

Kayla & the Rancher

By

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Chapter One

Kayla Mathison would have done anything to escape her life back in New York. Anything included traveling cross-country, in a cramped, uncomfortable stagecoach in the blistering heat to a city she didn't know. At the moment, she and another girl, who looked to be about her age, were the stage's only occupants. Before that, they'd been joined by an elderly woman traveling with her granddaughter, a portly businessman, and a sour-faced old man who did nothing but complain about what the rough ride was doing to his behind.

Kayla didn't give the other travelers too much of her attention, however, preferring to concentrate on the sketchpad she kept balanced on her lap. Not only did her drawings keep her from having to make polite conversation with the other travelers, but they also kept her from dwelling on the reason she was running away in the first place. Every once in a while, one of the other passengers would look over at the sketches she was doing of dress designs and make a comment, but she'd merely smile and disengage herself from the conversation as quickly as possible.

At twenty years of age, Kayla's father had decided it was high time that she got married. It seemed that he thought her willful, independent ways were going to get her into trouble. And he didn't want to marry her to just anyone, of course, but to William Delmont. Which probably wouldn't have bothered her so much if the man wasn't marrying her simply to get half of her father's company. Though that wasn't William's fault, she supposed, since it was her father who had bribed William and made it a package deal. Kayla had never been so insulted - or outraged - in her entire life. She couldn't decide what enraged her more. The thought that her father felt he had the right to decide whom she married, or that he felt it would take half his company to get someone to marry her.

Kayla had pleaded with her father, but it hadn't mattered. He was determined to see her married, and would hear none of it. So, with a small suitcase, her drawing materials, and what she thought would be enough money in hand,

Kayla left home to head west to San Francisco where she would become a seamstress. She could sew, and she knew that her designs were pretty good. She'd always dreamed of one day becoming a clothing designer in New York, maybe even Paris. But her father had changed all of that, so she would have to be a designer in San Francisco instead. However, she'd gone through her money faster than she'd thought she would, and she still had a few weeks of travel left.

"Those drawings are beautiful."

Kayla lifted her head to look at the girl sitting across from her. Slightly plump, she had a rounded, freckled face and curly carrot-red hair that she wore back in a bun at the nape of her neck. She gave Kayla a shy smile.

"I didn't mean to be so nosy," she hastily apologized before Kayla could answer. "It's just that you're so talented. I can't seem to draw a straight line myself."

Kayla smiled. "Straight lines are highly overrated, anyway."

The other girl laughed. "I'm Abigail, by the way."

"I'm Kayla." She turned her attention back to the sketchbook on her lap, hoping to put an end to the conversation, but the other girl didn't take the hint.

"Are you going to Copper Creek, too?"

Kayla had never heard of Copper Creek, but it didn't sound like a place she'd want to visit. She shook her head. "No, I'm going to San Francisco."

Abigail's eyes lit up. "How exciting!" she exclaimed. "And how brave of you. I'd be terrified at the thought of going so far." She frowned as if considering something. "Actually, I'm terrified at the thought of going to Copper Creek." She gave Kayla a small smile. "I agreed to be a mail-order bride, you see, but I don't think I can go through with it."

Kayla's brow furrowed. She'd seen the advertisements placed by men who were looking for wives, but she'd never actually known a woman who had responded to any of them. Perhaps she should have considered becoming a mail-order bride herself, she thought wryly. It certainly couldn't be any worse than marrying William Delmont.

Across from her, Abigail was telling her about the stranger that she'd left her home in Boston for. "His name's Cord Holderness and he owns a cattle ranch outside of Copper Creek. It's positively huge, at least as big as the city of Boston. And he has all these cattle and horses and lots of people working for him. But he's not all about the money. He sounds so nice in his letters, just like the cowboys that you read about in the dime-store novels. A true gentleman." She laughed, blushing. "I never told anyone this before, but I've always been fascinated by cowboys. In the books, they're always so big and strong and handsome and gentlemanly..." A dreamy expression came onto her face, but it faded after a moment. "But the men that I've met since coming out here aren't at all like they are in the books. They're rough and unmannerly and not at all what I imagined. Most of them actually smell."

Kayla couldn't help but smile. She'd met a few of those men herself on this trip. "And you're afraid that this Cord Holderness is going to be like that, too."

Abigail nodded. "Yes...no..." She sighed, slumping back in the seat. "I don't know. He sounds so wonderful in his letters, but I'm afraid that he may have just made everything up so that I'd marry him. Plus, I have to admit it, I miss Boston. I never thought I would, but the west just isn't the way I thought it was."

The stage slowed, and through the small windows, Kayla could see that they were approaching a town. The driver had said it was called Hangman's Bend. Who would name a town something like that? she wondered.

Across from her, Abigail was shaking her head. "I can't do it. I can't marry him," she said. "I'm getting off here and taking the next stage headed back

east.”

Kayla frowned. “But what about Cord? Isn’t he going to be expecting you?”

The other girl nodded miserably. “But if I went all the way to Copper Creek, I’d have to tell him face to face, and I can’t do that.” She looked at Kayla pleadingly. “What am I going to do?”

Kayla said nothing for a moment. She didn’t know anything about being a mail-order bride, and since she’d run away from everything she knew to avoid her own wedding, she didn’t think she was the right person to be asking for advice. “Well, since you agreed to marry him by way of a letter, then I suppose you can tell him that you changed your mind the same way.”

Abigail seemed to be considering her suggestion, but after a moment, she shook her head. “But that seems so impersonal.” She thought a moment, and then looked at Kayla, a smile brightening her face. “Perhaps you could tell him for me.”

Kayla blinked in astonishment. “Me?”

Nodding, Abigail leaned forward in her seat excitedly. “Copper Creek is the next stop, so you’ll be going through there anyway, and I know it would sound so much better coming from you than from some letter.”

“Abigail…”

“Oh, please, Kayla,” Abigail begged. “Please say you’ll do it. You have to pass through Copper Creek anyway, so it’s not even out of your way. It would just take a minute or two of your time. If Cord is as nice as he seems, then I don’t want to hurt him. This way I’ll feel better about doing such a horrible thing. Please, Kayla.” She reached into her reticule and took out some money, which she held out to Kayla. “For your trouble.”

Kayla’s gaze shifted to the money that Abigail was still holding out to her. She

was down to her last few coins, and the five dollars that the other girl was offering her was a lot of money. As uncomfortable as she was with the idea of going up to some stranger and telling him that his mail-order bride had changed her mind about marrying him, the money was too good to turn down. It seemed like an easy way to make five dollars.

Reaching out to take the money from the other girl, she nodded. "I'll tell him."

Smiling, Abigail sighed with relief. "You don't know how much this means to me. Thank you!"

Kayla put the money into her own reticule. "How will I know him?" she asked Abigail.

"He described himself as tall, with dark brown hair and brown eyes," the other girl offered.

Kayla frowned. "That could describe half the men in the territory."

The other girl shrugged. "Sorry. He knows I was coming in on this stage, though, so he'll probably be looking for me."

Again, that wasn't much to go on, but Kayla supposed it would have to do. The stage came to a halt just then, and Abigail's gaze went to the window. She looked out at the small town, but said nothing.

Kayla regarded her for a moment. "Are you sure you don't want to go to Copper Creek anyway and meet Cord, just to see what he's like?" she asked. "You could always say that you want to get to know him a little better before you marry him."

Abigail seemed to genuinely consider her words, and for a moment, Kayla thought the other girl would actually agree, but then she shook her head. "I've made up my mind. I'm going home." She looked at Kayla. "Thank you."

The driver opened the door then, putting a halt to any further conversation, and Abigail stepped out of the stagecoach. They stopped in Hangman's Bend just long enough for Kayla to stretch her legs and to pick up their new passengers – two elderly sisters – before going on their way again.

It was several hours to Copper Creek, but the driver assured them that they would be there before sundown. The two women, though pleasant, ignored Kayla for the most part, which suited her fine. She tried to concentrate on her newest drawing of a lady's day dress, but all she could seem to think about was what she was going to say to Cord Holderness. She probably should get in the part about the inconvenience to her and imply that some type of payment would be nice before she told him that his fiancé wasn't going to be coming. However, she couldn't figure out how to even start the conversation. The man was expecting his mail-order bride to step off the stage, not some stranger there to tell him that the girl had changed her mind.

As the driver had promised, they arrived in Copper Creek well before sunset that evening. Like so many of the other towns where the stage had stopped, Copper Creek was small, with one main road running through the center of it. Of course, there was the requisite saloon, general store, telegraph office and sheriff, but more interested in the people than the town, Kayla took little notice of more than that as she stood in front of the stagecoach office.

Kayla noticed several dark-haired men, regarding her with interest, but none of them came over to her immediately. One of the men, however, was looking at her with more interest than the others, and after a moment he approached her.

Kayla said nothing for a moment. This was Cord Holderness? Tall and well-built, with dark hair, warm brown eyes, and the faint hint of a beard along his jaw line, he was absolutely one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. And dressed in denims, a shirt that he'd left unbuttoned at the neck, a hat and well-worn boots, he looked every inch the cowboy, she thought.

"Abigail?" he asked, looking at her curiously. His voice was soft, sensuous.

Kayla opened her mouth, all set to ask him for a monetary award in exchange for her information regarding Abigail, but all she could seem to manage to say was, “Cord?”

He grinned, flashing white teeth at her, and Kayla just about melted on the spot. Putting his arms around her, he bent his head and kissed her cheek. “I’m so glad you’re finally here.” Lifting his head, he gazed down at her, his brown eyes soft. “You’re even more beautiful than you led me to believe.”

Kayla blinked. She was rarely, if ever, at a loss for words, but with him standing so near, she couldn’t seem to formulate a complete thought. He thought she was Abigail, she realized. She opened her mouth to explain, but Cord continued before she could speak.

“As you can see, most of the town came out to meet you,” he said, gesturing to the people who had gathered nearby. Leaning close, he spoke conspiratorially in her ear. “Don’t worry. I told them they had to wait until you settled in.”

Standing in front of this man who was so handsome that he literally made her dizzy, she suddenly began thinking of a different plan. She had no idea where it came from; it just popped into her head. Maybe she could go along with this, let him think that she was his mail-order bride. From what Abigail had said, he was probably rich. He was certain to have money or something valuable around his home that she could take to sell later. She could certainly use a little bit of extra money to get herself started in San Francisco. And Cord being so attractive was an added bonus. Pretending to be his fiancé certainly wouldn’t be distasteful. She had a momentary twinge of guilt, but it disappeared quickly when she thought about how easy it would be to start in San Francisco if she had a little bit of money.

Kayla looked around to see groups of people clustered along the street. Some were looking at her with open curiosity, but most, judging from their smiling faces, looked genuinely happy for Cord. That just gave her added

justification. After all, how could she tell him about Abigail's decision not to marry him in front of all these people?

"Is this the only bag you have?"

Kayla saw that Cord had picked up her small suitcase. She nodded as a plan began to develop in her mind. "Yes." She gave him a pretty little pout. "Everything else I brought with me fell off that stupid stagecoach. My trunk opened and everything inside was ruined, of course. The driver said that the stage wasn't responsible for such things, but..."

Her voice trailed off helplessly, and he gave her one of those dazzling smiles of his. "Don't worry, Abigail. I'll buy you whatever you need. Copper Creek's small, but the general store has some good mail order catalogs you can get things from."

This was even better than she'd hoped, Kayla thought. Conniving him out of his money would be as easy as pie. She would have no problem wrapping this big, strapping man around her finger. She probably wouldn't even have to actually steal anything. Smiling up at him, she took his arm and let him lead her to the waiting wagon. As they walked, she couldn't help but notice that his forearm was strongly muscled beneath her hand. When he offered his hand to help her up into the wagon, she smiled and thanked him. Then, before she knew it, he'd climbed in beside her and took up the reins, sending the wagon in motion.

"You must be tired after your journey," he said, giving her a sidelong glance.

"A little," she admitted. "Stagecoaches aren't the most comfortable form of transportation."

"Or the safest," he added, glancing at her. "I was concerned about you traveling alone, especially since you said that you've never been out of Boston." When she said nothing, he continued. "It must be a big culture shock for you, not just leaving Boston, but coming all the way out here on your own."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "And it certainly doesn't help that we've never met before. But I just want to let you know that I'm not going to rush anything. We can take our time getting to know each other. There's no pressure, Abigail, so you can just relax and enjoy the beautiful scenery."

Once again, Kayla was rendered speechless by this man. Cord Holderness was so nice; deceiving him just didn't seem right. She should tell him the truth, she thought. But then again, she reasoned he did order a bride through a catalog, so how nice could he really be?

Well, just because she thought that he might be a wolf in sheep's clothing didn't mean that she couldn't appreciate the surrounding mountainous landscape of the Wyoming Territory. The sun was just beginning to set, and she didn't think she'd ever seen a more vivid display of colors. "I would never have thought it would be this beautiful," she said, almost to herself.

Beside her, Cord laughed. "So, my letters didn't do it justice, then? And here I thought I was sounding poetic."

She looked at him in confusion. "What?" Then she remembered. Cord and Abigail had probably corresponded for weeks, months maybe, before the girl had begun the trek out here. Kayla laughed nervously. "Oh...of course...I didn't mean to imply..."

Cord reached out and covered her hand with his own. "I was teasing you, Abigail," he said, turning his head to look at her. "It is beautiful, but not as beautiful as you."

Kayla caught her breath. His hand on hers was doing funny little things to her pulse, and once again, she couldn't seem to think clearly. Blushing, she looked away. "Th...thank you," she stammered, and then gave herself a mental shake. She had to keep focused on her goal with this guy, or she was going to find herself grinning at him like a lovesick teenager all the time.

