

The Case of the Copper King by MK McClintock EXCERPT

QUINN MORGAN RUSHED into the street and shielded his face from the heat of the fire. He might have been cold without his coat and hat had it not been for the adrenaline pumping through his body. He caught sight of a skirt as a woman rounded the wagon, but she disappeared behind the dwindling flames. Shouts from men and women reached him as he followed the skirt.

“You worthless drunk. You could have burned half the town down with your stunt!”

The skirt in question was in fact part of a nightgown peeking from beneath a canvas duster. Boots, similar to his own, completed an ensemble that left little to the imagination.

“Need some help?”

More striking than he remembered from his glimpse of her at the restaurant, the woman looked in his direction after she yanked on the other man’s coat. After two failed attempts, she nodded toward the drunken man. “Were you just talking to hear your voice, or did you mean to help?”

Quinn cleared a few sparks that jumped when someone tossed water on the flames and stepped up to help her. The good-for-nothing reeked of cheap whiskey and slurred his complaint at the rough handling. Quinn heaved the man up and braced him against one of the beams on the store now missing its front windows.

The woman moved closer and smacked the drunk across his face. “You’re lucky there weren’t people in the wagon or in the store.”

“Sthphm meh dronuk.”

“I don’t speak the language of drunk idiots.” She raised a hand and called out to someone else. Quinn watched the sheriff run over, with one hand holding his hat in place and the other on his gun.

“Det—Miss McKenzie. What have you got?”

“An idiot who spent too much time in the saloon tonight. I found him trying to light a cigar, and a lot of spent matches strewn about. One must have ended up in the wagon.” She pointed to the wagon, now in pieces. “Any idea what was in there, Sheriff? I saw your deputy panic when I first came out.”

To Quinn's surprise, the sheriff's face became an unremarkable shade of red.

"Powder. It wasn't supposed to be here."

Quinn handed the derelict over to the sheriff. "I believe he'll find your jail comfortable enough for tonight."

The sheriff tipped his hat and hauled the man away.

"It's a chilly night."

She nodded.

Quinn grinned. "Some might think it's too cold for anything but long underwear." Miss McKenzie—he'd like to know her given name—pulled and overlapped the edges of her duster. "Might help."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "I've seen you before. The restaurant."

"You saw me, and I saw you."

"Are you following me?"

"You mean, did I contrive to have the foolish deputy leave a wagon with gunpowder across from the hotel, hoping a drunk imbecile would strike too many matches, thus causing one to hit the powder and—"

Quinn swore he heard her growl, but to be safe, he cast a glance around to make sure they were still alone or as alone as two people can be in an open street. The water-soaked wagon and ruined powder stood between them and everyone else. He smoothed his grin into a straight line and held up both hands in defense. "My apologies, Miss McKenzie." He held out one of his hands to her. "Quinn Morgan."

"Miss McKenzie."

His mouth quirked. "An unusual forename. Your parents had an odd sense of humor." This time Quinn was certain the growl came from her.

She tugged her duster as tightly as she could manage, revealing more in the process than she likely intended. With only a heated glance that Quinn decided to mistake in part for attraction, Miss McKenzie tromped back to the hotel. He watched her short journey and smiled when she veered right and headed for the side entrance to avoid the small crowd of people who had gathered out front.