

FIREBIRD SERIES – BOOK ONE

THE GIRL WITH
STARS
IN HER EYES

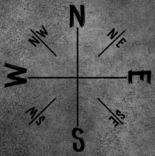
DAWN FORD



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

To my husband who has patiently waited for my dreams to become a reality and who gave me as much room as I needed to make them come true, I love you beyond words.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For my readers, I hope *The Girl With Stars In Her Eyes* has taken you on a journey along with Tambrynn and Lucas into a brand new world full of magic and curious creatures, both good and evil. If I have managed to pull you in for the ride, my job as an author is successful.

As a writer, I must thank God first and foremost for gifting me with this story. It was He who made my fingers fly across the keyboard that first day when three chapters flew into creation on my computer screen. I was immersed into this fairy-tale land then and each time after as I worked with Tambrynn on bringing her story to life.

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PART ONE



1



A brisk autumn wind pushes against the heavy manor door when I step outside for midday chores. The sky is stony and overcast, promising a coming storm.

Face to the sky, I smile slightly. I take a deep, crisp breath of the chilled air. I'd been here less than a week, but with one month left until my birthdate, I can almost taste the freedom it brings. No more winters shackled to a wooden pole awaiting my next assignment or grueling hours of thankless servitude. The end of my indentureship is near. At last, I'll be free and able to search for my father.

Wind whips my face and my hood slips. I hurriedly clutch it to hide my hair that I'd pulled in a tight bun. I didn't have a chance to rub more coal dust in it this morn to darken the silver tresses.

Little Nellie, the newest maid, steps through after me, glancing at the forest that lies beyond the boundary of the Broodmoor Estate. "Tambrynn, is it true the forest is haunted?" Her eyes widen like brown saucers as she runs to stay beside me as we head to the barnyard.

My joy disappears like dried leaves darting about in the wind, and I press my lips together. “Who told you that nonsense?” I couldn’t tell her the truth. The forest isn’t haunted. I am. Haunted from my past and my curse. One only needs a glance at my eyes or hair to know I’m different. However, I’ve been careful to keep the hood over my head and not be noticed by most of the staff since arriving the past week. For once, I’m thankful that scullery maids secure little attention. Only Cook and Mrs. Calvin have seen me without my covering.

Cows bawl in the barn next to the chicken coop as we walk up to it. The wooden latch on the door always sticks, and a humming sensation that starts in my gut answers my unspoken *call*. The bolt releases as if well-fitted instead of wedged too tight. It’s just a little nudge, not enough pull that Nellie would notice and not enough to sap my strength.

Recently I’d learned how to *call* objects with more control, so the wood flips loose easily, though there’s a spark of blue static that travels between my hand and the door handle. I shake my fingers to get rid of the sting, confused. Though I haven’t always been able to restrain it, *calling* has never bitten me back before.

Hens squawk and dart about, kicking up dirt as we enter, tossing dusty clouds in the air. Nellie’s clasped hands are red and chapped from scrubbing the hearth earlier this morn. Knowing she’s a recent orphan, my heart twinges at her fate. I was the tender age of eight, Nellie’s age now, when Mother died and I first became indentured. It had taken me the ten years since, moving from place to place, to become tough enough to survive. I consider what to tell Nellie.

Glancing at the trees, I shiver, but not from the cold. “Nellie, there’s nothing haunting that forest. Whoever told you that wants to scare you so you don’t try running away.”

She looks up at me, her face alight with the trust only seen in the young and naive. I'm heartened when she doesn't flinch as she looks into my eyes, something even adults cannot manage. Mother lovingly said I have stars in my eyes, as if my star-shaped pupils were magical. But then she'd been brutally murdered by wolves, and I realized Mother was the only one who thought my eyes and hair were acceptable. If only everyone could be as innocent and nonjudgmental as Nellie.

I touch her shoulder, longing to protect her as I had not been. "You'll learn soon enough the tricks they use to keep us obedient." I leave her to gather eggs so I can get the grain and water.

A high-pitched wolf howl from the forest startles me. A flock of birds in the trees along the forest's edge explodes into the sky.

Tambrynn, danger! A voice inside my mind calls out. I haven't heard that voice in a long time, and it's as shocking as the howl. It's familiar to me as my own voice and snippets of visions flit through my mind of a young, handsome man with dark eyes and dark hair. Could it be my father? I have no real recollections of him, but who else would I recall but him? He's definitely not any of my previous employers. Yet I hear this voice, always warning me, and see the cloudy picture of him in my mind.

My heart pounds painfully in my chest. I pray silently to the Kinsman that *they* aren't coming again, but even as I say amen, I fear my words are all in vain. The beasts are never far away from me, even if they're only memories that plague my dreams at night.

And once again, I am unable to stop the images of Mother's broken body from returning to me. The beasts are blurry in my memory, but I recall the evil that rolled like waves of fog off of

them. I'm shaking as I press the memories back inside the darkest recesses of my mind.

