

The Bounty
Hunter and
the Heiress

Carol Finch

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Carol Finch
The Bounty Hunter
and the Heiress

Аннотация

Evangeline Hallowell has sworn not to rest until she finds the dirty swindler who conned her sister. So when Colorado's best bounty hunter, J. D. Raven, refuses to help, the determined heiress joins the trail as his "wife"—for better or for worse. . . . With enemies galore gunning for him, the last thing Raven needs is some stubborn, sass-mouthed hellcat landing them both in bigger trouble! But he soon finds keeping Eva safe is way easier than keeping himself from wanting her. . . .

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“I like being married to you. It’s convenient.”

Eva lifted her chin rebelliously.

Raven barked a laugh. “Not as convenient as you might think if we continue to ride the stage. We’d have to sleep together to keep up appearances, sweetheart.”

Damn, she hadn’t thought that far ahead. Eva drew herself up to full stature. She couldn’t resist a challenge.

“I can endure sleeping together if you can, sweetheart,” she countered defiantly. “Turn around, please.”

“What for?”

“So I can retrieve the money I stuffed down my dress.”

Raven grinned scampishly and shook his head. “Being married and all, there’s no reason for me not to watch...”

The Bounty Hunter and the Heiress

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The Bounty Hunter and the Heiress

CAROL FINCH



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This book is dedicated to my husband Ed and our children, Christie, Durk, Jill, Jon, Shawna and Kurt. And to our grandchildren, Brooklynn, Kennedy, Blake, Livia, Dillon and Harleigh. Hugs and kisses!

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Chapter One

Denver, Colorado

1880s

Dressed in her breeches and shirt, Evangeline Hallowell paced back and forth across the Aubusson rug in the spacious study of her home. At irregular intervals, she paused to glance anxiously toward the hallway, then at the window. Muttering a curse, she wheeled around to wear another rut in the imported carpet.

Her younger sister, Lydia, had left earlier that afternoon and she hadn't said where she was going or when she'd be back. Now it was dark and Evangeline was worried. She had the uneasy feeling that something was amiss.

A loud wail erupted near the front door. The sound echoed through the tiled foyer and bounced off the walls. Evangeline whirled around to race to the study door.

She stared incredulously at Lydia's disheveled coiffure, tear-stained eyes and puffy face. "Dear God, what happened to you?"

Dirt soiled Lydia's expensive pink gown. The pristine lace—that was now a dingy shade of brown—was snagged with leaves and twigs and drooped noticeably over the torn ruffles.

"Oh, Eva, I'm such a fool!" Lydia burst out as she flung herself into Eva's arms.

The sobs and howls commenced in earnest—the outpouring of emotion that had apparently sustained Lydia until she reached

the safe haven of their lavish mansion. She clung to Eva as if she was a lifeline and she proceeded to bawl her head off.

Eva let her sister vent her anguish for several minutes before guiding her to the sofa that sat perpendicular to the bookshelves that stretched from floor to ceiling of the north wall. Although Lydia refused to release her hand—and nearly squeezed off the blood flow to her fingers—Eva didn't complain. She had spent years nursing Lydia through one melodramatic, emotional ordeal after another because she had assumed the role of mother, father and older sister.

This high drama, however, seemed to be more serious than usual for Lydia.

“You were right about him,” Lydia blubbered, then dragged in a shuddering breath. “I was an imbecile to believe him.”

Him, Eva presumed, was the suave, smooth-talking gentleman who had been courting Lydia and escorting her to Denver's elite social functions for the past three months.

Eva tensed as she reassessed her sister's tattered gown. “If Gordon Carter forced himself on you—”

Lydia flung up a trembling hand that sported three broken fingernails. “Worse!”

Eva's dark brows elevated. “Worse than ravishing you?”

Lydia bobbed her head, sending shiny waves of auburn hair tumbling from her lopsided coiffure to cascade haphazardly over her shoulders. “He broke my heart, stole my buggy and my favorite horse and he swiped my money!” she cried in distress.

Eva went perfectly still, her mind racing back through time to reevaluate Lydia's rather peculiar behavior this past week. She had been in and out of the mansion without bothering to inform Eva or the servants when she planned to return. If Eva hadn't been preoccupied—fending off a particularly persistent suitor—she might have paid more attention.

Should have paid attention, she chastised herself. It was her sworn duty to protect and care for Lydia. She had solemnly promised her father that she would, after he fell ill suddenly then died.

Lydia wiped her eyes with the back of her grimy hand, sniffled loudly then glanced toward the imported grandfather clock that graced the corner. "Gordon and I were going to elope because he said you wouldn't approve and you were jealous because you were interested in him. He said we had to be clever and discreet. He said you would be outraged if you weren't the first to wed."

"What!" Eva scrambled to control her temper then gnashed her teeth, wishing she could take several bites out of Gordon's conniving hide. "I never had any interest in that scoundrel. It was plain to me that he was insincere. He made all the right noises, in his dedicated effort to impress you and others in our social circle, but I didn't trust his intentions. The fact that he tried to pit you against me is one more reason why I dislike him."

"It worked to some extent," Lydia admitted on a ragged breath. "He suggested that I gather plenty of funds so we could elope—" Her voice broke and she half collapsed on the couch.

“Oh, Eva, I’m so humiliated I could die! Gordon insisted that we shouldn’t bother with luggage so no one would suspect a thing. With my satchel of money we headed south to Canyon Springs to be married.”

Hot fury boiled through Eva’s veins as she visualized that silver-tongued, self-serving bastard luring her naive sister beneath his spell. At nineteen, Lydia hadn’t learned to be wary and cautious of shysters who sought to separate her from her inheritance. She had fallen for Gordon’s flattery and premeditated charm. His scheme had been to divide and conquer the Hallowell sisters so he could manipulate Lydia. Damn that lying, cheating bastard! He would be punished severely for this, she fumed.

Although Eva was silently condemning Gordon Carter to the farthest reaches of hell, she reined in her anger to listen to the rest of the infuriating tale.

“Then what happened?” she questioned intently.

Lydia rerouted the tears on her flushed cheeks, dabbed at her eyes with her dirty sleeve and finally met Eva’s unblinking gaze. “Gordon stopped the buggy in the middle of nowhere and shoved me out. He claimed that he was bored with my childish prattle, and I should walk back home because marrying me was the very last thing on his list of what to do with the rest of his life...”

Her voice fizzled out and humiliated wails erupted. Lydia flung herself facedown on the sofa, sprawling in emotional defeat. A few moments later, she raised her tousled head and

clutched Eva's hand again, accidentally scratching her with jagged fingernails.

"I'm dreadfully sorry I listened to Gordon's lies. He kept telling me that you were spiteful, stifling and envious because I was happy and you weren't. Since you discouraged me from seeing him I thought it might be true."

Eva shook her head adamantly. "You should have known better, Lydia. I have sworn off men for good reason. I can guarantee that I will never be jealous of my own sister. I want you to be happy, but you need to realize that adventurers will always set their sights on you because you have access to a fortune. That's why we have to be so wary and selective of men."

Lydia nodded and sniffled. "I understand that now, but Gordon kept telling me that he loved me and he'd never met anyone like me. Then his sugary tone changed to disdain once he had my money, my carriage and Hodge. You know how much I adore that horse. He was my last gift from Papa."

Eva promised herself, there and then, that she would hunt down that vermin and see to it that he was poisoned, stabbed, shot and strung up by his heels. Then she would haul his sorry carcass to jail for the duration of his life.

"From now on I'm going to be just like you," Lydia said determinedly. "I'll never again trust a man with my heart or my money."

"I regret that you had to find out the hard way that our family fortune is a burden and a curse. It attracts the wrong kind of

men.” A faint smile pursed Eva’s lips as she brushed the tendrils from Lydia’s face and met her watery gaze. “For us, Lydia, all men are the wrong kind of men. They will always want what we have, not who we are on the inside. They want our prestigious connections, not our companionship. The only way I’ve found not to be hurt, disappointed or taken advantage of is to guard my heart carefully. You must look beneath the charming smiles and calculated flattery to determine a man’s sincerity.”

Lydia nodded her head. “I know you speak from experience because you were so sad three years ago and—”

“Past is past and I never look back,” she interrupted. “I prefer to profit from my mistakes, not repeat them.”

Although Lydia insisted on talking her unpleasant experiences to death, Eva preferred to keep them buried. The man who taught her not to trust, not to expose her heart to pain, was a closed chapter of her life. If she never saw him again, that would be perfectly fine with her. Unfortunately, Felix Winslow owned a successful local jewelry shop—thanks to his new wife’s financial backing. He showed up often with his young bride at parties and Eva had taught herself to look through him as if he wasn’t there.

When the grandfather clock chimed ten times, Eva glanced up. She tapped Lydia on the shoulder then urged her to her feet. “Why don’t you go upstairs and I’ll have a warm bath prepared for you. I need to go out for a while, but I’ll return shortly.”

Lydia levered herself upright and managed the faintest hint of a smile. “If you are off to shoot that lying scoundrel I’ll send

you out with my blessing, but I know he's headed toward Canyon Springs, and probably to parts unknown. Finding him will be next to impossible."

"You're right. I would like to shoot him a couple of times for hurting you," Eva insisted. "It's the only purpose the men in our lives can possibly serve. Target practice."

Lydia snickered but her expression sobered when she surveyed the irreparable damage to her expensive gown. "This was to have been my wedding dress."

"Burn it," Eva recommended. "That's what I did with the one I wore the last time I was with Felix Winslow. I imagined him in it while it burned to ashes."

Lydia shrugged, and when Lydia trudged up the staircase, Eva sailed out the front door. She jogged down the street to the Philbert estate. Roger and Sadie Philbert—twin brother and sister—were her lifelong playmates and friends. The blond-haired, blue-eyed twosome was returning from a party and they stepped down from their coach just as Eva hurried up the flagstone driveway.

"Rather late to be gadding out in men's breeches, isn't it?" Roger teased as he appraised her unconventional attire.

Eva glanced down, having forgotten that she was still wearing the garments she had donned for horseback riding, while attempting to track down her missing sister.

She shrugged carelessly in response to Roger's playful grin. "You know I've acquired the reputation of an eccentric and free

spirit. Why not enjoy it?”

Sadie clasped Eva's hand to lead her to the front steps. “We attended the Jenson's stuffy dinner party. I'm sure you had a more interesting evening than we did.”

