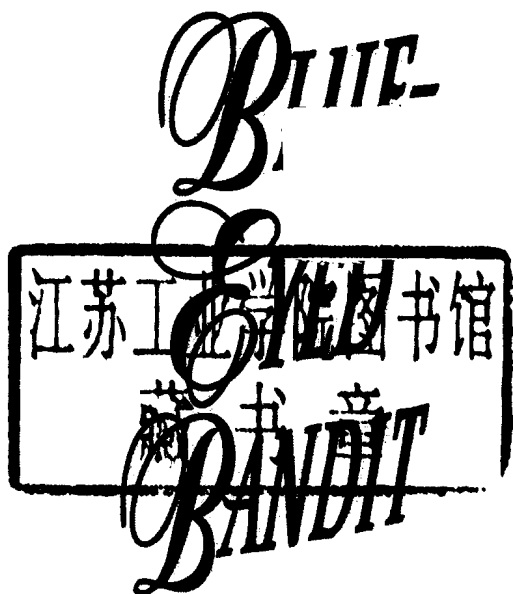


BLUE-
EYED
BANDIT
STOBIE
PIEL
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
FREE FALLING



STOBIE
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*To two wonderful friends who have believed in me
and supported me, Chris Keeslar and Tim DeYoung.
Thank you for making Dorchester such a special
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A LOVE SPELL BOOK®

August 2000

Published by

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.
276 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

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ISBN 0-505-52394-9

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Printed in the United States of America.

THE CRITICS RAVE ABOUT STOBIE PIEL!

FREE FALLING

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SWEPT BY THE TIDE

She stared blankly at him for a moment, then exhaled a long, tortured sigh as if he had brought up all the world's ills. "I'm not married because I don't want to be." She spoke proudly, then paused. "Marriage isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"Is that so?" Obviously, Miss Emily Morgan hadn't found the right man. Darian smiled and rode on ahead, feeling comfortable. "Marriage isn't to be entered into lightly, that is true." He glanced back to see her reaction, but her expression was veiled, and seemed more sorrowful than he expected. "I came close to matrimony myself once, but the arrangement ended before it could be transacted."

She eyed him doubtfully. "'Transacted?' How romantic!"

"You may be right. I was not romantic enough to enter into a sacred union, so it is best not to have undertaken the adventure."

Emily frowned, but she didn't look at him again. "Romance, Captain, is an illusion, and it's the last thing you should count on when choosing someone to wed."

Darian stopped his horse and waited for her to catch up. "But what better way than to follow your heart, to be swept up in its most passionate currents?"

She rolled her eyes and snorted. "The only thing those 'passionate currents' will get you is solitude."

Other *Love Spell* books by Stobie Piel:

FREE FALLING

THE WHITE SUN

THE MIDNIGHT MOON

MOLLY IN THE MIDDLE

THE DAWN STAR

BLUE-
EYED
BANDIT

Prologue

Tucson, Arizona
April 2001

“ ‘Captain Darian Woodward, the Civil War hero known for terrorizing the Southwest under the alias of the Blue-eyed Bandit, was hanged for treason on May twenty-first 1870, restoring order under the command of the renowned General Clement Davis.’ ”

Emily Morgan made a wide berth around the paperback romance section of her store—avoiding that section had become ritual to her, but the muffled voices from the back room attracted her attention. A tall dark man read the solemn words to his extremely pregnant wife, then paused as if it had been his father’s obituary.

She shouldn’t be listening—as the bookshop owner, she should have directed her strange customers to the “rare and used” section and left them in peace. But they

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were so odd. Odd and beautiful. The husband was Native American, with long black hair, a beaded earring, and the best body she'd ever seen. His looks alone were worth spying on. His wife had pale blond hair tied up in an off-center bun. When the two entered Emily's shop, the woman's pretty face had been knit in a worried expression as if a close relative lay on death's door.

Emily felt sure the wife was crying now, as if the words read about a long-dead outlaw were spoken about her brother. She heard a muffled sob, followed by soft words from the husband.

"It can't be true." The woman sniffed. "Hanged. Adrian, he can't be hanged. He's so young." Young? Weren't they reading about a man who had died soon after the Civil War ended? And why did she speak of him in the present tense?

A romantic woman, obviously. As Emily herself had been, years ago. The woman looked about Emily's age—it seemed romantic ideals hadn't been driven out of her yet. Maybe, for some women luckier than Emily, those romantic dreams didn't fade.

Emily tiptoed back, seized her small stepladder, and inched her way up, then peered through her selection of children's books into the "rare historical works" section. *Maya the Bee* was a large book, and got in her way. She edged it gently aside to get a better look at the couple. The husband had his arm wrapped around his wife's shoulder. She was crying. Pregnant women can be emotionally overwrought, true, but the husband himself appeared devastated by the passage they'd read.

