

Chapter One

Southern California 1860s

It was the argument that woke him. Loud, strident voices, one female and one male, not to mention the sledgehammer that was playing a rhythmic tattoo in his brain. Stone forced his eyes to squint and allow a sliver of bright sunshine to hound him. Little by little, he opened them further and raised his head off the pillow to look around. Immediately, he noted he was naked—not unusual—he slept that way at home. But this wasn't home and he wasn't used to shedding his long johns, in case he needed to respond quickly to any unusual situation that might arise.

With a groan, he held his splitting head together with both hands and swung his feet off the side of the bed. The voices that awakened him moved down the hotel hallway and faded away.

He stumbled to the pitcher of cold water sitting on the dresser and poured some into the metal basin. Using his hands as a scoop, he splashed it on his face and behind his neck, willing himself to come awake.

Had he really drunk that much whiskey last night? He didn't think he had but his head felt like someone had run it up and down his mother's washboard, hung it out to dry, and then filled it with cotton wool. His mouth was parched so he greedily gulped a handful of water to pry his tongue loose.

Then he remembered. There had been a girl, a very beautiful girl, and he was sure he had come in with her. But where was she now?

Finishing his ablutions made him feel slightly better but he still couldn't remember what had happened to the girl. He'd met her at the Nugget last night and they'd spent the evening together, and then he'd brought her back here.

There weren't too many fillies who could match him shot for shot but she'd managed it. It had been a source of great amusement for him to drink with—his brain fished for her name, but couldn't quite remember it. Michelle? Millie? Something like that.

Wait! Mellon, that was it! Unusual name. Irish, or something like that. Didn't really sound Irish, but she'd been Irish, every feisty inch of her! Her name meant lightning in the old country and he thought her aptly named with her sizzling smile.

He shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs. The girl had intrigued Stone, and he was more than a little attracted to her buxom figure in the green satin dress. Her creamy breasts had tantalized him all evening and he had decided he had to have her, against his better judgment. After all, it wasn't as if he bedded a different girl in every town. No, something about Mellon had been very different—and very desirable. He could have sworn there was innocence peeking out at him from behind the canvas of lustrous green eyes but she hadn't acted like an innocent. He hadn't been sure she was a whore, either, but what else was she doing in the saloon?

Nice girls didn't frequent saloons.

Somehow, they'd never got around to discussing that. He wished she'd stayed until this morning so he could talk to her without alcohol numbing his senses.

He stared down at his butt naked self and concentrated hard. She must have left early, after they'd spent the night in bed, why else would he be without clothing? He sighed impatiently and rubbed his bristly chin as he lifted his head and stared at himself in the mirror. His gray-eyed

gaze stared back at him, mocking him at his brain's refusal to give over any information. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders in defeat. It was a damn shame he couldn't remember any of last night. The only thing he did remember were those creamy breasts playing hide and seek with his hot gaze all evening.

Disgruntled, his hard muscled limbs rippled beneath their tanned covering as he quickly dressed. When he picked up his wallet and realized his money was gone, he swore loudly. "Cheating little vixen!"

He should have known! How could he have been so naive? He berated himself and tried to bury the disappointment he felt at knowing she must have been a whore after all and a thief, to boot.

Stone fumed, grizzled, and then finally put the empty wallet back in his pants' pocket. Once he put on his boots and donned his dilapidated brown Stetson, he left the room.

It was a real bother but he'd have to go around to the bank and get a small loan to get him home. The McCormick name would be enough to secure all the cash he would need with a promissory note, but the whole episode was damned aggravating, and his sense of frustration weighed heavily on him. He could go back to the Nugget but the chances are she wouldn't see him. And he might end up in jail for his efforts to get cash back from a whore.

As he let himself out into the bright sunshine, he couldn't help squinting again. The headache wasn't totally gone and he couldn't believe how much he must have drunk to get that soused. Maybe he'd look up Miss Mellon at the Nugget after all and take his cash out of her thieving hide—if she was still around. With a grunt, he quickly discarded the idea, yet again. No point in buying trouble when his brothers would be expecting him home soon.

"Ah, Mr. McCormick, so good to see you again. How is your blushing bride this morning?" The booming voice grated on Stone's ears and he whirled to see a man of the cloth beaming at him and looking around him as if he were looking for the afore mentioned wife. The only problem was, Stone didn't have a wife, he wasn't married! He glanced behind him and beside him, to make sure the preacher wasn't talking to someone else but the beaming countenance remained fixed on him.

He looked closely at the man and answered cautiously, something seeming familiar about the jovial, rotund fellow. "I'm not married, Reverend, and how do you know my name? I don't come through Gold Rush very often."

