

THE FOUR SWORN: SPRING EQUINOX  
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CHAPTER 1

Abby picked up a piece of silver and dabbed some flux onto its surface before placing it onto a fire brick on the work bench. Starting her acetylene torch with a flick of her spark lighter, she adjusted the valves until she got the flame just right. Once she approved of the intensity of the flame, she moved it methodically back and forth over the piece of silver until the flux bubbled and hissed. The solder flowed into place exactly where Abby intended it to go. Satisfied, she shut off the valves with one hand, grabbed the hot silver with copper tweezers clasped in her other hand, and then dropped the piece into a pot of pickling solution on the far side of her work bench.

Abby always held the power of fire with awe and respect. As a metal-smithing artist, she loved being able to create beautiful things while harnessing its power, and she prided herself on her ability to utilize and control such a dangerous force.

*Fire good....*

*(Yes, it is)*

*What?*

Abby shrugged as she replaced the lid on the pickling solution with a satisfied smile and pushed a rogue lock of her brown hair off her face with the back of her hand.

*That was strange,* she thought to herself. A sound behind her broke her concentration.

“Hey, are you still working?” Her husband, Dan, called up the stairs as he ascended, his head peeking through the worn oak rails. His dark eyes fixed on hers as he smiled affectionately at her.

“Normally when artists go to shows they tend to take finished work with them. Aren’t you going to be late?”

“I just needed to blow off some steam and relax.” Abby replied, wiping her hands on a towel.

“Aren’t you supposed to pick up Sara?” Dan questioned. “I thought it was your turn to drive.”

Damn. She almost forgot Sara.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

Abby cast one last glance at the bench. She felt the draw of the flame, a pull similar to that of a moth to a porch light. It was easier for her to succumb to that pull because she knew she wouldn’t suffer the same fate as a moth. The draw of the torch was satisfying, as was the creation of an object with it. *It would be so easy to stay here, stay and work and play...*

*Play with fire...*

Abby shook her head. *Where is that coming from? Everything here can wait until later.* She would just have to resist the draw to the flame for now.

Dan stepped aside as Abby bolted past him and descended the stairs at break-neck speed.

“Slow down, don’t kill yourself,” he scolded as he trailed after her. “You still have some time. The van is already loaded, and I made you a lunch. I even made one for Sara. I bet she’ll forget.”

Abby had to smile. Sara probably wouldn’t even be ready when she got to her place to pick her up. That would seriously cut into their time to set up their booth at the art show.

“I’d better head out.” Abby glanced at her watch. “Thanks for the reminder. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Turning to face him she took a few steps forward and softly slid her arms around his waist and gently pressed her lips to his.

“Have a good day, sweetie.” Dan smiled as he steered her towards the door. “Sell lots, have fun, and get going.” He handed her a cooler bag and her key ring as she swung her backpack over her arm.

“Bye, sweetie.” Abby waved as she walked through the doorway and through the door of her studio. Striding down the path to the driveway, she made her way to the van, tossed her stuff in, and drove to Sara’s house.

Abby smiled as she recalled the first time she had met Sara. Abby had been a freelance metal artist for several years and always did her own thing—outdoor shows, some gallery work, and even private showings at her studio, but never belonged to an artists' guild or association. One day she encountered an ad in the *Harmon Review*— the Harmon Art Guild was looking for members, and the meeting was that evening.

*What the hell?* She thought. Abby had always avoided membership in clubs and associations. Didn't someone famous once say that they wouldn't join any club that would have them as a member? Abby thought it was Mark Twain, but it could have been someone equally as memorable. Besides, weren't artists who belonged to clubs a bunch of artsy-fartsy snobs? Abby was relieved that that perception was only a myth in the case of the Harmon Art Guild. Sara was not only the least artsy-fartsy person she knew, but she was probably the most interesting person Abby had ever met in her entire life.