They arrived at his home a little while later. It was a big, two-story house with

a porch that went around the entire perimeter. Several hundred feet from the house was an immense barn with several other smaller buildings around it, and Kayla could see horses in the adjoining paddock. Cord brought the wagon to a stop outside the house and offered his hand to Kayla, helping her down. Taking up her small suitcase, he led her up the steps and into the house.

Inside, it was simply but comfortably furnished. Though she could see why he needed a woman out here. There was nothing soft or feminine about the place. No pictures, no curtains, no rugs, not even a throw pillow. Directly opposite the front door was a staircase that led to the second floor. Though Cord said there was dinner waiting for them on the stove, he gave her a quick tour of the house before they ate. Off the entryway, there was a living room to one side and a dining room on the other. Beyond that was the kitchen, where Cord served them hearty bowls of stew and a plate of biscuits. Though the food was quite good, Kayla had to concentrate so hard on what she was saying that she hardly tasted any of it. Pretending to be Abigail was going to be more difficult than she thought.

She was relieved when the kitchen door opened. Kayla turned her head to see a tall, dark-haired man entering the kitchen. He was older than Cord by several years, and from his clothing, she assumed that he must be one of the ranch hands.

The man's blue gaze went from Kayla to Cord. "Sorry, Cord. I didn't mean to interrupt," he said. "I'll come back later."

Cord shook his head and got to his feet. "No, stay. Lucas, this is Abigail Murray." He looked at Kayla. "Abigail, this is my foreman, Lucas Johnson. He's been my right-hand man around here for years, so if I'm out and there's anything you need, he'll take care of it for you."

Kayla smiled and held out her hand, which Lucas took in his work-worn one. "It's nice to meet you," she said.

Lucas dipped his head. "Pleased to meet you, Ma'am." He looked at Cord. "I have some things to talk to you about, but it'll keep 'til morning."

Relieved at the interruption, Kayla pushed back her chair and got to her feet. "You two talk," she told Cord. "I'm so exhausted from the trip that I'm half asleep at the table. It was nice meeting you, Lucas." She smiled at Cord. "Good night, Cord."

"Abigail," was all he said, but she could feel his eyes on her as she left the kitchen. As she made her way up the stairs, the men's voices carried to where she stood, and though she'd been taught never to eavesdrop, she paused a moment to listen to their conversation.

"She'll make a very attractive wife," Lucas said. "It's difficult to believe that she's not already spoken for."

"I couldn't agree more. The men in Boston must be crazy to have let her go."

Kayla felt her pulse skip a beat at his words, and for a moment she wondered why her father couldn't have found a man like this for her to marry instead of that yes-man, Delmont.

There was a pause before Cord spoke. "So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"McCauley sold his ranch to Dalton Jeffries this afternoon," Lucas said.

"Damn," Cord muttered.

"Someone cut his fences and made off with almost half his herd last night. His son was watching over them and got pretty beat-up. That was the last straw for him," Lucas said. "A man can only take so much, you know."

Their conversation about the other rancher continued, and since it sounded like Cord was going to be awhile, Kayla decided it was the perfect opportunity

to snoop around. Thinking that the most likely place Cord would keep money or anything valuable would be his bedroom, she went there first. She wouldn't take anything right now, of course. She just thought that it would be good to know where the valuables were kept.

It was right across the hall from hers, and she'd gotten a quick look at it when Cord had showed her around before. Taking the lantern from the table just inside the door, she used a match to light it, and then closed the door behind her.

Like the other room in the house, Cord's bedroom was simply furnished. Besides the big four-poster bed and nightstands, there was a washstand with a mirror, a low dresser, and a wardrobe, but it was the chest at the foot of the bed that caught her attention.

Placing the lantern on one of the nightstands, she knelt down beside the chest and lifted the lid. Thinking that there had to be something of value inside, she was surprised to find only some blankets, an oily jacket, and two pistols with boxes and boxes of bullets.

Her brow furrowing, she sat back on her heels and looked around the room. That was when she saw it. A metal box underneath the bed. Now, there had to be something valuable in there, she thought. Lifting the edge of the quilt, she reached underneath the bed to pull it out. It was heavier than it looked, though, and she needed two hands to do so. With her bottom in the air, she scooted her head and shoulders as far as she could under the bed.

Which was exactly how Cord found her when he walked into his bedroom.

Unaware that she had an audience, Kayla grabbed hold of the latches on either side of the heavy box and yanked. It scraped along the floor, but didn't budge much, and she tightened her grip, ready to pull on it again.

"Just what do you think you're doing?"

At the sound of Cord's voice, Kayla jumped, thumping her head on the underside of the bed. Muttering something unladylike, she reflexively touched her fingers to the back of her head. Darn, but she'd thought Cord would be busy with his foreman at least long enough for her to get a look around. Knowing she couldn't very well stay in this position while he was still standing there, she wiggled out from under the bed.

Smoothing a stray piece of silky auburn hair back from her face, she met Cord's accusing gaze with one of complete innocence. "Cord!"

"Abigail," was all he said.

She glanced at the bed, and then back at him, nervously smoothing her hair back again. "I...I was just looking for one of my hair pins."

"Really?" He folded his arms across his chest. "It looked more like you were snooping to me."

She flushed. "Snooping! I most certainly wasn't snooping. I can't believe you would even imply such a thing." She tried to sound as indignant as she could.

He lifted a brow, but said nothing.

She bit her lip, and looked away. "Well...maybe I was snooping a little," she admitted softly. He'd caught her red-handed, so she would have to try and wiggle out of this using her charm, a tactic that had worked many times before on the men in New York, especially her father. She turned big green eyes on him. "But I was just trying to find out more about you."

He scowled. "By crawling around under my bed."

Kayla managed to look suitably embarrassed. "I certainly realize that it looked bad, but I hope you understand that I'm just trying to ensure that you are the wonderful man that you described to me in your letters. After all, you know it's quite a shock for me. Being out here all alone without my family back in

Boston and all.” She put on a sad face as she spoke. She’d used this same expression often on her father with great results.

Cord regarded her in silence for a moment, but he didn’t appear to be swayed. “Well, I don’t know how they do things in Boston, Abigail, but out in the west, we respect other people’s private property. It’s a guiding principal out here that you’ll have to come to learn.”

She flushed again, and lowered her gaze. “I’m sorry, Cord,” she said quietly, hoping she sounded suitably chastised. “I won’t do it again.”

His mouth quirked. “Oh, I intend to make sure of that.”

As he spoke, he reached out to take her arm and led her over to the bed.

Kayla hung back. “What...what are you doing?”

But Cord ignored her question. Instead, he sat down on the bed, and in one swift motion, pulled her over his knee. Kayla simply lay there for a moment, too surprised to do more than that. He wouldn’t, she thought in disbelief, then let out a startled “Oh!” as his hand slapped her upturned bottom. Outraged, she struggled, trying to push herself upright, but a strong hand on her back held her in place while he spanked her again. Another followed, and then another, each slap harder than the previous one.

The spansks stung, even through the thick material of her dress, but more than that, it was the embarrassment of being held down across this handsome man’s strong thighs with her bottom in the air that made her struggle to free herself.

“Let me go!” she ordered indignantly, trying to push against him again.

“Not until you learn some manners,” he replied, lifting his hand to spank her again.

“What would a hick cowboy like you know about manners, anyway?” she demanded, craning her neck to look at him over her shoulder.

The insult earned her an even harder spank and she cried out in protest. “Obviously more than a spoiled city girl like you,” he retorted, bringing his hand down again and again on her poor bottom.

“Ouch! That hurts!” she whined.

“It’s supposed to hurt,” he told her, spanking her again. “How else are you going to remember not to snoop around in other people’s things?”

“Please, Cord,” she pleaded before he could continue with the spanking. “I won’t do it again.” Of course she would, she told herself; she just wouldn’t be foolish enough to get caught next time.

But her words must have been enough to sway Cord because he let her up. Or maybe he had just simply decided that she’d been punished enough. He had spanked her at least twenty or twenty-five times, she thought; her bottom was still throbbing even now that she’d stood up. She couldn’t decide if she should say something to him, or just turn and leave the room without another word, but he made the decision for her by holding onto her hand. Her face flushed, Kayla looked up at him. In the lantern’s light, his eyes were a rich golden brown, and she felt her pulse quicken. No man had a right to be this handsome, she thought. As she continued to gaze up at him, she realized that he no longer seemed angry or upset at her. She didn’t understand how that could be after the spanking he’d just delivered.

“I’m willing to forget about this, Abigail,” he told her sternly. “As long as you promise to behave yourself.”

Beneath her dress, her bottom felt hot, and she longed to lift her dress and look at his handiwork in the full-length mirror that was in the corner of the room. She had no idea where that desire had even come from. This was certainly the first spanking she’d ever gotten, and she was confused by her

reaction to it. She was embarrassed certainly, but not nearly as much as she thought she should be. Blushing, she nodded. "I promise," she said softly.

He nodded. "Good. Because if you don't, you're going to find yourself over my knee again, and next time, the spanking will be much harder than the one you just got."

Her pulse quickened and she felt herself blushing even deeper at his words. She should be outraged at the idea of getting spanked again, not feel breathless at the thought of it. If a man had tried this back in New York, she would have slapped him across the face and told him to go to hell. Had coming out west changed her that much, she wondered? Or was it something about Cord Holderness?

Her brow furrowing in thought, Kayla left the room and crossed the hall to her own bedroom. Before the door was even fully closed behind her, she already had her skirt pulled up and was rubbing her sore bottom with her hands.

Chapter Two

Cord rode out early the next morning with Lucas to work on some fences that had been cut on the north end of his property. He knew full well that Dalton Jeffries was behind this recent act of vandalism. The man had been trying to get Cord, as well as every other rancher in the valley, to sell their ranches for months. But Cord had no intention of selling, and if he did, he sure as hell wouldn't sell it to a crooked snake like Jeffries. No one knew why the man was so intent on getting his hands on every ranch in the area, but it was obvious that he would stop at nothing to get them.

Cord's mouth tightened. In the past that wouldn't have bothered him; he could take care of himself and his ranch. But now he had Abigail to think about. Suddenly, everything was different, especially after hearing what Jeffries' men had done to McCauley's son to force the man into selling. In fact, he was going into town to talk to the sheriff today. But first, he wanted to check on Abigail.

As he rode back to the house, his mind turned to thoughts of his mail-order bride. His foreman had actually been the one that had suggested placing the advertisement for a mail-order bride. Cord had mentioned offhandedly to Lucas that he was ready to settle down and start a family, but Copper Creek had had few prospects to offer, so his friend had talked him into writing the letter to the company back east. They had sent him background information on half a dozen women, but Abigail had stood out. He had begun sending letters to her, which she had immediately answered. He liked to think that they had developed a very good friendship over the months that they had been writing each other, and he was overjoyed when she had finally arrived.

She was different than he thought she'd be, though. When he'd first seen her on the stagecoach platform, he hadn't even been sure if she was his mail-order bride. Abigail had described herself as a rather plain-looking girl, when in fact, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And that episode with her snooping around in his bedroom seemed out of character. But maybe

that was just how people acted back in Boston. He sincerely hoped that she had learned her lesson because he'd meant what he'd said about spanking that bottom of hers again if she didn't.

Abigail had still been asleep when he'd left the house that morning, but when he got back, he found her at one of the corrals admiring the horses. She turned as he rode up. She was wearing a light blue dress today, her long auburn hair tied back with a ribbon, and Cord thought that she looked even more beautiful this morning than she had last night.

Swinging one long leg over the saddle, he dismounted and led his horse over to where Abigail stood. Still embarrassed about what had transpired between them the previous evening, she gave him a tentative smile as she reached out to pet his horse.

"You certainly get up early around here," she commented.

He nodded. "I had to check some fences," he said. "I usually spend the day out on the ranch, but I have to go into town today. I thought we could stop by the church and talk to the pastor about when we'd like to be married. I'm sure he can be ready in a few days."

Kayla's hand stilled on the horse's nose and her gaze flew to Cord. "A few days?" she asked in disbelief. Then remembering that she was supposed to be his mail-order bride, she laughed nervously. "But I couldn't possibly be ready in that time. I mean, there are flowers to choose and a menu to be decided, and I'll need a maid of honor, of course."

Cord was looking at her as if she were crazy. "Abigail, this isn't Boston, you know. Weddings are simple things out here," he told her. "The only flowers you're likely to find are wildflowers and the food's usually everyday fare."

"But this is our wedding and I want it to be perfect. So, it'll have to take as long as it takes to bring it all together." She had to find some way to delay the wedding, she thought, and quick! "And besides, I don't even have a wedding

dress. The one I brought with me was in the trunk that fell off the stagecoach.” She stepped closer to him and gently placed her hand on his arm, then looked up at him with pleading green eyes. Her charm may not have worked on him last night, but she was sure it would have its full effect this morning. “Cord, every since you asked me to be your wife, I’ve dreamed of our wedding day and about how special it would be. You may not understand women, but the dress is a vital part of the wedding. Isn’t there a dress shop in town?” she asked, knowing full well that there wasn’t.

His brow furrowed. “Not really,” he said. “There’s a general store that has some dresses, but I don’t think they’ll have what you’re looking for.”

“But they’ll have catalogs that I can order from.” She looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. “Please, Cord. I want our wedding day to be perfect.”

He regarded her for a moment, but she could tell that she’d gotten to him. “Okay,” he said, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “We’ll stop at the general store so that you can get your dress.”

She smiled up at him. “Thank you, Cord.” Impulsively, she leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. He smelled of leather and the outdoors, and something else that was uniquely manly, something that made her want to breathe in his scent even deeper.

