
Chapter 1

U.S. MARSHAL CLINT GARMEN tried to push away his annoyance as he waited for the afternoon stage to get into town. He shifted from foot to foot as he stood on the platform, checking his pocket watch every few minutes. To say he was irritated, was an understatement. He'd sent a telegram to headquarters reporting his assignment complete after he caught up with that gang of outlaws he'd been sent after, but rather than getting one telegram in answer, he'd gotten two. One of the messages had politely asked him to stay where he was until he was contacted again, but the second...

The second telegram had ordered him to meet the stage coming in today and to cooperate with the person who would be on the stagecoach. The person's name was Elizabeth Morgan, obviously a woman, but one whose last name matched that of the newest senator from Texas. If someone expected him to waste his time playing escort for the wife or sister or daughter of a politician, they had a nasty surprise coming. Clint had better things to do with his time than

babysitting a woman while she got a close-up look at the Wild West.

Which means I'll probably end up putting her on the next stage going back east, Clint thought as he shifted his big body in the chair in front of the stage office. *The senator won't like my refusing and will probably try to make trouble for me, but that's actually a good thing. If my people don't back me up the way they should, I'll just hand them my badge and walk away. There are dozens of towns looking for a good sheriff, decent towns, filled with decent people. I'll just pick one and accept a different kind of badge.*

The thought of settling down didn't bother Clint the way the idea once had. He'd spent the last five years always on the move, constantly looking for men who had broken the law and then run off. In the beginning, Clint had enjoyed camping out and being on his own, but lately, being alone had somehow changed to being lonely. He'd worked hard the last five years, risking his life many times over, and all he had to show for it was some money in the bank, a bunch of commendations, and a growing conviction that his life was empty of everything of value. He had no family, no one to go home to at night, and he was beginning to think he might like those things.

Two people went by on the wooden sidewalk, a man and a woman, and they were so wrapped up in each other that they didn't even see him. Clint followed them with his gaze, almost able to feel the man's satisfaction. A surge of envy rose so strongly that Clint had to fight to rid himself of it. The only women he got involved with were saloon girls, the kind who worked the upstairs rooms and were gone as soon as they'd done their job and were paid. He'd once tried talking to a couple of those girls, but they'd had no interest in conversation unless they were paid to listen.

"The stage ought to be here in just a little while, Marshal," a voice said, pulling Clint out of his thoughts. The

voice belonged to the man who ran the stage office, and just as he had in the office earlier, the man both looked and sounded nervous. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off Clint's badge, and that was a reaction too many people showed. Everyone wanted a marshal around when there was trouble, but once the trouble was over, they couldn't seem to see that marshal as anything but a gunman with a badge... and Clint hated that.

"Thank you," Clint responded quietly, and the anxious man nodded before hurrying back into his office. It was a fairly nice day, and chances were good that the man would have waited for the stage outside—if one of his chairs hadn't been occupied by Clint. There was nothing to do about the situation but shake his head just a little, so Clint did that and went back to simply waiting.

About fifteen minutes later, Clint's patience finally paid off. The coach, being pulled by its six horses, came racing up the street, beginning to slow as it approached the office. The driver pulled the horses to a stop with the coach itself directly in front of the office, and the man riding shotgun left the box to open the coach door on his way to the back where the luggage was stowed. There was also luggage on the top of the stage, and after tying off the reins, the driver turned to take care of those bags himself.

Three men left the stage, one after the other, two of them looking like drummers and the third like a man who was finally home. That last man, husky and dressed better than the drummers, turned once he was on the ground, to offer a hand to someone still inside the coach. That gesture, of course, killed Clint's hope that the woman he was supposed to meet had somehow missed her connection. The woman was there, all right, and as she stepped carefully out of the coach, all Clint could do was stare.

Instead of the older woman or delicate young female

Clint had been half expecting, the woman smiling her thanks to the man for his help was a black-haired, green-eyed vision. A touch taller than average, she seemed willowy and graceful, rather than gawky, her dark blue dress hugging a figure that could only be called lush. There should have been something vapid in her eyes and smile, something that showed she wasn't worth knowing, but instead, there was the sharpness of intelligence and the hint of a sense of humor. That combination pulled Clint to his feet and over to the stage almost before he knew he was about to move.

"... nice of you, Marcus, but I am being met," the woman was saying in a voice like silk as Clint reached her and the man. "This is Marshal Garmen, I believe?"