Sara was a strikingly attractive woman with platinum blonde hair and prominent sapphire-blue eyes. She was dressed as she was always dressed—in jeans and a button up shirt with a leather jacket. Abby thought she looked as if she had just ridden a horse into town. *Or a Harley.* Sara had made Abby feel welcome as a part of the group with her easy conversation and bubbly laughter. It wasn't long before they got into a regular routine of getting together to talk about art over coffee at each other's homes. Abby felt comfortably familiar with Sara and appreciated Sara's penchant for black cowboy boots and bulky turquoise and silver jewelry. She even enjoyed some of Sara's more unconventional topics of interest, particularly the unexplained or paranormal. While Sara didn't always have an opinion, she seemed eager to learn as much as she could about any subject that piqued her interest so that she could form her own opinions. Abby admired that quality very much, even though she had ambivalent feelings about many of the topics that Sara delved into.

"What do you think about aliens?" Sara had inquired of her during one of their afternoon discussions. "Do you believe in the existence of other beings in the universe?"

"Well," Abby had answered, "I think the universe is vast, and I believe that there could be more than just humans in it, but I don't know if I believe that aliens have visited here. I guess I would have to see it to believe it." Abby added.

"Well, I'm sure that they have better things to do than anal probing, don't you?" Sara replied, laughing.

That had been the topic of discussion their first afternoon together, three years ago. *Wow, had it really been three years?*

Abby wondered what topics they would be delving into today. Abby thought about mentioning a disturbing dream she had a couple of nights ago, but quickly dismissed the idea. Abby never felt comfortable talking about her dreams. She always hated hearing about other people's dreams, and she also worried that all dreams could be interpreted in a Freudian manner. Anyone who told her she wanted to have sex with her father or kill her mother would definitely be in for a serious ass-kicking. Besides, what would people make of a metal-smith dreaming of fire? They would probably say she was working much too hard.

Abby felt the familiar crunch under her tires as the road changed from pavement to gravel and began to slow down and turn into Sara's long, gravel driveway. As she pulled her van up to the front of the house, Sara came bounding out of the front door carrying a wooden easel under her arm.

"Guess what?" Sara called out to Abby. "I'm all packed and ready to go! I just have to haul it all out and load it up!" Sara plunked the easel down on the grass and headed back to the house to bring out more artwork and equipment.

Abby got out of the van and began to load it with Sara's artwork, bins and structures. In no time, the two of them got it all in the van and ready to go.

*A small miracle happened today,* Abby thought. *We're actually going to be early.*

Abby got into the van and turned the ignition as Sara plopped into the passenger seat.

"So," Sara turned toward Abby inquisitively. "Do you believe in past lives?"

"What?"

“Past lives. Reincarnation. The ‘*déjà vu*’ feeling that you’ve done something before in a previous life. That sorta thing,” Sara explained as she pulled her seat belt across her shoulder.

Abby shrugged noncommittally and pulled the van down Sara’s driveway. She wasn’t sure she believed, but the idea of remembering a past life left Abby with a bad taste in her mouth and an even worse feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Once they arrived at the park, Abby and Sara quickly found their spot and set to the familiar work of unloading the van and setting up their booths and artwork displays. This was Abby’s third year setting up at the Harmon Art in the Park show and Sara’s second.

*At least they put us next to each other,* Abby thought.

Though the sky was clear, they still opted to put up their display tents. While the weather was fairly comfortable and moderately cool for late August, the sun was still too hot to be standing directly under all day. While Sara was an avid sun worshipper, Abby didn’t share her enthusiasm. “I shun the sun,” she would say, retreating under a large floppy hat, long shirts, and SPF 50 sun block.

The morning passed relatively quickly. It appeared the majority of the residents of Harmon were taking advantage of the weather, strolling through the park, pulling carts with their children, and eating an assortment of foods that came off the various carts.

“All that food is making me hungry!” Sara announced loudly. Her voice jolted Abby out of her musings.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Dan made us both lunch.” Abby fumbled inside the bag and produced two sandwiches, two apples, and two bottles of water. “He figured you probably wouldn’t have had time to make something,” Abby added.

“No, he probably knew I’d forget.” Sara replied with a sigh. “I know I get distracted easily—,” she broke off in mid-sentence as she looked out across the artists and vendors.

