

Prelude

“Push, child, push,” the old midwife urged.

Screams filled the room as Seneria bore down once more. Neddie doubted the girl even knew they were her own. With one final push, the babe’s cries overrode those of his mother.

A big smile broke across Neddie’s old, weathered face. “You have a boy, a beautiful boy.”

The little bundle squirmed as Neddie handed him to his mother.

The exhausted woman took her son and brought him to her chest, an enchanted look of wonder on her face. “A boy! I have a son,” Seneria’s green eyes widened in fear as she regarded her newborn babe. “He’s the king’s bastard son. King Galen must never learn of this child.”

The midwife nodded her head and spoke softly to the young woman. “Have you a name for your son?”

Brushing her black hair from her face, Seneria smiled down at her babe. “His name will be Rayden, after my father.”

“Prince Rayden.” Neddie nodded in approval.

“No,” Seneria warned. “For his safety, he must never be called ‘Prince’.”

The elder woman dipped her gray head and stifled a soft sob as she nodded again. “Never will he be given his rights as a prince. King Galen will not allow a bastard child to live.”

“During the time I was with him, I saw a compassionate and kind king. Something changed him. The man I love no longer exists. I need to rest now.” Seneria lay back upon her pillows and closed her eyes.

Neddie stilled, instinctively knowing something was terribly wrong. Blood spread on the blankets beneath her charge. “Seneria, Seneria,” she cried as she leaned in to gently shake the young woman, to no avail.

“Oh, no, no!” Neddie wailed into the night. Taking the sleeping bundle from Seneria’s arms, she lowered her aging bones into the old rocker by the bed.

“What will I do with you now, my young prince?” She pulled him close, drooped her chin over his head, and wept softly.

Unaware of how much time passed, Neddie just sat there holding the child. The sudden sound of horse hooves on hard dirt shook her from her grief. She jumped up in terror as she heard footsteps on the wooden porch outside. She rushed behind the rocker and stood cowering against the wall. When the door crashed open, Neddie screamed and clutched the child protectively. A man dressed completely in black stood in the doorway, a sword hung at his hips.

From across the room, Neddie surveyed the intruder. He was around thirty, about six-one or two, with light brown hair and dark brown eyes. He had a muscular body—a warrior’s build.

Shaking her head, Neddie uttered a soft, “No.” She knew this man. “Bowden,” she whispered. “King Galen’s man. You can’t have him,” she hissed as she began to inch along the wall away from the imposing figure.

“I’m sorry.” Bowden stepped into the darkened room and looked past the midwife to the motionless form on the bed. “I tried to get here sooner.” He turned his attention back to Neddie. “Good lady, I must get you and the boy away from here. King Galen has just now learned of Seneria’s condition. He issued an order for her execution. I’m here to take the boy to safety and to protect him.”

Bowden strode around the bed toward Neddie and stopped just short of her. She stood with her back against the wall. “I won’t let King Galen kill him.”

She looked at Bowden with terror and disbelief, yet daring to hope he spoke the truth. “You won’t harm him? Why would you do this? You would be defying the king.”

“I have the gift of Sight, my lady. I have foreseen that the future of the kingdom lies in this child’s hands. He must live.”

This could be a trick. Could she trust him?

“King Galen doesn’t know of my gift. I hardly understand it myself. From the time I was but twenty years old, I knew this day would come. When it actually would, I wasn’t sure. I worked my way into the King’s Guard and from there to the king’s side for just this very purpose. Come with me, my lady, for your sake as well as the child’s. Make no mistake, I’ll take the babe whether you come with me or not. I doubt your safety, though, if you refuse to leave with me. King Galen will learn soon enough of my deceit.”

He took a step closer to her. “I need your help with the child. Whether you come or not, I must go with him now. The further away I get from here, the better it will be for the prince.”

“Sir Bowden, I will go with you.” Neddie moved toward him. “I’ll help you with the child.”

Chapter One

Rayden stared at Bowden, who lay sprawled on the ground. “I did it. I didn’t think I would ever best you.” The student extended a hand and the master grasped it. Rayden pulled Bowden to his feet.

“Lucky shot, that’s all.” Bowden, with pride showing in his brown eyes, looked at the boy he had raised. He watched as Rayden backed away and assumed a defensive stance.

