

Chapter 1

Audrey Beacon was a winner. It inspired her as she was packing her things to pirouette around the small room, brushing the bed and nearly running into a closet door. She held her little black cocktail dress to her chest like the dearest of dancing partners and she hummed a jaunty tune as she worked.

She paused to pick up and read the brochure on the tablet computer near her suitcase on the bed for the thousandth time. “Romantek Adventure Vacation Experiences,” it said in bold red letters. “Your RAVE will be every joyful thing you can imagine, all the challenges you’ve been waiting to face, and a dream come true. Memories from your RAVE will last a lifetime.” Then, the brochure listed the wonderful benefits the nanite gel immersion would have.

The microscopic nanites would resurface skin, draw impurities from the body, and even sculpt by removing unwanted fat deposits. Audrey was a bit on the thin side, so she had told them when she signed the paperwork that she didn’t want to lose weight or what little bit of padding she had. The Romantek rep had been very understanding and made notes in her records.

The next few pages covered the various places and times she could choose to set her dream vacation. They all seemed magical. Although Audrey had tried to “think outside of the box” she ultimately realized she wanted to stay within North America, and with English speakers. There were several time periods she might have chosen, including something prehistoric or something set in the future. But Audrey was uncomfortable with anything too unfamiliar, so it had seemed like her best bet was to pick the United States circa 1850. From what she read in the brochure, it was a time of rough changes to the country, but full of chivalry and romance as well. It sounded civilized but not boring. During her second conversation with the Romantek rep, she had made her choice known and the wheels had been set in motion.

The sales brochure also set out rules for the game aspects of the dream, and as Audrey continued to reread the disclaimers, a sense of trepidation shivered along her skin.

“Although the vast majority of RAVEs involve computer-generated opponents and companions, Romantek reserves the right to include depictions and avatars of real people as part of your experience,” she whispered. She didn’t understand the disclaimer entirely, but she didn’t care. This was a golden opportunity, no matter what caveats they put on it.

When Audrey had entered the contest to win a RAVE, she’d never actually expected to win. But the Big Nutz peanut butter company had picked her. It was amazing! She had never won anything before in her life, and to think she’d won something that everyone wanted but only very few (and very rich) people got to experience. Ever since the comm with Big Nutz, she had been busy preparing for the weeklong escapade. Although she would only be gone one week, they assured her that those five days would feel like ten days, as long as she followed the simple rules. It was like a game... in a dream... in an adventure.

Of course, RAVE offered many different versions of their adventures. She had won a bargain, basic adventure. Winning a deluxe adventure would have been too much to ask, naturally. There were options for other adventures that she couldn’t access. With some of the more advanced packages, participants could live out their adventure through an alter ego

persona. Audrey was relieved that she would be playing under her own name. Acting out another character would have been confusing.

It was a little scary of course, and somewhat out of character for her to take part in an adventure of any kind, but she wanted to step out of the corner she had painted for herself. She had dithered for several days before even entering the contest, and really, if the truth were known, she would have actually preferred to win the second prize chunk of cash. But given the Romantek brochure, she had decided to take a chance when they told her she had won. It was only make-believe, after all. How dangerous could it be?

Tucking her dress in her suitcase, she added a few toiletries and closed the bag. A limo would be picking her up early the next morning. As she put on her flannel pajamas and crawled into bed, she tried to imagine all the wonderful things she'd see, feel, and hear as she dreamed her vacation while her body was pampered in the nano-tank on the luxurious cruise ship.

As she understood it, the more she imagined in the days just before her RAVE, the more likely her dreams would come true. The chip already implanted in her scalp was recording it all for use in her RAVE script.

It would all start tomorrow, but tonight, sleep.

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It was still dark when Audrey got into the limo. She didn't have to state the destination, the self-drive luxury vehicle was pre-programmed to take her to only one place, the heli-jet terminal in downtown Omaha. It was about a thirty-minute ride, but the excitement made the time whiz by. The sun was coming up on her right. Soon she boarded the private heli-jet and began her journey to New York, where she boarded a long-distance heli-jet to Reykjavik.

She had never been to Iceland before. Actually, she'd never been further than Omaha before, so every sight along the way was new and wonderful. She thought maybe could write a book about this adventure, though there were quite a few books about Romantek RAVES already. Still, every person's experience was different, personalized, so there were thousands of stories to tell.

This one would be Audrey Beacon's RAVE, and would be the best story of all. She wondered if Mr. Finster at work would allow her to make notes as she thought of what she wanted to say upon returning from the vacation. He hadn't been too happy about her going at all, claiming that such pursuits led to immoral behavior. He thought Audrey was too naïve to withstand the temptations Romantek would offer her.

Basically, he was ultra-conservative and pious, believing Audrey should get married and settle into dependency as his wife had done. It was an old-fashioned notion, but one encouraged by his social and religious organizations. He had the support of his peers, and that was a dangerous thing.

Audrey wasn't afraid of temptation. Her morals were modern, but conservative. She believed that caution was the wise path, but you still had to move forward with your life. Besides, she was entitled to a week off every year, and it had been three years since she had taken any time at all. Finster had been miffed at having to hire a temp to do the administrative work Audrey usually did, but he worked her like a slave robot and made demands on her time. Audrey exhausted more often than not. Even though it was risky—she wasn't the kind of person

who dabbled in adventure or took chances with her job—she wanted to do this. Or, at least, she was willing to do it this time.

If he hadn't been so cheap, Mr. Finster could have bought himself a bot to do her job and so Audrey tried not to be too irritated. Everyone worked hard, she told herself. The economy was bad and she was lucky to have a job at all.

The long-distance heli-jet was very luxurious and she had it all to herself. It was only a two-hour flight from New York to Reykjavik so Audrey tried to soak up every minute. She often murmured into her old, second-hand comm unit, making recordings of what she saw along the way.

Soon enough, she arrived in Reykjavik where another tiny heli-jet took her and five other passengers to the Romantek cruise ship about 300 kilometers offshore.

There had been quite a bit of controversy about the Romantek technology when they started up, so the company chose to take its facilities offshore. Now the cruise ship parked outside of various ports around the world, picking up passengers as they moved from friendly country-state to country-state.

As they hovered above the ship for a few minutes, Audrey got a good look. It was modern, sleek, the latest version of a small luxury cruise ship. It had seven decks and could carry about two hundred passengers. All that was in the Romantek brochure, but seeing it herself raised her excitement level several rungs. She noted a pool and an outdoor bar on the pool deck. There was a single exhaust stack, but that was only for looks. The ship had a small nuclear pack powering it, so no exhaust.

A smiling woman carrying a tablet, flanked by four Daedalus Six model bots from Orion Industries, greeted the six passengers. Audrey recognized the bots from an ad she had seen somewhere. The woman shook hands with each person and started assigning the bots. The two couples who had been on the flight had one bot assigned to each pair, but Audrey was assigned her very own, personal bot. She felt like a zillionaire.

The bot took her bag and led her deeper into the ship, where there was a grand atrium. Beautiful plants from all over the globe graced archways and hanging gardens on the glass walls. It was warm from the sun, but not too warm for comfort.

Audrey's cabin was on deck five, among the most deluxe cabins aboard the ship. She had read about the cabins in her brochure. Hers was bigger than her whole apartment—granted, her apartment was unusually small—and it had finely finished décor, meticulous in every detail. There was a separate sitting room, a bedroom, and a bath. It seemed so extravagant considering that she would only occupy the room for one night before she went to the dream deck, and one night after she'd finished her RAVE. But it was hers.

After the bot left her, updating her tablet with the proper app for the ship's itinerary, she shucked off her shoes and let her toes squeeze the deep pile carpet. It was the softest she had ever felt. She ran her hands over the Australian leather couch and chairs, and tested the real maple wood of the tables and desk. She had to bounce her bottom on the huge bed, testing out its perfect springiness.

Satisfied and delighted, Audrey fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, grinning from ear-to-ear. This RAVE was a dream come true already and she hadn't even made it to the dreaming part yet.

Still, a frisson of indecision poked at her, ruining the moment. Was she doing the right thing? Should she back out before it went too far? Was she so out of her league that she was going to embarrass herself?

No. How could you embarrass yourself in your own dream? Duh.

She unpacked and rested, having a small meal brought to her by the bot. Audrey never ate out so having her meal catered was a magical moment. Normally she pressed a few buttons on her Auto-Cook and ate whatever meat and veggies it popped out.

This meal had rice! Real rice, all grainy and brown, the starch melting on your tongue as you savored every mouthful. North Americans rarely had rice anymore because the government had determined that starchy carbs were bad for you, especially after the fungus scare forty years ago. But apparently, Romantek bought from Asia or off the black market, because they had this exotic treat on their menu for anyone to order.

The sun set early this time of year so far north and by five o'clock it was dark. A cocktail party was beginning on the Palace deck. Audrey slipped into her cocktail dress—bought with the little bit of prize money that accompanied her trip—and tried to control herself as the bot escorted her to the party.

There were perhaps a hundred people there. All the rest must have been on the Dream deck, enjoying their RAVEs. Audrey met a number of people, with whom she chatted animatedly. Mostly they were couples who had saved up for decades to have this opportunity. But a few were men and women—rich ones, she guessed—who had come to Romantek out of boredom. It was possible they needed a break from working, too, she admitted. Everyone worked so hard, but that was life.