She'd turned to Clint with the last of her words, and the man also turned his head but not with the same expression. Marcus looked at Clint with something less than approval, which was really too bad about him.

"Yes, I'm Clint Garmen," Clint agreed with his own smile. "And you must be Elizabeth Morgan."

"See, Marcus, Marshal Garmen is here, just as I said he would be," Elizabeth Morgan went on to her companion, her smile still bright and friendly. "That means you can continue on your way home without delay."

"The ranch has waited for me for two weeks already, so it won't have any trouble waitin' another hour or so," Marcus responded as he squared his shoulders, his tone showing that he'd made up his mind. "The least I can do is see you to the hotel and up to your room."

"All right, I think it's time to stop beating around the bush," Elizabeth Morgan said before Clint could step in, her smile gone and her tone of voice having hardened. "I didn't say anything when you appointed yourself my bodyguard during the trip, Marcus, but the trip is over. I didn't really need your help to begin with, but my daddy raised me to be

polite to people who were only trying to help. Right now, you've stopped trying to help and have started to be annoying, so just turn around and walk away from me. If you don't, you'll wish you had."

"You can't be figurin' on makin' me wish I left on your own, so you must be expectin' this lawman to do it for you," Marcus drawled, his gaze moving over the woman as he spoke. "Once I send him on his way, it'll just be the two of us together again, this time without those drummers. I'm a man with property and position, girl, so the law jumps when I talk. And now that I'm thinkin' about it, why waste time puttin' you in the hotel when you'll be comin' out to my ranch tomorrow anyway? We'll go straight to my ranch, and then—"

"The lady asked you to move along, Marcus," Clint interrupted to point out in a mild voice that still drew the man's attention to him. "This lawman doesn't jump for anybody, not unless it's to jump on someone. Take the lady's advice and get going before you find out the hard way that your company isn't wanted."

The look in the husky man's eyes was one of dismissal before he turned back to Elizabeth Morgan to put an arm around her shoulders. Marcus's smile was more of a smirk as he opened his mouth to say something to the woman, and once again, Clint didn't get the chance to let the man know how big a mistake he was making. Marcus's smile and words froze together as his arm stopped before touching Elizabeth, and it was only a moment before Clint found out why all that had happened.

"That's right, Marcus, it's a derringer you feel pressing into your middle," Elizabeth said in that silken voice, a smile curving her lips again. "If you're not gone by the time I count to five, I'm going to pull the trigger, and I doubt if there's a man in this town who'll blame me for doing it. Your

ranch is someplace I won't ever be going. One... two... three... "

It actually took to the count of three before Marcus understood that the woman wasn't bluffing; once he did, he turned and quickly walked away. Clint had known at once that Elizabeth wasn't bluffing, and by the time he looked back at her after making sure that Marcus meant to keep going, the derringer wasn't in sight any longer.

"I knew I'd probably have trouble with him once we got to this town, but it would have been foolish to make a fuss any sooner," Elizabeth said with an annoyed shake of her head. "Why is it that every man I meet thinks he's the first man to ever find me attractive—and the first to decide to try to do something about that attraction? Talk about being sick and tired of the same old thing..." The beauty looked up at him, shrugged, and then went on, "I saw the hotel on the other side of the street from the stagecoach, Marshal, so we'd better collect my luggage and get over there."

"Your luggage has already been collected by the hotel's boy," Clint said, following her to the back of the stage before pointing. "I made the arrangement before the stage got in."

The boy, his red hair falling into his eyes, stood in front of the hotel struggling with two heavy-looking carpet bags and a long leather case of some kind. Behind them, people had arrived to board the stagecoach, so when Elizabeth moved toward the boy, Clint simply followed along behind.

"That was a good idea, Marshal, and I commend you for thinking of it," Elizabeth said over her shoulder, barely turning her head in his direction. "Once I have a room, we can sit down and talk, and then I'll be able to answer the questions you probably have. Is there a restaurant as part of the hotel, and if so, is it any good? I'm just about starving, so the food had better be good."

"Yes, the hotel has a dining room where more people

than just the hotel guests eat," Clint answered, trying to decide between annoyance and surprise. The way the woman spoke to him made him feel like a servant, but the fact that she hadn't asked about the best restaurant in town had surprised him. Most of those who were new to the west tended to confuse these small towns with the city they came from. The only other place to eat in town was at the boarding house, and those who weren't boarding at the place paid double for the same food.