Eva knew Lydia would be mortified if news of her involvement with Gordon made the gossip grapevine so she waited until she and the Philberts were behind closed doors before she asked, “I want to hire the best bounty hunter in the business, a Mr. J. D. Raven, I believe is his name. How do I go about finding him?”

“Bounty hunter?” Roger and Sadie crowed simultaneously. “Are you mad?”

“No, only vindictive,” she said enigmatically.

Roger motioned for her to follow him into the office to ensure complete privacy. Then he gestured for Eva and his sister to take a seat on the brocade sofa. “What the devil is going on?”

Eva shrugged evasively. “The business I want to conduct requires the skills of a particular kind of man like Mr. Raven. He's known to be the best and that's who I want.”

“If you need assistance, why not call upon the Rocky Mountain Detective Agency?” Roger recommended. “You know they are reputable.”

Eva had considered it, but since local and state newspaper reporters constantly followed the detectives' cases, she feared Lydia's name might be leaked. The last thing she wanted was a public scandal. Her nineteen-year-old sister was too vulnerable

and too sensitive to gossiping peers.

“I came here for information, Roger,” she declared, avoiding his direct question. “So how do I contact Mr. Raven?”

“I cannot begin to imagine what you are up to, but it sounds intriguing,” said Sadie, her blue eyes glinting with interest.

When Roger crossed his arms over his chest and clamped his lips together, Eva sighed impatiently. “If you won’t help me then I’ll try another source.”

When she bounded to her feet and headed to the door, Roger grumbled under his breath. “All right, Miss Persistence, I’ll tell you what you want to know. As luck would have it, J. D. Raven arrived in town earlier today,” he reported. “In case you haven’t heard, he’s half-Cheyenne, half-white. And yes, he’s said to be deadly accurate with every weapon imaginable. But he’s not the kind of man our friends and colleagues associate with directly.”

Eva flicked her wrist dismissively. “You know I refuse to follow the dictates of snobbish society. I associate with whomever I please. I want Mr. Raven because his success rate is legendary when it comes to tracking down men who don’t want to be found.”

“From what I heard at the party this evening, he showed up at Marshal Doyle’s jail with two of the three fugitives he’d been tracking,” Sadie declared.

“What happened to the other one?” Eva asked curiously.

“Dead and buried,” Roger replied. “According to rumor, Raven doesn’t place a cross on the graves, just an X so Indian

deities and the Lord Almighty won't have to bother with the sinners. Plus, he plants them in the ground, facing away from the rising sun." He flicked his wrist casually. "I'm told it's some sort of Indian tradition that eternally curses evildoers."

"You are full of all sorts of helpful and interesting information," Eva praised. "Do you also know where I can find this legendary avenger of injustice?"

"You should let me handle this," Roger advised.

Eva shook her head decisively. "This is a private matter and I will take care of it myself."

His shoulders slumped and he shook his sandy blond head in defeat. "Fine, but you should go in disguise so you don't cause a stir. The London House is the place where Raven roosts when he returns from his forays."

"Thank you." Eva grasped the door latch. "I might be out of town for a few days so please check on Lydia for me."

Sadie frowned worriedly, but she said, "Of course, whatever you need. You know you can always count on us."

When she opened the door to leave, Roger burst out indignantly, "You really aren't going to tell us what this is about?"

"No, I'm sorry but I can't right now. I'll explain later," she promised on her way out the door.

J. D. Raven collapsed on his bed, exhausted. He grabbed the bottle of whiskey he'd picked up in a saloon on his way over from Marshal Emmett Doyle's office. He expelled a weary sigh and

took a drink. The liquor burned its way down his throat to his belly then he took another sip.

He stared at the saddle and saddlebags he had tossed in the corner of his hotel room. “Damn sons of bitches,” he mumbled before he took another swig.

If life were fair, Buck—the best horse he’d ever had—would be brushed down, eating hay and resting comfortably in the livery stable right this moment. “But life sure as hell isn’t fair,” he said to the room at large. “I’ll drink to that.” And he did.

A firm rap on the door forced Raven to roll to his feet. “Who is it?”

“Emmett. I brought your bounty money.”

Just to be on the safe side, Raven grabbed his pistol, moved to the left of the door then peeked out to make certain it was the city marshal.

“Besides the bounty, I also have a word of warning for you,” Emmett said as he ambled inside. “Buster Flanders’s widow just stormed out of my office. She swears revenge after you killed her husband.”

“She wouldn’t be the first,” Raven murmured as he brushed his hand over the three-week growth of beard and mustache he hadn’t bothered to shave during the manhunt. “I’ve had lots of death threats.”

Emmett shrugged his thick shoulders. “Well, this woman says she intends to dance on your grave when you end up like her husband. She also wants to know where you planted Buster.”

“At the bottom of a deep ravine. Took me an extra two hours to climb down, make sure he had expired, cover him up and climb back to the ledge to retrieve the other two criminals.” He glanced at the marshal. “Dance on my grave, huh? That’s a new one.”

Emmett stared solemnly at Raven. “Buster Flanders has lots of kin and so does his wife. You’ve been marked for death so you better watch your back, in case she hires someone to repay you for killing her husband.” He dropped the pouch of money in Raven’s hand then gave him three new bench warrants. “These men are reported to be preying on miners and prospectors near Purgatory Gulch and the other camps in Devil’s Triangle to the southwest of here.”

“These will have to wait until I train a replacement for Buck.” Raven tucked the warrants in his saddlebag. “I’ll get to them when I can.”

Emmett nodded. “I’m real sorry you lost your horse. And remember what I said about the spiteful widow’s threat. She’s been passing word around town so be on guard, Raven.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Raven said as Emmett exited.

Sighing heavily, Raven plopped on the bed and helped himself to another drink. Five minutes later a quiet rap on the door prompted him to reach for his six-shooter. Hell, now what? he wondered. Considering the possibility of Buster Flanders’s kinfolk gunning for him, plus a few others along the way who had vowed revenge, Raven adhered to his motto. Stay alert or die. It was the code of the Cheyenne and of the wilderness. Carelessness

got a man killed in a hurry.

Raven came silently to his feet. “Who is it?”

No one answered so he eased up beside the door again. There had been times when outlaws had shot through doors, hoping he was standing in front of them. Raven never faced a door directly.

When the quiet rap came again, Raven snapped open the door, grabbed the unwanted guest by the throat then jerked him inside. A gurgling yelp erupted from the kid in the oversize hat and jacket. Snarling, Raven slammed the kid’s thin shoulders against the wall and loomed threateningly over him. If the widow had hired this brat then Raven vowed to scare the bejeezus out of him and send him running back to the widow.

“You’re messing with the wrong man, brat,” Raven growled viciously. “Get the hell out of here and don’t come back or I’ll gut your carcass and throw it to the wolves.”

The kid’s chocolate-brown eyes widened then narrowed in annoyance. Raven didn’t usually have trouble with his scare tactics, but the kid boldly reached up with a gloved hand to pry his fingers—one at a time—from his neck.

“Back off, you buzzard. I came here to hire you and I can pay good money for your services.”

The kid’s voice sounded feminine and Raven squinted to appraise the shadowed face beneath the wide-brim hat. When he used the barrel of his pistol to knock off the kid’s hat, a cascade of curly auburn hair tumbled free. The woman was young. Twenty-two or twenty-three, he guessed. Despite her

smudged cheeks, she was stunningly attractive. Although her thick-lashed eyes were her most striking feature, her Cupid's bow lips drew his rapt fascination.

"Are you the Flanders widow?" he asked, refusing to unhand her until he knew how much of a threat she posed.

"No. I'm the angel of doom who wants a lying, cheating sidewinder of a man hunted down," she replied.

It had been three months since Raven had been anywhere close to a woman. Staring at this woman's lush lips had him wondering what she tasted like. As good as she looked? He was certain of it.

Before he became sidetracked, he shook off the lusty thought. No matter how deprived he had been, his survival instincts always prevailed. Always. He trusted only half of what he saw and even less of what he was told. This mysterious female was no different, lovely though she was.

The wary thought provoked him to clamp his hand around her throat again...in case this was a ruse. The woman coughed then glared at him for cutting off the air in her windpipe. He eased off enough to let her catch her breath.

"Nice to meet you, too, J. D. Raven," she sniped. "Kindly move away. I didn't come here to shoot you. Only to hire you."

"I'm at a disadvantage here. Who the hell are you?"

She looked him up and down and said, "You? At a disadvantage? Rarely, I suspect. I've heard that you're the best in the business. Judging by our unique introduction, you seem to be

prepared for anything.”

“Everything. There’s a difference,” he corrected. “You didn’t answer my question, Miss...? Mrs...?”

He arched a brow when she refused to fill in the blank. Instead, she made herself at home by walking over to plant herself in the middle of his modestly furnished room.

“I’m glad to see the room is tidy and clean. Good. A guest has every right to expect the comforts of home,” she commented.

He disregarded her odd remark and studied her closely. She possessed the regal bearing of nobility, but she didn’t flash the aloof smiles he usually attributed to the privileged class of white society. Her unconventional style of clothing indicated that she wasn’t afraid to be different. Yet, she didn’t bear the hard lines of living that he noticed on the faces of women who supported themselves on their backs.

In addition, she possessed exceptional courage or she wouldn’t be here alone with him, for fear of damaging her reputation. There wasn’t a hint of fear in her dark eyes, only critical assessment and the sparkle of persistence. In addition, she stood up for herself and stood up to him in a way few people dared. He unwillingly admired that about her.

“Who do you want tracked down?” he asked as he set aside his six-shooter. “An unfaithful husband or fiancé? And what do you want done to him when I find him?”

“Shooting his legs out from under him would be good for starters,” she replied. “But he isn’t my husband or fiancé. I don’t

have either one. As I recently reminded my sister, men best serve the purpose of a target for shooting practice.”

Raven squelched the makings of a smile when he realized she was perfectly serious. “You’re a man-hater, I take it.”

She shrugged noncommittally. “What will it cost me to hire you and when can you start this private manhunt?”

“You can’t afford me and I’m taking time off.” He hitched his thumb toward the door. “Nice meeting you. Close the door on your way out.”

She didn’t take the hint, just stood there staring at him with the confidence of one seasoned gunfighter bearing down on another.

Who the hell was this woman? he asked himself again. “Bold and determined” only began to describe her. The fact that she had come alone to confront him when most folks in polite society shied away from him was nothing short of astounding. His mixed heritage and his deadly profession usually worked like a repellent.