I clasp the hooded shawl tighter as I walk beyond the barn to the well house. There's no movement, no menacing shadows. No monsters hunting me. I struggle to calm my breathing. I can't let fear affect me as it always leads to my undoing. And here there are too many eyes watching at every turn, especially Cook's favorite snoop Adelia. I shake my head, trying to dispel the emotions churning inside of me.

The rope scratches my calloused hands as I send the bucket down the stone well and wait for it to sink and gather a full load of water. It's heavy as I unlatch it from the rope, but luckily, I only have one to carry instead of the three like my last employer's home, which had required more than one trip.

Another barking howl rings through the trees. *'Danger is coming!'* The masculine voice is closer this time, desperate, and sounds almost as if he stands over my shoulder. I stagger. Water sloshes over the bucket, soaking through my thin stockings. It pools inside my worn leather shoes. Cows' muted bawls filter through the barn as they hear and sense the predators.

My chest tightens with an old, familiar fear. I can't let it cripple me again, not when I'm so close to being free. "Stop it!" I whisper over and over, hands and eyes clenched tight until I regain my bearings. Finally, the voice recedes and is gone. I hasten to another shed to gather the cracked corn and millet. My gaze darts about to keep watch for any threat and I end up spilling the grain in the dirt. Not wanting to be chastised for waste, I quickly scoop up the feed and dirt with my hands into the bucket, wiping my gritty, damp hands down my stained apron. I've eaten worse, and the chickens won't notice.

When I return, I find Nellie on the coop floor, sobbing. Her

egg basket lies askew against the wire fence, with several eggs broken and oozing on the dusty ground.

“Good heavens, Nellie. What happened?”

“A magpie scared the ch-ch-chickens, and one flew at me.” Nellie hiccups. “I couldn’t open the door, and I dropped the basket trying to.”

I glance at the shadows that seem to move along the forest line. Hair on my arms prickles against the wool sleeves of my dress, and I fight the dread that creeps into my soul. Fear or anger causes me to lose control of my cursed ability to call things. And when that happens, someone always gets hurt.

I count to twenty slowly, silently, then assess the damage.

“We’ve got almost two dozen. Maybe there are more in the pantry than I remember.” Another glance at the forest shows no hint of immediate danger, so I hand her the grain, dump the water in the wooden trough, and give her a weak smile. “You finish tending the chickens, and I’ll take the eggs to Cook.”

Turning toward the manor, I press a hand against my churning stomach and resituate the hood that had dropped away from my hair. The wolves outside or the maids inside? Neither is desirable.

The heat from the kitchen stove warms my chilled body as I step into the pantry. Odors of malt vinegar, red onions, and salted bream sting my nose. I find more than a dozen eggs preserved in salt. I place the extras into my basket to take to Cook and set it aside to re-cover the crock.

Adelia breezes past me into the pantry. “I thought I saw you sneak in here. I need to start on Mistress’s custard, or it won’t be cooled in time. Where are those eggs?” She grabs for the basket. Her crisp white apron over her blue smock is startling against my stained hand-me-downs.

She steps on my foot with a smart-looking heeled boot, and I jerk sideways, bumping the basket. Eggs fly up and out. I

juggle four eggs, *calling* the others to keep them from dropping. However, they break in their rush to reach my waiting hands. Yolks drip through my fingers and down the front of my worn dress. More eggs lay broken on the floor.

Even worse, my hood has fallen to the ground as well, leaving my hair and face exposed.

Adelia's eyes are wide and she gasps. "What they said about you is true!" Her laugh is condescending. She stares at me as I glance away to try to hide my eyes, knowing there's nothing I can do about my hair. It seems like forever before she turns from me and steps over the mess on the floor.

She counts the remaining eggs out loud, and I concentrate on her white cap atop her dark hair to still my anxiety. Her small, upturned nose wrinkles in distaste, and I wonder how she can breathe so easily through those narrow slits. "Twenty-six. Not nearly enough for what we need. You've ruined the tea." Adelia's tone is as sharp as her tongue. "We'll see what Cook has to say about this."

Though smaller than I, Adelia's grip bites into my wrist. I try to bend down to grab the hood, but she yanks me through the pantry door before I can grasp it. I hurry to keep up with her, wishing I could disappear into the floor as my damp shoes squeak. The sick feeling I'd get ever since my first employer, Farmer Tucker's wife, declared me an evil spawn spreads through my veins.

The other maids stop and stare, curiosity overruling their current duties. Adelia and I stumble between the women and the wall, making our way down to Cook. I clench my jaw and fists as the weight of their inquisitiveness turns to judgment. There's nowhere to hide. I can't lose control in front of everyone.

With a whoosh, the kitchen door opens and Nellie blows in

with the wind. She halts at the sight of Adelia dragging me behind her. Tears well in her big, brown eyes.

“What is it now?” Cook’s sweaty brow wrinkles as we approach. Her wiry black hair, having come loose from its bun, flutters wildly about her chubby head. Short and stout, she stirs a bubbling stew.

Adelia flings my arm down as if I’d just burned her. “Tambyrnn has ruined the tea, mum. She dropped the eggs. We’ve less than two dozen left.” A triumphant glow spreads around her freckled face.