“Come on, charge at me again.”

Bowden smiled at the young man. Rayden was twenty-three years old now. He stood at six feet and had the build of a warrior. His black hair was the same color as his mother’s, the hereditary color of the Ruar monarchy. Rayden’s pale, light blue eyes differed from the dark brown eye color of the Ruar heritage.

Being a master in weapons, Bowden had always been a good fighter with fists, sword, or knife and he had taught the boy well. Rayden had those skills now, as well.

“Enough lad. Let’s leave this morning’s lesson with you having a small victory.”

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Rayden said, “As you wish.” He strolled over to a large tree stump and sat down. “Are you coming on this new job with me?”

For years, he and Rayden had worked as guides through the Kemmerlin Pass. Raiders were known to frequent that area. They had earned a decent living protecting the merchants who traveled from Keeper’s Town through Kemmerlin Pass to the town of Waterbend.

The two were well known to the locals. Merchants could identify them by their black clothing, the silver swords at their hips, and the knives at their waists.

“Yes, I’ll ride with you this day. I would have joined you last trip, except for the pressing business I had to deal with.”

“You said you had something important to do. You haven’t told me what it was.”

“In time I will.”

“You’re so mysterious of late.”

Bowden glanced at the boy. “Not now, please. Just let it drop.”

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Thinking back on his childhood, Rayden remembered Neddie and Bowden telling him stories about Bowden finding him as an infant and how he hired Neddie to help look after the child.

Bowden, as a young man, saddled himself with an infant not his own. Rayden vowed never to forget what his adopted father did for him.

However, secrets surrounded Rayden, and Bowden kept them close. When questioned about Rayden’s birth and abandonment, the stubborn look on Bowden’s face indicated further discussion would be pointless.

“All right, I’ll drop it.” Rayden stood. “Let’s take a quick dip in the stream. It’s awful hot today.”

“Let’s,” Bowden eagerly agreed.

They swam awhile in the stream adjacent to the practice field. As they were toweling off, Rayden spoke. “I’ve told you I don’t like this new merchant. He’s an odd fellow. Every time we meet him to set up the route for his wagons, I find him watching me.”

“Maybe he’s wondering if the reputation you’ve acquired for yourself is valid. After all, you’re quite a young man to have such fame.”

“The reputation is yours, not mine.”

“Some of it is, but I don’t work alone, you know.”

“Well,” Rayden said with a grin. “Our reputations are good ones. We’ve got a nice life going here.”

“Yes, we do, though you must realize I’m getting old. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to do these jobs with you.”

“You’re not old.” Rayden grunted. “You’ve got the body of a much younger man, and you’re stronger than a horse. I’m sure you’ll be around for a few more years. However, just to ease your mind, I promise to take care of you in your old age.”

Bowden laughed. “I will expect it, don’t doubt.” His laughter died quickly. “Have you ever thought there could be more for you out there?”

“More? More of what? We have a good life. We make a good living, and I have a lady I’m quite fond of here in Keeper’s Town. The only thing that could make life better is for you to find a lady of your own. You’re letting life pass you by on that, Bowden.”

“Oh,” Bowden replied, looking at Rayden with a raised brow. “I do have some secrets, lad.”

“Meaning you have a lady friend of your own? If you do, you keep her well hidden.”

“That is totally my business.”

Rayden’s grin disappeared. “Okay, I respect that. I’ll mention it no more.”

“I’m sorry.” Bowden shrugged and waved his hand. “I didn’t mean to sound so gruff. Neddie used to tell me the same thing. Go out there and find a good woman. You’re a good man, she would say. A young lady would be happy to have you as her man. I miss Neddie, lad.

The look on Rayden’s face must have given Bowden pause.

“No,” Bowden stressed. “There was nothing between Neddie and me. Good grief, she was old enough to be my mother. She was a good friend to you and me.”

“I know.” Neddie had been gone now for thirteen years. “I miss her, too.” Rayden frowned and slipped into his clothes. “We had best saddle up. We’re due in town shortly. I want to get this job done.” Something was not right about this new merchant. The sooner they finished their business with him, the better.

“I promised Adrienne I would take her to the Keeper’s Town dance next fortnight.” Rayden grinned. “I wonder why she keeps mentioning dances to me. That’s one thing you never taught me.”

