



The
Confidential Life
of
EUGENIA COOPER
A NOVEL

KATHLEEN Y'BARBO

Praise for
The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper

“Kathleen Y’Barbo’s *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper* is a fast-paced story full of fun, action, drama, and love.”

—MARY CONNEALY, author of *Calico Canyon*, *Petticoat Ranch*,
and *Gingham Mountain*

“A fun read. Delightful, engaging, charming, and yes, funny. Humor in the characters, especially Miss Eugenia Cooper, humor in the events, as she dreams of and heads on an adventure in the West. I thoroughly enjoyed this romp of a read. If you loved Cathy Marie Hake, give yourself a treat with *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper*.”

—LAURINE SNELLING, author of the Red River Series,
Daughters of Blessing series, and *One Perfect Day*

“Take one spirited young woman seeking adventure—with a dime novel heroine as her role model—and add a lonely man determined not to lose his heart again. Stir in the excitement of an Old West setting, and you have a recipe for success. *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper* is an absolute delight! Kathleen Y’Barbo’s writing sparkles like the clear, blue Colorado skies.”

—CAROL COX, author of *A Bride So Fair* and *A Test of Faith*

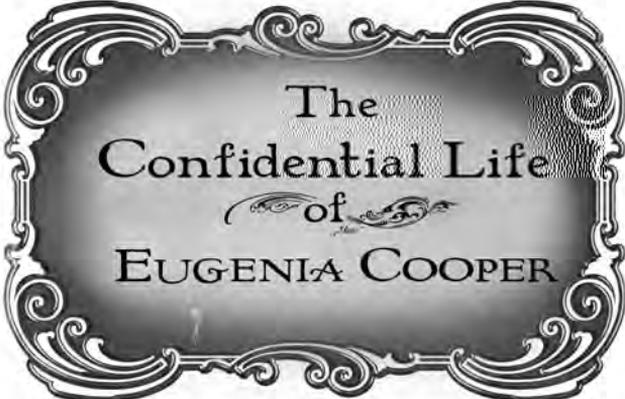
“Eugenia Flora Cooper has her Mae Winslow, but Kathleen Y’Barbo is my Woman of the West. In *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper*, Kathleen takes you by the hand on the first page and draws you into a chase every bit as merry as any Mae Winslow adventure story. Before

you realize it's happening, you find yourself in places you're reluctant to leave, among characters so genuine they only lack flesh to be real."

—MARCIA GRUVER, author of the *Texas Fortunes* series

"The gap between fiction and reality turns out to be much smaller than Eugenia Cooper realizes when she makes a last minute, ill-planned decision to hop a train to Denver in 1880. With excitement, romance, and humor, Kathleen Y'Barbo spins a tale that captures your mind. The author's enthusiasm for writing spills out of every scene, creating, as it should, enthusiastic readers."

—STEPHEN BLY, award-winning western author of more than one hundred books, including *One Step Over the Border*, *Paperback Writer*, and *Wish I'd Known You Tears Ago*

An ornate, decorative frame with intricate scrollwork and flourishes, enclosing the title text. The frame is rendered in a dark, textured style.

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WATERBROOK
PRESS

THE CONFIDENTIAL LIFE OF EUGENIA COOPER

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the King James Version.

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ISBN 978-0-30744-474-5
ISBN 978-0-307-45792-9 (electronic)

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of The Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Y'Barbo, Kathleen.

The confidential life of Eugenia Cooper : a novel / Kathleen Y'Barbo. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-307-44474-5 — ISBN 978-0-307-45792-9 (electronic)

I. Title.

PS3625.B37C66 2009

813'.6—dc22

2009007465

Printed in the United States of America
2009—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*To Josh, Andrew, Jacob, and Hannah
My life, my loves, my world...I'm so proud of you!*

*And to Wendy Lawton, Shannon Marchese, and Jessica Barnes.
Without you and the wonderful team at WaterBrook,
Gennie would be back in Manhattan still reading under the covers.*

“Sometimes what a person wishes
for is neither what they really want nor
what they need. Sometimes,
it’s the wishing that’s the best part.”
—*Mae Winslow, Woman of the West*



The warning came too late.

