago to smooth the process of pairing and make it more manageable for everyone. It was her last chance to have a normal life. To miss it meant she'd stay in Briarlee forever, unmatched and unwanted.

"Your fate is sealed." There was no compassion in her father's eyes, no leniency at all. "This is your punishment."

She'd always had a strained, barely civil relationship with her father and his coldness didn't shock her. His words did. Deep inside him, she felt his sadness that he couldn't understand his youngest offspring. There had been rare times when she'd felt his love for her when she was a child, but for years now, all his emotions had been filled with frustration and rage, centered around her lack of control.

The door at her back opened, but she didn't turn, all her focus on her father. "Please, I know what I did was wrong, Papa, but I won't do it again. I swear it. Don't take away my chance to find a match!" She sounded like a sniveling child, but this punishment was something she hadn't ever considered. To be sent to pray on her knees for five years, her hair shorn, her chance to pair gone. Taureans were extremely sensual and sexual creatures, but they were also ferociously possessive and once paired, they bonded for life. She'd been saving herself for a betrothed and had never taken a lover, a fact her father must know since she couldn't enter a Cloister without being a virgin. The chance of her pairing might be slight, but she'd embraced that hope with every part of her being.

“You will be examined by the Cloister’s healer after you leave here.” He pointed behind her where three caped Sisters of the Goddess stood, garbed in gray, their hoods drawn. “You are hereby banished from this nation and this family until you have completed atonement. This discussion is over.”

Her heart squeezed so tightly she could barely breathe, Gabriella turned in a daze and went with the Sisters. Her life was over now. Even if she came back after her five years were complete, her slim chance at pairing and finding happiness was gone. If it weren’t for her old nurse, Melinda, there would be no reason to come back at all.

* * * *

Six hours later, her initial panic and despair had been pushed aside by her strong will. All her life, she’d known she was different, known she might not ever pair, no matter how much she wanted to. Her father had said there was a chance he could match her with someone outside of their nation, someone who might not mind her fatal flaw. It crippled her to face spending her life alone, but she would not live out her life without knowing the touch of a man, the feel of him inside her.

And she knew just who she’d choose. The one race of men who might be able to block their emotions long enough for her to complete the deed.

Opening a secret compartment in her clothes trunk, she pulled out a rope and the key her grandmother had given her, her mind made up, her body burning for action.

She might be sentenced to five years in a Cloister, but she would not arrive there a virgin.

Rash and spontaneous as the idea was, she couldn’t deny herself this one last rebellion. She was a Taurus, for the Goddess’s sake! Her people were known to be amazing, if monogamous, lovers. She deserved to have a single memory to sustain her through five years of silence and prayer, and all the remaining years of her life.

She had a mission now. She always did so much better when she was focused. That had been part of her problem. The more they took away her freedom, the more she found herself pushing for escape.

Waiting until the guard outside her room was flirting with a kitchen maid in an alcove, she ducked down two flights of stairs to the secret door which hid a series of passageways her grandmother had once shown her. Her Gran had been the only one to understand her, and Gabby had missed her every day since she died.

Slipping behind an old, faded tapestry, she ghosted through the portal to her one place of freedom. Inside was tight, and she could barely shut the door by holding her breath and squeezing against the wall. The passageways were small corridors, big enough for her to crawl through, crisscrossing the whole castle. This set went into the dungeons.

Dropping onto her hands and knees, she crawled along the passageway to the holding cells containing the one race of people who could block her empath abilities and allow her an experience she’d only dreamed about.

Her father rounded up every Sagittarius he caught raiding and threw them here until they were ransomed by their king. She would offer one of them his freedom in exchange for a night of sex.

Not the best plan, for sure. Guilt that she’d be taking advantage of the captive gave her pause, but then she hardened her too-soft heart. He’d get over it after he was free and would forget all about her.

She, on the other hand, would have this memory to sustain her for five long years.

The first cell was empty, as were the second, third and fourth. Dread snaked up her spine, mixing with frustration. Wasn't it her rotten luck that she'd talked herself into this insanity and the dungeon was empty?

One more cell to go. She wiggled toward the grate which kept the air in the dungeons flowing, the rope she carried snagging on the corner, so that she had to back up and free it. The passageway was high up in the room, almost ten feet, giving her a bird's eye view of the room.

She was now deeper into the dungeon than she'd ever been, looking into rooms she'd never explored. The dungeon had held little appeal in her secret travels. It made the upstairs damp chill seem warm by comparison.

She peered through the bars, relieved to find the room had a prisoner, but paused when she saw that this cell wasn't like the others.

Her gaze brushed past the cold, jagged rock walls, across the floor that had shallow trenches running through it. She followed their path's progress leading off through the far wall. Why had they put drains into the floor?

The smell of old blood hit her and she knew instantly what the drains were used for, barely controlling the bile that threatened to gag her.

Pushing away the thoughts of torture, she gazed at the prisoner. She'd expected him to be chained to the wall by a wrist manacle like the others she'd spied on in the past, but he wasn't.

The man hung from his wrists in the center of the chamber, his toes braced on the floor. Blindfolded and shirtless, he should have appeared defeated, but he stood ramrod straight, the muscles across his chest and along his arms standing in cords. His black hair was unfashionably short, a style only Sagittarius men favored. He was one of them then, a spontaneous, flighty lack-wit, as her father called them.

A thousand questions filtered through her mind, begging to be freed. She reminded herself that he might not even have powers. In fact, he probably didn't, since only about twenty percent of their people had the ability to use magic. But he would know so many things she'd always wondered about.

Now that she was this close, doubts swirled around her. She didn't even understand her need to come to a dirty dungeon to force a chained man into having sex with her. This was yet another example of her inability to reason clearly.

She almost lost her nerve. *You said you wanted to feel a man's touch. Here's your chance.*

Her hands trembled, rattling the loose bars of the grate.

The man tipped his head in her direction, his hands tightly clenching the ropes suspending his arms skyward. His legs were shackled to the floor, but he turned towards her as far as the iron ring would allow, as if he meant to meet this new threat head on.

This is ridiculous. Gabby rubbed her sweating palms on her shirt. Yes, she wanted a man's touch, so much more so after her father had punished her by making sure she'd never have the chance. *But he's hardly in a position to touch me.*

The guards shouldn't return tonight, though. Her father was having a feast to celebrate the Solstice. She

hadn't been invited, already deemed an outcast. No one would be torturing prisoners on this holy night.

Gabby shook her head, even as sadness welled up in her stomach. She was reduced to attacking the helpless to find a bed partner. *I want the experience, but not like this.* She stared at the man, seeing the bruises on his torso for the first time. They'd already beaten him. The battles between the Sagittarians and her father had intensified to the point of lunacy in the last months.

But even as she lay there, the sharp rock biting into her belly, she knew she wouldn't leave him, just as she couldn't leave the wolf two days before. The horror of the chamber rode through her and she was glad she couldn't feel the emotions of anyone who'd been hurt here in the past. She would extend the offer and let him go regardless of his decision. If he denied the sex, she'd get him out anyway. If he agreed, they'd both have what they wanted.

For a moment, she didn't know what to say to him. How to start a conversation that no sane person would ever have?

Taking a deep, calming breath, she said the first thing that came to mind. "I didn't know they had torture chambers here." Not the most intelligent of starts, but one from her heart. She'd been living two stories away from a room that had a trench in the floor to drain away blood and had never known it. The thought made her want to run screaming, but she stayed.

His head jerked at the sound of her voice, his whole body tensing as if gathering strength to fight his tormentors.

She couldn't negotiate with him like this. Digging out the key from under her shirt where it hung on a string, she turned the lock in the grate, almost dropping the heavy bars into the room as it came free with a snap. Dust rose as she dragged the grate back to the secret hallway. Then she attached the rope to the bars of the room opposite and unrolled it from her shoulder, playing it out. She crawled back to pitch the rest through the opening.

Easing herself carefully over the edge, she wrapped the rope around her rear end and walked herself down the wall.

When she turned at the bottom, the blindfolded man tracked her as if he could see her movement.

Chapter Two

Before she could regain her sense and give up her insane plan, Gabby strode across the uneven floor to the hanging man.

Up close, he appeared twice as large as she'd first thought. Muscles and scars ran down his chest, mingling with fresh bruises. Dark breeches and black tall boots covered his lower half. Horror, the likes of which she'd never felt before, poured through her. How dare her father torture people! What kind of monster did that?

Never in her twenty-two years had any man even approached her, let alone one half naked. She was queer, different, with odd gold eyes, always doing such strange things like saving wounded animals and standing for hours in the sunlight. Once she'd turned fourteen, her eye color had molted, warning all who cared enough to look about her magic. She'd been restricted to the castle, then to her own rooms when she'd been caught once too often sneaking out. It hadn't stopped her from leaving, but made her feel more guilty about it.

Tension simmered beneath the surface of the man hanging before her, but she didn't feel any emotions rolling from his body. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I offer a bargain," she said, before she changed her mind.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she lectured herself about the folly of a rash decision. How many times had she let her quick reasoning lead her astray?

"A bargain indeed." His voice came out so low, she leaned forward to hear the words, barely an inch between them. No emotions reached out to strangle her. She had been right! The Sagittarians had shielding which protected her from their emotions.

He smelled of sweat and man, but under that a scent of spice and freedom had her nose twitching.

This could be her only chance to breathe the scent of a man, she realized, and closed her eyes again. Inching her shielding down, she rose on her tiptoes just a bit to enjoy the blessed emptiness emanating from him.

Underneath the spicy male, she detected the briefest whiff of horses. Then pain, frustration and rage slammed into her, rocking her back onto her heels, destroying her silly notions. She felt like crying. She'd thought for sure she'd been right, that there would be someone she couldn't read.

She stumbled back, then it hit her that he probably didn't have magic. Perhaps he had to have powers to erect shielding against her. Still, even if she could sense his emotions, she couldn't give up her plan entirely.

He frowned, then let out a half laugh that was tinged with bitterness. "You know I'm not in a position to turn down whatever you offer." His voice was a deep rasp, and she had the terrible thought that he'd screamed when they'd beaten him.

She shook off the morbid musings. No, this man wouldn't yell. He had too much pride for that.

"But you could," she assured him, then fell silent, unwilling to let him know he had an out. "There's no help for it. I offer freedom."

"In return for a pound of flesh?" He made a mocking slight bow, restricted by his tied hands. "It is yours."

I'd do much to be free, as you must know."

"I don't want to hurt you." The words rushed from her mouth to spill into the room, striving to push back his anger. Her shielding slipped under the onslaught of his strong emotions, so apparent now that she was tuned to them.

"Take off the blindfold," he ordered. The tone mimicked her father's and she knew he led men, knew there was more here than just a raiding Sagittarius out for a bit of spontaneous fun.

Which meant he could not see her face. What if he somehow used her actions against her family? They might have banished her, but she wouldn't openly hurt them. "No, that's part of the deal. The blindfold must stay on."

"Yet you expect me to believe you'll set me free?"

The swirl of his thick anger had her stumbling further away, her shielding tumbling down completely. The empath abilities she'd tried so hard to control flared out and gave her a piece of his mind--literally. His emotions crawled over her body like marching ants. He thought she would do as she wanted and leave him hanging. He thought she was the ultimate deceiver, sent as a special punishment. He thought--

"Stop!" She underscored her panicked words with a hand on his chest, her touch making him jump as if he had expected her to strike him. There was no way she could have sex with this man. A pleasant tumble was out of the question now that she knew her own father had tortured him. But a small part of her couldn't let him go without taking something. "I will give you freedom. In return you will allow me an hour to touch your body and promise to wear the blindfold while I lead you from here."

Now, through their contact, she felt him weighing her trustworthiness. He wanted to believe her, but he was not a trusting man. "How do I know you'll let me go once you've gotten what you wanted?"

"I won't leave you here," she said and even she could hear the truth and promise in her voice. "I didn't even know this room existed. Today is Solstice. Tomorrow they'll come back."

"No doubt." He paused, shook his head. "It's not as if I have much choice. What is your name?"

"Gabby," she whispered. No one ever called her that, but she'd always thought of herself that way in her own mind. Just simple Gabby, not royal Gabriella. "What's yours?"

His anger jumped again. "Does it matter?"

For the rest of her life she might only have the thought of this man to sustain her. Only him and no other. "It does to me."

"Brac, then, if you must have one."

"Thank you."

Obviously coming to a decision, he raised his head. "So touch me, Gabby, and let's be done with it. The guards could return at any moment."

"No one will be here again until tomorrow."

If they'd left him hanging here all night, he'd be in agony by the morning. She shivered, wondering what he'd done to deserve this special treatment. He had the feel of a leader, but that alone wouldn't get him

tortured. Would it? She honestly didn't know.

Her hand still rested against his skin, pressed tight, and she wondered if she could actually do this, if she could really stroke him. It went beyond the fact he was tied and didn't want her. Those things she had resolved herself to overcome.

Could she touch him, feeling him hate her for it the whole while?

"I know you don't want this, but you're my only chance and I have to take it." And then she leaned in to rest her lips against his smooth, hard chest, kissing a man for the first time.

Wonder and awe at the experience of pressing her lips against another human's flesh had her head spinning. Her own emotions overrode his, all his anger dropping into the background. Something hummed through her, zipping along her body to tighten her stomach into knots.

*

Brac couldn't believe it when his body responded to the kiss. A sharp fire raced up his spine. He clenched his teeth against it and tried to stop the roar of humiliation echoing through him. A special hell the King of the Taureans had created only for him in the form of soft hands and even softer lips. This *couldn't* be part of his torture. Could it?

Her scent wrapped around him. Secrets and sunlight. He inhaled, replacing the foul air of the dungeon with her.

He closed his eyes behind the blindfold. The Taurus people shunned those with powers, while his own people revered them. It was ironic that he'd been in this kingdom only to help solve a mystery that impacted both countries equally.

He'd been tracking a killer, one who was slipping back and forth over their borders, leaving dead bodies in his wake. Brac didn't think the monster killed only on their side. Taureans were dying as well, he could feel it. Since the two countries didn't communicate, the murderer concealed the number of his kills.

Gabby's hands whispered along his back, distracting him, but he blocked her out.

Brac's rank meant he rarely entered the field alone any more, since he usually led groups of trackers to trace enemy movement, but his men were needed in the war against the Taureans. He was the Captain of the Trackers, his power well beyond those below him, so he'd thought he'd slip over the border and find the killer. In and out in two days, no more.

It was a stupid thing to do, he had known, but he hadn't fully used his abilities in so long. How hard was it to track the passage of fifty men? A child could follow the Taurean army. But the murderer, cunning and intelligent, running for his life, had been another story. Even if he had been wounded, the murderer knew every trick in the book to evade his pursuer.

The kiss she placed on his shoulder he could disregard, but when she licked up his shoulder blade, Brac was pulled from his inner thoughts, all his focus sliding to the woman who touched him. He tightened his hands into fists of frustration, trying to ignore her. When she returned to sliding her hands along his skin, he could again block her out.

The gods must have been playing a trick on him, because when he finally found the murderer early this morning, he was dead. His wound had festered and something must have stopped his heart. Brac

couldn't believe it, fearing at first the man lying beside the still-smoldering campfire was a trap.

And in a way, it had been. While he was kneeling before his quarry, the Taurean guards had easily surrounded and captured him.

When they hauled him to the dungeon, the Captain who'd interrogated him wanted to know what in the hell Brac had been doing with a dead man. When Brac told the truth, the Captain hadn't believed him.

Gabby's fingers skimmed across his bicep, drawing his thoughts permanently from the past into the present.

What tore away his defenses was the reverence in her touch, gliding along his chest as if she were memorizing the feel of his skin. He had half a mind to believe her, that for some reason she would let him go if he just agreed to let her touch him for an hour.

It was, on one level, a man's fantasy turned against him. There shouldn't be anything exciting about this.

She must be hideously ugly. That had to be the reason, if he could believe her at all. Which he shouldn't. And yet he was beginning to, against his better judgment.

Her fingers trailed down to his breeches, then reversed and traveled up, burrowing through the hair on his chest. The exploration had an innocence to it that would be hard to fake.

Her scent blanketed him, no heavy perfume tainting the pure fragrance of clean woman. Yet her voice held education and the slight clip of royalty. He didn't believe for a moment that a Taurus royal would come to him, no matter how ugly. They were the most arrogant of races, thinking themselves above all others, despising his people most of all.

She stood only to his chest, a full head shorter than he, although he could feel her lift onto her tiptoes to reach him better. Like now. She rubbed the ache in his shoulders, then massaged up his straining arms, unable to travel past his elbows.

He'd grown numb already, the stretch at first seeming so minimal, he hadn't felt it at all. But he'd been here for hours, and the weight of his own body had begun to tear at his muscles. Although, if she didn't free him, he knew that would be the least of his problems.

Her hands worked magic, easing the ache he'd been ignoring. As much as he fought it, there was another problem developing, a dull pressure forming in his cock as innocent stroking built the tension inside him.

Her hands ran down his arms, over his shoulders, down his chest all the way to his pants, then returned. There was a pause, just a small hesitation when she trailed back up, before she skimmed the flat of her hands across his nipples.

The moan slipped past his lips before he could suppress it and he dropped his head forward, calling himself ten kinds of fool.

Her hands stopped immediately and he heard her soft gasp.

He was playing into their plans, letting her tease him ... and then what? It made no sense. He studied it from every angle, but couldn't understand the trap.

She'd come through some sort of vent in the ceiling. He remembered now. Not through the door. Maybe,

just maybe, she would do as she promised.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she whispered.

She sounded so pained, he had to squash his guilt at manipulating her. “My arms,” he said.

“I, I can’t let you go.” She sighed and dropped her head onto his chest. “This isn’t going to work. I can’t do it.” Then she straightened, as if she came to a decision. “You promised to keep on your blindfold if I lead you out. Do you still agree to it?”

He couldn’t believe it. She was going to let him free without making him pay his part of the bargain. It made no sense. “Of course,” he said. He’d tell her he’d dance a jig if it got him out of here.

“Stand still while I cut you down.”

Taureans feared magic, feared anything they couldn’t influence with their own hands. They wanted to chain it up and beat it down, for the good of the whole. Now one of them was letting him free. He tried to master his mind so he wouldn’t blow this chance by stupidly asking why.

Something scraped on the floor, then the rocking sound of a wooden bucket as she climbed on it. She leaned one hand against his shoulder for balance and stood on her tiptoes to reach the rope that bound him, putting her chest into his face.

The heady swirl of woman-scent flashed through his senses, making him dizzy. He had the craziest thought that if he just turned his head, he could capture her nipple in his mouth through the thin fabric of her shirt and she couldn’t do anything to stop him without losing her balance. His senses flared out, following her arms as they reached up and sawed on the rope. Her breasts jiggled as she cut and his desire cranked up a notch.

The burn of need had him pressing his cheek against the soft flesh of her breast. He wanted her.

Had he lost his mind?

Yes, he was pretty sure he had.

Chapter Three

Gabby struggled to cut the rope. It was stretched so taut, it had doubled in strength.

“I hate to ask this,” she said, balancing for a second with her bare hand on his very bare shoulder. Muscles rippled in his arms. She swallowed, trying to unknot the twist in her stomach. “But can you rise up just a little, to take some strain off the rope?”

He inhaled, and she imagined he was scenting her, but that couldn’t be. The breath he took was only to ready himself. He was hurt and beaten. Goddess. Her heart ached for him and tears welled up. She couldn’t believe she’d thought to offer him a bargain like she had. Obviously she’d been struck mad by the rejection of her family. How could her father do this to another person? There wasn’t any reason that made sense to her, nothing that would make this right.