A couple of times Audrey caught herself flirting and normally she would have shut down that behavior rapidly—she didn't want to start anything she couldn't finish—but this time she let herself go. She would never see these folks again and this was her vacation! Besides, one of the goals she'd set for herself for this RAVE was to dream up some hunky guy and have a torrid affair. It was only make-believe and there were no commitments in her personal dream world. It made her squirmy inside in anticipation.

There was one fellow who, a little tipsy from alcohol, tried to monopolize Audrey's time. He was tall, spare and gray-haired in a distinguished way. He was way too old for her to consider seriously, but she spent time with him, enjoying his conversation and the banter that went along with flirting. After a while, she floated away to another group to mingle and take up a flirtation with another fellow and his wife. It was harmless, she told herself. Besides, once the purser called her number, she would be leaving these people to embark on her adventure.

* * *

Across the room, Owen White watched Audrey, a tilt of pleasure on his lips. She was gorgeous and vivacious. Her light brown hair was long, wavy, and completely out of fashion, but on her it was perfect. Even from the other side of the room, Owen's enhanced sight could detect her eye color and he'd be damned if that vivid blue wasn't the real thing! She was a gem, he decided, and he had to meet her.

Would she flirt with him so shamelessly? Was it a habit? Perhaps she was loose. It was old-fashioned of him, but loose behavior in a woman made him wary. The young woman's

flirtation with so many people bothered him. She seemed out of control, somehow, and risked the wrong sort of attention.

He was making his way across to her, trying not to get waylaid by too many other passengers eager to meet him, but they rang the bell for dinner and people filed out. Owen lost sight of her as the group moved along. His dining table was removed from hers, and for a moment he was tempted to change the place cards, but he knew he was seated in a place of honor, so he refrained from cheating. His pursuit of the girl with the light brown hair would have to wait until the end of the trip. He'd set out to find her when he got back from his dream sleep.

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Audrey tried not to be nervous as they lowered her into the nanite gel. It would give her nourishment and remove waste products as she slept. And the makeover was a really amazing perk, adding enormously to the value of the Romantek experience. She was so excited!

The moment her body moved into the gel, she felt a tingling sensation on her skin. It had to be the physical experience stimulation beginning. She tried to relax her head against the contoured headrest that would transmit the dream to her, but as her head went down under the gel, she held her breath. It was scary, but eventually she let go, taking a shuddering breath, and all she felt was the lukewarm gel seeping into her body like a warm breeze. She didn't choke, gag, or cough, which was very reassuring. The gel smelled like newly cut grass and carnations.

She had heard that sometimes returning from the dream was disorienting, and took several days to recover. Audrey hoped that wouldn't be the case for her, she had to get back to work as soon as she got home. There would be no recovery time for her. In the meantime, she was immersed and beginning to relax.

The human nurse said something Audrey could barely understand as she tiptoed away from the tank. It sounded like, "It's going to be a wonderful experience so relax and don't worry."

Audrey worried anyway, until a wave of sleepiness stole over her. She fought it for a moment, but her eyes drifted closed and the world shifted.

Light poked her eyes as she blinked into the small western town circa 1850 CE. Stumbling slightly, Audrey bobbed the tray she carried, but recovered quickly. She stood before a sheriff's office, her hand on the doorknob. Apparently, she'd been about to go in.

Squaring her shoulders, Audrey took a deep breath. This was it. She was in the adventure. She turned the knob and went inside.

The room was small, sparsely furnished with a desk and two chairs. A coatrack was attached to one wall, sporting a long leather duster that was much the worse for wear. A broad-brimmed cowboy hat hung next to it. Dust motes flickered in the light from the dirty windows.

The man who sat behind the desk looked up from a stack of papers—*real papers!*—and gave her a smile. He had a bushy brown moustache that covered his upper lip and disappeared at the seam of his mouth. His eyes were deep brown and friendly, crinkled at the corners as if he smiled a lot, or spent a lot of time squinting in the sun.

Audrey had the impression that both of those reasons came into play. The badge on his chest confirmed that he was the sheriff. And despite the moustache, he reminded her a little bit of

her father. Not enough to *be* her father, of course, unless he was a dream character and she was supposed to recognize him as family.

She returned his smile.

“I brought your...” She faltered. Was this his lunch or dinner? She should have noted the placement of the sun so she’d have an idea of what time it was. Damn. She was messing up already.

“Lunch!” he said, standing up. “What did Elmira make for me today, Miss Audrey?”

Ah. So he wasn’t her father. No father would casually address his daughter that way. Audrey set the tray on his desk and moved the napkin away. There were two plates, each with mashed potatoes—Audrey’s mouth watered, she hadn’t had potatoes since she was a girl—gravy and some sort of meatloaf. There were peas on the side and what looked to be a slice of cornbread half-dipped in the gravy. The whole presentation looked fabulous. Audrey wondered if the second plate was for her, but the sheriff cleared that up quickly, nodding toward the narrow hallway across from the door.

“He’s probably a mite hungry,” he said. “Ain’t had nothing since yesterday, near as I can tell. Course, he was drunk as a worm in a whiskey barrel when I picked him up last night.” The sheriff took one plate and cutlery off the tray and sat back down at his desk, digging right in.

After a moment, as Audrey stood there wondering what she was supposed to do, he gestured toward the hallway with his fork. “Go ahead, Miss Audrey. He’s safe. Door’s not even locked. I don’t think he’ll do you no harm. Seems like a peaceable sort, for all that carrying on last night, but if he gets fresh, you holler and I’ll come running.”

Audrey picked up the partially laden tray, licking her lips, wishing the wonderfully fragrant food was for her, and walked slowly toward the dark hallway. Her long dress swished as she walked, petticoats rubbing against her legs softly. She realized she was wearing a sun bonnet, and her hair was tucked up underneath. The ribbons at her throat held it securely. She was covered head to foot, very modestly, in brown, blue and cream calico.

A few bright sunbeams splashed the floor as she walked down the aisle—sunbeams shadowed by bars and grillwork. She was in the jail. Audrey’s steps slowed. It appeared that no one was in either cell to her left and right, but as she worked her way down the hall, she saw another shadow on the floor. There was a person in the third cell, on the left side of the jail.

As she approached, the fellow looked up, standing politely when he saw her. “Ma’am,” he said.

He had a deep, rich voice, slightly rough. She had longed to find someone with that kind of voice just so she could listen to it on her comm! She didn’t know if any current actors had that voice because she couldn’t afford the cost of entertainment vids, but she was glad to have heard it this time, even though this was only a dream.

“Hello.” She gestured with the tray. “I brought you your lunch.” Balancing the tray on her hip, she stood at the heavy cell door for a moment, undecided. He could be dangerous. But no, the sheriff hadn’t even locked the door. The man was there on his honor. That made him safe.

Well, nothing in this dream would harm her in real life, which comforted her nerves greatly. She opened the cell door with her free hand and he stepped back away a few feet. The cell was small, with only a bunk and a bucket, so he didn’t have very far to go to move away.

“I’m right grateful, Ma’am. Let me take that.” He took the tray and put it on the bunk, next to his battered hat.

He was chiseled and handsome. Obviously from a Native American background, if his burnished skin and dark eyes were any clue. He wore his hair long, straight, and touching his shoulders. He looked a little dusty and smelled like sweat and horses. The scent went straight to Audrey’s hindbrain and rang a bell. It was a peal that made her nipples hard and a flame begin to burn in her belly. Was this the man she hoped to have a crazy, make-believe affair with? She couldn’t remember dreaming up anyone specific, but she knew the Romantek chip had recorded everything for the last week.

No. This couldn’t be him. As appealing as he was, he was in jail, for charges she wasn’t sure about. Probably not serious crimes, or the door would have been locked, but a miscreant nonetheless.

Still, this was her dream, so she’d stay and flirt for a moment, drinking in his beauty, that voice, and his intoxicating scent.

“I’m afraid I ain’t got a chair to offer, Ma’am, if you’re fixing to stay.” He smiled, even white teeth flashing.

How could she prolong this meeting? “I need to stay to take the plate back,” she prevaricated.

“Oh. Well, I’d best get to the meal then. Do you mind watching me eat? Do you want to share with me?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I’m not hungry. But you go ahead.”

He nodded and sat down on the bunk, taking the tray into his lap. He ate like every bite was a joy and a blessing. Apparently, he hadn’t had a good meal in a while. Audrey wondered about him.

“Are you from around here?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. I come from Texas. I ain’t been in Nebraska territory for long. You from here?”

She could honestly answer yes. Wryly, she thought she’d come thousands of miles and deep into a dream to end up back home again in Nebraska. Apparently, her subconscious wasn’t terribly creative. “Yes. Close by. What’s your name?”

“White Star Smith,” he told her. “Yours?”

“Audrey Beacon.”

“Well, Miss Audrey, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Why are you in jail?”

“I put a hole in Joe’s Saloon last night. Guess I had a mite too much to drink, I don’t remember much after I punched some mouthy farmer in the snoot. Got myself into this trouble, that’s for sure. But the sheriff says he’ll let me out this afternoon after I learn my lesson.” His smile was a little embarrassed but charming.

“I guess you’re on your best behavior until then.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave her an appreciative but respectful look. “That’s a right purty dress, Miss Audrey.”

Touching her skirt, she smiled. “Thank you, White Star.”

