

# Chapter 1

Texas, 1881

Eerie shadows cast by her tiny lantern flickered around the shelter she had built for herself by the stream. Her petite frame hadn't allowed her to build anything high up in a tree but her small cloak blocked the chilly night breeze and gave her the illusion of privacy. With her back to the water, she felt safe... or safe enough... most of the time. When the first faint footfalls had heralded the arrival of a visitor, her senses had gone on high alert, but as the weasel-like tread reminded her of an overgrown ferret investigating a particularly interesting rabbit warren, she identified the newcomer. "Bo? Is that you?"

"Pip? It's me," he called back softly. "Don't shoot."

"I haven't got a gun, as you've got good reason to know," she replied. He knew it because he had refused to get her a gun when she asked, but that was Bo all over. He had a heart of gold and shared her adventurous spirit, but he wasn't as easy to bend to her will as she would have liked. He only indulged her detours from proper behavior when it suited him.

"You also haven't got much sense, and I have good reason to know that, too."

"I wouldn't shoot you even if I did. I knew you were coming, remember? I asked you to go and bring me something to eat."

"That's right, and I think you'll find I've done well. A delicacy fit for a queen." He held out a small brown paper bag. "A pip is a seed," Bo commented unnecessarily. "Isn't it funny that I'm giving you yourself?"

Priscilla Sloan pushed a lock of her red-gold hair away from her face and accepted the small bag of toasted pumpkin seeds gratefully. "That it is, Bo." Her stomach gave a loud burble and she covered it with her hands.

"But could be you need something a little more substantial than seeds, I suppose. I should get you a plate." Bo gestured toward the string of brightly colored caravans nestled comfortably in a large grove of oaks.

"Not right now, Bo," she admonished him in patient tones. "Not if anyone will see you and wonder why you're so hungry all of a sudden."

"I don't see why you have to keep to yourself out here in the bushes when you'd be as welcome as a cool breeze in June if you told Mr. Gabor you were here." Bo sat on his heels in a boneless, unself-conscious sort of way, his dark blue trousers and shirt blending into the darkness until he almost disappeared. In contrast to the rest of his clan, he made no more mark than a shell on the shore.

"But if I make myself known, there'll be no going back. What if he's angry and wants to send me home? I don't want to go, Bo. I have to make a point."

He shook his head and let his arms hang lax in surrender. “This point you want to make, my dear little *gadje*, is one of the sillier things I’ve ever heard of you people doing, and that’s saying something.”

“You’ve known I was not one of your people since I was a little girl. That never stopped us from having fun together and being friends even though there will always be things about me that you don’t understand and things about you that I don’t understand. But you’re not going to tell him, are you? He might think he has to tell my family where I am.”

“Don’t you want them to know? They’ll be worried sick about you.”

“But they shouldn’t be! I can take care of myself! That’s what I have to prove.”

“That you can sleep under a cloak and get pneumonia and starve?” Bo rolled his eyes in a dramatic gesture that reminded Pip forcibly of her Aunt Drina. She was a distant relation to Mr. Gabor’s clan and had grown up traveling with their show. She retained the dark dramatic beauty common among her people, but she had left the traveling life decades earlier without regret. “Great point there, cousin.” He honored her by using the name all the members of the clan called each other. In truth, there was no relation between them other than the affection between two kindred spirits who had grown up together.

“It’s summer. I don’t think there’s much danger of my expiring from frostbite. From hunger, however...”

“If you stay in the shadows, you can come into camp. No one will notice you in the dark and you can eat by the fire.”

“With this hair? I might fit in if everyone suddenly goes blind, but without that happening, I think I’d better stay out here where it’s safe.”

Bo pulled a face. “There’s such a thing as a scarf to cover up your hair, you know. And there are plenty of strangers in the camp tonight. No one will notice you.”

“Strangers?” Mr. Gabor and his people could be trusted. None of them would hurt her, but strangers?

“Mr. Gabor has taken on three new acts this season. That means three new wagons to hide behind and all those extra people milling around.” Bo grinned at her. “But like always, he’s checked them out thoroughly beforehand. Anyone who will be traveling near the clan will have to pass inspection.”