Lifting his arms higher, he circled the rope with his fingers. “Can you cut it around my hands?”

“I think so,” she murmured, rising again onto her tiptoes to insert her knife carefully between his hands and the rope.

She sawed, putting her weight into her cutting. The rope separated with a snap and she tumbled backwards, hauling him with her. His hands still tied and feet bound in place, he couldn’t break their fall. They landed hard and ungracefully, her knife clattering free across the floor.

“Damn,” he growled, ripping the blindfold from his face with his tied hands.

“You promised not to take that off!” Her voice held all her outrage, even as the pain in her hip told her she’d have bruises. She’d really messed up this time. He could identify her!

She paused and reconsidered. If she freed him, he’d never have the chance to use the information against her. Tomorrow she’d be in the Cloister anyway, gone for five years.

He stared at her, one eye cobalt blue, the other hunter green even in the dark light of the dungeon. She tried to scramble away but his body pinned her to the floor.

“Once you lead me from here, I’ll vanish. If you’re worried I’ll reveal you, you needn’t be.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re not ugly at all.” He sounded puzzled.

“You’re a magician!” Which dashed her final hope that there was someone in the world who could shield her from his emotions. He had magic and her empath abilities were working just fine.

His eyes were so mismatched, his abilities must be strong indeed. The more a person used their powers, the more their eye color diverged.

His full, sensual lips twisted. “Ironic, isn’t it? You’re not ugly and I’m someone you would normally never touch in your lifetime.”

He was right. She wouldn’t have if she’d been normal. But if a person looked at her own eyes in just the right light, they, too, were mismatched. It was a secret only her parents and Melinda knew. Not many gazed that carefully and she’d not been allowed out of the fortress into the sunlight where the villagers might see them. The closest she’d been to freedom had been the parapets, or the times she’d escaped against her parents’ strict orders.

“I suppose I’ll have to take your word, although you promised to leave the blindfold on and didn’t.”

Actually that made her pretty mad, now that she thought about it. “Breaking your word wasn’t very honorable.”

His body became heavier where he squished her into the rock floor. “As far as I’m concerned, once the torture started, my honor was the least of what I’d sacrifice to get away from here.”

“Sounds practical to me,” she said, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“Practical?” His mismatched eyes flared comically wide.

She grinned at his surprise, unable to stay angry. The damage was done, so why waste the energy? “Very Taurean.”

“What?” He sat up and pulled her with him. “Are you teasing me?”

Tipping her head, she studied his strong features for the first time. His eyes had been so surprising, she really hadn’t taken in the defined cheekbones, the full lips and handsome lines of his face. She resisted the urge to trace his now frowning mouth.

His eyes narrowed at her lack of response.

“Yes,” she said quickly, before he had to prompt her. “I was teasing you.” She started to stand.

“Wait, you need to release my hands and feet.”

It occurred to her that he could attack her if she cut him free. *A little late for those kinds of thoughts, Gabby.* Sometimes she was an idiot. No wonder she was being banished. She should toss herself off the parapet and save everyone from her presence, including herself.

Brac shook his head. “What were you just thinking?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled, catching up the knife, then slicing through the ropes around his feet. “Hands.”

He held his wrists up, but she could tell he was studying her as no one else had ever bothered to do since her Gran died. She slid the knife between his wrists, wondering what he saw.

The guards had tied him tight. Too tight. If she wasn’t careful, she’d cut him.

“There isn’t enough room.” She changed her angle, moving her body closer to his, but the knife was dangerously near his bare wrists. “I’m afraid I’m going to slice you.”

“I’ll pull my wrists apart as far as I can. Just go slow.”

His scent rolled over her, distracting her as she braced one hand on his thigh to get more leverage.

She worked slowly, sawing carefully through the rope so she didn’t accidentally separate the strands and cut his wrists. Her breast pressed into his huge bicep, distracting her.

“Focus,” she snapped at herself.

But the desire was overwhelming her. She knew a lot about sex, had seen many people together in the act as she ghosted through the fortress. She’d felt need before, although it was the faceless man of her dreams who usually had her waking wet and wanting like this.

Those desires paled in comparison to what she was experiencing right now.

Need crawled along her insides and pooled between her thighs, made worse when his arm rubbed across her painfully tight nipple.

It was too much, too much for her.

Right before she cut the rope completely, she realized what was happening.

“Stop that.” She jerked back. “You’ve been doing it on purpose!”

He blinked mismatched eyes innocently. “What are you talking about?”

Was she wrong?

Without thinking, she dropped her tattered shields to make sure she’d read him right, using her empathy on purpose for the first time since she was a child.

His desire flooded her, primal and hot. So strong her blood ran with it. She hastily tried to resurrect her shields, shocked at her behavior. She knew better than to use her powers. It would only make her eye color diverge even more.

She hissed in irritation with herself, ignoring the fact that unlike when she read others, the experience with Brac had been pleasant, not ugly and painful as it usually was. “Don’t play innocent with me. Your need is burning my insides out.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is it really?” he murmured.

Wrenching his wrists apart, he snapped the remaining strands of rope binding his hands.

Then he caught her cheek in the palm of his hand, the gesture both rough and gentle at the same time. Gabby wondered just how things had gotten so far out of her control.

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Your need is burning my insides out. Certainly an interesting way to put it, one that had Brac burning in return. He wanted her, more than he’d ever wanted a woman in his life. It didn’t make sense, but he didn’t deny that it was true. The fact she seemed ready to let him go without receiving her pound of flesh made him want her even more.

He had never considered how sexually potent an act of unselfish kindness could really be.

“I promised you an hour of touching. Had I known you were going to spend all of it running your breasts along my arm, I would have insisted on much longer.” He flashed a grin at her startled expression and swooped in for a kiss.

Her lips trembled, but stayed shut. Did she not want him after all? Maybe that was why she’d stopped touching him earlier, although her flushed cheeks and struggling breath told him differently.

Shaking fingers curled around his neck as if she needed to ground herself before she lost control.

He took that as encouragement and ran his tongue along her lips. They parted, as if he’d put a key into a lock. He took his time with her, feeling her uncertainty.

Usually he liked fast, hurried sex, quick relief without a lot of emotional commitment. He’d spent his life knowing that his strong powers would lessen his chance at a mate. Strong talent matched to strong

talent. Why waste his time on something destined only to be a passing fancy? But this was going to be so very good. He could tell they had some sort of attraction on a basic level that was rare and made it worth treading lightly.

He should leave, urge her to hurry from the chamber, but first he wanted a kiss from her. Just one, to slake the hunger inside him, but somewhere inside his head, his mind argued that his freedom wasn't worth a kiss, no matter how good it was.

Suckling her tongue, he drew it back into his mouth, encouraging her to explore. She took his invitation to heart, running her tongue over his, nipping his lip with her teeth. He groaned at the teasing, fighting an urge to toss her on her back.

"Need to," she said, panting as she straightened. "We need to get out of here."

"I thought you said the guards wouldn't return until the morning?" He watched her heaving chest and knew she struggled to draw away. It made him want to tempt her back again.

"They won't, but I don't like this place."

He nodded, forcing himself to his feet. "Lead us out, then."

She took his offered hand without seeming to even notice, turning a bit unsteadily to the wall.

His brain engaged and he took in her slender form in a pair of men's pants and a white shirt. Strange animal hide slippers completed the odd ensemble. She'd twisted her black hair into a heavy braid that she tucked into her shirt before grasping the rope hanging from a hole in the upper part of the wall.

He moved to help her, but before he closed the space between them, she was climbing up without any problems.

Amusement flowed through his body, combining with the strong hum of desire. She'd been one surprise after the other.

She boosted herself through the opening in the wall without pause, showing him how strong her small body really was. Then she peered down at him. "You're wearing the wrong shoes for wall climbing."

"I won't have a problem." He sounded as if he was bragging, but his upper body could easily pull him up the ten feet, even though his arms and shoulders ached from spending hours hanging from the ceiling.

She grinned when he climbed through into an odd shaft. "I guess you will make it."

"You doubted it?"

"My apologies." She reeled in the rope. "Slide into the passageway." When he did, she carefully repositioned the grate, locking it with a key that hung from a cord around her neck. "This way," she whispered.

Chapter Four

For the first time, it occurred to Gabby that the reason no one used the passageways might be because they couldn't fit through them. She was small and dexterous and had never had any problems, but Brac struggled behind her. Instead of crawling, she could hear him pulling himself forward on his elbows. It slowed them down.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"Yes," his voice filtered to her in the darkness, strain making the words deep, shivering them along her body. He needed a break, since the next passageway would be even tighter than this one.

"We'll be in a room where we can rest in a moment." She kept her pace deliberately slow.

Luckily, she'd never had problems with dark, tight spaces. In fact, she welcomed them. It was one of her many oddities.

Using her key, she opened the grate to an old, unused guard tower. Somewhere along the way, her ancestors had expanded, building another wall beyond this one, leaving this room bricked with no other access except the windows.

"We have to leave the grate up here. I'll return later and fix it." She pulled the iron bars back into the tunnel, wondering why she should bother. It would be five years before these passageways would feel her presence again. Five years was a small lifetime. "Can you put it behind you?"

"Maybe. It's like a coffin in here."

"I've always liked the feeling of passing unseen like a ghost." The moonlight shone in the room through several windows, casting shadows. It was bright enough that she could see the space hadn't changed since she'd last been here. Dangling her legs from the vent, she reminded herself that the floor wasn't as far down as it had been in the dungeons. The trick to not hurting herself was to expect the right amount of drop.

He grabbed her arms. "Do you need me to lower you?"

"I'll be fine," she reassured him. They were treating each other as if they were friends. Besides Melinda, she'd never had a friend before. But from the moment they'd touched each other, something strange had happened.

He released her almost reluctantly.

She dropped, landing without even a step to the side. He jumped down, ; then stumbled as his feet came in contact with the floor before he anticipated it. Without thinking, she caught him, but her interference only threw him more off kilter.

They ended up in a tangle, this time with her on top of him.

"You know," he said, his words amused in the darkness. "We seem to have a balance problem."

She didn't return the smile she heard in his voice. The desire that had briefly disappeared now returned full fledged. He wanted her, she knew he did. Or he had in the dungeon. And she couldn't stop the sharp twist of longing that suddenly welled up.

“Is this place safe?” he asked.

Smoothing her cheek along his naked chest, she took his scent deep inside her and decided that she’d kiss him again. He could rebuff her and she’d back off, but this was her last chance to have a man. And she wanted him. “The only other way to get into this room is through the windows,” she murmured and then gave in to the need to run her mouth along his bicep.

Deep inside his chest, he made a sound like a purr. Rolling her under him, he landed her in a moonbeam on the floor. “You want to play, little ghost?” He nipped her chin. “Because I promised you an hour of touching and you haven’t gotten it yet.”

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

He laughed. “I should be the one saying that. I want to touch you, too. That isn’t in our bargain, but I promise you’ll enjoy it if I do.”

“Yes.” She didn’t need to think it through. She’d hoped from the beginning to have this and for once, luck was with her.

His lips landed on hers and she opened her mouth immediately for his tongue.

Her hands skittered across his chest, sweeping across the smooth surface, along a scar that ran across it, marring one nipple with its jagged edge. She was scared and yet not, wanting this with all her heart.

His mouth increased its pressure and he inched his body closer, melding them together. Running his lips along her cheek to her ear, he captured the lobe and sucked it lightly.

She gasped at the feeling, sharp and tight, as it raced like lightning down to her belly, ending in her core. “How can you touch my ear, but I feel it here?” She pressed her stomach.

In the shadows she caught the flash of his teeth as he smiled. “Because this,” he rested his hand on her, not on her stomach, but below it, on the mound of her sex, “is where you hold all the desire in your body.” He licked across her lips, just a whisper stroke. “Feel it under my hand?”

She nodded. She had. And it felt like nothing she’d ever imagined.

He lowered his head, capturing her peaking nipple and giving it a sharp tug.

She bowed, the sensation under his palm so strong, she couldn’t lie still. “Oh, Brac, I...” She stopped, not knowing what she wanted to say.

The pressure of his hand increased for a moment, then softened, shooting pleasure through her again.

“You touch me like you know my body,” she whispered, confused.

“All women feel desire this way, but sometimes the places that feel good vary.” He stroked down her leg, leaving a trail of fire, even through her pants.

“And do all men?” She wondered if he could teach her secrets she’d never dreamed existed. Not that she’d need them where she was going, but she could make him feel good before she left. When she’d started her journey into the dungeons, everything had been about her own needs. Satisfying his had somehow become equally as important. One last exploration, one last freedom, memories to last her for the rest of her life.

He swept the hem of her shirt up to bare her belly. "I think so, although the only one I'm sure about is me."

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All her chatter had the feel of nerves to him, as if she talked through her excitement and fear in order to understand the rush of new emotions sweeping through her body. Which meant that his earlier suspicions that she might be a virgin were probably true.

He licked across her stomach, enjoying the jump of the muscles there at the flash of pleasure.

His mind had been arguing for several minutes now that this wasn't wise. Taking the virginity of any woman wasn't something he'd ever done before because virgins required emotional involvement. He needed to leave the castle as fast as he could, not spend his time being gentle and smoothing her way to womanhood. But the bargain had been made and he could uphold his part without intercourse. No matter that this was the best he'd felt with a woman in a long time--hell ever--it wouldn't be good to break long standing rules just because his body lit on fire every time he touched her.

He trailed his fingers inside the top of her waistband, then untied the laces. His hands were rock steady even though the rush of desire flooding through him should have had them shaking uncontrollably.

Tugging down her pants just to the top of her mound, he licked along her hipbone. She arched and caught his hair in a death grip, the pain bringing him an odd pleasure. In payback, he nipped the flesh of her hip.

"Goddess," she moaned, writhing below him, the pain seeming to bring her pleasure, as it had him.

Then an avalanche of desire cascaded over him, as if he stood under a waterfall of sensation. His mind clicked off and, in the shadows and moonbeams, there was only a woman and a man and a need so great, he couldn't fight it. He had to see her naked body or the pressure would kill him.

Pulling her upright, he tugged off her shirt. Then he positioned her so that she straddled him. "Undo your hair," he ordered. "I want to feel it on my skin."

She sat back on his legs and fished her braid from over her shoulder.

Unable to wait, he cupped her breasts, noting how well they filled his palms.

With three twists, she freed her hair and he watched his hands disappear under the soft, black cloud.

"Your hair is like the softest fur." He fanned it across his arms, enjoying the feather-caress.

"It will be gone tomorrow." She smoothed down her locks, her hands trailing over her breasts, leaving her nipples peeking through.

Which is why he almost missed what she said, since he was wondering what she'd look like in sunbeams. He didn't have enough light to see if her nipples were cherry red or dusky brown. He'd bet either way, the sight would burn its way into his brain forever, flashing back at odd moments to make him just as hard as it did now.

"Gone?" his muddled brain kicked in enough to ask.

She didn't answer, instead moving up his legs to press her lips and chest to his. Need roared through

him.

“Virgin, virgin, virgin,” he chanted silently to remind himself to take it slow and not to join his body to hers as he wanted to with a desire that bordered on insanity.

He had enough sense to grab her shirt to place under her before he took her to the floor, then he shimmied off her pants, taking her undergarments and shoes with them.

Running his mouth systematically over every inch of her body but her core, he marked her with strong sucks more than once. It brought him raging pleasure to leave small bruises on her flesh. Maybe she’d forget him, but not for the time it took for the bruises to fade. Goddess knew he wouldn’t forget her any time soon.

She held onto his shoulders as if she needed a lifeline, and he knew she did. He was overwhelming her, not leaving a single part of her untouched.

Lifting one leg over his shoulder, he rose enough to kiss along the inside of her thigh, watching her mindlessly shiver as if she stood naked in a snowstorm.

Her shaking brought back some measure of control. It was time to put an end to it, before he went too far and scared her off the male race forever. He wanted her hot, not over-stimulated to the point of madness.

He placed his mouth on her sex and she came, shouting his name and convulsing so hard, he pinned her hips so she wouldn’t hurt herself slamming into the rock floor. Her response to him had a fierce possessive ache riding in his chest. No woman had ever been this affected by simple loving before. Not with him, at least. Although he’d never bothered to take this kind of time with them before.

Sliding up beside her, he pulled her into his arms, feeling mild guilt for pushing her too hard too fast. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

She nodded, then went still, the rise and fall of her chest as she tried to catch her breath her only movement.

He was aching hard, his clothed cock nestled into her stomach, but he fought the desire to rub himself against her. Instead, he threaded his hand through the silk of her hair, the texture extra soft on his sensitized skin.

“Why will your hair be gone tomorrow?” he asked, trying to distract himself from the ache that had traveled all the way from his cock to the tips of his fingers and toes.

“They’re sending me to the Cloister of the Goddess.” She shifted, rubbing against him.

He bit back a moan before it escaped his lips.

“Your desire is eating at me.” She pushed at his chest. “Lie back and I’ll touch you as you did me.”

“I don’t think I could take that,” he warned, but sat to take off his pants and boots with shaking hands. He had to have her touch him. Right now, before he died.

When he lay down, she stroked his chest.

He tried to distract himself, calm his need to a manageable level. “Why are you going to the Cloister?” Her hair would be cut off, he realized. He knew next to nothing about the Sisters who lived there, but

that much his poor, muddled brain understood.

“Punishment,” she murmured into his right nipple.

This time he did moan, the whisper of her breath across his skin too much to hold back.

Control. He needed to keep control. “What did you do?”

“I acted without thinking.” She sat up and studied him. “Why didn’t you have sex with me?” Trailing a hand down his side, she brushed his cock as she traveled by. Or maybe she hadn’t. Maybe he was just so sensitive, the stir of air had felt like she’d caressed him.

“It would be...” he dragged in a breath, trying to think around the desire that had turned into pain.
“...your first time. Can’t take your virginity. Can’t.”

She cupped his cheek. “But don’t you see? You must.”

He shook his head.

Her hand increased its pressure. “Listen, Brac, if I don’t have sex with you, then I’ll spend the next five years regretting it.”

“You’ll regret it if we do,” he said, trying to stop her from straddling his legs, but he wanted to feel the press of her inner thighs on his skin.

As she leaned down to kiss him, her stomach dragged across his cock so deliberately, he knew she’d done it on purpose. His little virgin had turned into a temptress.

“I was going to let you free, but I can’t come this close and not finish.”

“Gabby,” he whispered, catching a fistful of her beautiful hair. He wanted her so much he had to force the words from his lungs. “I can’t fight you. I want you too badly. But don’t do it.” Keeping his body as still as he could, he wanted to tell her to slide him inside her and ride him hard and deep.

Her hair filtered across his skin, lighting miniature fires in his bloodstream as it went. “Why do you say one thing, but really want another?”

He could hear her confusion and had to laugh. Goddess, he had always been known for keeping his feelings close to the vest, but with her, he was an open book. “Because for some reason I can’t begin to understand, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh,” she said, sounding relieved. “Well, I’d rather hurt a little now then spend the rest of my life not knowing what this will feel like.”

She moved so quickly, his poor, confused, desire-soaked brain had no time to react. Holding his cock in her hand, she dragged it along her mound to her channel and pressed down.

“Dammit.” Pleasure burst across his vision, so intense he lost his slim hold on his control.

As her channel inched down the length of him, his tracking power slipped free and flared out over her.

She bowed and shook as if she could actually feel it, her body slamming down his shaft, breaking through the barrier that said he was her first.