Mae Winslow's finely tuned senses jumped as the fire bell rang, setting the populace into a motion akin to the stirring of a nest of hornets, and sending Mae into a fit of the vapors.

Before the sounding of the alarm, the only stings fair Mae felt in the bleak light of dawn were from her heart and her conscience. She had disappointed dear Henry once again, allowing the calamity that dogged her steps to set her on yet another path leading away from the home and hearth he so freely offered. Surely the long-suffering Henry understood that beneath her buckskin-clad exterior beat a heart that held nothing but love for him despite the vagabond life she must lead.

At the moment, however, her mind must turn from the excess of emotional thoughts that Henry Darling brought and toward the situation at hand. With the practiced eye of one far too well-trained in the ways of desperate outlaws and lowly curs, she lifted the sash of the boardinghouse window and lowered her gaze to the street below. With the fresh wind came the bitter scent of smoke. Alas, the odor did not emit from below or from beyond the bounds of the quaint structure, but rather swirled from behind, as if seeping beneath the slightly crooked bedroom door.

Mae made to turn when a shot rang out. A bullet chipped away several layers of paint on the sill and sent her scrambling to the floor. There, with her breath coming a bit freer, she crawled toward the bed, where her pistols hung on the bedpost.

“So,” the fair jewel breathed as she wrapped her small fingers around the cold metal that had saved her life more times than she could count, “they’ve found me.”



New York City, July 5, 1880

Something tickled her nose. Eugenia Flora Cooper batted at the offending object, then opened her eyes to see that she’d tossed a fringed pillow onto her bedroom floor. A thud told her the book she’d been reading last night had gone flying as well.

The book, a brand-new episode of Mae Winslow, *Woman of the West*. Gennie sighed and pulled the silk and velvet coverlet over her head as she snuggled down into the soft feather mattress. Despite the fact she was required to attend a post-Independence Day breakfast with the Vanowens this morning, then catch a train to Boston at noon, she’d devoured every word of the dime novel last evening, staying awake late into the night.

After completing Mae’s latest adventure, Gennie reluctantly closed her eyes. Even then, the story continued, this time with Gennie as the subject. She’d been running alongside a moving train full of stolen gold, her borrowed cowboy boots dangerously close to tripping her, when the dream abruptly ended. And, like Mae, she’d been fleeing the bonds of a man bent on prematurely tying her to home and hearth.

Gennie, like Mae, could admit no real aversion to marriage and family. In fact, she welcomed the idea of a life spent in such a way.

Just not yet.

Like Mae.

Perhaps that was what drew her to Mae’s stories over other novels.

It seemed Mae was the only woman whose books never quite ended with a happily ever after. Each one promised it could—even should—and then the adventure took a turn, and so did Mae. By the end of the book, the bad guys were caught but Mae was not.

Someday, if Gennie ever had the nerve, she'd just head west down Fifth Avenue and keep walking until she reached South Dakota or Wyoming. Colorado, maybe, where she could pan for gold or dig for silver. Maybe save some hapless child or even a whole town from whatever evil preyed upon it.

Gennie smiled. Wouldn't *that* be an adventure?

Of course, Mama and Papa would miss her, but what a time she'd have riding runaway horses and fending off savage beasts with nothing but a broom and three wet matches. It would certainly be more interesting than painting flowers on china plates or embroidering her initials on handkerchiefs. Mama always had despaired of her stitching.

At the thought of her mother, Gennie bolted upright. It would never do for her choice of reading material to become common knowledge, even though she'd never understood the condemnation dime novels drew among her social set. Mae's adventures were tame compared to stories she read in the Bible. Surely the Lord smiled equally on the authors of such wholesome entertainment and on those who wrote more scholarly works.

