

Sojourner

Janalyn Voigt

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Dedication

To my sweet daughter, Zemier, who sneaks behind me
while I'm writing to read over my shoulder.

What People are Saying about DawnSinger

Janalyn Voigt is a fresh voice in the realm of fantasy. Her writing is crisp, her verbs muscular, and it's all wrapped up in a lyrical style. Blending action and romance, DawnSinger is a journey through fear, failure, and faith, and I look forward to its sequel. Eric Wilson, NY Times bestselling author of Valley of Bones and One Step Away

In DawnSinger, Janalyn Voigt has penned a novel full of surprises. With adventure, mystery, and an unlikely romance, this beautiful, epic fantasy debut will leave you scrambling for the next book in the trilogy. Jill Williamson, Christy Award-winning author of By Darkness Hid

DawnSinger is a delightful fantasy spun with bardic prose and threaded with danger and intrigue. Linda Windsor, author of Healer, Thief and Rebel, Brides of Alba Historical Trilogy

Janalyn Voigt builds an exciting world, tranquil on the surface but filled with danger, ancient enemies, and a prophecy yet to be fulfilled. DawnSinger leads you into a land only imagined in dreams. I can't wait to read the second book in the Tales of Faeraven trilogy. Lisa Grace, bestselling author of the Angel in the Shadows series.

Part One

Secrets and Lies

1

THE CALLER

A tiny creature leaped from beneath Mara's foot and splashed into the nearest pool. She jumped back, flailing. Ripples circled outward from the place the creature had entered the water. An iridescent frog emerged and cleaved the surface with strong strokes as it swam away from her. She tucked her skirts at her waist and crouched to see it better, but she already knew it for a grillon. The frog emerged onto one of the rocks, the river flowing behind it, and from that point of safety, watched her with sides puffing. She stared back at the beautiful creature whose venomous bite could end her life.

A fish jumped, the splash it made jarring her nerves. The grillon flicked into the next pool. Mara let out her breath and straightened. Sun heated her skin, pleasant after the cold of winter, but she forsook it for the shifting shade of the path beneath the trees.

Her father should know about this. Da wouldn't say or do anything to alarm the inn's guests, but he'd want to search the pools for others of its kind.

She put a hand to her back and rubbed away an

ache. Youth and a lifetime of working at the inn favored her with strength, but she'd spent all yesterday afternoon bent over while picking dewberries and most of today stirring vats of jam. When her mother had urged her to slip away for a break, she'd ignored a twinge of guilt at leaving Mam alone with such a hard task. The inn gave them much to do in the days of fair weather. A weary traveler wanted to stop the night where a comfortable bed offered rest and a plentiful board satisfied the belly. The inn offered both, which meant that it did not lack for customers.

"Mara!" A tousle-haired stable hand called to her.

She waved to Hael, and he grinned in return. A sudden lift of heart sent her to meet him before he could leave the stableyard. It was an old game, one they'd played since she could remember.

Hael slowed his pace, grinning. He'd taken to letting her win of late. She arched her brow to tell him she knew this, but a smile tugged her lips. "I suppose Mam looks for me already."

"That she does." He ducked his head, an unruly brown lock escaping his cap.

"I shouldn't keep her waiting, but I need to find Da." She swept a glance to the inn yard, where insects turned lazy spirals in the air.

"Your father be in the common room. What's amiss?"

"I saw a grillon at the river."

His brows met in a scowl. "Did you take harm?"

"Of course not. I know to be careful."

He tapped her under the chin, a smile warming his brown eyes. "A grillon can bite even the careful."

"It wouldn't let me near."

"If grillons did not fear people, more would die

from their bites."

"Don't grillons prefer the bog? I've never seen one in the cove before this."

Da and Hael always returned from cutting turf for the fire in the bog lands with tales of the strange creatures they found. Last summer, Da had brought home a grillon trapped in a jar. Mam had been none too pleased about that. He'd explained that he meant to take Mara along next time and wanted to warn her about the grillons. Mam made him promise to put an end to the grillon, but had it somehow escaped?

"Sometimes they stray. Don't be afraid. I'll search him out for you."

He'd never gazed at her with such a soft look on his face before. What did it mean? She stepped backward. "I'm not fearful, only concerned about the lodgers."

