

CHAPTER 1



“Those who cannot remember the past are—”
“Condemned to repeat it,” Beth moaned. “No, Papa, please!” She widened her blue eyes and looked imploringly up at the tall angry man in front of her, composing her practiced adorable and helpless look upon her features.

“Try that where you’re headed and it’ll get you in trouble for sure!” her father snapped. “It’s time you stop letting others lead you into time-wasting partying and expend your energies instead on improving yourself. I’ve been informed that you failed your essay in your class, Nineteenth Century American West. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is for me as the Minister of Historical Studies to have a daughter who can’t even write a decent essay at the undergrad level when you’ve grown up taking family field trips to nearly every important era on this world?” He shook a digital tablet at her. “Your instructor forwarded it to me, asking if you were playing a joke on him and demanding to know why you aren’t taking his class seriously. I’ve had to soothe some very ruffled feathers!”

Beth gulped. She’d been pretty confident that she’d done a decent job of conveying the overall atmosphere of old time Las

Vegas, highlighting its disdain for natural resources with the excessive lights and open water in swimming pools and fountains; the damages to its patrons' health with the unlimited food buffets and casinos with constant lighting and no clocks to trigger sleep impulses; the money frittered away in addictive play when there were people without homes living on the streets; the disrespect shown half the population with the shameful clothing that the women were forced to wear in order to make a living.

She knew that she hadn't even looked at any of the resources required by the curriculum, but why should she have to? She was the daughter of the man entrusted by the ruling council to ensure that time travel didn't abuse the past. She had spent her entire life making journeys to previous times and places. Her father had always talked with her about what she was seeing and experiencing, making sure that she got the full benefit from their adventures. She'd lived and breathed history all her life. She didn't need to read the textbooks, she'd probably experienced more than the damn authors! Her family had spent a week in 1989 Las Vegas when she was thirteen and she had drawn on that when she picked the topic for her essay. Maybe she'd missed some points that the professor was expecting, she'd written the essay the night before it was due and hadn't had the time or inclination to go back and re-read what she had pulled together, but surely she hadn't omitted enough to fail!

Her utter confusion showed on her face and her father sighed, his anger spent. "Lilibet, you haven't seen any of the lectures from this course or read any of the resources, have you?" She hunched her shoulders and stared at the ground, doing her best impersonation of a turtle. "I guess the title of the course wasn't enough of a clue – *Nineteenth Century American West*?" She still didn't respond and he was forced to believe that she really didn't know what she had done wrong. "Your essay about Las Vegas was based on our family trip there, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It was a wonderful experience, I learned a lot." When

her father got quiet after being angry, it meant that he had decided on her punishment. All she could do now was to placate him as much as possible and hope to mitigate whatever he had settled on. "I've always appreciated all the places you've taken us to and how you always show us everything and make sure that we understand what we're seeing."

"So apparently this essay is my fault, I guess, for failing to make sure that you understood that we went to Las Vegas in the *twentieth* century. If you had heard a single lecture or read anything in your textbooks, you'd have realized what era your course was on."

"A hundred years, that's not so bad, is it? How different can it be?"

Her father stared at her aghast. It took him a full minute to recover his ability to speak, and during that time Beth felt her heart sink. She'd really put her foot in it now. She hoped that he wasn't going to make her do manual labor again. She really hated when he made her clean out the stables or weed the garden. Why should she have to deal with muck when there were machines for those jobs? She supposed that was why it was punishment.

"You have fifteen minutes to arrange your affairs. I'm sending you back to see how different it can be."

"Can't you just bring me back shortly after I leave so that I don't have to bother with putting things on hold? That's the great thing about time travel, you can control your departure and return times," she said brightly.

He bent over and smiled in her face. She gulped; it wasn't a pleasant smile. "You, my dear, are going real time. Since you can't be bothered to actually make an effort in your classes, I've withdrawn you from them. And since you aren't in school, you have all the time in the world, literally. You're going to live in the nineteenth century American west until school resumes again in September. By then, I hope you are ready to make an effort to really study." He straightened to his full height. "By then you will have had plenty of practice with doing manual labor, and if you aren't

prepared to eagerly apply yourself to your lessons, I will be generous and let you decide whether you'd prefer to spend your time in the stables or the gardens. If you don't complete your schooling, I can't see any other future for you." He glanced at the tablet. "Your time is down to eleven minutes."

"But, Papa, how can you afford to spend so much time away from your work? You've never been gone for more than a few days before, how can you plan on months?"

