
HARMONY

Journey's End - Book Three

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Prologue

“Damn,” Matthew Cullen exhaled the curse in a disgusted puff. His steel gray eyes devoured his friend’s wife, Melody, as she sashayed up the walk. Mitch McBride locked Melody to his side with an arm like an iron band while she matched him stride for stride keeping her thigh pressed tight to his.

Melody was tall for a woman so she could do that – match a man’s stride – and look him nearly in the eye. Why he bet when she laid that long body over Mitch’s she was almost a blanket – a blanket of woman. He gave his head a hard shake. Hard enough, he hoped, to knock the thoughts that rambled hot and humid out of his lonely brain.

“Damn,” he whispered a second time. Melody McBride was one beautiful woman. Hair the color of honey dripped down her back. Her wide-set eyes shone like the first spring blue bells, and that pink mouth, generous, full, begged to be kissed.

He gave his pant leg a shake and frowned. He didn’t want to embarrass himself like some greenhorn. Melody McBride with her pert bosom and sassy behind would never, could never, should never, belong to him. Ever.

She was married to his friend. The one who just now stopped in front of him.

“Afternoon, Sheriff.” Mitch stuck his free hand, the one not clamped around his wife, in Matt’s direction.

Matt proffered his own hand, and the two men performed the masculine ritual. If his friend knew the kind of thoughts, longings, and desires he entertained for his wife he’d retract those fingers into a fist and let it fly. He’d deserve it, too.

“Hello, Mitch,” he nodded. “Melody.” He tipped his hat. “What brings you two to town?”

“Melody was expecting a letter, and...” Mitch began.

A ruckus erupted from inside the jail. A tin cup banged against iron bars and a voice, outraged and ragged, took up a litany of complaints. *You got the wrong man. I’m innocent. I never robbed no bank.* When he got to the end of his declarations, he started over from the top.

The three listened for a minute or two before Matt gestured toward the far end of the building where the noise was considerably less. “He was sleeping it off when I put him in the cell, but it looks like he’s come awake with a vengeance.” He gave a disgusted laugh.

“Who is that sidewinder?” Mitch asked. “What did he do?”

“Well, nothing, according to him.” Matt rolled his eyes toward the continued ranting. “But I got a wanted poster and a telegram from the sheriff in Denver. Seems like two hombres robbed a bank there and killed a man in the process. They caught one, and he sang for his supper. Told the sheriff his buddy planned to head for Oregon with his half of the money. He gave a real good description right down to the scar on his right shoulder and a missing big toe that’d been shot off.”

“That guy fit the description?” Mitch enquired.

“He surely does. I arrested him for drunk and disorderly, but once he was in the cell and passed out, I checked for the scar and the missing toe.” He stopped for a bit to listen to the continuing

declarations of innocence. “Unless he has an identical twin somewhere with the same injuries, he’s the one.”

Melody laughed, gave an adorable snort, and laughed again.

“Something funny?” Matt gazed at his friend’s lovely wife.

Mitch smiled at the sweet peal of his wife’s laugh. “Well, you probably don’t know this, but about six months ago we discovered that Melody has a twin sister, an identical one.”

“What?” Confusion flickered across his eyes like a thunderstorm. “Where’s she been? How could you not know you had a twin sister?”

“My mother died when we were born,” Melody began.

“I’m sorry,” Matt said.

“Thank you. Well, my grandmother, my mother’s mother, didn’t think my pa could take care of us. She wanted both of us, but my pa couldn’t bear it. He told her to take a baby and leave a baby.” Melody blinked back the beginning of a tear. “After my pa died, I found a letter. He said he’d regretted letting my sister go every day since, but he didn’t know what to do. Harmony was most likely happy, and a deal’s a deal.” She shrugged.

“Harmony?” Matt asked.

“Yup, Melody and Harmony. We’re two halves of the same tune. I always knew I was missing something. There was this hole that needed filling.”

“They’ve been writing,” Mitch began.

“And it’s like we’ve known each other always. We even like the same foods.” Melody interrupted. “She broke her leg when she was seven, and I felt it. Pa didn’t know what to make of my crying and limping around on a perfectly good leg.”

“Where is she?” Matt asked.

“Chicago. That’s where our grandmother lived, but she passed on a while back. I got a letter today, and Harmony is coming here to visit, but I hope she’ll stay.” Melody tilted her little chin a defiant inch.

“You know she’s welcome,” Mitch assured her. “But let her

make up her own mind. She's been raised in a big city. She might not want to live on a ranch like Journey's End, and Ford," he swept his hand to encompass the collection of wooden buildings, "is just a little western town. No theatre, no concerts, no trolley cars."

