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Author of
PROMISES
FROM THE
PAST

Windmills In June

EHM

Handwriting in Game

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FEED A FEVER

From where she sat in the grass, Sarah looked at Jesse, her upturned mouth poised to ask her next question. She must have read the answer in his eyes, for the unspoken words melted from her lips, vanishing into an expression of childlike wonder.

Beneath her fleeting look of confusion, he saw a beauty her recent illness couldn't hide, a depth of emotion as appealing as the first dawn. He leaned toward her, the sun's warmth on his face no match for the fever burning inside of him.

Starve a fever, the folk remedy went. Or was it feed a fever? He was starving all right.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, feeling her curves beneath his fingers as he drew her near. This wasn't the innocent schoolgirl he'd had a crush on his whole life. This was a woman through whose eyes he was beginning to see his whole world anew.

She gazed up at him, her fingers clutching his arm, her ragged breathing mirroring his hunger. Every ounce of common sense he possessed warned him to run like hell.

He traced the soft angles around her mouth with his thumb and felt her quiver beneath his touch. *Feed* a fever, he heard echoing in his brain. He wasn't sure he was thinking straight, but it sounded right to him. She'd soon be well...and so would he.

She tilted her mouth up to welcome his, and then it was too late to change his mind. He pressed his mouth to hers and heard a soft moan escape her lips as she returned the kiss.

Other *Love Spell* books by Victoria Bruce:
PROMISES FROM THE PAST

*To Georgia Nelms, who first introduced me to the romantic
timelessness of the Nebraska Sand Hills.*

*Many Thanks to:
Barbara Benedict, Angie Ray, Sandra (Paul) Chvostal, and
Colleen Adams, who keep me writing.*

Windmills
In June

Prologue

Nebraska Sand Hills, 1887

Jesse Colburn flipped his frayed collar up against the falling temperature and, looking up at ominous black clouds, nudged his horse into a canter on a road nearly washed out by the last rain. The weather wouldn't hold. And he didn't care to be soaked to the skin after an already miserable day of cooling his heels at the bank.

Hat in hand, he'd met with the bank president, Lindsey Seymour, about a loan. Seymour had hemmed and hawed, spouting stock phrases about bank procedures and final loan approvals as if they were a creed. Then he'd finally swallowed with an Adam's apple so large it barely fit inside his high starched collar, and said he'd prefer to

postpone the transaction—especially seeing as Mr. Morgan, Chairman of the Board, was away for ten days selling cattle in Ogallala.

Jesse had left empty-handed, but he wasn't finished with Lindsey yet. He needed the money or he'd have no crops come spring.

Slowing Sage to a trot, he surveyed the devastation along the side of the road and swore under his breath. Last month, John Morgan's cattle had broken through a weak section of his fence and destroyed his corn and wheat. As greedy as the old man himself, the animals hadn't been satisfied with ravaging his ripening crops. Like scavengers come to pick his bones clean, they had trampled his garden too, systematically devouring the table crops he'd planned to live on through the winter. Now he'd have to repair the damage to the fence and hope it was enough to keep them out when he planted again.

As he came up over the rise, his thoughts were interrupted by a wagon blocking the road, one of its wheels lodged in a rut. Old man Morgan and his ranch hands were the only others who regularly traveled this stretch of the Sand Hills. Except for Sarah Morgan. Not that Morgan's daughter would choose a lumbering hay wagon when she had her pick of sleek black buggies.

Jesse rode up to the stranded cart and noticed a still form huddled next to the wheel, a cloak covering the body. A bloodless hand clutched the hub. He swore again, dreading having come upon

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someone who'd fallen ill on such a lonely stretch of road.

He hunkered down next to the wagon and lifted the edge of the cloak, exposing a richly embroidered skirt stained with bright red blood. The woman gripped her crimson-streaked belly as desperately as she clung to the wagon. Peeling back the hood of the cape, he uncovered the ashen face of Sarah Morgan, her drawn features sending a shaft of fear through him that made his own troubles wax pale.

"Sarah," he said hoarsely. "It's Jesse Colburn. What's wrong? Did you have an accident?"

She shook her head, the motion nearly imperceptible. "The baby," she murmured.

She opened her eyelids and looked at him, her big brown eyes reminding him of the frightened little girl he'd befriended in first grade.

"What baby?" She was the only woman of child-bearing age on the nearby ranch. Seeing her weakened condition and the blood, he hoped there was another explanation. Twenty-five and unmarried, Sarah was John Morgan's only daughter, the one thing Morgan worshiped more than his land.

"My baby. . . ." She struggled to sit up, only to collapse back into his arms, her eyelids fluttering and then closing in a way that chilled him to the bone.