"You've misunderstood, my girl. I'm not going with you; you're on your own this time. You've reached the age that you are considered an adult, despite your behavior. So you are going to arrive with a carpetbag with a change of clothes, a few other items, and a small amount of money to buy food and lodging for a few days. You'll have to find some way of supporting yourself and arrange for a place to live. Once a week I will check what your recorder has saved." He fingered the golden heart attached to a permanent chain around her neck, it was welded closed and couldn't be removed. Not only did it record what was happening around her, it transmitted the information back to her father's office, along with her location and biological condition. Her father would be able to keep track of what was going on in her life and retrieve her if it got bad enough. At least she hoped that he would. All time travelers had an implant that would bounce them back to their real time and medical care, should their bodies be near the point of death. Surely he wouldn't let things get that bad, would he?

"Lilibet, I may be frustrated at how you have been wasting your time and my resources, but I would never send you into something that I didn't fully believe that you are capable of handling. Cleaning up after animals and growing food are universal skills that will help you find work in any time period, that's why I've always emphasized them. You know how to build and tend a fire and have mastered basic cooking techniques, including preparing fish and game. I fully expect that you will have no problem finding a job and providing for yourself, but if you experience hardship, you can still

feed yourself off the land. This is not going to be a vacation, you are being taught an important lesson, but it should not be completely unpleasant.” He consulted his tablet again. “Your time is nearly up. Set the away notice on your comm and direct any inquiries to my office. You no longer have enough time for any personal conversations, you need to change into your travel clothes.” He turned her towards her chamber and gently pushed her on her way.

A few minutes later, Beth was standing near some ruts indicating that wheeled vehicles travelled this route. The terrain was fairly barren – small shrubs and tufts of coarse grasses were scattered wherever they could set down roots in the hard baked ground, the surface was mostly level, although she could see indications that there were highs and lows that could conceal approaching danger, if she were not careful. Mountains rimmed the distant horizon. She turned in a full circle, careful to note the direction she was facing when she arrived as that was her father’s way of telling her which way to go. But there was no sign of a city anywhere, not even a town, or some buildings, or anything that indicated the presence of people, other than the ruts forming a rudimentary road.

Her father’s confident speech about her ability to live off the land rang in her ears. *Lord, I hope not! Or amend that, she thought hastily, I hope I’m not required to, but I know I have the skills if I have to.* That led her to thoughts about what she would need to survive in the wild and she decided that she had better investigate what she carried in her bag. Her father had handed it to her at the last minute, just before transporting her back.

Another quick circle of inspection, and nothing had changed; there wasn’t even a nice comfy boulder nearby to sit on in this empty place. Sighing, she plunked herself down right where she was standing, no point in losing track of which way she should be heading, and started to fumble with the buckles on the straps holding the bag closed. The leather was stiff and worn, and she was having trouble figuring out exactly how they fed through the

coarse metal fasteners. She wondered briefly how her father had managed to give her equipment that looked like she had used it for years. She felt a flash of pride, new things brought attention and made their owner stand out, something no Traveler wanted when they were trying so hard to fit in and go unnoticed. That was why her father was so good, he thought of things like that.

The sun dimmed. She looked up at the sky. It appeared to be mid-morning, the sun hadn't reached a point overhead yet. The temperature was comfortable, which meant that it would probably become less comfortable as the sun heated up her surroundings. Clouds were gathering, which is why she had noticed a change in the light. She could hear a low rumble in the distance behind her. It looked like she was going to get wet when it started raining. Unless... unless there was a folding umbrella inside her bag! She stopped looking at the sky and focused on the buckles, the damn uncooperative, shitty buckles. How the fuck was she supposed to stay dry if she couldn't even open her bag? Her temper exploded and she threw the bag as far as she could. And then she stood up, and hands on her hips, marched over to it and kicked it. There was apparently something very hard inside because the soft leather of her boot didn't fully protect her toes and she yowled in pain, hopping up and down, pausing to kick the bag again, which brought on another bout of hopping and swearing.

Jason nudged his elbow into the driver's side and pointed to the sight in the distance, chuckling. "Look Amos, something sure has her dander up!" The horses were going at a good clip and the stagecoach joints were groaning as the wheels jolted along the ruts of the trail. There was no possibility of hearing what the distant girl was saying, but her gestures made it clear that they probably could expect that whatever she was saying wasn't acceptable in polite society. The two men continued to watch in amusement as the horses carried them closer.

It finally dawned on the driver that the girl didn't realize that the large vehicle was bearing down on her; she'd made no attempt

to move out of its path and he had to pull the horses to an abrupt halt. "What in blazes is wrong with you?" he demanded in the sudden silence.