“And a right purty girl in it, too.” There was a friendly twinkle in his eye. It didn’t feel threatening, just a gentle flirtation.

“Thank you.”

“You got the bluest eyes I ever seed.”

She blushed. She did have blue eyes, but they weren’t enhanced like many people did. She knew they would be nicer with some gold streaks, or even a neon burnt-orange ring like some enhanced eyes had. However, au naturel as she was in this setting, it made her feel special to have one of her plainer features flattered. “Thank you,” she whispered again.

His smile was genuine, infectious. “I’ve got a little time after I get out of here and before I head off back to Texas. Maybe I could visit with you a spell?”

He was so handsome, so sexy. Maybe, after all, he was the man she was destined to meet on this adventure. But was he being too forward for the time? How demure was she supposed to be? Well, heck, this was her dream. She could be as demure or as shameless as she wanted to. She screwed up her courage and answered. “Yes, I’d like that.”

“Where do I find you later today?”

Where indeed? She wasn’t entirely sure, but she figured she’d recognize where she was supposed to go when she had to. Romantek wouldn’t expect her to wander around like an amnesiac. But she couldn’t give him directions to a place she’d never been before. “Well....”

“We could meet in a public place, if you like. I don’t have to come to your home. Why don’t you meet me in Miss Patty’s Hotel for supper?”

“All right.” Somehow, she’d find the hotel. How many could there be in this town?

“I can be there by five-thirty. Would that suit you?”

That could be six hours from now, she wasn’t sure, but she wanted to meet him. This could be her opportunity. The whole idea that she might seduce this strong, gorgeous man was both scary and extremely titillating. She could flirt, true enough, but could she really go the extra distance and have sex with him? The last time she’d had sex had been four years ago, and that relationship hadn’t lasted because of work. It had been painful to break up and she was so not a seductress type. Still, it was well within Romantek rules to get involved with a dream guy, so she figured it was worth a try. This whole experience was like a game, and she wanted to win it!

“Okay. I’ll be there at five-thirty.”

He had long since put down his cutlery and now he stood with the tray. “Here you go, Miss Audrey.”

Taking the tray, she gave him what she hoped was a come-hither smile. “I’ll see you later.”

His grin was pure pleasure and a little bit wolfish. “Yes, Ma’am, you surely will.”

With that, she turned and left him, smiling to herself as he closed the cell door behind her. He appeared to be an honorable sort. Maybe a little naughty, considering how he had roughed someone up the night before, but a little wickedness in a man wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

Chapter 2

Audrey waited in the lobby of Miss Patty's Hotel. It was a respectable hotel—very mid-nineteenth-century—with striped wallpaper, a marble-topped table in the lobby, and a dark wood registration desk with little cubbies for keys. The hotel clerk, a man with a paunch, a pair of round spectacles, and a polite smile, looked at her for a moment and then went back to his duties. A few people came and went while she waited. They all looked so picturesque dressed up in their town clothes as if they were on their way to dinner or a jaunt around the boardwalks of the little burg. There were plenty of cowboys though, and some shopkeepers were scurrying around at their end-of-day errands. Farmers were heading out of town in wagons laden with supplies.

After a while, and not knowing the exact time, she thought she might be too early for her rendezvous. Not wearing a watch, she could have easily been off by more than a few minutes when she headed to Miss Patty's. Audrey wandered out to the well-swept boardwalk to kill some time and try to calm her nerves. There wasn't a lot of amusement value though. The town was small. Audrey could see the end of the street on both sides as she stood looking at the dusty boulevard and the various horses tied up along the way.

The boardinghouse where she lived and worked hadn't been far from the sheriff's office. Audrey realized she knew where it was when she was finished at the jail. Mrs. Elmira Brown was the widowed proprietress of the place. She was shrewd, but a kinder woman Audrey had never met before. She seemed unaffected by Audrey's ineptitude in the kitchen, assigning her easy tasks that a child could do, and not expecting more. Audrey fetched and carried, she stirred, and she swept. The work was pleasant, as was the company. It was good to do some actual manual labor rather than the brain-intensive and frustrating administrative work she normally did in the twenty-second century. And it was a better workout than her apartment building gym provided.

Provisionally, it was Audrey's night off from the boardinghouse job, so she was in the clear for her date with White Star.

Now, as she stood watching, fewer and fewer people came out, and more and more men entered the saloon next door. Audrey noticed that there were no women entering the premises and she realized that respectable women were probably not allowed in. That seemed very discriminatory. Then she heard a woman's voice shriek from inside. Was that a shriek in pain, or a shriek of delight? It was hard to tell. Still, Audrey couldn't sit idly by if a woman was somehow being abused. The saloon might not be the place for women to be welcome, but one was inside and sounded upset. Did they hurt women who ventured in? Audrey wished for the tenth time that she were more familiar with this period! She had intended to study up on it, but as always, things were crazy at work as she prepared to go away for the week and she hadn't had time to do anything but work and get a few hours of sleep each night.

The woman shrieked again. Was that laughter afterward? Nervous laughter, scared shrieks. Audrey bit her lip in consternation. In her time, she could go anywhere and do anything that a man could do. And this was her dream, her personal Romantek Adventure Vacation Experience, so she would do what she thought was right. Granted, she was not supposed to use

modern language in the scenario—that was a rule and part of the game aspect of the RAVE—but nothing had been said about imposing some modern sensibilities on the place.

It took nearly all of her courage to do so, but Audrey straightened her skirt and her bonnet and strode up to the batwing doors of the bar as though she owned the place. With a deep breath, she pushed her way in.

It was teeming with cattlemen, farmers, and gamblers. A few men stood at the bar, guns at their hips. Others flirted with scantily clad barmaids, who obviously had dyed hair and false smiles. The air was smoky, and Audrey coughed a bit, drawing the attention of all the people in the saloon. No one was shrieking, or laughing by the time they saw her.

The place was silent, save the indrawn breaths of some of the patrons. Audrey didn't quite know what to do. It looked like she had made an error in judgment and nothing bad was happening inside. But there she was. Should she turn around and run away? The twenty-second century Audrey surely would. What would the 1850s Audrey do? How much adventure was she willing to experience? She had always wanted to be more assertive. This was her chance, in a safe way. Clearing her throat and tightening her shoulders, Audrey barged her way through the crowd and bellied up to the bar.

"I'll have whisky on the rocks," she said bravely. She had never tasted a drop of whisky in her life but now was as good a time as any to try it.

The bartender eyed her as though she had sprouted another set of arms, putting down the bottle he had in his hand. "Rocks?"

"Ice?"

"Ain't got no ice, lady, and you shouldn't be here. Skeedaddle."

"I-I have every right to be here," she told him, hating the quaver in her own voice.

"No ma'am, you ain't. So unless you're planning on hiring yourself to the saloon, I suggest you hike your foolish tail out of here."

Hiring herself to the saloon? Oh, being a barmaid. No, that would really cross the line. Besides, she already had the job that Romantek had provided with her dream. She stuck out her chin, stubbornly determined. "I demand that you serve me that whisky."

The sheriff stood up from one of the tables, frowning at her, his thick, bushy moustache turned down at the corners. "Miss Audrey, you take yourself home."

"Aw, let her stay," said one cowpoke near the darkest corner.

"Get her out of here," said someone at one of the tables.

Soon, everyone was speaking at once. The cowpoke from the corner came forward and punched a farmer who was protesting Audrey's presence, and the fighting started in earnest.

Audrey looked on with horror and shock, but the bartender poked her in the shoulder and handed her a shot glass full of amber liquid. "Might as well drink up," he said. "You're going to need it."

People were tumbling and breaking chairs and the girls were squealing and pushing people into each other. Two men with guns fired them off into the ceiling, and doors started slamming upstairs. Two half-naked women rushed down the stairs, right into the fighting crowd, getting lost in the sea of confusion nearly immediately.

Audrey gulped her whisky, coughing and sputtering as the liquid burned like molten metal on its way to her stomach. Even her nose burned. A moment after the girls had run down

from upstairs, another person came into view on the landing, strapping his gun belt to his hips—White Star. Apparently, she *had* been early to their date, much as she thought, so he had been busy doing...something else, here at the bar.

He took one look around the craziness below him and Audrey tried to shrink away from the look of approbation and the deep frown growing on his chiseled, bronze face.

Audrey took a deep breath—the first one she had been able to draw since downing the whisky—and straightened her spine. She was not going to leave, no matter who frowned at her.

White Star, however, had different ideas. He stalked down the stairs and pushed his way through the crowd, punching one cowboy who reached for Audrey. Then he took her by the arm and wrestled her out the doors onto the boardwalk. The mayhem continued behind them, one unfortunate fellow getting thrown through the doors and into the dusty street.

“Miss Audrey, you were the start of this, weren’t you? What in Sam Hill were you doing in there?”

“Saving someone from harm!”

He frowned down at her. The fighting noises from the bar were vigorous. It looked like she had done a goodly chunk of that harm all by herself.

“I thought...” The excuse seemed pretty lame, under the circumstances. She tried a different tack. “I was, getting a drink?” She cringed at the anger on his face and the further darkening of his brown-black eyes.

“You know decent women ain’t allowed in there!”

She nodded, feeling cowed. His irritation trumped any sense of triumph she had over getting served at the bar. “Yes, I guess so.”