“There are a lot of artists we know here,” she gave a little wave across the park. “Sharon is here, Steve, Tim, Tallulah — look,” she indicated toward a brown-haired man across the park, “there’s that potter you were interested in. What’s his name again? Joe something?”

“Joe Asine,” Abby corrected, pronouncing it Ah-see-nay. “And I’m not interested in *him*. I was hoping to get a deal on one of his stoneware bowls - you think maybe he’d do a trade?” Abby looked to Sara for a response. She was staring dreamily across the park at Joe, with a half-smile on her face.

“He is kinda cute, isn’t he?” she breathed. “I wonder if he’s married or something?”

Abby followed her gaze. Joe was placing a tissue wrapped bowl into a box. His shoulder-length brown hair was very shiny and the sun gave it the appearance of having red highlights. His broad shoulders and trim waist revealed that he had a good physique hidden underneath his denim jeans and a long-sleeved button front shirt.

“You know, for a Native man, he isn’t really tuned in,” Sara added. “I talked to him once. He’s not into traditional Native beliefs.” She leaned in closer to Abby and added, “in fact, he’s very *conservative*.” She intoned, as if uttering a swear word.

Abby gave a laugh and took a bite of her sandwich. She leaned her chair back and delved into her lunch.

The afternoon dragged as the crowds dwindled down to a trickle of people and the occasional family strolling through the park. As fewer patrons came through the show and sales started to slow, the artists themselves began to flit back and forth visiting, catching up on news, sharing show information, and doing the occasional trade. It was one of the better perks of being a “starving artist”. You may not always have the big sales or get the ribbon and cash prize award for *Best in Show*, but you could always get a decent collection of good art through trading and bartering, or, at the very least, get a head start on your Christmas shopping.

Abby jumped up out of her chair, “Sara, do me a favor? Please watch my booth while I go see if Joe is interested in a trade.”

Sara nodded and Abby strolled nonchalantly away from her display. She ambled slowly up each row, stopping at the odd table to pick up a piece to examine or just say hello.

“Hi.” Abby said shyly when she finally approached Joe’s space.

“Hi,” he replied quietly smiling in return. “You’re Abby, right? I remember you from the Art in the Street show in Coppertown.”

“Didn’t you get *Best in Show*?”

“Yeah,” his smile thinned. “The prize money helped to make up for the slow sales. Have they given out the show awards yet?” his eyes widened. “I wonder who’ll place.”

“I dunno.” Abby scrutinized his table and the metal structure behind him outfitted with various shelves all featuring his many clay creations.

His pots were perfect; the clay was smooth, and the glaze was perfectly applied and gleamed brightly in the sun. He had several sculptures, some of people, some of animals, and several freeform pieces hanging on the structure. Her eyes moved along each piece appreciatively. Her hand came to rest on a five-inch pot painted in many hues of green and finished with a clear glaze.

“I was wondering whether you would consider a trade,” Abby blurted out. “Are you interested?”

“You like that piece?”

Abby nodded as she picked up the pot and gazed at it appreciatively.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” Joe replied.

He spoke briefly with the artist in the space next to him, and after arranging for him to watch his booth, he followed Abby back to her space. Abby caught Sara’s eye and gave her a quick wink as she led Joe over. Sara jumped up so quickly she knocked her chair over and almost fell backward over it.

After casting a smile in Sara’s direction, Joe began picking up and examining objects on Abby’s table. He seemed to be particularly interested in the jewelry. He picked up a very feminine silver and turquoise brooch and turned it over and over in his hands.

“Looking for something for your wife?” Abby probed cautiously.

“Oh no, I’m not married.” Joe stated (Sara covered her smile with her hand), “but my Mom’s birthday is next week, and she wanted a new piece of turquoise for protection—not that I personally believe it. You’re Sara Taylor, aren’t you?” he said as if finally realizing she was there. “I really admire your work. Your mixed media sculptures are so interesting.”

Sara beamed at him. It seemed she was also at a loss for words, but she finally managed to squeak out a shy “thanks.”

“Abby, how about this brooch? Can we do this trade for the bowl? I’ll throw in something else too. Meet me back at my booth, okay?”

Abby nodded in assent as Joe strode over to his booth.