The look of surprise and shock on the preacher's face made him uneasy. The shaggy white eyebrows shot up over indignant brown eyes and he stuttered, trying to get the words out. "B-b-but, I married you last night. You and your lovely fiancée! You couldn't wait to get married, remember? Rush thing and all that? You certainly paid me well to do so, even if you were both drunk as the lord, pardon the expression.

He crossed himself with vigor and continued, "I had to assume you knew what you were doing and you were both of age, so there was no problem. I even gave you a copy of the marriage certificate, which Mrs. McCormick took possession of!"

Stone's headache quickly got worse. He was flummoxed and his mouth worked like a fish out of water for a few seconds and then he blurted out, "I assure you, I'm not now, nor have I ever been, married! I know I would remember such a joyous and auspicious occasion so you must have me mixed up with someone else! Have you been imbibing, Reverend?"

The real problem was, the preacher's words were beginning to trigger flashes of unfamiliar happenings, sort of like dream sequences. Images of Mellon laughing, a cross in the lamplight. Could it be possible they had married? And if so, where in the hell was she?

The preacher sniffed and pulled himself up to his full height. "And I assure *you*, Mr. McCormick, you and your lady were married last night in my home. I know, because you rooted me and my wife out of bed to do so! If the marriage has gone awry already and you don't wish to remember it, that's your problem. But in my church records, *you* are a married man!" He turned and marched indignantly away as Stone stared after him, trying to digest the unpalatable facts that were being thrust upon him.

His stomach rumbled but he ignored it for the moment and turned towards the Nugget. Maybe his blushing bride had gone back to pick up some clothes or something. He rubbed his temple trying to ease the ache as his boot heels snapped across the boardwalk and through the swinging doors. It was early enough in the morning that not many were about, but that didn't matter. He bellied up to the bar and spoke to the balding bartender who was drying shot glasses and replacing them in the shelving behind him.

"Can you tell me if Mellon is here?" he asked, trying to remember her last name.

The barkeep looked blankly at him. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"Fiery little Irish girl, about this tall." Stone put his hand up to the middle of his chest. "Her name is Mellon and I met her here last night. She has green eyes and long reddish brown hair, all curly. She had on a green dress."

The barkeep's eyes lit up. "Ah yes, I remember her. She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"So where is she?"

The man shrugged. "I don't know, I never seen her before last night."

"She doesn't work here?" Stone got a sinking feeling in the pit of his rumbling stomach.

"No, sir. Like I said, I never seen her before. I'd know if she worked here, believe me. So would every other man in town!" He guffawed and winked and Stone felt like slipping his hands around the man's neck. Murderous rage was a good way to describe how he was feeling. The idea of any other man knowing Mellon in that way sent shards of jealousy deep into his gut.

"So you don't know where I can find her, then?"

The barkeep shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sorry."

A dead end! This was getting more and more confusing. If Mellon wasn't a tavern whore, then where did she come from? And why had she tricked him into marrying her? Because he was beginning to see, he *had* been tricked. It would have taken more than alcohol to get him to lose his wits as he had. Besides, alcohol usually left him with a hangover that wouldn't tolerate breakfast and he was starving.

No, the chit must have drugged him with something, but why? Surely not his money? She could have had that without getting married, so what was going on? She'd not only robbed him, but she'd deliberately stolen his name and he couldn't give up until he found out why.

Stone stepped back outside and looked for the bank sign. First things first. He'd get some cash and something to eat, then he'd go visit the preacher. Maybe he could at least find out the name of his so-called bride and then see about chasing her down. And when he caught her, the first thing he was going to do was to put her over his knee and spank her treacherous butt! He tried to picture what her bottom looked like and failed.

But if they'd spent the night together—and all signs pointed in that direction—and they really were married, then she might even be with child! No McCormick baby was going to be born without a father, not if he had anything to say about it. Especially his child! Clamping his jaws together and his hat to his head, he stalked off towards the bank.

It was an hour later, and Stone was just finishing his breakfast when they came in. There were two of them, and he didn't care for the look of them right off the bat. He made sure the loop

was off his gun holster under the table as they approached him, oily smiles intact. Either they wanted to sell him something or they figured he had something they wanted. He knew the type.

The first man looked like a banker. He was tall with dark hair graying at the temples and wearing a double-breasted, light blue suit, complete with shiny, black spit shined shoes. He would be the one who gave orders while the other looked like hired help. The shorter man's smile didn't reach his eyes and his clothes were dusty and trail worn. His hand seemed to hover above his gun and Stone noted the nervous twitch of his right eyebrow. He would be the hired help.