“You guess so? I’ve got a mind to take you out to the livery and tan your hide.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, hell yes, I would!” He dragged her down the boardwalk, his grip on her upper arm sure and strong, but not particularly painful. “You come with me, girl!”

She resisted, but his pull was inexorable. He propelled her down the street and into a large barn where horses snorted at their approach. It smelled of sweet hay, horse manure, and leather. White Star started to take her in, and the stableman spoke. “White Star, what’s this? What are you up to, mister?”

“Just doing my civic duty,” White Star answered.

“Civic duty?”

“This young woman bellied up to the bar In Joe’s Saloon and caused a fight to break out. She deserves a licking and I aim to give it to her.”

“Ahem,” the young stableman said, turning beet red, obvious even in the shadows of the barn. “Well, I guess if that’s what you’re about, I ain’t going to stop you. I was on my way out to supper anyways.”

White Star nodded and continued dragging the dumbstruck Audrey toward a far corner of the stable. He sat on a hay bale and pulled her, kicking and protesting, over his lap. One of her skirts got pulled up, next the petticoats, and soon nothing but her quaint cotton pantalets was covering her behind. The pantalets were poor coverage as they were made of two long legs that fitted over her hips and tied at the waist with a ribbon. They were completely open instead of seamed over her private parts.

“Stop! I demand you stop!”

“You’re full of demands, ain’t you?” With that, his hand came crashing down on her upturned fanny and she squealed, as much with indignation as with any pain.

“Ouch! Who do you think you are? You can’t spank me!”

“Who I think I am is White Star Smith, and I am surely spanking you, yes, I am.” Again and again his hand came down. Audrey’s butt got warm and soon after it was positively hot.

“Stop! I’m sorry! I won’t do it again!”

“That’s for damn sure, you won’t.”

More spansks peppered her butt and Audrey started to cry. The pain was intense, all over her poor little cheeks and starting down her thighs. Oh, what had she gotten herself into? How could such an appealing man be so mean? Maybe it was his Indian heritage. Did they spank? “Please, please stop. I promise I’ll do better!”

He continued spanking until Audrey was sobbing and blubbering her apologies. Her nose was running, both sets of her cheeks were hot, her bonnet had been knocked off, and her hair was falling around her face like a light brown veil. She prayed that no one could hear her screams and come make an even bigger scene. At the same time, she hoped that someone *would* come and stop the awful spanking.

She was beginning to despair of it ever ending, when it did. Audrey was bawling her eyes out, but he pulled her skirts back down and turned her over in his lap.

“There, there,” he said, his gravelly voice soothing in her ear. “It’s over. You ain’t earned yourself more...yet.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I won’t go into the saloon again. I really won’t. Someone shrieked and I thought...I thought... Oh, never mind.”

“I got a feeling we ain’t done with this conversation.”

“You hurt me.”

“I didn’t do you no harm. You got a spanking, nothing worse.”

“I’ve never been spanked before. Why couldn’t we just have had a discussion instead?”

He chuckled. “We had ourselves a discussion, Ma’am. I can’t help it if it made you cry.”

“You could so help it. Let me up.”

“You can get up anytime.”

Desire to stay in his lap and feel his strong arms around her for a while longer warred with embarrassment and peevishness. Desire won for a few more minutes. Audrey rested her head on his shoulder. It had been years since she’d had a good cry like that. Although her fanny smarted, it had been cathartic. So many frustrations were lightened in those few short minutes. He smelled so good and his shirt was so soft under her cheek. A feeling of rightness soured through her. She hadn’t felt this precious and cosseted since she had been a little girl in her father’s lap. Of course, he’d never spanked her beforehand; he mended skinned knees first.

“You about done watering my shirt?”

She nodded.

He helped her to her feet and stood. “You best mind your manners in the future. There’s more where that came from.”

“Yes, sir.”

He tilted her head up and looked into her eyes. She hadn't even realized her gaze had been downcast. She really had been embarrassed. "You fix yourself back up, darling, and I'll take you to Miss Patty's like we set up."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're too thin by half. You need to eat." He handed her the bonnet and a few hairpins that had fallen to the ground.

Audrey tried to pin up her long hair, but it wasn't something she was familiar with and she fumbled with the pins until he took them from her. "I'll do it, woman," he said, sounding exasperated. "I grew up with sisters." He knotted the long mass up and had it pinned in no time. Audrey patted her head. It wasn't as intricate a knot as she'd had when she started the adventure, but it was tidy. "Thank you."

He snorted. "Got all that purty hair and can't even tie it up."

Defensively, she said, "I can, too."

"We'll see." But he didn't move, nor take her arm to lead her out. He stood there, looking at her like he was memorizing her face. After a moment, he touched her cheek and slowly, terribly slowly, bent down to touch her lips with his.

At first, Audrey was shocked. He had just spanked her and *now* he wanted kisses?

But with his mouth firm against hers, his masculine scent tickling her nose, she was soon touching his chest and testing his dampened cotton shirt with her fingertips. White Star's kisses became a little more insistent, and Audrey responded shyly. This was what she wanted, but she didn't want to go too fast. She wanted to savor every sensation in discrete little capsules. So she kept her mouth closed until she felt his tongue teasing the seam of her lips. Slowly, she opened to him, allowing him to tease her teeth, then her tongue, with his. The kiss deepened, and White Star touched her shoulders, her neck, finally cupping her face, holding her steady for his kisses. It went on for an eternity of pleasure, but was over way too fast.

Audrey was breathing heavily when he drew back.

"Sweet as molasses," he whispered.

She was lost in his dark eyes, too enraptured to speak.

"Best we get moving or I'm going to throw you down here in the hay."

And this was a bad thing? "We could—"

"No, Ma'am," he interrupted. "You're a decent woman and I ain't a brute."

Resigned, Audrey put on her bonnet, muttering, "I'd like to be less decent, if you don't mind."

Apparently, he didn't hear her because he simply took her hand and led her out of the barn.

Chapter 3

Later that night, long after the saloon fiasco, her spanking, and her dinner with White Star, Audrey couldn't sleep. She had a feeling that it was part of the dream state. Of course, she might have expected that, if she had given it much thought. She lay awake in the boarding house for an hour or more, thinking about her day and especially about her meeting White Star. Those kisses had been the most romantic, sensual things she had ever experienced. His hands on her face had been gentle, but calloused. He must be a cowboy, she thought. He certainly had the build for hard work like that, and he had been wearing similar clothes to the other cowboys she had seen in the town.

But White Star was a cowboy who spanked. That was less than pleasant. Audrey had to admit that she might have deserved it, but it was a truly weird thing to find in her RAVE. Leave it to Romantek to exploit some little kinky particle in her psyche and make this game more challenging.

After daydreaming for a while, Audrey closed her eyes and tried to rest. When she opened them, the day was dawning outside. Had she slept after all? She wasn't tired, though she hadn't been tired at bedtime either. She didn't feel groggy, or disoriented, as though she'd been sleeping. Well, whatever. There were chores to be gotten to. Mrs. Brown started early and Audrey knew she was expected to be in the kitchen to help at first light.

She quickly got out of the long, white nightdress with the ruffled yoke, and changed into a fresh calico dress. This one was off-white with green sprigs all over it. There were several in her simple armoire. Not enough to be extravagant, but enough to make her feel pretty, not having to wear the same thing every day. Washing clothes was going to be an interesting experience in the 1800s, she realized. It was best if she kept them clean as long as possible.

Once in the kitchen, Audrey greeted Mrs. Brown warmly, grabbed a cup of coffee and put on an apron to get to work. Much of the day was full of fun projects, like learning how to gather eggs, beat pancake batter, and pick flowers for the table. Audrey couldn't remember a time when she had seen or smelled anything other than hothouse flowers, so gathering them up from the plants around the house was a rare treat. She touched every petal and sniffed every bud.

But soon the day was drawing to a close. The sun was low on the horizon. Audrey estimated that she had another hour of sun left, but there was a lull in the chores, so she sat down at the whitewashed kitchen table and drank a glass of milk.

Fresh milk. From a cow. Amazing.

Mrs. Brown was fussing somewhere near the front of the house when there was a knock on the backdoor. Audrey considered calling for the landlady, but decided that it would be okay to answer the door herself. She wiped her hands on her apron and pulled the door open.

"White Star!"

He removed his hat and smiled. Those even, white teeth gleamed at her and Audrey was struck anew at how attractive he was. Today, his black hair was plaited neatly, and his shirt was clean and freshly pressed. He seemed bigger, framed in the door, his shoulders broader than she recalled from the day before. Remembering how that hard-muscled chest felt under her fingers made Audrey's middle flip.

“Miss Audrey. I told you I would come calling.”

“Yes! But I thought you would be out of town today. Did I misunderstand what you said last night over dinner?”

“Well, I was supposed to head out toward the Bar R to see about a new horse, but I decided it could wait. I wanted to see you instead.”

That warmed her heart. He wanted to see her, even after she had been so tongue-tied at dinner the night previous. If she managed to say a whole sentence, it would have surprised her. She had been so embarrassed about that spanking, and so flustered by the kisses that followed, that she sort of stared at him while he made polite conversation. Or, at least, he tried to make conversation. She hadn't helped. But here he was, “calling.”

“I'm very happy to see you,” she told him, trying not to gush. “Please come in.”