She kept to the edge of the stableyard, lifting her skirts as she sidestepped puddles left by the night rains. Ignoring the inn's wide front steps, she went around to the back door and found it hooked open.

Everything seemed the same as when she'd left. Aunt Brynn's face, red as her hair, glistened above several large roasts she turned on metal spikes. Their drippings hissed into the flames flaring below to haze the air with smoke. Ardel, the kitchen maid, her curly brown hair covered by a muslin cap, slid loaves of bread into the oven. Mam stirred a pot of stew and wiped her brow with the back of her hand as fading red tendrils strayed from beneath the brown kerchief knotted at her nape. She glanced up as Mara came in.

"There you be, and none too soon."

"I'm sorry, Mam. I shouldn't have gone to the river."

"That one!" Brynn shot a venomous glance to Mara. "Idling about. Take her in hand, Heddwyn, or she'll bring you grief, and no mistake."

Mam waved a hand. "She can't help being lively, just as you were in younger days. Come, Mara, and stir the stew."

Brynn fell to grumbling.

Mara gripped the wooden spoon and stirred the steaming pot with more force than necessary. Mam bent with Brynn over the meat, perhaps more to distract her sister than to check for doneness. Ardel crossed her eyes behind their backs. Choking back laughter, Mara stirred the stew.

When the rush to serve began, Mam shoved a tray into Mara's hands and thrust her through the swinging kitchen door into the common room. The fragrance of bruin stew from the bowls she carried made her mouth water. If any food remained after the guests took their portions, the kitchen workers could eat it. Otherwise, their evening meal would consist of bread and cheese. Aunt Brynn usually kept back a share of the guests' food for herself despite the rule, but Mam observed it.

"Quinn, where be my ale?" A burly man in farmer garb called.

"Here, Calib." Her father pulled a tankard of foaming ale from one of the barrels behind the counter and plunked it down on the farmer's table. He tossed a smile Mara's way before returning to load a tray with more tankards of ale. Mara delivered the bowls she carried and started back for more.

The swinging door burst open, and she sidestepped to avoid a collision with her aunt, who scowled at her. Aunt Brynn's dislike seemed to have grown of late, although she had no idea why. Pushing

the thought away, she flung herself into the task at hand and hurried toward the common room balancing more bowls on her tray.

The swinging door burst open. Mara's tray flew from her grasp. Stew splatted the wall and ran down into the floor rushes. Mara gasped. . Hadn't Brynn heard her coming as she had her? The servers always yielded to the one carrying food.

"Watch yourself!" Brynn snarled as she passed. "Look what that wretched child has done now." She spoke so loudly that her voice carried from the kitchen.

Heat crawled into Mara's cheeks. No one in the common room could have missed what Aunt Brynn said. Tears stinging her eyes, Mara turned to go into the kitchen.

The door rocked open, and Da caught her arm in a firm grip. "Never mind." Da said close to her ear while handing her a rag and a bucket of water.

She summoned a smile. "Thank you."

He nodded and turned away.

Her father's kindness heartened her, and Mara bent to clean the mess with a better heart. Ready to throw out the water in the bucket, she went through the kitchen toward the back door.

Ardel stepped in front of her. "Let me."

Giving her a grateful smile, Mara surrendered the bucket. She held her head high as she returned to the common room with fresh bowls of stew. A man with black hair came in the front door. Dark eyes sought hers, and she pulled in a breath. What brought their nearest neighbor, Rohan, from his homefarm? Not hunger, for he made no move to sit at one of the trestle tables but remained standing in the small entryway. Her father rushed to him, and Rohan spoke near his

ear. The two stepped outside. She could see them talking on the porch through the greased oilcloth window. Da came back in without Rohan.

She put the matter out of her mind. Whatever business her father had with Rohan had nothing to do with her. As the level of bruin stew lowered in the pot, the babble in the common room rose. Even after the kitchen workers had scrubbed down the kitchen, the travelers still made merry.

Da pulled her behind the counter and peered at her in the light from the lanthorn hanging from a rope overhead. "What brought that frown to your face? Not Brynn?"

"Nothing, but a grillon come to visit." She kept her voice low.

"Where?"