How desperate was this female? What had the man she wanted apprehended done to provoke her relentless fury?

When he walked over to grab her arm and escort her to the door she set her booted feet and jerked away from him.

“I’m not leaving, J.D. Get used to the idea.”

Her challenging stare and the determined tilt of her chin surprised and impressed him. He’d never shared a conversation like this one with a woman. Brief small talk before and after a tumble on the sheets was the extent of his association with women. This female was a novel—but annoying—experience

and he wanted her gone. Intimidating her seemed to be the only effective method of shooing her on her way.

He scooped up the whiskey bottle and offered her a drink—which she turned down with a distasteful shake of her auburn head. Then he gestured toward the bed. “If you aren’t leaving then disrobe and climb in. We’ll negotiate the terms of our agreement later.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

He could tell right away that he’d offended her. Hell, he could practically see steam rolling from her ears.

“That’s what you want for your fee?” she snapped, disgusted. “All dealings between a man and woman are to be resolved in bed? You are an ass, J.D.”

“I’ve been called much worse. And it’s just Raven,” he replied, undaunted.

In his effort to route her from his room he removed his shirt and tossed it toward the towel rack on the washstand. When he reached for the clasp to the double holsters that held his ivory-handled Colts, she didn’t blink, just held her ground as the weapons clanked on the floor. Raven unfastened the top two buttons on the placket of his breeches and smiled wickedly.

She stared at his bare chest then at his gaping trousers, before raising her gaze to meet his challenging grin.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she muttered.

“I’ve dared plenty in my life. More than you have, I suspect. So how far do you plan to go with this game of chicken?” He shoved his breeches a little farther down his hips. “All the way...?”

Chapter Two

Eva silently fumed at the ornery rascal known as Raven. It was bad enough that this man, who was six foot three inches of brawn and muscle, appealed to her in ways that baffled logical thinking. The hard, defined muscles of his chest, shoulders and belly drew her admiring gaze and held it fast.

His Indian heritage was evident in his bronzed, angular face. With the growth of the dark beard, mustache and shaggy hair—not to mention his black shirt, buckskin breeches and moccasins that made him appear as wild and untamed as the rugged Rocky Mountains—he looked formidable.

Yet none of that seemed to bother her because he was such a magnificent study of masculinity. His powerful physique suggested he had tested himself to the very limits of endurance time and again and that unwillingly impressed her.

He possessed none of the sophisticated gestures or polished manners of the affluent. Come to think of it, that was a point in his favor. He was not particularly handsome, though who could tell with that wooly facial hair that concealed the sides of his face and his jaw. Striking was a better word to describe him, she decided.

His large, almond-shaped eyes were the intense combination of green and gold. They were translucent, intelligent, alert and alive. Similar to the cougar she and her father had happened upon

during one of their mountain excursions a dozen years earlier. The beast had watched them from an overhanging ledge, its gaze missing nothing in its surroundings. The great cat had intrigued Eva then, just as this man intrigued her now.

“Well? What’s it gonna be?” he said, jostling her from her pensive thoughts. “In my bed or out the door?”

“Neither,” she replied. “My sister fell for the wiles of a conniving swindler who professed his undying love and devotion. They were supposedly on their way to elope when he took a share of her inheritance and left her afoot. I want the bastard tracked down. I want the money returned to my sister and I want retribution for her humiliation and heartbreak.”

Raven stood there, his hands on his lean hips, shaking his coal-black head. “No, I just returned from three hard weeks of tracking thieves. They shot my horse out from under me and I need time to train a dependable mount. Get someone else to help you.”

“Then name someone reliable and trustworthy,” she demanded. “And he better be as good as you’re reported to be.”

“There’s...” He paused, frowned then flicked his wrist dismissively. “No, he’s too trigger-happy. But you might try...” He shook his head again. “Never mind him. He’s a drunk.”

Eva elevated her brow and stared pointedly at the whiskey bottle on the nightstand. “Seems to me that the pot is calling the kettle black.”

“I’m lamenting the loss of a good horse and celebrating the

end of three weeks of exhausting hell,” he defended righteously. “That’s different from a man who has whiskey for breakfast, lunch, supper and a bedtime snack.”

Eva crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot impatiently. “Who then, if not you?”

Raven raked his hand through his long hair then shrugged impossibly broad shoulders. “Try the Rocky Mountain Detective Agency.”

“That is not an option,” she said in no uncertain terms.

He studied her curiously. “Why not?”

She refused to meet his green-gold eyes and stared over his wide shoulders. “I have my reasons. I want you and apparently you can’t think of anyone good enough, either, so it’s settled. We will leave in the morning and I’ll pay you half your fee then. You’ll receive the second half when the fugitive is brought to justice.”

“We?” He barked a laugh. “That wouldn’t happen. If by some remote chance it did, it would cost you double because I’d have to babysit a tenderfoot sissy like you. No thanks. I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

Frustrated, Eva stamped her foot. “You are exasperating and infuriating!” she muttered.

He flashed a mischievous grin. “Part of my charm.”

“Charm?” She scoffed as she raked him up and down, trying exceptionally hard not to become sidetracked by his rippling muscles and bronzed flesh. Not to mention those fascinating eyes

and the seductive gap at the waistband of his breeches. Try as she may, she couldn't keep her gaze from straying to the dark furring of hair that disappeared into his buckskin breeches.

He unstrapped the dagger tied to his thigh and tossed it on the nightstand. She watched him cautiously, wondering if he was going to drop his breeches in front of her, wondering how she was going to react to seeing her first naked man.

Despite her bravado, the only person she had seen naked was herself and she didn't think it was going to be at all the same.

"I'm not taking your case," he declared as he heeled off his moccasins. "I'm going to bed because I'm about as worn out as a man can get. So take a hike." He bent at the waist to untie his leather leggings. "I'm through talking to you."

Eva noticed the scars on his muscled back. Two long, deep strips of discolored skin resembled claw marks. The other scars must have come from a whip, she speculated. It left her to wonder at the torture he'd endured as he passed back and forth between Cheyenne and white culture.

Her thoughts scattered like buckshot when he did the unthinkable and shoved his breeches down his lean hips. Her face went up in flames and she whirled away before he disrobed completely and she received an education she hadn't anticipated.

She heard the low rumble of his chuckle as she faced the wall. The bedsprings squeaked, assuring her that he had sprawled out. She hoped he had covered the lower half of his torso with the sheet and bedspread. But no matter what, she wasn't going to

allow this contrary rascal to get the best of her. She had made a pact with herself three years ago that no man would ever put her at a disadvantage again.

Drawing herself up to full stature, she gathered her courage and spun around. She was greatly relieved that he had covered his torso with the sheet. Even as he reached for the whiskey bottle, she noticed the look of surprise on his rugged face. Clearly, he thought she'd bolt and run.

"You can try to dismiss me, but you haven't seen the last of me, J. D. Raven," she assured him.

He settled back against his pillow and cushioned his head on his linked hands. Muscles rippled over his arms and down his washboard belly. "Thanks for the warning, sugar." He took a swig of whiskey. "This is your last chance to climb in bed with me."

"Thank you but no. I also sleep naked and I'd likely be cold because you probably pull covers," she countered sassily before she turned to leave.

"We won't need covers for what I have in mind," he drawled suggestively. "And I have every intention of warming you up, sweetheart."

Eva flashed him a go-to-hell glare as she swooped down to retrieve her discarded hat. She wrapped her hand around the doorknob—and wished it was his throat. He tossed her another scampish grin and waggled his eyebrows.

J. D. Raven might have won this skirmish but she wasn't one to give up easily. This bounty hunter and legendary gunfighter

was exactly the kind of man she wanted to track down Gordon Carter. She wasn't taking no for an answer and that was that. All she had to do was sit herself down and figure out how to convince Raven to take this assignment, for which she would pay him a premium.

Eva pulled her hat down to shield her face then descended the steps. She detoured over to pay the hotel clerk for Raven's rented room before she exited. Raven didn't know it yet but he was on her payroll—starting now.

“Where have you been?” Lydia questioned the moment Eva strode past the bedroom suite.

“I'm in the process of making arrangements to hire a highly trained bounty hunter to track down Gordon,” she reported as she came to stand beside Lydia's canopy bed.

Lydia blinked her dark eyes. “My goodness. Already?”

“Well, we are still negotiating terms,” Eva hedged. “But I will be monitoring his activities to ensure I get my money's worth. I'll be gone a few days.”

“You're leaving me here by myself?” Lydia wailed. “You know I can't go out in public ever again after the embarrassment I've suffered.”

“First off, no one but the two of us knows what happened and we'll keep it confidential. But the next few days will determine what you're made of,” she told her sister. “You will appear in public and answer questions about where Gordon got off to by

saying you decided to go your separate ways.”

Lydia shuddered and clutched the sheet to her chest. “I’m not sure I can do that. I’m too ashamed.”

“If you say that you are no longer interested in sharing his company that won’t be a lie,” Eva pointed out.

For Eva, she hadn’t had the luxury of voicing a pat comment because Felix had used her to introduce him to another wealthy heiress. He had turned his attention to a younger and less independent-minded woman. Then he had paraded her around in public and married her five months later, leaving Eva feeling like a cast-off bride candidate.

“I told Roger and Sadie that I was going to be out of town and I asked them to stop by here to check on you. You can always count on our friends.”

“Thank you,” Lydia murmured. “I’m sorry that I’ve been such a burden to you the past six years since Papa died.”

“You are not a burden,” Eva contradicted. “You are my sister and sisters stick together. Also, they stick up for each other.” Eva patted her arm affectionately. “Now get some rest so you can walk out to face the world and convince the high society of Denver that you couldn’t care less about Gordon.”

Eva turned toward her room. For all her words of encouragement, she had yet to figure out how to convince Raven to take this assignment. He didn’t back down easily, but then neither did she.

A warm flood of pleasure washed over her as she discarded

her clothes and lay down on her bed. Raven's teasing words rolled over her and she wondered what it would be like to join such an incredibly masculine man in bed, to feel his muscled contours gliding alongside her—

“Stop it this instant!” Eva scolded herself. Damn his scampish hide for planting the erotic thoughts in her head.

She owed him for that and she'd make him pay.