He peered into the kitchen, looking a little concerned, but wiped his boots on the outdoor rag rug and stepped into the room.

Audrey wasn't sure what “calling” meant in the nineteenth century, but she did have good manners. “Would you like some coffee? I was having a glass of milk. It's really delicious. I could get you some.”

“No thanks, Ma'am.”

She gestured at the table. “Please, sit down.”

White Star looked uncomfortable again, but sat anyway, putting his hat on a chair nearby. “How are you, Miss Audrey? None the worse for your spanking, I hope?”

A blush made her face hot. “No. None the worse.” And it was true. She had expected to be black and blue today but her bottom remained clear and pale when she twisted around to catch a glimpse of it that morning. She wished she'd had a mirror, but it appeared that wasn't a usual feature in the servant's room. In fact, it would have been very helpful to have one while she'd been trying to pin up her hair. It surely was a botched up mess, but no one commented on it, so she must not look like Medusa. “How are you?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“My spanking hand is still attached, if that's what you're asking.”

He was teasing her and she knew it. “I'm happy that you didn't have to amputate it after all that rough treatment.”

“Naw. Besides, I got two hands and they work equal well for that purpose.”

Audrey's behind twitched and she squirmed in the chair. “Well...um...what do you do when you're in town?”

“Besides raising a ruckus,” he asked, teasingly. “I do a little gambling and spend time in the saloon some.”

The saloon... where those women were plying their trade. A man as gorgeous as White Star must be mighty popular. And he was some sort of gambler. That wasn't the best news, but it shouldn't matter in the long run. This was only make-believe, after all.

“Audrey Beacon, what are you thinking!” Mrs. Brown bustled in, frowning darkly, her hands on her ample hips.

Both Audrey and White Star stood up quickly. “I'm chatting. My chores were done, Mrs. Brown. I was taking a little break, talking to White Star. Have you met?”

“I know all about this no-account criminal. I can’t believe you invited him into my house.” She gestured with her apron at the man, as though shooing a fly. “Out. You get out. This place is for God-fearing good folk, Mr. Smith. Not for the likes of you. Git!”

He picked up his hat and put it on his head. “Yes, Ma’am. I’m sorry to have upset you.” It was only three steps from the table to the door and White Star got there in two long strides. “I’ll see you in town sometime, Miss Audrey. I wish both you ladies a good evening.”

“Out!” Mrs. Brown reiterated.

White Star exited quickly.

* * *

Being kicked out of the boardinghouse was a pretty ignominious way to start what had begun as a good evening. Owen White, aka White Star Smith, had very much wanted to spend more time with Audrey, hopefully coax a little conversation out of her. Maybe they could have taken a walk in the moonlight. He itched to touch her again. Of course, things had to go slow, but not so slow that his dreamtime would be over before he pulled her close to kiss her all over.

Unfortunately, his in-game reputation had preceded him. Damn Romantek for picking up one of his crazier fantasies and making it come to life in his dream! At least they had complied with his wishes and left out the bigotry element of his heritage. It wasn’t strictly correct, but this was his dream and if he didn’t want to be called a “dirty Indian,” well, he paid for this and he was going to get what he wanted.

His RAVE went on, and he headed back into town and to the saloon where he had been spending much of his time. Two days down and all he had done was win a bunch of money and get flirted at by a bunch of floozies.

Well, and there had been meeting the fellows from the Bar R. There *was* a horse there he dearly wanted to see. From what he could gather, the stallion was more than a quarter horse, he was a champion.

Owen would love to have a horse like that to train. He longed to get back to those days when it was just him and a good horse working out their relationship and finding accommodation. In his real life, he used to have a way with horses, and that had held him in good stead. But winning some big races had changed everything, and now all of his life was about winning. Winning in business. Winning with sought-after women. Winning bets. He didn’t want to lose, of course, but he needed to get back to his roots and feel the challenges again. It was not something he could do in his real life. Too many people depended on him for their jobs and the future of their families. The economy was rough, and it would be wrong to let those people down.

He hadn’t realized he could dream up a girl like Audrey, and after only that one quick glance across a crowded ballroom. She obviously made quite an impression on him! And now he was challenged to come up with a way to win the girl.

It wasn’t such a bad dream after all.

The saloon was crowded and smoky. Someone was playing the piano near the front of the room. Girls were circulating, trying to coax the men to buy them a drink—and one for themselves of course, or maybe a few. Owen figured the girls were earning a commission on those drinks. Or maybe they wanted to get a fellow drunk and roll him for his money. There were some heavy pockets in there some nights. Often they were his.

It was going to be another night of gambling and drinking cheap whisky, but it was fun to match wits with the professional gamblers in the saloon. It was diverting enough to make him stop thinking about Audrey of the beautiful blue eyes for a while.

As he moved toward his favorite poker table, one of the barmaids approached him with a smile and a wriggle of her hips. Rosemary was her name. He had spent a few hours with her his first night dreaming. She was fun but way too nosey. She rattled on and asked too many personal questions. She was pretty, with rich blond hair and caramel colored eyes with the thickest dark eyelashes he had ever seen. In this setting, she wore way too much makeup and smelled of rancid perfume and cigar smoke. But she had been fun for a tumble, not expecting more from him. That was a pleasant change. Women in his real life always wanted something more, and God forbid he should think about taking a mistress! The press would be all over that like a bad suit. No, out in the real world, he was a single man for the time being. Single was his identity these days, and it was something he had learned to live with.

Rosemary sidled up and ran her hand up his arm to his chest, where she let it rest suggestively. "How's big chief White Star today, sugar?"

He snorted. "Not a big chief, Rosie, just a simple Indian."

Her hand trailed down his torso to rest on his hip, teasing the muscle there as though wishing it was something else made of muscle. "Aw, sugar, you underestimate your charm. You're a big chief in my book."

"Thanks."

Rosemary's touch traveled to his groin. He carefully moved her hand away and left it at her side. "Not tonight, hon. I got some plans to make myself a rich man before the night's through."

She pouted. "You don't like me anymore?"

"Like you fine. Just got other plans, is all." Actually, compared to Audrey, Rosemary was a garish caricature of a woman. He didn't quite know what he had seen in her that first night in his RAVE, except maybe a quick lay with a willing woman who supposedly had no designs for more than that one roll in the hay. She was a dream creature, a pleasure that he could enjoy without any repercussions.

Owen continued toward the table, but Rosemary followed him. As soon as he sat down and put his stake on the table, she was in his lap, her arms around his neck and her breath against his cheek. "White Star's got a gal," she announced, and the men around the table looked over at them.

One fellow was shuffling the cards, a cigarillo dangling from the corner of his mouth, a bowler perched atop his graying hair. "So what?"

The gambler next to him—Phelps—wearing a fancy suit, looked at his pocket watch. "How long are you going to be shuffling those cards, Miller? I don't want to wait all night."

"Hold your horses. You don't want a cheat, now, do you?"

To Miller's left sat Tarryton. He was a farmer who liked to gossip. They had heard all about his neighbors, his cousins, his wife, and his daughters over the last few days. "Tell us about your gal, Smith?"

"I ain't got a gal," he insisted. He gave Rosemary a nudge. "Get off of me, woman. Can't you see I'm playing cards here?"

“I saw you with Miss Audrey Beacon during that bar fight. You’re sweet on her, ain’t you?”

Rosemary was out to stir up trouble and Owen didn’t like it one bit. He gave Rosemary a little stronger nudge.

“I ain’t sweet on no one, Rosie. Go get me a drink.” He plucked a coin from his table stakes and handed it to her. “Git!” This time, he pushed her to her feet.

Although she pouted, Rosemary didn’t say another word, taking the coin toward the bar.

“So the gal is Miss Beacon?” Tarryton asked. “She’s the one that works for Elmira Brown, right?”

Owen picked up his cards, neither affirming nor denying Tarryton’s query.

“She’s quite a looker,” said the cowboy to Owen’s right. “I wouldn’t mind spending an hour with her upstairs.”

“She ain’t no upstairs gal,” Owen said as calmly as he could. He would have liked to throttle the man instead.

“They’re all upstairs gals at one time or another. You just got to know how to...finesse them.”

“And I suppose you know how?” Owen asked facetiously.

“Stop gossiping like old ladies and play cards,” Phelps told them.

“I know how,” the cowboy said. “You’ve got to sweet talk them. You have to say a lot of shit that makes them squirm in their drawers. I could show you with Miss Audrey Beacon, if you want a lesson.”

Owen snorted. That was as likely as a bird hopping to Denver. “No, thanks. I’m fine on my own.”

Rosemary returned with his whisky and he downed it while she stood next to him, handing her the shot glass when he was done. “Buy me a drink, too, White Star,” she wheedled. “Or I’ll tell what I saw after that fight.”

A surge of adrenaline shot through Owen. Had she seen him kiss Audrey? Was Rosemary going to expose Audrey to scandal? His protective instincts all sat up and took notice. “You didn’t see anything, woman, because there was nothing to see.”

“Sure there was,” she said, touching his shoulder. “Buy me a drink, or I’ll tell.”

“Tell us what?” Tarryton pried, folding his hand decisively.

Owen had the makings of a straight, if he could draw a seven or a two. He tried to focus on his cards and ignore Rosemary, hoping she might lose interest and go away if he didn’t encourage her. After all, she could say anything and he could deny it. The problem was, if she had seen anything, the men might hear the ring of truth in her words and go to town with the information. It was a gamble.