"At the cove."

"All right, then. T'll probably leave again on its own."

She nodded, all at once weary.

He tilted her face to the light. "You're growing up quicker than I realized. Off to bed. You've a caller come morning and will want to look your best."

"A caller?"

"Rohan asked to see you."

Alarm jangled through her. "And what would Rohan want with me?"

"He'll tell you that himself, I'm certain."



Mara turned over, yet again, and pulled the covers about her with a sigh. Neither sleep nor morning

seemed likely to arrive any time soon. A pity, since her thoughts made ill companions. That she was old enough to court had somehow escaped her notice until now. The idea knotted her stomach. Rohan seemed nice enough, but she'd never thought of him or anyone else as someone to marry. A bar of moonlight crept past the edges of the wooden shutters and into her chamber. It had stretched all the way to her bed before sleep claimed her.

A knock dragged Mara from sleep. She moaned and pressed a hand to her throbbing head. All she wanted to do was sleep. At least she had an excuse to avoid her caller. Surely Mam would send word to Rohan that she wasn't in health today. The knock came again, and she forced herself from bed to crack open the door.

Mam pushed into the chamber. "What's this? Lingering abed?"

"My head aches."

"Hmm..." Mam's eyes narrowed. "I'll brew an infusion. You'll recover before Rohan arrives."

"But Mam—"

"Stir yourself. He means to ask you to marry him." She took herself off to make the remedy.

Mara swallowed against a lump in her throat. She'd never thought Mam would be happy to see her gone. There seemed nothing to do but drag herself from bed and endure today's ordeal. Rohan wanted a wife, did he? Maybe she could persuade him to look elsewhere. She pulled her coarsest tunic of brown linsey over her linen chemise, braided the sides of her hair and wound it on top of her head. Her mirror glass told her she looked as she'd intended, tidy but not festive.

Mam brought the headache infusion and Mara breathed in the scents of lavender, rosemary, feverfew, and mint in its soothing steam. She sipped the sweetened liquid, and its warmth uncurled within her stomach. She rested the cup against her forehead and closed her eyes. She would let Rohan speak, then remind him that an inn-keeper's daughter could not count herself an equal match for a gentleman farmer of his caliber.

She made it to the kitchen on shaky legs, where she managed to swallow a crust of bread and drink a dipper of water.

"He's here." Da called in through the doorway.

Looking up from peeling yellowroot at the scarred work table, Ardel bolstered Mara with a smile.

Mam stopped in the middle of spreading fresh rushes to peer at her. "Ach! Could you not have worn your fine scarlet? You're pale as a new lamb's wool." She came to pinch Mara's cheeks.

Brynn slapped the bread she was kneading. "Leave her be. Rohan's a farmer and will want a plain wife."

Maybe she should have worn her finest garments and stained her lips with beet juice.

Rohan, feathered cap in hand and wearing a belted tunic of rough wool, leather leggings, and sturdy boots, waited beside Da in the entry.

Mara came from the kitchen, weaving between the tables in the common room with slow steps.

"It's nice to see you, Mara." Rohan held her hand a little too long in greeting.

"Hello, Rohan." She resisted the urge to snatch her hand away and freed herself more gently.

"Come, sit in the parlor." Why did Da have to

sound so cheery?

"Thank you, but I'm a man of the soil, little given to parlors," Rohan forestalled him. "Will you allow Mara to walk with me?"

She'd rather walk beside Rohan in the fresh air than cast about for words in a stuffy parlor. On the other hand, being alone with him might make walking worse.

Da nodded. "All right, but stay near."

Mara said little as she kept pace with her unwelcome caller in the spring sunshine. They left the stable behind and followed the path beneath the trees to the river bank. For a time, they watched in silence while the White Feather River hurried away on its journey to the sea.

Rohan turned to her. "Tell me of yourself."

She lifted a shoulder. "I was born and raised here at the inn."

"You're no stranger to hard work, then."

"I help with the cooking and serve the food."

"Do you tend crops as well?"

"Aye."

He nodded approval. "You'll have a strong back."

Something in his tone made her uneasy. "I'm an innkeeper's daughter. T'would be strange if I didn't."

"Have you traveled?"

"Almost never."

