

Arrival

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**A**s the stagecoach came to an abrupt halt, Kenna Scott felt exhausted and excited all at once. It was as if she had driven onto the set of an old Western movie. *Dusters*, her dad used to call them.

*Dust is right*, she thought as she felt the dryness of her mouth and the grit between her teeth.

After being jostled and bounced for days during her journey from present-day Chicago to this bustling northern California town in 1870, she was looking forward to being on solid ground again. She opened the door and carefully stepped down onto the dirt road of Main Street, holding on to the side of the coach for a moment to steady herself as she took in the row of one-and two-story wooden buildings that lined either side. Most were in good repair and looked as though they had been built or upgraded recently. The town felt almost welcoming, and Kenna realized she was smiling slightly. The nervousness that had gripped her throughout much of her trip had evaporated.

She walked carefully around to the front of the stagecoach and found the driver. "Excuse me. Can you tell me where Pauline's boarding house is?"

The driver was probably not more than ten years her senior, but he looked much older. His skin was weathered and dark from many years out in the sun.

No sunblock in 1870.

"Yes, ma'am. Up the street and turn left at the dry goods store. You'll see Pauline's sign just down a way. You can't miss it. If that's where you're staying, I'll have your trunk sent over shortly."

Why did men insist on calling her *ma'am*? She was only twenty-two years old! "That would be lovely," she said with a smile, trying not to show her teeth just in case the grit she felt was visible.

Kenna walked up the street and turned as directed. She immediately saw the large sign on the front of the boarding house and quickened her pace. A smaller, brightly painted sign nailed to the door directed her to "Come on in," so she let herself into the building.

"Hello?" she called as she walked through a large mudroom and into a cheerfully decorated living area. Yellow-checked curtains framed the windows, and several overstuffed chairs with a tasteful flower pattern were positioned in a half circle across from a dark-chocolate leather couch.

"Howdy! Be right there!" said a high-pitched woman's voice, soon followed by the sound of footsteps coming from a room in the back. "Sorry about that! I just had to take the pies out of the oven. I'm Pauline." The tall, full-figured woman nodded and gave a wide, friendly smile. "You must be Kenna."

"Yes, that's me." She remembered not to offer her hand for a handshake. Women didn't do that in this century.

"All righty then. Let me show you the facilities first, and then I'll give ya the tour."

"Yes, please." She definitely needed a pit stop.

When the tour was finished, Pauline left Kenna in her room to clean up and get ready for supper. After she made sure the

curtains were closed and her door was locked, Kenna hastily peeled the brown dress she'd lived in for the past few days off her small frame, then her underthings. It was midsummer and scorching hot. Being naked felt wonderful!

The one thing Kenna had noticed was missing during the tour was a tub. She was very disappointed but would make do. These circumstances were temporary, after all. She poured water from a pitcher into a deep basin on the dresser, picked up the rough washcloth Pauline had provided, and bathed slowly, enjoying the cold water against her overheated pale skin. Rinsing her long hair proved more difficult. She'd have to ask for more water next time.

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SHE WAS FINALLY HERE! Her mind drifted back to the day Management had asked her to come to Forest Hills to complete this mission. Kenna thought it was odd that Human Resources would set up the interview for a promotion to Lab Technician II. It had only been six months since she had graduated from college and started with this company. Most people had to work at least two years before they moved up.

She went willingly to the interview, even though she was sure they had made a mistake, deciding she would do her best to impress whoever wanted to speak to her. When she sat down in the large boardroom and the three impeccably dressed executives told her what they wanted her to do, she was taken aback. Time travel? That was just on TV, wasn't it? Apparently not. The company she worked for had people moving around through time regularly. They were careful not to disrupt the timeline significantly, but as it was a large company concerned with profit, that wasn't the priority. Wealthy people were willing to pay a lot to be sent back in time for an adventure vacation. It was essential

that the bases containing the portals were well maintained and ready to receive the next client.