“I saw...”

“You keep your sights on your own self, Rosie.” The low, slow voice came from over Owen’s right shoulder.

He turned to see the barkeeper. A glance at the bar showed one of the girls pouring drinks in his absence.

“I was just—”

“Ain’t no never mind what you were just. You were threatening a paying customer and that ain’t right. Come with me.”

“Aw, Mitch, I was just fooling.”

The barkeep took her by the arm and pulled her up off Owen’s lap and toward the stairs. Although Rosemary tried to release her arm, she went along, protesting the whole way.

* * *

The stairs were worn smooth from so many feet trudging up and down. Rosemary wondered how many of those feet had been women like her going toward a punishment. She struggled against Mitch’s grip, but it was a half-effort. Where would she go if she didn’t have this job? She needed to be at Joe’s Saloon.

Once upstairs, Mitch pulled her into a room. She had been there before. It was a rental room, waiting for a customer to rent it for a short time. It was the cheapest lodging in town, and the room reflected that fact. It was spartanly furnished. The iron bedstead was bent in a few places. The pegs on the wall were spaced as though some were missing. There was a small table and a single, hard wooden chair. Even the comforter was threadbare. However, it would get rented. If not today, then perhaps by tomorrow.

After shutting the door behind them firmly, Mitch released her arm and moved to sit in the chair. “You been through this before, Rosie, you know what to do.”

“Please, Mitch. I ain’t done anything wrong.”

“You were blackmailing a customer. That’s mighty wrong in my book. Now,” he said, patting his lap, “Pull your drawers down and get your ass over here.”

Rosemary pouted, but did as ordered. Slowly. She could see Mitch’s growing impatience, but she couldn’t help tarrying. The spanking she’d had before were awful. She had been sore for a full day. Her time satisfying customers, even sitting on their laps in the main room, became painful and those that knew what had happened to her, laughed at her.

Unfortunately, it was a part she had to play, or take herself elsewhere. There was nowhere else for a woman of her skills to go in Pollyville.

Finally, her drawers were down, sagging at her ankles. She hobbled over to Mitch and he pulled her onto his lap, throwing a leg over hers to keep her in place. Rosemary hung over the other side of his lap, her hands touching the floor. Mitch pushed her skirts, necessarily short, up over her behind and sat in contemplation for a moment.

It was too short a moment, as far as Rosemary was concerned. He made one small smack on her left cheek—Mitch was left-handed—getting his aim straight, but that was immediately followed by several hard, strong slaps on that cheek. Rosemary gasped. The pain was nasty, stinging her beleaguered flesh smartly, before Mitch moved his strikes to her right cheek. Those, too, were stingers. The spanking continued, left cheek, right cheek, and right in the middle of both. Those hurt the worst, and soon enough, Rosemary was crying out with each spank. Once she started wailing, Mitch began his lecture.

“You are going to mind your place, Rosie.” He spanked down her thighs.

“Y-yes, sir!”

“You ain’t going to threaten customers no more.”

“No, sir!”

He was back to the left cheek again, and the spanks were fast and furious, burning her bottom and probably causing bruises. "I don't ever want to catch you spying on customers."

"I won't!" It was a lie, but she would do anything she could to cease this awful spanking. He was striking the place where her bottom cheeks and thighs made a cross. It was excruciating, and tears were running down her cheeks. Rosemary was sobbing loudly.

"You remember this lesson, Rosemary, or we'll have us another trip up here, followed by you finding your way out of the saloon permanently. I've got no patience for errant whores."

"Yes, sir! Oh, please stop! I'll die!"

He chuckled, but didn't stop spanking. "You ain't going to die from a spanking."

Rosemary felt like she would. She'd perish if he didn't quit soon. She would do it because she wanted this torture to stop.

It did stop. With one resounding slap in the middle of her ass, it was over. She lay across his lap for a moment, before he pushed her off on the floor. "Get back to work."

"Y-yes, sir." Painfully, she rose and pulled up her scratchy cotton unmentionables. The warmth they brought made the fire on her bottom that much worse, and she cringed as she tied the tape that held them on.

Mitch speared her with a brown, relentless stare. "Let this be a lesson to you."

It would be a lesson. The lesson was that she'd have to be stealthier and cleverer. This bar, and Mitch, was no place to be careless.

* * *

Owen addressed the dealer and put his king face down on the table. "One."

"That girl is pure trouble," Miller said as they watched Rosemary painfully, slowly, wobble down the staircase and back into the main room. She didn't even look Owen's way. Just as well.

Miller pushed a card toward Owen.

"You got that right," Owen agreed.

Tarryton spoke up. "I'd still like to hear about Miss Audrey Beacon, White Star."

Owen allowed himself a moment of memory before responded coolly. "I'll just bet you would, Tarryton. I'll bet you would." If he sounded a little smug, well, he was only human. But even pleasure over finding Audrey here in his dream was not going to give him bragging rights. Gentlemen didn't kiss and tell, right?

* * *

Most of the boarders had gone to bed and Audrey had a moment to decompress in the parlor where a nice fire burned in the fireplace and tidy doilies were colorful treasures beneath the gas lamps. She had cleaned this room herself earlier in the day, and was proud of her handiwork. It made her feel useful and appreciated to see Mrs. Brown's approving smiles.

The doors were open and one of the boarders walked in. It was Mr. Rimley. He was a traveling salesman who never seemed to sell anything. He paid his rent on time, according to Mrs. Brown, and that was good enough for her. It was good enough for Audrey, too, since he was barely on her radar.

"Miss Beacon," he said, coming into the room to stand near the fire a few feet from where Audrey stood.

"Mr. Rimley, how do you do?"

“I’m well, thank you. Supper was exceptional. I’m sure you were responsible.” He wore his dark hair parted in the middle and slicked down with Makassar. Thick brown sideburns mutton chopped along his cheeks and jaw. He was a perfect example of a thoroughly antebellum male. All of that was intriguing, and he had smiling hazel eyes that had escaped Audrey’s notice before. She smiled back demurely.

“I must be honest with you. I had no hand in tonight’s supper. Mrs. Brown is more than capable of serving the finest food imaginable.”

“Pish tosh. I’m sure you had something to do with it. And, even if you didn’t, your gracious service at table shows your refinement.”

Heat stained Audrey’s cheeks. “Thank you.” She gave Rimley a more thorough look from beneath her lashes. He was attractive, though not in a rugged way. She couldn’t imagine him wrestling with a cow or hoisting bales of hay. He was fairly average in height and weight, with an appealing face and a dimple in his chin. He was polite and solicitous. Audrey entertained the idea that maybe White Star was not the man she was destined to have the affair with. Could it be this man? Was he supposed to be charming, erudite and sweep her off her feet with money and wit? Maybe... all though bad boy White Star was more appealing. Still, she ought to give Romantek a chance to give her what she wanted subconsciously.

The pause in the conversation drew out, but Rimley spoke up finally.

“You look lovely tonight, Miss.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rimley.”

“Call me Marcus, please.”

“That’s not...seemly on such a short acquaintance, sir.” Audrey was terribly proud of her nineteenth century parlance, but she tried not to clap her hands.

“Oh, but I insist. And surely we shall get to know each other better.”

“Perhaps.”

“Say the name. I want to hear it tripping off your sweet tongue.”

Wow. That was kind of fresh, she thought. Tongues and all of that. It didn’t seem very polite given the mores of the time. “You presume too much, Mr. Rimley.”

He sighed. “Perhaps. But I beg you to indulge me on this one harmless thing.”

Well, really, in her own time she wouldn’t think twice. So be it here. “Very well, Marcus. And you may call me Audrey.”

He smiled brightly. His teeth were a little crooked but not in a snaggle-toothed way. “My dear Audrey, I am honored.” Marcus gestured to the settee. “Shall we sit for a moment?”

There was no harm in it, and if he was the one, she had better take advantage before the dream ended. Since they didn’t seem to be the kind of couple who would madly rip each other’s clothes off and wind up in a heap of passion on the floor—White Star popped into her mind, but she pushed him as far into a corner as he could go—conversation was a necessary first step.

“Yes, Marcus. We may sit.” Carefully arranging her skirts, Audrey perched on the settee. Marcus sat at her side, but there was a respectable space between them. The fire crackled and smelled like pine pitch. Audrey had smelled it once at an arboretum. It was fresh and pungent.

“So, *Audrey*, please tell me about yourself?”

“There isn’t much to tell.”

“You’re shy with me. Perhaps I pry too deeply? A less intimate setting might be in order. Would you consider joining me on a picnic tomorrow?”

“I’m sorry, Marcus, but I can’t. Mrs. Brown needs me here.”

He frowned slightly and moved a few inches closer to her. “I need you, too, Audrey,” he said softly.

The way he said it was gentle and romantic. A little boring when Audrey considered that she really wanted lust, fire and passion for her affair, but she hadn’t been treated particularly solicitously by her previous boyfriend. Maybe subconsciously, she wanted to be wooed. Marcus took her hand in both of his and squeezed. Audrey didn’t withdraw.

“I’m flattered, Marcus. You do me an honor requesting my company.”

“I would request so much more of you, my dear. But that will have to wait for another time, when we know each other better.” He paused. “Much better.”