And,” Bowden said as he laced up his boots, “it’s something I won’t be teaching you. Come on, boy, let’s get going.”

They trod the two miles back to their cabin nestled deep in Bragens Woods. Both packed for the trip, which would take five days each way to complete. They saddled their black horses and secured their packs. Rayden sat astride Shade and watched Bowden as he mounted Everling. He noticed the wistful look Bowden gave their home.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

The look on the elder man’s face was unsettling. Rayden watched him as he turned and led his horse toward Keeper’s Town road. He followed, trying to shake off the cold shiver that ran through to his bones.

They arrived in Keeper’s Town in the early afternoon. Rayden dismounted and glanced around. City Guardsmen traversed from one business to another.

“They must be collecting taxes. A king is supposed to protect his people, not steal from them.”

“That’s treasonous talk, lad.”

“Don’t tell me you agree with the king’s taxes?”

“Of course, I don’t. I just think it’s not prudent to announce my disapproval within ear shot of the City Guard.”

“Look at the people, Bowden. Their shopping baskets are half full. The citizens can’t live on so little. Come winter these people will have nothing.”

“Unless the tax laws are amended, there is only so much we can do to help. Come on. We can talk about it later.”

Rayden followed Bowden into the Whitehorse Inn. Tonight they would meet with the merchant, Leon-no last name, to finalize plans for the trip and then leave for Kimmerlin Pass at first light.

Toward dark, they descended the stairs of the inn to the common room. Leon sat at a table with another man, whom Rayden hadn’t met before.

“Gentlemen.” Leon stood. “Please, have a seat.” Raising his hand, he gestured toward a serving girl. “Two ales for my friends here.” He turned his gaze back to them. “I’m anxious to get this trip started. Everything set?”

Not for the first time since meeting the man, Rayden felt unease settle over him. The merchant kept glancing at him with his dark brown gaze. Leon had to be close to Bowden’s height and age, maybe a couple years younger. His black hair, mixed with a little gray, was too immaculate for a merchant.

From an early age, Rayden had been taught to be observant and everything about Leon bothered him. When Bowden did his usual background check of the new merchant, assurances were given, so his mentor didn’t seem to understand his concerns.

Over the rim of his mug, Rayden studied Leon’s companion. This stranger had the bearing of a warrior not a merchant. His hair was even tied back in a warrior’s tail. It was strange the man hadn’t been introduced.

When Bowden made the usual request to check out the merchant’s wagons, Rayden rose. Seeing the loaded wagons should alleviate some of his concerns.

The two guides followed Leon and his man to the livery. Reaching it, they did their customary walk and inspection of the high-wheeled, fifteen-foot long, eight-foot tall, wood-sided, covered wagons. Rayden glanced in the last one and frowned.

“Sir Leon, where is all your merchandise? These wagons are filled with traveling supplies.”

“I deal in the merchandise of crop yields. I’m going to Waterbend to see like-minded merchants. We hope to find a market for the crops grown in my region of Curol.”

Rayden glanced toward the wagons. The man was hiding something.

“I assure you, the lack of yielded crops in my wagons does not represent my interest. I wasn’t able to bring a sample of all the people of Curol offer in the way of crops. Hopefully, I’ll be able to set up trade with Waterbend without having to show all of my wares.”

This man wasn’t a merchant. Rayden nodded and inspected the wagons again while Bowden and Leon made final preparations, and then he followed the three back to the Whitehorse.

Leon stopped at the staircase. “Gentlemen, my associate and I wish you a good night. We’ll meet you at the livery at dawn.”

“Something’s not right.” Rayden grasped Bowden’s arm. “I want to talk to you.” They placed their order then sat down at a table in front of the hearth.

“Rayden.” Bowden lowered his head and sighed. “I told you I asked around about the man. There’s nothing about him that should have you so worried. He appears to be an ordinary merchant. I’ve never seen you like this before. Look, you’ve got great instincts, but let it go this time.”

The serving girl arrived with their order. After taking a long drink of his ale, Rayden said, “We need to drop this job.”

A sudden wariness came into Bowden’s eyes.

“You’re too good at what you do, Bowden, to be unaware something is not right. For one thing, look at Leon’s man. He’s not a merchant or farmer.”

