

Copyright © 2002 Doranna Durgin
CHANGESPELL LEGACY ISBN 0-7434-3544-3
This sample chapter may be freely
distributed in its entirety

CHANGESPELL LEGACY
Chapter One
by Doranna Durgin

Arlen meant to be home before now.

With the Lorakan mountains looming on the western skyline to remind him just how much land lay between here and Anfeald, he calculated the distance to the nearest travel booth versus the time before Jaime's next visit.

He wasn't going to make it.

From one world to another she would come, from Ohio on Earth to Anfeald in Camolen, and she'd find him. . .

Absent.

Not that anyone would be able to tell her why--not Carey, his close friend and head courier, who thought Arlen attended the special field calling of the Council of Wizards in Siccawei. Not his two apprentices, who thought the same. Not the Council itself, with a renewed emphasis of confidentiality after the events of the previous summer, the rogue wizards and their mage lure-enhanced powers run amok in Camolen with far too many people chatting about the particulars.

They'd overcome that trial--Arlen and Jaime, Carey and Jess, and Dayna, ever twiddling with her forbidden raw magic on the sly. It had been more the others than Arlen himself, who'd found himself hampered by his adherence to Council strictures and then by recovery from a long-distance blow dealt by an embellished and revengeful wizard.

The thought of it made him wince. Without the mage lure, Willand would never have been able to touch him. And even knowing she'd had it. . .

Well, he'd underestimated her.

But those *others*--his friends--armed more with determination and wits than conventional magic--had taught the Council a lesson about going pro-active. About shaking off the strictures of their endless debates to choose *action*--even to the point of taking to a trail in Siccawei without him.

So here Arlen stood, gazing at the moonrise over the mountains with three layers of heartland jackets over his Jaime-gifted silken long underwear and OSU sweatshirt and a blanket from the road inn wrapped tightly around his shoulders on top of it, his breath frosting the air and riming his thick grey-shot mustache. A porch board creaked under his foot as he shifted his weight, reminding him of the need for quiet with an inn full of grouchy winter travelers at his back.

He could send a spell message through the wizard's Dispatch service, but that would only reveal his location to the alert and nervous Mage Lure-runners he'd come here to thwart. They had reason for their nerves--the old border guard spells against them had worked once, and with the study he'd done this past week, they'd soon work again.

But not until he made it home. Back to warmer Anfeald in south-central Camolen, to the winter-burnt pastures and hills, the turned-over garden fields, the deep-honed respect for his wizard's power from the Anfeald's landers and the casual irreverence from Carey in spite of it. And Jaime. Commuting between worlds, rearranging her life and her life's work to spend nearly half her time here with him. In another day she'd be sitting in the rocker by the thick-silled open window of his personal rooms, one spell heating the room and another keeping the heat from escaping. She'd have the old black and white cat on her lap while the young calico male tried to impress her with his antics and

headstands.

But she'd be waiting for him. Wondering, perhaps worrying, probably annoyed on top of it all.

Like most powerful wizards, Arlen rarely pulled himself up into a saddle. Mage travel with transfer booths, town coaches, shoe leather. . . they all came more easily. Even so. . . in the morning, he'd see about securing a horse, one to get him to the nearest transfer booth three townlets down the road in Amses.

Jaime would be waiting. And for once, the rest of Camolen rested quietly around him.

#

Branches warped and oozed, merging into one another. Winter-flattened ground cover of fall leaves compressed into a blanket over the earth and melted into the roots of the tree, swirled old golds and dulled crimsons into silvery bark to obscure the small den-hole there.

An uneasy ground squirrel bolted for that hole.

Half the squirrel made it home. Rich brown fur merged into the red-gold-silver patch where its life ended, following twisted eddies of matter.

