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## Chapter 1

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"YOU LOOK JUST LOVELY, DEAR," Mary Melchior said to Elizabeth as they both studied her image in the large mirror in Mary's bedroom. "But we don't really have time for admirin' how beautiful a bride you make. With the weddin' due to start in less than two hours, the preacher ought to be here any time now."

*Less than two hours*, Elizabeth heard echoing in her head as she kept staring at the simple but pretty yellow dress Mary and some of the other women had helped her make. It had taken three days to finish the dress, and one of the women had found a pair of yellow slippers to lend Elizabeth that matched the dress incredibly well. Clint had made all the wedding arrangements based on how long finishing the dress would take, and now... less than two hours.

"You're not gettin' cold feet, are you, Elizabeth?" Mary asked suddenly, now looking directly at Elizabeth instead of at her reflection in the mirror. "It's not like you're doin' some-  
thin' you never did before, and it's not like you and Clint haven't been... anticipatin' tyin' the knot. You've been lookin' so happy these last three days, but now—"

"But now, I'm remembering how bad a mistake I made the first time I married," Elizabeth said after taking a deep breath to regain control of herself. "My mind knows that this time, it isn't a mistake, but my feelings are like a little girl alone in the dark, I guess you could say. Those feelings are afraid there's a monster around that I can't see, just the way there was the first time."

"Then let's both tell that little girl there is no monster," Mary responded, her voice firm and her gaze unwavering. "Clint Garmen has been visitin' here for years, and for most of those years, my husband Jacob was around. I find myself sometimes mistakin' how good or bad a body is, but Jacob never made that kind of mistake and he even went so far once as to trust his life to Clint. But if you're really not sure, just tell Clint you changed your mind about marryin' him."

Elizabeth parted her lips to speak, but the surge of panic she felt kept any words from coming out. The idea of losing Clint, the one man she'd ever met who wanted her just for herself alone, was enough to fill her with terror.

"Well, that did it," Elizabeth finally said to Mary, also showing a wry smile. "That little girl may be terrified of hidden monsters, but this big girl is even more terrified at the thought of losing her man. Besides, if he ever turns out to be a monster in disguise, I'll just shoot him."

Mary joined Elizabeth in an amused laugh, but Elizabeth could see Mary knew that what she'd said wasn't really a joke. Elizabeth was a dead shot with a rifle, and she'd already proved that if it became necessary, she would pull the trigger without a moment's hesitation.

"I'd better go out and help Clint with the guests," Mary said then, putting her hand to Elizabeth's arm with a quiet smile. "Havin' you two stay with me until Clint gets you a house of your own is fillin' my life with pleasure, and if it wouldn't be mean of me to hope there's a real delay in findin'

that house, I'd do it in a flash. You just sit yourself in my chair and relax, and I'll come back when it's time for you to come out."

Elizabeth tried to find the right words to thank Mary for everything she'd done, but the older woman waved away the thanks and quickly left the room. It had been many years since Elizabeth's mother had died, a mother she couldn't really remember any longer, but Mary was doing a marvelous job of taking her place—a mother to Clint and her both.

Mary's chair had thick, comfortable cushions all over it, and Elizabeth settled into them carefully so as not to wrinkle her dress. Yesterday, sitting down—even with the cushions—would have been, at the very the least, uncomfortable, but she and Clint had spent the previous night apart, in anticipation of today's wedding. That meant Clint hadn't given her the spanking that had become their nightly ritual before they made love, a punishment Elizabeth would be getting for an entire week.

*And after the week is over, I'll provide reasons for an extension of the "punishment,"* Elizabeth thought with a smile. *Clint thinks he's punishing me for trying to ride away from him without a word, but what he's really doing is giving me reasons to never consider leaving him again. I still can't believe how much better making love is after he spansks me...*

And tonight, they would be continuing both practices as man and wife. Elizabeth smiled with a small thrill of eager anticipation, now wondering how she could have felt the least amount of hesitation, the way she had just a few minutes earlier. She hadn't known Clint Garmen long, but that wasn't the same as not knowing him well. Clint loved her as much as she loved him, and Elizabeth couldn't wait to start the next part of her life with the two of them side by side.