"When is she coming?" Matt asked.

"She's leaving Chicago in two weeks and traveling by train to Denver. That will take five or six days. Then she'll take the train from Denver to Portland. She'll have to switch in Salt Lake City. The main line heads on to Sacramento, but there's another line heads north, a smaller one. I hope to meet her, but she could take the stage from Portland to Ford. She should get here in about six weeks we figure." Melody's brilliant smile stunned him like a baseball bat to the head, but his mind churned and charted.

"Well, now, isn't that something. I plan to escort my prisoner to Denver and hand him over to the authorities there," Matt said. Truth be told, he'd not intended to do any such thing. He'd planned to wire the sheriff in Denver to send someone to fetch the man. "Train travel from Chicago to Denver is safe enough, but from Denver on can be plenty rough. Especially for a young woman accustomed to the comforts of Chicago and in early spring, weather can still be mighty fierce in the Rockies." He paused a thoughtful moment. "Tell you what. I'd be happy to meet your sister in Denver and escort her back." He shrugged, pretending nonchalance. "I'm going there anyway."

Mitch stifled a cough with his hand. "You would, would you?" His eyes gleamed with intelligent humor.

Matt nodded, but didn't meet his friend's eye. He'd never been good at hiding his thoughts.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Matt. Isn't that wonderful, Mitch?" She blazed that devastating smile at her husband. How the man didn't burst into flames on the spot he'd never know.

"I've been worried about her traveling alone. I think you're right. Chicago to Denver is a well-traveled route. It would be

such a relief to know she had an escort the rest of the way.” Melody glowed. “I’m going to write her right now. She planned to stay at the Colorado Copper Hotel.”

“Good. You tell her to stay put at that hotel until I come to collect her,” Matt instructed. “Denver can be on the rough side. She shouldn’t be out after dark. She needs to avoid the saloons and watch out for men, especially if they’ve been drinking.”

“I’m sure she knows to take care, but I will pass on your warning,” Melody said. “Thank you, Matt. You’ve taken quite a worry off my mind.”

“Yes, thank you, Matt. Something tells me this is the perfect job for you.” Mitch slapped his friend on the back. “Let’s head home, Melody.”

Matt watched the young couple head for the Livery. They were still sealed together from hip to knee, but his jealousy had been replaced with hope. Melody had an identical twin. A woman with the same honey-colored hair and wide, generous mouth. Maybe the same swinging behind he watched disappear up the dusty street.

“Sheriff, Sheriff,” the prisoner called. “I need my dinner. You can’t starve an innocent man.”

Matt frowned. The trip to Denver with that man caterwauling all the way would be a sore trial, but the return trip with Harmony at his side would make it worth the trouble. He’d have two weeks, maybe three depending on the train schedule, to woo her. Time to convince her that Ford had much to offer a young woman used to the sophistication of the big city. Time to convince her that a small-town sheriff fit her just right.

He looked up the street and down the street before heaving a sigh the size of a Texas twister.

He aimed to give it his best.

He hoped his best would be good enough.

Chapter 1

Harmony pulled the crisp white curtain back from the hotel window and surveyed the street. Well, Denver wasn't Chicago, but it wasn't the back end of nowhere, either. Perfectly good streets stretched away into the distance. Solid brick buildings lined both sides and people hustled in and out of doorways and up and down the sidewalks.

A brisk wind blew under women's skirts, and men held their hats to their heads with a single hand. From the pink in their cheeks and hurry in their steps, she figured it was cold. She knew all about cold and wind. Chicago had a good share of both.

Chicago was a city of the plains. Defined by the river winding like a giant snake through its center and Lake Michigan, enormous and blue, fading away into the distance until water met sky.

Denver was a city of mountains. It was as if a giant had carved a bowl into the earth and nestled a town in the bottom. Mountains tall, rangy, wild, and snow-covered surrounded and shadowed it. The Rocky Mountains. She shivered at the sight of those frozen monoliths. When her sister informed her she would have an escort from Denver forward, she'd thought it silly. She

was twenty years old, a woman grown. But when she pondered riding a train up, into, and over those peaks, she knew she would be glad of the company.

Sister, what a lovely word. She had a sister named Melody. An identical twin sister. The other half to her tune. The one her father kept while he sent her to live far away with her grandmother. The grandmother who never told her the truth of her birth even as she'd sat by her bed day after day and held her claw-like hand until her boney chest rose with its final breath. Well, she mustn't be bitter. The cream of Chicago society had been her playground since earliest memory. She'd had the finest clothes, attended the best schools, and acquired the proper friends.