Beth looked up, paled when she realized how close the horses were and then had the grace to blush as she quickly stepped to the side of the road. But then she realized that everything that she owned for the next several months was in danger of being trampled, and just as quickly darted forward to retrieve her bag.

The sudden movement had the horses squealing and attempting to rear in their traces. Amos swore and focused his attention on maintaining control of the animals. "You need your tail tanned! Have you no more sense than God gave a newborn kitten to get out of the road when you're about to be run down? What are you doing out here all alone?"

Jason suddenly realized that this was a perfect ambush situation and swore as he cocked his shotgun and aimed it at Beth. "You tell your friends that if they try anything, you are a goner." She stared up at him. "Go on, tell 'em!"

There was the sound of another gun cocking and the guard looked around, trying to place where the danger was. He quickly realized that the sole passenger in the coach had his head and shoulders out the window and was aiming his weapon directly at him.

"Now, I don't want to cause any trouble here, all I'm aiming for is to calm things down a mite. That young lady is clearly addled in the head and I can't rightly let you go shooting her. So stand down."

The guard swallowed and slowly shook his head. "Can't do that, I'm afraid. I've been taking my pay regular-like for months, riding shotgun, and it just ain't right for me to ignore my duty when it comes time."

Now it was the passenger who swore. He had no desire to shoot anyone and he was suddenly very mindful of the warning he had heard many times about never drawing a gun unless one is prepared to use it. He kept his gun aimed at the guard, just like the

guard continued to hold his on the girl, but he turned his attention on the cause of the trouble. "Answer the driver. What are you doing here all alone? Where is your horse?"

She opened her mouth and stared wordlessly at him. How had she gotten herself into such a mess? How did she get out of it?

"Are you capable of speech, girl? Do you understand what I am saying? Have you injured your head? What is wrong with you?" he demanded impatiently. "If the horses jostle us too badly, you and the guard are both likely to die, so I suggest that you answer quickly."

"My name is Elizabeth." If she was going to die, she wanted them to know her name. She wasn't sure why it mattered, but somehow she needed to make a connection before she was killed. Somehow, knowing that the implant would return her to her own time wasn't such a comfort.

"So you can talk and you do understand me. A slight improvement in the situation, but not by much. Where is your horse?"

She looked around in confusion. *Had* her father sent a horse with her? It generally wasn't done, since it was usually easy enough to obtain transport once a settlement was reached; but she had arrived with nothing in sight. Maybe he had sent her with transportation. "Snowflake? Are you here, Snowflake?" she called. Surely her father would have sent the horse that was her favorite, she'd raised him since he was a colt. She turned in a circle, scanning the area. "I don't see him. I don't see him! Where could he be?" Her voice took on a note of hysteria as she looked up at the men sitting a good four feet higher than her. "Do you see him from up there? Look for a white gelding with a red blaze on his nose and red socks. He wouldn't leave me; I know he wouldn't. Something must have happened to him. Oh, no!" She started to wring her hands.

"Enough!" the passenger said sharply. "There is no horse in sight, why would we ask you if there was? Are you alone?"

“Yes, sir.” This was one she had no problem answering, and she knew it was always a good idea to use her best manners.

“Where are you headed?”

“Now that’s enough!” the driver exclaimed sharply. “We got a schedule to keep to and it ain’t good for the horses to be standing around while you play twenty questions. If you promise to keep your gun on her until we reach the next town, we’ll take her on board and then hand her over to the sheriff. You can ask her all the questions you want. If holding a gun on a woman is too much for your sensibilities, we’ll leave her here by the side of the road and let fate take its own course. Jason needs to stay alert, so you’ll have to get down and help her up, if we’re taking her.”

“Well of course we’re taking her! We’re not leaving her alone to face the Indians, the animals and whatever outlaws may be about.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m grateful to avoid getting wet.”

The three men all looked at the sky. There were a few bits of white fluff, not the kind of cloud that carried rain. “Seems like she is addled in the brain,” Jason announced. “It’s not likely to rain for months.”

“But I heard thunder!” Beth protested. The men stared at her until it finally clicked. “Oh, I heard the stagecoach coming, didn’t I?”

The passenger sighed, shook his head, and then pulled it inside the window so that he could open the door and unfold the steps. “Come on, let me help you in.” He stepped down and approached her cautiously. “No one’s going to hurt you, all right? Just move towards the coach nice and easy and I’ll get your bag for you.”

She scowled at the uncooperative piece of luggage and gave it a good kick, setting off another episode of hopping and swearing. This time her words were perfectly audible and all three men were taken aback.