An engineer staffed each station to ensure everything was working correctly, and the experience was as safe as possible. Clients were provided with a guide who toured them around the area. There had been no mishaps in the past few years. Until now. Barrett, the engineer who operated the base near this town, had vanished. He had never been the most reliable employee, and so Human Resources had spoken to him more than once and had seriously considered bringing him back and firing him. But they had been patient because it was difficult to train an engineer for this position, challenging to find someone who could tolerate the isolation of living at the base, and Barrett had performed his job adequately when a client was booked.

So, now, here she was. She was supposed to live in the town and keep her eyes open for Barrett. She would be given money to live on during her stay, and she would travel regularly to the base and do whatever was needed to make sure it was fully operational. If she could send the missing engineer back home, she'd get a bonus. Kenna had reminded Management that she had studied biology in school and not computers, physics, or time travel. She wasn't sure how much assistance she could render in this situation. They'd assured her that staff would guide her to do whatever needed to be done and that most of the work could be completed from their side. If not, she could send for an engineer, who would travel through the portal to help her. They were hoping this wouldn't be necessary, they stressed, as it would be much more cost effective if she could solve their problems.

It had all sounded very far-fetched at first. And then Kenna was sent through the time portal in Chicago with a guide who had taken her shopping for appropriate clothing for her mission. It was all very surreal.

When she was packed onto the train and then a stagecoach to Forest Hills, it all became very real. And now, here she was.

This new job felt beyond her capabilities, but her employers thought she could handle it, so she decided she would give it a shot!

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KENNA LOOKED in the mirror and brushed her long auburn hair. It had taken a long time to dry without a blow dryer. This new life was going to take some getting used to.

When she had fixed her hair into a loose topknot and put on her favorite royal-blue dress with a fitted bodice and flared skirt, she made her way downstairs for dinner. She was the first to arrive. Pauline sat her down with a glass of water at a small table with four white wooden chairs in the corner of the dining room. With her back to the pale-yellow wall, she watched as people slowly started streaming into the large room. Many of the guests greeted each other and pushed tables together to sit in large groups.

Although Kenna considered herself very independent and confident, she felt awkward sitting alone. She was the only woman not accompanied by a man.

*Oh, well, she thought, suck it up, princess!* She would only be here for two or three months. After that, she'd never see these people again. It made it easier that no one stared or bothered her in any way. Many of them just glanced over or even nodded in her direction as they sat down, then they were all quickly engaged in conversations among themselves.

Pauline came out of the kitchen with several plates of food on a large tray and brought one over to Kenna. "I hope you enjoy your meal. Let me know if you need more water or anything."

"Thank you," Kenna said, but the woman was already halfway to the kitchen. She sighed and slowly began to eat her dinner at the lonely little table.

She was mid-mouthful when a very tall, dark-haired man with broad shoulders sauntered into the dining room. Her gaze followed him as a few of the men stood up from their chairs and shook his hand, addressing him as *Sheriff*. He chatted with several people, and then his gaze drifted around the room and rested on Kenna. She felt herself blushing and quickly looked down at her plate, scooping another small forkful of beef and potato stew into her well-shaped mouth. When she glanced up, he was accepting a plate from Pauline. He thanked her and looked over at Kenna again as if he was sizing her up. To her surprise, he walked over to her table.

"Good evening, miss. Mind if I join you?"

His deep voice was rough and growly. Very sexy, just like the tough guys in the movies.

"Of course," she said shyly. She took a quick sip of water as he settled into the chair beside her—not across from her as she'd expected a stranger to do. She ran her small pink tongue over her teeth, hoping there was nothing stuck between them. Why was she suddenly shy and self-conscious? That wasn't like her. At least he had called her *miss* and not *ma'am*!

"I haven't seen you around town before today," he said as a lazy grin touched his lips. "I'm the sheriff in these parts and I like to keep up with who's set foot in my town." His head tilted to the side as though he was trying to get a good look at her from a different angle.

Her cheeks grew even hotter. "I just arrived on the stage this afternoon." She could feel the heat of his body with him so close to her.

"What brings a pretty girl like you to this fine town? Where's your husband?"