She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until the sound of someone opening the door woke her. It was true that she hadn't gotten much sleep last night, but to drift off like that...

"It's time," Mary announced happily as she swept into the room. "Just stay there in the chair until I help you with your hat, and then you can stand up."

Rather than getting to her feet as she had been about to do, she stayed in the chair and waited until Mary brought over the small yellow hat. The veil attached to the hat was white, rather than yellow, but that couldn't be helped. They'd had to attach the veil themselves, and the thin netting hadn't been available in any color other than white and black.

It took only a moment for Mary to pin the hat to Elizabeth's upswept hair, and then the older woman fluffed out the veil before smiling again.

"All done, dear," Mary announced as she stepped back. "Are you still nervous?"

"My feet are nice and warm now," Elizabeth answered with a small laugh as she stood up. "And since that's so, I'm going to use those feet to get me outside as fast as possible, before Clint changes *his* mind."

"I hope you're not holdin' your breath waitin' for that to happen," Mary answered with her own laugh as she followed Elizabeth toward the door. "Clint wants you so badly, he'd fight fire and flood to get you, and for the last hour and some, he's been gettin' more and more anxious. I think he's afraid somethin' will happen to keep you two from marryin'."

"Let them try," Elizabeth muttered, keeping her face turned away from Mary as they walked toward the back of the house. Elizabeth knew how hard her expression must be at the thought of someone trying to keep her from Clint, the kind of expression that called for her rifle being in her hands.

No one was going to be allowed to keep her and Clint apart, no one living or dead!

By the time they reached the kitchen door, Elizabeth had her expression back under control. Mary had been chattering away as they walked, and once they reached the door, the older woman moved forward to walk out first. According to instructions, Elizabeth waited a brief moment, and then she also walked out the door, to see the rather large crowd standing all over the yard.

"You look lovely, my dear," Charles Walker said from the foot of the steps with a smile as he put out a hand to help Elizabeth down. Charles was the mayor of River Bend, and he'd agreed to give the bride away. As soon as Elizabeth descended the steps and took the man's arm, someone with a harmonica began to play the wedding march.

The crowd had parted to show Elizabeth where Clint was standing and waiting near the preacher, a man Elizabeth didn't know standing to the right of and behind Clint. The stranger stood in the position of best man, and the faint smile he wore did nothing to soften the harsh lines of his face. The man was almost as big as Clint and was dressed the way Clint usually was, and it was perfectly clear that he wore a gun.

But then, Clint turned and saw Elizabeth, and the smile on his face made her forget about everyone else. Before she knew it, she was standing beside her groom, her hand in his, the preacher beginning the ceremony. Everything went the way it usually did during a wedding ceremony—until Clint was asked to say, "I do."

"I do take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife," Clint said instead as he gazed into Elizabeth's eyes. "With all my heart and love, now and forever."

Those added words made Elizabeth want to cry, but when it was her turn to take the vow, she said the same words

that Clint had. The delight in his eyes was so strong that Elizabeth almost missed it when the preacher declared them man and wife. She missed nothing, however, when Clint raised her veil and kissed her the way he'd been told he could. The kiss was passionate, and they parted reluctantly, to a lot of clapping and cheering.

Just about everyone in the yard came over to congratulate the newlyweds, but eventually, the guests left to help themselves to the food that was being put out by Mary and some of the other women. All the guests, that is, but the big man who had been standing next to Clint. At that point, Clint gestured the man closer, then turned toward him with Elizabeth folded into his one-armed embrace.

"Elizabeth, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine," Clint said with genuine warmth. "This is Leon Harshaw, and he and I became marshals at the same time. We worked together a few times over the years, but it's been a while since we've seen each other. Leon, this is Elizabeth Morgan—Elizabeth Garmen, I mean."

"A pleasure to meet you, ma'am, even if this fool can't remember what he did just a minute ago," Leon said in a deep voice after they'd all chuckled over Clint's mistake. "I heard that Clint was in this town, so I rode over to say howdy. Never thought I'd be standin' up with him at his weddin', but I'm sure glad I got the chance. Could be, I'll find me a woman too someday."