Eva stretched leisurely then stared at the twinkling stars framed by her spacious bay window. If someone in her social class discovered her alone in the hotel room with Raven, there would have been a scandal of gigantic proportions. For years, the Hallowell name had been widely known throughout the area and gossip would be flying.

Thanks to her father, who had made his fortune prospecting for gold and had invested wisely, the Hallowells were always newsworthy. Her father had built businesses to outfit other prospectors. Also, he had established hotels and restaurants to house and feed his fellow prospectors. In addition, he had organized two local banks to grubstake miners who needed a helping hand.

Although her family name was familiar, Eva was rarely recognized on the street. She went to great effort to maintain a low profile. She spent most of her time at the expansive estate, overseeing various family businesses and contributing to worthwhile causes. Raven, on the other hand, was easily identified. His unique manner of dress signified that he had a

foot firmly planted in two contrasting civilizations.

If their names were linked together, especially while he was half-dressed in her presence at his hotel room, she might have been forced to marry him, just to salvage her family's good name and her reputation....

She jerked up her head when creative inspiration struck. A mischievous smile worked its way across her lips and she snickered. "I told you, J. D. Raven, you haven't seen the last of me," she said to the vision floating above her. "And indeed you haven't. Just wait until tomorrow."

"The kid did what?" Raven crowed in astonishment the next morning when the hotel clerk informed him that his bill had been paid in full.

The balding manager stepped back apace, his gaze darting apprehensively left and right. "Yes, sir, Mr. Raven. The boy said to thank you kindly for your time and any inconvenience. He also said to have a good day."

Raven ground his teeth as he lurched around to see that his raised voice had sent three men darting to the door. He could clear a room in two shakes. Not that he cared most of the time because it was a powerful tool of intimidation, which was vital in his line of work.

If he looked and sounded like hell's avenging angel then that was half the battle against defiant outlaws. As for men who turned tail and ran from him, they were usually guilty of

something and that made them easy to flush out.

When involved in a showdown, Raven had learned not to display the slightest fear or hesitation. And when he barked an order, he had to make it stick. Otherwise, his intimidating reputation was useless. Raven knew how to make orders and ultimatums stick and he had the souvenirs of battle scars to prove it.

Just ask the man frying in hell after he put the whip marks on Raven's back for no other reason except that he was half-native.

Cold fury trickled down his spine at the thought, but he quickly shifted his attention to the cowering clerk. The man assumed he'd somehow offended him by permitting that female masquerading as a young boy to pay for the room.

Raven fished a silver dollar from his pocket then tossed it to the clerk. "Thanks for the good night's sleep. It was a long time in coming after sprawling on the ground while chasing down thieves for three weeks."

The balding clerk relaxed and smiled slightly. "My pleasure, Mr. Raven. I'll pass along your kind words to the hotel owner."

"Yeah, be sure to tell the Hallowells I enjoyed my stay," he said and silently smirked as he envisioned the highfalutin family members who reportedly owned half of the damn town.

"It's always good to have you stay here," the clerk added. "Come back again."

Raven nodded before he walked outside. He was no fool. He knew exactly why the clerk at London House was eager

to have him stay here. He had quelled three disturbances with drunken patrons during the past four months. Now there were no disruptions when word spread that he was renting a room here.

A cynical smile quirked his lips when two prissy females reversed direction the instant they spotted him standing on the boardwalk. The fashionably dressed pair scurried off. Apparently, they had heard circulating legends. He had overheard the rumor that he was half-human and half-Cheyenne ghost spirit. Damn, where did whites come up with that superstitious nonsense?

His smile faded as he carried his saddle with him to the restaurant to have breakfast. He noticed the manager opened his mouth to object, recognized him then turned away to speak confidentially with the waitress, who scurried over to take his order immediately.

Raven ignored the stilted silence that descended on the café. He wondered if the mysterious woman, who had barged into his room the previous night, would be as well-received in her unaccepted attire as he was. He stuck out like a sore thumb—and on purpose. She would, too, if she removed her oversize hat and allowed those silky auburn curls to tumble around her alluring face.

A knot of unwanted attraction tightened in his belly when the image of the fascinating woman who dared to visit his room sprang to mind. Hell, half the reason he had refused her request was that he felt an admiration and sexual interest that could have

spelled trouble.

J. D. Raven had one hard-and-fast rule. He never, ever became emotionally involved in a case. It was strictly business because anything less might make him hesitate, make him think with his heart, not his head. Like carelessness, distraction could get him killed before his time.

After eating the hastily delivered breakfast Raven exited the restaurant, much to the relief of the proprietor and customers, he noticed. He halted on the boardwalk to survey Denver's hustling, bustling citizens, who cast him cautious glances then hurried on their way.

Above the clatter of wagons and carriages in the street, a train whistle pierced the morning air. Glancing absently toward the depot, Raven strode off to deposit his bounty money in the bank. Fifteen minutes later, he entered the dry goods store to replace the shirts damaged during his recent foray. In addition to ground-in dirt and mud stains—the result of wrestling Buster Flanders on the edge of a cliff—smears of blood and ripped fabric made the garment better suited as a rag.

Raven plucked up two black shirts then set them on the counter. As an afterthought, he picked up a plaid shirt and brown breeches for Hoodoo Lemoyne, the older man who kept the home fires burning in Raven's mountain cabin. The clerk hastily tallied the expenses so he could get Raven out of his store as quickly as possible.

Ah, how he longed to be working around the mining camps

tucked in the mountain valleys. At least there, where the lines of civilization weren't so strictly defined, he wasn't treated as such an outcast. Then again, he reminded himself, he wasn't accepted readily much of anywhere and he'd become accustomed to his solitary existence.

Tucking his purchases in his saddlebag, Raven scooped up his saddle, rifle and gear then spent a long moment lamenting his fallen horse. That buckskin called Buck had listened patiently while Raven rambled. He knew what Raven expected of him during a frantic chase and he trotted loyally to him when he whistled. Losing Buck was like losing a trusted friend.

Raven strode deliberately down the boardwalk, sending citizens veering off like the Red Sea parting for Moses. Once inside the stagecoach depot, Raven purchased his ticket to travel south. He sprawled negligently in a chair—away from the three men and the woman who would soon be wedged in the coach with him during the journey.

Hat pulled low on his forehead, Raven crossed his arms over his chest. Stretching out his long legs then crossing them at the ankles, Raven settled in to get some more shut-eye before the stage departed.

The whiskey he'd consumed the previous night left him with a dull headache. Missing several nights of sleep to remain on constant alert was catching up with him.

From beneath the shadowed brim of his hat, he could see the men and woman fidgeting nervously at the prospect of sharing

confining space in the coach. If he cared in the least—which of course, he didn't—their distaste of what he represented would dent his pride. But, like a cougar in the wilds, he had come to terms with his isolated lifestyle and didn't brood about it.

Tracking criminals for bounty was what he was good at. He supposed he could sign on as a deputy marshal or city marshal in some nameless little town. As long as he clipped his hair, dressed strictly in white's man's clothing and made a conscious effort to look civilized. Yet, the very idea...

His rambling thoughts scattered like a covey of quail when the door creaked open and a woman entered. Raven had learned to school his facial expressions and give none of his thoughts away years ago. But he was stunned to the bone when he recognized the woman whose curly auburn hair danced like flames in the sunlight. She was the very same female who had dared to approach his room and make demands the previous night. She was even more fetching in daylight, especially when she discarded shapeless masculine clothing in favor of feminine apparel.

This morning she had dressed in a modest but flattering calico gown that accentuated every voluptuous feminine curve and swell. And she had plenty of them in all the right places, he noted. She carried a matching parasol and wore a hat that boasted a couple of feathers and ribbons. War bonnet, most likely in her case, he mused as a wry grin crossed his lips. Indian custom had nothing on white civilization, he decided. Undoubtedly, the

woman had girded herself up for another confrontation to urge him to take her assignment. Waste of time though it was.

Without acknowledging her arrival, he surveyed Miss Calico. She stood about five foot six inches and weighed about one hundred and ten pounds—give or take. She passed a polite smile around the depot then focused her full attention on him. Still he didn't move or alert her that he recognized her from the previous confrontation.

If she planned to open another lively debate with an attentive audience on hand then he would refuse her not only in private, but also in public. No matter what, Raven wasn't taking the assignment. He needed time to rest, relax and to train Buck's replacement. Period. End of story. No exceptions.

He shouldn't have been surprised when the gutsy female walked straight up to him—but damn if he wasn't. Then she shocked him speechless when she said, “Did you purchase my ticket, J.D.?”

Calling him J.D. suggested they were on intimate terms. He sat there, too stunned to react, while the three men and woman glanced back and forth between him and the daring female. Even the agent at the ticket window perked up at the unexpected scene unfolding in the depot.

She sighed dramatically, shook her curly auburn head then smiled at him in tolerant amusement. Miss Calico, with her matching parasol, set her two carpetbags on the empty chair beside him.

To his further astonishment, she doubled at the waist, pushed his hat back to stare him squarely in the eye and said, “Honestly, love, I know we were married recently but you’ll have to remember you have a wife to consider now.”

You could have heard a pin drop on the planked floor of the depot. Everyone’s jaws sagged with incredulous disbelief. If Raven hadn’t trained himself not to show the slightest reaction, his mouth would have dropped open and his teeth would have clattered to the floor.

Married? What the hell was she talking about? Sure, he’d been drinking last night but he certainly would have remembered something like that!

Seemingly unaware or unconcerned with the rapt attention she’d attracted, Miss Calico kissed his bearded cheek then sashayed over to purchase her ticket. She returned to take her place beside him. By that time, Raven had managed to sit up a little straighter in his chair and shake off the alluring scent of her perfume that had clogged his senses.

When Miss Calico brushed her shoulder affectionately against his and smiled at him as if he were the sun in her universe, something very strange and unfamiliar unfolded in the region of his chest. It was probably indigestion, he decided. He’d wolfed down his breakfast in a rush so he’d have time to swing by the bank and dry goods store before catching the southbound stagecoach.

When she glided her hand over his, giving it a seemingly

affectionate squeeze, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wasn't sure he could have formulated a sentence at the moment if his life depended on it.

"I'm very much looking forward to the rest of our honeymoon, J.D.," she said in a stage whisper.

Beneath lowered lashes, Raven observed the expressions plastered on the faces of the other passengers. Something in the way they stared at him had altered drastically since his supposed bride arrived to make over him as if he were special to her. He seemed to have acquired instant respectability because everyone thought he was married to the stunning female—whose name he still didn't know, damn it.