Now they were getting somewhere! “Is that what you want? To get to know me better?”

“How can you ask? Have I not made it plain? Yes, Audrey, you are my Circe, my Helen, my Aphrodite, every enchanting goddess in my pantheon!”

It was a trifle overwhelming, especially since she didn’t know what he was talking about. “Thank you,” was all she could manage.

“We’ll picnic tomorrow, my Dear. I shall make it right with Mrs. Brown.”

Maybe the passion was to be outdoors. It had been something of a fantasy for Audrey to make love under a tree in a green grassy field. She had once seen a picture of lovers holding hands in a bucolic setting like that and it had captured her imagination deeply.

“Very well. If you can convince Mrs. Brown.”

He stood and pulled her up with him by her hand. “You make me a very happy man, my Dear. Very happy.”

If that was going to be the result of their conversation, Audrey wanted to hurry up to bed and close her eyes so the new day could begin. Although Marcus wasn’t like White Star at all, Mrs. Brown clearly felt the other man was off limits. It would be hard to finagle a way to spend time with him. That might be part of the challenge of the game, but it was so hard to tell what she was supposed to do. The game was personalized to Audrey in every detail. She would have to trust her instincts and go with the flow.

“I’m pleased, Marcus. Now I must say good night. The day starts early for me.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her four knuckles. “Until tomorrow, Audrey. I shall count the minutes and dream of you.”

Flustered, Audrey smiled, withdrew her hand and hurried out of the parlor, closing the doors behind her. She paused in the foyer. Was tomorrow going to be the big day? Did she want that with Marcus? Was Marcus literally the man of her dreams?

Chapter 4

Although Owen was up until nearly dawn playing cards, eventually the other gamblers made their ways home, leaving him to find his bed in his room over the saloon. It was just as well. The walls were thin and he often heard the girls plying their trade in adjacent rooms. It had been cheap lodging and since he only had a twenty-dollar gold coin to start out with, he needed cheap. The fact that it wasn't particularly respectable didn't bother him. Or it hadn't until he met Audrey and Mrs. Brown. He couldn't remember the last time he had been persona non grata, because of his heritage or his profession, but it must have happened sometime in his life. It didn't matter much, he was still struggling to find a way to meet with Audrey again and woo her.

He should have just rolled her in the hay while he had the chance—she was only a dream, after all, no strings attached as there would be when he finally met the real Audrey sometime after he awoke—but he didn't want a quick fuck from her. Owen wasn't sure what he wanted, exactly, but it was more than sex. He liked her spunk and industriousness. Working at the boardinghouse couldn't have been an easy chore, but she seemed to take it cheerfully. What kind of person liked hard work like that? Besides himself, of course.

Lying on his bed, watching the sky lighten the dirty windows in his room, he wracked his brain to think of a way to be with Audrey again. Nothing came to mind. Nothing that was above-board, that is. He could kidnap her out of her room at Mrs. Brown's, but that wasn't his style. She might protest, and then he would have ruined his chances.

He changed his clothes and went down to the saloon for breakfast. Few people were about in the tavern, and the patrons who were seemed hung over and uncommunicative except with grunts and weary glances. Owen wasn't in the mood for chitchat anyway. He finally decided to take a chance and go back to Mrs. Brown's boarding house. If he waited outside, maybe he could corral Audrey for a few minutes, set up an assignation.

As he was putting down his empty coffee cup, a young man entered Joe's Saloon. He was maybe twenty, with a swagger and longish, dirty brown hair. Squinting from the dim light, he looked around carefully. When he spotted Owen, he paused.

"White Star Smith?" he called from across the room.

"Who's asking?"

The boy responded rather loudly. "I'm Johnny Sacco! I come to call you out."

White Star arched a dark eyebrow. This was different. "What for, kid?"

The question made the young man sputter a bit. "Why...for being a no-account cheater and killer of innocents."

"Those're tall charges. You got any proof?"

"Proof? I don't need any proof except the dead man you left in Council Bluffs."

Owen didn't remember a dead man, but he did remember a dream he'd had a week or so ago as he contemplated this RAVE. He imagined himself as an old west gunslinger. Perhaps that was at the crux of this matter. He wanted to play along and see where it led. Hopefully, it wouldn't lead to his getting killed. That would throw him out of the game.

"That ain't any of your business, boy. Get out of here before your mama calls you late for supper."

The young man stalked over to White Star's table and confronted him from a meter away. "I'm going to shoot you dead, you cowardly Indian! Rise up out of that chair and meet me like a man!"

No man, no matter what time, place or circumstance, would ever get away with being a bigot, as far as Owen was concerned. Romantek was purposely pressing his buttons and he didn't like it one bit. He would certainly file a complaint when the RAVE was over.

He rose and nodded toward the street. "If you're so ready to meet your maker, son, get out there on the street where you ain't going to shoot the barkeep by accident."

Frowning, snorting, the young man led the way out into the dusty street. People were bustling about at the beginning of their day. But seeing the men squaring off in the middle of the street, they hurried away, taking horses and wagons and emptying the street as quickly as they could.

Finally, the street was clear. White Star could see people peering out from behind curtained windows. He prayed to whomever one prayed to in a situation like this, that he didn't accidentally shoot through a window and get a bystander. He had learned to use a pistol as a young man, because there were rattlesnakes where he came from. Occasionally he encountered them when exercising his horses on the range. You had to be a good shot to hit a moving snake from a distance. He was better with a rifle, but the Smith & Wesson in his holster would do. He didn't want to kill the boy, even in a game—it was too realistic—but he would try to wound him and give him a good scare.

"All right, you varmint," the kid yelled at White Star. "Prepare to go to hell!"

Owen had never imagined not having his enhanced vision, so for this RAVE he had it. He could see the boy's hand shaking as it hovered over his gun. If Johnny hit anything, it was going to be his own foot.

There was a pause. The only sounds White Star could hear were a horse nickering down one of the side alleys and the wind whistling up dirt devils behind him. His hand hovered over his gun. The sun was warm in his face, and he squinted his eyes against the glare.

In the space between two heartbeats, the boy went for his gun. Although he wasn't as quick as he might have like, White Star drew his gun first, took aim, and fired. Johnny got off a shot too, but his whizzed by White Star's leg and ended up in the dirt.

"Ow! I'm hit! You bastard! You shot me!"

White Star hurried over the boy on the ground and kicked his gun away. "I got you in the hand, son. Stop whining and get your ass up out of the dirt."

"I'm bleeding!"

The sheriff came rushing over, surrounded by some shopkeepers. "Let me see that hand."

Johnny held up his hand, showing the sheriff his dripping wound. White Star had grazed the side of his right palm. It wasn't much of a hit, but it had ended the fight.

"Get yourself over to the barber. He'll fix you up." The older man turned to White Star. "You. Come with me."

"Okay." Hopefully, he wouldn't have to spend another night in jail over this. It had been self-defense, after all.

In the sheriff's office, the sheriff hung his hat on a peg and sat in his chair, indicating that White Star should sit across from him. That was better than handcuffs, so apparently, he wouldn't be arrested.

"You're nothing but trouble lately, boy."

"I'm sorry, sheriff. There are witnesses who will corroborate that Johnny started the fight. I finished it is all."

"I saw that he weren't too hurt. Was that your intent?"

"Yes, sir, it was."

The sheriff nodded. "Well, Smith, I hardly know what to do with you. I can't have you causing trouble and you done it twice since you come to Pollyville."

He had caused a fight in Joe's Saloon. And his reputation as a gunslinger had caused today's gun battle. But if he left Pollyville, his chances of seeing Audrey again were nil. "I can't take back what's already happened."

"No, son. You purely cannot." He considered for a moment. "I'm gonna have to ask you to leave town. Get your horse and ride on out. Today. Now, in fact."

So much for another meeting with Audrey. Disappointment was a bitter pill to swallow. "You don't have to do this sheriff. I couldn't help it that a stupid kid came gunning for me."

"Your reputation wasn't your fault, I suppose?"

Well...he *had* dreamed it up. "I'd rather stay in Pollyville."

"I'd rather be an English gentleman with a mansion on a hill, but that don't make it so. Go on now, or I'll have to do this the hard way."

White Star stood and without so much as a goodbye, he went to the saloon, packed up his gear, and walked to the livery stable to retrieve his horse. He stared at Mrs. Brown's house as he went down the street. There was movement in an upstairs window, but the sun glared off the glass and White Star couldn't see who or what it was.

The liveryman nodded to him as he headed toward his horse, Capable. "Had yourself a busy morning, haven't you?"

"A bit too busy. Come to get my horse."

"Where you headed? Back to Texas?"

Where was he going to go? Texas? There was still that horse to consider at the Bar R. And he'd made good connections with the owner and foreman. It had the added advantage of keeping him relatively close to Pollyville, even though the possibility of seeing Audrey again was dimly small.

"I'm riding over to the Bar R," he told the liveryman. "Got to see a man about a horse."

"See you later, then."

White Star gave a grunt of acknowledgement, got up on his horse and left town.

* * *

As she was cleaning, Audrey heard a commotion on the street. People were high-tailing it off the main boulevard, taking cover wherever they could. As she peered out the parlor window, she spoke to Mrs. Brown who was cleaning nearby.

"What do you suppose is going on, Mrs. Brown?"

The older woman joined Audrey at the window. "Looks like a gunfight. Best get away from the window."