Hoofbeats sounded in the cold winter air. Dun mare, deep buckskin with black points, a black line down her spine, and wiser eyes than most. Alone, unhindered save for the padded leather girth and chest band holding a courier's pouch over her withers, she pranced to a stop, sampling the air with widened nostrils and the raised neck of a wary posture, alert for movement, for scent, for something on which to pin her attention. To define the *wrongness* she felt here.

After a moment, she snorted and moved on, her equine vision unable to perceive the frozen patch of distortion by the side of the trail. Too still, too close for her to see out of that eye without at that angle.

With a flick of her tail, Dun Lady's Jess left the birth of death and destruction behind her, and never knew it was there at all.

Chapter 2

Suliya swept the main aisle of Anfeald Stables, using more energy on resentment than she did on the chore itself. She should have been out on a courier run today, burn it all, and here she was doing clean-up chores instead. Inspecting stalls, re-wrapping bandages, mixing a warm winter mash. . . and sweeping up the inevitable clots of mud, melting ice chunks, and wasted hay. Half the day's horses were still out, slowed by the roads despite seasonal spells meant to clear them. No doubt their riders were wind-chilled and stiff and more than ready to return home, but Suliya longed to have been one of them. The only rider making fewer runs out of Anfeald than she was Carey--and everyone knew he had to keep his schedule light because of the wizard-inflicted damage he'd taken a year and a half earlier.

Suliya was the last of the couriers hired to rebuild the stable after that summer, and initially she'd counted it a rare opportunity. Anfeald's reputation was spotless, their horses impeccably bred and trained. Working here meant the opportunity to watch Jaime Cabot apply her unique Earth riding theory--and to watch others take lessons under her, a bonus earned by the top-performing couriers. Working here meant being in Arlen's hold, and Arlen's reputation as a man of power had risen considerably these past few years. Working here meant being one of the best.

If she ever got the chance.

Her father hadn't believed she would. . . that she could. "Try one of the

smaller barns," he'd advised her, even upon showing her the trail. "Someplace they might tolerate your lack of discipline." She hadn't believed it of him--that he'd truly reach the end of his patience. That he'd truly withdraw his support. Not the SpellForge head chair, so full of his public image.

At three years old, she'd wandered his giant work suite unchecked. At ten, she sat in on meetings, met her tutor's requirements, took riding lessons, and charmed everyone she met. By sixteen she was bored and jaded and knew the best way to reclaim her family's distant attention was to act out in all ways.

And at nineteen her father overrode her mother and did what she'd never believed possible.

He kicked her out.

Not without money in her pocket, but without direction, without--other than the ability to ride--discernable worldly skills.

But with a goal. She'd show him he was wrong. She could find her own success, make her own way. *If she ever got the chance.* If Carey ever took her seriously.

She shoved the broom over the cobbled floors--spelled so the horses wouldn't slip, just as spells kept the under-mountain stables supplied with constantly circulating air and made sure the cistern-stored water stayed fresh--and considered the reason she was sweeping and not riding. Sweeping and not proving her worth to Anfeald and Carey.

Carey's girlfriend, that was why.

Carey's girlfriend, who'd decided to move from Kymmet Stables to Anfeald, arriving only a moon's span after Suliya herself. If it weren't for Jess, Suliya was certain she'd have been moved up from her entry-level position to something more meaningful, maybe even to a junior courier. But Jess had arrived, taking on the training of the young horses, taking on the occasional run, making Suliya more of a backup rider than anything else.

And leaving her sweeping the aisles.

The sound of raucous laughter echoed down the hall from the job room at the back of the stall aisle; four of the couriers were back for the day, drinking hot tea and warming themselves over exaggerations of their past exploits. Envy tugged Suliya, but she couldn't blame them for her situation. They'd all been here before her, some of them since the summer Carey was hurt and everyone else had been killed. Still. . .

She wished she didn't feel so left out. Or that she even knew how to join in.