Blushing, she took a step back, confused by her reaction to this man. “Let me just go freshen up.”

The general store, it turned out, was owned by friends of Cord’s, Matthew Connelly and his wife, Rachel. The couple was around Cord’s age, making them just a few years older than Kayla.

“When Cord told us that you were finally coming out here, I couldn’t wait to meet you, Abigail,” Rachel said to Kayla after Cord had made the introductions. Rachel, a petite girl with honey-blond hair and amber-colored

eyes, had a warm, welcoming smile that made Kayla like her immediately.

She'd been nervous on the ride to town because she knew that Cord would be introducing her to people once they got there, but she was surprised at how easy it was to be herself with Matthew and Rachel, and she smiled at the other girl. "Well, Cord made Copper Creek sound so wonderful that I couldn't wait to get here," she said.

Cord put his arm around her slender waist, and Kayla felt her pulse flutter. "If only her trunk had gotten here as well," he said with a wry smile. "It seems my bride is without a dress for the wedding, so we're here to look at some catalogs."

Rachel laughed. "You mean that she's here to look at some catalogs," she corrected reprovingly. "You are not to see the dress before the wedding, Cord Holderness." Reaching out, she took Kayla's hand. "Come on," she said, leading her toward the back of the store. "We can look for your dress while the men talk about whatever it is they talk about."

Smiling, Kayla followed the other girl to a small table in the corner. On it were several catalogs, one of them a clothing one, and Rachel picked it up as she and Kayla sat down.

"So," the blond-haired girl said with a smile. "What do you think of Cord now that you've actually met him in person?"

Kayla glanced at Cord. He was still standing at the counter talking to Matthew, and he grinned at whatever the other man had just said. "He's exactly as I imagined," she said, turning back to her new friend. "Though before I got here, I couldn't help but wonder if he were really as nice as he sounded in his letters."

Rachel laughed. "You couldn't ask for a nicer guy. Except Matthew, of course, but he's already spoken for."

Though Kayla smiled at the other girl's words, she couldn't help but again feel a little guilty about misleading Cord. Why couldn't the other girl have had something nasty to say about him, so that Kayla could feel better about what she was doing to him?

"This catalog has some wedding dresses, but I'm afraid that they won't be like anything you could get back in Boston," Rachel said, handing her the book. "I can get whatever you order in about two weeks, though."

Two weeks would be more than enough time to get what she needed from Cord, she thought as she thumbed through the catalog. Though there were one or two pretty dresses, none of them were her style. She could make something much nicer, providing that Rachel could order material for her. And that way, she reasoned, she could delay the wedding however long she needed to.

She was still considering whether to order a dress from the catalog or simply make her own when Cord came over. "So, have you decided on a dress yet?"

Kayla looked up at him. His hair had fallen across his forehead and she longed to reach up and brush it back. Staying in Copper Creek with the handsome rancher for a little while longer wouldn't be all that bad, she thought. "Actually, I can't find any that I like, so I was thinking of making one myself."

His brow furrowed. "Making one? I thought you told me that you were terrible with a needle and thread."

Kayla bit her lip. How was she to know that the real Abigail couldn't sew? "I...uh...well, I've been practicing," she stammered. "I knew that I'd probably have to sew when I came out here. I mean, people have to know how to make their own clothes out here, right?"

Cord said nothing for a moment, and then he laughed. "Sometimes," he agreed. "Most of the time, though, they just buy them."

Kayla blushed, but Rachel spoke before she could think of a suitable retort.

“Stop teasing her, Cord,” the other girl chided, though when she turned to Kayla, she was smiling as well. “Don’t mind him. Actually, I just got material in that I think would be perfect for a wedding dress. You might have to order a little lace to go with it, but that should get here very quickly. I’ll get the material for you.”

Cord grinned. “Since there’s probably some kind of rule about me not seeing the material for your dress before the wedding, either, I’m going to go talk to the sheriff. I’ll be back in a little while to pick you up.”

Kayla watched him go, her gaze following his tall frame until he’d disappeared outside. She didn’t think she’d ever met a man that captivated her the way Cord did. No wonder Abigail had jumped on his offer for a mail-order bride.

The material that Rachel brought out – white with tiny embroidered flowers of the same color - was indeed perfect for a wedding dress, and Kayla automatically found herself mentally designing a dress for the beautiful cloth. When Kayla asked the other girl if Cord had a sewing machine out at the ranch, Rachel shook her head.

“But you’re welcome to come use mine,” the blond girl offered with a smile. “That way, Cord won’t see the dress until you want him to.”

Kayla hesitated for a moment, but then nodded. If she declined, then Rachel would think it funny. They spent a little while talking about various things, but when the other girl had to take care of the store while her husband delivered some items to the blacksmith down the street, Kayla decided to go meet Cord at the sheriff’s.

To get to his office, she had to pass the saloon, and as she did so, her steps slowed. She’d never been in a western saloon before, but she’d heard talk about what they were like. Curious to see for herself, she peered over the

swinging double doors. It was dimly lit inside, but in the afternoon sunlight coming in from outside, she could see a bar along one wall. Several men were seated there, which surprised Kayla a little, considering it was daytime. There were also a few men playing cards at one of the tables near the door. After watching for a moment, she recognized the game as poker. She'd played a few times back in New York and was actually quite good at it. Perhaps, it would even be a good way for her to make some money while she was in town, she thought. That way she wouldn't have to steal from Cord, she reasoned.

One of the men playing was apparently quite good, too, she noticed, watching as he swept the pile of money from the center of the table. The men with him grumbled something, but he just chuckled and pocketed his winnings before picking up his hat and heading for the saloon's door.

Kayla stepped back as the man walked out of the saloon. He was taller than she - though not as tall as Cord, she noticed - with sandy-colored hair and a matching mustache. She expected him to walk by her and down the street, but instead, he stopped outside the door, his dark brown eyes regarding her with interest.

"Well, good afternoon, Ma'am," he said, tipping his hat to her. "I don't think I've seen you around here before, and I would have remembered seeing such a pretty woman like you. Which means that you must be Cord Holderness's mail-order bride. From Boston, isn't it?"

Kayla nodded. She supposed that in a small town like Copper Creek everyone knew everyone else's business. "Yes," she said.

The man grinned. "I'm Dalton Jeffries."

She thought that she recognized the name, but she couldn't remember where she'd heard it. Realizing that he was probably waiting for her to introduce herself, she said, "Abigail," she said, and then added, "Murray."

His grin broadened. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, then, Abigail Murray. A woman as beautiful as you will certainly be a welcome addition to our town."

She smiled and was about to answer when the sound of Cord's voice interrupted her. "Abigail, what are you doing?"

He stepped in front of her, protectively putting himself between her and the other man. She frowned. "I was just talking to this gentleman," she told him.

Cord's mouth tightened as he glared at the other man. "He's no gentleman."

Cord's voice was hard, and Kayla looked at him in surprise, but before she could say anything, he continued.

"Stay away from her, Jeffries," he warned.

Dalton Jeffries smirked. "Can't a man talk to a pretty lady?"

"Not when you're the one doing the talking," Cord retorted.

The other man said nothing for a moment, and she thought that they might start a fight right there in the street. After a few seconds, however, Dalton Jeffries tipped his hat to Abigail. "Afternoon, Ma'am." He gave Cord a long look before walking around them and heading in the direction of the general store.

"I told you that I'd pick you up at the general store," Cord said to her when Dalton Jeffries was out of earshot.

"I was finished, so I thought I'd meet you at the sheriff's," she said.

He regarded her for a moment in silence. "Dalton Jeffries is dangerous, Abigail. I don't want you near him."

Her brow furrowed. "He seems nice enough."

The muscle in Cord's jaw flexed. "Well, he's not. The man's a snake." Lifting his hand, he caressed her cheek, and when he spoke again, his voice was soft. "I want you to promise me that you won't go near him again, Abigail."

She said nothing for a moment, and then she nodded. "I promise," she said, though she couldn't help but wonder why Cord disliked the other man so much.

As she and Cord rode back to the ranch that afternoon, Kayla's mind kept wandering to the poker game she'd seen at the saloon. Though she wanted to go back into town the next day to play in one of those games, she thought it better to wait a few days, at least until she was more familiar with Cord's routine so that he wouldn't know she'd sneaked off to do it. Somehow, she didn't think he'd approve of his fiancé playing poker at a saloon.

Cord, however, spent a good portion of each the day out on the ranch. Kayla watched from her bedroom window as he saddled his horse, admiring the way the muscles in his arms flexed as he tightened the cinch straps. Placing his booted foot into the stirrup, Cord swung up into the saddle. Then, almost as if he could feel her eyes on him, Cord lifted his head to look up at her window. A grin tugging at the corner of his mouth, he took up the reins in one hand, and then tipped the brim of his hat with the other before riding off. Kayla felt her pulse flutter.

Blushing, she walked across the room and out into the hallway, then stopped, her gaze going to Cord's room. The door was open, and from where she was standing, she could just see the edge of the metal box beneath the bed. With Cord out on the ranch, it was the perfect opportunity to do some snooping, she thought. But then she remembered the trouble her snooping had gotten her into before. She could still feel the sting of the spanking Cord had given her.

She bit her lip. Cord would be out all day, so it wasn't likely that she'd get

caught, she told herself. And if she were careful to put everything back the way she'd found it, Cord would never even know what she'd been up to. Making up her mind, she went into his room.

Kneeling down beside the bed, she reached under it and grabbed the handles on either side of the box. Tightening her grip, she dragged the box out from under the bed and sat back on her heels so that she could open it. But, much to her chagrin, the lid wouldn't budge. He'd locked it, she realized.

Not to be deterred, she took out one of her hairpins and slipped it into the lock on top of the box. She worked it one way, and then the other, but still the lock wouldn't budge. After several minutes, she gave up. Whatever was in the box was undoubtedly valuable, but she couldn't get it open.

With a sigh, she pushed the box back underneath the bed, and got to her feet. The poker game it would have to be, then, she decided. Though as much as she wanted to go to the saloon right then, she thought it better to wait for a few days, like she had decided to do.

That afternoon, Cord asked her to go riding with him. Kayla accepted the invitation without hesitation. The horse Cord had picked out for her, a chestnut brown mare, had a sweet personality, and Kayla fell in love with her immediately. Back home, she'd ridden often, and was actually quite good at it, so when Cord started them off slowly, she was tempted to tell him that he didn't need to hold back for her, but since she didn't know what Abigail had told him about her riding experience, she didn't. She'd already slipped up once, and had promised herself that she would be more careful.

But atop her horse, and amid such beautiful landscape – not to mention beside such a handsome man - Kayla soon forgot all about Abigail, and simply enjoyed herself. So much so that when they got back to the barn, Kayla asked Cord if he would take her riding again. He agreed without hesitation, obviously pleased that she had had so much fun.

Over the next few days, when she wasn't out riding with Cord, she was

working on her designs. Though she hadn't intended to, she somehow found herself working up a design for a wedding dress. Not that that meant anything. A good designer needed a variety of dresses in her line, she told herself, and that included a wedding dress. Besides, she had to have some excuse to go into town.

"Rachel offered to let me use her sewing machine for my dress, so I was thinking of going into town tomorrow," she told him as they had dinner one evening. "I was also going to make some curtains for the windows, if that's okay with you."

He seemed mildly surprised at the mention of the curtains, but only smiled. "Whatever you'd like to do is fine. It's your home now, too, Abigail."

His words, spoken so softly, made her warm all over, and she looked away.

"I'll have one of the hands take you into town," he said.

She shook her head quickly. "That's not necessary," she told him. "If you'll just have one of them get the cart ready for me, I can go myself."

He seemed to be considering that for a moment, and then he shook his head. "I'd feel better if one of the men went with you."

"Cord, it's silly for me to tie up one of the men for the whole day while I go shopping. Nor do I want to have to wait for someone to take me into town all the time," she said, making sure to keep her voice even so that she wouldn't sound quarrelsome. She gave him one of her sweetest smiles. "I'll be fine, really."

Cord finally relented, though he did warn her to be careful, and to make sure that she was back before dark. She assured him that she would be, and they spent the rest of the evening together in the living room. Cord talked mostly of his ranch, telling her stories of cattle drives and round-ups. He was originally from St. Louis, he said, and had come out west several years ago, where he

could have both space and independence. He had liked Copper Creek from the moment he'd seen it, and knew it was where he wanted to settle down and start a family.

Listening to him, Kayla once again felt a stab of guilt for misleading him like she was. But that didn't stop her from going into town the next day to play poker at the saloon. She did stop at the general store first, however, to buy some material for the curtains she'd told Cord that she would make, and to do a little work on the wedding dress.

"So, how are things going with Cord?" the blond girl asked as she cut the material to size for Kayla. They were at the table in the back of the general store.

"Very well, actually," Kayla answered honestly.

Rachel smiled. "I can't imagine being a mail-order bride myself, but if I were, I'd marry Cord." She glanced over to where her husband was standing behind the counter, and then added with a wink. "Don't tell Matthew I said that, though."

Kayla laughed. "Have you known Cord long?"

The other girl nodded. "About five years, ever since he came to Copper Creek."

Kayla began folding the material that Rachel had cut for her. "It's obvious that he's both attractive and a great guy, so why would he even need a mail-order bride? I would think that women would be falling all over themselves to marry him."

"Because there aren't many unattached women out here," Rachel said. "Unless you count the prostitutes, though they'd certainly take him, if he offered."

Kayla felt an unreasonable stab of jealousy, and wondered if Cord had slept with any of those prostitutes. "I suppose that makes sense," she said after a moment. "When Cord and I were in town the other day, we ran into a man named Dalton Jeffries. Cord really seemed to dislike him, but he wouldn't say why. Do you know him?"