"The stage has arrived," the ticket agent announced.

Miss Calico was the first one on her feet. She grabbed her satchels then tugged him from his chair. "Don't forget your saddle, sweetheart. And I'm so sorry about the loss of your favorite horse. I know how much he meant to you."

The comment confirmed to the other passengers that she knew specific details about him. She sealed their connection by adding, "I'm anxious to watch you train the replacement. In time, I'm sure the new saddle horse will be as invaluable as the last one."

Then, to his absolute amazement, and that of the onlookers, she pushed up on tiptoe to press another kiss to his bearded jaw. Again, the tantalizing fragrance of her perfume infiltrated his senses and fogged his brain. He couldn't recall, but he presumed

she had led him outside like a stupid lamb to slaughter. Then she directed the other passengers where to sit so the newlyweds could cozy up side by side in the coach.

It was only while Raven was tossing his saddle and the satchels into the luggage compartment on the back of the coach that his head cleared long enough for him to realize that he hadn't shut down the woman's charade and sent her packing. Worse, several passersby heard her call out to him. When she referred to him as sweetheart, she stopped traffic on the boardwalks and attracted owlish stares.

While she stood there, all smiles and cheery disposition, he stepped up beside her and bent his head to ask confidentially, "Who in the hell are you?"

"Evangeline Raven, of course. Really, J.D., you've been calling me Eva for weeks. Last night you swore I was the love of your life."

"Ha, curse of my life is more like it," he said and grunted. "Last night you interrupted a perfectly good drunk. And here you are this morning to ruin a perfectly good hangover. Be warned that you're going to regret this little charade of yours, I guaran-damn-tee it, Eva."

He wheeled around to tuck his Winchester rifle beside his saddle and she followed after him. Flashing an impudent grin, she said, "I told you that you hadn't seen the last of me. You were warned, darling."

"I thought you were a man-hater."

“Can you think of a better way to get even with a man than to pretend to marry one of the worst offenders?” she countered in a syrupy tone.

“What the hell—?” came a startled voice from overhead.

Raven looked over the top of Eva’s auburn head when the stage driver’s gravelly voice boomed above him. From his elevated perch, the grizzled driver, whose bushy hair, long beard and mustache concealed most of his wrinkled features, stared at him in bewilderment.

“You’re married?” the driver croaked like a bullfrog. “To her? You must have more charm than I thought.”

Raven inclined his head to take a better look at the driver. He recognized George Knott, the man he had interviewed after a stagecoach holdup the previous year.

“He has oodles of charm,” Eva defended as she laid her hand on Raven’s forearm. “I’m honored to be his wife.”

Raven noticed the speculative glances coming his way again. This new respectability in white society beat anything he’d ever seen. One attractive female in calico, who testified to his charm and claimed to be his new bride, and wham! Suddenly he wasn’t the dangerous bastard everyone thought he was. He was considered almost human.

Eva tapped his hand, then lifted her full skirts so he could assist her into the coach. He took his cue. However, he gave her a bit more of a boost than she needed. She yelped when she nearly sprawled facedown on the other passengers’ feet. He noted that

she reacted quickly and that she was agile enough to catch her balance. She eased a hip onto the seat and settled in for the ride. Raven expected her to glare daggers at him for the spiteful stunt but she grinned sportingly.

“How clumsy of me.” She tucked her skirts beneath her legs then scooted sideways to pat the empty space beside her.

Raven wedged into the space between Eva and the window. In the close quarters, it was impossible to rail at her without being overheard by the other four passengers. Presently, he was too irritated to keep his voice to a whisper so he held his tongue. He did what he always did during the rare occasion when he was forced to travel by stagecoach. He pulled his hat low on his head, crossed his arms and caught a catnap.

Unfortunately, visions of his impish bride kept intruding into his dreams and jolting him awake. And sure enough, she was still cuddled up beside him, smiling triumphantly at him.

He sighed inwardly, aware that he had lost control of the situation the instant she appeared in the stage depot to shock him speechless. He decided to give her high marks for ingenuity and let her enjoy her crazed charade for the first leg of the journey. But that was as far as this pretend marriage went.

Biding his time, he closed his eyes to nurse his headache and vowed to get even with Eva Whoever-she-was for trying to outsmart him.

Chapter Three

An hour into the overland journey Eva was still feeling exceptionally pleased with her ingenious scheme to attach herself to the stubborn bounty hunter. Of course, she wasn't so smug to think that just because she had stunned and outmaneuvered Raven that he would take the assignment to avenge Lydia's humiliation. She figured she had some fast talking to do before that happened.

However, he hadn't shouted her from the depot, denouncing her claim. It was a start. Either she had caught him completely off guard while he was hung over or he hadn't wanted to make a scene in public. Maybe it was a little of both. Whatever the case, he had kept his trap shut and they were sharing the same stagecoach that was headed south.

Eva glanced discreetly at Raven. She knew he wasn't sleeping at the moment. He was like a lounging panther, intently aware of his surroundings, ready to pounce at the first sign of danger. Beneath those long thick black lashes, she could see a slash of golden green.

Although she knew he wasn't going to let her completely off the hook for duping him, she enjoyed her reprieve and played her new role to the hilt. She even spun the simple gold band on her finger—the one that had belonged to her departed mother—calling the other passengers' attention to the ring that implied

marriage.

She smiled cordially at the woman across from her, who looked to be a few years older. The thin brunette with the sad smile also wore a wedding band.

“Are you meeting your husband, ma’am?” Eva asked.

The brunette nodded. “He’s an officer at the army post near Canyon Springs. I’m returning from a visit with my family in St. Louis.”

Within five minutes, Eva knew her fellow travelers by name. Clara Morton had left her seven-year-old son with his maternal grandparents for a month. Delbert Barnes, the effeminate little bookkeeper, wore thick, wire-rimmed spectacles. He had a bald spot on the crown of his head and a cleft in his chin. He was on his way to Pueblo to begin his new job as an accountant with a coal smelting company.

The other two men looked like gamblers, judging by their frock coats, brocade vests, snappy black hats and expensive pocket watches that dangled from gold fobs. Eva reminded herself that gamblers were a nickel a dozen in the area. They frequented saloons that catered to miners. One look at the rings on Frank Albers’s and Irving Jarmon’s fingers suggested their hapless opponents at gaming tables had lost their bets and paid their debts by surrendering their jewelry.

Irving Jarmon had a long, horselike face and large horselike front teeth. His tuft of hair reminded Eva of a horse’s mane. Frank Albers was average height and slim build. His blond head

seemed too large for his thin-bladed shoulders.

Frank Albers and Irving Jarmon—if those were their real names—claimed they were headed to Mineral Wells, before venturing to the mining towns in Devil’s Triangle. According to reports, visitations to the numerous bawdy houses, gaming halls and saloons were the order of the day in Mineral Wells.

She wondered if that’s where she’d find Gordon Carter—con man, shyster and God knew what else. She suspected he planned to lay low in the isolated mining camps before reappearing in society to fleece another young, unsuspecting heiress.

“Stage stop ahead. We’ll exchange horses,” George Knott called down from his perch.

Eva stirred on the bench seat, eager for a reprieve from the jostling ride that left her posterior numb and cut off the circulation in her arms, which were jammed between Raven’s broad shoulders and Frank’s narrow ones.

The instant the coach rolled to a stop, a plume of dust rose around it. Like a great cat surging to its feet, Raven exited then pivoted to clamp his hands around Eva’s waist. The instant he touched her, strange fissions of heat rippled through her body. Stunned, she glanced into his hypnotic eyes as he slowly, deliberately lowered her to the ground.

Eva cleared her throat. “Thank you, dear.”

“Anything for you, my sweet,” he purred. “We’ll partake of a cool refreshing drink and enjoy a private moment alone.”

Eva wasn’t sure she wanted to be alone with him just yet.

He might strangle her and toss her behind a tree as a snack for wolves, mountain lions and such. Nevertheless, he clamped hold of her hand and strode off swiftly, forcing her to scurry to keep up with his long-legged strides.

The reckoning, she predicted as he led her out of earshot. She expected him to chew her up one side and down the other—and he was entitled because she felt a little guilty about the deception. But she wasn't one to give up easily. Especially when it came to an important cause like avenging Lydia's shame and recovering Hodge and the money Gordon had extorted.

Her thoughts trailed off when she noticed the unhitched buggy sitting behind the stage station. Eva thrust out her free hand excitedly. "That's it!" She set her feet, only to be uprooted by Raven's superior strength. "That's my sister's carriage. Gordon has been here."

"Good for Gordon and good for you for finding the first piece of the puzzle," Raven muttered caustically. "But that doesn't change the fact that I have a few choice comments to make to you. And be warned, none of them are very nice."

When he halted by the creek, she was surprised that he allowed her time to cup her hands and sip the refreshing drink of cool water from the stream before he launched into his scathing lecture. Apparently, he wanted to wet his whistle, too, before he laid into her.

Rising, he fisted his hands on his hips and widened his stance. His thick brows swooped into a sharp V and he glowered

ominously at her. “You think you pulled a fast one on me because I didn’t call your bluff, don’t you, Eva? If that truly is your name.”

“It is,” she confirmed. “What does J.D. stand for?”

“Jordan Daniel.”

“Your white father’s name,” she presumed.

“Yes, not that it’s your concern,” he snapped curtly.

“Jo-Dan,” she mused aloud. “That’s the pet name I’ll use for you.”

His bearded face puckered in a scowl. “No, you won’t. I hate it. Furthermore, I’m not taking this case, even if you did spring for my hotel room. I pay my own way. Always have. I’ll not be kept by a female.”

“It was the least I could do since I interrupted your evening.” She smirked. “After all, I did interrupt your designs on your whiskey bottle. Any of it left, by the way?”

“Yes.” He waved her into silence. “Now listen, lady, this marriage you concocted is a bad idea. In order to remedy that problem, we are about to stage a big argument and you aren’t going to speak to me again.

“I’m going my way to my mountain cabin to train a new horse and you’re going to Canyon Springs...or wherever,” he instructed. “Our disagreement should gain you sympathy from the driver, guard and passengers. Especially if you work up a few crocodile tears. After I abandon you, you can annul this pretended marriage by waving your magic wand of a parasol.”

She lifted her chin rebelliously and said, “No, I like being

married to you. It's convenient."