They were grief-stricken about a desperado with blue eyes who had terrorized Tucson over a hundred years ago. And not very well, either, or Emily would have heard of him—certainly, a movie would have been made.

Blue-Eyed Bandit

"It's over now, Cora. Captain Woodward has been dead for over a hundred and thirty years."

The wife, Cora, dried her eyes, but more tears came. "I encouraged him to mutiny. If not for us, he would have stayed what he was before. . . ."

Adrian shook his head and frowned. "An uptight, Victorian yuppie. At least he died a man." Cora sputtered as if this logic wasn't enough by a long stretch.

Emily took another step to the top rung. Mutiny? She furrowed her brow tight. Somehow, she'd misunderstood what they were reading. Maybe it was all caused by the heat—her air-conditioning unit had been unreliable lately, leaving her with only a fan in 98-degree heat.

Cora maneuvered her round body back and forth between the Tucson history section and Emily's collection of antique maps. She folded her hands on her stomach. By the look of her, her child's due date had to be in days. "I cannot believe that General Davis is considered a hero. That man had no scruples. I am sure he was behind that evil gunfighter Tradman's actions. . . . And he wanted to hang you, too."

Adrian stood motionless, watching his wife pace. His dark face formed an even darker glower. "Recorded history doesn't appear to be terribly accurate."

Emily listened in disbelief. They spoke in low voices, so she doubted they were sent to her as a joke. And there was no doubting the authenticity of their emotions—which meant they were both crazy. Emily eyed Cora's round stomach. This didn't bode well for their unborn child's future.

Cora and Adrian fell silent. Cora rested her head on Adrian's shoulder as he stroked her hair. Emily watched them, and a deep longing rose in her heart. To feel loved, protected, by a man who shared her dreams, her heart. . . . Of course, Cora appeared to be a romantic woman, able to

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touch a man's heart, and hold it. Though Emily had once believed that she, too, was capable of inspiring love, she had learned—or been taught—that it wasn't so.

Maybe Cora had found the secret, after all—find a man as crazy as you are.

There is no point in wanting what you can't have. Emily wasn't a romantic woman, but she was bright and inquisitive, and Cora's bizarre claims interested her. She leaned closer.

Cora drew back and looked at her husband. Her face twisted to one side as if she were scheming. The look on Adrian's face indicated he recognized the expression, and feared it.

"Cora. . . ."

"We have to do something. We owe that to Captain Woodward. If not for him, we'd be—heaven knows where. You'd be dead, your people would have been massacred, and I would be lost in time without you."

"What we do in the past might alter the future."

"Nothing happened because of our trip, Adrian."

He hesitated. "That was us, Cora. We're sane, normal people. Darian Woodward is another matter entirely."

Emily's skin felt suddenly cold. There was something innately terrifying about eavesdropping on crazy people. She started to ease back, but the ladder creaked, and she held herself motionless. *Maya the Bee* slipped to one side, and she caught it before it could fall to the floor.

Cora stood up, closed the book, and looked her nervous husband straight in the eye. "We have to go back and save him."

Adrian clasped her shoulders, "Cora, we barely escaped the past with our lives. You are not going back, not when you carry our child inside you." He kissed her forehead, and from her slumped shoulders, Emily knew Cora had conceded.

Adrian closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. "The

Blue-Eyed Bandit

captain's fate is my doing—I will go back and set it right."

"Not without me, you won't! Adrian. . . ." True fear resonated in Cora's voice and she clasped his arm. "They wanted to kill you. They will kill you. Your father said so. You'll end up in this book right beside Darian."

Darian. They spoke the desperado's name with love. Why, Emily couldn't imagine. If he had been a bandit, his real goal must have been money, and engrandizing his own ego. Not a very romantic motivation.

Cora nestled into her husband's arms, protected and loved. Seeing them, Emily realized how truly alone she was, how much her heart had dreamed of loving this way, and how empty it had been as those dreams drifted from her grasp. She closed her eyes and saw herself, standing alone at the door of her first apartment, waiting for a man who would never return. She remembered opening an attorney's letter and reading formal words—the exact moment when she realized she had been a fool, that she never would be truly lovable, truly loved. . . .

"There has to be another way." Cora sniffed, brushing away tears. "If you can't go back, and I can't . . . we'll just have to find someone else to do it instead."

Adrian didn't appear hopeful, and Emily could see why. "That won't be easy, Cora. Who would we ask?"

"My friend Jenny? She's adventurous."

"And she just got engaged to Davis Sprague, in case you've forgotten. I don't think that stuffed-shirt accountant would look too favorably on his fiancée trekking back in time."

"I suppose they wouldn't believe us."

"There is that little problem, too."