The banker held out his hand as he approached Stone. "Hello, I'm Evan Prescott and you must be Stonewall McCormick. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Stone was surprised once again, how was it that everyone seemed to know him while he didn't know anyone? More importantly, how did this man know his full name was Stonewall? His mother was a great admirer of Stonewall Jackson and she had blessed him with that name. Stone hated it but a man didn't disrespect his mother. He had shortened it to Stone as soon as he was able and folks had picked up on that very easily. He nodded and cautiously shook the man's hand. "Yes, I'm Stone McCormick, what can I do for you?"

Mr. Prescott waved his hand towards the chair. "May I?"

Stone nodded as the other man sat down across from him. His lackey stood behind him, his hand still hovering over his gun. It made Stone wonder why the man would need a bodyguard. He waited for Prescott to get to the point of his visit and he didn't waste any time.

"Well, now, I'd like to do a little business with you," replied Prescott, lighting up a cigar. "I'm willing to take that mine claim you filed on this morning off your hands for a very reasonable price."

Stone didn't even blink, his carefully guarded reaction keeping his face blank. This was the kind of man who counted on dropping a bombshell into your lap and learning from the reaction. Whatever was going on here, he had a sudden hunch it had to do with his alleged, runaway wife. He certainly hadn't filed on any mine claim.

"Now, why would you want to do that?" he asked smoothly, spearing a piece of scrambled eggs and ham on his fork. His mind was racing, trying to fill in the blanks as he watched Prescott gauging his reactions.

"Because I've been interested in Sean Flanagan's claim for some time now," replied Prescott, dropping ash off the cigar into the ashtray on the table. "He and his son, Mel, have been operating under squatter's rights on that useless piece of land and I've allowed it. I always figured I'd take it over once he was gone."

Stone's quick mind latched onto Flanagan having a son. Could Mel actually be Mellon?

Prescott took another puff off his cigar. "I'm a fair man. I admit Flanagan's been working the area, but now you've come along and filed a claim on it, and I have to assume it has something to do with that son of his being underage. I haven't seen Sean come into town lately and now, suddenly, you're here. Why is that?" His eyes narrowed as he watched Stone. "I'm willing to settle this as gentlemen and take it off your hands for what you think it's worth. What I'm *not* willing to do, is let you become the new claim squatter if old Sean has kicked the bucket or something."

Stone finished his plate in silence as he contemplated his options. Finally, he sat back, folded his arms and looked Prescott straight in the eye. "I'm willing to think over what you've said, Prescott. I'm a fair man, too, and I admit this has been somewhat sudden. Give me a week or two to think it over and I'll get back to you. Where can I find you?"

Prescott paused and then nodded. "I have an office in the bank; you can reach me there at any time. My partner has already told me you gave him a promissory note for some cash and that's fine. I assume you're of the Sacramento McCormicks?"

Stone nodded. That explained how this man knew his name, anyway.

"They have a good reputation for being fair minded people and sound business men, so I'll give you the time you're asking for and wait to hear from you." He stood up and tipped his hat to Stone, then turned and left the diner.

Stone watched him go, his mind working quickly. Like any small town, news seemed to travel fast. It wouldn't be long before Prescott became aware of his marriage, or maybe he already was but didn't tie it into this claim business. Either way, he needed to get to the assayer's office and get a map of that claim. After all, he couldn't allow Prescott to think he hadn't even been there.

Whatever was going on, it looked like Mellon might be in over her head and Stone found that very disturbing. He needed answers and the only way he was going to get them was to find his conspicuously absent little wife. He'd get his answers—after he turned her over his knee and gave her a damned good spanking.

Quickly, he shoved his chair back and flipped a few coins onto the table. The sooner he was on her trail, the better he'd feel. If she were in trouble, he wanted to be there to help her, in spite of her deceit. Why he felt that way, he wasn't sure—that made him even more disgruntled.

The assayer's office was off the back alley of the bank and Stone didn't have any trouble finding it. He approached the small man at the desk, his hat in his hand, waiting for him to acknowledge him. The glasses perched on the man's nose were comical but Stone was about to find out that Samuel Jensen was a force to be reckoned with!

"Yes, sir, may I help you? I'm Samuel Jensen, assayer for the city of Gold Rush, among other things." He stuck his hand forward and Stone took it, unprepared for the hearty shake of the smaller man.

"Uh, I'm Stone McCormick and I need to get a copy of my claim."

Mr. Jensen stared suspiciously over his squared glasses. "Excuse me? Mr. McCormick was in here this morning to file his claim and, I can assure you, he was much shorter than you."

Stone hesitated, surprised yet again. Had Mellon been impersonating him? Not only had the little chit stolen his money and his name, she was now stealing his very appearance! As angry as he was, he still wanted to proceed cautiously to protect her.