But he couldn’t think through the implications. Details swamped him, the scent of her amplifying to a

layer of nuances he'd never before known with another. Sunlight, secrets, her woman's musk, and the dust of the passageways swirled together, then apart to reveal the core of her. It was a scent with no name, special to this one woman.

For a moment, he could see her aura, the outline of the body that he'd occasionally seen when he'd been tracking. The imprint of her on the air left him gasping in wonder. She was a cool gold, smeared with a sharp red that throbbed with his heartbeat and he knew it was a piece of himself combining with her.

His mind tripped on the mixing of magic, the extra boost of sharing two strong magicians enjoyed when they made love. He'd never had this with another but here it was, actually visible to his tracker eyes.

Then his mind flew apart as she moved on him. His only thought was to help her achieve the rhythm they both needed to find relief.

His fingers bit into her hips as he pulled her down onto his shaft, then released to let her rise back up. Her nails dug into his chest so hard they broke the skin. He didn't care. There was only one thing that was important here, and that was bringing her with him when he came.

He angled her so her clitoris would hit his body every time she sheathed him.

"Brac," she moaned.

"Almost there, Gabby. Fight for it. Don't let yourself be left behind." He wanted her to know pleasure was there for the taking. Wanted her to know that as a woman, she had to participate, had to want the orgasm for it to happen.

She thrust harder and it was enough to spill them over the edge together.

Pleasure raced through his veins, burning him in its intensity, and Gabby dropped like a rag doll onto his chest. He came in waves, spurting into her body as if he had to pour himself into her, claim her in some way.

He held her tight while she shook with aftershocks, each contraction bringing him a shiver of pleasure.

With a great reluctance, he pulled himself from her body, then rolled her to her side, facing away from him so he could wrap his body around hers. Spooning behind her, he tried for several futile moments to fight the wave of sleep that washed over him. Vaguely he realized it was the exhaustion he sometimes felt when he'd overextended his powers. He'd lost control of his magic as he never had before in his life, but couldn't think about it now. He was too tired for anything but the mindlessness of slumber.

Chapter Five

She awoke to the eerie light of pre-dawn. Birds were singing in the distance, their twitters filtering through the high window.

Brac had tried to talk her out of having sex with him, but she knew he'd wanted her. When he'd touched his mouth to her body, every barrier she'd erected to keep other people's feelings out had crumbled down. Something had broken and her emotions tangled with his, making it impossible to figure out where her feelings started and where his left off.

He'd enjoyed their love making. She knew exactly how much and it brought a surge of pride in her chest. She might never have another chance to touch a man again in her life, but this one time, she'd been wanted, desired so intensely she'd always have this memory inside her.

It had been so much more than she'd ever thought possible. A huge rush of sensation, not the usual bad ones she felt from others, but pure and clean, riding through her body like the force of a landslide. She was glad she'd experienced it; glad she'd taken this risk.

His arm was still tucked around her, keeping her warm in the chill of the morning air. She traced a small shadow of a scar down to his hand. His fingers captured hers, startling her since she'd thought he slept.

"I wondered if you'd still be here when we woke, or if you really were a ghost." His voice crawled along her skin, resonating inside her body, lighting her on fire.

He rolled her to her back and she closed her eyes to fight his desire. Or was it her own? She couldn't tell any more.

He kissed her, nice and slow, the action gentle and possibly possessive. She figured she was misinterpreting his emotions, though. No one had ever felt possessive of her before.

"We need to go," she whispered when he let her up for air, then tugged him down for another kiss.

He sat, pulling her with him. "One more second of this and I'll end up here long past sunrise." Desire hummed off him in waves.

She smiled up at him in the first rays of dawn. "We should leave before we're both caught."

His amused expression dropped from his face like a stone, and he caught her chin in his callused palm. "Your eyes."

She realized he saw the mismatched color, but she didn't cower. He had them, too, and wouldn't judge her. "What about them?" she asked, her tone with enough of an edge to warn him off the subject. They had always been a curse she'd had to bear. The reason for all her misery.

"They're two different colors." His voice was hushed, his head shaking as if he couldn't believe it.

"We have to leave." She didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to deal with her freakishness. Turning, she searched for her shirt.

"Gabby," he said, curiosity running off him now. "Are you one of us?"

"A Sagittarius? No." She ducked her head as she pulled on her shirt. Not that her life wouldn't have been a lot better if she'd been one of her father's hated enemies. The thought had her pausing. What if she'd been born across the border? Then she would have simply been acting normal. How different would her

life have been?

It doesn't matter what could have been. It only matters what is. She looked around for her pants.

Brac stopped her, tipping her face into the light again. "You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen, little ghost." He searched her gaze in the dawn light. "One the gold of sunset and one the butter yellow of sunrise." His finger brushed against her cheek. "It's very rare to have eyes this close in color and yet so opposite." A smile played at the corners of his mouth. "But perfect for you, I think. Keeping your powers a secret is only fitting for a ghost."

Beautiful eyes. He'd called them beautiful. She almost choked on the fact that the first person to show her this level of kindness was one of her family's greatest enemies. "We have to go," she whispered, turning her face away and dragging on her pants and shoes.

He didn't ask her what was wrong but she felt his curiosity and concern. After several attempts to raise her shields, she realized they wouldn't go back up again.

She hoped it was only a temporary failing, because otherwise she'd have access to everyone's feelings. And then she'd feel the full brunt of their hatred once more.

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She'd pulled away from him as surely as if she'd slammed a door in his face. He didn't like it. In fact, it had him grinding his teeth as he followed her down yet another cursed passageway, crawling on his belly like a snake.

His little ghost had been silent since they'd left the strange room they'd spent the night in, keeping carefully out of his reach. She could easily outdistance him in the cramped tunnels.

When they reached yet another grate, in a blessedly larger alcove, he caught her hand before she could turn the key in the lock. "Don't shut me out," he ordered, unable to keep the anger from his voice. He wished he could stand and tower over her, but the best he could do was sit menacingly.

She blinked mismatched eyes that seemed to glow in the dim light of the tunnel. "You need to leave before it's full daylight," she whispered.

He caught the braid she'd hastily woven before they'd climbed back into the tunnels. "What we shared will soon only be a memory for both of us, but I want you to know that I name you my friend." Unable to stop the well of desire and strange longing that battled inside his chest, he laid his forehead against hers. "Thank you for saving me."

She sighed out a breath that held sadness and a simple joy.

How could he know her emotions? Yet he did. Suddenly, he was sure that she knew his as well.

And it hit him what her power must be.

He pulled away to see her eyes. "You're an empath."

She flinched.

He felt her embarrassment and need to deny it. "Don't lie to me." He growled his frustration. Damn Taureans. They were always likening magic to evil.

What must it have been like to grow up with powers and not be able to use them? She had to feel like an outcast. "Empaths are highly prized in my country. They are rare, Gabby, rare and special." He tried to give her at least that simple truth, not bothering to add that they were also supposed to make the best mates. Who wouldn't want to be attached to someone who understood their emotions without having to be told?

"They aren't prized here." She said the words firmly, tipping her chin up to show him she wasn't beaten down.

He searched for some way to take away her pain, some way to make it all better. But how could he erase the irrational hatred of an entire country?

There was nothing to do but kiss her.

She crawled onto his lap with a soft moan of need.

Without thinking, he flared his power out around her, drinking her in with all his senses, memorizing her for all time.

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Gabby didn't want him to leave. Or maybe she wanted to go with him. She'd had more acceptance and kindness from this one man than she'd had her whole life.

She didn't want it to end.

But in all fairness, she'd gotten so much more than she'd set out to find. Deepening the kiss, she ran her hands along his chest, memorizing him for the long, lonely nights ahead of her.

When he tugged off her pants, she let him, jerking on the ties of his breeches.

Pulling his cock free from the fabric, she glided her fingers up the shaft, studying the engorged flesh with interest. "We have no time for this," she whispered, holding him in her hand as she met his gaze.

"We'll make time."

"You're increasing your risk of being caught."

"I'll take the chance." He captured her neck and brought her forward for a kiss.

She fisted her hand around the head of his erection and he hissed in a breath of air.

"That feels amazing."

"I know," she said, and found herself smiling at him. He knew who she was, knew she could taste his emotions on her tongue, and he hadn't stopped wanting her.

"I guess you do."

She brushed along the soft sacks below his shaft and he hummed.

"What is your magic?" She'd felt it twice now, could still feel it touching her body like a cloud of dry mist.

He rolled his head on the rock wall and opened heavy-lidded, mismatched eyes. "I'm a tracker."

"You hunt things?"

He smiled and it was the lazy smile of a predator. "Sometimes." Ducking his head into her neck, he licked up the column of her throat as if he tasted her. "I could track you with my eyes closed."

She shivered, even as her mind argued that he'd never follow her. But for some reason, his unspoken threat conjured an erotic vision of herself running, laughing, as he stalked her, intent on having his wicked way with her. She blinked to banish the silly musings.

He sketched her breasts through her shirt. "You're body is so perfect, little ghost. Nice and strong and supple." Then he drew on her nipples, his hands and mouth soft and sweet after last night's hurried love play.

His fingers whispered along her skin, so light, but with an edge of possession. She was sure of that now. And for this moment, she was his.

Then he cupped her sex, testing her readiness with one finger and then two.

"Eyes open, so I can see your power," he said, his tone almost harsh in its command.

And then he laid her down on her back and worked his way into her channel. The slow invasion had her gasping for breath, the feeling so intense and right, she thought she might drown in it.

The pace he set was gentle and deep, his eyes watching hers. "Let your magic go completely. You're still holding it caged."

Is this how Sagittarians made love? She figured they must, and found the idea of power-sharing more erotic than she'd ever imagined.

"Thank you, Brac, for all of this." She let her broken shielding go completely, flaring out her ability, drinking in his desire and need like nectar from the gods.

"With our powers mixing, I have some ability to pick up your emotions. You should be able to use some small amount of mine." He thrust again, the stretch and filling of her body shooting another sharp twang of need inside her.

"How?" she asked, fighting off the mindlessness that threatened to engulf her.

"Take my scent deep inside your body. Close your eyes and breathe in the essence of who I am." His cock moved harder, as if he couldn't help himself.

She closed her eyes and inhaled. At first, she only smelled the surface of the air, then his true scent rushed through her body--man, blood, sweat, the dust of the tunnels and something spicy and free. She moaned with the force of its impact, the smell running through her body like a physical sweep of his hand.

Grabbing his hips, she rode him from the bottom, taking over the pace of their lovemaking. She increased their speed, angling her own hips so she could rub across a place deep in her channel with his cock that felt so good, she wanted to scream with it.

Her climax raced over her body like a roar, screaming along every nerve ending to explode from that

place where her magic resided.

And she knew in that moment, she would never be the same again.

Chapter Six

He had to hurry, doing up his clothes while she dragged on hers. “Quickly,” she urged, turning the lock in the gate to find the sun already risen. “We’ve taken too long.”

This gate spilled him out right on the other side of the castle wall. He still had to swim the moat to safety.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it.” He framed her face for a fast press of his mouth. “Leave immediately and return to your room, little ghost, or you’ll be caught.”

“Go,” she said, panic welling up inside her now that her need for him was slaked. She hadn’t taken the risk to save him only for him to be caught this close to freedom.

Then he was gone, sliding soundlessly into the water and disappearing into the mist which still hovered in the morning sunlight. Her stomach twisted in longing for something she could never have.

She waited without breathing, unable to hear anything, her only solace that if he’d been spotted, the guards would have shouted an alarm.

“Thank you, Brac,” she whispered when enough time had passed that she knew he was gone.

She started crying on the crawl back, tears of relief and wonder. She’d hoped to have a memory, but what a memory he’d given her. Using her magic alone had relieved a great pressure she hadn’t even known was there. But the sex--no wonder everyone spoke about it in whispers and had it standing up in stolen locations. The lovemaking had been wonderful. Something told her it had more to do with Brac, though, than the act itself.

Her tears dried by the time she reached the top steps, leaving in their wake a strength she’d never felt before.

The truth was, she’d been so lucky to find him. He’d given her more than she’d ever imaged having, more than she’d ever hoped for. And she realized she loved him for it.

Waiting at the top of the stairwell to make sure no one was in the hall, she shook her head at herself. How could she love someone she just met? Friendship, she believed. He’d named her friend and she knew he had the feelings that went along with that, but love? That was an emotion that grew slowly through time spent together. Time they’d never have.

So she didn’t love him, but maybe what she felt was more the possibility of love.

She sprinted across the hall and exploded into her room at a run, shutting the door as quietly as she could.

Only to turn and find Melinda waiting for her, anger rolling off her in waves. “I’ve been worried sick about you, child. Waiting for you all night, I have.” Melinda had been her nurse, always with her since Gabby’s first memories.

“I didn’t mean to concern you,” she said, sorry to have upset her.

“Where were you, gone so long?” Melinda stepped forward, worry still creasing her brow.

“Saying goodbye to the castle,” she said, not really telling a lie. She had been saying goodbye.

Melinda's face softened, then her eyes flared wide in horror. "Oh, no, Gabriella!"

"What?" Gabby's chest tightened. Her old nurse had taken one look at her and knew she was no longer a virgin, knew she'd been with a lover.

"Your eyes. Gabriella, your eyes!" Melinda caught her arm in a vise-like grip, pulling her across the room, her horror telegraphing clearly through Gabby's broken shielding.

She blinked at the woman who stared back at her in the mirror. Instead of the unloved and defiant child she usually saw, a woman appeared in the reflection. Her eyes, beautiful Brac had called them, were a stunning set of sunrise and sunset. He'd described them correctly. Their difference was certainly more pronounced, but not as much as she'd anticipated with Melinda's reaction.

But it was the rest of her that surprised her most. Her face had softened, losing its frustration and despair. Now she found a new confidence. How much difference it made having one person treat her as if she were special.

She smiled with lips still swollen from his mouth.

I'll miss you, Brac, she whispered to herself.

* * * *

He ran like a hunted deer, dogging through the forest, moving on silent feet until he was able to steal a horse on the outskirts of a nearby town. Then he rode like the wind.

His mind replayed every single moment with Gabby as he worked his way back home.

Over and over he returned to a vision of her on her knees, the silky black locks being shorn from her head. A slow burn began inside him, this time not of desire, but of anger.

She was one of *his* people, not by birth but by the will of the Goddess. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like to have lived in the very seat of hatred for his kind. She'd said that she'd done something without thinking and it had ended in this punishment. From the very beginning of his memories, his parents had laughed at his spontaneous ways, encouraging him to learn from his mistakes, admonishing him gently when he went too far. But for Gabby, there would be no gentle reproof. They'd sentenced her to hell.

Riding low over the horse's flanks, he thundered through a flat field, his homeland within sight in the distance.

How would it feel to be an empath, the most tender and well respected of all the powers, surrounded by people who hated you? She'd feel it every time her own family rejected her, feel their loathing in the very air around her.

He reined the horse to a halt so fast, the poor animal squealed as its front legs reared into the air.

Turning his nervous mount in a circle, he faced the border, then the far-away citadel of Millboon, which housed the Cloister of the Goddess.

The horse minced a circle again, facing his home. *Be honest, Brac. You don't just want to save her because you feel sorry for her. You want her because you think the magic exchange you shared means she could be your destiny.*

“Not if she’s in a Cloister. She’ll be no one’s destiny there.” His anger cracked through the air, making the horse prance again.

For a moment, he paused, considering that she could want to spend her life serving the Goddess.

Then he laughed. No, his little ghost would never voluntarily spend her life locked behind high walls. She had the skill to move about unseen, but it was sheer curiosity which drove her to explore.

In fact, she was a natural spy.

He turned the thought over in his mind, before discarding it. Many trackers became spies as well. Empaths would struggle with that occupation.

The only way to make sure she was where she wanted to be was to ask her.

If she wanted to leave the Cloister and live another life, he’d offer her his. She’d be happy in his homeland. He could promise her that at least.

His mind made up, he dug his heels into the horse’s flanks, riding now towards Millboon.

* * * *

The Sisters from the Cloister of the Goddess were later than expected. Gabriella Etall was ready for them. Dressed in the drab gray cape of the Goddess, she hugged her only friend goodbye without crying.

“Take care, girl,” Melinda whispered, her concern and love filtering through the air. Gabby had been unable to resurrect her shielding since her lovemaking with Brac.

“Thank you for everything, Melinda.” She smiled, feeling sad to leave her friend, but not sad to leave her prison.

Exiting her room, she marched down the stairs, for the first time in recent memory not trying to conceal her passage. When she reached the first floor, she found the whole house waiting for her in a silent throng.

Odd bits of emotions twirled like mini dust devils in the great hall. Fear, curiosity, and hatred combined into a mesh sealed with pity.

They pitied her!

But Gabby found that she didn’t pity herself. She’d had acceptance from a stranger and it healed something inside her. How strange, yet it was true.

A vision of Brac above her, saying, “Eyes open, so I can see your power,” filled her mind. He’d wanted to see her eyes, wanted to feel her magic.

With head held high, she strode slowly past the watching people, past her fretting mother and silent father, not bothering to say goodbye. Secretly, her mother had always wished her gone, wished her youngest daughter hadn’t been so different. Before Gabby had learned to shield correctly, she’d heard her mother’s emotions.

Well, she was leaving. And in that moment, she realized it would be for good. She wouldn’t return to this place of fear and pity again.

Gabby entered the waiting carriage without pause, the three Sisters following her inside.

“We’ll take a bit of that pride from you soon enough,” one of them said, as she settled across from Gabby.

I doubt it, Gabby thought silently, but only turned to watch from the carriage window instead of replying.

The three women gave off an evil hum, as if they’d relish breaking her spirit, but Gabby shrugged it off as a leap of her imagination. The Cloister of the Goddess should be filled with every manner of light and life. Those were, after all, what made up the Goddess, according to their teachings.

Six hours later, she entered the Cloister and had to admit she had overestimated her newfound strength and she’d completely misjudged the nature of the order she’d be joining.

If her family’s fortress had been continually cold, the building the Cloister called home was downright frigid. The entryway was filled with dark woodcuttings. She caught quick glimpses of women with their hands tied behind their backs, kneeling before snarling monsters.

Her father might hate her, but she wouldn’t believe he intended for her to come here, of that she was sure within seconds of arriving.

“This way,” a new woman said, her face hidden in the shadow of her gray cape.

Their footsteps echoed down the high hall as if someone clapped in amusement at Gabby’s doom. Shadows flickered in the corners, or maybe they were people peering at her from secret hiding places.

Her breath caught in her chest, fear squeezing her heart. The Sister led her to a huge empty room with only a blazing fire to light it. “Kneel here.” She pointed to a spot that looked washed in blood in the very center of the rock floor.

In a daze, Gabby knelt.

“You will pray for your sins until morning, then you will begin the first step to becoming one of us.” The woman’s voice rang harsh in the room. “We will cut your hair when the sun rises, initiating you to the lowest level of our order.”

Gabby’s mind scrambled to process this latest turn. She was to pray for her sins, but she no longer felt as if she’d done anything wrong.

The Sister moved closer and whispered so low, Gabby almost didn’t hear her. “Don’t worry, child. This is not so bad a place as it appears. It will be your home.”

Gabby explored the other women’s emotions. Unlike the Sisters in the carriage, compassion mingled with a deep sadness.

Then the Sister turned and her footsteps echoed as she strode from the room.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Gabby carefully peered around her, half expecting the monsters from the walls of the foyer to be lurking in the shadows.