“Still, I never thought about... this is definitely turning out to be harder than I thought.”

“Ready to give over? You proved your point. You’re on your own, just like your mother and aunt.”

“But I haven’t even lasted two nights. They did it for years. I can, too.”

“Suit yourself. Not only a *gadje*, but a woman to boot!” Bo made a sound that let Pip know that whatever she might say, he would never understand her. “Let me see what we have in our caravan. There’s always something tucked away in a barrel somewhere and Uncle Josef isn’t usually sleeping this early.” He straightened with a snap and melted into the undergrowth.

“Don’t get into any trouble on my account.” Pip suddenly regretted her complaint. She knew Bo’s position in the clan was precarious. “I’ll be fine.” She was talking to his back and then to thin air. Bo was gone and with him the brotherly comfort he had brought her.

Night sounds grew louder and the lantern grew dimmer but Bo never returned. It wasn't hunger or fear, Pip told herself, but curiosity and daring that had her doing as he had suggested and edging up to the outskirts of the firelight. There was still enough stew left in the large pot for her to dish out a generous helping for herself and not leave a noticeable dent in the supply. Positioning herself for a strategic getaway should one be required, Pip ate hurriedly. This was the first real meal she'd had since breakfast the day before.

Bo had been right. There was even more chaos in the camp than usual and no one was paying her the slightest heed. No one except... who was that cowboy and what did he want? Why was he staring at her that way? Pip melted into the shadows that obscured anything not directly near one of the smaller fires dotted around the grove or the large bonfire in the center, where the fiddler and the other musicians were weaving a rollicking air into the night. The only dancing being done was the sort that resulted when confident folk go about work they understand and love, but the music made even that seem like a country reel.

She hadn't heard him, but she wasn't surprised when Bo materialized beside her. "Who's that cowboy?" she enquired.

"Which one? There are about half a dozen here. They delivered the horses for the Zambini's act."

"The one who looks like that picture of that Greek god Apollo you showed me in your book," Pip answered.

Bo gave her a sideways look. "Oh, that cowboy," he snickered. "I think his name is something memorable like... Fred... or Joe."

"Why is he staring at me?"

Bo's look slanted to the other side, reminding Pip of a teeter-totter. "Why else does a cowboy stare at a beautiful girl?"

"Nobody stares at me that way." Pip rolled her eyes, but she could feel the blush creeping up her cheeks.

"Apparently he's nobody then, because he is staring."

This was true enough. Every time Pip sidled out of his line of sight, the cowboy sloped over a bit to compensate. "How annoying. Now I'll have to leave."

"You weren't planning on coming anyway."

"Oh, go read a book!" She gave his shoulder an affectionate push and used that momentum to slide out of the clearing and back into the woods.

Suddenly Bo was right behind her. "Did you bring me any?"

"In my saddle bags, of course. Would I come to the camp without bearing gifts?"

He was now ahead of her, breaking off branches, ripping out vines in his haste to clear his path. "Who's minding your library while you're gone?"

"It's not my library, as the town very forcefully pointed out last week at the board meeting. It's the town's library and they feel that the Ladies Auxiliary is the more appropriate organization to be running the volunteer roster. My services will no longer be required more than once a month. I'm welcome to visit the library and make use of the sections that contain suitable topics, but it was hinted to me that I should spend my time in less academic, more feminine pursuits, as decided again by the Ladies' Auxilliary."

"Aren't you in the Ladies' Auxilliary?"

“It’s for married women only, as was pointed out to me at that same meeting.” Pip was sorry they had arrived at her little camp because it meant that she would have to school her face to hide her bitterness.

“So, get married,” Bo suggested. “Surely you’ve had offers.”

“Yes,” Pip grouched. “All cowboys.”

Bo folded himself down and started to build a fire. “And not a one met your high standards?”

“Not a one got far enough for me to see for myself.” She waved a hand over his little pyramid of sticks. “No fire. I don’t want anyone seeing the smoke.”