Rachel's mouth tightened. "Regrettably, yes. He's my brother."

Kayla looked at her friend in surprise. "Your brother? But Cord told me that he was dangerous. He warned me to stay away from him."

The other girl stopped cutting and looked at her. "Cord's right, Abigail. You should stay away from him."

Kayla frowned. "What do you mean?"

The blond girl sighed. "Take it from me, Abigail. Dalton isn't the kind of man you'd want to be around."

Rachel didn't say more and Kayla didn't push. Usually, she did the opposite of whatever she was told, but in this case, she thought, perhaps Cord was right. If he wanted her to stay away from Dalton Jeffries, then she would.

Rachel turned the conversation back to Kayla's upcoming wedding, telling her that the lace she had ordered would be there in about a week. "You should probably be able to have the rest of the dress ready by the time it gets here," she told Kayla, and then added excitedly. "I bet you can't wait to get married!"

Kayla felt herself blush. For some reason she couldn't explain, the thought of marrying Cord Holderness made her feel uncharacteristically giddy. That thought brought her to a halt, and she gave herself a mental shake. What was she thinking? She wasn't in Copper Creek to marry Cord. She wasn't even his real mail-order bride. She had to get herself some money, and get out of Copper Creek quick, she realized, or the next thing she knew, she'd be marrying the man!

With that thought firmly in mind, Kayla hurriedly thanked Rachel for the use of her sewing machine, and after promising the girl that she'd be back the next day, she left the general store and headed straight for the saloon. She had brought the money Abigail had given her, which should be more than enough to get her into a card game.

Since it was afternoon, the saloon wasn't very crowded. The men at the bar looked her way when she came in, but she barely noticed them. On the contrary, she was much more interested in the card game going on at one of the tables.

Lifting her chin, she slowly made her way over to the table. At her approach, the three men seated there got to their feet. Dressed in denims and homespun shirts, they varied in age, but were all older than she.

"Ma'am," one of the men greeted her. He was tall and wiry, with a droopy mustache.

She gave them one of her most innocent smiles. "I couldn't help but notice that you were playing cards," she said sweetly. "I was wondering, is that poker you're playing?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it is."

She looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. "Really? I thought I recognized it. I've played it once or twice before just for fun, you see." She paused. "Do you think I could play? Just a few hands?"

The man with the droopy mustache exchanged glances with the other two. "Uh...we play for money here, Ma'am."

"Oh, but I have money," she said, reaching into her reticule.

He frowned. "It wouldn't be right to take a lady's money, Ma'am."

Kayla looked up at him. "But I do so want to play," she said, and then laughed lightly. "Besides, who knows? I may take yours."

That got her a few chuckles. "You just might at that," the man with the droopy mustache agreed. He pulled out a chair for her. "Have a seat, then, Ma'am."

With a smile, she took the chair he offered her, smoothing her dress as she did so. Opening her reticule, she took out some money and set it on the table in front of her.

"I'm Jed," the man with the droopy mustache told her, and then inclined his head at the other two men. "That's Caleb," he gestured toward the blond-haired man across from her. "And that's Lawrence," he said, indicating the other man, this one red-haired and freckled.

Kayla smiled. "I'm Abigail."

Jed eyed her curiously. "You're Cord Holderness's mail-order bride, ain't you?" he asked as he began shuffling the cards.

"Yes," was all she said.

Jed exchanged looks with the other men, but made no comment as he began to deal. Though Kayla had a good hand, she deliberately let one of the men win. She did with same with the next hand, though she won the fourth hand with two pairs, and the one after that with three of a kind. She managed to look surprised each time she won, however, and by the time she left the saloon ten dollars richer, she was pretty sure that none of the men suspected she'd ever played poker for money before.

With her winnings safely tucked into her reticule, Kayla started for home. Cord was still out on the ranch, so she hurried upstairs to her bedroom to freshen up before dinner.

Splashing some water on her face from the basin on the washstand, she patted her skin dry with a towel, and then took the pins from her hair. Cord seemed to like it tied back with a ribbon, so she would wear it like that for dinner. Picking up her hairbrush, she walked over to the window and slowly began to run it through her long hair. She was watching the horses graze in one of the paddocks when Cord rode up, and at the sight of him, Kayla caught herself smiling.

Cord swung down from the saddle and walked over to the trough of water beside the barn. Unaware that he was being watched, he stripped off his shirt, carelessly tossing the garment onto the adjacent fence. Kayla caught her breath as she stared at his naked chest.

She'd seen paintings and sculptures of men in various states of undress before, but none of those men even compared with Cord. He was gorgeous. Every muscle, from his shoulders to his taut stomach, was clearly defined in exquisite detail, and she suddenly longed to run her hands over their smoothness. She blushed at the direction of her thoughts.

As she watched, he dipped a wooden pail into the trough. Lifting it with both hands, he tipped his head back, and poured the crystal clear water over his face. Kayla watched transfixed as it ran down his chest, making his tanned skin glisten in the afternoon sunlight. Her pulse quickened and she tightened her hand on the handle of the brush.

Below, Cord set the pail down and picked up his shirt from where he'd tossed it over the fence. Kayla waited until he'd disappeared into the barn before she left the window and walked over to the washstand. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she saw that her cheeks were flushed. Cord would be coming in for dinner soon, she thought. How was she going to look at him now without blushing?

But before she could come up with an answer for that, the door to her room opened and Cord strode in. Startled, she whirled around. He hadn't put his shirt back on, but carried the garment in his hand, and, try as she might, she

couldn't seem to stop staring at his bare chest. Up close, he was even more perfect, she thought. The water had dripped down his chest to soak the front of his pants, making them fit tightly to his form underneath. She tried to pull her eyes away from that area, but her gaze kept straying back.

Cord, however, was oblivious to her scrutiny. "One of the hands was in town today, and do you know what he told me?" he demanded.

At his harsh tone, Kayla tore her gaze away from the area below his beltline to look up at Cord, only to find him glowering down at her, and she wondered what had him so angry. But before she could ask, Cord continued.

"He told me that he saw you playing poker at the saloon." He folded his arms, and she couldn't help but notice how the muscles in his arms flexed with the movement. "Is that true, Abigail?"

Kayla said nothing for a moment, wondering how she should answer his question. She could either deny it or own up to it. She realized that denying it would be pointless because he already knew for a fact that she'd been there. Instead, she chose to throw a tantrum, hoping she could confuse the issue. It had certainly worked many times on her father. She had discovered that many men didn't know how to handle an angry woman.

"Yes, it's true." She slapped the hairbrush down on the washstand and glared at him angrily. "I stopped by the saloon after I went to the general store, and yes, I played a little poker. It's not like I committed a crime, you know! Why shouldn't I be able to play any game I want?"

His eyes narrowed. "Ladies don't play poker, Abigail, and they most certainly don't go into saloons."

She folded her arms. "Why not? There's nothing wrong with a lady playing a game of cards back in New York."

He frowned. "New York?"

Kayla said nothing for a moment. She hadn't even realized that she'd slipped up. She quickly recovered, however. "I was there a few times," she told him, and then hurried on before he could question her about that, too. "But there's nothing wrong with it back in Boston, either. Or is it that out here you men just want to keep all of your women locked up in their homes, sewing curtains?"

He seemed to actually be taken aback for a moment, but quickly regained his focus. "Well, this isn't New York or Boston," he told her. "Out here, only loose women go into saloons, and I won't have my wife's reputation called into question before we're even married." He paused. "Since you're new to how things work out here, I'll let it go this time, but I don't want you playing poker at the saloon again."

Good sense told her to give in, but she'd never been the quiet, submissive type. "Just because we're going to be married, does not mean that you own me, Cord Holderness!" she snapped.

He scowled at her, and for a moment, she wondered if she'd pushed him too far. "You're right; I don't," he agreed. "But it is my job to protect you, Abigail, and saloons are dangerous places. People can get shot playing poker out here."

She shrugged. "I'm sure you're exaggerating. The men I played with were very nice."

His brows drew together and he gave her a hard look. "This isn't something I'm going to give in on, so I'll make it clear. I don't want you going to the saloon again, Abigail. Do you understand me?"

Again, Kayla knew that she should acquiesce, but the words just wouldn't seem to come. Instead, she lifted her chin and glared up at him defiantly. "If I want to go to the saloon again – or anywhere else, for that matter – I will, and you can't stop me."

Dismissing him, she turned her back on him with a swirl of skirts. Determined to ignore him, she picked up her hairbrush, intending to run it through her hair, but Cord yanked it out of her hand. She spun around, ready to snap at him, but before she could do more than open her mouth to protest, he took hold of her wrist and led her over to the straight-backed chair across the room.

“What...?” she demanded, but she already knew. He was going to spank her again, she realized, and her pulse quickened at the thought!

Pulling out the chair from where it had been placed under the writing desk, Cord swung around to face her, and she caught her breath at the look in his golden brown eyes.

“I’ll do whatever is necessary to keep you safe, Abigail, and if that means paddling your bottom until you agree to do as you’re told, then so be it,” he said.

Before she could even think of a reply – as if she could with him standing so close to her! – Cord sat down on the chair and dragged her over his knee. Her long hair tumbled down around her face and she had to brace her hands on the wood floor to keep her balance. She opened her mouth, intending to continue the argument when she felt him lift her skirt. Her petticoat followed, exposing her white pantaloons, and she felt herself flush.

“Wait!” she began, only to feel the wooden hairbrush smack sharply against her upturned bottom. It hurt more than his hand had, not terribly, but it still stung, and she let him know it. “Owww!” she yelped, struggling to push herself upright.

Cord put his hand on her back, firmly holding her in place and lifted the hairbrush again. Oval in shape, it was made of finely polished wood, and from the minute he picked it up, he knew it would be perfect for teaching Abigail a lesson. “Something tells me that a spanking like this is long overdue where you’re concerned, Abigail Murray.” He brought the brush down on her other

cheek, harder this time, and she jumped, crying out. He followed with another, and then another, alternating from one cheek to the other.

Not only did her thin pantaloons offer little protection from the brush, he thought as he continued to spank her, but they also showed off her curvy bottom quite nicely, and though he longed to pull them down and expose her bare ass, he didn't trust himself to do so. Just the thought of her half-naked got him hard. It didn't help that she was wiggling against his arousal, either, he thought as he smacked her bottom again. He could feel his hardness pressing against her, and he had to stifle a groan.

Over his knee, Kayla squirmed and kicked her feet, trying to escape the sting of the hairbrush, but to no avail. "Cord...ouch!...please..."

Forcing himself to concentrate on the reason she was over his knee in the first place, he spanked her again, this time on the tender area just below her right cheek. "I want to be sure that you remember this the next time you think about going into the saloon."

The brush came down again – same spot, but below the other cheek – and she yelped. "I won't, Cord. I promise!"

"You won't what, Abigail?" he asked, smacking her bottom a little harder with the brush.

She gritted her teeth. "I won't...ow!...go into the saloon again."

"Good," came his reply. "Then just a few more to serve as a reminder."

Cord's "few more" turned out to be twenty-five more – she knew because she counted – and when he was done, her bottom felt as if she'd just sat on a stove! Good gracious, but the man knew how to spank! The only thing that was more shocking to her was the thought that she wouldn't mind a few more of those spanks. But no more were forthcoming, and as she lay over his lap, wondering where that thought had come from, she couldn't help but notice

that a sizeable bulge was pressing into her hip where she'd been squirming against Cord's groin.

That caused a myriad of thoughts to run through her head. She was so consumed with them that she just barely heard Cord set the hairbrush on the desk, and didn't even know what he was doing until she felt him gently help her to stand. As she did so, her petticoat and skirt started to slide down over her pantaloons, but before they could, she quickly put her hands back to cover her sore bottom. She could feel the heat of the spanking through the thin material, and though she didn't know why, she longed to push down her pantaloons and press her hands to her bare skin.

Though Cord had gotten to his feet, she didn't look up at him. Her gaze was locked on the arousal showing clearly through his wet jeans. She imagined her face was now as red as her bottom, especially when she felt him gently lift her chin.

"You promise me that you'll stay out of the saloon, Abigail, and I expect you to keep your promise, or the next time, you won't be able to sit comfortably for days," he said softly. "I mean it."

His words brought a rush of color to her cheeks, and she nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The promise of another spanking was almost enough to make her want to rush into town and the saloon right then!

He regarded her in silence for a moment, and she wondered what he was thinking. "I'll see you downstairs," was all he said.

As soon as he was out of the room, she hurried over to the mirror. Slowly pushing down her pantaloons until they were just below her bottom, she half-turned to look over her shoulder, and her eyes widened. Her creamy white skin was rosy pink and hot to the touch, and as she gazed transfixed at her reflection, she felt a tingling between her thighs.

Kayla caught her breath. Could it be that she actually enjoyed being

spanked? she wondered. She didn't understand how that could be possible, but it was there just the same. Fresh color rushed to her face, and she hastily looked away from the mirror. But as she stood there, contemplating the strange things she was feeling, her gaze kept drifting over her shoulder and back to the reflection of her reddened bottom.

Chapter Three

Kayla couldn't stop thinking about the spanking Cord had given her the previous night. Or her reaction to it. Which made sitting across the table from him during dinner that evening very awkward. She couldn't seem to look at him without blushing. It didn't help that her bottom had still been hot and stinging, either, and she had quickly excused herself after dinner to hurry up to her room.

Not surprisingly, Cord insisted that one of the ranch hands take her into town the next day. Rachel, who was with a customer when Kayla entered the general store, told her to go on up to the small living space above the store that she shared with Matthew, saying that she would be there in a little while.