Now she longed for the home that had been her prison. As shadows danced along the walls like claws from a thousand raging beasts, Briarlee didn’t seem that bad after all.

Chapter Seven

It took her an hour to beat back her fear enough to be able to use her powers. Keeping her head bowed as if she was deep in prayer, she flared out as she had when she was with Brac.

At first, she felt nothing. Then she caught the boredom of her watcher.

Focusing all her energy, she was able to pinpoint her guard. To her right for sure, possibly from an unseen hole in a tapestry which showed a golden woman walking through a sea of dead, mutilated bodies.

Gabby held perfectly still until her legs screamed and her body cramped. But after a small lifetime, the effort was worth it.

Whoever watched her fell fast asleep.

Gabby tried to stand, but ended up in a ball on the floor. Biting on her lip, she silenced the bellow of agony that wanted to escape. Her whole body was a writhing mass of pain from kneeling too long.

Get up! Now, Gabby. Move!

She tried, shaking out her legs until the pinpricks of pain subsided.

Then, on silent feet, she ghosted to the door she'd come through.

Only to find it locked. In fact, three of the doors were bolted from the other side. She didn't try the one near the sleeping watcher.

Turning a circle, Gabby fought tears. She would not give up. She would not.

Letting her head drop back, she blinked away moisture. Brac had called her a ghost, because she was, dammit. She had spent her lifetime flowing through every part of her father's fortress, finding passageways no one else knew existed.

She opened her eyes, determination building.

Above her, beams crisscrossed the ceiling, leading to a small door in the eaves. How the Sisters were supposed to reach it, she didn't know. There were no stairs or ladder from this room so they must have access from the other side. Perhaps the entry was meant to be used to hang flags or banners from the rafters during celebrations.

After a thorough inspection of the hall, she realized the only way to reach the ceiling would be to climb up the outside of the fireplace. She'd climbed stonework before, many times, but her stomach knotted in worry as she hurried towards the chimney.

The rock was rough, spaced with mortar that had contracted and receded with the passing of time, leaving shallow foot and hand holds.

Tying her skirt up between her legs for better movement, she flipped her cape over her shoulder. She'd worn a wheat-colored dress when she'd left Briarlee, so she'd need the dark cape to hide if she managed to escape. But to escape, she'd have to make sure she didn't drop to her death halfway up the six man-length climb.

Pacing herself, Gabby forced all thoughts of falling from her mind.

She wasn't staying one more moment in this place. That much she knew. That and the fact that any life she lived would be better than life here. She'd walked away from her family for good this morning. She knew that now. No matter how painful that might be, she wasn't going live in a Cloister full of monsters. She was done paying penance for things beyond her control.

Working her way up the chimney, she felt the pads of her fingers scratch and burn on the rough mortar. But with each passing foot farther towards the ceiling, she envisioned a new life. One in the land over the border, where she'd blend in with people. No one would think twice about her mismatched eyes there. How she would support herself, what she would eat, she'd have to figure out when she got there. And if she was completely honest with herself, she would admit being close to Brac was important as well, even if she'd never see him again.

She pulled herself up another set of rocks, her right index finger stabbing into an unseen sharp rock.

Ignoring the pain, she climbed again.

"I'm done with darkness and cold," she whispered, pulling herself up again, her left fingertips ripping this time. She imagined a life standing free in the sunshine.

Suddenly, she was even with the rafters. Dragging herself up and over a beam, she straddled the wood.

Inching along, she worked her way to the door, realizing that it too could be locked.

"Cross that bridge when you come to it," she whispered, glancing at the tapestry where the watcher hopefully still slept. She couldn't focus well enough to use her abilities to check.

Suddenly, the whole room spun, and she clutched the beam to keep herself from toppling. "And don't look down!"

Finally, she reached the door, holding her breath as she grasped for it. The knob turned easily under her hand, revealing a set of steps leading up to an old, unused bell tower.

Climbing through, the dusty stairs shook beneath her weight. Something snapped below her. In a panic, she scrambled up to the platform above, scared the rotten stairs would collapse at any moment.

Thank the Goddess this floor isn't about to give out, too.

From the windows of the high tower, she studied the rooftops of the cloister, finding herself only a short distance away from the flat roof of the hall she'd just left.

"Move, Gabby, or you're caught for sure." She hopped down, dropping to her knees with a hiss. Where was all the grace she had at home? She'd be bruised for sure with the rough landing.

Taking off at a run, she raced across the rooftop, reaching the farthest side, where she lowered herself into a tree, then climbed slowly out on a branch that stuck out over the wide rock wall. It would be a shame to come so far only to lose her balance and end up with a broken leg on the wrong side of freedom.

* * * *

Brac crouched on top of the wall, his senses flaring out into the Cloister. He had been serious when he'd told Gabby he could track her with his eyes closed. Her luscious gold aura had left traces of itself as she passed into the front doors, but he knew she was no longer near the entrance. She'd arrived hours ago

and would be deep inside somewhere. He would make a slow sweep of the bailey from the wall until he found another trace of her.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled, hoping to pick up her scent but knowing it would be a long shot at best. He'd only smell her if she stood by an open window or out in the open.

Only he did smell her. Her rich woman's scent curled inside him as if she was only a hand's breath from his face, telling him she was close.

Scanning the yard and buildings below, he didn't see any gold in the darkness. Surely their power exchange hadn't increased his ability to smell her to this extent?

Perhaps she was around the corner of the building closest to him. He'd need to change positions to see.

Reversing direction, he saw gold in a tree nearby.

He stifled the bark of laughter that threatened escape. He should have anticipated that she'd be on her way out faster than he could get to her. His ghost didn't stay put any place she didn't want to be.

Moving silently, he approached her as she inched along a tree limb over the wall. Raven-black hair was blessedly still intact on her head.

"Where are you going, little ghost?" he murmured, his hands itching to touch her.

She yipped and lost her balance.

With a lunge, he caught her, then himself, as she threatened to take them both off the wall. While he'd love to have her on top of him again, he didn't want it to be at the bottom of a ten-foot fall.

"Brac," she breathed. "What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you. Although I'm a bit late for that, I see."

"You should be home. You could be caught!"

"Millboon's a free town. I'm safe here." He inhaled her, not liking the faint taint of darkness that clung to her hair, but enjoying her scent with his tracking magic. He wanted to bring her down below him, roll his body along hers until she carried his essence again.

"You came back for me." Her voice held a wealth of emotion and he wished he had some of her ability to read what was there.

He forced himself to tamp down his magic and think as a man. "Where are you going?" The words came out a bit harshly.

"I, I thought I'd go to your country, where I could blend in," she said in a rush.

He didn't have to be an empath to hear her uncertainty. "Then I'll take you. Come on. I have a horse."

*

He'd come back. He'd come back for her. Her whole body shook at the revelation as she watched him lower himself, then drop from the wall on the side of freedom.

"There she is!" someone yelled in the darkness.

Gabby didn't wait to see who it was. Launching herself, she jumped from the wall, letting her body roll to take the impact, coming to her feet the end of the move.

"Dammit, woman," Brac growled from somewhere close. "You could have broken that pretty neck of yours."

"They spotted me," she said, jogging to him.

He grabbed her hand, dragging her to the west at a run that had her stumbling. "Keep up," he ordered.

"I'm trying," she whispered, tripping along behind him. His stride was double the length of hers.

He swung up on a horse, then lifted her before him. Digging his heels into the horse's flanks, they were off, riding into the night down to the town of Millboon.

It soon became clear to Gabby that they weren't riding aimlessly. Brac knew where they were going and she wondered what their destination could be.

As they dogged down side streets and up alleys, she held his bare arms, attempting to warm him in the chilly night air. He was still shirtless from the dungeon. She really couldn't believe he'd returned and wondered why he'd come back. Silly thoughts of love were tossed out immediately. It made no sense. He risked his freedom for her.

They darted along another alley and skidded to a halt. Brac pulled her from the saddle, then slapped the horse's rump to send it on its way.

"Won't we need it?" she asked, worried as their only means of escape rounded the corner at a full gallop.

"I'd rather not be caught with a stolen horse." He knocked on a nearby door.

"Where are we?"

"A friend of mine owns this inn." He caught her hand and pulled her to his side. "Follow my lead."

Before them, the door opened.

Chapter Eight

The innkeeper laughed too much. In fact, he was laughing now, pounding Brac's back yet again. "So good to see you, lad," he said, then glanced in Gabby's direction, nothing but joviality on his face.

But Gabby felt his true feelings and they were laced with suspicion and worry. She was an outsider, an island in the middle of the room, which consisted of a table with a pitcher and bowl, a bed and a just-lit fireplace. Once again, she stood alone, strange, freakish Gabriella Etall.

Narrowing his eyes, the innkeeper, named Sattermon, tried to peer past the hood of her cloak, another puff of suspicion escaping from him. "Didn't think I'd see you for another few years, with your new position and all." He'd shown them the room with only a laugh, but now that the door was closed, it was clear he wanted answers.

Gabby ducked tighter inside her cape. Brac had said to let him handle it, so she would. She'd spent her life an outcast, with little practice dealing with others, and no practice dealing with someone who seemed overcome by mirth, but who felt so differently inside.

"I'll need clothes, if you have some to spare." Brac ran a hand down his marred chest, the bruises there molting into harsh greens and yellows.

"I do." Sattermon crossed his arms. "Since you don't seem inclined to give up information, I guess I'll have to come right out and ask it."

"Ask away," Brac said, a smile playing around his mouth. Then he shifted, putting himself a few more steps nearer to her.

She could reach out and touch him, he was so close, and his presence seemed to act as a buffer. Suddenly, Sattermon's emotions were muted, less severe, more manageable. She let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

"What in blue blazes are you doing with a novice from the Cloister of the Goddess? Have you lost your mind, man?" The innkeeper was angry and baffled, but Gabby only felt the edges of it.

Unable to help herself, she slid partially behind Brac, effectively silencing all of Sattermon's anger.

Brac tipped his head to the side and murmured, "You okay, little ghost?"

She nodded. She was now. But how could she function in the world if she could no longer deal with other people's emotions? She'd have to figure out how to rebuild her shields. She couldn't stay hidden behind Brac forever. In fact, the time would soon come when they would part ways.

"She's not a novice, Sattermon." Brac pushed the hood from her face and captured her braid in his palm to prove it.

Sattermon's frowning mouth showed he wasn't convinced, but his emotions were thankfully muted. "She wears their cape."

Brac ran his hand along the end of her braid like a caress, saying nothing.

"You took her from the Cloister, didn't you? Are you mad?" The innkeeper's outrage flared high enough for Gabby to feel it. "They'll have your head on a pike!"

Gabby had to speak, had to defend Brac from blame. It was time to start dealing with problems instead

of ghosting through her life. Lifting her chin, she gathered her courage and met the world head on for the first time. "He didn't take me. I left."

Sattermon's gaze twitched to hers. "People don't leave the Cloister. You go in, not out."

Forcing herself to breathe through his emotions, she focused on the argument. "I'm very good at getting in and out of places."

Brac's mismatched eyes twinkled and she felt his quiet spurt of amusement.

"You're eyes are two colors." Sattermon said it like an accusation. "Yet your accent is Taurean. And your cloak is from the Cloister."

"A mystery," Brac said, his unreleased laughter dancing along her skin. "She's coming home with me."

"Home? Are you mad? You'll lose your position if you take a mate!"

Brac's hand tightened on her braid.

She placed her fingers on his. "Mate?" He wasn't pairing with her. They barely knew each other.

Sattermon threw up his hands. "Don't tell me you haven't discussed it with her?"

"Of course I haven't," Brac said, his irritation with the innkeeper jumping from his skin to hers. "I just got her out of the Cloister."

"I escaped all by myself," she clarified for the record.

"You did, although I hope you give me some credit for showing up at an opportune time."

"Of course. But mate? Is he talking about pairing?"

"He is." Then Brac dropped her hair and shook his hand free from hers.

Pain at his rejection sliced through her as he turned away.

*

Brac had to get rid of Sattermon before the conversation went completely out of control. He didn't want his friend to see him groveling, which he was totally prepared to do to have Gabby in his life.

He'd decided on his mad dash to the inn that he wouldn't just be escorting her to his country--he'd be taking her home as his mate. It only complicated matters that Sattermon saw his intentions so clearly. Then again, he'd shown little or no interest in women over the years. Certainly he'd never showed up with one in tow, having rescued her from a religious order. Well, not rescued, since he'd gotten there too late.

Part of the reason he burned for Gabby was because she didn't need rescuing. She was resourceful and talented. And she had beautiful eyes, filled with a rare power. Everything about her had his whole body focusing on her when she was near.

Brac took his friend's arm and dragged him to the door. "I'd appreciate the clothes when you get a chance."

"You have to take her back," Sattermon protested.

“She left on her own.” He grinned, but it was a smile that showed his teeth, telling Sattermon to back off. Opening the door, he stuffed his friend through it, then lowered his voice so she couldn’t hear him. “She’s mine. I’m not giving her up without a fight.”

Sattermon’s eyes flared wide. “Brac,” he said helplessly. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Yes.” He closed the door behind him and lowered his voice further. “We mixed magic.”

“You had sex with her? Are you insane! She’s a novice!”

“She’s not a novice and of course I had sex with her. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Sattermon rocked back on his heels. “So you’ve chosen, then.”

“Yes.”

“But she hasn’t?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ve watched women chase you around for years without you even noticing they were there.” Sattermon shook his head. “And now you choose *this* woman. She’s trouble. I can feel it. There’s more to her than what you see on her surface.”

He clapped his friend on the shoulder. “That’s part of the reason I want her.”

Then he turned to go try to convince the woman he loved to choose him even though she didn’t know who he was beyond a man she found hanging in a dungeon.

* * * *

Brac came back, determination sliding off him in waves. He strode across the room, his mismatched eyes sparking. She almost stumbled away from him, but caught herself. From now on, she faced things head on, or at least things that had to do with this man.

Strong fingers untied her cape. “The Cloister is behind you.” He turned and with a snap of his wrist, tossed it into the fire. “Your future is what matters now.”

She nodded. “I want to go to Silverpass.”

His eyebrows rose, but he didn’t seem surprised she planned to travel to his country’s capital. “And I shall take you there, no matter what you decide here in this room tonight. But I’d like you to travel as my lover as well as my friend.”

Her breath caught in her throat. It wasn’t a declaration of love, but his offer was filled with stark possession and need. Did she want to be this man’s lover? Yes. But she hadn’t told him who she was. For a moment, she considered never telling him, just walking away from Gabriella Etall forever and becoming simple Gabby. Then she threw the idea away. He would want her for all of who she was or not have her at all. “I am the youngest daughter of the King of my people.”

His mouth dropped open and she felt his disbelief. Fisting her hands, she waited for his rejection.

Then he dropped back onto the bed, his amusement filling the air. “Are you really?” he murmured, staring up at the ceiling.

She waited him out, wondering what he found so funny. His mood had her tipping her head.

Then he grinned and patted the bed. "I knew you were keeping something from me, but that I wouldn't have guessed, although I supposed it should have occurred to me. You were living in his fortress."

"You don't care?" she asked, unable to believe it.

"Do you plan to ever go back there?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then it doesn't matter to me. There is no way they could understand you, Gabby. I do," he said simply.

She sat on the bed, unable to hold herself apart from him, relief that he wasn't upset at her parentage flooding through her. And she knew he understood her as no one else had ever done. It made him so very perfect. "Sattermon said you'd have to leave your position if you took a mate. What is your position?"

"I'm the Captain of a group of trackers. Our army uses us as scouts during campaigns."

Without thought, she ran her fingers through his short hair, remembering again that their countries were at war. Sometimes it was so hard to keep that in mind when she was with him. It always felt like the rest of the world dropped away when he was near. "And you can't scout if you're paired?"

He rolled to his side and rested his hand on her leg. "No. Trackers take too many risks to be mated. Look at the scars on my body. Nothing wants to be hunted, be it animal or human." Splaying his hand on her knee, he paused as if trying to decide what to tell her. "Gabby, when Sagittarian magicians mate, they mix their magic and it ties them together. I wouldn't want to be away from my mate for any length of time."

"So if we mated, you'd have to stop doing what you love to do?" And she knew he loved to track. She felt the thrill that rode through him when he used his power.

"Oh, I would never stop using my magic, little ghost. There are other things for a tracker to do besides scout for the army."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "The part of life I enjoy the most is exploring the opportunities the Goddess presents to me." His hand trailed up her leg to her hip. "We could discover the future together."

She shook her head. "But if we don't stay together, you won't lose your position." He spoke as if it was a forgone conclusion, yet she knew it was not, just as she knew he couldn't seriously be thinking of her as a potential mate.

The hand around her hips tightened, tipping her onto her side on the bed. "I'm not leaving you unless you force me." He kissed her, his lips melding to hers. "You hold the decision for us both."

"I don't understand, Brac," she said. "I can't understand why you would give up so much for a relationship that might amount to nothing."

"Because, little ghost, this thing between us might be worth all the sacrifice in the world."

"But what if it isn't?" she asked in a whisper.

“It will be.”

He sounded so sure, she stared at him in confusion. She’d never in her life met someone so ready to take a chance, so willing to risk it all on an act that could mean absolutely nothing in the end.

Well, actually, she had met someone like that--her.

They were so similar, it took her breath away. And yet they were totally different in other ways, too.

She’d risked everything to free the wolf from the trap, then again to free Brac. He’d risked his freedom to save her from the Cloister.

Yet she knew he’d been raised in a loving, accepting home, the strong hum of confidence that constantly rolled off him confirming he’d had a life she’d only dreamed of having. And his powers were skilled and well developed, his magic a part of him.

They lay side by side, facing each other, their heads only inches apart as she searched his gaze for answers.

“Going with you brings me so much, but I don’t understand what I bring you.” If she stayed with him, he would teach her how to use her powers, give her the acceptance she’d never had before, back her up when she got into a tight place. She’d be a fool not to stay as long as he’d have her.

He traced along the edge of her hand, the caress bringing to the surface the desire she had for him that was never buried deep. “You’re strong, Gabby, forged in the fires of your childhood. You won’t break under adversity. You won’t faint at the slightest danger. Any place you go, you’ll be exploring its secrets within hours of arriving. Why wouldn’t I want to spend a lifetime discovering the world with you?” He met her gaze, a small smile tipping his lips. “And we have an attraction so enormous, it’s never going to go away.”

She stared at him, an emotion so strong and thick and right filling her that she wondered if it might be love after all.

Chapter Nine

He waited for her decision, every muscle of his body held rigid. She studied him, her face so filled with confusion he could read it easily. Resisting the urge to touch her, he closed his hand in a fist.

"I've always wanted just one person who'd like me unconditionally, who'd be my friend despite who I am." Her golden eyes blinked and the confusion cleared. "But instead you like me because of who I am." She leaned over and kissed him sweetly on the lips. "I can't tell you what that means to me."

He rolled to his back, pulling her down on top of him. "No, but you could show me."

She returned his smile. "I could," she whispered. Running her mouth across his chest, she licked along a scar to his nipple. "I'm going to be sad when Sattermon brings you a shirt."

Capturing her hand, he kissed the cuts on her fingertips.

"From climbing in the Cloister," she murmured and he realized her empath abilities had let her hear his unasked question. "I want to explore you."

He let her touch him as she wished, unraveling her hair and wrapping his hands in it. She pulled off his clothes, then her own, and he cupped her breasts, teasing her dusk-colored nipples with his thumbs. "Pretty," he whispered, bringing color to his memory of her in the tunnel.