“All right. Give me the lantern, then. I want to see what you’ve brought me.” She reached underneath her cloak and dug in her saddlebags. “Two thin novels and one fat reference book. Comparative anatomy of farm stock.”

Bo brought the books to his face and inhaled deeply. “They smell like heaven.”

“They smell like a cure for insomnia. Give me a good travel guide or a memoir.”

Bo put on a stuffy, stilted air. “Then when I was twelve, we removed twenty-five miles to the country where we raised corn and rutabagas.”

Pip reached for the books as if to take them back. “If you’re going to be sarcastic…”

“No, no, I love them. Thank you. I’ll leave them for you at the Bumchuck library when I’m done, shall I? They’ll send them on to you in Merriview.”

“You can just return them to me. I’ll be right here,” she replied primly, ignoring his implied suggestion. “Or wherever the camp has moved.”

Keeping a good tight hold on the books and resting them out of reach, Bo stared at Pip. “Come on, Pip. Do you really think your family will let you camp out here under a cloak forever?”

“What say will they have in the matter?”

“They’ll find you,” he retorted, as if telling a fractious three-year-old that no matter how hard he cried, there was no way of stopping the rain even if it was ruining the picnic.

“Not if Mr. Gabor keeps moving, and it seems like he might. We’re heading out tomorrow afternoon, aren’t we?”

Bo narrowed his eyes at her. “Does this have more to do with your situation at the library, or the underlying cause of that situation? You’re being ousted from a place you love, so I can see where you might want to get away for a few days. But is it more than that? Are you running away to heal a broken heart?”

“I can’t get my heart broken if I’m not allowed to give it away, can I?” She couldn’t keep the petulance out of her voice.

“Your father ran them all off?”

“The ones Papa and Uncle Slingshot left, the boys nixed. I think they’re trying to find a combination of Abraham Lincoln, William Shakespeare and... the Greek god Apollo.”

Bo laughed. “Not a one made it through? I find it hard to believe that a girl like you couldn’t find a way to get what she wanted. You’ve at least had a few offers.”

“From men hand-selected by the boys.”

“Your brothers must know some fine men. Surely you can’t think they only want to marry you for your money. The Frogleg has to have at least a few mirrors that work! Any one of them would be able to show you why men stare at you.”

“And not a one of them smart enough to believe it when they’re told that I’m not a rich heiress.”

“You’re not?”

“Don’t you remember my family history? Mama told it as a campfire story often enough when I was a child. It wasn’t summer until Mama had told what Papa and Uncle Slingo had to go through to get the Frogleg.”

Bo leaned back against a tree and sighed. “Oh, yes, now I recall. Something about his mother’s life being blighted by wealth. That’s a curse I wouldn’t mind being able to cast!”

“You laugh now, but we both know it can happen. A girl’s life can be made miserable by a wrong match.”

“So you admit your family is wise to help you find a good husband.”

Pip raised her hands and let them fall dramatically. “I can do it myself,” she cried. “Just like I could run the library by myself if given the chance! And I could run my life if given the chance! So, I’m not waiting to be given the chance. I’m taking it.”

Bo rose as if being pulled by a string. “*Gadje!*” He used the term with a mixture of exasperation, affection and incomprehension.

“You’re just as *gadje* as I am!”

“Yes, and that’s why I know. You should go home, Pip. Home to your *gadje* family. Maybe they’re not as careful as Mr. Gabor’s people are when it comes to strangers, but they love you. Your Mama and all your brothers and cousins just want what’s best for you.”

“Are you going to tell Mr. Gabor I’m here or not?” Pip demanded, rising in her turn.

“Not,” he replied, almost glumly, “But I really should.”

As he walked away, Pip asked him, “Why don’t you?”

“Because it’s always good entertainment whenever you and your family join us for a while.” He ducked so that the pine cone she chucked at his head missed its mark. “And because you brought me three very interesting books. Once I’ve read those, we might have to renegotiate.”