Still, she should probably fetch the book and hide it with the others before the new chambermaid came in to open the drapes and draw her bath. Her secret had been safe with her previous maid, Mary. The dear Irishwoman carried off the books once Gennie read them. She claimed to be tossing them into a trash bin, but Gennie knew better. At least Mary hadn't informed Simmons, who would have told her parents at the first opportunity. Anything Simmons knew was destined for Papa's

ear before the day ended, which was why P apa paid the elderly houseman so well.

But then M ama and P apa, along with four teen-year-old Connor, were safely aboard a ship heading for their silver anniversary tour of the Continent. Gennie smiled and sank back into her cocoon of blankets. Surely a maid stumbling o ver a dime novel was beyond their concern. Perhaps she'd read the next dime novel in the drawing room instead of under her covers.

Opening one eye, she peered across the pile of pillows and through the bed drapes to see only the faintest glow of daylight at the edge of the curtains. "Still early," she muttered. "Just a few more minutes and I'll..."

She snuggled deeper into her pillow and closed her eyes.

"Miss Cooper, you've fallen back to sleep. Do wake up."

A blinding shaft of light intruded on her slumber, and Gennie fumbled for a pillow to cover her face. Finding none within reach, she struggled into a sitting position.

"I'm sorry, miss," the maid said, "but it's half past ten."

"Half past ten?" Gennie sputtered, suddenly alert. "How in the world will I explain to Mrs. Vanowen why I missed such an important event as her post-Independence Day breakfast?"

Gennie fought her way through the bed curtains and reached for her robe. As she tied the sash, she began to pace, carefully avoiding the pillows strewn across the Aubusson carpet. She'd also have to explain her absence to Chandler Dodd, although that prospect didn't upset her nearly as much as disappointing her father.

"Papa will be most upset," she said as she drifted toward the easternmost window and glanced at the midmorning rush on Fifth Avenue three stories below. "He so coveted a place on Mrs. Vanowens's list for Mama, and with this snub, she'll certainly be overlooked next time."

Mae Winslow, on the other hand, cared little for such frippery. *If only...*

“So sorry, miss.” The hapless maid, Mary’s replacement, ducked her head and inched forward, the silver tray she held wobbling with each step. “You see, there’s been a most upsetting problem with my sister’s departure, and I—”

“Never mind.” Gennie gave the tray a cursory glance, then pointed to the dressing table nearest the window overlooking the park. “Perhaps you’d like to tell all of this to our neighbor.” She paused as the maid’s eyes filled with tears. Gennie sighed. “Forgive me. I’m being awful. I’m exhausted because I stayed up too late.” Her heart sank. This was no way to begin with a new employee. “What’s your name?”

The dark-haired girl fixed her attention on her shoes. “Fiona, miss. Fiona McTaggart.”

“Perhaps there’s no harm done, Fiona.” Gennie seated herself at the writing desk and pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer.

Crafting two notes of regret that included only vague mentions of any specifics of her condition, she dried the ink, folded the paper, and then set her seal on the edge. When the wax hardened, she held the notes out to Fiona.

“Have Simmons send someone to deliver these, please.” She paused to set her tone in what she hoped was a mix of understanding and firmness. “And then perhaps we will both be forgiven for our transgressions.”

The girl grinned, then quickly seemed to remember her place. “You’re every bit as nice as Mr. Simmons said you’d be. Oh!” She stifled a gasp. “Begging your pardon, miss, but I’d be ever so grateful if you’d not mention I forgot to wake you. I’m afraid I’d be out on my ear after my first day, and with my sister’s leaving us this afternoon, I don’t know how I’d take care of my mama and my ailing papa.”

“Of course, I won’t mention it. There’d be no purpose to it.”

As Fiona scurried out, Gennie rose and turned her attention back to the scene unfolding on the street below. Several drivers had arrived with carriages, and liveried attendants milled about beneath a brilliant blue sky.

She let her gaze drift across the street and up the marble steps of the imposing mansion that sat on the corner like a wedding cake. The Vanowens' third floor ballroom stood at eye level, floor-to-ceiling windows open to the fresh July breeze. A lone figure swept the marble floor where, as a child, Gennie and her friend Hester Vanowen pretended to ice skate across the polished marble in their stocking feet.

