

Chapter One

Montana Territory, 1882

The men rode into Beaver Run like two horsemen of the apocalypse, justice on a white horse and war on a red one. The town's few citizens walking through the muddy streets hurried to get out of their path, while those milling on the plank walkways stared as the duo passed.

Danger.

Long and lean, both sat their saddles with the ease of men accustomed to mastering both the beasts beneath them and the world around them. Their long dusters hung to the tops of their boots and were covered in trail dust, speaking to their long travels. Their hats, pulled low, cast shadows over their faces, the rifles mounted to their horses' saddles and the glimpses of the guns strapped to each man's thigh told of the men's serious intent.

"Yes, Mrs. Smith, I quite understand my duty as the town's schoolteacher..." Inside the mercantile, Lacy Morgan, hiding under the name Lacy Jones, sucked in her breath as the two strangers passed by.

"That is exactly what I'm talking about, Miss Jones." The preacher's tight-lipped wife clucked her tongue in disapproval. "You shouldn't be ogling those men in public."

What? I should ogle them in private? Lacy bit back the retort. Angering Mrs. Smith or any of the town's other leading citizens wasn't in her best interest.

"As the children's teacher, you must be circumspect in everything you do. We want no idle gossip to taint your reputation," Mrs. Smith continued in her pinched nasally voice. "It is your duty to set an example of chastity and the highest moral qualities for our children."

If she knew the truth about her past, Mrs. Smith wouldn't so much as give Lacy the time of day.

And now these two men appeared in town. As she watched them slowly ride by, the man in the lead—with the golden skin and curly dark brown hair touching the collar of his coat—turned to stare at her. His piercing blue eyes looked deep into her soul. Lacy knew without doubt they were here to find her. She raised a hand subconsciously to the choker of gold chains she always wore, even beneath the high collar of her schoolteacher dresses, and nervously fingered the strands.

He spoke a word to his companion and the other man turned to stare, too. The second man's features were a mixture of Indian and European. His black hair hung straight to his shoulders beneath his hat, his dark eyes held the same intensity as his partner.

Quickly, Lacy dropped her hand. She'd done the stupidest thing yet in her life. Despite her best effort to blend in, in a heartbeat she'd attracted the men's attention.

Her past had finally caught up with her.

As soon as the pair rode farther down the main street of town, she turned to leave in the opposite direction.

"Miss Jones, we weren't finished with our conversation," Mrs. Smith said in a very irritated voice, gripping her arm. "Do not forget to whom you owe both your present employment and home."

Lacy hadn't forgotten for one minute. Between the woman's constant nagging about morality and her preacher husband's much-too-pious sermons, Lacy had walked a fine line to keep her respectable job and continue hiding in Beaver Run.

Inhaling to steady her already racing heart, she turned back around and smiled at the old biddy, gently pulling her arm free of the other woman's talon-like fingers. "I agree with everything you've said, Mrs. Smith. I assure you, I plan to attend tomorrow's service and take to heart every word Pastor Smith speaks. However, you must forgive me as there is something I need to do at home."

Turning on her heel, Lacy prayed God didn't strike her down for her blatant lie. She had no intention of making the church service. In fact, she intended to be long gone from Beaver Run and the two strangers before morning. With the late-afternoon sun behind her, she hurried down the plank walkway to the church and the small house the town provided for the teacher, which sat at the end of the street opposite the saloon and brothel.

Once inside the small shack, Lacy dragged her carpetbag out from under the bed, then started throwing her meager belongings inside. Her traveling dress and good shoes went in, then her hairbrush, lavender-scented soap and the few undergarments she'd purchased down in Denver. They'd been frivolous things to buy when she'd sold her horse and tried to hide as a respectable schoolteacher, but a small feminine part of her soul that hadn't been beaten out of her insisted on smelling the lavender and feeling the silky garments against her skin.

Damn. Now she wished she'd held on to that old horse. What she wouldn't give to be able to hop on him and ride out of town like lightning nipped at her tail.

No, Devil would've tracked her by Cesar's markings—even accused her of thievery, despite the fact she'd had the old paint since childhood. Selling Cesar had broken her heart, but her life had depended on it.

She couldn't ride out of town and she couldn't wait for the stage to get to Beaver Run for two more days. No, if she wanted to escape the two strangers, she'd have to go on foot over ten miles to the next town, then catch the stage to Billings. Luckily, she'd been trained to withstand the march.