“So? Leon hired an extra guard for his wagons. There’s nothing wrong with extra protection.”

“Why would Leon need extra help? He doesn’t have any wares in his wagons. We have never taken a merchant into Waterbend that didn’t have wares. And did you notice all the other horses in the livery? Okay,” Rayden said as Bowden lifted his eyebrows. “Maybe they don’t have anything to do with Leon, but again, maybe they do.” He leaned over the table. “Look, you taught me too well. Something’s not right here and you know it. Let’s drop this job.”

“We can’t drop the job. We’ve already taken part of his money. Besides, we gave him our word we would take him and his wagons over the Kemmerlin Pass, and we’ll keep our word.”

Rayden shook his head. “We don’t need the money. Give it back to him. Tell him we’ve changed our minds. He’s not being honest with us. I know you see this.”

“We keep this job.” Bowden got to his feet. “I’m going to our room, and I suggest you do the same. Dawn will be here soon enough.”

“You know I won’t run from a fight. You taught me it doesn’t mean we have to deliberately run headlong into one either. Everything in my gut tells me we are heading for trouble.” Rayden rose from his chair. “I know you sense this as well. What have you hired us out to do?”

Seeing Bowden’s clamped jaw, Rayden took a deep breath. He didn’t want to get into a shouting match with his mentor and best friend. “When it comes to jobs, you’ve always told me the way of it until now. What is really going on? Are you asking me to follow you blindly into whatever this is? Talk to me.”

He almost winced when Bowden squeezed his shoulder. The elder man's strength was truly amazing.

"Yes, I ask you to follow me on this without questions."

Rayden stared at him in surprise. He hadn't expected that answer.

"You know I love you as if you were my own son, and I wouldn't deliberately put you in danger. I only want what is best for you. I can't explain this to you now. You have to trust me. Do you have faith in me, boy?"

"I trust you more than anyone." Rayden saw the worry etched on Bowden's face. "But, this is not like you. You're too careful to just walk into trouble."

"You're right. I am too careful to walk into something without checking it out first. So, you have to trust me to know what I'm doing is right. I promise I will explain all on the road."

Rayden let out a long resigned breath. He'd believe in his partner as he always had. "I'll do this job with you as you wish."

"Thank you." Bowden squeezed Rayden's shoulder again. "Come on, boy, let's go to bed, and get some rest."

Rayden nodded and followed Bowden to their room. He didn't rest well that night, and for the first time since he was small, he dreamed of being a boy abandoned.

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Other Books by Joy Brooks

King's Reign – Blurbs (EPIC Awards 2017 Finalist)

Rayden is forced to live a life he never intended. As King of Ruar, he finds it is not easy to side step his responsibilities, there are too many injustices to stamp out. Not only must he strive to help the kingdom, he must face his foes, who are determined to stop him from getting what he desires most, his freedom. When turmoil between the parties escalates, Rayden's fight to forge his own destiny becomes paramount.

(Second Book of Three Book Series)

Fourth Son – Blurbs

Twenty-One year old Grayson has been chosen to be the next Jewell and Master of the Green Stone. The Stone imparts power to control the dragons – all the dragons. As Master of the Stone, Grayson will live for 7 centuries. Bonding with the Green Stone is a torturous and necessary process. Grayson fights to escape that bonding torment and he flees from the certain anguish of losing everyone and everything that he loves over the course of 700 years.

Coming Home – Blurbs

While Europe faces the ensuing Battle of Waterloo, Gabrielle Anderson travels to her brother's best friend's estate. Lord Marshall Hampton opens his home to her but Gabrielle also wants his love. Gabrielle is determined to show him how she feels, but her time is shortened when Marshall is summoned to the war front. Will Gabrielle win the heart of the only man she has ever loved?

A Christmas Wish – Blurbs

Katie Holston, raised in foster homes, wants nothing more than a family to call her own. She meets the man of her dreams in Ian Stokely. Being his five year old son's teacher, she is in a position to make her dreams come true. Kyle Stokely confides in Katie his greatest wish for Christmas. He wants his widowed father to be happy again. Ian Stokely has a different view than Katie Holston and his son, Kyle. He wishes to be left alone. Can Katie and Kyle convince Ian to live life fully again?