Slipping away, she kissed along his body, finding his hot spots, spinning him higher. When she finally took his cock into her mouth, he caught her chin. "Another time."

Then he flipped them to their sides and tucked her leg over his so he could slide himself inside her. Catching her hand, he threaded her fingers with his. "This is much better with a bed below us."

Her breath caught as he gave a shallow thrust.

He snuggled her closer, the angle of their bodies not allowing for rushed loving. He brushed a hand over her bruised hip. "You're as beaten as I am."

She sighed at the caress. "It doesn't hurt when you're inside me."

He petted her once more, then arched deeper. "Let your magic go," he whispered, already addicted to the rush of her power.

They flowed together, the joining more about slow loving than fast release.

"You smell so good, Brac."

"It's my power, it intensifies scents." He kissed her, feeling them working towards climax.

"Will you teach me about magic?" Her hope was clear now that their powers were mixed.

"Of course." He lightly pinched her nipple, knowing it would drive her higher.

She used her leg to work her way farther along his shaft, and they were lost in the feeling of their bodies coming together, the magic intensifying their sensations. Emotions swirled from one to the other, the pleasure of one building the pleasure of the other.

When he climaxed, it pushed her over the edge into her own orgasm. Contentment raced on its heels, the sensation of being completely sated making euphoria hum through him. Collapsing, he snuggled her

close, dragging the covers over their rapidly cooling bodies.

Then he framed her face. “We know almost nothing about each other. I was a hanging man and you were a ghost when we met, but I promise you I’ll always accept and love you for who you are, always be at your back and be in your bed. You won’t ever regret your decision.”

“I won’t regret it,” she agreed, believing him with all her heart and soul.

The rest of their lives stretched before them, the whole world waiting to be explored, Brac at her side. Gabby couldn’t wait.

The End

About the Author:

Leigh Wyndfield has been writing for years but finally decided to get serious in 2003.

When she finished her first book, True Seeing, she was surprised to learn she’d written a Romantica novel, especially since she can’t watch the kissy bits during movies. She lives in Virginia.

Enjoy free short stories and upcoming book excerpts from Leigh Wyndfield at her website, www.leighwyndfield.com or email her at leighwyndfield@yahoo.com

Taking A Chance

Blaise Kilgallen

Dedication

Always and forever, my romance novels shall be dedicated to my handsome husband, Bill Fox

Prologue

Joyce Winters hopped onto the waiting train from a platform thin of people at New York's Pennsylvania Station. The ride home to Pleasure Park in New Jersey would take a couple of hours. It was normally a commuter train, but today was Saturday and it made stops like a local. Joy plopped her slender backside, covered by faded jeans, into a seat near the door between cars. She laid the denim jacket and the bulging duffle next to her. She could use some legroom and some relaxation. She was pooped after a miserable day without anything to be ecstatic about.

She'd noticed a cattle call for auditions in *Variety* last week and grabbed the five a.m. milk run from the Jersey shore to New York City. Now, it was after six o'clock in the evening. Her feet ached like hell and she had a splitting headache. She'd eaten nothing except a bagel with cream cheese and coffee since boarding the early train. She was famished, ragged, and stressed out after waiting in line to audition, her stomach cramped by hope and anxiety.

Joy had decided on one more try, knowing it was a long shot. At the Albion Theater there must have been a hundred girls, just as pretty and probably as talented, in a line snaking down the street ahead of her. Adding to her discouragement was the fact that she hadn't been called back for additional tryouts for the new musical opening soon. She knew she could sing and dance, but so did scores of other hopefuls who, like her, hungered for a chance in the bright footlights of the Big Apple.

Well, that takes care of that. No more dreams of footlights and big money for me, she mused, slouching down and stretching her legs toward the seat in front of her. I guess it's back to school for me.

Joy stuck her ticket in the back of her seat. The train out of Pensy left on time, rolling smoothly and swiftly through the tunnel under the Hudson River and heading farther south. Arms crossed over her chest, her duffle snuggled close, Joy laid her head against the backrest, eyes drooping, and slipped into a gentle snooze.

Chapter One

“Miss? Your ticket’s punched for Peck’s Wells. We’ll be stopping in a few minutes to grab the mail pouch from Wells Fargo and take on water. After that, we don’t stop for another fifty miles till we get to Laramie. You’d best think of getting off.”

Joy spun out of her slumber with a spasmodic jerk. Coming out of a doze, she rubbed grains of sleep from her lashes. “Uh! Oh, gosh, sorry. Guess I dropped off. I’ll just ... what did you say?”

She straightened up more quickly, leaned forward, and glanced through the grimy window of the train. What she saw was emptiness--vast plains and rocky, rolling hills with spotty groves of dark green pines and very tall, purple-colored mountains a great distance away. The cloudless sky and the awesome mountains dominated the landscape, their peaks topped with snow. It took Joy a moment to drink in what she saw. There wasn’t a building in sight. Suddenly wide-awake, but confused and puzzled, Joy swiveled her gaze upward and blinked at the mustachioed man standing next to her. “Hey, wait a minute. W-where the heck are we? Did I miss my stop at Pleasure Park?”

“Pleasure Park, eh?” The rotund, middle-aged conductor stroked an index finger along his silver-streaked moustache. “Never heard of the place, ma’am. No town hereabouts with that name. It ain’t on this route. Them buildings you see, that’s Peck’s Wells, like your ticket says.” He shoved the funny looking train ticket under Joy’s nose and pointed a finger so she could read it. “Right here, see?”

“No, no, hang on there, mister, I’m not going to ... wait up. I don’t understand. I bought a ticket at Pennsylvania Station in New York for Pleasure Park in New Jersey.”

“I ain’t never been to Noo Jersey or Noo York, either,” the man said with a wide grin, his lips twitching in a sarcastic smile beneath his bristling moustache. “This here’s Wyoming Territory, ma’am ... the Wild West.”

* * * *

Joy dug out a cell phone from her purse, tried to get it to work, but got no connection.

Shit, did I forget to charge that battery again?

Her eyes lit up when she spied a small building outside the passenger car’s window.

There has to be a phone in the Wells Fargo office, even in the middle of nowhere.

When the conductor hustled her off the empty car, Joy got off gladly. If what he said was true, there was no way she wanted to get farther away from New Jersey than she already was.

Joy slung the duffle over her shoulder and started walking. Her jaw dropped when she realized what she’d been riding behind.

A steam engine? In this day and age? Well, look at that! The damn thing looks ancient, like the ones that ride tourists around the fun parks in south Jersey. How in the heck did I end up on that?

Just then, the engineer yanked out two earsplitting toots on the train whistle. Joy flinched from the sudden blast. The large, steam-powered locomotive hissed and grumbled like a hibernating bear waking up, spewing black billows of smoke out of its balloon stack. An orange glow emanated from inside the engineer’s cab. The iron and steel monster got up steam and began to roll slowly along the tracks. In the dim twilight, the headlamp mounted on the front of the iron horse threw its yellow beam over ties lying

on the ground like toy soldiers between the two iron rails. Metal wheels screeched, their pistons moving faster and faster, clacking noisily and pushing the bright red cowcatcher ahead of the huffing engine. The conductor hung off between cars and waved back at Joy.

As the train rattled past she saw the words Union Pacific Railroad, Express Baggage and U.S. Mail plastered across the solid wooden side of one car. Joy counted the engine, a wooden baggage car, two passenger cars, and at the very end, a red caboose--the total length of the train in which she'd been riding.

Coming partly to her senses, although her brain was still muddled, Joy surmised the train had somehow landed on a wrong spur. One of the switches must have flipped the wrong way.

But where the hell am I?

Joy shook her head until she spotted a distant cluster of one-and two-story buildings. They looked to be about five blocks away down a dirt road leading from the tracks. She saw a light blinking inside the Wells Fargo office, and more lights in the other buildings now that the sun had dipped behind the high mountains.

Joy inhaled and filled her lungs to calm herself. "Thank you, God," she murmured softly. "I guess I'll find out how I get back to the main line when I speak with somebody inside the office."

She mounted the three rickety steps and plunked her duffel down on the small stoop. The bag seemed to have gotten heavier since this morning, or maybe it was just that she was pooped after the frustrating, unsuccessful time she spent outside the Albion Theater.

Joy peeked through the dusty windowpane fitted into a wooden door. Someone was moving around inside, so she pushed the door wide and stepped inside a tiny waiting room. A wall bisected the building front to back with what appeared to be an office in the rear. A man working behind the bars of a ticket window wore an eyeshade, spectacles, and bushy, whiskery sideburns. He wore no jacket. The collar of his shirt looked strangely shiny, as if it were made of clear plastic.

"Excuse me, sir," Joy began, stepping up to the ticket window and flashing him her best smile. "Where is your phone? I don't see one in here." She swiveled with a look around the waiting room. "Or is it out back?"

He frowned, squinted, and looked her up and down over his lenses before replying. "Phone? Don't reckon I know what you mean."

She looked him straight in the eyes. "Don't be funny, mister. I need to make a call because I don't know where I am. And that train..."

"You're in Peck's Wells, ma'am," he was quick to answer. "I saw you get off the train. Was you plannin' to go on further? Or mebbe you didn't know the line only goes as far as Promontory."

"No, I..."

He interrupted her a second time. "Union Pacific engineers use the round house at Promontory; then turn around and come back east toward Omaha."

"Omaha? You mean, Omaha, Nebraska?"

"Yep, and all points in between, I reckon. I don't know 'cause I ain't been that fer East." The agent

scratched his head. “There won’t be another train goin’ through here either way, westward or eastward, for another two days accordin’ to my schedule.”

“What? What the heck are you talking about?” Joy’s eyes raked the sordid room again, her nerves curling tighter and tighter as if they’d soon split open.

Joy began to repeat her train ride scenario again in case the man didn’t understand the problem. “Look mister, I got on a train in Pennsylvania Station in New York City. I bought a ticket to Pleasure Park in New Jersey.” She glared at him where he stood listening. “Now *you* tell me how I got here to ... where did you say we are?”

“Peck’s Wells, ma’am. Wyoming Territory.”

Chapter Two

Peck's Wells, 50 miles west of Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1870

Joy thought she'd really gone bonkers, until she noticed a small sign over the ticket window:

Telegraph Office.

"Thank God," she muttered aloud.

She'd send a telegram to her uncle and let him know where she ended up after leaving New York. He'd be frantic, of course, if she weren't back in Pleasure Park and tucked in bed before midnight. Maybe he could explain how she could switch back to the New York-to-Philly mainline.

"Er, mister, I'd like to send a telegram. Do you have a form I can write it on?"

He shoved a slip of paper and a pencil through the window toward her. Joy frowned at him but wrote the message and slid it back to him. He read it and glanced up at her, his forehead briefly puckering.

"That'll be two bits, ma'am."

It was hard not to get a chuckle out of that, even if she were in the middle of nowhere.

She hadn't heard that term in years though her middle-aged uncle used it every now and again.

"Twenty-five cents for a telegram?" she asked with a smile in her voice, questioning him again to make sure she heard him right

"Yep. But we call it a telegraph."

That's all? Wow! I hit a bargain. This really is the boonies.

Joy said nothing else and fumbled in her handbag, pulling out a quarter from her change purse.

He squinted down hard at the coin. "Never seen one like this 'un. Where'd you get it? In Reno?"

"No. I've never been to Nevada. I got it in New Jersey. Where else?"

"Don't look right to me..."

"Mister, that's an authentic silver coin, minted by the U.S. Treasury." She glared up at him then asked, "I can change it to two dimes and a nickel if you want."

He put the quarter between his yellowed teeth and bit down on it. "Don't like it 'cause I ain't seen anythin' like it, but I reckon it'll do. The dang government keeps changin' things alls the time."

When Joy saw him tapping out her message on an ancient telegraph pad that looked like one she'd seen at the Natural History Museum during a grammar school field trip to New York in eighth grade, she almost flipped. "You're sending my telegram on that thing?" she blurted.

He didn't answer, just kept tapping away.

"Mister, that won't get where it's going!" she argued sarcastically, holding onto her temper because she knew she sounded exasperated. "That thing is as old as the hills! It isn't gonna work!"

“Well, ma’am, this pad ain’t that old. It’s the newest thing Wells Fargo give us. The message I jest sent will get where it’s agoin’ if you writ down the right words.” He handed back the slip of paper on which Joy had penciled in her uncle’s address in New Jersey.

“Okay, okay.” She huffed the words out with a frown, her insides growling from hunger. “How long before I’ll get a reply?” she asked brusquely, zippering her purse after returning her change purse inside it.

“Can’t say. Tomorrow, mebbe.”

“What!” Joy’s eyes rolled up into her forehead. “I don’t believe this!”

“Yep, well, believe it. I’m as fast as any telegrapher, ma’am. Some folks has waited fer a week for an answer, but that ain’t my fault. When I gets a message here, I allus send a boy to deliver it. Unless you stop by the office to pick it up, that is.”

“You call this fast? I could have sent my message to my uncle by Pony Express and it’d be quicker!”

“No, ma’am, then it won’t get there a’tall.” He cracked a supercilious smile. “Ain’t no more Pony Express riders. Mail goes by train nowadays. And them trains is as fast as greased lightning. Thirty or forty mile an hour goin’ downhill to my mind way of thinkin’.” The man leaned his forearms on the shelf behind the ticket window. “Now, is there somethin’ else I can do fer you, little lady?”

“No,” Joy snapped, frustrated. She turned and walked toward the door then halted, thinking of a question she suddenly needed an answer for.

“What year is this?” she asked, turning back.

“What year? Why it’s 1870, ma’am. May 1870. Where have you been?”

“Not here,” she mumbled, letting a gasp explode from clenched lips. “And you say I’m in Wyoming?”

“Yep.”

God help me! I’ve been zapped back in time somehow, a hundred and thirty-five years. Geezus criminy! The daily horoscopes in my local paper kept telling me I’d have an adventure very soon. Holy shit! Sagittarius has taken over my life. Now what do I do?

* * * *

Joy forced her heart to stop racing so she could keep her cool. This time she politely asked the Wells Fargo agent if there was such a thing as a hotel in town.

“Yep. But if I wuz you, I’d head for Mrs. Grainger’s Boarding House. It’s a heap cleaner, the food’s better, and it’s not as noisy as staying next to the Lucky Lady Saloon.”

“Thanks, Mr. Jarvis.” Joy had finally asked his name.

When she left the depot, there was no street per se, only the ruts of wheel tracks leading to the buildings she coarsely nicknamed *Pecker’s Wells*.

Joy paused and gazed up at the clear evening sky. The mountains looked like so many sleeping black bears. Throwing a wary eye in front of her, Joy slung her duffle over a shoulder again and started walking toward the lights of town.

The vast emptiness added to Joy's sense of bewilderment and uneasiness. She'd read about bears roaming parts of Jersey. If she met a bear or something else wild before she reached--*ha ha*--civilization, what the heck could she do? Yell and scream? Surely no one, even Mr. Jarvis, would hear her. She quickly lengthened her stride and hurried toward the huddled buildings before her.

Chapter Three

Pete Rivers, better known as Chance by the cowpokes, trappers, buffalo hunters, and prospectors who lived and worked on cattle spreads and played-out mines in the area, gazed down at his saloon from an open balcony. The polished mahogany bar was the main attraction of the Lucky Lady Saloon, spanning one side of the room. Opposite the bar was a roulette wheel, whirling and clicking as the tiny ball settled into black or red slots. Gold and silver coins and government silver certificates were piled in the middle of poker tables.

Chance had brought in a battered piano and someone to play it. He arranged it up front, hoping music might draw more customers. Stairs from the rear of the main room led up to the balcony that disappeared into a private second level. One of the rooms off the hall was Chance's cluttered office and doubled as his sleeping quarters. Two other rooms were vacant. A door led outside the saloon to the rear yard and to an outhouse.

The gaming area held a mixture of hard-eyed gamblers and those who were strictly there to swill rotgut whiskey. A drink was two bits a glass. Chance himself drank only the smoothest, finest whiskey available from his liquor supplier in San Francisco.

As usual, there wasn't a female in sight. The few women who lived in Peck's Wells never showed their noses on the street after eight o'clock on any given night. And Chance was hungry for a woman. He hadn't fucked anyone in more than a month and his nerves were raw and edgy. He knew what would help his crankiness--some raunchy, hot-between-the-sheets sex. There wasn't even a brothel in the damn town since the mine shut down two years ago.

Chance took out a long, slender cheroot from the breast pocket of his well-tailored jacket, bit off the end, lit the tip, and blew out the wooden match. His lips caressed the cylinder of rolled tobacco as he slowly inhaled the fragrant smoke deep into his lungs. He'd be content if he had a woman to dally with, but he knew he wouldn't have a two-bit chance in hell of getting what he needed in this town tonight.

His was the same complaint of many men, young and old alike, in the west: not enough women to go around. Unless an enterprising pimp had the seed money to bring in whores, they were all out of luck.

Chance knew there was plenty of gold to be made in the sex business, but, dammit, he had some morals even though he wanted to strike it rich. There was no way he'd pimp his way to wealth. While he was in California, he almost considered hiring a few women from San Francisco to work the Lucky Lady's upstairs rooms. But he'd been raised by a mother who prayed to the Madonna twice a day and every night. Doing what made sense and good business would give him nightmares. That didn't mean, however, that Chance would give up sex, free or paid for.

He watched as the skinny piano player sat down at the battered instrument and pounded out a lively tune loud enough to filter outside the saloon. It was past eight o'clock and as the only saloon in town, the Lucky Lady was already busier and noisier than hell. The next closest drinking establishment was twenty miles west in Pinnacle, housed in a ramshackle shanty that doubled as a stagecoach depot. It certainly wasn't as well run as the Lucky Lady. Fist fights and gun duels exploded in Pinnacle regularly. Josh Logan, Pinnacle's proprietor, had once asked Chance to get rid of the culprit who shot up the place and killed three men. Chance had replied he was in the saloon business, and his gun wasn't for hire. Chance hadn't strapped on a Colt since his gunslinger days--the same day he arrived in Peck's Wells with a deed to the Lucky Lady in his coat pocket. After six months, he was almost used to not having a loaded holster anchored against his thigh.

* * * *

Joy was drawn to the notes drifting out of the ramshackle building. Ah yes, ‘Oh! Susanna!’ She smiled before pushing through the swinging doors of the Lucky Lady Saloon then stopped dead in her tracks, surprised by the avalanche of male eyes swiveling in her direction.

Well, she *had* liked attention during stage appearances, but shit, this was a little much to handle right off the bat. Joy sucked in a breath, steadied her nerves, and stepped farther into the room, a confident smile pasted on her lips. The almost-deafening buzz of conversation she’d walked into now stilled to a deadly silence.

“Uh, good evening, gentlemen.”

She tore her gaze away from leering male eyes and made her way toward the bar.

Phew! At this point, I could use a drink.

“Do you have a white wine cooler, bartender? Or a Chardonnay with ice would be nice if you have one.” She rested the duffle against the bar’s brass foot rail. “If not, I guess any decent white wine will do.”

The bartender looked flummoxed. He kept wiping a glass with the bar rag and staring at Joy with his mouth hanging open. He finally had enough presence of mind to meet the eyes of the man leaning over the balustrade.

“Boss?”

“I’ll handle it, Brice,” the man called down to the bartender, his commanding baritone cutting across the heads of men clustered around tables and others hunkered along the bar.