Gennie's family returned the favor when Hester accompanied them to their house in Newport, where the long upstairs hallway opened onto a balcony that overlooked the lawn and the ocean beyond. Little imagination was required to believe that with just a bit of extra effort, one might be able to launch over the balcony's edge and soar into the clouds.

Hester only attempted it once, and thankfully the thick foliage broke her fall. Even better, Mama and Papa were away at the time.

"May the Lord bless you, miss. Perhaps you'd like me to pour your coffee now?"

Gennie turned to see the door close behind the maid. "Yes, Fiona. Please do."

A flurry of activity across the street again caught her attention. Gennie shrank back from the window and peered around the heavy drapes as a cluster of guests emerged from the Vanowen home. Among them was the tall figure of Chandler Dodd. Clad in his usual top hat and ascot, he looked every bit the banker he was. As Papa reminded her often, a life spent as Chandler Dodd's wife would be most comfortable.

Gennie sighed. Chandler was not an unpleasant sort. Far from it. He could even make her laugh if he put his mind to the task. But a hus-

band? She hadn't decided what that would be like, although if Papa insisted, she'd do as he said.

Still, she'd wondered on more than one occasion whether Chandler would prefer a brownstone over a home in the country, what opinion he held of dime novels, and what he might think of a wife who wanted nothing more than a honeymoon in Deadwood or Denver instead of Rome or Athens.

One of her father's footmen dodged buggies and people to cross the street just as Chandler ducked into his carriage. Knowing the banker's first inclination would be to look up at the spot where Gennie now stood, she let the drape fall into place and turned her back on the window.

Thus far, she'd managed to escape any sort of private audience with Chandler, keeping their meetings to public gatherings. Soon enough he'd come calling; today, however, was not the day for it. Not when her mind was occupied with thoughts of her month ahead in Boston. Papa's Boston family was nice enough, but a month spent with them was a bit long, especially when she'd lack the comfort of escaping with Mama when discussions of politics became too tedious.

Still, it would be better than a month spent alone in Manhattan, although if she had a choice, she'd prefer to be headed west for adventure.

Fiona, who had set out the breakfast and poured the coffee, waited with a linen napkin in her hand. Obliging her, Gennie sat and accepted the napkin. Fiona lifted the silver cover and revealed enough scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast to feed three hungry men.

"You've been a bit generous with the portions," Gennie said. "Perhaps when I return from Boston we might sit down together and discuss my preferences." She paused to stab at the eggs. "Has Simmons given you my schedule?"

The maid pulled a piece of paper from her apron pocket and unfolded it. "You're to be delivered to the train station at half past eleven this morning, and Simmons will send a man to retrieve you on August 7 at exactly three in the afternoon. Any correspondence you receive is to be bundled weekly and delivered to you in care of the Eddington Cooper family, Lake Street, Boston."

Gennie scooped up a slice of bacon and situated it across her toast, then indicated for Fiona to sit. "Correct." A thought occurred to her. "What will you do while I'm gone? Mary used to take the month to visit family along with me. She was from Boston."

Fiona shrugged as she perched on the edge of the settee. "After I accompany you to Boston, I'm to come back here and busy myself about the house until you return."

Gennie set the napkin atop her plate as an idea formed. "You know, Fiona, I believe I'll make this trip on my own." She met the maid's gaze. "Have you ever had an adventure?"

"An adventure?" Fiona seemed to consider the question a moment. "No, I don't suppose I have. I'm not nearly as brave as my sister."

"Tell me about your sister," Gennie said.

"My sister?" Fiona's eyes widened. "Oh, miss, she's the bravest thing you'd ever want to know, that one. I shall miss her terribly." She hung her head. "'Tis a pity."

"A pity?" Gennie took a sip of coffee. "Whatever do you mean?"

"We have a cousin, Katie, who's a governess. Well, she *was* a governess until she agreed to marry Angus. But she couldn't just run off and leave the girl without guidance, what with the men she lived with, so a promise was made. Either my sister or I would go and take her place so she could marry Angus. I couldn't imagine it, being so far away, but my sister, she's the brave one. Then she met a young man too. Now she's

leaving him to go out and take care of Charlotte.” Fiona shrugged. “There’s nothing to be done about it, really.”