He barked a laugh. "Not as convenient as you might think if I continue to ride the stage line until we have to bed down for the night. We'd have to sleep together to keep up appearances, sweetheart."

Damn, she hadn't thought that far ahead. When she winced, he noticed. Those green-gold cat eyes missed nothing.

"What? This isn't the grand love affair you've made it out to be for the benefit of the passengers?" he taunted.

Eva drew herself up to full stature. He wasn't going to intimidate her with that snarly scowl and threats of intimacy. She was sorry to say that she couldn't resist a challenge. It was one of her many faults.

"I can endure sleeping together if you can, sweetheart," she countered defiantly.

He gave a sarcastic snort. "I'd hang around until tonight to find out just how far you'd take this charade, but I've had enough companionship for one day. I'm heading west after we stop for lunch."

"Fine, but do me one favor," she negotiated. "Check the barn to see if a chestnut gelding is stabled there. Maybe Gordon traded the thoroughbred for a mountain pony to make the next leg of his journey. Meanwhile I'll question the stationmaster about the buggy.... Turn around please."

He frowned, bemused. "What for?"

"So I can retrieve the money I stuffed down my dress. I want to

buy back the carriage,” she explained. “The horse, too, if Hodge is here.”

He grinned scampishly and shook his head. “Being married and all, there’s no reason for me not to watch.”

She rolled her eyes in annoyance then reached into the bodice of her gown to fish out the money she’d brought with her. Despite the blush that splashed across her cheeks, while she watched him stare deliberately at her bosom, she didn’t turn away, either.

He was still staring at her gaping gown when he said, “Checking on the horse is all the effort I’m putting into this case. I’m still taking time off to train a new horse. Maybe you can hitch a ride with your two new friends, Irving and Frank, to check the mining towns for your sister’s missing boyfriend. If you really have a sister and you aren’t making up this tale the same way you made up the story about our marriage.”

It was plain to see that Raven didn’t trust easily. Besides, she hadn’t offered conclusive evidence. But still...

He wagged a lean finger in her face. “No matter what, sugar, I’ll be gone this afternoon. No more of your clever charades. I’m fresh out of patience and this headache and hangover are hard on my good disposition.”

“Didn’t know you had one,” she couldn’t help but sass. When he pulled a face and muttered something under his breath that she didn’t ask him to repeat, she frowned curiously. “For the life of me I don’t know why this bothers me, but why don’t you like me? Is it because you don’t find me particularly attractive? Because

I talk too much to suit your tastes? Because I'm headstrong and pushy?"

"All of that, plus you're a royal pain in the ass," he told her bluntly.

"Maybe I am, but I can't let a thing like that get in my way while I'm serving a noble purpose and I need your help."

"I'm not helping and the very last thing I need is a wife, pretend or otherwise. Especially one like you."

Even though his comment stung her pride a bit, she angled her head to peer up at him. "How do you know you don't need a wife? Have you had one before?"

"No, but I travel light. A wife is extra baggage that might get in the way or become another hazard in my profession. As it is, your charade will cause complications. When I return to Denver, everyone will have heard the news. It's your job to quell the rumors when you get home."

"I intend to pretend to be married for a good long while so get used to the idea," she said stubbornly.

Considering her place in high society, having a pretend husband, especially one with J. D. Raven's legendary reputation, would discourage insincere proposals from fortune hunters. She should have hired a husband impersonator earlier, she mused. It would have solved dozens of problems.

"Lady, you are loco," Raven said with a marveling shake of his shaggy black head.

She tossed him a teasing smile as she handed back the

comment he'd made to her. "Part of my charm." She lurched toward the station to inquire after the stolen buggy. "And don't forget about looking for the horse."

"Nag, nag."

"No, Hodge is a gelding," she insisted, grinning.

He frowned darkly. "I wasn't talking about the horse."

Raven stared after the bundle of irrepressible spirit wrapped in calico. He didn't recall having this much trouble winning arguments until he clashed with a woman who possessed an incredible amount of fortitude and determination.

Muttering under his breath, Raven raked his hands through his untrimmed hair then hunkered down to drink his fill from the clear stream. Despite his irritation with the madwoman, he was unwillingly impressed by her uncanny ability to draw information from the passengers without seeming nosy.

She had even mentioned Gordon Carter offhandedly then inquired if anyone knew him. She had discovered quickly that the passengers didn't reside in Denver. They were passing through and no one had heard of the con man.

Glancing this way and that, Raven decided to take advantage of the privacy and sink into the cool water. If nothing else, the quick bath eased his hangover and helped to curtail the inappropriate thoughts that hounded him after being nestled beside Eva in the coach.

Watching her dip her hand into her bodice to retrieve her

money intensified his unwanted awareness of her. Hell, even their lively debates stimulated his interest. She intrigued and aroused him all too easily. He didn't want to like her or give her a second thought.

This was going to be a very brief acquaintance, he promised himself. Wife indeed! That had bad idea written all over it. If his longtime associate, Hoodoo Lemoyne, and his only surviving cousin, Blackowl, got wind of this, they would laugh themselves into comas.

The thought of Hoodoo Lemoyne, the crippled man who lived at Raven's mountain cabin, while he tracked notorious criminals, made him grin. Raven hadn't been able to get rid of that chattering Cajun any easier than he'd gotten rid of Eva.

Raven just sort of inherited the gabby older man who had been his father's acquaintance. In addition, Raven thought, now he had a pretend wife and she had more grit and gumption than most men he knew.

Raven blew out his breath, shook off the cold water and dressed hurriedly. He hiked to the barn to watch the stage attendants trot out fresh horses. He glanced around the stalls but there wasn't a chestnut gelding in sight.

"Did you happen to see the man who left the carriage behind the station?" he inquired.

"No," the first worker replied. "I showed up for work this morning at seven and the buggy was already here."

"Same for me," the second man chimed in. "You might ask

the station owner. He's around all the time."

The first worker surveyed Raven's attire. "You're Raven the bounty hunter, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Heard of you," the man murmured. "Congratulations on your marriage. Your wife is one of the prettiest females I've ever laid eyes on. You must be proud."

Raven was no such thing. He was baffled by the newfound respect he'd acquired because of his association with Eva. The uncharacteristic chattiness from men who usually ignored him was difficult to grow accustomed to. Raven glanced toward the doorway of the station house where Eva was deep in conversation with the potbellied owner, who was only a few inches taller than she was.

"She's the prettiest female I ever laid eyes on, too," he admitted.

"How'd you meet her, if you don't mind my asking?" the second attendant said interestedly.

Raven smiled in wry amusement. "A young kid, a mutual friend, introduced us."

He pivoted around to amble toward Eva. He was ten feet away from her when the report of a rifle echoed around the rugged canyon walls overlooking the stage station. Raven reacted instantly. He lunged forward to hook his arm around Eva, forcing her to roll across the ground with him. The stage station owner yelped and leaped backward when the bullet whistled over their

heads and thudded into the water barrel outside the door. Water dribbled into the dirt, leaving a puddle that could easily have been Eva's blood.

While Raven lay atop Eva, her lush body melded familiarly to his, she gaped at him in astonishment. He was surprised to note that curiosity, not fear, flickered in her chocolate-brown eyes.

"Here's another reason why being married to me is unwise. It puts you in harm's way," he murmured against her ear. "Criminals dislike me and so do their vindictive kinfolk. I might as well have a bull's-eye painted on my back."

"How do you know that someone is shooting at you and not at me?" she retorted. "It could be Gordon. The stationmaster informed me that late last night he bought the buggy from a man who matches Gordon's description. He bought a saddle and rode off on Lydia's horse. Gordon would recognize me easily and I predict he would be anxious to have me off his trail."

Raven rolled sideways then pulled Eva up beside him. He kept her protectively behind him while he scanned the towering peaks that were rife with hiding places behind rocks and trees. Wherever the sniper was lurking, Raven couldn't locate him. What's more, it disturbed him to no end that he'd been so distracted and preoccupied with Eva that he wasn't as attuned to his surroundings as he usually was.

She was a liability he could ill afford. The sooner they parted company the better for both of them, he told himself.

"You okay, ma'am?" the driver questioned—and Raven was

quick to note the smell of whiskey on George's breath.

Eva adjusted her cockeyed hat and smiled reassuringly at George. "I'm fine," she insisted as she dusted herself off.

"This is one of the drawbacks of marrying a man who has a target on his back," the driver slurred. "Somebody's always gunning for him, I reckon."

"Then I'll have to take extra good care of J.D., won't I?" she murmured as she stared adoringly at him.

Raven studied her blankly. He couldn't recall anyone offering to take care of him. A moment later, he remembered that her comment was part of her act and he shrugged off the pleased sensation that had no business taking root.

"Are we going to be ambushed again?" Delbert Barnes asked warily as he readjusted his drooping spectacles. "I haven't begun my new job and I could be dead before I start."

"Relax, Delbert," Raven said he as brushed off his buckskin breeches and black shirt. "Stay inside each station along the way or in the coach and you'll be just fine."

Flustered, the little man fidgeted from one foot to the other, glanced apprehensively toward the stony peaks of the mountains then dashed headlong toward the coach.

Raven had expected a reaction like that from Eva. She, however, was amazingly unruffled by her near brush with disaster. Another blossom of admiration unfurled inside him as he watched his pretend wife walk purposely toward the stagecoach. She halted halfway then turned to wait for him to

catch up.

“Surely you aren’t going to pick a fight with me so soon after I was nearly gunned down, are you?” she murmured as he strode up beside her.

“No, but I’m leaving eventually so don’t think I’ve changed my mind,” he said gruffly.

An impish grin spread across her bewitching face. “Of course not. I’m your proverbial pain in the ass.”

“Exactly right and don’t you forget it.”

And he better not, either.

His tone wasn’t as sharp as it should have been, not if he hoped to convince her that he considered her a nuisance. To his dismay, she noticed the lack of intensity in his voice and looked excessively pleased with herself.

“Help me into the coach, will you, darling? Being knocked off my feet during the ambush affected me more than I first thought. I feel a bit shaky.”

Shaky? This ironclad daisy? Ha! Nothing shook her up that he could tell. Not his terse rejection, his intimidating threats or flying bullets. Raven gave his head a marveling shake as he assisted his wife into the coach.

Wife? The word rang through his mind like a clanging gong. She was not his wife and she never would be, he reminded himself realistically. Let her have her fun while it lasted. By nightfall, he’d be long gone and she could track Gordon by whatever means available—as long as it didn’t include him.