He scooted neatly out of the way of the stick she threw at him, but she knew he wouldn’t betray her on a whim. He was in fact putting her on notice. If she hadn’t figured out something by the time he finished reading those books, he would act. And he was a fast reader. Pip stayed awake long into the night, pushing thoughts of cougars, skunks and the god Apollo out of her mind.

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“So, my friend, where to next?” Gabor sat down with a thunk on the log, preventing Joe from following the girl as she left the grove.

He noted the position of the tree she slipped behind and wondered if the two of them were together and if Mr. Gabor knew about it. Apparently, he had wondered aloud without realizing it, because the older man snorted.

“That is very interesting place. I know Texas has some strange names, but ‘who is that girl and the man following her’? Gabor never hear that before. Where is this place?”

“Sorry, Mr. Gabor. It’s just... who is she?”

“Who is who? There are many girls here tonight. You know better, my young *gadjo* friend. Our girls are all... how you say... spoken from?”

“Spoken for.”

“My English gets better, no?”

Joe smiled. "Your English has improved since we first met. All that studying has turned your hair grey."

"Snow on the roof, but still fire in the furnace." Gabor thumped himself on the chest. "You find nice town to find nice girl in."

"She wasn't one of your people, Mr. Gabor. Don't worry. I know the rules." Their girls married too young anyway, so Joe had never even entertained such thoughts when he was near Mr. Gabor's camp. "We don't come near your wagons, your wine or your women. In turn, you feed us well even if you won't eat with us. You trade the best livestock in the state and you have no truck with the cheats and criminals that hang around some traveling shows. I've got no complaint to make."

"But you ask about girl." Was there challenge in Gabor's voice? Maybe just a hint. A cautious man, for all his flamboyant style.

"She had blue eyes."

Gabor hesitated, as if taking mental inventory. "Some Romani have blue eyes. One of the new girls... They maybe bring new people Gabor is not know."

"And hair the color of sunset on a wheat field."

Gabor snorted again and tossed his head. "You can see this in the dark? Now, you part cat, my friend?"

"It caught the firelight just so and..." At that very moment, Madame Gabor crossed over from the circle formed by a few of the wagons. "Here comes your wife." Both men stood, partly out of courtesy but Joe knew something must be wrong. He had never seen her outside the family area unless she was doing her fortune-teller act.

Madame Gabor hissed at her husband as if to get his attention. After a lengthy exchange with Gabor in their native language, she gave a brief smile and nod to Joe. "You bring good horses. Good boy. Tell Gabor sell you good horse for trip home."

"Everybody's trying to get rid of me. I can at least stay till morning, can't I?" Joe knew they didn't like strangers lingering near their camp, but he was feeling a bit like a dog in a chicken yard. The memory of those blue eyes and their intense focus made thoughts of leaving somehow distasteful to him.

Narrowing her eyes at him, she took a step closer. "You find a girl? Here?" Slapping Gabor on the elbow, she scowled fiercely. "Why you not tell him rules? I thought he knew rules!"

Another rapid conversation took place before Madame Gabor relaxed. "I don't know girl like this. You want girl, you go to Merriview. Lots of good girls there for you."

"Actually, I'm headed for Brightly. My mother needs a bit of looking after, so I'm moving her from Brightly to Bumchuck."

"Good boy. Take care of mother. Then go to Merriview. You tell him, Gabor." Wrapping her shawl more tightly around her, she gave her husband what Joe could only describe as a girlish swish.

Gabor reached out and gave her a discreet swat, making Joe chuckle. "Fire in the furnace, just like you said. You old son of a gun!"

"Gabor knows how to treat wife. If you learn that, you smart man." He examined Joe's face as if Joe were a horse he was considering buying. "Gabor not sure. If you go chasing around after girls with blue eyes and yellow hair, maybe not smart, but maybe very smart. If you listen to Madame Gabor, you very smart. She knows."

“Maybe she does. I’ll think about it after I get my mother settled.” Joe sat back down heavily.

Gabor lowered himself to sit beside his friend. “Your mother died in flood, fifteen year ago. Gabor recall. You and sister run away, come wanting join circus.”