With a deep sigh, she dragged open the last bureau drawer and lifted the heavy Colt .45 she'd kept for protection. She opened the cylinder, checked to be sure it was still loaded, then closed it and laid it in her bag. Finally, she pulled out her dungarees, leather boots, man's blue cambric shirt and long duster.

She'd hoped never to wear the outfit again. Memories of the last time she'd worn it and the men she'd worn it for filled her mind. She should've burned the outfit, but she was glad she hadn't.

With care, she removed her button shoes, wiping off the muck of Beaver Run's muddy streets before setting them in the bag. Next she removed her staid shirtwaist, inhaling deeply as her breasts were freed from the restraining material. Her skirt and petticoats followed suit.

The fashion of respectable women felt so imprisoning. No wonder women became so cold and mean like Mrs. Smith.

She pulled on the cambric shirt and buttoned it closed, making sure her necklace was beneath the collar. Then she stepped into the men's pants and boots. Just as she reached for the duster, a loud knock sounded on the front door.

Her heart sank into her gut.

They'd found her.

For a moment she glanced around the shack. The only other means of exit was the window. The black-haired man now stared in at her, then pointed to the door.

No escape.

She straightened her shoulders and opened the door.

The curly-haired man filled her doorway, nearly blocking out the fading light behind him.

The other man joined him. Up close they appeared more handsome and dangerous than they had riding through town. The white man's face was all hard angles and deep lines, his eyes so blue they resembled shards of ice that hung from the trees in the winter, just as cold. The duster hid most of his frame, but she'd guess he was whipcord lean, all sinewy muscle and strength.

The other man—his deeply tanned skin and high cheekbones spoke of his mixed blood—stood just behind the first. His dark eyes scanned the surrounding area, but she knew without a doubt he was just as interested in her as his friend.

“May I help you, gentlemen?” She tried to sound as innocent as the town schoolmarm should. Not one quaver sounded in her voice.

The first man pulled back his duster to show the dented silver star attached to his shirt. “U.S. Marshals, ma’am. We’re looking for Lacy Morgan.”

His deep baritone rumbled over her senses like thunder threatening in the distant mountains. Every nerve in her body awoke, trying to find a way to flee the ensuing storm.

“I’m afraid you have the wrong person.” She tried to shut the door, only to have him shove it back towards her.

“Now, darlin’, I’m sure there aren’t two Lacys in this town.” He stepped inside, his friend following behind him. The already small room suddenly felt no bigger than a closet. The men seemed to swallow all the available air. Blue-eyes studied her from top to bottom, then pulled a paper from inside his duster.

“Tall, octoroon coloring, red hair, green eyes,” he read from the paper then took a step closer, forcing her against the wall.

The reference to her octoroon heritage set the hairs on her neck on edge. Devil had loved her mother’s mixed blood. He’d craved more.

Were they truly lawmen? Or using their badges to track her down for another purpose?

Had her stepfather sent them to get her?

No matter what, she wasn’t letting these men return her to that hell she’d fled in the fall.

“If you don’t leave this instant, I’ll--”

“You’ll what? Scream for help?”

She should, but she doubted anyone would really come to her aid. Beaver Run’s citizens didn’t get involved with other people’s problems.

She wished she’d answered the door with her Colt in hand. Instead it lay useless in the pile of her belongings. “I don’t know who Lacy Morgan is, and I’d like you to leave my home, now!”

Blue-eyes edged closer, trapping her against the room's wood-slat wall, his big body mere inches from hers. Despite being tall for a woman, she was forced to lift her chin to see his face. A slow smile parted his lips, his white teeth slightly visible. He reached forward and unbuttoned her collar one button at a time. Fear, certainly not this man's physical nearness, made her heart jump into her throat and her belly clench down low.

"Stop it." She batted at his hands.

"Hold still if you don't want me to rip the damn shirt off you," he ordered, grabbing one hand, then sliding his other hand over her throat, fingers catching in the links of gold pressed against her skin.

"And she always wears a choker of gold filigree chains." He sniffed her hair. "Hello, Lacy Morgan. We've been searching a long time for you."

Damn, she was truly trapped. She should've sold the necklace with Cesar, but it was the last thing her mother had ever given her, telling her, "The collar's your inheritance.

Never let it out of your sight, dearest." And so she would die before parting with it.