Gennie shook her head. “Fiona, I’m confused. Start over. Something about your sister Charlotte, a girl named Katie, and her fellow Angus.”

“No, miss. My cousin Katie married Angus last month. When she left her job caring for Charlotte, she promised Mr. Beck—that’s Charlotte’s father—she would send someone to replace her. My sister leaves on the afternoon train.”

“Ah, so your sister’s going on an adventure. How exciting.”

Fiona shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. My sister’s met someone. In order to keep her promise to Katie, she has to leave behind the man she loves.”

“And he can’t go with her?”

“No, miss. He can’t leave so soon. If only someone could mind the child until my sister and he are wed. It would only be a few weeks, a month perhaps.” She met Gennie’s gaze as if asking for a solution.

Gennie was the last person from whom a solution could be received. She had her own dilemma: a need for an adventure of her own, a Mae Winslow-sized adventure. But would she be brave enough to grasp the chance if it were presented to her?

If You bring the opportunity, Lord, she vowed.

“I see.” Gennie toyed with the gilt edge of the saucer. “And you are not up to taking that trip?”

Again Fiona’s eyes told the story. “I’m . . . afraid.”

“Afraid? Of what?”

“Well, it’s far. Very far. And me, I’ve never even been to New Jersey.”

Gennie moved the tray aside. “Where is this awful place? Shanghai? Siam?”

"No, miss." Fiona shuddered. "Denver."

"Denver, Colorado?" When Fiona nodded, Gennie rose and sucked in a quick breath. *If You bring the opportunity, I will go.* Had her prayers been answered so soon? "Tell me again why your sister isn't keen on this opportunity. Is this child naughty?"

Fiona jumped to her feet. "O h, no, she's a sweet one, so I've been told, though I understand she can be quite the challenge. My cousin cried when she left the family. That's why she was so particular about sending for one of us to take her place."

"I see." A plan began to hatch and with it came more pacing. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to think carefully before you answer. If your sister were offered the chance, would she give her ticket to someone else?"

A puzzled look crossed Fiona's face. "You mean would she sell her ticket? I don't think so. But if there was someone suitable to take her place as governess to that little girl, well, I think she'd be glad to hand her ticket over." She paused. "Begging your pardon, miss, but I feel I ought to remind you that you've got a train to catch shortly."

"Yes," Gennie said slowly, "but first, I need to write a letter to my Boston cousins."

"A letter to your cousins?" Fiona shook her head. "I don't understand."

Gennie kicked a pillow out of the way and settled at the writing table. "You'll understand soon enough. Grab your coat, Fiona, and tell Simmons to send the carriage around. This will only take a moment."

Dire circumstances seemed the order of the day for Mae Winslow, and yet never had she failed to have a plan. To panic would mean certain death, so Mae lifted the delicate lace handkerchief to her nose and raised her eyes heavenward. Her prayers completed, she sprang into action.

Through the haze of smoke, Mae found her boots and then her hat. What remained was to see whether the carefully devised scheme would actually work.



“Oh, miss, this will never work.”

Gennie shook her head and pressed a gloved finger against her lips. “Quiet now, Fiona. We don’t want our plan to be discovered until...” She paused to wait for the front doors of the house to close behind them. A fresh north wind whipped down Fifth Avenue and chased up her spine. “In order for this to work, we’ve got to stick to the plan.”

The maid looked doubtful. “Are you certain? I know my sister will be ever so grateful for you to take her place, but I do worry what the child’s father will say when he realizes he hasn’t got a governess after all.”

“Ah, but that’s the beauty of it.” Gennie nodded at a pair of matrons passing on the sidewalk. “He *will* have a governess. I plan to stay and assist the poor fellow in the caring of this child, at least until your sister and her new husband can cash in my ticket for two lesser fares and join me in Denver. By that time, I will be thoroughly satis-

fied with my adventures in the Wild West and ready to return home.” She beamed and gathered her traveling cloak around her as Papa’s carriage turned the corner. “If all goes well, Mama and Papa never have to know.”