Joy watched him start down the stairs toward her. He walked with a loose-limbed, broad-shouldered grace that immediately caught her eye. His legs were long, his trousers tucked into tall, leather boots. Her gaze remained focused on him when he paused and tossed a half-smoked cheroot into a brass spittoon.

“Well, will you take a gander at what the wind blew in through those dang swingin’ doors. Dammit, if I jest didn’t get lucky.”

Joy heard the young, blond cowpoke’s words and glanced over at him. He was sitting at a card table and had thrown down a losing hand, adding a raucous laugh.

“Mind ya mouth, Bowser! That’s a lady!” growled a grizzled ranch hand sitting across the table from him.

The chatter around the room now resumed its former volume. Even so, Joy could hear what the men were saying about her.

“How the hell would you know, Johnson? You ain’t laid those ole peepers of yers on anythin’ but them cows ever since ya signed on as Mercer’s ramrod!”

Joy heard another rude voice exclaim. “Holy Joshaphat! I gotta get me some of that stuff real quick!”

What she overheard was primarily genial and admiring, if somewhat outspoken, and she listened to the men yakking and joking amongst themselves, surprisingly unthreatened. Every eye in the room,

however, was still glued on her.

The imposing man ceased his strolling and halted in front of her.

Joy turned slightly to face him.

“Evenin’, ma’am. Can I be of help?”

“Good evening,” Joy replied. She had to tilt her head to see his face. He had to be a couple inches over six feet, because she was the five-eight needed for a New York chorus line. His hair was very dark, combed straight back without a part and shone blue-black under the light from the oil lamps. Curly ends met the collar of his jacket. His sideburns were long and tapered, framing a strikingly handsome countenance.

Startled by the powerful, electric sex appeal in those brilliant blue eyes, deep set below arched, slashing brows, Joy’s mouth suddenly went dry. She swallowed unconsciously.

The smooth, clean planes of his jaws indented slightly beneath his cheekbones, casting a faint shadow. The man had been born with a great dimple in his chin to boot, Joy saw, and she contemplated sticking her tongue into that devastating little cleft and tickling him.

His skin was bronzed, probably burnished from hours in the sun, or maybe it was just his natural coloring. She wondered if he were part Native American. Hot damn! He had to be the best looking, the most sensually arresting male she had run across in a long, long time.

A string tie looped beneath his shirt collar. He sure didn’t look like a cowboy, but he must be, here in no man’s land surrounded by cactus and sagebrush.

There was something unique about this guy. He oozed a raw vitality that had Joy’s heart beating a lot faster than it should. She wasn’t naïve. She’d had a roll or two in the hay during high school and college. But it’d been with boys, not men, and none of them were nearly as dangerous-looking at this man. She realized she was attracted to him, so quickly and so unexpectedly, that she’d better watch her P’s and Q’s, or she’d do something she shouldn’t. Already her nipples had reacted, disturbing her equilibrium. She even felt flushed. Cripes! Her panties were already wet!

Chapter Four

Chance felt his groin react before he even stopped in front of the woman. She was quite tall and reed thin, but with curves that were obvious under the male duds she had on.

What female wore pants in this civilized part of Wyoming?

He felt his heart do a little jig in his chest before the blood moved downward, waking up something that had been dormant, but itchy, for most of a month.

Was she the answer to his prayer, finally?

He couldn't tell in this light what color her eyes were, nevertheless he almost lost himself in their depths. His gaze roved over her upturned face and he decided every feature was molded into classic perfection. He knew she was young, but not a girl, a woman, full grown. Something in her eyes told him that. Not a virgin. But not the hard, sexually promiscuous kind. Not with the knowing looks and actions he usually found in a whore's eyes.

Chance saw she was weighing him in much the same way he studied her. Strangely enough she didn't act frightened. Maybe she should--a lone female garbed like that in a room full of horny men. Chance knew what every man jack in this room was thinking--the same thing he was. Find someplace to poke his cock into her and satisfy his itch--for any price.

When he scrutinized her expression again, she looked a little more jumpy. What woman wouldn't? She'd entered a lion's den, all eyes on her. Her clothes showed every delicious curve from shoulders to knees. But she didn't show fear outright. That took a certain measure of dumb courage, Chance mused.

Now he repeated his question. "Do you need help?"

"I'm not sure, Mr...?"

"Chance. Chance Rivers. And you are...?"

"Joy Winters. Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure, ma'am. Now," he drawled, "What can I do for you?"

Chance knew, just as he'd always known, when a woman was inclined to give him what he wanted. He was pretty sure Joy Winters would fold and go upstairs with him.

*

Joy felt heat radiate between them in waves. The sizzle, like a jolt by a hot wire, was strong, powerful, and could be very dangerous, Joy knew. That kind of heat could scorch your eyeballs if you leaned too close to a flame. No way did she want to get burned by a man from another century.

"I'm, er, relatively new in town, Mr. Rivers."

"I heard the train whistle. That must've been when you arrived in town. Where are you from?"

The future, she was about to say, but he'd think she was nuts.

"Er, from the East. New Jersey, really."

Their gazes met and held. Recognition and attraction flared between them though hardly a word was

spoken.

“You’re a long way from home, then. What are you doing out here?”

He had insinuated himself between a cowboy and her, his broad shoulders blocking the other man’s gaze.

“I--well--I thought I’d look for a job.”

That’s a downright lie, but what else can I say? I don’t plan on staying in this time. I just want to go home.

“This town doesn’t hire many women, unless...” he paused.

“What kind of work can you do?”

Not the kind you’re thinking about. Joy read the message in his hot blue eyes as he stared at her breasts. Even if she liked everything about him, today’s events were too crazy to think about sex. Let alone getting involved with a total stranger, no matter how compelling and sexy he was. It wasn’t normal for her to pick up a guy for a quickie fuck.

She’d learned that lesson a few years ago, and knew that casual sex could too easily mess up your life and your future.

Adventure or not, she vowed to find a way out of this era, return to hers, and resume a normal life. Earning some money seemed the way to begin.

“I sing a little, dance a little, and play the piano a little.”

“Is that right?”

His eyebrows arched with interest while he appraised her, eyes glinting like chips of sapphire, sheer male appreciation written on his smiling lips. His gaze crisscrossed her skin, roaming its surface and raising tingling goose bumps.

Joy crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

“I studied all three as a child, Mr. Rivers. I’m really quite good.”

“Well, then, honeybun, why don’t you give me and the boys a taste of what you can do? I know my customers would sure like it.”

She knew he was baiting her; his grin was dangerously mischievous.

“I don’t think I know many of your current songs ... and, by the way, don’t call me honeybun or honeybunch. I *have* a name that I answer to.”

“Prickly, ain’t you?” He grinned again. “Okay, okay, hon ... er, Miss Winters.”

When he laughed, the sound came from deep in his chest. “You mean to tell me you don’t know ‘Oh! Susannah!’? That’s a favorite tune around these parts. Hmm? That’s a real pity.”

She frowned up at him. “Of course I’ve heard of the song, Mr. Rivers. Everyone north or south of the Mason-Dixon line has. I’m just not sure I know all the words to it, that’s all.”

He talked the words for her in a raspy baritone.

“Well, I suppose I can try,” she answered flippantly.

“Then sing it, Miss Rivers, I’m waiting.”

He was challenging her all right. She knew part of the lyrics, and maybe she’d be able to fake the rest since the tune was certainly familiar.

Joy left the duffle in front of the bar, strode over to the piano, slinging her handbag over her shoulder. The saloon quieted enough to hear a pin drop.

“Your boss wants me to sing ‘Oh! Susanna!’” she told the wiry man sitting at the upright. “I never thought I’d be auditioning in a joint like this,” she grumbled to herself. “In key of G, piano man. Okay? Got it?”

The clapping and stomping of rough, callused hands and muddy, booted feet shook the rafters of the room when she finished singing.

Well, I guess I’m a hit someplace, anyway.

Joy managed another smile at the gap-toothed, dusty, raggedy, completely odd-looking members of her male audience. She sketched a brief bow and hurried back toward Chance. He had been clapping and stomping just as loud as the rest. Joy felt stupid, but she couldn’t help blushing.

“You’re hired,” he said. “Two dollars every day you work, and free room and board.”

Chapter Five

Chance picked up Joy's duffle. "This your bedroll?"

"Bedroll?" she squinted up at him. "Oh! Yeah, I suppose that's what'd you call it here."

"What's in it? It feels as heavy as gold nuggets."

"Er, no. No gold. No silver, either. I wish it were one or the other, but it's just ... my costume and some personal stuff."

"I thought what you have on was your costume. No *real* ladies hereabouts wear trousers."

"Well, Mr. Rivers, this is what I wore when I arrived on that strange train, so you can like it or lump it. It's all I have to put on except a fancy costume."

"Sassy-mouthed, ain't you?" He chuckled, and the sound of his laughter skittered over her skin like a warm caress. "You look mighty fine in those tight pants, by the way, but you may want to change. Men who ain't seen women wearing them might hanker to see what's beneath those duds."

Like you, maybe?

Chance led her up to the balcony and beyond, into a narrow hall. At the far end, he pushed open a door and lit a match. Next to the doorway was another oil lamp on a small table. He removed the glass chimney and touched a flame to the blackened wick.

Joy looked around the small room. A narrow bed, one straight-backed chair, and a chest of drawers were the only furniture. The lamp's soft glow added a certain intimacy, even if the bare wood floor was uncovered by throw rugs.

Chance noted her expression. "You're used to something better, I expect."

"Er, a little. Yes." Joy plunked her handbag down on the bed then thumped the mattress to test it. She grimaced. "Hard as a concrete slab. A feather bed it ain't," she muttered.

Sniffing, she wrinkled her nose. "It smells very musty in here, Mr. Rivers. Don't you ever air this room out? Or open a window once in a while?"

"Don't have any reason to. Nobody sleeps here. Until now."

Joy walked over and pushed at the window sash. "Damn. It's stuck. Can you do this for me? I need some fresh air or I'll suffocate."

"Picky, picky, ain't you?" Chance groused.

But he banged a heel of his hand on the frame and loosened it enough so he could raise the bottom half of the window. Laughter and raucous joking from the men below and the tinkling of piano keys filtered up through the open window. Joy wondered how long the saloon stayed open. She'd never get any sleep with that noise. She sighed aloud. At least there was a breeze blowing in to clear away some of the stale air.

She turned and asked him bluntly, "Where's the bathroom?"

"Bathroom? You mean where you take a wash?" He glanced out the open window. "Down the street at

Mrs. Grainger's Boarding House. She rents stalls in the bathhouse. Two bits extra if you want hot water."

"But ... but I mean, er..."

Oh my God! There's no bathroom, no indoor plumbing or anything of the sort here, of course! This is 1870, dummy. What's the matter with me?

"You see, Mr. Rivers, I have to..."

"Chance."

She tried to smile. "Okay. Chance. You see I wasn't asking about bathing..."

"Ah, I get your meaning. I reckon there's no chamber pot in here, but the outhouse is out back. A two-seater. Just watch out for rattlers."

Good Lord, I'm living in a pigsty. Worse than that, I'm stranded in hell without an escape hatch. How did the pioneers handle this?

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Very."

"We've got what's known as the Lucky Lady's free lunch. Hardboiled eggs and crackers on the bar during the day if it ain't all gone by nighttime. We keep a little ginger beer behind the bar for teetotalers, but there's not much call for it." He chuckled again and paused. "I'll see what's left. There ain't no waitresses here, but I'll fetch you something. Maybe you can do double duty when the saloon gets busy." He grinned as if he'd just thought of a splendid idea.

"Oh, you're really kind," she mumbled sarcastically. "But if I'm supposed to wait tables and sing, too, Mr. Rivers, then I want more money."

"Well, now, that sure got a rise out of you, didn't it?" He laughed out loud. "I gotta know first whether you can earn your keep."

She glared at him, certain that her eyes must be blazing with unconcealed temper. Nevertheless, she shut her mouth. What else could she do but mind her tongue, grin, and bear it until she found a way back to the twenty-first century? Dammit, how in the world did she get stuck in this time warp?

"T'morrow go to Mrs. Grainger's. She's right down the street. Her sign's hanging out front. She puts out a *man's* breakfast--plenty to eat. Tell her to put your eats on my tab until I tell her to stop."

Joy's mouth watered. Her stomach must think her throat had been cut, she was so hungry. Before anything else, though, she needed to relieve herself. She was scared stiff to go out to the darkened outhouse alone. It must be as black as the inside of a mummy's tomb out there.

"W-Will you show me where the outhouse is, Mr. Rivers?"

He grinned. "Sure. Bring the lamp. We'll go out together."

* * * *

Joy had never been so mortified. But all he did was laugh at her. He told her to take the lamp inside the outhouse, and then waited for her to finish. He must be pacing in front of the door, she thought, as she

heard his boots crunch on the stony ground. The hiss of a match and the scent of cigar smoke blew in the open window of the rickety shed.

In the weak light of the lamp, Joy saw the outhouse had two holes cut in a board, nothing else. The window was meant to eliminate odors inside, but phew! It sure didn't do its job. It would be nice to have a can of air freshener. A thick catalog lay on the floor. It was for personal use, she knew, not for reading material. She gulped down her nausea and did what she had to do with her eyes and nose clamped shut.

Holy hell, could she really survive in this era without shooting herself?

Chance escorted Joy inside again after she finished, following her upstairs with a few eggs and crackers. Then, without warning, he grabbed one of her hands and pulled her toward him.

There was nothing gentle about his grip, Joy realized. His hands were as callused as she guessed the men's downstairs would be. Beneath his lanky frame lay a wiry muscularity. She shrank back a little, wondering what he planned.

"You know, your eyes are real pretty when you're mad. I saw them shooting sparks at me before," Chance said.

Did his tone only sound conversational?

"You intrigue me, Miss Winters." Chance tightened his grip and drew her close into his embrace, his arms strong and unyielding. "I like a little fire in a woman when I make love to her."

Uh oh!

"You've got it all wrong!" Joy exclaimed quickly, shoving at his chest. "I didn't ask for this."

"Uh, uh. I think you *did*, honeybun."

Defiantly, Joy's eyes scorched his face a second time. "You men are all alike, groping and grabbing like animals on a first date."

"A date? What's that?"

"Never mind. Just let go of me," she growled. "I'm hungry."

"Oh, honeybun, you have no idea how hungry *I* am." His western drawl became coaxing and feather-soft now as it reached her twenty-first century ears.

Right then Joy knew this charismatic hunk was used to getting what he wanted. He'd probably be shrewd and ruthless as well. Startled, she flinched. Why had her brain gone woozy when he touched her, his scent and male allure invading her nostrils like his cigar smoke? Her heart suddenly thundered a fast tattoo against her ribs.

His first kiss was brief and couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. But it threw a monkey wrench in her reactions to him. This man from 1870 showed her a few new tricks about kissing. His lips pressed down on hers, and it seemed as if decades skipped by in those few seconds. Unwittingly, strong emotions blended into timelessness, and Joy floated as if she had been somewhere with him before. Her extraordinary desire for him, and her sudden loss of control frightened her to death. Why had her hormones decide to take a running leap into the unknown now?

Joy stiffened and struggled to move away from him.

It didn't help. She was still weak and weary from her train ride, and he seemed determined.

*

Chance closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, savoring the clean scent of Joy's hair, her perfumed woman's skin, the feel of her body clinging to his. His cock came to life in a flash, growing hot, hard, and thick in anticipation of the satisfaction he needed so badly.

He deepened his kiss, then pulled back to look down at her.

"Don't do this, Chance," Joy murmured, leaning back and gazing up at him ineffectually.

Her eyes, her voice, the way she lay in his embrace, told him different.

Her rapid breathing brushed against his cheek before he yanked her shirt over her head.

His desire spiked higher at the sight of the two soft mounds of flesh contained in that odd contraption she wore. Her breasts were covered modestly, but her rosy nipples were hard and prominent beneath the sheer lace. They seemed to beg for his mouth. He slid his fingertips beneath the thin shoulder straps and nudged them down her slender arms, dragging the fabric away and exposing her breasts to his gaze.

They were the most beautiful things he'd seen in a long, long time.

*

Joy knew she shouldn't let him do this, but she couldn't seem to help herself. Her attraction to Chance Rivers had been almost instantaneous--intense and damnably weird--as if she'd known him or dreamed about him before. Since she had never believed in either reincarnation or time travel, how could this be? Both ideas confounded her. She had been born in the 1980's, not the dark ages, nor the future. Wrong or right, at this moment in time, she wanted him. She was listening to her body's wants and desires, not to her intellect.

Joy reached up and slid her arms around his neck. She kissed him back, hard.

*

Chance growled deep in his chest at the fierceness of her kiss. He needed to taste this woman's flesh right now. He cupped her generous breasts in his roughened palms, then nuzzled their bounty with his lips before taking a nipple into his mouth to suckle. He felt almost as if he'd come home, perhaps not to his mother--but to the warm embrace of a woman he could love, improbable as that seemed.

In the desolation of an untamed west, time and poverty had led him into trouble as a rank boy and then into a life that didn't suit him. He'd spent time behind bars. Used his gun for hire and killed men. But he vowed never to land in jail again. Now, he'd met a woman only a few hours ago and was desperate to hold onto her. How could this be? How could he be in love with her?

Chance abruptly released Joy, staring down at her with puzzled incomprehension.

"I planned to have you in my bed tonight, Miss Winters, but I don't think you're ready to make that decision yet. The choice is yours. Make up your mind, then tell me when. It'll happen sooner or later." Chance lips twisted with a wry sort of humor. "I'd bet on it."

Chance murmured goodnight and spun away, followed by the sharp click of the latch as it snapped

closed behind him.

*

Joy's head was splitting. She had wanted him to make love to her then and there, but it was just as well nothing happened. It would be a nightmare if she were to fall for him, because it would be so easy. She pulled her shirt back on. What she needed, above all, was to come up with a way to get out of here. And soon.

She checked her purse and duffle. She didn't find an aspirin, or clean underwear. All she found were wet wipes, a wrinkled bath towel, stage cosmetics, a comb and brush, and her dance costume--the one she'd auditioned in on the Albion's stage. It was a slinky gown--very snug--in royal blue--with slits up the side almost to her hips. With the exception of spaghetti straps holding up the bodice, it left her shoulders bare. The gown shimmered with rows and rows of glittery silver beads and dark blue sequins. It was one of the gaudiest costumes she owned, but she had wanted to make a vivid impression on the Broadway director.

Rummaging farther, she located a pair of sheer pantyhose, silver tap shoes, and the fluffy ostrich fan she used in her dance routine.

Could she perform before a crowd of rowdy cowpokes and wild-eyed, sex-starved prospectors and miners in a sleazy saloon in the middle of Wyoming Territory? Joy shivered at the thought.

Finally she collapsed on the hard mattress, staring up at the dingy ceiling before leaping up again. She hunted for a key to lock the door, but there wasn't any. Dammit. Anybody could enter the room at anytime. Would Chance Rivers change his mind and come back to rape her? No, he wasn't the type. He was forward, yes, more forward than any man she'd ever met, but he wasn't a rapist. She couldn't make that assumption about any of the other men in the saloon.

Joy scuttled back to the bed, her nerves jumping like frogs on a hot, sun-baked rock. She was exhausted, her stamina gone. This time travel thing had knocked her for a loop. Nevertheless, she compelled her eyes to stay open and watchful. Gradually, her breathing calmed along with her heart.

She felt around for her handbag and pulled out her wallet, counting out a total of forty-seven dollars, plus another dollar's worth of loose change. She had several credit cards and a checkbook, but knew that none of them would help her in this unenlightened era of hard cash and barter.