As Abby boxed the brooch and placed it in a small organza gift bag, a group of show officials stopped at Sara’s space.

“Congratulations, Sara Taylor! You have won the *Best in Show First Place Award*. Here’s your ribbon,” said the short, officious-looking judge. Both show officials in turn shook her hand. The short, officious-looking woman placed the ribbon on her table while the tall bald man pressed an envelope containing the cash award into her palm. Sara squealed with delight.

The two judges turned to face Abby. “Abby Fabrica, you have earned an *Honorable Mention*,” the officious woman spoke again, setting down her clipboard, placing a ribbon on Abby’s table with one hand and shaking her hand with the other. Sara spied the unawarded second and third place ribbons on the judge’s clipboard.

“Hey, who got the second and third for *Best in Show*?” Sara inquired enthusiastically. She could hardly stand still behind her table.

“*Second Place* will be awarded to Joe Asine for pottery and *Third Place* to Sharon Janish for her pen and ink drawings.” The officious looking judge picked up her clipboard and strode in the direction of Joe’s booth.

“You better hurry and finish that trade,” Sara urged, “in case Joe doesn’t like the idea of second place.”

Abby grabbed the gift bag and raced ahead of the judge to Joe’s table. He had the bowl already boxed.

“I put a surprise in there.” He added, “Oh yeah, say congrats to Sara. I heard she won first place.”

Abby smiled and backed away as the judges reached his table. “Thanks, and congrats to you, too,” she spoke over her shoulder as she headed back to Sara. A crowd had already gathered around her as she showed off the first place ribbon.

“First place, I can’t believe it!” Sara was almost in shock with excitement.

“You earned it.” Abby said sincerely.

“Yeah,” echoed another artist.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” said another.

Abby looked at her ribbon too. Dan would be pleased when she got home. Something to celebrate.

After the awards were completely given out and the crowds of people had gone, everyone began to pack their wares and tear down their booths.

“Thanks for coming out to Art in the Park,” a loud speaker boomed. “We hope that your participation will help to make next year’s event a success as well.”

Abby began packing her jewelry away into cushioned boxes. *At least I sold a few pieces*, she thought. *Maybe even enough to cover my booth fees.* After she finished packing her sculptures, she collapsed her tables and display panels. She loaded them into the van as she waited for Sara to get packed so she could help take down the tents. After getting the tables and panels into the van, Abby left the van’s back door open and sat on the bumper to catch her breath. She pulled her water out of the bag and took a long swallow. She felt drained, but in a good way. She ran her hand through her hair and sighed. It was almost seven o’clock and she was more than ready to head home.

Sara was still packing and chatting. Abby stood and walked to a copse of trees in the park. The soft breeze was rustling the leaves gently, and the crickets were adding their night song as the melody.

Suddenly, Abby felt a prickling sensation begin at the base of her neck. It crept up the back of her head while simultaneously racing down her spine. She felt her body stiffen and become rigid. She was being watched. And she was alone in the trees.

*What did all those women’s self-defense classes teach?* Her mind raced to remember. *Yes, that’s it. Face your attacker.*

She whirled around quickly hoping to catch whoever it was off guard. But no one was there. She looked down to the ground to detect any signs of someone running away, and to her surprise she saw a man. A small man. A very diminutive man, to say the least. He couldn’t have stood any taller than two feet unless he was standing on tip-toe. He was shaped like a beer keg and had no discernible waist. He appeared to be wearing moleskin pants and a sheepskin vest over a leather shirt. His face seemed to be entirely covered by a semi-long, wiry gray beard. His eyes were small grayish-blue buttons surrounded by crow’s feet. Abby thought that he looked like a cross between Popeye and Danny DeVito, but he was wearing a hat any self-respecting New York cab driver would be jealous of.

Abby’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t help but stare, but she couldn’t speak either. His eyes narrowed as he raised an arm up and waggled a finger in her direction.

“What the feck you lookin’ at?” he growled.

“Abby, where are you?” Sara’s voice sang through the trees. Abby was jolted by the sound of Sara’s voice. She turned toward it and then turned back to the little man.

He was gone.