Most of those friends were already married. A few had babies of their own. Grandmama wanted her to marry before she passed. She wished to see her granddaughter settled, and Harmony had been ever obedient. But this she could not do, and she couldn't explain it to either Grandmama or Jerome, the man Grandmama had selected for her husband. Jerome, safe and secure, poised to assume the reins of his father's law practice. Harmony would continue her life of social calls, dinner parties, and charitable works. She would be the hostess and wife she'd been raised to be. It was a future that stretched bleak and unwelcome in an endless circle of polite chatter.

Then Melody's first letter arrived, and her horizons exploded. She'd filled her lungs with the air of possibility. Their letters crossed the country each one a revelation and a confirmation. Soon Harmony would meet this girl who looked like her but had ridden a horse, shot a gun, and married a cowboy.

Jerome had been most unhappy with her decision to travel across the country to meet this more adventurous copy of herself, but she had persisted with her plan and ignored his protests, a response so surprising and unfeminine it had caused his eyebrows to rise and his mouth to tighten. If she married him, how many

times would she be the recipient of that look of disapproval? If she married him, would he simply order her life to his liking? She feared it would be so, and her married friends told her to expect it.

It was time for supper, and Harmony's stomach growled in agreement. She laughed. Grandmama would be most unhappy. A lady did not allow her body to make noise. She smoothed the skirt of her dark green dress. The sleeves were puffed large to the elbow as was the style. The dress had a military air with its double row of buttons marching down the front and jaunty epaulets at the shoulder. A belt of matching fabric encircled a waist cinched tight. Her boots were of fine, thin leather and laced to a dainty close. A small cap with a martial air sat atop her honey blonde hair. She swept the matching cloak around her shoulders and secured the clasp at her throat.

A quite lovely dining room lay directly across the street. She had eaten there every evening for the three days she'd been waiting in Denver for her escort to appear. Harmony closed and locked her door before descending to the main lobby and heading for the door.

"It'll be dark in another hour or so, Miss Beckman," the desk clerk called. "Women traveling alone should be back in the hotel afore dark."

Harmony tipped her head in acknowledgement. He'd said the same thing every night, and it did grow tedious. She paused just inside the door struck by a new thought. Her name was not Harmony Beckman. It was Harmony Williams – Harmony Eileen Williams. Melody had sent her birth certificate in one of her letters. Beckman was Grandmama's name and had been her mother's maiden name, but never hers.

Harmony returned to the hotel as the sun turned the mountains deep purple in the fading light.

"Good evening, sir." She waited until the night manager raised his head from his newspaper. Goodness, a hotel employee

in Chicago would never get away with such rudeness. Grandmama would have seen him fired on the spot.

“Can I help you, miss?” he asked.

“I would like a bath brought to my room in the morning at nine. I will need assistance dressing following my bath,” Harmony replied.

“You can’t dress yourself?” His eyes wide with what? Astonishment? Mockery? Really, it was quite unmannerly to question a woman’s personal needs. Harmony gave a little huff.

“There is a young maid, Cassandra, I believe. She has been most competent. Please leave a note for her to attend me around ten.” Before the man, really no more than a servant, could offer another opinion, Harmony swept up the stairs.

She managed to get her clothes off although it was a struggle. She bent her arm around to her back and searched with her fingers until she found the tie to her corset and pulled. With some enthusiastic wriggling, it loosened and slid over her slender hips. But no woman could lace herself into a corset and cinch it tight. For that, she’d need help.

Harmony glanced at the three trunks stacked against the wall of her room. When she’d packed them in Chicago, it had seemed the right number of clothes. She and Grandmama had changed twice a day always and, more often than not, three times. If they went to an afternoon tea or had callers, that required a certain dress. They always changed for dinner even if it was only the two of them. She had noticed in the dining hall across the street that not all women wore a bustle or were tightly corseted. Clothes more often were warm and clean, comfortable and relaxed.

She folded the dress over a chair, threw an embroidered nightgown of finest fabric over her head and crawled into the fluffy bed. She would discuss her wardrobe with Melody when she arrived in Oregon. Her sister could advise her. Sister. She shivered. Oh, how she loved that word.

In the morning, Cassandra helped her into a dress of deep

maroon. The long, straight sleeves ended in a deep cuff with a line of delicate ivory buttons. The bosom was an inset of pin tucked lace bordered by a broad ribbon. Matching ribbon circled her hips and dipped into a V in the front while a belt tied into a bow adorned her waist. The small bustle at the back fell into graceful pleats.