With a smile and a wave, Kayla hurried up the stairs. She immediately went to the sewing machine and began working on the wedding dress, hoping the task would distract her from thoughts of being over Cord's knee. It did, at least for a little while, until Rachel came upstairs and reminded her about it.

"The whole town is talking about you playing poker at the saloon yesterday," the blond girl said the moment she came into the apartment. "If Cord doesn't know already, he will soon, Abigail, so my advice would be to tell him yourself before he finds out from someone else."

Kayla didn't look at the other girl, but continued to focus on the hemline she was sewing. "He already knows," she said quietly. "One of the hands was in town and saw me."

"What did he say?" Rachel asked.

Kayla thought not so much of what Cord had said, but of what he'd done, and she felt herself blush. "He told me that a saloon is no place for a lady, and that he doesn't want me going in there again," she said with a shrug.

“That sounds like Cord,” Rachel said, sitting down on the chair beside the sewing machine table. “But whatever would possess you to go into the saloon in the first place? And to play poker, no less. Matthew would be absolutely furious if I ever did something like that”

Finishing the hem, Kayla cut the thread and tied it off with a small knot. “I played a few times back home and enjoyed it,” she told Rachel. “I didn’t think anyone would make a big deal about it.”

The other girl sighed. “Abigail, this is the west, not Boston,” she said quietly. “Out here, a woman’s place is very well defined, and men expect their wives to act accordingly. Cord’s pretty open-minded, but he’s not much different when it comes to that.” She paused. “Please don’t think that I’m berating you, Abigail, because I’m not. It’s just that you and Cord are so perfect together, and I don’t want you to start your marriage off on the wrong foot.”

Kayla had been studying the hemline she’d just done, but at the other girl’s words, her fingers stilled. To her surprise, tears stung her eyes, and she hastily blinked them back. But not before Rachel saw them.

“Abigail, what is it?” the blond girl asked, her voice full of concern.

Kayla didn’t answer. What could she say? That she had been lying to Cord the entire time she’d been in Copper Creek? That she’d never had any intention of marrying him, but had only let him believe she was his mail-order bride because it could get her something?

Rachel reached out and covered Kayla’s hand with hers. “Abigail, I didn’t mean to make you think that Cord wouldn’t marry you simply because you played one little game of poker at the saloon,” she said, and then smiled. “If you want to know the truth, I think that Cord was already half in love with you before you even came out here.”

She looked at the other girl in surprise, and Rachel nodded. “Before you got here, he’d come into the store and we’d end up talking about you. There was

something in his voice when he talked about you, Abigail.”

Kayla chewed on her lower lip. She had had lots of girlfriends back home in New York that she could talk to, and it wasn't until now that she realized how much she missed having them to confide in. Pretending to be Abigail Murray was suddenly too much for her, and she desperately needed to talk to someone. It felt like she would explode if she didn't tell someone soon.

“Rachel, I haven't been completely honest with Cord,” she said quietly. “Or with you. Or with anyone else in this town.”

Her friend's brow furrowed in confusion. “About what?”

Kayla fingered the finely embroidered material of the dress, and let the words come out in a rush. “I'm not Cord's mail-order bride. My name isn't Abigail Murray, and I'm not from Boston.” She paused to glance at Rachel, and saw that the other girl was looking at her in opened-mouth surprise. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly before continuing. “My name is Kayla Mathison, and I'm from New York. I was on the stage heading toward San Francisco, running away from an arranged marriage myself, when I met Abigail. She couldn't go through with being a mail-order bride, and she asked me if I would tell Cord that she had changed her mind about marrying him.”

“So you decided to take her place, instead?” Rachel asked. She didn't sound accusing, merely curious.

Kayla shook her head. “Not in the beginning,” she said quickly. “I fully intended to tell Cord the truth, but he seemed so happy to see Abigail that day I arrived in Copper Creek that I simply couldn't. I thought it would be easier when we got back to the ranch, but then one thing led to another, and one day turned into two, and then three, and I still hadn't told him.” She conveniently left out the part about her plan to steal from Cord. “At first, I was simply going to get some money together, enough to get me on my way. I'd write Cord a letter saying that I changed my mind, and then leave Copper Creek with him none the wiser. Now...”

“Now?” Rachel prompted, a knowing smile on her face.

Realization dawned on Kayla then. “Now, I don’t think I want to leave,” she said softly. “I want to stay in Copper Creek and see where this leads.”

Rachel regarded her in silence. “You have to tell Cord the truth, Kayla,” she said after a moment.

Kayla shook her head. “I...I can’t,” she stammered. “If I do, he’ll never want anything to do with me.”

The other girl smiled gently. “He’ll probably be furious that you lied to him, but I don’t think he’d send you on your way or anything. Especially after you tell him that you’ve fallen in love with him.”

Kayla blinked.

“Well, you are in love with him, aren’t you?” Rachel asked.

Kayla said nothing at first. There was no question about loving the spankings Cord gave her, but did she love him? “I don’t know if I’m in love with him. Yet,” she answered honestly. “But I could see myself falling in love with him. Which is why I can’t tell him. Not yet, at least.”

The other girl looked like she wanted to protest, but before she could speak, Kayla continued. “Rachel, please promise me that you won’t say anything to Cord,” she entreated softly.

Rachel hesitated for a moment, and then she nodded. “I won’t tell him, but you should, and soon,” she said. “Trust me on this, Kayla.”

Relieved that the other girl would keep her confidence, Kayla nodded. “I will, when the time is right.”

She really did think about it, while she worked on the wedding dress the rest of that afternoon, and then later on the ride back to the ranch. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that telling Cord the truth now wouldn't be such a good idea. Later, she told herself, after she figured out if she was in love with him or not. It was even possible that by that time Cord would have feelings for her as well. If that were the case, surely he would forgive her then.

Cord had indeed been very surprised that Abigail hadn't even tried to argue with him when he'd told her that he was sending one of his men into town with her that morning. Though she had promised that she wouldn't go into the saloon again, he didn't want to take any chances. He couldn't believe that she would be so naïve as to think that she could simply waltz into a saloon and play cards. He had to admit that he admired her spunk, though, and the way she'd stood up to him when he'd called her on it. From her letters, he would have thought that Abigail would have been more biddable, though he had to admit that he was glad she wasn't.

Cord's mouth quirked as he rubbed more oil into the leather tack he was cleaning. He hoped that she wouldn't become too docile in the future, though, because he certainly wouldn't mind spanking her again. Just the thought of having his beautiful mail-order bride over his knee while he reddened her delicious bottom was enough to make him go hard. He sure hoped she finished that wedding dress of hers soon.

Deciding that the tack had been cleaned enough, he replaced it on its hook and, grabbing his hat, headed for the house. In the setting sun, he could see the glow of a light coming from Abigail's room, and he felt compelled by the urge to see her. Perhaps he'd ask her to go riding with him tomorrow, he thought as he made his way through the kitchen and up the stairs.

The door to her room was ajar, and without thinking, Cord pushed it open and walked right in only to find Abigail soaking in the tub. She had her head back and her eyes closed, and at his entrance, she sat up in surprise. The movement caused the bubbles to shift, displaying smooth shoulders and

creamy breasts, and for a moment, Cord simply stood and stared, transfixed by the sight of his naked fiancé's glistening wet skin. It wasn't until a startled Abigail crossed her arms over herself that Cord abruptly remembered he was supposed to be a gentleman.

Flushing beneath his tan, he turned his back to her. "I'm sorry. The door was open, and I...I didn't realize you were taking a bath." His color deepened as he realized he was stammering like a schoolboy.

Behind him, he heard the water swish against the side of the tub as she sank deeper into it. "What was it that you wanted?" she asked softly.

He stared at the wall, trying to concentrate on something other than the fact that there was a very beautiful naked woman in a bathtub full of bubbles right behind him. He cleared his throat. "I thought that perhaps you'd like to go riding with me tomorrow," he said. "If you're not going into town, that is."

She didn't answer immediately, and though Cord wanted to turn and look at her, he determinedly held his position while he waited for her reply.

"I'd like that," she said after a moment, and Cord felt himself relax.

"Good," he said. "I suppose I should let you get back to your bath, then."

With a nod, he left the room, careful to keep his back to her. In the hallway, he stood outside the door for a moment, listening to the sounds of the water as she washed, and as he imagined her running a soapy sponge down her neck and over her sweetly rounded breasts, he almost groaned aloud. As far as he was concerned, that wedding dress she was making couldn't get done fast enough.

Though she couldn't imagine what she'd done, Kayla was sure that Cord had come into her room to spank her again. However, after he'd just come in to ask her to go riding with him, she realized that it had just been wishful thinking on her part.

But what if it had been more than that, she thought? What if Cord really had come into her room to spank her? Exhilarated by the idea, she picked up the sponge and gently ran it down her outstretched arm, letting the scene play out in her mind.

Of course, Cord would question her about her misdeeds first, asking her why she'd deliberately disobeyed him and gone back to the saloon to play poker when he'd specifically told her not to. She'd give him some flippant answer that would be sure to annoy him, and go back to her bath. His jaw would clench and he'd remind her of the consequences for her actions. Then, before she even knew what he was doing, Cord would grab her arm, haul her out of the tub and drag her - naked and dripping wet - over to the straight-back chair. Knowing she was about to get a spanking, she'd protest, of course, but just a little. After all, wasn't this what she wanted?

But Cord would ignore her objections, and a quick yank would send her tumbling over his strong thighs. With his arm firmly around her small waist, she would be helpless to do more than lay there and wait in breathless anticipation for that very first spank.

Naturally, Cord would scold her, but gently, of course, and all the while he would caress her bare bottom. Then, finally, when she thought she couldn't wait any longer, Cord would lift his hand and bring it down sharply on her right cheek. Just as quickly, he'd smack the other, alternating from side to side until he had a nice rhythm going.

Leaning back in the tub, Kayla could almost imagine the imprint his hand would leave on her creamy skin, and because she colored easily, her bottom would have a rosy glow to it after a dozen or so spanks. And she imagined that because her skin was wet, it would sting even more.

But Cord wouldn't stop there, no matter how much she squirmed and kicked. Instead, he would tighten his hold and tell her that he had simply warmed her up for a real spanking! No sooner would she be able to ask what he meant by

that than she'd feel the sharp slap of her wooden hairbrush on her bare cheeks.

Kayla shifted in the water, her bottom suddenly stinging simply at the thought of getting spanked with the hairbrush again. That wasn't the only part of her responding to such a vivid fantasy, either. On the contrary, there was a warm tingle between her thighs that didn't want to be ignored, and she had to fight the urge to reach down and touch herself there.

Blushing, she sank lower in the tub and imagined what it would feel like for Cord to touch her there. Before she'd met Cord, she'd never had such thoughts about a man. Now, it was all she seemed to think about. She wondered if it was Cord, or if there was something in the air out here that made her think such naughty thoughts. She decided that she had no idea, but she liked it nonetheless.

On their ride the next day, Cord surprised her by bringing a picnic lunch. He had asked the wife of one of the hands to make it up for them, and after riding out to a grassy meadow, they stopped to enjoy the simple meal of roast chicken, corn bread, and juicy strawberries atop a soft plaid blanket that he had set out for them. Sitting this close to Cord made it difficult to concentrate on anything but the handsome man beside her, and she looked out at the colorful countryside surrounding them.

"I still can't believe how beautiful it is out here," she said, her voice a little breathless.

Cord reached for a slice of corn bread. "I'm glad you like it," he said with a grin. "I was hoping that you wouldn't miss Boston too much."

She lowered her gaze to stare down at her hands, wondering if she shouldn't simply confess everything to Cord right then. He'd be angry, of course, but surely if she appealed to him, told him that she hadn't meant to mislead him...

"Abigail?"

Kayla lifted her head to find Cord regarding her in concern.

"I didn't mean to upset you by mentioning Boston," he said gently. "It's natural for you to miss your home there."

She shook her head. "Oh, but I don't. Not really." At his surprised look, she hastily explained. "I've discovered that I'm a lot more independent than I thought I'd be."

"You're a lot more independent than I thought you'd be," he laughed.

She tilted her head to look at him. "Does that bother you?"

He thought a moment before answering. "As long as you don't get yourself into trouble, then I don't mind it a bit. Truth be told, I think I kind of like it." He regarded her for a moment, his golden brown eyes warm. "As a matter of fact, there are a lot of things I like about you."

Things he liked about her, or Abigail, Kayla wondered, and she felt a sudden pang at the thought that he could be referring to the other girl.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, both of them watching the horses grazing nearby, before Cord finally spoke.

"I saw you sketching the other day," he said, drawing up one leg and resting his arm on his knee. "You didn't tell me that you could draw."

Kayla shrugged. "It's always been a hobby of mine," she told him. "I didn't think to mention it in the letters."

"What do you like to draw?"

"Dress designs, mostly," she admitted, and then, picking up a strawberry, she gave him a shy smile. "Actually, I've always wanted to have my own shop."

Cord lifted a brow, clearly surprised by her admission. "Really? Is that why you learned to sew, then?"

She nodded. "Part of it, yes."

He thought a moment. "You know, you should ask Rachel if she'd be willing to sell some of your dresses at the store. There aren't as many women here as there are in Boston, of course, but more move out here every day. Who knows? You could get so many orders that you might even have to open your own shop."

Kayla looked at him in surprise. "You really think I could do that?"

"I have no doubt," he said. "You certainly seem to have the gumption to do whatever it is that you set your mind to."

She smiled. "Are you sure you don't think I'm just a little too spirited at times?" she teased, gazing at him with mock innocence in her eyes.

He locked eyes with hers and the corner of his mouth quirked slightly. "Actually, I find that spirit to be extremely sexy."