The man on the ground was the first to react. “Enough!” he roared. “That is not language I care to hear and never would expect to emerge from the mouth of a member of the fairer sex! Not one

more word!" He picked up the troublesome bag in his left hand and grabbed her arm with his right and marched her towards the vehicle. Tossing the valise inside, he then had both hands free to lift her up and in as well. "Sit there and keep your mouth closed until I ask you a direct question." He seated himself on the opposite bench, riding backwards, reached out to swing the door closed and pulled his gun from his pocket. "Drive on, we're all set!"

"You got your gun on her?" Amos demanded.

"Yes, sir, I do." He did, but he hadn't bothered to cock it, this chit of a girl was not a threat. Still, that was the agreement that had been reached and he was a man of his word.

The stagecoach began rolling, and he sighed. He hated riding backwards and it was a good couple of hours before they reached the next town. "My name is Winthrop Johnson. My friends call me Win. You will call me Mr. Johnson. What is your full name, Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth Bell."

"And your surname?"

"Bell is my surname."

"No, Belle is a woman's name. Don't try to give me your middle name as if it were your surname, girl."

"It's Bell, without the 'e' on the end, like a church bell. And I'm not a girl!"

He grinned; she was wound up tighter than the ball of yarn the kitten she resembled should be playing with. "Funny, I could have sworn that you were a girl. What are you then?"

"I... I'm... Oh!" She threw her hands up in frustration and turned her head to look out the window.

"We are having a conversation and I expect to see your lovely face, not your cold shoulder, Miss Bell. Face me, please." The silence dragged out. Just when he thought he was going to have to physically move her to make his point, she reluctantly turned back towards him.

"I'm sorry. I'm having a very bad day. It's not something that I

should be blaming on you and I do appreciate you taking my side back there when the man with the gun was going to shoot me. I apologize.”

He nodded stiffly; it was best not to get too involved. “Are you a runaway?”

“No, sir. Just a tourist.”

“This is no place for a woman to be traveling alone. Where is your family?”

“I am an adult. I don’t need my family to go traveling.”

“What kind of family allows their womenfolk to wander off? I repeat, where is your family?”

“My father knows that I am traveling. He sent me on my way with his blessing, although he was not happy with me at the time.”

“Why? What did you do?”

She grimaced and dropped her gaze to her fidgeting hands in her lap. “I, um, failed an important essay in one of my classes.”

“So you are a student.”

She shook her head. “Not any longer. Papa withdrew me from school and sent me on this trip.”

“No. That’s not the complete story. A man who is forced to withdraw his daughter from expensive schooling because she isn’t performing as she should, does not decide to reward her with an unsupervised trip. Seems to me most likely that you are a runaway.”

Beth stamped her foot, which didn’t make nearly the impression she wanted while she was seated. “No. I am not! Papa sent me out on my own to learn about life here. He wants me to have a better understanding of what I will have to choose from if I don’t go back to school when I go home in September.”

“So you are seeking work, not a tourist.”

“I suppose. Papa said he gave me enough money for food and lodging for a few days. So I’m a tourist until then.”

“And you think that when you run out of money and are forced to work, you will immediately find a job and will be paid the same day so that you can eat?” Win shook his head and said bluntly,

“There’s only one kind of job for a girl like you that pays the same day and I don’t think your father sent you to work on your back. And I doubt that the sheriff is going to allow you to stay in town if that’s what you’re planning.”

She flushed angrily. “I am not that kind of woman! I’ll get a job. A respectable one.”

“You’re not any kind of woman, so far as I can tell,” he sneered. “What I see is a spoiled little rich girl who was sent away by her daddy because she was naughty and didn’t do what she should.” He shook his head again. “What skills do you have to get yourself a job? You have quite a mouth on you with a vocabulary that is only going to bring you trouble.”

“I have skills! I’ll find something. I will,” she insisted, perhaps a little more forcefully than necessary, but this irritating man had voiced her deepest concerns. What if she didn’t find a job?

“What can you do?”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked back at him in anger. “I can clean stables and weed gardens. I can build and tend a fire and I can cook. I know how to prepare fish and game to eat.”

“So you’d make half a wife, since you didn’t mention cleaning or sewing. And you’re going home in September, so you aren’t even available to be a wife. A mistress maybe, oh, I forgot, you’re not that type of woman.”

“No, I’m not,” she agreed. “But I am smart and I can learn quickly. I’ll find someone who is willing to train me.”

“Not likely. No man is going to take on an unruly brat like you, not unless he’s willing to wear out his arm taking a stick to your hide. You’re sure to be more trouble than you’re worth. I think that you’d best head home with your tail between your legs, and tell your daddy that you’re sorry and will be a good little girl from now on.”

I can’t, she thought sadly, feeling overwhelmed by the reality of what Win had pointed out to her.