Unfortunately, that day may be today.

She swallowed hard, her breasts rising and falling against Blue-eyes' chest. Her nipples hardened at the contact. "What do you want with me?"

His hand remained on her throat, almost caressing her over the choker. "Simple, darlin'. I want you to take us to see Devil."

"I can't."

"You can't or you won't?" He applied just a little pressure over her windpipe.

"I can't," she whispered. "I haven't seen him in six months."

Blue-eyes leaned in closer, his tongue stroking her ear a moment. "But you know where he's hiding. Don't you?"

His warm breath sent shivers of awareness over her body. Nodding, she swallowed hard. "If I tell you, he'll kill me."

"Darlin'," Blue-eyes squeezed a little harder. "Make no mistake, I'll kill you if you don't."

Her gaze jerked to his cold one. She didn't doubt him for a moment. She inhaled again, this time feeling the stranger's heat all the way down to the junction of her thighs. She couldn't escape in this shack. Maybe she could give them a false lead and they'd leave her. If she could get out in the open

country, all she needed was a few hours to escape.

“He sometimes winters in the Hole-in-the-Wall.”

Blue-eyes stared deep inside her, trying to read her words for the lie they were. She forced herself to hold his gaze and willed her pulse to slow. She’d learned years ago to lie to save her skin.

“Okay. We’ll start our search there.” Keeping his hand on her throat, he glanced over his shoulder to Dark-eyes. “We’ll need another horse.”

The other man simply nodded, then left.

“You don’t need me,” she started to protest.

He seared her with his cool blue gaze once more, his hand pressing slightly tighter on her throat. “Darlin’, I didn’t ask you to talk.”

With his other hand, he opened the paper he’d read from earlier and turned it so she could see the image on it. Whoever had drawn the “Wanted” poster had nearly captured her likeness.

“We know Devil Morgan robbed the Cheyenne Bank six months ago. But the only person anyone could identify was this woman standing outside, holding the horses. You were dressed like a man.” He let his gaze wander from her head to her bare feet. “Seems you fit the description to a T.”

He folded the poster and pocketed it once more, never releasing his grip on her throat.

His blue eyes glinting with cold rage, he leaned in again until she could smell the cinnamon and coffee on his breath. “Let me make something perfectly clear. You are under arrest for the Cheyenne bank robbery and murders. Either you take me to Devil and his gang of murdering thieves or you hang alone for the robbery and murders committed that day.”

Lacy knew the day would come when she had to answer for her part in the Cheyenne raid, but she wasn’t ready for it to be today. She’d have no choice but to accompany these two lawmen. Her only chance of escape was to get out onto the open trail.

He squeezed her throat more. “Do you understand me?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Lacy nodded.

The urge to choke the life out of Lacy Morgan soared hot in Quinn Halliday’s blood.

Slowly he eased his grip on the outlaw woman's slender throat. Her pulse pounded against his thumb, and he lightly stroked it as he stared into her lying eyes—the color of fresh grass in the meadow near his ranch.

He knew without a doubt she'd lied when she claimed to have no idea where her stepfather and his gang were hiding. Oh, she'd hid it well, never blinking or breaking eye contact with him. But even a thief like her couldn't hide the jump in her pulse he'd felt beneath his hand. Quick, like a flash of lightning, but he hadn't missed it.

How far was she willing to go to protect the murderous son-of-a-bitch?

He let his hand drift down below the chains of the choker and opened the next few buttons until he could see the swell of her breasts. Her undergarments felt as silky as her skin beneath.

Interesting.

She hid behind the schoolmarm guise and men's clothes as cool as any outlaw, but underneath the frigid exterior she wore the garments of a courtesan. Still, she'd ridden with Devil Morgan's gang, and was instrumental in at least one robbery. He wasn't fooled by her outer trappings. She was more dangerous than she appeared, but she'd finally met her match.

Now was the time to show her he was in control and she was at his mercy.

“Strip.”

She blinked. “Pardon me?”

“You heard me. Take off your clothes.” He stepped back, then pulled the rickety straight-backed chair up against the wall. A glint from inside the carpetbag on the bed caught his eye. He strode over and pulled the Colt out of her bag. He slipped it into the pocket of his duster, then sat in front of the only exit. “Now strip. I want to be sure you don't have any other weapons.”

“That was the only gun I have.”