Never mind. Tomorrow, right after breakfast, I'll go back to the telegraph office and see if I hear from Uncle Jim and then ... oh my God!

Joy gasped, horrified by unforeseen, precipitous, stark realization. Her heart thumped hard again, hitting against her ribs like a canary trapped in a birdcage. The message the Wells Fargo agent tapped out was never going to be delivered. She knew that now for a fact.

She swiped shaking palms down her cheeks. Neither her family nor where she lived would be there, not for another hundred years or more! She was alone, living in a dim past with no one but herself to rely on to return her to her own time.

Joy struggled to swallow her fear, but started to shake. She stared at the dingy walls of the room, her mind's eye broadcasting a frightening vision of what her future portended as it unfolded like a movie.

You've got to snap out of this, Joy. You've got to find a way out of this mess. You need to be tough, and do what Chance Rivers says. Keep him entertained. Keep him happy. You need time to figure how to get

back home. If the pioneers could do it, so can you, right? Shape up and get on with it if you really want to go.

The thoughts wavered through Joy as she lay curled like a kitten on the hard mattress. She reached up and wiped away the tears that squeezed from under her eyelids. Since when had she been a big crybaby? Not since grammar school when she punched out Danny Ryan for pinching her behind in a fire drill, then sobbed all the way home because it cost her two weeks of detention.

She felt her lips stretch into a tiny smile. Danny never tried it again, not even in high school.

Now thoughts about Chance Rivers shoved their way into her brain.

He didn't do anything really bad, just kissed you and fondled your breasts. He's been ... well, almost gallant although he threatened to do more. Seems to me you thought about doing things to him yourself downstairs.

Joy finally lay quiet, pulled the thin blanket up to her chin, curled in a tight ball, and waited to fall asleep.

Chapter Six

Chance was up early because he couldn't sleep. Joy Winters upset his equilibrium. He'd wanted her the minute their eyes met--maybe before that. The slender body, curved with lush, womanly flesh, had him hot and bothered, just like the rest of the randy men in the saloon. When she sang for those few minutes, the sweet, innocent tenor of her voice clobbered his lonely soul with heat and wanting. He tried to shake off the feeling. He didn't need sweetness and light, he'd told himself; he needed a good dose of raunchy, sweaty sex.

He ate breakfast at Mrs. Grainger's, got his horse from the livery next door in Peck's Hotel, saddled the paint, and rode out of town at a good clip. He neared a grove of pine trees and a small stream that cut through the prairie a couple miles out of town.

He'd shaved off his beard and moustache before he arrived in Peck's Wells months ago, and still did, because he never knew if someone might recognize him and try to see how fast--or slow--he was. This morning he'd strapped on his Colt for the first time in six months. It gave him something to do. He didn't want to think about Joy Winters yet.

He practiced his fast draw to keep his shooting hand in tune and his mind in the here-and-now.

* * * *

Joy slept long and hard. The sun was well up in the sky, the morning light streaking through the uncovered window of her room. She woke with start, the same way she had on the train. For a moment, she was dazed and didn't know what time or day it was. She squinted at the unpainted walls of the room and recalled where she'd spent the night. Yesterday's events rushed back in vivid flashes.

Her stomach growled and her mouth had a flinty taste. Oh, for a toothbrush, mouthwash, and paste. At least the air in the room smelled fresher this morning. She remembered passing a mercantile on her way into town. Maybe she should purchase a few necessities ... clean underwear, socks, a long-sleeved shirt, soap, shampoo, a washrag, pajamas, and another pair of jeans.

Then she realized those things would eat up all her money. Chance had hired her, but for pennies. Maybe she should hold off buying anything.

Joy hustled to get dressed, shoving her duffle under the bed. When she descended the stairs, the saloon was empty, the swinging doors hooked against the front wall. Well, it *was* Sunday. Joy stepped over the threshold and onto the dirt street. A horse and wagon waited outside the mercantile. Another was parked in front of a sign outside Mrs. Grainger's Boarding House. She was so hungry she could *eat* a horse for breakfast.

Mrs. Grainger was a middle-aged widow who remained in Peck's Wells after her husband passed away. She was pleasant and answered Joy's questions as best she could, but really wasn't of much help.

* * * *

Mr. Jarvis, at the Wells Fargo office, wasn't very helpful either. Joy never got a reply from her uncle, but she knew she wouldn't. He did mention he got a telegraph from a Wells Fargo office farther west on the rail line. The tracks needed repair. He'd be notified when the line was open again.

Hearing that bad news, Joy had no place to go but back to the saloon. The piano player was there when she returned. She spoke with him and learned he'd worked in saloons in California during the Gold Rush

as a youngster. They rehearsed a few versions of 'Jimmy Crack Corn,' 'Listen to the Mockingbird,' 'The Man on the Flying Trapeze, and 'Lorena,' a haunting love song Joy had never heard before. She sang a few verses a capella from her own repertoire. He picked out some tunes by ear even if he hadn't heard them before. Joy's audience might not know her songs, but if she was going to entertain, she sure as heck didn't want to sing all those dumb oldies.

She was surprised when Chance entered from a rear door of the saloon and walked across the room to join them.

"Barleycorn, how's she doing?" he asked the piano player.

"The lady's got a sweet voice, boss. Sings like a nightingale."

"Good." Chance grinned at Joy. "Come upstairs to my office, Miss Winters," he said. "We need to talk." He headed for the stairs without waiting for her to follow him.

Joy needed to be in a room alone with him like she needed a hole in her head. She had trouble enough already fighting her sudden and very unusual attraction to her boss.

The piano player winked at her and went back to tinkling the keys.

Chapter Seven

"I'm glad you asked me up here," she lied. "I wanted to talk to you about something else."

"And what's that, honeybun?" He asked, lounging behind a scratched desk.

She glared at him when he used that term again. "There's no lock on my door..."

"That's right. No one comes up those stairs but me."

"Well, I don't want *you* poking into my room without permission, either. I want a lock put on my door if I'm to stay here."

"Where else could you go, darlin', but here?" he drawled. "From what I heard there ain't a train coming through for days. Until the Lord knows when. Accidents happen out here regularly. Tracks buckle, Indians get likkered up, attack and rip the ties and rails out of the dirt if they think the Union Pacific is trespassing on their precious hunting grounds."

Joy watched the twinkle in his blue eyes. He had a luminous smile on his lips, too.

"By the way, why are you so fired anxious to have a lock on your door? I told you, you can come into my room--join me in my bed--anytime you wish."

"You're so damn high-handed and conceited..."

"Maybe I am, but what has that got to do with anything?" He replied, grinning back at her.

"People like privacy where I come from, Mr. Rivers," Joy said, a cool tone icing her voice. "It's what I'm used to, so I don't want anyone going through my things."

"Fine. I'll make sure that no one does, but there won't be any locks put on."

She frowned, squinting at him through narrowed lids.

He met her look and said, "Now that we've cleared that obstacle, why don't you come over here so we can get better acquainted."

"I won't be staying long enough for us to get acquainted, Mr. Rivers."

"Chance."

"Okay, Chance." She growled out the words, her frown deepening. "Yeah, well, let me explain what happened, okay? You see, somehow I got on the wrong train ... or the train got on the wrong tracks ... and I ended up in Wyoming instead of New Jersey."

He leaned back in the swivel chair. "Quite a difference ... New Jersey and Wyoming, I must say."

His bright blue eyes watched her as Joy tried to explain her predicament. She wouldn't tell him about the different timeframe yet if she didn't have to. Hell, he'd probably think she was a wacko.

"I've never been that far East, Miss Winters. What is New Jersey like, if I want to visit?" As he spoke, he hid a smile. He pressed fingertips over his mouth, rubbing them slowly along the crease between his lips while Joy's gaze followed the movement.

"A lot different from here, let me tell you," she replied, finally, tearing her eyes away to meet his. "But,

you wouldn't understand..."

"Tell me about it."

She knew what she said would be difficult to make clear, but she had to try.

"Yes, you see, Mr. Riv ... uh ...Chance, I have to go back to where I live, I mean. In New Jersey. In the twenty-first century."

She held his gaze, hoping to impress him with her sincerity.

"Is that right?" His black brows arched, and Joy knew he didn't believe a word she said.

Chance leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk. "Dear me, that sounds like a wild and wooly fairytale. Do tell me more, darlin', I'm all ears."

Joy was irked by the snide tone and the bland, uncompromising look on his handsome face.

"Look, I know it sounds crazy..."

"Yep, it sure does."

"But you asked, so I'm telling you anyway."

She tried smiling at him, trying to force him to believe her. "I'm not lying, Chance. I don't have a clue how all this came about. All I know is that it happened. To me. One minute I was on a train going through the Holland Tunnel to New Jersey, and the next thing I knew I was in an ancient train belching smoke here in Wyoming. I don't think I can live this way. Not for very long, anyway."

"What's wrong with Wyoming? You've got a roof over your head, three squares a day, and I'm handy enough so you can ask for a poke from me anytime you want."

He winked, dammit.

"For you, honeybun, I'll be free with my, er, attentions." He chuckled wickedly. "What could be better for a woman like you?"

"What do you mean, a woman like me?"

"I've met saloon singers up and down the west coast, darlin'. Some do lots more than sing for their supper."

Those damn unbelieving eyes of his wouldn't give up. He really got her goat. She was fuming, but she knew she had to watch her blunt, cutting, wiseacre remarks. As a Sag, she was known for speaking before thinking and then battering a man's tender ego in a matter of seconds. Looking at Chance, though, Joy believed he could take whatever she could dish out. *He* might be the one who dumped her if she were as outspoken. Then what would she do?

"Mr. Rivers ... Chance. Look, I don't sleep around," she went on to say. "Other women may fall all over you, but I have other things on my mind right now, and it isn't sex. So get that out of your head."

"Wanna bet?"

Joy had no idea how fast he could move. He was around the desk in an instant, pulling her up, and clamping his arms around her. She let out a surprised squeak, pasted against him from breast to thighs.

He capsized a boatload of her senses into tumultuous flood waters of want and desire, his oozing male allure pursuing her like feral pheromones. Joy got a quick whiff of male sweat mixed with a tangy odor of shaving soap. Nothing she inhaled was the least bit offensive. He may not have bathed, but she saw he had shaved this morning.

The wise voice in her head told her to behave, entertain him with your body if she must. *May as well not lie to yourself. You know you wanted to do just that last night anyway.*

“You know honeybun, I can’t think of anyplace I’d rather be, or with anybody I’d rather be making love to jest now. So, loosen up, darlin’, ‘cause I get the same feelin’ you ain’t that unwillin’. I bet you’ll like it.”

God help me, he’s right. I’ve gone off my rocker sometime between last night and now. He’s arrogant, ruthless, and smart-assed, but, yeah, I want him. It started when I stepped through those batwing doors and has been sizzling up my spine since. The thought startled her. This guy from 1870 sparked a compelling curiosity in her. She wanted to fuck him. It had to be different from making it with a guy from 2005, and, God knows, *that* hadn’t been anything to write home about. *My God, this has to be the most daring and wildest adventure I’ve ever experienced.*

Joy felt Chance’s warm breath on her forehead, his body radiating the same excitement hers did. He was bending nearer, his mouth hovering close.

“Darlin’, you talk too much, don’t you know that?” he whispered. Before Joy could protest, his mouth covered hers so completely that he sucked air from her lungs. Something banged like a bass drum where her heart used to be.

The world rocked beneath her feet as their lips met, as his mouth plundered, devoured. She was drowning in sensation. She opened her mouth wider under his prodding, letting his tongue search, tease, play delightful love games with hers. He pulled her closer, and she felt the pressure and heat of his rigid cock against her groin.

Joy reached around his neck, grasping the dark hair that curled around her stroking fingers. His eyes were open, watching her reaction to his kisses.

A bittersweet, poignant ache escalated inside her, highlighting what she’d missed during her youthful experiments with sex. She’d never felt this way before, and she wanted more of it. She squeezed more tightly against Chance. An unexpected shudder ran through him when she felt his lips slide along the contours of her cheek, his tongue feathering her skin, touching, caressing, while she burned hotter than the July sun in Pleasure Park. Flames flickered along her nerve endings, ignited by his carnal caresses. Desire roared through Joy when he ducked down and nuzzled and nipped her earlobe. She couldn’t break away from him if her life depended upon it. Past crushes and men she thought she cared for were obliterated during these few momentous minutes in time.

“Honeybun,” his voice was ragged and raspy, showing obvious need.

Joy’s rapture had her yearning for complete fulfillment, and grew stronger by the second. She shivered with comprehension and expectation, drawing in a shaky breath while she tried to restore a measure of calm to a body wracked by stormy passion.

Chance came back again and again to savage her mouth, lips swarming down hard on hers. He kissed her fiercely, expertly, deeply, and avidly. Eating away at any resistance she might have had. Joy felt his arousal growing longer and harder and heard his low murmur of, “I want you badly, darlin’. But I

promise I won't hurt you."

She'd never expected to succumb to a man she barely knew, one who was making magical love to her mouth and mind. He pushed her female buttons without even trying. An urge to see and touch him naked almost overwhelmed her. She wanted his bare chest next to hers, wanted to stroke his cock to reciprocate his fondling.

Chance finally picked her up and carried her to his bed, his mouth still hungry, ravishing hers.

Joy sighed, stopped thinking, and gave in to pure sensation. She'd never thought herself as a wanton, but now she couldn't wait to have him inside her.

* * * *

Chance tried to tame the undisguised need licking at his sex. It couldn't be that he loved this woman, he told himself. It was just raw sex--a means to quiet his raging libido until he could get to a decent brothel to slake his normal male urges.

He tugged on the hem of Joy's shirt, dragging it over of her head. The sight of her tempting breasts slammed into him like a fist just as it had last night; his heart galloped like a stallion in pursuit of a mare. His cock came to life so quickly he needed to be inside her--now.

Her footwear and trousers went first. She wore skimpy drawers. They, too, were ripped away in an instant.

Joy leaned up and unhooked her bra, letting it fall from her, then lay back, waiting for him.

Lust, hot and heavy, spread like wildfire through Chance's throbbing balls. He kissed Joy again, long and hard as he plunged his tongue deep again.

Elation grabbed him, darts of pleasure spearing like arrows through his bloodstream. He saw Joy's willing smile and the flash of acceptance in her hazel eyes, and knew that she was his.

"Kiss me again," she whispered huskily, leaning up toward him. She clung to him, her heart beating against his chest, her response unflinching now. Her gaze followed him when he left the bed and started to undress.

He came back quickly, reaching out a rough palm, stroking her tenderly, smoothing over her shoulders and finally, her breasts. He eased down next to her, kissed each nipple in turn. She was lovely, her body lithe, muscles firm but soft and giving. He ran a hand over the tops of her thighs, brushing against the soft hair of her mons. He'd never been so careful, so patient, so tender with a woman before. He wasn't sure why he was now.

When he eased fingers into the wet cleft between Joy's thighs, he felt her jerk away almost instinctively until she came back slowly and permitted him to continue. He knew that she wanted him. His fingers were already drenched with liquid that leaked from her core.

*

Joy held herself still. When Chance pushed a finger inside her and teased the walls of her pussy, she flinched. His touch was magic, and she wanted more from him, so she forced herself to relax. Pure fire coursed through her as he thrust another finger into her, moving slowly, stretching her. Want and need grew stronger. Pressure escalated in every part of her.

Chance leaned over and pulled a pebbled breast into his mouth and sucked.

Joy's desire became hot and alive in an instant, raw with yearning for more.

Chance left Joy's breasts and glided down her body, rubbing his lips and tip of his tongue into the triangle of hair. She quivered with shockwaves as he reached the engorged nodule hidden deep inside her. Then he was licking, swallowing her juices without thought or hesitation. No one had ever made love to her like that. Joy strained against his mouth, all reservations gone. She eagerly threw herself over a precipice of unbelievable pleasure. Sensation exploded in potent waves of earthshaking convulsions, and she let them take her higher and higher, until she finally came back to earth with a murmured, satisfied sigh.

Chance moved then, positioning his entry. His swollen cock probed, not quite invading. He had watched and waited until she finished climaxing, only rigid control holding him back.

Joy could only guess what that delay was costing him, the agony of denial, the need for sexual release now. Joy reached down to caress him, his heartbeat throbbing inside his cock. She fingered his swollen length, toying with it without saying a word.

His head snapped up and pulled in a soft groan, but he acquiesced and leaned back to let her make love to his cock.

Joy's eyes feasted on his naked physique, his handsome face, her fingers cupping his powerful manhood as it jerked like a piece of smooth, thick steel. When he pulled her hand away, she knew he was ready to fuck her--ready to enjoy his own pleasure. Triumph, coupled with anticipation of more lovemaking, spun through her. Joy opened her legs wider and begged with a needy whisper of command for Chance to come into her, deep, hard, and fast.

*

Chance began slowly and deliberately, although he was burning like the fires in hell to reach his own nirvana. Then he could wait no longer; he grabbed Joy's buttocks and pounded his engorged cock into her waiting pussy--solidly. Tight, hot walls of flesh clamped onto his cock, surging through him and filling him with a plethora of carnal delights.

Joy wrapped her legs around Chance's hips and pulled him inside even farther.

Chance scarcely heard Joy's second gasp of delight--aware only of his own extraordinary pleasure as it screamed through his aroused nerve endings, shooting sensation after sensation from his cock to his balls. Explosions built until they ignited like a firestorm; powerful tremors shook him just before he spurted his hot, creamy seed into her. "God help me," he yelled, his expletive loud and clear.

Chapter Eight

Joy donned her electric blue gown, sheer pantyhose, and silver tap shoes. She'd decided to tease the whiskey-drinking, loud-mouthed, uncouth men of the Lucky Lady Saloon. They ranged around tables and the bar, looking raw, hard and worn. She ran through a mixed repertoire of songs old and new. Her voice rang true, mellow, and sweet. The lyrics she sang were underscored by the tinkling of a badly tuned piano although accompanied adequately by the grinning musician.

Joy entertained for almost an hour early in the evening and came back later for a shorter reprise to the roar of a raucous crowd showering her with applause and stomping feet. Sometime around midnight, cowboys and prospectors alike filtered out between the swinging doors and left for home or camp. Monday was a workday for Chance's rowdy customers. Joy had already disappeared to her room and undressed, slipped into bed, and turned down the wick on the oil lamp.

The room was dark, only dim moonlight filtering through the window when Joy heard the latch on her door click open. She smiled, having mused for an hour, wide awake, about her fantastic adventure in the Wild West. Was Chance coming back to make love to her again? That sounded fine to her. Joy waited beneath the thin blanket without moving.

Heavy footfalls approached the bed. A tall form halted before bending over. Joy reached up to grasp Chance's shoulders. When she inhaled a strong whiff of whiskey, she knew something was terribly wrong.

Chance's breath was clean and smelled sweet, not strong or sour. Joy reared back and punched the man hovering over her in the chest with a closed fist, shoving him backward. By the feel of his shirt, she thought it was made of tanned animal hide. The stench from his clothing and its owner's body almost overwhelmed her. It had to be one of the trappers who had come into the saloon very late. It certainly wasn't Chance Rivers in her room!

The three grimy trappers had been drunk long before Joy came upstairs to bed an hour ago. She knew why the man sneaked into her room, and it wasn't because he wanted to hear her sing.

Joy screamed her head off and kept screaming, long and louder than she ever had before.