"I never expected it to happen to me, but it did," Clint said after clapping the other man on the arm. "There aren't many women like Elizabeth around, but if you keep your eyes open, you just might—"

Clint's words broke off at the sound of distant gunfire, and Elizabeth could feel him stiffen beside her.

"Sounds like somebody letting off some steam," Clint remarked with a sigh as his arm withdrew from around Eliz-

abeth's shoulders. "Since I'm the law around here now, I'll have to take care of it, but the chore won't take long. I'll be back in just a—"

"The hell you'll go," Leon said in a growl as he straightened, the smile now gone from his face. "This is your weddin' day, and my present to the two of you will be me takin' care of the chore. Do I need a key for the lockup?"

"The office is open, and the key to the cells is in the right-hand cell door," Clint answered, almost without thinking, Elizabeth could see. "But really, Leon, you don't have to—"

"Hell, I don't," Leon interrupted again, straightening the Stetson he wore over his long dark hair. "I got nothin' to do for the next couple of days, so I'm goin' to stick around and play sheriff. After that, you get to take the job back, so enjoy the time with your woman while you can. If I ever find me a woman, you can return the favor."

And with that, the man stalked away, obviously intent on finding out who was disturbing the peace. His movements and bearing were so much like Clint's that Elizabeth had no doubt about Leon's ability to handle anything he might find.

"I'm beginning to want to meet the rest of your friends," Elizabeth said to Clint, her arm going around his waist after his went back around her shoulders. "Judging by the ones I've met so far, the rest have to be people I'd really enjoy knowing."

"Yes, Mary and Leon are special, aren't they?" Clint said, the words in no way a question. "And I think it's safe to say we just got the best wedding gift we'll have, no matter what anyone else brings. And now, Mrs. Garmen, it's time we got something to eat and then mingled."

That thrill of excitement ran through Elizabeth again at being called Mrs. Garmen, but she wasted no time agreeing with Clint's suggestion. She hadn't been able to eat anything at breakfast, and now she felt as if she were starving.

Mary filled plates for Elizabeth and Clint, and then she stood guard over the two people until they finished eating. Every time someone came over intending to interrupt the bride and groom's meal, Mary headed them off with cheerful talk and all sorts of questions. Elizabeth exchanged a small laugh with Clint while they both hurried to finish the meal, and then they were able to release Mary from guard duty.

Not long after they'd finished eating, Leon came back and got a plate of food of his own before ambling over to Clint.

"Nothin' but a couple a cowhands on firewater, feelin' real happy," Leon reported after swallowing his first bite of the fried chicken. "I got there just as they finished emptyin' their guns, which made puttin' 'em in the lockup real easy. I'll turn 'em loose after they sleep it off."

"Don't let them leave until they each pay the two dollar fine for firing their guns in town," Clint told Leon with a nod. "If they don't have the two dollars, send one of the town boys with a horse out to the ranch where they work, to tell the ranch owner. If their boss won't pay the fine for them, they get to spend a month behind bars."

"And then they'll probably have to go lookin' for new jobs," Leon said with his own nod. "Seein' as how they could a killed somebody, that's lettin' 'em off real easy."

Elizabeth noticed that some of the townspeople had heard the exchange, and the delighted smiles on the people's faces almost looked out of place. After suffering with having Zack Holland as sheriff, a man who just wore the badge and spent his time looking the other way if trouble developed, it had to feel really good to those folks to now have two men around to protect them.

As the afternoon wore on, Elizabeth got to know some of the people who had come to the wedding. Most of them



were really nice, and even the ones who seemed the type to do nothing but complain kept their complaints to a minimum. At one point, Mary disappeared for a while, but the next time Elizabeth looked around, the older woman had rejoined the guests. At first, people seemed to look nervously at Leon, but when Clint introduced Marshal Leon Harshaw to everyone as his temporary replacement, the nervousness disappeared.

The party went on until sundown approached, and then people began to leave. Most of them had brought some little token as a gift, even though Clint had asked them not to, and the cloth Mary had spread on the grass for the presents was fairly well filled. The women who had helped Mary make the food also helped her take the few leftovers and dirty dishes and cups somewhere, and Leon helped Clint take the cloth into the house. When Elizabeth followed them inside after saying goodbye to the last of the guests, she found Clint standing near the kitchen table reading something.