“Thank you, Cassandra.” Harmony studied her reflection critically.

“Call me Cassie, ma’am. Everybody does.” The maid adjusted the material at the back of the dress. “You have the prettiest clothes I ever did see,” she sighed.

“Thank you, Cassie, that’s very kind.” Harmony opened her little purse and withdrew some coins. “Please, may I reward you for your help?”

“You may,” Cassie giggled. “You talk mighty nice too. Jim, that’s the night manager, he said you sound like you got a stick up your...” She ground to a sudden stop. “But I think it’s real nice.” She folded yesterday’s green dress and returned it to the trunk. “Do you need anything else? Help with your hair?”

Cassie had appeared each day with two braids laying over her shoulders and tied with a blue ribbon. Harmony did not much care for the look.

“No, thank you. I can manage,” Harmony assured her.

“All right, Miss Harmony. Should I come tomorrow?” Her voice was hopeful.

“Yes, please, that would be lovely. See you then.” It was a dismissal, and Cassie understood as much. She closed the door with a quiet click.

Harmony studied the heavy mass of golden hair that hung down her back. Grandmama insisted young ladies wore their hair up, and her maid saw to it, but she had not a notion how it was done. She twisted it this way and that and, after much trial and error, wrangled it into a fairly neat bun.

Harmony spent the day walking around the town a bit, not

too far from the hotel as she was a woman alone. After lunch in her room, she spent the afternoon reading before dressing for dinner. She hoped her escort arrived soon, she was ready to move on.

She crossed the street for dinner at the usual hour and received the routine warning from the desk manager. Harmony returned as the last ray of light disappeared over the purple mountains.

The manager lifted his head and squinted at her as if she were some colorful, foreign bird. "Somebody to see you," he said and flicked his fingers toward the sitting room. He didn't wait for a response but returned his attention to his paper.

Harmony huffed. She'd grown accustomed to the man's rude behavior, but she didn't have to like it. She moved with all the grace and dignity seven years of finishing school had instilled toward the room where guests were received.

Several men lounged in over-stuffed chairs smoking cigars, sipping brandy, reading. How was she to know which was her escort?

A tall man with a barrel of a chest and arms reminiscent of the trunk of a tree rose from one of the chairs. He wore a thick, red plaid wool shirt tucked into heavy denim pants. A jacket lined with sheep skin lay over his arm and heavy boots enclosed large feet. His face was broad and bronzed from sun and wind. Two intelligent gray eyes peered from beneath shaggy eyebrows, and his mouth curved into a generous smile. It was not a sophisticated face, but she liked it.

"Hello, Harmony," he said. "I'd know you anywhere. You look like Melody, only fancy." He grinned. "I'm Matt Cullen. I've come to escort you to Oregon."

Harmony extended her hand, and Matt engulfed it in his giant one.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Cullen," Harmony said.

"Call me Matt, and believe me, Harmony, the pleasure is all

mine.” He held her hand prisoner. “I bought two tickets for tomorrow’s train. It’s only an engine, one passenger car, and one freight car. Nothing else going. It won’t be much, but it will get us headed in the right direction. It leaves at two. I’ll come fetch you at 12:30. Can you be ready?”

Harmony tugged on her hand, but he was unwilling to let it go. “Yes, I’ll be ready.”

He surveyed her from head to toe and those steely eyes left a trail of fire.

“Do you have warm clothes?” he enquired. “The mountains are colder than... well, they’re cold.”

“Thank you. I will dress appropriately,” Harmony assured him.

He released her hand, and she rubbed at the unfamiliar tingling.

“See you tomorrow.” He smiled and pulled the coat over his shoulders before disappearing out the door.

Harmony had never seen a man so big, so raw, so masculine. He could have been carved from the mountains that loomed in the distance. Jerome thought muscles vulgar. An indication of physical labor. That man who just left did not seem less. He inspired thoughts of more, more, more.

Why, she wondered, were people unwilling to finish their sentences? Cassie said the manager thought she had a stick stuck up... stuck up what? And now Matt said it was colder than a... a what? If it happened again, she would enquire.

Tomorrow she would take a giant step closer to Melody.

She would cross the Rockies, the backbone of the country, and enter the west. A tingling rushed up her body, and her fingers and toes vibrated. It was an unusual, but not unpleasant, sensation. Excitement, that’s what it was. She was excited.

Grandmama would disapprove.