At that choice moment, one of the massive front doors eased open, making way before the rising night wind. "Ay!" Suliya exclaimed, jumping to get her broom placed over the pile of sweepings--but not quickly enough. As a dun mare walked into the stable, the swept hay scattered along the length of the aisle and settled back into the corners from which it had come. A lone dun mare, elegant even in her winter coat, ice on her whiskers and the back of her fetlocks, ice weighting the end of her tail, and a unique harness carrying a bulging courier's pouch just behind her withers.

Carey's girlfriend.

Suliya glared at the mare unnoticed as she ran to shut the door, securing it with its own weight behind the slight bump in the floor, just enough to keep it there until the next courier returned home. The dun--Lady, they called her, when she was her horse self--stopped in the middle of the aisle, shook vigorously, and lifted her head with perked ears to scent the air.

"He's not here," Suliya said brusquely, taking a hank of the dun's mane up behind her ears and giving a slight tug. Lady's spellstones clinked dully there, sewn into several braids. With them, she could return to the woman Jess, but not here in the middle of the aisle. There was a special stall set aside for the transformation, where Jess kept a change of clothes and which Anfeald used as a

mid-aisle storage stall.

Lady hesitated at the Suliya's tug--not surprisingly, since they'd moved the stall only days earlier, swapping it out with another in order to separate two horses who'd taken to kicking at each other. But Suliya gave another tug, perhaps not as gently as she might have, and Lady followed her--into the wrong stall.

Suliya realized it immediately. But something wicked spoke within her, something tied to her resentments and envy. She slid the stall door closed without latching it and walked away.

After a moment, Lady sorted out the situation--wrong stall, no clothing waiting here--and gave a short, sharp snort of annoyed objection.

Suliya went back to her sweeping. Let Lady change to Jess where she was; Suliya would bring her clothing when she was asked. And then maybe someone would notice that she existed at all.

She couldn't feel the magic when Lady changed to Jess--few of the couriers had that kind of sensitivity--but she heard a difference in the way the stall bedding rustled, and knew it had been done. She kept a sharp ear out for Jess's request as she dumped her recaptured hay sweepings into the waste bin.

Instead, after a long, considering silence, the door slid open; Suliya turned to see Jess step out into the aisle without a stitch of clothing, the courier harness dangling from one hand. Barefooted on the cold cobbles, she gave no sign of discomfort--or embarrassment--as she headed for the correct door, two stalls down. She appeared not to notice Suliya's near-gaping consternation, nor the appearance and startled reaction of two grooms from a stall at the far end where they'd been re-leveling the floor.

She carried herself with absent dignity, and she was beautiful--long lean legs and flanks, erect carriage, masses of dark sand hair spilling down her smooth caramel back with a strikingly black centerline the longest section of all,

echoed in a faint dark line down her spine. Suliya was struck by the feeling that this was the first time she'd actually--truly--seen the woman. Seen that she was so human. . . and so obviously not.

As Suliya stood frozen with the broom in her hands, she heard Carey's cheerfully teasing call to the two grooms--coming from within the hold, he could see nothing but their stupified expressions. He walked around the corner into the aisle just in time to see Jess disappear into her stall. Even from the middle of the aisle, Suliya could see his eyebrows shoot up to disappear behind the uncontrolled fall of his dark blond forelock. Without hesitation, he came on.

For a moment, Suliya held out the hope that he'd aimed himself for Jess. . . but a few strides told her otherwise. Slightly uneven strides, another leftover from the summer that had torn through these stables, but otherwise the perfect image of a courier rider. Tall enough and substantial enough to hold the strength for rough, long rides, lean enough to keep unnecessary weight off the horses' backs. And experienced enough to run Anfeald stables in spite of his relative youth--Morley, head of the Siccawei Stables, was nearly fifty. Carey struck Suliya as a hard thirty.

Suliya, at just under twenty, intended to be running her own stable by his age as well. Or earlier.

But as he approached, she winced inside; thinking of his reputation, the things that had gained him this post several years earlier. Uncompromising standards. An eye for detail. And the willingness to do what had to be done, no matter what it was, to accomplish the job before him--be it delivering a message or saving Arlen's life.