"Elizabeth, listen to this," Clint said as he glanced up from the piece of paper he held. "Mary says here that she put up supper for us and Leon, and all we have to do is sit down and enjoy it. She's also going to be staying with a friend in town for a couple of days, so the house is ours until she comes back. She says it's her wedding gift to us, as if she hasn't already given us so much."

"We'll have to think of a way to thank her," Elizabeth said with delight, then walked over to the stove to see what was in the two covered pots. "Something she'll enjoy but won't be able to refuse. That's going to take some thinking... The food is almost done, but the coffee is ready right now. Would you men like a cup?"

"Sure would," Leon answered as he went to a chair at the table and sat down. "But don't you two worry that I'll be

overstayin' my welcome. Soon as the food is gone, I'll be the same."

"That's the way headquarters makes sure Leon doesn't get killed on his assignments," Clint remarked after folding the note and putting it in his pocket. "They tell him that when he gets back the food will be ready, so he always does get back."

"You can't find fault with something that works," Elizabeth said after she and Leon laughed. "But as far as food goes, Clint, you haven't tasted my cooking yet. If you like, you can invite Leon over for supper tomorrow night so he can get a taste as well. I'm not really all that good at it yet, but I'm definitely willing."

Both men almost turned pale, and Leon began to make all kinds of excuses about not being able to make supper tomorrow night. Elizabeth had kept her face straight as long as possible, but finally, she had to laugh.

"I love how easy it is to send two big, brave men into a panic," she said as they stared at her. "Point a gun at them and they don't even blink, but just invite them to supper after mentioning that you can't cook... Relax, you men, I was only joking. I may not be the best cook ever born, but I haven't poisoned anyone yet."

"She said 'yet,'" Leon pointed out to Clint, his tone on the ominous side. "Since I'm not married to her, I don't have to worry, but I hate thinkin' about losin' you as a friend, Clint. Maybe gettin' married wasn't such a good idea after all."

"I expect I'll survive, Leon," Clint assured his friend with a grin as he inspected Elizabeth with his gaze. "Besides, we risk our lives every time we go out, but all we get for it is money. Marriage pays a whole lot better than that, even if it turns out that I'll have to do the cooking."

Leon chuckled his agreement as Elizabeth brought two

cups of coffee to the table, and she paused to touch her lips to Clint's before heading toward her bedroom. Her feet were hurting from walking around in thin slippers for half the day, and she also wanted to change her clothes. So far, she hadn't spilled anything on the yellow dress, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Changing clothes didn't take long, not when it was trousers and a shirt and boots that she put on, and then she was able to rejoin the men. They'd taken off their coats and hats before starting to drink their coffee, and Elizabeth got a cup of her own before sitting down to join them.

When supper was ready, Elizabeth served them all, and the three of them had a good time while they ate. Leon and Clint enjoyed teasing each other, both men keeping perfectly straight faces during the kidding, and every now and then, they both teased her. There was almost as much laughter as eating going on at the table, and there was even pie for dessert. Once the food was gone, Elizabeth cleared the table and did the dishes, and by the time she was through, the men had finished their fresh cups of coffee. That was when Leon stood up and held his hand out to Clint.

"It was good seein' you again, brother, but I don't want to see you for the next two days," he said as he and Clint shook hands. "We can visit again after that, before I move on, but until then, you do your visitin' with your new missus. You hear me?"

"Sure do, brother," Clint answered with a smile while Elizabeth dried her hands on a cloth. "And I'll repay the favor when you find a woman like mine. That's a promise."

"I'll hold you to that," Leon said, then paused to kiss Elizabeth on the cheek before putting on his coat and hat. Clint saw his friend to the front door, and when he came back, Elizabeth had already rinsed out the two cups that had been used.

"We haven't even looked at the rest of our presents yet," Clint said, glancing at the cloth-covered mound on the floor at the side of the room. "Do you want to take a look, or would you rather leave the looking for tomorrow and get ready for bed?"

"Bed, definitely bed," Elizabeth answered, smiling as she met Clint's gaze. "I want to find out if we'll enjoy ourselves as much now that we don't have to sneak around."