Raven continued to chant that mantra, even when she held his hand and smiled up at him so sweetly during the next leg of the journey. Eva? Sweet? He chastised himself for getting soft when she poured on the feminine charm. He didn't want to warm up to her. But when he stared at her enchanting face and gazed into those twinkling brown eyes he knew she was getting to him. He'd better put a stop to it quickly if he knew what was good for him.

"Damn, I knew she'd come after me." Gordon Carter spewed a string of foul expletives as he watched Evangeline and her brawny bodyguard pile into the stagecoach.

He'd botched the perfect opportunity to remove that female thorn in his side...permanently. But his aim had been slightly off the mark. Now, instead of disappearing for a few months to live on the money he'd swiped from Lydia, he had to deal with Eva breathing down his neck.

Gordon had expected as much from that willful woman, which is why he went to roost in the rocky terrain near the line of stage stations that flanked the mountains. He hadn't considered that she would hire that half-breed bounty hunter called Raven to help track him down. Gordon knew he had to strike suddenly and quickly because getting hold of Eva and making it look as if she had an untimely accident had just become more difficult than he originally planned.

Scowling, he tugged on the reins and led his confiscated horse along the mountain trail. Too bad he hadn't been able to resolve

his problem with one well-aimed shot, he mused sourly. Next time, however, he'd take his time and make the bullets count. On that cheering thought, he mounted the chestnut gelding and trotted off.

“In all the excitement of the ambush I forgot to ask if you gathered any information about the man who stole your sister's carriage,” Raven whispered in Eva's ear five miles down the road. “And no, the attendants haven't seen the horse named Hodge that you described to me.”

“That's because Gordon rode off on Hodge last night, after selling the buggy to the stationmaster and buying a saddle,” she murmured against his bearded jaw. “I bought back the buggy, of course.”

“If you leave it sitting where it is for too long the owner might sell it twice,” he warned.

“That's why I left a message to be delivered home so my friend can pick it up.” She squirmed to find a more comfortable position in the cramped space. There wasn't one.

Raven smirked. “What if the agent isn't honest enough to forward the message? Let me tell you something, sugar. You won't get far in this world if you're too trusting. Cheaters, backstabbers and liars are as thick as mosquitoes.”

Eva stared pensively at him. Cynical and wary though she had become—after dealing with a long line of gold diggers who tried to smooth-talk her out of her inheritance—she couldn't hold

a candle to this bounty hunter. No doubt, chasing bloodthirsty renegades distorted his perception of everyone.

Taking into account Raven's mixed heritage, she suspected he had encountered racism, bigotry, brutality and who knew what else. The scars on his back indicated that he'd endured difficult times and he'd lost his faith in humanity. Raven had become isolated because of his Native background and insulated by his indifference to other people's opinion of him.

As much as she wanted to probe into Raven's past to understand what made him the hard-edged, mistrusting man he was, this wasn't the time or place. In the coach, whispering in his ear was the extent of the privacy between them. And so, she scrunched down the way Raven had and closed her eyes to catch up on the sleep she'd lost while making last-minute arrangements for this trip.

Chapter Four

An hour later, someone poked Eva on the shoulder. Groggily she opened her eyes, shocked to find her head on Raven's chest and her hand flung across his abdomen. She nearly recoiled to sit upright but she remembered she was playing a charade. Cuddling up to her supposed husband wouldn't be considered improper.

A shiver of unexpected pleasure riveted her when Raven's warm breath caressed her neck. "Better move your hand off my lap before you embarrass both of us. I'm going to need a cold bath if you plan to sprawl all over me until lunch. Good thing the relay station is up ahead."

Heat suffused her face. She shifted her hand and arm then levered herself upright as casually as she knew how. The fact that she felt innately secure and comfortable with Raven disturbed her. She supposed that since he was straightforward and assured her that he considered her a nuisance she wasn't as leery of his intentions. She couldn't say the same for the men who moved in her social circle, however. They told her what they presumed she wanted to hear to draw her interest. They relied on effusive flattery to win her affection.

That wasn't a problem with Raven.

How refreshing to encounter a man who wanted her out of his hair rather than schemed to part her from her fortune, she mused as she silently appraised him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked warily.

She cast him a drowsy smile. “Because I’m only half-awake. I’ll be my old self in a few minutes.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he murmured against her ear, causing a stream of unwanted tingles to trickle through her.

She ignored the taunt and the arousing sensation by focusing on the landscape outside the window. The stage route skirted the fissured mountain range, providing a scenic view of craggy precipices bracketed by rugged ridges and mesas. Some of the towering summits were snow-capped while others were a tumbling cascade of boulders. There were also peaks that stood like green-clad soldiers barricading the entrance to the wilderness. Colorful wildflowers between crests waved in the breeze, making Eva wish she had time for exploring.

She had made an excursion into the mountains two years earlier with Roger and Sadie Philbert. The invigorating climb and panoramic views had captivated her. Although the Philberts decided one strenuous adventure into the wilderness was enough for them, Eva had enjoyed the rugged beauty and the challenge.

The trip reminded her of the hikes she’d made with her father when she was a child. Hoping her sister would delight in the experience, Eva had hired a guide to take her and Lydia on a short jaunt the previous year. Lydia also decided that city life appealed to her more than roughing it in the mountains. She had announced that Eva would have to make her next excursion alone. And here Eva was, striking off to overtake that slimy weasel

Gordon.

Her thoughts trailed off when George Knott shouted out that they were near the rest stop at the base of the looming cliff. She noticed Raven had come to alert attention and he was the first to step down from the coach. Like a great cat scanning the terrain, he searched for signs of trouble before pivoting to help her down.

Eva tried to control the baffling tingles she experienced when his hands encircled her waist. Erotic speculations ricocheted around her mind as her body brushed suggestively against his masculine contours.

“We’ll be here ’bout fifteen minutes to check the undercarriage. A brisk walk is usually a good idea to get circulation goin’ again,” George suggested in a slurred voice.

While two scraggly-looking attendants hunkered down to check the wheels, hubs and carriage sling, Raven grasped her hand and veered away from the other passengers, who stretched this way and that to work kinks from their necks and backs.

“You’re being extremely careful, I see,” she said as he zigzagged in and out of the pines and cottonwoods that lined the narrow creek.

“I don’t want you hurt because of me,” he insisted. “Besides, it makes me look bad if I can’t protect my own wife.” He halted abruptly then spun to face her. “I’ve been thinking it over for an hour and I’ve decided you should go home on the next stage that comes through here.”

She stared disparagingly at him. “Just because I’m pretending

to be your wife, don't think you can tell me what to do, Jo-Dan."

"Don't call me that," he said and scowled.

"Don't tell me to go home," she countered. "I'm going to find that lowdown, good-for-nothing swindler and recover the horse and every red cent he stole from Lydia."

"How many red cents are we talking about?"

"Doesn't matter." She flicked her wrist dismissively. "It's the principle of the matter."

Raven barked a laugh. "You're in the wrong neck of the woods to avenge your strong sense of fair play to your personal satisfaction. I can tell you from experience that life isn't a damn bit fair. If you don't believe it, ask the Cheyenne people whom Colonel Chivington massacred at Sand Creek in Colorado, and then suffered through George Custer's ambush on the Washita River in Indian Territory."

Eva grimaced at the thought of Raven's family encountering such a disastrous fate. She remembered reading about the Sand Creek Massacre investigation. Her private tutor had described it as one of the most brutal and insensitive crimes in the country.

"Were you there?" she asked gently.

He nodded abruptly. "I was twelve years old when Chivington and his soldiers killed my mother, uncle and all of my cousins except one," he said in a grim voice. "Blackowl and I survived by pretending to have drowned. We floated facedown in the stream until the soldiers passed. Then we came ashore to confiscate a horse. We headed for cover in the mountains and then took

refuge with a band of Utes.”

“I lost my mother to illness when I was five and my father died when I was sixteen,” she confided. “But I cannot fathom how awful it would be to endure a cruel massacre that senselessly took your family from you.”

“It was hell,” Raven muttered as he stared at the towering precipices. “Two years later I located my father at the trading rendezvous near Pine Crest. He thought I had perished, too. In the meantime, he’d married a white woman and settled into town life. Although I wasn’t accepted into polite society more readily than I am now, my father was determined to indoctrinate me into white culture.” He pulled a face. “It didn’t help that I inherited a racist stepbrother who made my life miserable. When my father died, I cleared out. At eighteen I hired on to ride shotgun for coaches and express trains before venturing out on my own.”

“But you never used your impressive skills to scout for renegades for the army,” she presumed.

“Hell no,” he grumbled. “Soldiers in uniforms bring back too many bitter memories. I’ll be damned if I’ll help them track runaway warriors from other tribes so they can herd them like cattle to those hated reservations.”

To say that Raven harbored hard feelings was an understatement. Not that she blamed him. She was still bitter about being used by Felix Winslow, who professed to love her until his dying day...and discarded her for another woman so fast it made her head spin. So who was she to pass judgment?

“Stay here.” Raven drew a peacemaker from his holster then pressed it into her hand. “Do you know how to use this?”

“Sort of,” she hedged.

“You can always use it as a club if you’re desperate,” he suggested before he slinked away.

“Where—?”

She compressed her lips when Raven disappeared into the bushes. She glanced around, wondering what his trained senses had seen or heard that she had missed. Then, in the near distance, she heard the thud of retreating hoof-beats. A moment later Raven appeared, swearing in what she presumed to be the Cheyenne language.

“Did you see who it was?” she asked as he approached.

“No. Which is all the more reason for you to wait at this station to catch the returning stage.”

“I made it perfectly clear that I’m not abandoning my mission,” she retorted sternly.

“How many more times do I have to win this argument?” he shot back. “Any association with me puts you in danger. How do you think you’re going to avenge your kid sister if you’re dead or worse?”

“What’s worse than dead?” she said, smirking.

“Don’t ask.” He clutched her hand to lead her down to the creek for another refreshing drink from a spring-fed stream.

Eva had the unmistakable feeling that Raven had seen the worst humankind could do to one another. In comparison to his

exploits, she was hopelessly sheltered and naive. Nevertheless, her fierce sense of justice and her devotion to her sister refused to let her give up when the going got a mite tough. She would see this through, whether Raven approved or not—which he obviously didn't.