The words made her catch her breath, and she abruptly realized that their light conversation had suddenly become flirtatious. Not knowing what to say to his comment, she took a bite out of the strawberry. A small amount of the juice squirted out and began to run down her chin, and as she started to lift her fingers to catch the liquid, she saw that Cord was looking intently at her lips.

Cord suddenly leaned in, and she thought he was simply going to wipe the juice from her chin with his fingers. But instead, he cupped her face with his hands and gently kissed the juice off her chin before slowly finding his way up to her slightly parted lips.

Kayla had been kissed before, but it had been nothing like this. Those other kisses had been cool, almost chaste, the men barely brushing their mouths to hers. But Cord's kiss was neither cool nor chaste as his mouth explored hers. His kiss was tender, and yet demanding at the same time, and she felt lightheaded from it. She realized that she hadn't taken a breath from the moment his hands had touched her face.

She felt him slide the ribbon off her hair, felt his hand delve into the thick waves. His mouth moved more insistently over hers, and she instinctively parted her lips, only to sigh with pleasure when his velvety tongue dipped into her mouth to glide along her own.

Cord ran his free hand down her back and over her hip before settling on her curvy bottom. As she felt the heat of his hand on her skin through the thick material of her riding skirt, she found herself wishing he'd give her a few light spanks. But he didn't, of course. Instead, he gently lowered them both to the blanket. Still kissing her, he moved his hand up her bodice and along the curve of her breast to slowly undo the buttons on her blouse.

The material parted easily at his touch, and she gasped as he gently cupped her breast through the thin undergarment that she wore. Kayla let out a soft sigh of pleasure that quickly turned into a moan when Cord began rubbing his thumb over her sensitive nipple. She should have been shocked, but she realized that she felt very comfortable with everything he was doing.

Cord abruptly lifted his head to gaze down at her, his breathing ragged. "We'd better stop before we get carried away," he said hoarsely.

Kayla didn't want him to stop, though, and as she lay on the blanket panting, she wanted to tell him so. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized the wisdom of what he was saying, and so she reluctantly nodded. "I suppose you're right," she agreed, giving him a shy smile.

His mouth quirked. "I was hoping you'd disagree with me," he said, lightly running a finger down her cheek before gently kissing her on the mouth

again.

If he only knew, she thought as she buttoned her blouse. Cord put what was left of the food back into the basket while she folded the blanket they'd been sitting on. With both the basket and the blanket safely stowed in one of Cord's saddlebags, he pulled Kayla close for another kiss before helping her to mount her horse.

Giddy from Cord's kisses, Kayla gave him a dazzling smile. "I'll race you back."

Before he could answer, she gave her horse a nudge with her booted foot and, with a quick glance over her shoulder, galloped away before Cord had even mounted his own horse.

Grinning, Cord swung up into the saddle and set out after her. Willing to let her stay in the lead for a while, he followed more leisurely.

He began to turn his horse back the way they had come, expecting Abigail to do the same, but she continued to ride toward the tree line that topped the slope that led down into their ranch's valley. That wasn't the way they had come.

"Shit," he muttered.

Gripping the reins tighter, he kicked his horse into a gallop and raced after her.

Up ahead, Abigail threw a quick glance over her shoulder, and seeing that he was closing the distance between them, urged her horse into a run.

Cord did the same. "Abigail, stop!" he shouted as he raced after her. "Abigail!"

But she ignored him, continuing to ride toward the trees. He put his spurs hard into his horse and gained on her quickly. Racing ahead of her, he

brought his horse around in front of her, forcing her to bring her own mount to a sharp halt.

“Dammit, Abigail, I told you to stop!” he said. “Couldn’t you hear me?”

Her brow furrowing, she shook her head. “No. What’s wrong?”

He gestured with his arm in the direction she had been headed. “You can’t go this way. It’s too dangerous,” he told her. “I want you to promise that you’ll never even try to go that way.”

He saw that she was looking toward the tree line in confusion. “Isn’t that the way down to the house?” she asked.

“Yes, it is, but you’d be lucky to live through it if you went that way,” he said. “The slope turns into nothing but loose rock halfway down. Once your horse goes into that, you’ll slip and slide all the way to the bottom, probably bringing half the slope with you. If that isn’t enough, the walls start to rise up tight on either side so that you couldn’t turn around even if you wanted to.”

“I didn’t know,” she apologized. “I thought this was the fastest way back to the house.”

He shook his head. “It’s my fault, really,” he said. “I should have pointed it out to you when we rode out here.”

They rode back to the house the long way around, and at a much more leisurely pace. In the barn, Cord unsaddled both horses, and then brushed down his big bay while Kayla did the same to her mare.

“You ride very well for a beginner,” Cord said, glancing at her as he brushed down his horse.

She didn’t answer for a moment. Abigail might not be a horsewoman, but Kayla had ridden all of her life, and was quite comfortable in the saddle. She

couldn't admit that to Cord, though. "I love riding," she said simply, running the brush over her horse's glossy coat.

"You can ride any time you'd like, you know," he told her. "Just let any one of the hands know, and they'll saddle your horse for you."

She gave him a smile. "I don't need anyone to saddle my horse. I can do it myself," she said, a challenge clear in her voice.

He lifted a brow. "Really? Well, that might be the case, but ask for help anyway."

After giving the horses both feed and water, they made their way to the far end of the barn. In one corner, several of the hands were seated around an old crate, and as she and Cord drew nearer, Kayla could see that the men were playing poker.

One of the hands, a stocky, blond man named Joss, looked up from his cards as they approached. "Want to join us, Boss?" he asked Cord.

Beside her, Cord shook his head, declining the offer, but he must have seen her look of interest because he leaned close to whisper in her ear.

"Don't even think about it," he warned softly.

Cord's words sent a delightful little shiver through her, and for the next few days his warning not to play poker with the hands was all she could seem to think about. What if she deliberately defied him and played cards with them? Kayla wondered as she lay in bed one evening. Would Cord really give her another spanking? And would she get aroused from it again? Though she was almost certain that he would indeed spank her, she finally decided that the only way to know for sure if it would excite her would be to try out her theory. The thought that she was going to intentionally provoke Cord into spanking again made her pulse race excitedly and she had a hard time getting to sleep that night.

Since it wasn't unusual for the hands to play cards after finishing work for the day, Kayla found a game going on when she walked into the barn the following afternoon. The men looked up at her entrance and greeted her warmly. Having met all of the hands by now, she knew most of them by name, and smiled at the group seated around the makeshift card table.

"Are you looking for Cord, Ma'am?" one of the men asked. His name was Harold, and he was tall and thin with a mop of curly red hair.

She looked at each of the men in turn before answering. "Actually, I was hoping to play cards," she said with a smile.

Harold blinked in surprise. "With us?"

She laughed lightly. "That was the idea, yes."

The other men laughed, but looked at each other uncomfortably. Putting his cards face-down on the table, Harold hastily got to his feet. "Uh...Ma'am, I'm not sure if that's such a good idea. I'm not sure the boss would like us playing cards with you."

"Of course he wouldn't mind," she assured them. "He just didn't want me playing cards in town because it was not safe. But I'll be perfectly safe playing cards with you gentlemen, right?"

The men nodded at the logic of her words. And besides, she knew the men would enjoy her company. All of them were unmarried and didn't often get a chance to spend much time with a beautiful woman. She thought they would be willing to take a chance for the privilege of her company.

Harold must have thought so, too, because he said, "I'll get you something to sit on."

Kayla didn't know if Cord would come in before the men finished playing, but

she was pretty sure that at least one of them would mention to their boss that she had played poker with them that afternoon. As it turned out, however, Cord walked into the barn after they'd played only a few hands.

She wasn't aware of his presence behind her until the men she'd been playing cards with abruptly got to their feet in the middle of a hand and excused themselves with a polite, "Good day, Ma'am." As one, they hurriedly left the barn.

Suddenly realizing the reason for the men's hasty getaway, Kayla felt her pulse quicken. Just how furious was Cord?

"Care to explain yourself, Abigail?"

Cord's voice was soft, but there was a hard edge to it, and Kayla wet her lips nervously as she got to her feet and turned to face him. His arms were folded across his broad chest and he was glowering at her. "I...I don't know what you mean," she said, smoothing her hair back from her face and looking up at him innocently.

He clenched his jaw. "I told you that I didn't want you playing cards."

She smoothed her skirts with suddenly trembling hands. Could she really go through with this? she wondered. "Actually, what you said was that you didn't want me going to the saloon to play cards," she pointed out. "If you look around, you'll notice that this is not the saloon. You really should be more specific next time, you know." She realized that she was pushing it a little bit, but she wanted to make sure that this whole thing would result in a spanking.

He scowled. "Are you trying to provoke me?"

She blushed and looked away, but not before he saw the slight curve of her lips.

"Is that what you're doing, Abigail?" he demanded angrily. "Trying to see how

far you can push me?”

Before she could answer, Cord took hold of her arm and dragged her over to where several bales of hay had been neatly stacked in the center of the barn. Her heart beating wildly with excitement now, Kayla tried to dig in her heels, but it did no good.

“What...what are you doing?” she asked, her voice suddenly trembling. She knew what he was going to do, but she didn’t think he’d do it here! She thought they would go back to the house. Anyone could come in the barn and see her getting spanked!

He spun around to glare at her, his golden eyes glinting in the afternoon light coming in from the barn’s high windows. “Maybe you don’t think I’m serious, Abigail, but I intend to show you that I mean what I say.”

Kayla expected Cord to sit down and put her over his knee, like he’d done before. But instead, he surprised her by bending her over one of the hay bales. It was exactly the perfect height for her to lean over comfortably, she noticed. Her heart hammering in her chest, she looked over her shoulder at Cord to see him grab a leather strap from a nearby hook. Though it looked soft and supple, it was also about two and a half inches wide. He doubled it, making a loop and slapping it against his palm. It made a sharp slapping sound, and her eyes widened at the sight of it. Surely, he wasn’t going to spank her with that!

She started to push herself upright, but a firm hand on her back bent her over the hay bale again.

“I told you that I didn’t want you playing cards, didn’t I Abigail?” he asked, slapping the strap against his open palm a second time.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she stared at the leather strap as if transfixed by it. “Cord...” she began.

“Didn’t I?” he demanded, his voice harsh.

She hesitated for a moment before answering, and when she did, her voice was soft. “Yes.”

He slapped the leather against his palm again. “Lift your skirt, Abigail,” he ordered, and when she hesitated, he added, “Now.”

Reaching back, she slowly pulled up her skirt until it was bunched around her waist.

“The petticoat, too,” he told her.

Again, Kayla hesitated, and was rewarded with the feel of leather slapping against her right cheek. The thin material of the petticoat offered little protection and she gasped at the sting left by the strap.

“The petticoat, Abigail,” Cord said again.

Kayla’s heart was pounding so loudly now that she was sure Cord could hear it. She couldn’t have imagined this scene better if she’d made it up herself, she thought. She’d deliberately not worn pantaloons beneath her petticoat for just this moment, but now that the moment had come, she didn’t know if she could actually be bold enough to go through with it. Then there was that nasty-looking leather strap...she couldn’t imagine that being used on her bare skin.

And yet, isn’t this what she wanted?

Grasping the material in her hands, she slowly lifted her petticoat to reveal delicate ankles, gently curved calves, slender thighs, and then finally her bare and very vulnerable bottom. Her face flaming, she held her breath and waited for the first lash.

Behind her, Cord stared in amazement. He hadn’t expected Abigail to be

naked beneath her skirts, and bent over the hay bale like she was, he was not only treated to the full length of her shapely legs and perfectly heart-shaped ass, but all of her womanly charms as well, and it was all he could do not to unbutton his pants and plunge himself deep inside her. He didn't think he'd ever seen a woman more beautiful.

Or known one that was more infuriating, he thought. His wayward fiancé seemed to think that she could get away with anything with just her pretty smile. She needed to be taught a lesson. She needed to know that he meant what he said. If he didn't teach her that lesson, now, then there would certainly be more problems later on. His hand tightening on the folded piece of leather, he lifted it and slapped it sharply against one creamy white cheek. He certainly didn't spank as hard as he could, but she let out a gasp anyway. The strap left a soft pink stain of color, which was quickly followed by another on the opposite cheek when he brought the strap down on that one as well.

Gripping the edge of the hay bale, Kayla let out a soft cry of surprise, and danced lightly from foot to foot. Cord wasn't hitting her all that hard, but the leather strap still stung intensely. And she loved the feel of it against her flesh as he brought it down again and again on her bare bottom!

With each stinging lash, she felt herself getting wetter, and in between her soft cries of protest, she couldn't seem to stop from letting out the occasional moan of pleasure. Cord didn't concentrate on one particular area of her bottom, either, which only seemed to drive her more wild. Instead, he would move from cheek to cheek, so that she never quite knew where the strap would fall. Sometimes, he would slap the backs of her thighs or administer a few spanks to the tender spot just below her cheeks, both of which would make cry out with a startled "oh!" of surprise.

Behind her, Cord couldn't help but admire his handiwork. Abigail's skin reddened quickly, and even though he had kept the strapping light, her cheeks were criss-crossed with color where the leather had struck her delicate skin. Even more surprising than finding Abigail bare-bottomed, however, was discovering how aroused she was getting from her spanking.

From where he stood, he could see the wetness as it glistened on her pussy and ran down the inside of her thighs. Her mound was literally swollen and throbbing with excitement. Still holding onto the strap, he stepped closer to where she was bent over the hay bale.