"Nothing to say we have to stop sneaking around, just because we're married," Clint answered with a deep chuckle, then he came close and lifted Elizabeth into his arms. "I didn't get to carry you over the threshold into the house, but I don't intend to miss carrying you into our bedroom. Here we go."

Elizabeth had been startled when Clint picked her up, but now that she knew what was going on, she put her arms around his neck while he carried her toward her bedroom. *Toward their bedroom.* It felt so strange to think that now they were going to be sharing everything in their lives, unlike what had happened in her first marriage. Blake hadn't wanted to share, not in any way. He'd wanted Elizabeth to tell him how to get himself elected, but all the rest of his life had been off-limits to her. None of that had been sharing, not any of it...

"And here we are," Clint said as he put her down inside the bedroom. "You go ahead and get ready for bed, Mrs. Garmen, and I'll be back in just a few minutes."

"Don't take too long, Mr. Garmen," Elizabeth said after they shared a brief kiss. "I'd hate to have to start my wedding night without you." She gave him a wicked smile as her hand went to her crotch.

"I just want to take a quick look through those gifts to make sure nothing needs attending to right away," Clint said after laughing at Elizabeth's comment. "I'll be back before

you know it. And take that hand away from what belongs to me now. You really are a very wicked girl, *Raven*."

Elizabeth giggled and they exchanged one more quick kiss before he left, but he also left the door open. She had hated the nickname Raven when her father's hands had called her that, but somehow, when Clint did it, it was sexy as hell. She waited only a moment before going over to close the door softly, and then she began to get undressed. She wanted Clint to find something enticing in his bed when he got back and knew just what that something ought to be.

It really wasn't more than a few minutes before the door opened again, and by then, she was ready. One of Mary's friends had given Elizabeth an early wedding gift, a kind of nightgown set the woman had never had the nerve to wear herself. She had gotten the set from a drummer passing through, a fancy man who claimed he came all the way from France, but that was just about the man's only sale.

Most of the women, seeing what the drummer had for sale, had just blushed and run away, the woman had told Elizabeth. All the women wore flannel nightgowns or cotton nightshirts, and the idea of wearing something like what the man was selling would have made them feel wicked. But Elizabeth was young enough and independent enough that she might not mind feeling wicked, and that's why the woman had brought the set as a gift. Elizabeth was delighted with it, and the woman was happy to be rid of it.

"Wow," Clint said as he stopped short only two steps into the room. "That's—"

"Wicked," Elizabeth finished for him with a smile. She lay on her side across the bed, a position that let Clint see most of her body. The low-cut nightgown was a very sheer pink, so that it looked like her body had been painted that color. In Elizabeth's opinion, she looked more provocative in

the nightgown than she would have looked stark naked, and apparently, Clint agreed.

"Yes, that's definitely wicked, my dear Raven," Clint said as he slowly approached the bed, his stare unmoving from Elizabeth's body. "Since this is our wedding night, I'd meant to let your punishment go for tonight, but now, I don't think I can. A man has a duty to teach his wife not to do things that are wicked."

"Do you really think you can hold out long enough to spank me?" Elizabeth asked with a laugh that was meant to be taunting as she moved her body just a little. She didn't want to miss out on what would make their lovemaking so much better, and challenging Clint, was the fastest way to get what she wanted.

"Let's try it and see," Clint responded to her taunt, pausing to take his boots off, one at a time, before walking the rest of the way to the bed. His gun belt already hung on the coat rack near the door, the place he always kept it. "If it turns out I can't hold out long enough to give you a good, lengthy spanking, I can always use one of our wedding gifts."

And with that, he pulled out something that he'd put into his belt in back. At first, Elizabeth had no idea what she was looking at, but when Clint put the thing down on the bed in front of her, she was finally able to make out what it was.

Leather made up the whole of the thing, leather that was only about an inch wide. Three or four folded-over lengths about four inches long had been bound together to make a handle, with another three or so inches sticking out past that part. The handle and other parts looked to be stiff, as new leather usually was, but the eight-inch length that completed the device wasn't the same. That had been softened to a large extent, mostly to remove the sharp edges. Other than that, it wasn't very soft at all.

"You really wouldn't use that on me, would you, Clint?"

