



Opal

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

Dakotah Territory, May 1886

"Well now, ain't that a purty sight?"

Opal Torvald heard the ribald words through river water in her ears and a haze of dreams in her heart as she floated on the gentle current of the Little Missouri River in her chemise and bloomers. Buoyed by the water, cat-contented by the sun, she was drifting along in a state of bliss. The words and intrusion took a heartbeat or two to register. It was a man's voice, a strange man's voice, and she was next to naked. Or at least in a manner of dishabille that would bring out the caustic side of her sister's tongue. Besides attracting unwanted attention.

Sometimes ignoring danger made it go away.

And sometimes it just got worse. Like now.

Fighting the urge to scream and run, she slitted her eyes open just enough to catch an outline of the man against the sun. She was well enough away from the shore that she could swim, then run to the western bank. However, her clothes were on the eastern bank. As was the man, not to be labeled a gentleman, for a true gentleman would have kept his back turned or would have ridden on by without comment.

Nor could the term gentlewoman be applied to her, nor lady, for no female under those terms would have been swimming in the river without either someone to stand guard or a bevy of other females in attendance.

She had thought of going in without even the benefit of thin cotton between her skin and the river water. But there was one count in her favor. She'd opted for decency—sort of.

Who was he, anyway? She considered various ranch hands she knew from the area, or the men in Medora who were still building for Marquis de Mores. Oh no. What about former visitors to Dove House, the hotel she and Ruby had inherited years earlier that had burned to a trash heap after a lightning strike?

No one came to mind. The man wore a hat she would have remembered had she seen it before. One side of the flat brim was pinned up to the crown, not a very practical method of protecting one's face and neck from the elements. Protection was the purpose of the wide-brimmed felt hats worn by so many out here in the badlands of Dakotah Territory. The crown was shaped differently too. She noticed all this while trying to decide what to do next.

Why did he have to come and spoil her unexpected break from school? She had truly felt sick when she told Mr. Finch she needed to head on home while she could still make it. Her head had been pounding like stampeding cattle, and she'd felt hot. His droning voice hadn't helped the headache any, nor did the antipathy she'd begun to feel toward the classroom. Ruby might call it spring fever, but after saddling Bay and heading toward home, the river had been singing her name. Headache and heat, two things that might be cured by a dip in the still-cold-from-spring-runoff river.

A dip had turned to a float, and now she was caught by something worse than a swift eddy.

As unobtrusively as possible, hands fluttering at her sides, she stroked toward the western shore. Any moment she should be able to touch bottom. If the hot weather continued, the river would drop quickly, but right here was a pool that stayed fairly deep year round.

"Hey, missy, you comin' on out and showing off what you tryin' to hide?" His laugh made shivers chase up and down her spine. Suddenly the water felt so cold her teeth started to chatter. "You can't get away, so forget the other bank. I got your horse and clothes right here."

I can give you a mean run for your money, you rattlesnake, you.

He rode his horse closer to the water's edge. "My, my, what a sight for sore eyes."

Going to be a lot sorer before you get what you're thinking on.

The horse put his head down for a drink. The man crossed his arms on the saddle horn.

She could feel his leer clear down to her toes that finally felt bottom. At least he could no longer see anything but her head. Water ran down her face, so she smoothed her hair back out of her eyes. She should have left her hair braided, but after the long winter, all she'd wanted to do was go for a short and simple swim. Free-floating hair was part of the pleasure. What was so bad about that?

She answered her own question. *Some stranger riding up. That's what was wrong with it.*

Mentally she called the man one of the names that Ruby had threatened her with loss of life and liberty for using, but it surely fit here. At the moment Ruby would be right. No

lady would let herself be caught in such a compromising situation. Not that Opal had any designs on that title anyway. Much to her older sister's chagrin.

"Well, if'n ya ain't comin' out, I'm comin' in after ya."

"I wouldn't advise that."

"Ya wouldn't? Now, ain't that some terrible shame." He slapped his leg and guffawed loud enough to set the crows to clacking. "And what do you think might stop me?"

Opal glanced beyond him when something moving caught her attention. "Water's too cold for a yellow-livered skunk like you."

"You ain't in no position to be callin' me names like that, missy." He nudged his horse forward, but the animal sat back on his haunches, ears flat against his head.

"Looks to me like your horse has more sense than you do." She kept her shoulders under the surface by bending her knees, not letting him see that she'd moved to shallower water. His horse would have to swim, and it obviously didn't want to do that.

The rider cursed his mount and dug in with his spurs, but all the animal did was spin and try to break for dry ground.

At the same moment, Opal was shocked to see her friend Atticus Grady launch an attack at the rider, pulling him off the horse with a bone-crunching thud to the rocky ground. The horse vamoosed but not before knocking Atticus back on his rear. The man was on him in an instant, and the two fought with fists and feet.

Though Atticus was nearing six feet tall he'd not filled out yet, so he was outweighed by a stone or two. Out-experienced too, from the looks of it.

Dear Atticus, for sweet pity's sake, why didn't you think before you leaped?

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