The asshole cursed and stumbled backward, fumbling his way toward the door, trying to yank it open. Joy gasped, her breath coming in short inhales, her heart pounding, until she heard footfalls thunder down the hall. Suddenly, a gunshot exploded through the once-silent saloon.

Joy leapt out of bed and rushed to the doorway, poking her head out into the dimly lit hall. A splash of golden lamplight spewed out of Chance's room, a menacing, dark silhouette framed by the doorframe. Joy saw the smoking gun in Chance's right hand, and knew he was the one who pulled the trigger.

His head swiveled in her direction.

"Get back in your room and shut the door. Don't come out until I tell you," he growled.

She did what she was told. But she didn't sleep very well afterward.

* * * *

When Joy came in from the outhouse the next morning, she ran into Chance in the saloon. He held a glass of whiskey clasped in his hand, his back resting against the bar, a booted heel hooked over the

brass rail. A gun belt was strapped around his lean hips.

“Chance?” she asked questioningly as she approached him. “What happened last night? Did you kill him?”

“That isn’t your worry, honeybun. Just forget what you saw.”

“But, I saw...”

“You heard me, sugar. Let it be.”

She sealed her lips, but sighed audibly. “Of course, whatever you say, Chance. You’re the boss.” She watched him drain his glass and reach for the whiskey bottle.

Joy spun away and walked toward the saloon’s swinging doors. “I’m going to Mrs. Grainger’s for breakfast. I want see if there’s a train coming through soon, too,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll be back later.”

She left, her stomach uneasy, wondering if she could eat breakfast after all. She managed a hot biscuit doused with sweet butter and honey and drank a cup of coffee laced with fresh cream from Mrs. Grainger’s cow.

The air was as fresh as only a May morning in 1870 could be. Spring was almost here in southern Wyoming. Joy had asked questions yesterday and found that the Union Pacific tracks began in Omaha and rolled westward to someplace called Promontory, Utah. Farther west the Central Pacific owned the tracks that led to Sacramento. Joy learned nothing more to help her find a way east from Omaha. But if she remembered her geography, there had to be lots of rail lines leading east. After all, it was the western U.S. that was unexplored, not New Jersey or the east coast.

The gray-haired Wells Fargo agent was behind the ticket window when Joy opened the door to the small waiting room. “Morning, Mr. Jarvis. Have I received a reply yet?” Joy asked, in case she had been mistaken about the time warp.

“Well, now, let me see.” He pulled out a sheet of paper from a pile on the counter. “Fraid not.” He squinted at her over his spectacles. “But right here’s news that might be of interest to you, young lady. I was goin’ to send a boy to the saloon, but you beat me to it when I saw you comin’ up the road.” He smiled his toothy grin. “By the way, Miss Winters, that was a real nice show you gave us last evenin’. We all enjoyed your singin’ right well. You’ve got a mighty purty voice, if I do say so. Jest as purty as you are.”

Joy smiled back. “Thanks. I’m glad you enjoyed it.” She persisted, asking another question. “What kind of news is that, Mr. Jarvis?”

“Well, this here notice came a couple hours ago. It’s a telegraph from Laramie. The track is clear, it says. There’ll be a train stoppin’ here this afternoon, heading east.”

“Oh my God, that’s wonderful, Mr. Jarvis!” She clapped her hands and laughed out loud. “Oh, thank you, thank you. I can’t wait. Now I can go home!” Joy paused briefly, then peered at him through the barred window.

“Are you *sure* I didn’t get an answer to my tele ... telegraph?”

“No, not yet, Miss, but mebbe later...”

“Never mind. Right now, all I need to know is how much a ticket costs from here to Omaha.”

“A gold eagle, twenty bucks, Miss Winters, one way.”

Joy rolled her eyes in gratitude to the Lord above. “I’ve got the cash right here.” She grinned and pulled out her wallet and handed Mr. Jarvis a crisp twenty-dollar bill.

“Where did this come from?”

Oh, no, is he going to give me a hard time with my twenty-first century paper money, too?

“Mr. Jarvis, this is legal tender on the east coast. It’s a twenty-dollar bill. I can’t help it if you don’t have it out here yet, but believe me, you’ll be getting paper money like this very soon.”

Yeah, maybe in a hundred and thirty-five years or so.

“You’re sure of this?”

“Definitely. I wouldn’t lie to you, would I? So please give me my ticket and let me go pack my belongings. I don’t want to miss the train. What time did you say it’s supposed to pick up the mail?”

“Didn’t say.” He pulled his pocket watch out of a vest pocket and flipped open the cover. “I figure it’ll be here in a few hours, around mid-day, so you’d best come back right quick jest in case. I don’t hold up any trains for latecomers. We gotta hold to our schedules, you know.”

“Oh, I will. And thank you Mr. Jarvis, thank you so much.”

Chapter Nine

Joy almost sprinted all the way to the Lucky Lady. She was puffing when she got there and swung through the doors. Several men were seated at a poker table and a few more stood lined up at the bar, but Chance was nowhere in sight.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she said, composing herself as she walked toward the bartender. “Is Mr. Rivers in his office, Mr. Brice?”

The bartender jerked his chin upward, aiming at the open balcony. Joy took that to mean that Chance was in his room. “Thanks,” she replied with an open smile.

When she reached the top landing, Joy paused and looked down at the saloon and its occupants.

Wow, I'll have some wild stories to tell my children when this is all over!

Her brain was geared to a speedy homecoming as she strode along the hall to Chance's room. His door was closed, so she knocked a couple of times. She knew enough about manners and closed doors even if he didn't. She would tender her resignation right now and get it over with. So be it.

Joy knocked again, and the door cracked open a couple inches, so she pushed it in all the way.

Chance was sitting behind his desk, a bottle of whiskey and a half-empty glass in front of him. To Joy it looked as if he'd hit the booze hard while she was gone.

“Chance? Can I talk to you for a minute?”

He was tilted back in the swivel chair. His eyes were red-rimmed and she could barely see the blue of his irises through his thick lashes. His hair was mussed, and it looked as if he'd raked fingers through it repeatedly. Joy had noticed earlier that his cheeks were smudged by a dark shadow of bristly whiskers. This morning his usually immaculate clothes had been rumpled. He had untied his string tie and left the ends hanging. His shirt hung open, exposing curly chest hair. Joy licked her lips, recalling him buck naked, remembering what they'd been doing in his bed just yesterday.

Was that only yesterday? God help me. It seems like ages ago.

“Sit down, little lady, and tell me you're all right.” His words came out slightly slurred.

Joy sat on the edge of the chair facing his desk. “Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be? I chased that guy out of my room. But you didn't have to shoot him, Chance.”

“Who says? Nobody comes up here without an invite,” he growled, reaching for the glass and bringing the whiskey to his lips. He grimaced, his lips twisting in distaste as he quickly put it back down.

“I had some training where I come from. I could have taken care of it myself,” she told him in a tone that invited no explanations.

“You're my woman, now, honeybun. I take care of what's mine.”

Joy's brows rose toward her hairline. “I'm nobody's woman, Chance. Not yours. Not in this time.”

She'd always been skittish about commitments, though she knew there was a lot going on with her and Chance Rivers. She had almost forgotten how long it'd been since she enjoyed herself with someone like Chance. He was one in a million so far as lovers went. Joy shook those niggling thoughts out of her

head. *Yeah, right. Too damn long.* Nevertheless, she'd known from the beginning that it couldn't continue. There was nothing to bind them together except mind-blowing sex. Not in this century. Not in the wilds of Wyoming. She was definitely a twenty-first century woman, and knew she couldn't survive in the nineteenth-century world.

If only he *were* part of her world. Maybe then ... if only... but no, that wasn't going to happen.

Joy knew deep in her being that when she got on that train, she'd never see him again. A painful flutter thumped in her chest, and she wondered if she was having a heart attack. She took a deep breath and held it until the spasm passed and she could breathe normally.

"Chance, I just came by to tell you that I'm leaving on the afternoon train."

She watched, but got no visible reaction from him. Not a surprised look or a word of denial.

"Are you listening to me?" She prodded.

He rolled the half-filled glass between his fingers, the same fingers, she saw, that had plunged into her body with such titillating caresses only yesterday.

Finally he mumbled, "Is that so?"

She hated it when he took that supercilious tone in his answers.

"Fraid so. Mr. Jarvis just told me the eastward bound train will be here soon, and, well, I plan to be on it. I have to go back to New Jersey, Chance."

"Come over here, darlin', will you? And give me a kiss."

"Chance..."

Again, he was too fast for her, even drunk. Within seconds, she was wrapped tight in his embrace.

"Why don't you tell me you love me, huh?" he drawled. "I love *you*, honeybun. Do you know that?"

Joy leaned away from his too-close lips, the rank smell of whiskey now pouring from his mouth. "You're drunk, Chance, and you're not making sense." She pressed an urgent palm against his chest. "This is no time to talk about love."

"Come on darlin', I just want a fast poke." He was pulling her toward his bed. "I need a poke from you real bad."

When he backed her up, Joy's knees collapsed, hitting the edge of the mattress, and Chance fell into the bed on top of her.

"Chance, stop! You're being a damn asshole! Now get off me!"

"Nope. Want a poke. Right now. Yank down your trousers, sugar. I'm almost ready."

Joy shoved at his shoulders, but he was dead weight. His kisses and his prickly whiskers tickled the side of her neck. His aroused cock was long and hard, pressing between her thighs, and she was starting to get as hot under the collar as he was. When he turned toward her and devoured her lips in a kiss that was so starkly needy--dark, deep, and passionate--she had no choice but to respond. His hunger was easy to forgive and impossible not to reciprocate. Drunk or sober, he was a dream lover.

Joy tightened her arms around Chance's neck, her tongue playing with his. He was kneeling over her when he reached down and snapped open the button on her jeans and pulled down the zipper. She yanked one of her legs out of her pants and let her thighs fall open.

Since when are you dumb enough to feel such strong emotions for this man? You'll regret it when you leave here, the voice of reason warned her.

Then a second, wiser voice overrode the first. *When you wake up on the train from New York and realize all this was a weird dream, you can laugh about it. Tell your friends what a strange and wild experience you had on your return trip from the city.*

Reality probed, beating a tattoo on Joy's conscience. Still, she wanted desperately what her body craved--to make love with Chance Rivers one more time.

Go ahead. You deserve it.

Chance fumbled and slid under Joy's panties, a finger separating the lips of her sex, stroking her. His lips clung to her with demanding kisses.

Joy was panting, breathing hard, and damn eager to have Chance's cock inside her, rubbing her pussy again.

*

Chance unbuttoned his trousers and pushed into Joy as if he always belonged there. Their fucking was a lot different this time. Chance was fierce and urgent with his lovemaking now, as if he realized bad news was heading his way.

Last night he almost killed a man. It wasn't the first time. It wasn't a gunfight. It was much worse. Something uncontrollable had burst from him when the drunk trapper ran out of Joy's room. He saw red, his temper firing out of control when he pulled the trigger and shot the man in the back. He'd realized only seconds afterward what he'd done. Knew what he'd have to do.

Chance thought he'd made it far enough away from the West's lawmen to forget him. If a damn posse rode into Peck's Wells today, he'd be forced to leave town fast, traveling alone. Without Joy.

So, he took her quick, hard, and urgently, without spouting love words. When they both climaxed, Chance rolled off of her and buried his face in a bed pillow. In no time, drunk and sated by sex, he was asleep.

Chapter Ten

Joy left Chance to sleep it off and hurried to her room, jamming her belongings haphazardly into her duffle. She was anxious to get on her way. Nevertheless, random thoughts tumbled through her mind. She shut that final love session with Chance out of her mind although it confused her like too many small pieces of a difficult jigsaw puzzle. Like Scarlet O'Hara, she wouldn't think about it right now. She was going home and looking forward instead of back. Once she got to Omaha, she'd figure out a way home to New Jersey.

Joy took one last look around the room where she'd spent two extraordinary days and nights. She picked up her belongings, shut the door behind her, and went downstairs to the saloon.

Barleycorn was diddling with the keys, but turned when Joy came up behind him and dropped the duffle next to the piano.

"Goin' someplace, Miz Winters?"

"Yes. I'm going back east. I heard a train's due in soon."

"That right? Well, dang it, I'm gonna miss you real bad then. You sure are a nice lady. And you sing purty, too."

Joy laughed, some of the tension from the past few days easing. "Thanks. We did good, didn't we, Barleycorn, without hardly a rehearsal?"

"Did you tell the boss you're leaving? Bet he wasn't happy to hear that."

"Uh, well, I gave Mr. Rivers my notice."

At least I hope he heard me. I told him I couldn't stay here forever.

"Maybe he'll find another saloon singer down the line," Joy continued.

"Doubt that, Miz Winters. Chance niver thought much about hirin' a songbird till you showed up."

Joy picked up her dufflebag again. "Time to go, piano man. It was real nice making your acquaintance. Keep tickling those ivories, okay? You're pretty good at it yourself."

He waved a hand as Joy pushed open the swinging doors of the Lucky Lady Saloon and strode toward the railroad tracks and Wells Fargo's waiting room.

* * * *

Chance was in a fog. He'd drunk too much, both last night and this morning. Shooting that trapper, even if he only winged him, brought back the raw memories of his life as a gunslinger. He had put that life behind him when he arrived in Peck's Wells. And now, he'd found a woman he wanted to keep. He was thinking about marrying, maybe selling the saloon, and buying a ranch and raising a family.

Change pulled a pocket watch out of his vest and realized his trousers weren't buttoned. What occurred earlier snapped into focus and hit him in the gut.

He had all but forced Joy Winters to make love with him.

Chance pressed shaking palms against pounding temples, pushing the vile thought out of his head. No,

no, he recanted silently. He didn't force Joy; he remembered now. She was as willing this morning as she had been yesterday.

He loved her. No mistaking that. But there was no future in it. Not with the possibility of a posse or young gunslinger always around the corner.

He'd still apologize and set things right after he cleaned up. He'd visit the outhouse, then go to Mrs. Grainger's for a shave and a bath. He'd be clean for Joy this time, and any other time she decided to come to him ... she deserved that much.

Something scratched at the back of his muzzy mind, something important Joy had said, but no matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't come to him.

* * * *

Joy waited on the stoop of the Wells Fargo office, listening to a locomotive puffing along the tracks. Wheels screeched like chalk on a blackboard as the engine came to a smoking halt next to the small building. Mr. Jarvis greeted the conductor as he jumped down to the ground.

"Morning Virgil. How're things?" The agent yelled over the hissing steam spewing from the locomotive.

"A small mishap past Laramie, but the Union Pacific crew got it fixed real quick." The conductor smiled as he went to meet the other man. "Mail bag ready?"

"Yup. Got it right here." Seth Jarvis tossed the leather pouch to the conductor. "And I got you a passenger, too. The lady's going back where she came from. To New Jersey, she tells me. I told her she'd have to change at Omaha."

"Well, now, that's mighty fine, Seth." The conductor swung his gaze from Jarvis to Joy as she approached the two men. "Hop aboard, young lady. We'll pull out soon as you get on board. Gotta make up time whenever we can."

Joy turned to the Wells Fargo agent. "Thanks again, Mr. Jarvis." she said, then hesitated. "And would you do me a favor?"

"Course, ma'am."

"Tell Mr. Rivers ... Chance Rivers..." Joy's throat clogged on his name just for a second. A rush of emotion suddenly squeezed hot tears from her eyes. She couldn't stop them from falling completely, but she wiped them away before continuing. "Tell him..." She sniffled hard and tried to smile. "Just tell him I won't forget him, Mr. Jarvis. You'll be sure to tell him that, won't you?"

"Sure will," he promised with a smile. "You take care of yourself now, Miss Winters. Have a safe trip, and come back to see us when you can. We sure enjoyed your singin'."

Joy mounted the steps to the railroad car and paused on the landing, glancing toward the cluster of shanties that made up the town of Peck's Wells. Just then, she noticed someone running hard toward the train.

Meanwhile, the iron horse hissed and blew black coal smoke and white steam out of its smokestack. A plaintive wail from its whistle drowned out all sound. Massive iron wheels rolled forward, spinning faster as the engine pulled slowly away from the tiny train depot. Mr. Jarvis waved goodbye to Joy.

She was about to turn away when her gaze fastened on the handsome, ebony-haired man who halted, breathing hard, twenty yards away amidst the wheel ruts leading to the dinky town.

The Union Pacific gathered speed.

If Chance shouted anything to her, she couldn't hear over the whistle and the noise of the chugging engine. Joy watched, biting down on her bottom lip, her fingers clenched, afraid her heart would split apart. She would never forget Chance Rivers, but there was no going back for her.

The solitary figure stood unmoving, an errant breeze ruffling his hair. Tears gushed from Joy's eyes again, and she sobbed aloud, raw emotions flooding through her and blurring her last sight of Chance Rivers.

"You'd best get to your seat, young lady," the conductor said kindly, standing nearby while urging her inside. "We've got a long trip 'fore we get to Omaha."

Epilogue

The conductor tapped Joy lightly on the shoulder. She knew right away that something had changed the moment she opened her eyes. Passengers dressed in twenty-first century clothing hustled themselves and their children onto the depot's concrete platform as the long, sleek Amtrak train emptied. A modern building hunkered alongside the tracks.

"We're at Pleasure Park Station, Miss," the uniformed conductor said. "I thought I'd better wake you. Your ticket says you want to get off here."

Joy gathered her things quickly and wove her way out of the car and onto familiar ground. She'd made it back to New Jersey. To her own time.

That must have been some dream, she told herself, allowing a fervent, audible sigh to escape. She had to believe it was nothing more than a vivid nightmare brought on by stress, keyed up by an anxiety-ridden but unsuccessful audition.

Nevertheless, remnants of the dream lingered. Joy vaguely recalled a handsome, dark-haired hunk that peopled her dream. She even recalled his name: Chance. How odd. Chance Rivers. Of course, all this was a figment of her imagination. None of it was real.

What I felt during that dream, though, sure seemed real. I've never felt that way before.

Joy hurried toward the depot's parking lot, shoving thoughts of her dream lover to the bottom of her mind. She spotted her car parked where she'd left it. Throwing her belongings on the back seat, she paused for long moments before settling behind the steering wheel and hooking her seatbelt.

Without warning, a vision appeared through the car's windshield. A man with hair as black as pitch and eyes as blue as sapphires was smiling in at her. Joy blinked several times before opening her eyes wide to stare through the glass. The man was gone, disappearing as quickly as he appeared.

Inhaling slowly and deep, Joy switched on the ignition. The car's engine revved and she pulled out of the parking lot and drove toward her uncle's house, remembering at the last minute that she needed to stop for gas. She pulled into a Quick Chek station. Uncle Jim would want to hear all about her audition on stage in the Big Apple. She could tell him some of it--but not about her dream man. Joy reached into her purse. When she did so, her nerves jolted sharply as she realized she had a single twenty left in her wallet, not the two bills she'd started out with this morning.

The End

About the Author:

Blaise was born in New Jersey, and lives in a semi-rural county in the "Garden State" with three four-footed companions: a retired thoroughbred mare, a half-Siamese cat, and "a rather large" Rottweiler.

She earned her BS in Fine Art Education with the intention to teach but found she'd rather "do" than teach. Blaise was employed for a number of years by a series of New York advertising agencies. Later, she wrote catalog and PR copy for a private label, sales marketing firm and drapery/bedspread manufacturer. Additionally, she earned a NJ Real Estate Broker's license and sold real estate. She now writes romantic fiction, paints, and markets her watercolors.

Blaise is also published elsewhere with Historical and Contemporary Romances under the name of Joan

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