“All right, how about a compromise,” Raven suggested as he reclaimed the pistol so she could sip water with her cupped hands. “You go home and I'll track this Carter character after I've trained a dependable saddle horse. Give me two weeks to work with a green-broke mount then I'll search for Carter.”

“In two weeks Gordon could be anywhere,” she argued. “Even out of the state if he's so inclined. I don't have to tell you that cold trails are difficult to follow. Gordon is obviously in the area because he sold the carriage just last night. If he heads for the hills there are but three mining camps in the area called Devil's Triangle for me to search. I intend to visit Purgatory Gulch, Satan's Bluff and Hell's Corner before I give up and go home.”

“If you think that claiming to be my wife, while you tramp around in those rowdy camps, is going to keep you safe then you're sadly mistaken,” Raven said harshly. “Some of those men working claims haven't seen a woman in months. Years maybe. Don't expect the polite consideration you're accustomed to in civilization. There are no laws and no rules, except survival of the strongest and you'd be an easy mark.”

She knew he was trying his damndest to impress upon her the danger she might face, but she wanted to apprehend Gordon

so badly that it was an obsession.

Besides, she had vowed to her father on his deathbed that she'd protect Lydia. She had failed miserably. And because she hadn't sought revenge on Felix Winslow for hurting her, she wanted to make an example of Gordon to compensate for her ill feelings toward the conniving con men of the world.

"I can take care of myself," she assured Raven.

His reply was a contradicting snort.

"I can hold my own with you, can't I? I'm not afraid of you, Raven. Fear is not the feeling tormenting me."

Compelled by some emotion she refused to name or delve into too deeply, she framed his bearded face with her hands. His catlike eyes glowed as she drew his head to hers. When her lips touched his mouth experimentally, she realized she'd wanted to taste him since... Well, she couldn't remember precisely when the forbidden craving began, but the casual pecks she'd planted on his cheek and chin earlier today had only whetted her appetite.

Despite his stubborn refusal to assist her, in spite of their ongoing conflict and her solemn vow never to let a man matter to her again, she wanted something from this man that she craved from no one else.

Raven's kiss was surprisingly gentle and the taste of him urged her closer—as close as she'd been when she'd used his muscular body as a cushion during her nap on the stagecoach. As close as they had been when he sprawled on top of her to shield her from the flying bullet.

In this fanciful moment outside the realm of time and reality, in this secluded cove by the creek, Eva cast off her wary inhibitions and looped her arms around Raven's neck. She leaned into him, enjoying the feel of her body meshed against his masculine contours, marveling at the fact that she'd taken the initiative with a man for the first time in her life.

"You aren't playing fair and this is no way to win an argument," Raven rasped after he broke the kiss. "Next thing I know you'll be offering me this lush body of yours if I'll take this assignment."

She grinned at him, feeling oddly confident and comfortable in the circle of his brawny arms. "Would you take it? In addition to a premium rate for bounty?"

He smiled down at her, his fascinating eyes flickering with playful mischief. Eva felt her heart thud against her ribs and stick there momentarily, even when he said, "No, hellion, I told you that you are a pain in the ass."

He angled his dark head and his gaze locked with hers as he took her mouth beneath his. His words were in direct contrast to the smoldering heat and hunger in his kiss.

Eva felt herself being swept up in the reckless moment. His arms contracted, lifting her off the ground. He pressed her against his hips as his tongue plunged between her lips. She felt his aroused flesh between her thighs and her body responded instantaneously. She couldn't get close enough to satisfy the burgeoning craving, couldn't kiss him hard enough or deeply

enough to appease the white-hot need that suddenly burned her alive.

Sweet mercy! Where had all these wild, desperate feelings and sizzling sensations come from? Had she suppressed physical desire for too many years, in her effort to avoid the wiles and entrapments of cunning adventurers? And why did this man, who didn't particularly like her, have to be the one who inflamed her with incredible hunger?

Eva's head was still spinning like a windmill when Raven suddenly set her to her feet and stepped away. He stared at her as if she were insane. Or he was. Then his thick brows bunched over his green-gold eyes and he scowled at her.

"You are trying to seduce me into taking this assignment, aren't you? Damn it, Eva!"

She puffed up with offended dignity. "I did no such thing! You're the one who tried to lure me into your bed last night." Shame and anger flooded her cheeks. "I can't begin to explain why I thought it was a good idea to kiss you. It was foolish and reckless and I don't care if you strike off to train a blasted horse while I track Gordon myself. No matter what, I will get the job done!"

Furious with herself for her lapse of good judgment—and feeling incredibly self-conscious to boot—she lurched around to hike back to the relay station. She must be out of her mind to be so attracted to a man who had no use for her whatsoever.

"Don't kiss me like that again," he called after her.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” she said over her shoulder.

Besides, she’d liked kissing him way too much and she would cut out her tongue before she admitted it to that infuriating man.

“Don’t go haring off by yourself without paying attention to your surroundings,” Raven warned as she stamped off without so much as a backward glance.

Raven blew out his breath. He hadn’t meant to pick a fight with Eva right now. Apparently, it came naturally for him. She made him feel reckless and vulnerable. Plus, she was as headstrong as he was, no doubt about that.

The more conflict between them, the better off he’d be. He wished he’d remembered that before he kissed her and discovered that she tasted like honey, smelled as fresh and wholesome as the whole outdoors...and felt like heaven in his arms.

Holy hell! Dealing with the scalding sensations she set off inside him was the last thing he needed to distract him while an unknown sniper lurked around. Already Eva had come dangerously close to being shot by a bullet meant for him.

He cringed at the thought of her being hurt or killed because of her association with him.

Marshal Doyle in Denver had warned him the Widow Flanders and Buster’s family were hell-bent on revenge. Since that clan of ruffians was as thick as thieves, whomever she’d hired to gun him down must be taking the job seriously.

The fact that someone wanted him dead was nothing new.

Besides, he faced danger on a daily basis. He had made peace with the prospect of his own demise after watching the massacre that had destroyed most of his Cheyenne family. But he was not prepared to claim responsibility for Eva's death.

He barely knew that firebrand but that didn't seem to matter. She provoked all sorts of intense sentiments and sensations that he usually had no difficulty controlling. But here she was, the picture of beauty and spirit, right in his face, right in his arms... and now she was the lingering taste on his lips.

The disturbing thought prompted him to take another sip of water, hoping to wash away her taste. It was a waste of time. And he had no idea how to erase the memory of her shapely body imprinted on his.

"Hell and damnation." Raven expelled an exasperated breath then inhaled fresh air, hoping to clear his head and get his unruly male body under control.

He stood in the exact spot where he'd kissed Eva with wild desperation—and she had kissed him back the same way. When the memory and sensations tried to overpower him again, he focused his concentration on scanning the hillsides. He'd encountered enough precarious situations the past decade to sense trouble. And he definitely sensed trouble now. Hell, he could practically hear death rattles.

The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention, prompting him to retreat into the pockets of shadows in the trees. He knew there was a narrow trail leading to the ridge to the west because

he'd followed it as a child and had used it three years ago while searching for the drunken murderer wanted in Leadville.

Raven stared up the rocky slopes and noticed a flash of color among the trees. Someone was lying in wait. Thankfully, he hadn't become an easy target for another ambush attempt.

A horse nickered in the distance, confirming his suspicion. Raven jogged off when he heard the driver announce it was time to board the coach. He circled to step into the opposite side of the coach, convinced that he was being stalked and that he had been marked for death.

No one in the coach uttered a word when Eva piled onto the seat. She sat catty-corner to him and never once glanced in his direction. It was clear to everyone that she wasn't speaking to him.

"Lover's spat?" Frank Albers questioned as he rolled a silver dollar deftly over his fingers.

Apparently, Eva overheard because she looked over at Raven and held his gaze while he replied, "Just a difference of opinion. Now that I think about it, I was probably wrong."

Frank snickered when he noticed the smile on Eva's lips. "A wise man once told me that if husbands knew how to say they were sorry and they were wrong, marriages would run smoother." He winked at Raven. "You're halfway there."

For the life of him, he didn't know why he'd bypassed the chance to fuel the anger that had sent Eva stamping off earlier. The only explanation was that he was turning into mush—all

because of a beautiful but feisty female who couldn't possibly be more than a footnote in the chronicles of his hardscrabble life. Why should he care if Eva Whoever-she-was was annoyed with him? He shouldn't...

Then she smiled and those luminous brown eyes twinkled with inner spirit. He turned into a mindless sap and smiled back at her.

Raven was reasonably sure that goofy smile was still plastered on his face when a loud clap of thunder shook loose his stalled thoughts. He glanced through the window to see a thunderstorm skirting the mountains. The bank of gray clouds that had scraped the summits left a curtain of rain sweeping over the stagecoach. The driver cracked his whip over the team of horses, hoping to outrun the cloudburst.

Rather than huddling against the seat, Eva outstretched her hand to catch the oversize raindrops then she inhaled a deep breath of rain-scented air. Spellbound, Raven watched her tilt her face to the mist swirling around the window. A woman who embraced storms? What else did she like? he wondered.

Was she really the sister of the woman Gordon had betrayed? Or was she the woman scorned? There was also the possibility that she had been Gordon's accomplice and he had double-crossed her by riding off with the extorted money. Perhaps she wanted her cut and wasn't giving up until she found him.

Why wouldn't she divulge her last name? he wondered. That made him highly suspicious. He knew she wasn't telling him the whole story. He could sense it.

You're thinking too damn hard, Raven. Before long, you'll be gone and Eva will continue her crusade with or without you.

Raven glanced away, watching the curtain of rain sweep past the stagecoach then fizzle out as if it hadn't been there at all. If nothing else, the shower settled the dust. At best, the midday storm might have waylaid the unidentified bushwhacker. Better yet, he might slip and fall on the treacherous mountain trails. If he ended up at the bottom of a canyon, it would be one less thing for Raven to fret about.

Of course, that would be too easy. When had life been easy? Never that Raven could recall.

"Lunch will be served at the upcoming station!" George called down to the passengers. "Eat heartily, friends, because it will be a long ride before we stop for supper."

Raven noted the slur in George's voice. Stage drivers were known to be heavy drinkers, he recalled. George had been tipping his stashed bottle all morning. That explained the bushy-haired man's daring when he'd asked how Raven possibly could have married a woman like Eva. He hadn't taken offense to the tactless question. It was obvious to everyone with eyes in his head that he and Eva didn't belong together.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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