Fiona leaned close as the carriage pulled up to the curb. “But, Miss Cooper, you’re *not* a governess.”

“Well, of course she’s not a governess, girl. Who would ever consider such a ridiculous thing?” Chandler Dodd grinned as he stepped out of the carriage.

“Mr. Dodd!” Gennie stepped back in surprise. Why was Chandler in her father’s carriage?

“Good morning, Miss Cooper. My, you look fetching.”

As did he. But then Chandler Dodd always cut a dashing figure. It almost made up for the fact that his dinner conversation, generally discussions of a financial nature, was usually so bland it was all Gennie could do not to fall into the soup in a dead slumber.

Chandler lifted her hand to his lips, then began the business of ordering the help about. Rendered temporarily mute, Gennie could only watch as her trunks appeared and were loaded. By the time she found her voice, the luggage was settled and she’d been handed into the carriage to sit beside the banker. A surprised squeak let her know Fiona had been loaded as well, most likely up beside the driver.

This certainly complicated her plan and left her with a difficult choice. Should she make a scene like Mae Winslow would have done, or give up her plan? Gennie decided to try a third option: using her rusty feminine wiles.

“Really, Mr. Dodd,” she finally managed. “This isn’t necessary. You’re a busy and important man, and the train station will be crawling with persons of unknown ilk. Besides, the driver is here to assist us.” She

started to rise, but the carriage bolted forward, sending her tumbling back onto the seat. "Oh my," she squeaked.

"I insist." The banker's smile didn't quite reach his eyes as he tipped his hat. "I promised your father I would look after you in his absence. In fact, it was for that very reason Simmons suggested I accompany you to the train station."

Gennie grasped the seat to keep herself in place when the carriage turned the corner. "Yes, well, honestly, Mr. Dodd, I really don't mind tending to myself today. I've been looking forward to visiting my destination for some time now. In fact—"

"And speaking of absences," Chandler said as if he hadn't heard a word except his own, "you were missed this morning at the Vanowen party." His dark brows gathered above his nose. "Are you unwell? Your note was a bit vague."

"Vague." She stared out at the passing scenery until her stomach complained. "I didn't want to burden you with a woman's silliness."

"Nonsense. I adore you, Eugenia. You know your father and I have spoken on more than one occasion of the great possibility that I might—"

Gennie lurched forward and began to cough, hoping to distract him. When she felt she'd accomplished her goal, she leaned back and covered the lower half of her face with her cloak.

"Forgive me," she said through the muffling layers. "I'm so looking forward to fresh air and open spaces."

He arched a dark brow. "In Boston?"

She was saved by a commotion outside the carriage, which temporarily directed his attention away from her. When he looked back at her, she lowered her lashes. "Forgive me," she said again, "but would you mind terribly if I rested my eyes a moment? I'm awfully tired."

"Of course." He shifted positions to face her. "Rest while you can. The trip ahead is a long one."

He had no idea.

The carriage soon arrived at the edge of what could only be called a mob scene. While the mass of people seemed intimidating, Gennie felt her courage soar. The train for Denver awaited.

"That settles it," Chandler said. "A lady of your caliber has no place among this. There's nothing to be done about it. You'll just have to postpone the trip until Father can make arrangements for his rail car to be brought up."

"No!" The force with which she made the statement stunned them both. She offered a smile and lowered her lashes again. "That is, I couldn't bear to think of departing at a later date. That would mean our reunion would take place later rather than sooner." She lifted her gaze and one corner of her mouth, hoping for a shy, demure expression. "And I couldn't bear that either, Mr. Dodd."

"Do you mean it?"

The look in Chandler's eyes took her off guard. Had her ruse worked too well? Perhaps a bit of backtracking was in order. "I...well, that is—"

"Say no more, Miss Cooper." He leaned forward to envelop her in an embrace and then, to her astonishment, kissed her.