"Do you wish to see the world?" Rohan asked in forbidding tones.

She shrugged. "I've not thought much about it."

"That's answer enough, I'd say."

Glancing at him, she found him smiling. "And what of you? Are you happy with a farmer's lot?"

"I am." The corners of his eyes crinkled. "I'd be

more content, had I a wife."

"Then I hope you may find one."

His eyes warmed. "I think I have done so."

She looked away. "That is a matter to know for certain."

"Obtaining a wife need not weigh upon a man of means. He has only to find a worthy maiden."

"You say nothing of love."

"That emotion comes later, if it wills."

She shook her head. "Wedding vows made without it can prove themselves a snare."

"Bah!" He folded his arms. "I have no patience for matters of the heart."

"Have you not?" Hope lifted her voice. Perhaps he would leave her alone after all.

"What does a farmer know of romance?"

"I want nothing to do with it myself." There. She had let him know how she felt.

"It seems we are agreed."

Relief washed over her. He had come around so quickly. "I believe so."

"That's well then." He nodded. "I will ask for you."

She stared at him. "You must not!"

"Why, pray tell?" A note in his voice hinted of wounded pride.

"Forgive me, but I should not have spoken so sharply. It was only dismay at having to confess that my dowry is not large."

He waved a hand. "What do I care for a dowry? A wife with a strong back ready to bear my children and able to keep my hearth and home is all I require. You'll do well enough."

"I'm certain you should continue looking for a

bride more suited to your station."

"What do I care for that? The man who marries Quinn and Heddwyn's only child stands to inherit the Whitefeather Inn and its lands. That expectation can replace a dowry."

His interest took on new meaning, all of a sudden. "But I want no husband."

He smiled. "Only consider what I'm offering, and you'll change your mind."

She wouldn't but didn't tell him so. From the set of his jaw, he meant to ask for her no matter what she said or how she felt.

Surely Da wouldn't promise her to this smug man against her wishes.

2

THE STRANGER

Seated at a scarred table in the inn's common room, Rand did his best to ignore the hostile stares from more than one pair of rounded eyes. He'd chosen a dark corner away from the lanthorn light in the hope of escaping notice. As a Kindren among the Elder, he'd expected to encounter suspicion. From the look of this crowd, he'd better keep watch to avoid being knifed in his bed. He couldn't let anything happen to him, not with his father's errand to carry out, although the thought of it made his stomach churn.

Almost as soon as Rand sat down, the man with silver-threaded black hair who had greeted him at the door brought a tankard of ale and called into the kitchen for service. He seemed eager for his Kindren guest to eat and leave. If so, in this their desires matched. A long day in the saddle had sapped Rand's strength and left him eager for sleep.

He lifted the tankard with his left hand, favoring his bruised side, acquired courtesy of his half-brother's ambush. The sudden memory of Draeg standing victorious over him, and looking far too much like their father, tightened Rand's jaw. He banished the image, unwilling to let himself think of defeat at a time that called for courage.

A maiden pushed through the swinging door from the kitchen, balancing a tray of small pies. She glanced

about the room, and her clear green eyes fastened on his. He'd never seen such beautiful eyes. Hair black as an eberec's wing crowned her head in a braid and also rippled down her back. Her face showed no blemish, so youthful he might take her for a child save for the female form her kirtle failed to hide.

A shy smile touched her lips as she lowered the tray before him. He accepted her offering and, diverted by hunger, crammed his mouth full of venison pie. She stepped back and away, all the while watching him. He must look rough after days on the road, or perhaps she'd never seen a Kindren before. He stared back, as fascinated with her as she seemed with him.

He'd known her at once from the description given him, but he'd never expected to find his quarry so quickly.



Mara felt the Kindren looking at her out of long eyes a strange hue between green and amber, deepened by the dim light in the far corner. He had a look she'd seen before, that of a care-worn sojourner. How far had he come, and what errand thrust him upon the mercies of the road?

The front door opened and the lanthorns suspended from overhead beams swung in the draft that fanned her face. Light flared across the stranger, turning his hair red-gold. She'd taken him for older than he now appeared, but guessing a Kindren's age wasn't easy. His kind hardly ever stopped at the inn these days, and she'd forgotten how intriguing she found them.