Elizabeth asked, aware of the way her new husband was getting out of his clothes while she stared at the leather thing on the bed. "I mean, this thing would really hurt me."

"No, this thing will really *punish* you," Clint corrected, and then he picked up the leather horror and moved to the head of the bed. There was a nail in the wall, and a small loop at the bottom of the horror let it hang easily from the nail. "If you ever do something to earn the strap being used, you'll find out what I mean. Right now, I'd like you to stand up and come over here."

After hanging the horror on the nail, he'd sat himself down on the bed, and Elizabeth wasted no time scrambling over to stand next to him.

"I can't imagine who would have given you something like that," Elizabeth said, staring at the horrible implement until Clint took her by the waist and put her across his knees. "All those people seemed so nice."

"They are nice, and you don't need to know who gave me the strap," Clint said as he raised the skirt of her nightgown to bare her bottom. "The note that came along with it said the giver hoped I'd never need it, but just in case I did, I'd now have it. I considered the idea really thoughtful."

At another time, Elizabeth would certainly have given her own opinion of the gesture, and "thoughtful" would not have been her choice of words. Right now, though, with her position so vulnerable, she simply waited for the first smack of the spanking. Her body was already responding to the position she was being held in, and when the first hard smack did come, she gasped more with arousal than with pain. Clint's hand felt as hard as a piece of wood, but soon there would be another hardness for her that she could barely wait to—

"Oh!" Elizabeth exclaimed when a sudden horrendous

noise outside came in time with the third smack. "What is that? It sounds like people banging on pots and pans."

"That's just what it is," Clint confirmed through the noise, keeping her from straightening to her feet. "It's called chivaree, and it's an old custom practiced on the wedding night of newlyweds. Usually, they just make a lot of noise for a while, but I suppose one or two might be looking for a way to peek inside here."

And then he calmly went back to spanking her! Elizabeth found herself struggling harder than ever before to get free, but the effort did absolutely no good. The shades on the windows were pulled down and the curtains closed, but the idea that someone might still find a way to look inside and see what her new husband was doing to her, was absolutely mortifying. And Clint was still spanking her hard, but a lot more slowly than usual!

Elizabeth was squirming hard by the time the spanking was over, the noise from outside drowning out her moans. She felt so aroused, she couldn't bear it, and she didn't understand why. When Clint finally put her back on her feet and stood up, she found it impossible not to bounce in place from the throbbing ache in her bottom—and the flaring need inside her. Clint pulled off her nightgown, making her as completely bare as he already was, then he picked her up and tossed her onto the bed.

There was barely enough time for Elizabeth to yelp before Clint was on the bed, that other hardness poking out for her to see. She purred as she caressed his cheek with her hand. "Hello, husband," she said in a sultry voice.

"Evenin', wife," Clint returned before assaulting her lips with his in a bruising, deep kiss.

His hands began to move along her cheek, then he broke the kiss and moved to her neck, nipping and sucking, marking her as his. "I want you, Raven."



Elizabeth sat up and gently removed the gown the rest of the way, throwing it to the floor. Then she put her arms around his neck and pulled his face back down to hers. Another kiss had them both panting when they came up for air.

Clint's lovemaking became urgent then as his fingers found her nub and began to fondle it. When he realized her juices were gushing over his digits, he wasted no more time. He replaced his fingers with the head of his hard cock.

"Clint," she moaned, "yes." She needed him there, needed it desperately, but he hadn't turned down the lamp before coming to her the way he usually did. She realized that for a brief moment, but then he thrust himself into her and began fucking her hard and fast. The noise outside was still going on, and some of those people making the noise might be trying to see in... What was it about the idea of spectators that was making her even more aroused than normal? And if the way her new husband was plunging into her was any indication, it had affected him as well.

Elizabeth tried to scream as her body exploded, but she couldn't even make her usual sounds as Clint's body slapped again and again against her tender bottom. Usually, that explosion eased the demanding torment of arousal, but this time, nothing of the sort happened. The arousal waited only until the shudders finally left her before jumping out again, and then she was pulled down into the whirlpool to spin around and around and around until another set of incredible fireworks sent her down into blackness. If the townspeople were still outside, she didn't know and, frankly, at the moment, she couldn't care less.