“Darlin', my mama didn't raise a fool and you're trying my patience. Start with your shirt.”

Her eyes narrowed like an angry cat ready to draw claws and attack. Would she?

He arched a brow, drew her pistol from his pocket and checked the chamber. Clean and fully loaded. He pointed it in her direction.

Her hands clenched into fists at her side. For a moment he thought she'd refuse, almost wished she would. His anger would like nothing more than stripping her of all pretense to show the harlot beneath the façade.

Then, slowly, she inhaled, lifted her chin and straightened her spine. Something in her eyes, courage or defiance he wasn't sure which, struck a spark deep inside him.

Almost as if she dared him to watch her, she lifted her hands to the front of her shirt.

One after another she released the buttons. The top opened to reveal the silky white garment beneath. When she shrugged out of the top, her dark nipples stood taut and visible beneath the thin silk.

Even covered, her breasts were magnificent. Not too big, but certainly enough to fill even his large hands. They stood tight and full against her chest. He clenched his hand tighter around the handle of the Colt, then relaxed.

She folded the top and laid it carefully on the bed, then she turned back to face him.

"Now the pants."

With an inhaled breath, she pulled off her boots. Then she unfastened the front of her pants and wiggled them over her hips. The loose camisole gaped to give him a bird's-eye view of her breasts as she bent to push the dungarees down her long, shapely legs then struggled to step out of them.

Quinn swallowed hard as heat surged to his already stiffening cock. She was a means to an end nothing more and he needed to remember that fact.

As with the shirt, she folded her pants and laid them on the bed, then turned to await his instructions. She was stripping all right, but not of her own will and she wanted to be sure he understood. He read it in her posture and the fire in her eyes.

Standing before him barefoot and in her silky underwear, she looked like a goddess ready for sacrifice. "Satisfied? I have no hidden weapons."

Oh, she had weapons, all right, and they were still hidden.

"All of your clothes." Holding the gun steady, he waved his free hand to indicate her undergarments. "Now."

She glanced at the open window to her right before she reached for the ties lacing her camisole together. Anyone walking past could look in and see her stripping for him. The idea of exposing her nakedness to others had his cock straining to get loose.

Her fingers worked quickly and he almost missed the subtle shaking in them, so fascinated was he by the growing vision of her skin and breasts. She obeyed him, but she wasn't used to undressing in front of strangers. He didn't know why the idea pleased him, but it did.

Dakota would love watching this. Too damn bad, someone had to get the woman a horse.

Besides, they'd shared more than one woman in their travels. Quinn was glad he'd have this memory for himself.

Once she stood before him proud and naked, he drank his fill. He wished he had time to tame her, slow and seductively, bring her to obey his will of her own accord.

Unfortunately, he needed her cooperation before Devil escaped to wreak havoc on more innocent people. He'd sworn to make him and everyone involved, even the naked woman before him, pay for his mentor's death. Anson's widow deserved justice.

He stalked toward her, Colt in hand, letting her fear build just a little. She was magnificent. Tall, round in all the places to make his cock throb, her skin a golden color. An offering waiting for him to claim. He wanted to pull her onto the bed and thrust deep inside her.

Inches from her, he stopped, slid the cold metal barrel of the gun down her arm, eliciting a shiver from her. Both nipples drew even tighter.

"Don't. Please."

He reached forward, pulling on one, twisting it between his thumb and index finger, increasing the pressure.

She gasped, arching her back slightly.

Yes.

Releasing the nipple, he slid his hand slowly down her chest, over her belly to the dark coppery curls at the junction of her thighs. "Open your legs for me," he ordered, his voice sounding deeper even to his own ears.

She pressed her lips together in the thin line of anger once more, her gaze piercing him with defiance. "No. I'm not a whore. You can see I haven't any weapons."

"Don't think for a moment I won't force you." Fury swelled through him, along with his need to control her. He locked his gaze with hers, willing her to submit.

Mutiny and fear warred within her. And something else. Guilt?

He knew the moment she conceded. With her eyes lowered, she took one step to the side to part her thighs. He slipped his fingers between them.

Just as he thought, slick and warm.

The woman might resent his orders, fear retribution for defying him, and even be humiliated, but obeying him had excited her.

He might not know exactly where to find Devil Morgan, but he'd learned one thing he could use to get the information.

Lacy Morgan loved having someone else in charge.