"Then, hopefully, the food is acceptable," Elizabeth said as she raised her skirts to move up to the sidewalk where the boy had stood before tottering into the hotel once he saw Clint coming. "As soon as my things are in my room, we'll give it a try."

There wasn't much to say to that, so Clint simply followed the woman into the hotel. In age, Elizabeth Morgan was more of a girl than a woman, but the self-assured way she handled herself said that if anyone called her a girl, the way Marcus had, she would quickly teach them better.

But there was a difference between being self-assured and being rude, and as far as Clint was concerned, this girl—woman—had started to step over the line. He didn't take to that, from anyone, but it was possible Elizabeth was still reacting to what Marcus had said and done, and that was why she acted the way she did. If that was the case, she would settle down once her blood was no longer up. If not, and this was her normal demeanor, then Clint would have some words for her—at the very least.

It didn't take long for Elizabeth to sign the guest register, and then she followed the red-haired boy up the stairs to the room she'd been given the key to. Clint walked over to one of the lobby chairs and sat down, resigned to even more waiting, but the time turned out to be a lot shorter than he'd expected. Surprising, for a woman like Elizabeth, or the

woman he'd expected her to be. No more than five minutes after the boy had come down with a big smile on his face, suggesting that Elizabeth had tipped him, Elizabeth herself came down a bit more slowly. She'd taken off her hat and now held an envelope as well as carrying the same purse she'd had on the stage, but other than that, she hadn't done anything to change her appearance. Another surprise.

"Will you be joining me in the meal, Marshal?" she asked when Clint rose and walked to meet her at the foot of the stairs. "I only mean to eat enough to hold me until supper, and after my evening meal, I'll be going straight to bed. We do want to get an early start tomorrow morning."

"A start for where?" Clint asked, his annoyance back and doubled as he spoke to the back of her head. Once she'd handed down her pronouncements, she'd turned toward the door that led to the hotel's restaurant, a direction she'd obviously asked about before going up to her room. This woman was already a thorn in his side. "And if no one ever mentioned this to you before, telling someone something and then walking off, is very unmannerly. The least you can do is invite that someone to walk beside you, rather than expecting them to tag along behind you like a pet of some kind."

"I do apologize, Marshal, but my appetite seems to be refusing to remember its manners," Elizabeth said at once, sending him a glance before she opened the door into the restaurant area. "Once I've satisfied that appetite, you'll hopefully find me a lot more reasonable."

There had been a faint trace of amusement of some kind behind Elizabeth's words, and Clint didn't like it, no matter what reason lay behind the reaction. Elizabeth Morgan was obviously a woman who was used to getting her own way, and any apologies she made were simply words without meaning. Elizabeth seemed to prefer to "handle" people, making no effort to find out that Clint Garmen was someone

who hated to be "handled." He would have to let her know that about himself, and sooner, rather than later, if this kept on.

There weren't many people in the restaurant at that time of day, but Elizabeth still chose a table that was as far from the nearest diner as it could be. The serving lady came over to ask about coffee, and when both Elizabeth and Clint accepted the offer, the woman went off to fetch the drinks. Elizabeth sat silently until the cups, along with cream and sugar, were brought and put in front of each of them, and then she ordered a chicken sandwich. When the woman had left again, Elizabeth picked up the envelope she'd put on the table and handed it to Clint.

"These are your official orders, Marshal, but I can give you the story in just a few words," she said in a soft voice. "Senator Ritcher, from this state of Wyoming, has been shot and killed, and we're going after his killer."

"Ritcher is dead?" Clint asked, just holding the envelope as he stared at Elizabeth with the shocked surprise he felt. "But Ritcher was a decent man... When did this happen, and who did it? I had not heard anything about it."

"It happened a little more than two weeks ago, in his home in Washington, D.C.," Elizabeth answered, her expression having turned grim. "I was there, visiting his wife Lena and his daughter Joanne, and we were witnesses to the murder. The man gave the name of George Robertson, claiming to be from the town of River Bend, which is about three days west of this town. After the murder, someone claimed that the man wasn't George Robertson after all, but they didn't know what his name really was. I was told that this was where you were expected to be by the time I got here, so I left the very next day. We'll be going to River Bend to look around, and if the man isn't there, we'll hopefully find someone who recognizes his description."

While she spoke, Elizabeth had been adding sugar and cream to her coffee. When she paused to sip from the cup, Clint shook his head.