"No husband," she stated. "I'm a writer. Kenna Scott. I was hired to write about my life in a western town for a few months." She immediately regretted admitting she was alone. But she was happy about how the lie had rolled easily off her tongue. No

hesitation. She couldn't very well tell him that she was from approximately a hundred and fifty years in the future and was actually hired to check on a time portal and an engineer who had not responded to any attempts at communication for several weeks. No one in town could know that—or would believe it!

"It ain't safe for a young woman like you to be alone in a town like this. You'll have to be very careful and stick close to the boarding house. There are a lot of men who would love to snatch you up and stake a claim," he lectured.

She studied this ruggedly handsome, very masculine man and noticed that her heart rate had increased significantly since he had sat down at her table. His skin was tanned from being out in the sun, but he didn't look weather-beaten like the driver of the stagecoach. His golden-brown skin contrasted with his straight white teeth and stunning blue eyes. Her attraction to him was immediate.

"I'll be careful. I can take care of myself." She sounded more confident than she felt. What he had said actually scared her, but she would never let him know it. She took another bite of her beef stew and chewed as she tried to look at him defiantly. She traced the strong lines of his face with her eyes and wondered who had given him the thin, jagged scar running in front of his left ear and curling around his square jawline. Who'd been brave or foolish enough to do that?

"You're a little too big for yer britches, missy. You better watch that attitude. It'll sure as hell get you in trouble." He looked at her with annoyance.

She lifted her chin. "I know what I'm doing. I'll be fine."

The sheriff glared at her and shook his head in disbelief then ignored her as he wolfed down his dinner.

As he wiped his plate with the last bite of bread, he looked at Kenna pointedly. "If you get in trouble, don't come wailing to me. I warned ya. Mind what I said." He popped the bread into his mouth and, still chewing, pushed his chair back and deposited

his plate on a small table where patrons placed their empty dishes. He said goodnight to Pauline and didn't give Kenna a second glance.

She finished her delicious dinner and put her empty plate on the small table the way she'd seen the sheriff do. She was exhausted and walked slowly up to her room.

Why did it seem that all hot men were assholes? The condescending tone in which he'd spoken to her was offensive. She was a grown woman, college educated. Horseback riding and using a gun came easily to her—not that she'd ever want to shoot anybody. But she thought she could if she had to, in self-defense. She could darn well take care of herself. She wasn't some simpering, helpless female who was afraid to do anything without a man at her side. She decided she would stay clear of him from now on. She'd go about her business and not give him a second thought.

When she got to her room, Kenna undressed, careful not to wrinkle her dress. All the washing was done by hand here, and with no place to do her laundry herself, she'd have to pay someone to do it for her. She'd been given money to live on, but as she had no idea how long she would be staying, she would have to be careful with her finances. She performed her ablutions and then climbed into a very soft and comfortable bed. It was a blessing for her sore back after riding on a hard, wooden bench for miles.

As she snuggled into her pillow, her mind drifted to the sheriff. So much for not giving him a second thought! She was innately drawn to his strength. She wanted his big, muscular body close to hers. As close as possible. But the way he treated her wasn't endearing. Kenna wound a long, thick lock of her soft auburn hair around her finger, a habit when she was thinking. His condescending tone was just part of being a man, she reasoned. In this time period, men owned women, just like any other possession. It was logical that he thought she needed his



guidance because she didn't have a man around to tell her what to do. He must have decided it was his right to step in and boss her around. When he'd lectured her, it felt good in a way, as though he was concerned for her, but it was also annoying because she had no intention of letting a man get in her business.

Kenna had come to this town to do a job, and if she completed the assignment, she would be paid a great deal of money—enough that, if she weren't extravagant, financial security would be one less thing to worry about. She was determined to fulfill her contract and return home as soon as possible. She couldn't let the sheriff or any other man get in her way. He had no idea what was at stake for her. The risks she had to take were worth it.

Kenna would make sure she had as little to do with the sheriff as possible. Maybe she could eat dinner in her room? That would cut down on the possibility of contact. But it would look strange, and her goal was to blend in and go about her business. That wouldn't work.

She yawned and drew the extra pillow in close to her body. It was a poor substitute for a man, but it would have to do for a while! She fell into a deep sleep as soon as she closed her eyes.