Kayla tensed visibly, anticipating the next lash, but instead, she felt Cord's hand on her upturned bottom. Did he intend to spank her with his hand now? she wondered. She held her breath, waiting, and then sighed with pleasure as he began to gently caress her sore bottom. The cool touch of his hand felt amazing on her scorched skin, and she parted her legs with a moan, silently begging Cord to touch her most intimate place. She didn't care that she was bent over a hay bale in the middle of the barn, didn't care if someone walked in and saw them. She needed Cord to touch her or she would surely go mad!

As if he could read her mind, Cord's fingertips brushed the damp curls between her legs ever so lightly. Kayla gasped, waiting breathlessly for him to continue, and then let out a startled cry as he gave her bottom a hard smack instead.

"Get back to the house," Cord growled in her ear, pulling both her petticoat and skirt down to cover her bottom. He had to cover her up before he lost what little bit of control was left to him. He hoped that Abigail wouldn't see the outline of his hardness when she turned around, or notice the fact that he could barely stand up straight. Gently taking her arm, he helped her to stand upright. "And no more poker, here or in town," he added as smoothed her skirt over her hips, his hands lingering a little bit longer than was necessary. He swore that he could almost feel the heat coming through her clothing. "Is that specific enough for you, Abigail?"

Not trusting herself to speak, Kayla could only nod. She was so aroused that she had to fight to keep from throwing herself at him. If he pulled her into one of the stalls right now, she wouldn't even think of resisting.

"Good," was all he said, and she almost smiled as she realized that he was just as excited as she was.

She watched as he replaced the leather strap on its hook. "Will you be in soon?" she asked.

He glanced at her. "After I see to my horse."

Kayla nodded, and turned to go, only to shyly glance over her shoulder at him before leaving the barn. She stood outside the door for a few minutes, watching the horses as they grazed in the nearby paddock. Well, she had certainly proved her theory true, she thought with a little smile. Getting spanked definitely aroused her. And Cord, too, she was happy to say.

Her face still flushed from her encounter with Cord, Kayla hurried up to the house. So preoccupied was she with her thoughts that she didn't see Dalton Jeffries standing on the porch until she was halfway up the front steps.

"Mr. Jeffries," she said, her voice still a little breathless with excitement.

"Miss Murray," he said, tipping his hat to her. "I came to see Cord. Is he around?"

She smoothed her hair back from her face. "He's down at the barn. He'll be in shortly."

He took in her rosy cheeks and bright green eyes with a grin. "That's where I was headed when I saw you coming back to the house."

Kayla's color deepened as she abruptly realized what Dalton Jeffries would have walked in on had he gone to the barn looking for Cord.

"May I come in and wait for him then?" Dalton asked when she said nothing.

She knew that Cord had warned her to stay away from Dalton Jeffries, but she couldn't refuse without looking rude. "Of course," she said, pushing open the door.

Inside, Dalton Jeffries let his gaze wander over the living room, taking in the curtains she'd made and the throw rugs she'd bought at the general store. "I've always said that this place needed a woman's touch," he remarked.

She supposed that was his way of complimenting her. "Can I offer you something?"

He looked her up and down slowly, his dark gaze lingering for a moment on her breasts before he gave her an oily smile. "No, thank you."

Kayla took an unconscious step back, suddenly very uneasy about being in the house alone with him. Where was Cord? she wondered.

"You look well," Dalton Jeffries said abruptly. "Life on a ranch must agree with you. It certainly can't be living with Cord Holderness that has you looking so fetching."

Before she could comment, Cord's deep voice came from behind her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Chapter Four

Kayla breathed an audible sigh of relief at the sound of Cord's voice. She half-turned to see him striding through the foyer and into the living room to where she stood. As he'd done outside the saloon that day when she'd first met Dalton Jeffries, Cord stepped in front of her, putting himself between her and the other man.

"I'll ask you again, Jeffries," Cord said. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

"I came to discuss some business with you, and your beautiful fiancé was kind enough to entertain me while I waited," Dalton said smoothly. "Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Kayla saw Cord's jaw clench, felt him stiffen beside her, and she unknowingly held her breath, her gaze going from one man to the other.

"You and I have no business to discuss," Cord told the other man bluntly.

Dalton's mouth tightened. "Why don't you hear me out before you decide?"

Cord was silent a moment before answering. "Say what you have to say, and then get the hell out."

"I'm here to make you an offer on the ranch," Dalton said without pre-emption.

Kayla looked at the blond man in surprise. Cord would never sell this place, she thought, not when he clearly loved it so much.

Cord's brows drew together, and his voice was hard when he spoke. "I already told you that I'm not interested in selling."

Dalton thought a moment, and then nodded. "Not even if I give you double

what this place is worth? Because that's my offer, providing you agree to convince the rest of the ranchers in the area to sell to me as well."

Cord folded his arms and eyed the other man coldly. "Why the hell would I do that?"

Dalton leveled his gaze at Cord. "Because it would make it easier for everyone involved if you did. The other ranchers respect you, Holderness. If you sell, then they'll be more likely to do the same."

"Get out," Cord ordered.

But the other man made no move to do so. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather reconsider?" he asked instead. "It's a lot of money. At least think about it."

Cord ground his jaw. "Get out, before I throw you out."

Dalton Jeffries gave Cord a long, hard look, and Kayla almost thought that Cord really would have to use force to make him leave, but then the other man nodded. "You really should have reconsidered, you know."

With that, Dalton Jeffries put on his hat and dipped his head at Kayla before heading for the front door. As he walked past where they stood, she instinctively took a step closer to Cord.

As soon as the other man had left, Cord turned to her. "He didn't touch you, did he?" he asked, gently putting his hands on her shoulders.

Kayla shook her head, her brow furrowing. "No, of course not," she said, hastening to reassure him. "You really don't like him, do you?"

Cord's jaw tightened. "Well, the feeling is mutual, I can assure you."

"So I noticed," she said. "He seems really eager to buy your ranch, though. Why?"

“Because this part of the Wyoming Territory is prime cattle grazing land, and Dalton already owns a couple hundred thousand acres to the north of us,” he told her. “Ranchers for hundreds of miles bring their cattle up here to graze for a few seasons before driving them down to Kansas City. All of the ranchers out here, me included, make good money letting these cattle graze on our lands. The more land you own, the more money you make, and Jeffries is always looking to make more money. That’s what he lives for. But one thing that is especially irritating to Jeffries is that my property lays dead center along the cattle trail that runs from Kansas City to his property. That means I get a little bit of the money that he thinks should go to him.”

She frowned, a thought suddenly occurring to her. “What did he mean when he said that you should have reconsidered selling? Was that some type of threat?”

Cord gazed down at her and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Jeffries likes to talk tough, and he’s a man who has to be taken seriously, as some of the ranchers around here have already learned. So I want you to be careful. If you want to go into town, have one of the hands take you. And if you go out riding by yourself, don’t go beyond sight of the ranch house.”

Though normally headstrong, Kayla kept Cord’s warning in mind when she decided to go riding the following day. She’d asked Cord if he wanted to go with her, thinking that perhaps they could have another picnic lunch, but he’d told her that he had work to do, much to her dismay. He did, however, give her the most delicious kiss before he’d gone out on the ranch that morning.

She was thinking so much about that kiss that she didn’t realize how far she’d ridden from the barn. She was thinking about turning around when she spotted two men by one of the fences that ran along the northern part of the property. At first, she began to wave at them, assuming they were a couple of the hands out fixing the fences, but as she got closer, she realized that she didn’t recognize either of the men.

Even though she knew that the smart thing to do would be to ride back to the barn and tell Cord or his foreman what she'd seen, her innate curiosity wouldn't allow it. Besides, she didn't even know what these men were doing. Deciding that she had to see for herself, she rode closer. She was still a couple hundred feet away when she realized that the men weren't fixing the fences at all, but were cutting them instead!

"Hey, what are you doing?" she yelled, the words out of her mouth before she even realized what she was saying.

Startled by the sound of her voice, the men spun around. They stared at her in disbelief for a moment, as if wondering where she'd come from, and then one of the men pulled out a pistol and pointed it at her. There was a puff of smoke and a bang followed immediately by a whizzing sound.

Kayla's eyes widened, and for a moment she simply stared at the man. He was shooting at her! Then, as if suddenly regaining her senses, she gripped her horse's reins tightly and jerked the animal around. Kicking her heels hard, she urged her horse into a gallop, racing back the way she'd come. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that both men had mounted their own horses and had started to pursue her.

Leaning low over her horse, she snapped at the reins and dug her heels into the animal's flanks. Behind her, the men had started to shoot, and she cried out as gunshots echoed all around her. She tensed her back, fearing that she would feel a bullet strike her at any moment.

Dismounting, Cord led his horse over to the trough of water beside the barn. As the big bay drank, Cord's eyes strayed to the house and he wondered if Abigail had come back from her ride yet. Most afternoons, she liked to sit on the front porch and sketch while she waited for him to come in, but she wasn't there. Which didn't mean that she hadn't come back yet. Despite the fact that it would earn her another spanking, he wouldn't put it past her to be in the barn playing cards with the ranch hands again. Or perhaps she'd do it because it would earn her another spanking, he thought, remembering how

aroused she'd gotten by the strapping he'd given her the day before.

His mouth quirked. Though he'd never put a woman over his knee before he'd spanked his mail-order bride that first night she'd been at the ranch, he doubted that all women enjoyed it the same way that she did. Abigail Murray was definitely full of surprises, that was for sure.

Just then, one of the hands came out of the barn, and Cord asked him if Abigail had come back from her ride yet.

The other man shook his head.

"When did she leave?" Cord asked.

The man thought a moment. "About an hour ago, at least. She was heading north when I saw her head out."

Cord frowned. She should have been back by now, he thought. Dammit! He had told her not to ride out of sight of the ranch house. Suddenly a noise intruded on his thoughts. It sounded like light thunder rolling in the distance, he thought. But it wasn't thunder. Cord recognized it as gunfire, and it was coming from the north. He swore under his breath.

"Get some men and follow me," he told the man, swinging up on his horse and kicking the animal into a gallop. The northernmost part of the ranch joined Dalton Jeffries' property, and after the other man's visit yesterday, he wouldn't put it past Jeffries to be trying something.

Urging his horse faster, he rode in the direction that Abigail had gone.

Shots continued to ring out as Kayla galloped across the floor of the valley. Fear gripped her in its clutches and she could hardly breathe from it. She swore that if she got out of this, she wouldn't stick her nose where it didn't belong ever again. If she didn't get shot first, she thought. She looked over her shoulder quickly, and her heart plummeted as she realized that the men

were gaining on her. If they got any closer, there was no way they would keep missing her. She urged her horse on even faster, but the animal didn't have much left to give.

Then, up ahead, she saw another rider racing toward her. She tensed for a moment, thinking that one of the men had gotten in front of her somehow. But then she breathed a sigh of relief as she recognized the big bay. Cord! she thought.

Cord's worst fear had been realized as he rode into the valley and saw the two men shooting at Abigail. She was pushing her horse as fast as she could, but they were gaining on her. Ignoring the urge to simply ride straight for Abigail, he pulled his gun from its holster and rode right past her at full speed, firing at the two men as he did so.

At the sound of Cord's pistol going off so close to her, Kayla's mare came to an abrupt halt, skidding to a stop so fast that the animal's back legs buckled beneath her, and she had to fight to keep from being thrown over the horse's head. But she pulled back so hard on the reins that the horse came to a stop in a sitting position and she completely lost her balance. Unable to hold on, Kayla's feet came out of the stirrup and she slid down the horse's back, landing on the ground with a thump. Lucky for her, the grass was deep enough to be soft, so she hadn't hurt herself. Freed of its burden, her mare quickly righted itself and galloped off.

Kayla immediately turned to see what had happened to Cord. Relieved to see that the shooting had stopped, Kayla hurriedly got to her feet as Cord came riding back to where she stood. The two men that had been shooting at her were nowhere in sight; apparently Cord had chased them off. Brushing off the seat of her riding skirt, she started to walk toward Cord.

Cord had wanted to pursue the two men, but when he had looked over his shoulder to check on Abigail and seen that she'd taken a tumble from her horse, he forgot all about the men and immediately turned his horse around. He was worried that she had been injured, and he sighed with relief when he

saw her get to her feet and brush herself off.

Slowing his horse, he stopped beside her, but didn't dismount. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

She nodded, but looked slightly embarrassed that she'd fallen off her horse. "I'm fine. The gunshots spooked my mare and she took off. I hope she's all right."

He glanced around, but the horse was nowhere in sight. "Don't worry about it. She probably just went back to the barn. She'll probably be back before we are." He frowned down at her. "What happened?"

She looked up at him, using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "I was out riding when I saw those men up by the fences," she explained. "I thought they worked for you and were out here doing repairs, but when I rode closer, I realized that they were cutting the fences. When they saw me, they chased me."

Cord's mouth tightened, but he said nothing, though she could tell from the scowl on his handsome face that he was annoyed with her.

Kayla opened her mouth to speak up in her defense, but could think of nothing to say, so when he held out his hand to help her onto his horse, she took it without a word. She put her foot in the stirrup, expecting Cord to seat her in front of him, but instead she found herself hauled up and thrown unceremoniously over his well-muscled thighs.

"Cord!" she protested, the word coming out in a gasp as her breath whooshed from her lungs.

His hand smacked her upturned bottom hard. "I told you that I didn't want you riding out this far, Abigail," he said.

"But...Owww!...Cord!" she yelped as his hand came down again and again

on the seat of her riding skirt.

His spanking quickly made her forget the fact that she had just been shot at. The smacks didn't sting that much through all of her clothing, but her position got her immediately aroused, and when Cord pulled her upright to sit in front of him side-saddle after only a few more slaps, she almost asked him not to stop.

She looked up at him, her face flushed to find Cord gazing down at her, and she caught her breath at the expression in his golden brown eyes.