He wasn't likely to offer quarter to the lowliest of his couriers.

Then again, she'd only made a mistake. Nothing more.

"What," he said, nodding his head at Jess's stall, "was that all about?"

Fess up. Fess up now. "I must have put Lady in the wrong stall. We just

changed them--"

He gave her a look, one that expressed his protective annoyance--but he didn't berate her about leaving Jess to walk naked from one stall to another, recognizing that she might have only just now realized the mistake.

Then again, he knew Jess best. Maybe *he* would have anticipated her decision to stroll from one stall to the other. Suliya certainly hadn't.

Carey turned for the stall, but stopped as Jess emerged from it, clothed from head to toe in winter layers--a deep green tall-neck weave under a brilliant turquoise, magic-hued sweater, the color offsetting the naturally, permanently tanned shade of her skin to perfection. Her hair was still wind-tossed, her cheeks still flushed, and the courier harness now settled over her shoulder like a natural extension of her clothes. She stopped once to wriggle a foot more comfortably into its ankle boot; she often fussed with her shoes, and just as often went barefoot within the warmth of the hold itself.

"What happened to that famous horse's memory of yours?" Carey said, his voice teasing as he held out a hand for the harness. "And how was the run?"

Jess shrugged the harness off her shoulder and handed it to him. "This is my first run since the stalls changed," she said, glancing at Suliya with larger than normal, walnut brown eyes. More perceptive than normal, too, it seemed to Suliya at that moment. She tossed her head in a minute gesture, one Suliya had seen often in the mares at paddock. "You," she said, "will not take advantage of my good nature as Lady."

"I don't understand," Suliya said, afraid that she did. She abruptly and sincerely regretted the wicked impulse that had allowed her to close the wrong stall door and walk away, for she wasn't accustomed to any of it--the envy, the bitterness, the impulses. . . and it occurred to her on the spot that someone used to pulling spiteful little pranks would have had a quick covering comment at the ready.

Suliya didn't. For Suliya was simply too accustomed to doing as she pleased without being called on it--or caring if she was.

"You *do* understand," Jess said. Despite almost two years of human experience, she still handled the junction of vowel and consonant with an awkwardness of tongue--never quite stumbling over the words, but often giving the impression she might. "Going to the stall may have been a mistake. Closing the door wasn't. If I had been human, I could have hesitated at the stall without breaking rules. I could have refused to go in. I could have pushed my way out before you closed the door. When I am a horse, Carey's people trust me to do none of those things. And I trust them to treat me honestly." Her eye flashed annoyance. "If you cannot do that, you will not handle me as Lady again."

Carey's hands paused at the pouch fastener. "Braveheart--it was a mistake."

Jess didn't reply. . . but she didn't remove her gaze from Suliya's.

It wasn't a gaze Suliya could hold, not when she realized she'd done more with her simple impulse than put a woman in the position of asking for her clothes. She'd broken a trust. And from a horse's point of view, trust was everything. She dropped her gaze to the gleam of the cobbles. "I'll make sure it never happens again," she said, struggling with unfamiliar capitulation.

In response, Jess merely said, "Yes," and somehow managed to encompass a plethora of unsaid words. Most of all, Suliya heard the threat to her position here. Surely not. . . not over such a small thing.

A small thing like *trust*. . .

Carey cleared his throat, taking Jess's unwavering gaze from Suliya; Suliya couldn't stop a sigh of relief. "And how," Carey said, "was the run?"

Jess said, "You are changing the subject."

He grinned, unrepentant; he had a lean face and a long jaw, prone to intensity and sternness of expression; the grin turned it light, made him from

someone who often intimidated Suliya into the man with whom she often saw the other couriers joking. "I'm changing the subject," he agreed, his words no more repentant than his grin.

Jess thought about it a moment, and nodded. "Siccawei was right--part of the river bank caved in. I couldn't have made it with a rider on my back."