"I'm sorry as hell that Ritcher is gone, and *I* will be leaving for River Bend first thing in the morning," he said as he watched Elizabeth closely. "What I haven't heard, though, is a reason for you to ride with me, so we'll do the smart thing and have you wait for me here. I'll find this George Robertson and bring him back with me, and then you can take a look at him."

"And if he isn't the murderer?" Elizabeth countered at once, in a way that told Clint she'd expected his argument. "Not only will you have wasted almost a week, assuming you find Robertson the minute you ride into River Bend and then turn right around, but you'll also have warned the real murderer that you're looking for him. If the man was foolish enough to return home, rather than go into hiding, he'll know better than to stick around after you show up and arrest the wrong man. And that could be what the murderer wants, for you to arrest the wrong man. Then he'll have accomplished his aim and seen it done, so there won't be any more reason for him to stick around."

Clint preferred his coffee black, so he picked up his cup and took a sip while he thought. The woman had made a couple of very good points, but he really didn't want to be saddled with an easterner, especially this one, for the next week or so. There had to be something that would convince her to stay behind without his needing to lay down the law...

"If I wait to arrest Robertson when no one else is around, your most telling points will be covered," Clint mused, speaking mostly to his coffee cup. "And bringing Robertson back here, will be easier than trying to find a surrey for you to ride in. Using a buckboard would slow me down too

much, and that doesn't even count the way you'll need to camp out if you come along. That means—"

"That means you have no idea who you're dealing with," Elizabeth interrupted, complete dismissal in the way she gestured with one hand. "I won't be using a surrey or a buckboard. I'll be using a horse, just the way you mean to. I grew up on my father's ranch in Texas, after all, so riding and camping out are things I've been doing since I was three. Are there any other silly objections on your list?" She gave him an obvious look of annoyance.

The serving lady came then to put a plate with Elizabeth's sandwich in front of her, so Clint used the time to smooth out the growl of temper in his head. Losing his temper with Elizabeth, would mean losing the argument entirely, so Clint used a mental fist to keep his temper in check and put forward what was really his best "objection".

"Are you trying to claim that having been raised on a ranch in Texas means no one will raise even a single eyebrow when you and I ride out together without a chaperone?" Clint watched that pretty face carefully as he spoke, expecting a faint trace of pink at the least, a nice flush of red at best. "I know most men cross the street in order to avoid having to look at you more closely, but men like me, who spend most of their time alone, have been known to be less than choosy. If you don't know what I mean, you can send your father a telegram and ask him."

"Sending a telegram won't be necessary, Marshal," the miserable female countered as she lifted her sandwich without showing even the smallest trace of embarrassment.

The amusement behind her words was so clear that Clint wanted to grab her, put her over his knee, lift up those blue skirts, and then—

"It was nice of you to think of my reputation, but you have nothing to worry about on that score," she continued,

interrupting his thoughts. "I'm a widow who refuses to remarry, so I have no reputation that needs protecting. And besides, everyone knows the kind of man you are, so since I'll be in charge of our mission, I'll also be perfectly safe." Calm, self-assured, to the point.

"Would you like to tell me what that's supposed to mean?" Clint demanded, a large chunk of temper pulling out of his grip. "What kind of man am I supposed to be that everyone knows all about it?"

"The kind of man you're supposed to be is a decent one, Marshal," Elizabeth told him after she'd swallowed, her gaze as steady as her voice. "That means no one expects you to try taking advantage of me once we're alone, and you also have a reputation for following orders. Since I'm hardly likely to order you to attack me, there obviously won't be a problem of any kind."

She flashed him a quick, meaningless smile before giving all her attention to the sandwich, and what she'd said let Clint sit back with his temper under control again. So that was why she'd decided that she would be in charge, to calm the worry she supposedly didn't feel. She wasn't embarrassed at the thought of being alone with him, she was nervous, but if she were in charge, then there would be nothing to worry about. After all, everyone knew how well he followed orders...

Clint sipped from his cup to hide the wry smile he would have shown otherwise. When the people back at his headquarters had told someone that he followed orders, they meant that he got the job done without finding all kinds of excuses as to why the job couldn't be done. That end result sometimes came about by his ignoring what was considered proper procedure, but the higher-ups would never admit that to anyone and thereby make themselves look foolish.