“What a memory you have. Yes, that’s true. My Pa married again so that he’d have someone to look after me and my sister. Then he died and the lady he married kept us and took care of us anyway, even though we were no kin to her.”

“Why she keep you? Why not send you back to your papa’s kin?”

“She knew they were just like him and he was why we ran away in the first place. She made life bearable while he was alive and after he was gone... well, let’s just say I’m very grateful to her. Nobody could ask for a better mother. I wish she weren’t ailing, but I don’t mind the chance to repay some of the debt.”

“How you take care of mother? You got no wife to take care of you. You riding range all day, gamble in bunkhouse all night.”

“Not anymore. I’m hanging up my spurs and changing directions, Mr. Gabor. You’re looking at the proud owner of the newest clock shop in Bumchuck. Or at least, I will be once I get there and find premises.”

“Clock shop? You that good? Gabor know you work on clocks and do good job, but to open your own shop?”

“I’ve got some cash laid by. I think I can make a go of it.”

“How did gadjo cowboy learn to make clocks anyway?” Gabor asked.

“Before my pa married again, we had plenty of time to do whatever we wanted to do around town. I liked to go to the jeweler’s shop and watch him repair watches. The store owner took an interest in me and made me a deal. If I stayed in school, he would teach me how to work on watches and clocks every afternoon and on Saturdays. I thought I had to give all that up when I decided to hire on at the Blue Moon ranch, but I didn’t. There was still plenty of tinkering to be done, either working on cowboys’ watches or grandfather clocks around some of the big ranch houses.”

“So you not going to chase cows no more? No wonder you not so interested in good horse.” Gabor gave a shrug of his huge shoulders and a nod of his shaggy head, reminding Joe of a resigned grizzly bear.

“The mount I have will do me just fine until I get settled. Then I might need one with a smoother gait for my mother.”

“When you need new horse, you find Gabor. He get you good trotter with smooth gait... and good deal on buggy. Old ladies like buggies.” He gave Joe a broad wink as he shook the younger man’s hand in farewell. “And young ladies, too. You can take long slow drives in buggies.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

As he turned to go, Gabor paused. “You be sure to get you some breads to take with you tonight. We leave before sunrise.”

“Why the hurry?”

“My Zena says water here is bad. We don’t want nobody drink too much of it. Bad for animals. Bad for us. We go early. Good roads to you!” And with that wish of farewell, he was gone.

Joe made his way to the place where he had last caught sight of the girl, but there was not a trace left. No use looking for her in the dark. She was probably with that fellow

anyway, and wouldn't appreciate Joe barging in. If only he knew who she was and why she piqued his curiosity. He'd seen other girls. Plenty of them had seen him too and apparently liked what they saw. This was different. Just the one look had passed between them but there had been more in that single moment of connection than he had found in many an hour of conversation with some girls.

Was it his imagination? Surely, it had to be. A man couldn't tell that much about a woman just from a look in her eye. But he did know some things about her, merely because of the circumstances. Only a brave girl would be out in those woods by herself. The man had been with her, but they hadn't been together. The more he thought about it, the surer he became. She wasn't going into those woods to be with him or any man. Whatever she was about, it was her own errand and no one else's.

Besides being brave, any woman who made it that far from any town or settlement would have to be smart enough to avoid the usual pitfalls and entanglements common to any area where there were far more men than women. Here she was, beautiful but alone, and by choice presumably. If not, why hadn't she approached the fire. In five minutes she would have had her choice of half a dozen swains vying for her attention.

That's what she was trying to avoid: attention. Why else would she melt into the woods when he caught her eye? But if she didn't want attention, why had she come to the fire at all? The communal food table set up for folks who were not allowed to eat in the family area was the obvious explanation. Hunger had drawn her out of hiding, but his notice of her had driven her back. He would have to be careful to be more discreet when he happened on Mr. Gabor's camp again in the next few days. And happen he would. How else would he find out who the girl was? And find out, he would. How else would he learn whether she was really all the things he thought? And learn, he would. How else would he get any peace? It was a very long night.