Gennie blinked hard as the world tilted, then righted itself once more. "Oh my," she managed through greatly shortened breath. "That was unexpected."

She spoke to an empty carriage, however, for Chandler had already jumped out and busied himself with her trunks. Gennie suspected the flush in his cheeks was not from the exertion of hauling her luggage.

By the time she climbed out of the carriage, her trunk sat atop a pile of luggage beside a Boston-bound train, and Chandler Dodd stood

beside the porter with his money clip in hand. She pushed her way inside the train station. Fewer people populated the building than the platforms, and they moved about in a more orderly fashion. Still, the sounds and smells competed with the occasional roar of a train whistle to make Gennie feel genuinely less than well.

And then there was the kiss. She touched her lips with her gloved hand and closed her eyes. Chandler Dodd had certainly given her something to think about on her trip west. He'd also given her a good reason to come home once her adventure ended.

"Take care of her," she heard the banker say. He was moving her direction.

Gennie opened her eyes. Fiona cowered at her side, her face a mask of fear. "It's going to be fine," Gennie whispered. "Do you see your sister?"

The maid nodded. "Over there, miss." She pointed through the crowd. Any of several women could have been Fiona's sister. Under the circumstances, Gennie decided not to ask which one.

She leaned toward the maid. "Go tell her what is about to happen, then wait for my signal. I'll handle Mr. Dodd."

Fiona's eyes went wide. "Are you certain?"

"Go."

Gennie watched the maid weave through the crowd and embrace a slender woman, then point in her direction. She forced her attention back on Chandler and the trunk she must retrieve once he left. He stopped by her side, the porter on his heels.

"Oh, yes sir." The porter folded a thick wad of cash and stuffed it into his vest pocket. "Glad to do it, sir. I'd best get her seated before the train leaves without us both."

"I've paid you enough to see that I get a few moments alone with Miss Cooper." Chandler reached for Gennie's elbow but did not quite meet her gaze. "If you'll excuse us."

The porter grinned and nodded as he headed for her trunks.

"Wait," Gennie called. "Don't take them yet."

"But..." He looked at Chandler, who nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Gennie allowed the banker to lead her to a quiet corner, if anything in that madhouse could be called quiet. When she saw Chandler's face, Gennie's fear at the possibility he might kiss her again was quickly replaced by the thought he might not.

"Something wrong?" she asked. "You're wearing a frightful expression."

"Am I?" He shook his head, concern etching his brow, then began to pace, a difficult prospect considering the people streaming past. Finally, he stopped and stood before her. "I've let your father down."

The statement stunned her, but the emotion Chandler showed surprised her more. "Whatever are you talking about, Mr. Dodd?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fiona and her sister watching them. "You've seen me safely to the train station. I understand completely that you must leave. You're a busy—"

"No, you don't understand." Chandler grasped her shoulders and turned her toward him. "I failed to keep you safe...from myself. My behavior in the carriage was reprehensible." He hung his head. "I don't know what happens when I'm near you, Miss Cooper. It's as if I take leave of my senses."

She might have laughed had the banker not looked so distraught. Instead, she offered a genuine smile. "I assure you I have never felt as safe as I do at this moment. And if it is the kiss to which you are referring, I must warn you that offering your regrets would offend me. You're not about to do that, are you?"

Chandler's worried look quickly shifted to a smile as he leaned closer. "I would rather die than offend a beautiful woman such as your-

self. In fact, were we not in such a public forum, I might risk stealing another.”

Gennie touched a hand to her throat while warmth crept into her cheeks. Where had this side of the staid banker been hiding? “Why, Mr. Dodd, this is all quite unexpected.”

A train whistle blew, and the porter called for stragglers to board. Chandler loosened his grip on her shoulders and grasped her hand. “Perhaps, but I vow I shall write you daily, and until you return, I will be a miserable wretch.”

Write daily? She hadn’t considered that when making her plans. “Oh dear,” she said. “Perhaps that’s not such a good idea.”

“No?”