So, I can't very well just tell her that no one is ever in charge of

what I'm involved in but me, Clint mused, the thought showing that he'd abruptly changed his mind about letting Elizabeth Morgan ride with him. *If she's even half as good as she thinks she is, she won't slow me down, and having her on hand to identify the killer I'm after will make things easier. Not to mention the fact that having the company is something I suddenly find very appealing...*

And not just because Elizabeth Morgan was a very attractive woman. Her attitude was already beginning to fray the rope he had tied around his temper, but the part of him that had started to hate being alone again was willing to put up with a lot to keep the loneliness at bay. The fact that he wasn't likely to tolerate nonsense, only meant that the trip just might be more entertaining than a simple ride was expected to be.

When he set his cup back on the table, Clint noticed the envelope he'd all but forgotten about after having accepted it. She'd said that these were his orders and he'd taken her word for it, but it suddenly occurred to him that the envelope was sealed. If his orders turned out to be something other than what Elizabeth Morgan thought they were, it might be helpful to know it. Not that any orders to the contrary of what he intended were likely to make him change his mind. If the day came that someone tried to tell him how to do his job, that would be the day he handed over his badge without waiting for anything else.

The envelope was on the thick side because it contained three pieces of paper. One of the papers was an arrest warrant for the murderer of Senator William Ritcher, without any specific name being inserted. The second paper was his authorization to go after said murderer and was signed by the Secretary of State, rather than by the man who usually gave Clint his assignments. Obviously, someone wanted to make sure that Clint knew just how important this job really was.

The third page was thick, expensive writing paper, and the handwriting was bold and aggressive but perfectly easy to read. It was also signed by Randolph Morgan, the new senator from the state of Texas.

"Dear Marshal Garmen," the letter started, suggesting that it was personal, rather than official business that would be discussed. "You're most likely rather annoyed by now, and for that you have my sincere apologies. My daughter was named Elizabeth in the hopes that she would turn out to be sweet and demure, but Fate obviously willed it otherwise when she was given the nickname of Raven.

"I was very much against her traveling west in search of the murderer of our good friend Bill Ritcher, but she is the only eyewitness in any condition to help catch the miscreant. Bill's wife and daughter are devastated by their loss and, in any event, would be even worse in Elizabeth's place. Bill's secretary, a young man named Arthur Faring, the only other person to get a good look at the assassin, fainted when the shots were fired. When someone suggested that he travel west, the poor man fainted a second time.

"So now, you have Elizabeth with you, and she's undoubtedly started to rearrange the entire town to make everything more to her liking. If you find it possible to overlook her attempts—or discover a miracle that will change that particular trait in her—you'll find me very grateful. My inquiries among those who know you, have assured me that you're a gentleman who can be relied on to behave honorably in every way, so I give over my daughter's safety and well-being into your hands without hesitation.

"You have a difficult job ahead of you, and my only regret is that Elizabeth could well make that job even harder. Over the years, I've cultivated patience as more than a simple virtue. The attitude has kept me from committing cold-

blooded murder, therefore, do I recommend the same to you, in the hopes that it will save you in the same way.

"Yours, Randolph Morgan."

The letter came as more than a small surprise, and Clint refolded everything and put the pages back in their envelope as he thought about what had been said—and what hadn't. So the girl's nickname was Raven, and as the boss' daughter, had probably started to take charge of everything at a very young age. Her father had probably doted on her and considered her actions cute, until the day came when he discovered that his adorable daughter had grown into a woman who always expected to get her own way. At that point, Randolph Morgan had found himself helpless, but the letter had hinted that he hoped Clint Garmen would not be the same.

Clint smiled to himself, his amusement caused by an idea that had just come to him. If Elizabeth expected to be in complete charge, then he would not argue the point. All he would do, would be to add one small provision to the agreement...

"Now that you have your orders, I've also been asked to give you this," Elizabeth said, once again drawing Clint out of his thoughts. He looked up to see that she'd produced a small pouch, probably from her purse, and had pushed the pouch in his direction. "That should be enough money for provisions for us and a horse and gear for me, all of which has to be ready at first light. Do you have any questions?"

"No, no questions," Clint murmured as he took the pouch and tucked it into his shirt. "Everything is perfectly clear now."

"Good," Elizabeth said before returning her attention to what was left of her sandwich. "I think it will be best if you don't join me for supper. We'll have enough of each other's company during the trip."

"As you like," Clint agreed, picking up the envelope before getting to his feet. "I'll be here at first light, with everything we'll need, and I'll see you then."

The girl's nod was more of a dismissal than simple agreement, which made Clint smile to himself again as he walked away. It was more than time Raven Morgan became Elizabeth Morgan again, and tomorrow ought to see the beginnings of that very desirable change...