The bartender had never seen her before and now the assayer obviously thought she was he. The whole thing pointed to her not wanting anyone to know she was female, except for him and the preacher, of course. And only long enough to rob him blind and lay a stake on a claim he knew nothing about. Had she ever planned to tell him about the marriage? And did the little brat honestly think she could get away with it? Crazy as it was, it was finally starting to make some sense. He cleared his throat.

"Look, Mr. Jensen, Evan Prescott has approached me wanting to buy the claim." The look on the smaller man's face told Stone all he needed to know. Samuel Jensen did not like Evan Prescott!

"There has obviously been some misunderstanding here and I intend to get to the bottom of it."

Mellon's bottom to be exact. "I need to find the location of the claim. I need your assistance and your willingness to keep this all under wraps. I can prove to you that I'm Stone McCormick, but I don't want it known that it wasn't actually me who filed that claim this

morning. Can you do that for me? I have my own reasons for not trusting Prescott."

Mr. Jensen took off his glasses and wiped them on the clean cloth of his shirt. "Look, Mr. McCormick, if that's really your name. I need more than your assurances. For all I know, I could be giving this information out to an enemy of Mr. McCormick who plans on killing him and stealing the claim. You understand, I'm sure?" He peered up at Stone when he replaced the glasses.

Stone took out the promissory note he had signed for the bank. "There, you can see this is my signature on this note. You'll also find out if you go to the preacher that I apparently got married last night, although I have no recollection of the blessed event." He leaned in close to Mr. Jensen, glancing quickly around before he spoke. "I have reason to believe that *your* Stone McCormick was my new wife impersonating me. I also believe that she is Sean Flanagan's daughter and she devised this plan to get her hands on the claim."

"Sean Flanagan never had a daughter," exclaimed Mr. Jensen. "He had a son—a small boy he was, so they say. I never met him myself."

Stone grimaced wryly. "I believe he *did*, and I believe she tricked me into marrying her so she could use my name to file a claim."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" Mr. Jensen looked outraged and admiring at the same time. "Imagine that! What an enterprising young lady she must be, dressing as a boy all these years and staking a claim for her own." Then he looked worried. "Makes me wonder if something has happened to Sean. You're not going to harm her, are you?"

"Short of spanking the devil out of her, no. I have no intention of harming her," replied Stone honestly. "But I can't let my new wife go running around the countryside dressed like a boy and impersonating people. And if Evan Prescott wants that claim, he'll have no trouble in taking it away from her if he learns the truth. So it's important that you remember me as being the one here and signing for it."

Jensen nodded, his eyes gleaming, probably at the thought of putting one over on Prescott. "Of course, Mr. McCormick. Just be sure to come back and let me know how it turns out. I do need to have my records straight in case someone tries to lay claim on top of your claim. And of course, I wish you luck with the young lady. If it turns out she is Sean's daughter, then she's bound to be a handful! Sean Flanagan's a crusty old Irish devil and don't take guff off nobody. Evan Prescott, on the other hand, is a greedy and conniving man who wants to get his hands on anything he can. It doesn't surprise me that he wants Sean's stake, it's been producing a nice little income for Sean and his boy—or daughter, as the case may be. It also wouldn't surprise me if Sean had even more tucked away that he doesn't tell anyone about. It would be just like him."

"Well, for the moment, he believes that Sean gave me the rights to the claim and I want it left that way. I intend to go out there and find out what's going on."

"Just to be on the safe side, let's draw up new papers and have you resign them. I'll file them for you and then it will be legal if anything does happen." When Stone nodded, he quickly drew up the proper papers, had Stone sign them for him, and then gave him a copy of the map where the claim was located. "It's a good day's ride," he said, pointing to an X on the map. "Just alongside the Blue River between the Devil's Horns. You'll see the horn shaped, rocky hills before you reach them. You can't miss it."

Stone took the map and put it in his vest pocket. "I thank you for your trouble, Mr. Jensen. And just to make it totally legal, how much do I owe you for filing the claim?"

"That will be twenty dollars, but your wife has already paid it once."

"No, my impersonator paid it," corrected Stone with a chuckle.

"You'll get one of the fees back when this is straightened out," assured Mr. Jensen, his eyes twinkling at the dilemma in which Stone found himself. "You certainly have an interesting problem, Mr. McCormick. Were I a younger man, I could almost envy you."

"Oh don't worry about that," replied Stone as he turned to go. "I fully intend to get my other twenty dollars back, too."

There was no mistaking the meaning in his voice and it was Mr. Jensen's turn to chuckle. "Well, give her a few for me if you don't mind. After all, she certainly pulled the wool over my eyes, too!"

"Oh I will," promised Stone heartily. "I *certainly* will!"