Emily closed her eyes. They were planning to talk someone into going back in time! Yes, there might be a bit of difficulty finding someone crazy enough to take them up on *that* offer.

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Cora tapped her lip thoughtfully. "It would have to be someone very brave, someone who knows history enough to fit in."

Adrian's brow angled. "Someone with a damned good imagination."

Cora ran her fingers idly along the spine of the antique books. "It's so unfair. Darian Woodward was the kindest man I've ever known. This book has to be wrong. I can't imagine him terrorizing Tucson."

Adrian chuckled. "I can imagine him lecturing the inhabitants until they turned blue and died of boredom, but not terrorizing, no."

"He was such a good man—handsome, and brave, and so noble. I just can't believe he could have met such a bitter ending."

Handsome, brave. Noble. Emily sighed, too. No, they don't make men like that anymore. She thought of Ian, her first and only lover. She had believed in him utterly—but she had been so young, and so trusting. She hadn't been able to see beyond his handsome face and his boyish charm. There had to be more in a man than sweet words and a pretty face.

Darian Woodward sounded noble—not a man likely to pretend to love a woman, share deepest secrets, then abandon her without a trace. Emily caught herself. *I have to stop comparing every man, even long-dead ones, to Ian Hallowell.* He was gone, and she would never see him again. She had trusted him with everything.

She would never trust anyone that way again.

Cora picked up the history book and read it quietly again. She closed her eyes as if in prayer, and tears dripped to her cheeks. "Darian saw so much pain during the war, he had lost so much. He was so young. He hadn't *lived*."

Emily's heart moved at Cora's description. It was touching, fiction or not. A brave, young soldier, noble

Blue-Eyed Bandit

and strong. . . . Emily clamped her hand to her forehead—this strange couple must be the two most talented actors that ever lived. She was listening to their story as if it was fact, not the fiction she knew it was. Maybe they were authors working out a plot. How they would laugh if they knew she overheard them, and absorbed their emotions as her own!

Adrian took the book and set it aside. "I hope he wasn't still a virgin when they hanged him."

Noble, brave, and . . . *a virgin*? The ladder toppled back, then forward. Emily braced herself on the bookcase. It crashed. She crashed, too, facedown at Cora and Adrian's feet. She peeked up. "He was a virgin?"

They both nodded, eyebrows tilted in equal surprise. Neither spoke. Emily cleared her throat, adjusted her long braid back over her shoulder, then sat up. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to eavesdrop. . . ." Her face warmed—it was so obvious that she had been eavesdropping in the worst way.

Cora and Adrian looked at each other. An eager smile formed on Cora's lips. Adrian reached for Emily's hand and helped her up. "You're the owner of this shop, aren't you?"

Emily tried to regain her poise, and felt foolish. "I'm Emily Morgan, yes." She looked around at the scattered books. "I've worked hard to build this place up. I have the best collection of children's books in Tucson, and the local history section is the finest in Arizona."

Cora moved to her side and touched her arm. She seemed eager. "We know—that's why we came here. We live in Scottsdale, you see, and we've been trying to find out what happened to some. . . ." She eyed her husband.

Adrian hesitated, then shrugged. "Old friends."

Emily looked between them. "I thought I must have misunderstood. . . ."

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Cora seized Emily's arm and helped her from the pile of books. She glanced hopefully at Adrian. "What do you think? Would she work?"

Emily shook her head violently. "No. No, I would not 'work.' Don't even *think* it!"

Adrian hesitated, assessing her with a critical eye. "Ever done any adventure training?"

Emily bit her lip. She felt as if she were being tested, with a poor likelihood of passing the exam. "Not exactly. But I was born in Arizona. I know my way around."

"Mountain climbing?"

"No. . . . I've hiked."

Adrian looked disapproving. Emily hated the sense of failure, the feeling she didn't quite measure up in some way. She'd felt that way for years, but for these two crazy people to judge her. . . . "I know martial arts!"

He appeared even more dubious as he assessed her. "You're kidding?"

Emily frowned. "Look, I might not exactly be tall or big-boned, but neither was Bruce Lee!"

His dark brow arched. "What form of martial arts did you study?"

She hesitated, not remembering the exact term. She'd only taken a few lessons and flubbed rather badly in a very short time. "It was kind of . . . kickboxing."

"Ah. What belt were you?"

She closed her eyes. "Yellow."

Adrian repressed a smile and Cora offered a commiserating sigh. "Adrian is a black belt, in several forms. He tried to teach me, but I didn't do it very well. I admire you for trying."

Emily decided she liked Cora, who seemed to believe in her abilities despite any actual evidence of prowess.

Adrian, however, didn't appear convinced. "Can you ride?"

"Yes." She hesitated, struggling with her conscience.