The magnitude of the situation pressed down on him like the impending storm, and he wished he were still sweating under the critical eye of Lindsey Seymour. Long before Morgan had begun try-

ing to grab up all the land he could buy—including the Colburn property—Jesse had felt protective of the man's daughter. But if she'd gotten herself pregnant, there'd be no helping her. Morgan's rage would know no bounds. From the looks of her slim waist, she couldn't be far along. Perhaps she had a fever and was hallucinating.

The nearest doctor was at least ten miles away. He couldn't leave her here alone, and it would take too long to dig out the wagon and drive her there. The comfort of her father's house, and her own bed, was still three miles ahead.

"What am I going to do with you, Sarah?" he whispered, knowing she couldn't hear him. "If I make the wrong choice, it could cost you your life."

He'd been making his own decisions since he was fourteen, and he'd learned that once you made them, you couldn't look back. Covering her again with her cloak, Jesse lifted Sarah in his arms and carried her to his horse. Straining every muscle, he managed to mount with her in his grasp, the reins tied over Sage's neck.

Her sod house was the closest shelter. He wished he had a better place to leave her while he went to get the doctor. Everyone knew that the hovel Morgan had built for his daughter was just so she could homestead the place in name only, leaving him to claim the land as his own.

Still, there wasn't time to be particular. It would have to do. He'd take her there and then bring back Doc Mabe. If the doctor were sober, the

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choice would prove a wise one. But if he'd been on a week-long bender . . .

Well then, Jesse would have the blood of another woman on his hands, and old man Morgan would have one more reason to try and make his life a living hell.

Chapter One

Surrounded by the written legacies of ten thousand men and women, Dierdre Brown expectantly curled up in an antique leather chair with one of the rare-book store's latest arrivals, an 1887 diary from the Sand Hills of Nebraska. Three years ago she'd been hired to authenticate and catalogue the late Samuel Vanderbrief's massive collection of rare books. Mr. Vanderbrief had been an eccentric collector, buying entire estate libraries—sight unseen—and hoarding the more than 80,000 volumes in a climate-controlled vault beneath his nineteenth-century mansion on Long Island Sound. Dierdre had always thought it sad that until his death, the only other person permitted to see the books had been his son, Sam, Jr.

Sam had apparently thought so, too, for almost

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immediately after hiring her, he'd opened a museum over the bookstore where anyone, whether of means or not, could view the priceless first editions and century-old manuscripts—all under glass, of course. As soon as she catalogued each new lot of books unearthed from the vault, Sam sent his favorites home to the austere library on the Vanderbrief estate, culled a few of the rarest finds for the museum, and advertised the rest to the bookstore's most discriminating collectors.

Dierdre pulled on a pair of acid-free cotton gloves and opened the diary. Manuscripts from pioneers who'd settled the prairies would never find their way into Sam's museum, or even into his private library, but to her the stoic personal accounts of untamed life on the Great Plains were just as precious as the valuable first editions.

She'd authenticated hundreds of such journals, and found them all unique in some way. Yet, from the moment Dierdre had spied the halting, almost childlike signature on the flyleaf of the delicately bound journal, she'd felt an unusual connection to its author, a pioneer named Sarah Morgan.

As strange as it may seem, the woman wrote, I believe that life must surely hold something more than hostessing and needlework for an unmarried woman of twenty-five. Having no one else in which to confide, I can only reveal my unconventional feelings within the uncensored forum of my journal.

The fan squeaked overhead, its blades throwing shadows across the mahogany paneling, the sound of its protesting gears echoing through the

two-story-high reading room. Heat strong enough to peel the smell of summer right off of the concrete rose from the Manhattan sidewalks outside, but Dierdre only had eyes for the story unfolding on the weathered sheafs of paper before her. As a historian, she considered the fact that someone would actually pay her to read a work of art like this a lucky bonus. Had she not needed the income, she would have done it for free.

Sarah's halting script was ornamented with tiny loops and swirls, hinting at fanciful dreams which she had probably never achieved. She had been young for her twenty-five years—at least it seemed that way to Dierdre. She'd spent the bulk of her years isolated on a large cattle ranch in Nebraska. And as was not unusual for a woman during those times, she'd been dominated by the man in her life, her father.

She'd also been pregnant out of wedlock, her reputation facing certain ruin. Dierdre pushed her horn-rimmed glasses higher on her nose, immersed in the woman's touching account of her predicament. Even as her first maternal instincts awakened within her, Sarah had lived in fear of what her father would do when he found out.

Twenty-seven-year-old Dierdre closed her eyes, trying to imagine how she would feel in the girl's place. It wasn't difficult. Although Sarah had been beside herself with worry at the prospect, Dierdre had always longed to have a baby of her own. Diagnosed with a unique seizure disorder, she'd