“No.” She inched toward the train, glancing over to indicate that Fiona should do the same. “With each letter, I’d only be reminded of what I left behind.”

He took her elbow and led her toward the porter. “Yes, but what else shall we do?”

An idea occurred, at once brilliant and devious. Surely an innocent trip to Denver would never come between them.

She paused to look up into eyes the color of freshly brewed coffee. “I propose we keep a diary of the things we do each day. When I return, we can meet again and share them together.”

Chandler looked skeptical. “You want me to write down what I do?”

“If you like.” Fiona appeared through the crowd, her sister a discreet distance behind. Gennie nodded to her maid, then returned her attention to Chandler. “Of course, if you’d rather write, I cannot stop you, but I must say that receiving your letters would cause me great distress.”

The confused look returned. “I cannot understand why. I certainly would not write of things that would upset you.”

"And yet our parting upsets me." She nodded toward the train. "It's time for me to go. I hope you understand if I prefer to say our good-byes here."

"But I'd hoped to see you to the train."

Gennie rested her hand atop his. "I'm asking two things of you, Mr. Dodd. Keep your journal, and let me go to the train alone."

The banker sighed. "These are your wishes?"

"They are."

She held her breath while he considered the statement. Fiona stopped beside Gennie's trunks, the only luggage near a train set to leave any moment. A fair distance away, Fiona's sister stood watching.

A smile dawned on Chandler's face. "Then it will be my pleasure to do as you ask."

Relief flooded her, but Gennie was careful not to let the emotion show on her face. "Then, since you are in a mood to do as I ask, perhaps I could make one more request."

"Anything."

Gennie rose up on tiptoe and embraced Chandler. "Could I beg one last kiss?" she whispered.

"Miss Cooper, it is I who is reduced to begging in your presence." He lowered his hat to shield their faces. "But I cannot think of any request I would enjoy fulfilling more than this one."

This kiss, while not taking her by surprise, still stunned her. How in all the years she'd known Chandler Dodd had she missed this side of him? The answer came to her as he offered one last embrace and turned to walk away.

She'd missed it because she hadn't been looking.

Gennie waited until Chandler's top hat disappeared around the corner, then hurried to her trunks. The porter, considerably less

enthusiastic about her delay now that the train whistle had blown, reached for the handle.

“Don’t touch that,” she called. “Whatever he paid you, I will double it if you see that this trunk gets to...” She turned to Fiona and her sister. “Tell him which train you’re—or rather, I’m on.”

Fiona did, and the porter shook his head and checked his schedule. “But that train’s not going to Boston. It’s headed for Denver.”

“Exactly.” Gennie reached for the velvet reticule hanging from her wrist. “Now, how much did he pay you?”

The porter waived away her offer. “Your gentleman told me to see you got safely to where you’re going. I figure if you say you’re going to Denver instead of Boston, then that’s none of my business. Just give me a minute to locate a man to get your trunks over to the right train. According to my schedule, you’ve got nearly an hour before that one leaves.”

As the porter scurried off, Fiona introduced Gennie to her sister.

“I don’t know how to tell you how grateful I am that you’ve offered to take my place until my man and I can marry up and head west.” Fiona’s sister paused. “You’re certain this is what you want to do, Miss Cooper?”

“Yes, absolutely certain.” Gennie retrieved her ticket to Boston from her reticule and exchanged it with the one Fiona’s sister held for Denver. “If I don’t take this chance, I might never get another one.” She smiled at Fiona. “Enjoy yourself the next three days, and don’t let on to Simmons where I’ve gone when you return to work.”

“Of course. Thank you again, miss, for letting me have time with my sister. I know it’s a sacrifice, seeing as how you’ll have to travel alone.”

Strange how a trip to Boston had always required an escort, and yet she felt no such need on her excursion to Denver. Perhaps she was more like Mae Winslow than she thought.

Fiona's sister's voice penetrated her thoughts. "And you're going to take good care of Mr. Beck's girl until I get there?"

"Mr. Beck," Gennie repeated. "Yes, of course. Tell me again how I will know who he is."