Audrey had never seen a gunfight, of course. She had never seen a gun except for this RAVE, in fact. It was hard to imagine that there was any danger here in the parlor, so she stood by the window a little longer, gasping when she saw White Star standing in the middle of the street, his hand hovering near his gun.

Suddenly, there were two sounds. They sounded like loud pops. Audrey saw the other man fall to the street, and White Star hurry over to him. White Star looked unhurt.

As she watched, the sheriff gestured to White Star, and the man replaced his gun in its holster and followed the sheriff back to his office.

Audrey couldn't help but wonder what would happen next, but she had chores to do if she wanted to go on that picnic with Marcus. A few minutes later, Audrey found herself at the windows again. This time, it was barely in time to see White Star ride off with his bedroll strung up behind him on his horse. He was leaving town! Apparently, he was going somewhere as a result of the shooting. Was he being kicked out of Pollyville?

"I have to go out a minute, Mrs. Brown."

"Very well. Be sure to close the privy door this time, Audrey."

She took advantage of the older woman's misunderstanding. "Yes, Ma'am."

Her apron got folded neatly, her dust rag was put away, and she made a quick trip to the upstairs rooms. Within a few minutes, Audrey was at the sheriff's office.

He greeted her warmly.

"It's good to see you, too, sheriff. I came because I saw there was trouble in town today. I was wondering what happened."

"Ain't nothing to worry your pretty noggin about, Miss Audrey. Had ourselves a minor gunfight, but there wasn't any lasting harm done."

"I couldn't help but notice that White Star was a part of it."

The sheriff sighed, world weary for a moment. "Yes, he was. But that's not going to happen again. I asked him to leave town. He did."

"Oh! You kicked him out?"

Nodding, the sheriff gave her a steely look. "You sweet on him?"

Had she made it so obvious? "No! Of course not! He just didn't strike me as a gun fighter."

"Well, you're an innocent woman. Why would you understand a man's behavior?"

Audrey quickly considered her options. "Did he say where he was going?"

"I ain't got no idea, and best you stay out of it."

"Yes, sir." She might find out at the livery stable where his horse was kept. "I ought to go now."

"Okay. I'll see you at lunchtime, Miss."

"No, sir. I'm going on a picnic today. Mrs. Brown will deliver your lunch."

"Picnic! Well, ain't you the lucky one! Enjoy yourself and eat a slice of pie for me." His smile was kind, fatherly. Audrey felt a little guilty over what she planned to do, but not so guilty that her plans changed.

"Thank you, Sheriff. I'll do just that."

After saying her goodbyes, Audrey hurried outside to the livery stable. The young man from before was there, currying a horse.

He blushed upon seeing her. Apparently, he hadn't forgotten her spanking.

"Hello." She smiled. "I was wondering if you had seen White Star?"

"What's it to you?"

"I um...borrowed a handkerchief from him and wanted to return it."

He continued to curry the horse. "Hm. Well, he went over to the Bar R."

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

"Don't rightly know, ma'am. He took his bedroll, so he's probably going to be gone overnight."

"I see. Thank you." She turned to leave, but that really wasn't her intent. Turning back, she asked, "Say, have you a buggy for hire?"

"Yep. Got a little one-person roadster back in the shed. It belonged to a real English gentleman who lost everything playing faro and needed to sell it quick to get out of town."

"How much to hire it and a horse?"

"How long do you need it for?"

"Oh, just a few hours." Hopefully, the errand she was planning wouldn't take that long.

"That'll be ten dollars, including the horse."

Audrey had a twenty-dollar gold coin that she had started the RAVE with and, since she was working for Mrs. Brown, with her room and board were paid, she had nothing to spend it on. Still ten dollars—half her stake—sounded like a lot.

"I'll give you eight."

"Ten or it's no-go."

"Come on...please?"

He eyed her from head to toe. "Got something more valuable than money?"

Audrey knew what he meant by that and it was out of the question. "No."

The liveryman went back to his horse grooming. "Ten dollars, take it or leave it."

"All right. How long will it take to get it ready?"

"Oh, a little while. Why don't you go sit yonder on that hay bale whilst I get to work on it?"

The hay bale looked prickly, and she couldn't help but remember White Star sitting there with her over his lap, or sharing that kiss while standing so near it. She couldn't go back to Mrs. Brown's yet. But she only had about two hours before she was due to meet with Marcus for their picnic. If she didn't show up, there'd be hell to pay. Mrs. Brown was going to be livid as it was.

"Okay. But hurry, please."

"Yes'm."

It took half an hour to get the horse and buggy all put together. The liveryman had insisted on finishing currying the horse he had been working on when Audrey arrived. Then there was some jostling and fussing with getting everything all hooked up.

Audrey eyed the setup with some trepidation. She had never driven a horse before, let alone one pulling a buggy. Judging from the way the liveryman moved up onto the buggy and around it, it looked to be a decent carriage. It had one long, padded bench seat, four big wheels with springs, and a leather top that opened and closed. It was painted a rich, dark red, and its brass accents were gleaming.

Although she needed a little help up onto the seat, Audrey thought she covered her nervousness well enough. He handed her the reins and she held them gingerly.

“Don’t let Old Hickory give you trouble, ma’am. He’s a stubborn sort, but he’ll respond if you take no nonsense.”

“Okay. Um... Which way is it to the Bar R?”

If he was surprised by her destination, he hid it well. “You go east for a spell and you’ll find a big cornfield. Don’t pass into the field, but instead, turn toward the south. The Bar R will be right in front of you after a while.”

Seemed simple enough. East, then south, past the cornfield—luckily, she knew what corn looked like. How hard could it be? “Thank you.”

“Flick them reins nice and soft now, you hear? He’s a well-trained animal. Don’t need rough hands.”

“Okay.” She lifted the reins—they were heavy—and let them drop. The horse moved forward, and the buggy jerked ahead. She wondered which way was east, and how to turn the horse that way, but the liveryman proved helpful again.

“No, ma’am, pull toward the east. To your left!”

“Oh.” She pulled gently on the reins in her left hand and the horse turned a little. A bit harder tug had him turning left. She flicked the reins one more time and the horse set off on a jaunty trot, pulling the carriage easily. Maybe this wasn’t so hard after all.

An hour later, her hands and arms were exhausted and she still hadn’t found the cornfield. There were acres of alfalfa and some sort of melons, so she kept going, skirting the field to continue east. Now she was concerned that that field had indeed been the field, maybe replanted with other things, and she was hopelessly lost and thirsty. She tried pulling the reins to one side to turn the horse around, and was successful at that, but she couldn’t remember which way she’d gone. There was another field of leafy stuff ahead, but was that the first one, or a second one?

Audrey looked up at the sun and found it glaring at an angle. It wasn’t noon yet, so she still had time. Ah, there was a field of stalks, up ahead. If she turned right before that field, she would be heading south.

Finally she was back on track, passing field after field. Some were corn while some had grassy shoots. They all smelled green and fragrant. The sun was hot, though, and she began to sweat under her calico. Her bonnet made her head hot, too, and trickles of sweat ran down her temples. She was so thirsty! Audrey couldn’t remember a time when she had been so thirsty.

Just as she was passing a fallow field, the horse balked. Frustrated, Audrey flicked the reins again. Her tired arms couldn’t put much effort into it, but she tried again and again. The horse backed up, stamping his feet and shaking his head. What was going on?

She dropped the reins and climbed down off the buggy, intending to go toward the horse and find out what was stalling their progress. The horse continued to be restless, and moments later, Audrey found out why. There was a snake in the road, something with a triangle-shaped head and black, beady eyes. When it lunged for her, the horse whickered and backed up again. Fortunately, the snake couldn’t quite get to her, so she avoided being bitten. But it was plenty scary!

There was a gun in her reticule. She’d “borrowed” it from Marcus’ room while he was out that morning, and after she made the decision to go find White Star. She knew she would be

traveling the countryside, but at the time, she hadn't known where exactly so a gun would have to be her protection. Of course, she didn't know precisely how to shoot one. But how hard could it be?

She slowly stepped back away from the snake, finally getting far enough away to make a dash to the buggy and get her gun.

It was a very small pistol, with two barrels, one on top of the other. There was a place for a finger and it had a handle for her palm. There was some sort of gizmo on the upper back that looked like it would rock back if it was pulled.

Rounding the horse again, she pointed the gun at the snake and tried to pull the trigger. It was so hard! It wouldn't budge. She held it with two hands, and the snake lunged for her. Crying out, she pulled the gizmo back, but the gun still didn't shoot. Desperate, she yanked on the trigger with both hands. Boom!

She was very nearly knocked over by how loud it was, and the gun bucked so hard it nearly flew out of her hand! The snake slithered away while the horse yanked on the carriage, pulling it forward with a jerk. The snake got as far as the dirt field, turned back toward her and lunged again. Again she pointed the gun at the snake and pulled the trigger with both hands. Her wrists were killing her, and the shot went wild. The horse went a little crazy, and spooked, rushing away with the buggy.

"Stop!" she yelled. "Stop, horse! Wait! Whee!" Wasn't that what you were supposed to say? "Whee!"

It didn't even pause in its wild escape. Within minutes, the buggy was hopelessly far away and Audrey was left with only the snake for a companion. Thankfully, it didn't seem interested anymore, hurrying off into the dirt.