My fingers itch and tingle. It isn’t the first time I’ve wanted to poke each spot on her face, jabbing my dirty fingernails into her flesh. I shake the cruel thought off and tamp down my instinct to strike out.

“Twenty-six,” I retort. “You counted them yourself.” The rest of the maids gawk, motionless. No help, no empathy offered. I don’t know why it always surprises me—their reactions. My scalp stings from the effort to keep my distress under control. Again, I inhale a deep breath and exhale slowly, trying to work through the anger and shame spinning circles in my stomach.

Cook pounds her fist against the butcher table, and the girls plucking peacocks scatter. Downy feathers scurry through the air. “Twenty-six or not, it *won’t* do!”

She wipes her hands on the stained apron tied across her rotund waist and flinches when she looks me square in the eyes. “I told Mistress Broodmoor not to take you on, cheap though you come. Don’t think I didn’t hear the talk. Strange things happen around you. Just look at you.” Cook waves a chubby hand at me. “I knew it wouldn’t be long before your wickedness reflected upon me, and I refuse to be the one punished for it. If it were up to me, you’d be in a workhouse where you belong.”

Icy fingers of anxiety steal the heat from my face. “I am neither criminal nor infirm.” Nor am I evil, but I don’t say that for fear of being struck. I twist my dress with my fingers. My wrist aches and bears marks from where Adelia grabbed me.

My gut buzzes. Once again, I’m thankful no one else can feel the power that rests inside me. However, pots hanging from the rafters clank together and utensils on the table rattle. The maids’ voices around the room rise in alarm. I’m losing control.

Saying a silent prayer to the Kinsman, I dig my fingernails into my palms to remain focused. “Your pardon, but they were only eggs.”

Cook scowls. “You insolent, stupid girl.” She spins and throws me back against the sturdy block table. Her reddened cheeks puff out with every heaving breath she takes. To focus, I stare at the mole on the side of her face. A dark hair sticks out of the center like a cat’s whisker.

“*This* is what impertinent maids get.” She flips the metal arm holding the kettle over the flames outward. The stew splashes and sizzles down the side of the black pot. Cook yanks me away from the table and thrusts my hand over the bubbling contents. I clench my fingers together, but the steam still blanches my skin.

In a flash, I *call* out with my mind. It’s instinct. I can’t stop it. My eyes burn and I blink. White light explodes behind my eyelids. A butcher knife from the table sails through the steaming air. Cook’s eyes bulge as the knife flies past and thuds deep in the wall behind her. Blood drips down the side of her face where the hairy mole once was.

As soon as the power inside me is released, I sag back against the table for support and to catch my breath. My hands glow with a bluish light. I shove them behind my body. I don’t have time to wonder about the radiance, though, as the

kitchen breaks out into riotous chaos.

Cook's screams join with the other maids'. She points a shaking finger at me. "H-h-her eyes! They lit up like fire! She's a witch!"

The door to the kitchen opens and slams against the wall. The head housekeeper, Mrs. Calvin, enters the room. She's imposing and her face is flush with anger at having been interrupted by the noise. "What's going on in here?"

Cook continues to sputter and point. "Her. There. Tambrynn. Her eyes flashed and—and—" she stutters but then takes a deep breath. "Look at what she did to me. I *told you* she was dangerous. Do you believe me now?"

I brace myself and struggle to stand at attention while my hands land on a warm peacock carcass. The knots inside my stomach tighten. "I didn't, Mrs. Calvin. She was going to stick my hand in the pot, and—"

Adelia's grin turns from wicked to innocent in the blink of an eye. She rushes to Cook's side. "I saw it. She threw that knife at poor Cook."

Mrs. Calvin picks up a cloth and, with smooth strides, is beside Cook in a moment. She presses the cloth to the wound with a steady hand before directing an eager Adelia to hold it in place. She glances at the knife stuck in the wall and then glares down her thin nose at me, her small lips puckering.

"You were warned when you came here about your behavior, Tambrynn. You're dismissed. Go to your room and pack. Since we're all busy with guests until this eve, you will wait to be collected and sent to the stocks as soon as someone's available to take you. Do not leave your room."

"The stocks? But I've committed no crime!" Tears blur my sight as my stomach does furious flip-flops. "Please, Mistress."

"No crime? You attacked Cook." Mrs. Calvin points toward the stairs leading up to the servants' quarters, her head turned

away from me. “Go. Now. And don’t even think about running. If I find you missing, we’ll send the hounds.”

I stiffen at the threat. Hell hounds, as they’re dubbed, are trained to kill by scent and are used for hunting as well as tracking down anyone who tries to escape from their indentureship. The animals are known to be vicious and often bring back the escapee in pieces.

The maids’ faces are filled with a mixture of horror and mirth, but no one dares move. I run past them all, catching the stricken look on Nellie’s face. I try to smile at her in encouragement but fear it comes out as a grimace. Her pain and fear only add to mine.

I glance at the forest through a tall window as I hasten up the stairway, already feeling the cold shackles against my skin again. A magpie sits on the ledge, watching me. Its eyes are familiar, and I’m overwhelmed by fear.

The bird’s presence is a harbinger of the beasts. Neither is a good omen.