Neither could any other horse, she meant.

Suliya's trickle of resentment returned. If *she'd* been the rider--and she would have been, had Jess not intervened--she was certain she could have made it. The run to Siccawei was a tough one in bad weather, but most of the couriers made more of it than it was. And in this case, the run had been to a small new sub-hold that Sherra had established to let some of her apprentices explore--*carefully*--the use of raw magic. Out between Siccawei hold and Anfeald, making the run shorter than normal; easier than normal. Carey often used it as a drop-off for less time-dependent documents.

"That bad?" Carey said, flipping through the papers from the pouch. He glanced at Suliya and she pulled her thoughts from her face, suddenly realizing that she didn't really belong in this conversation any more, but finding it all too awkward to simply walk away from them at this point.

"Bad," Jess said. "Arlen should tell Sherra we can't make any more runs until a road team fixes it."

"Bad, then," Carey agreed.

"If a road team goes out there, maybe they can do something about the whole thing," Suliya said, referring to the dangerous part of the dry river bank, where it narrowed to a rough path skirting the river. "Some kind of bridge or something, so we don't have to go around."

Jess looked at her with honest shock. "That would take away the fun of it!"

"Fun?" Carey said, and grinned again. "Don't know that I'd call it *that*, Jess. Not for the rest of us. But there is a certain. . . challenge. A nice change of

pace."

Suliya looked away, wishing she'd just kept silent. . . and thinking it still seemed like a good idea.

"Dayna is well," Jess said suddenly, and smiled. "She is rolling her eyes about how timid the others are."

Carey snorted. "I think they're just there to slow her down--Sherra's no dummy. Dayna doesn't have the advantage of growing up with her parents whispering the horrors of raw magic in her ears."

"Disadvantage?" Jess said, frowning.

"Advantage," Carey said firmly. "She's never been frightened away from using it." He jammed the papers back into the pouch and tucked the tangle of leather under his arm to hold the other hand out to Jess. "C'mon. Natt and Cesna are waiting for these, as little as they'll be able to do with them until Arlen gets back from the Council gathering. And Jaime's coming early tomorrow--you wanted to make sure the housekeeper had things set to rights in Arlen's rooms, didn't you?"

Jess stood visibly straighter at the mention of Jaime's arrival, brushing hay off her sweater as though Jaime were coming any moment. One hand found her hair; she made a face. "Groom this?"

Carey laughed. "C'mon. You might just talk me into it." His open hand still waited; he wiggled the fingers.

Jess took the hand, and bumped her hip against his in a teasing way--but gently, as if ever aware of his old injuries. Carey lifted their joined hands to Suliya by way of a parting gesture, and she stood in the middle of the aisle with her broom, watching them head for the job room, heads tipping slightly closer as Jess murmured something that made Carey laugh out loud. "Later," he said easily, as if he'd grown used to and easy with some of the outrageous things Jess could say.

Suliya and her broom and her bitter envy. She could have made that run, she knew it. She could be one of them. But she wasn't sure they'd ever give her the chance.

#

In a northern precinct of Camolen, frigid water lapping the edge of a lake suddenly became solid, and then grew tiny, brittle stalagmites that wove together and spired toward the sky. Just over the Lorakans, along an ancient trade road into Solvany, solid rock dribbled down along the side of the craggy mountain, revealing a hibernating burrowdog just long enough for melting rock above to impale and merge with it, killing it in its sleep.

South of Anfeald, a road team scout headed for the unexpected mud slide by the dry river bed and never made it. His partner returned with a babbled story about swirling leaves, melting trees, the hind parts of a ground squirrel sticking out of solid ground, and of a man lost to the astonishing explosion of a nearby bush, wood turned to sharp-edged metallic shrapnel.

She bore the wounds to back up her story. Wounds with shrapnel made of twisted metal hazel bush bark.

<<<<<<>>>>>