"You have got to be more careful," he told her, brushing back a strand of loose hair. "And you've got to start doing what I tell you." He caressed her face. "You really came close to getting yourself killed today, you know that? Just the thought of you being hurt scares the hell out of me."

She suddenly felt terrible that she had worried him so much. "I'm sorry," she said softly, looking up at him from beneath lowered lashes.

Cord said nothing for a moment, and then, lowering his head, he kissed her. She kissed him back, one hand reaching up to curl around his neck. They kissed for some time and Kayla would have enjoyed it even more if it weren't for the saddle horn digging uncomfortably into her bottom. Cord lifted his head at the sound of approaching horses. Her breath caught for a moment until she recognized the foreman and several other ranch hands.

"Two men were cutting the fences to the north of here," Cord said to them. "Ride up that way to check and make sure they're gone, and then get at least one strand up by nightfall."

They rode back in silence, Cord holding the reins with one hand, his other arm around Kayla. Though she relaxed against him, she couldn't help but think about how close she had come to being killed that day, and she gave a little shiver.

Instinctively, Cord's arm tightened around her. This was their ranch, and Abigail should be able to go anywhere that she wanted on the property without fear of getting shot.

He swore silently. He had no doubt that Jeffries had put those two men up to it. The man had practically threatened Cord the other day when he'd been at the house, so it wasn't difficult to believe. Cord seriously considered going over to Jeffries' place and confronting the man after seeing Abigail safely home. Though he would enjoy going after Jeffries after what the man's thugs had almost done to Abigail, Cord was smart enough to know that it would accomplish nothing. Dalton Jeffries would deny it, and Cord could prove nothing. But he could put in a complaint with the sheriff. Perhaps if Abigail could give him a description of the men, it would be enough to connect Jeffries.

Kayla, however, hadn't seen the men well enough to describe what they looked like when Cord asked her. Though she had to admit she was only mildly surprised to hear that Dalton Jeffries was probably behind what had happened. After they had gotten back to the house, she was concerned when Cord announced that he was going to ride into town to talk to the sheriff.

"Perhaps you should have one of the men go with you," she suggested when he told her. "Like Lucas," she added, referring to the foreman.

"I'll be fine," he said, brushing his thumb over her cheek. "Besides, Lucas is going to be up fixing the fences for a couple of hours." The corner of his mouth curved. "I'll be home before dark."

She chewed on her lower lip as she watched him mount his horse. "Be careful."

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Always," he said, bending to kiss her before riding off.

Still concerned, Kayla watched him go. If Cord was right, and Dalton Jeffries

was behind what had happened that afternoon, then there was no telling what lengths the man would go to get Cord's ranch.

With a sigh, Kayla turned and went into the house. Thinking to occupy herself, she made dinner, and then when that was done, she took out her sketchpad and tried to concentrate on her designs. As she put the finishing touches on a day dress, she couldn't help but smile. Not so long ago, she would have been up in Cord's room trying to pry open the lock on that metal box while he was out. But ever since she had decided to stay with Cord, rifling through his things couldn't be further from her mind.

Cord got back just as the sun was setting, and she could tell from the expression on his face that things hadn't gone well in town.

"What is it?" she asked.

He glanced at her as he hung his hat on a peg by the door. "That damn sheriff is good for nothing," he told her. "If he's not in Jeffries' pocket, then he might as well be."

"He wouldn't do anything?" she asked in surprise.

Cord scowled. "Said he couldn't prove Dalton Jeffries was behind the shooting, even though everyone in this town knows he is. Hell, every rancher in the area has been harassed by Jeffries and his thugs at some point."

Her brow furrowing, she hugged her arms around her middle. "What do we do then?"

"Protect ourselves," he said without hesitation. "Which means that you need to learn how to use a gun."

Her eyes widened. "A gun?" she protested. "But I've never even held one."

"Which is why I'm going to teach you," he told her. Coming over to where she

stood, he put his hands on her shoulders and gazed down at her. “Most of the time you’re alone here while I’m out on the ranch, and I don’t like the idea of you not knowing how to protect yourself.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “Do you really think Dalton Jeffries would purposely come after me?”

Cord’s mouth tightened. “He doesn’t exactly hold women in high regard. So, yes, I certainly think he would come after you if it got him what he wanted.”

The next day, she and Cord rode out to a section of the ranch where there was a large hill. Tethering the horses to a tree, they let the animals graze while Cord instructed her on how to use a pistol.

“This is a single-action revolver,” he explained, holding the weapon to show her. “Which means that you have to pull back the hammer before you pull the trigger.”

He had placed several tin cans along the hillside a short distance from where they stood, and Kayla stood back while Cord demonstrated. She watched as he thumbed back the curved portion he called the hammer, and then carefully took aim before squeezing the trigger. The gunshot echoed off the surrounding hills, and Kayla jumped at the sound. The tin can he’d targeted fell off the piece of wood it had been sitting on.

“It’s louder than I thought it would be,” she observed when he turned to her.

He nodded. “Here,” he said, holding out the gun to her, butt first. “You try.”

She eyed the pistol warily, but then reached out and took it. It felt awkward and heavy in her hands. As she turned to face the tin cans, Cord stepped around behind her to put his arms on either side of hers. It was difficult to concentrate on anything with him standing so close, and her gaze was transfixed on his hands as he slowly lifted her outstretched arms and helped her aim at one of the cans.

“Okay,” he said, his voice soft in her ear. “Now, thumb back the trigger.”

She did as he instructed, trying to hold the gun steady, but it was shaking all over the place even with Cord supporting her hands.

Behind her, Cord nodded. “Good. Now, take aim, take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then slowly squeeze the trigger when you’re ready. Don’t jerk it.”

Easier said than done, Kayla thought. She never realized that there were so many steps involved in firing a pistol. And it didn’t help to have Cord standing so close to her. She could feel the contours of his body pressing up and down the length of her. Concentrating hard, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She tried to keep her eyes on the target, but instead she shut them tightly in anticipation of the noise, and squeezed the trigger.

The revolver jumped in her hand, which in turn made her jump, and she would have dropped the pistol if Cord’s hands hadn’t been supporting hers.

Afraid to look, she turned her head to talk to Cord. “Did I hit anything?” she asked.

Soft laughter drifted to her ear. “I’m pretty sure it’ll hit the ground...someday. If it doesn’t hit a bird first.”

Her eyes flew open and she gave him a sheepish look. “You don’t think...?”

He laughed again. “No. At least you didn’t drop the gun,” he said, and then added. “I’m just teasing you, sweetheart. It wasn’t bad for your first time. But you might want to try keeping your eyes open next time.”

Kayla blushed. Lifting the revolver again, she aimed it at one of the cans and slowly squeezed the trigger. She still jumped a little, but her hand was steadier this time. Keeping her eyes open definitely helped, too. Though she didn’t hit the can she’d been aiming for, she was at least able to see where

the bullet hit when some dirt kicked up along the hillside.

The next few shots were the same and Cord had to reload so that she could try again. After putting more bullets in the pistol, he once again took up his position behind, which only made it more difficult to concentrate, and she couldn't resist rubbing her bottom up against him in between shots.

"Hey," Cord admonished gruffly, lightly smacking her behind. "This is serious stuff. Pay attention."

Knowing full well the effect that she was having on him, Kayla only smiled as she aimed at her target again. This time, the bullet pinged against the can, knocking it off its perch, and she laughed with delight.

She turned to see Cord grinning at her. "Maybe I should spank you more often," he said.

Blushing at his teasing, Kayla turned back to try her hand at shooting the rest of the cans. Much to her delight, she managed to hit all of them, and when she was done, she turned to Cord, a smile on her face.

"That was actually more fun than I thought it would be," she said, handing him the pistol. "Can we come out and do it again?"

He laughed. "Whenever you want," he agreed.

He spent a little bit of time teaching her how to load and unload the pistol before announcing that they were done for the day.

As she watched him place the gun back in the holster that was belted around his trim hips, she couldn't help but notice that he was hard beneath his denims. Dragging her gaze away, she lifted her head to find him regarding her intently. Blushing, she looked away, but he caught her chin with his fingers and gently forced her to look up at him. He made no other move, but stood gazing down at her, and she held her breath. Then, finally, he bent his

head to kiss her.

Kayla melted against him with a sigh of pleasure, her lips parting under his, and they were both breathing hard when Cord lifted his head.

“I’m so hot for you that I don’t think I can wait much longer for our wedding night,” he said, his hoarse with need. “When is that dress of yours going to be finished?”

Kayla, still heady from his kiss, looked up at him with fluttering lashes. “I should have it done in a day or two,” she said breathlessly.

He kissed her again, tugging gently on her lower lip. “Then what do you say to getting married on Sunday?”

Smiling, she nodded in agreement, but before she could speak, he kissed her again.

It was a long time before they got on their horses and went back to the house.

Happier than she would have thought it possible for one person to be, Kayla went into town the following day to put the finishing touches on her wedding dress. As was usually the case, Rachel was busy with customers when she walked into the store, so she went directly upstairs, eager to get to work.

Attaching the lace to the hemline was an easy task and after she was done, she tried on the dress, excited to see how it looked. It fit perfectly, the design accentuating her slim waist and curvy figure, the fine lace barely skimming the floor as she moved. She was just studying her reflection in the full-length mirror when Rachel walked in.

“Kayla, you look beautiful,” the blond girl said as she came into the living room. “And that dress is absolutely amazing. Cord won’t be able to take his eyes off you.”

Kayla smiled, exhilarated by the thought of Cord seeing her in her wedding dress. "I certainly hope not," she said, admiring the way the dress swirled around her feet when she moved back and forth. "We're getting married on Sunday."

Rachel walked over to the sofa and sat down, her brow furrowing as she looked up at Kayla. "You haven't told Cord the truth yet, have you?"

Kayla turned to look at her friend. "I've thought about it, but I just can't. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

"You're not serious!" the other girl exclaimed. "Do you really want him calling you Abigail on your wedding night?"

Kayla's heart ached at the thought, and she bit her lip. In the beginning, pretending to be Abigail had been easy, but now every time Cord said the other girl's name, Kayla felt as if a knife was being plunged into her breast. That alone was enough to make her want to tell him the truth. But then she thought of the alternative. If she told him the truth, and he rejected her, she didn't think she could take it. It would be better to let him call her Abigail for the rest of her life.

"You have to tell him, Kayla," Rachel said quietly.

"And what exactly do I say, Rachel?" she demanded. "How do I tell him that my name is really Kayla Mathison, and that I'm from New York? Do you really think he'll care that I was running away from an arranged marriage to a man named William Delmont, the man my father wanted me to marry? How is he going to react when he learns that I lied about being his mail-order bride, that I've been lying to him all along?" She answered without giving the other girl a chance to say anything. "I'll tell you how he's going to react. He'll be furious and he won't have anything more to do with me."

Rachel frowned. "You don't know that, Kayla."

She shrugged. "But I can't be sure, so I won't take that chance."

Her friend sighed. "And what if Cord finds out from someone else that you lied, Kayla? How is he going to react then?"

Kayla hesitated for a moment, and then shook her head. "There's no way that he could find out, Rachel. Unless you tell him, of course, and you already assured me that you wouldn't." Impulsively, she sat beside the blonde and took hold of the girl's hands. "Please promise me that you won't say anything to him," she pleaded.

Rachel gave her a small smile. "You know that I won't, but I'm telling you again that this is a bad idea," she said, and then sighed at the look on Kayla's face. "You really will make a beautiful bride."

Anything that Kayla would have said was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

"Rachel, are you up here?" a male voice said from the top of the stairs, and both Kayla and Rachel looked in the direction of the open doorway to see Dalton Jeffries looking into the room.

Kayla's heart thudded in her chest. What was he doing here? she wondered. After the other night, she didn't even like to be in the same room with him. Especially when he was eyeing her so boldly.

"Well, Miss Murray, Holderness sure is a lucky man," he said.

Beside her, Rachel got to her feet. "What are you doing here?" she demanded icily.

He chuckled. "Can't a man visit his own sister?"

Not wanting to be in the room with Dalton Jeffries for another minute, Kayla stood up and nervously smoothed her dress. "If you'll excuse me, Rachel, I

think I'll go change."

Ignoring Dalton Jeffries, she made her way across the room and into the bedroom Rachel shared with her husband. Through the door, she could hear muffled voices coming from the other room, and though she changed into her other dress quickly, she waited until she was sure that Dalton Jeffries had left before going back out.

Rachel's face was flushed, indicating that she was clearly agitated by her brother's visit. "Do you know that Dalton actually had the audacity to ask me when your wedding is? As if you and Cord would want him there!"

Kayla's stomach churned at the thought. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

The other girl shook her head. "But it doesn't matter. Copper Creek's so small that everyone, including Dalton, will know when the wedding is soon enough."

That was probably true, Kayla thought. "Your brother came by the other day to make an offer on the ranch," she said. "Cord wasn't too pleased. I thought they were going to get in a fight right there."

"I'm not surprised," Rachel said.

"What is it with those two? Is it just because your brother wants to buy Cord's ranch?"

"That's part of it," Rachel said, going into the small kitchen to heat water for tea. "But by no means all of it."

Kayla followed, her brow furrowing. "Then what?"

Rachel sighed. "Cord came to Copper Creek a few weeks after Dalton got married. Hannah was the daughter of another rancher, so it was natural that her father gave his blessing when Dalton asked to marry her." She two mugs down from the shelf beside the stove and set them on the table. "When

Hannah saw Cord, though, she immediately fell in love with him.”

Kayla knew where Rachel was going with this, and though she didn't want to hear about how much Cord had loved this other woman, she had to know.

“And he loved her.”

Rachel shook her head. “No, he didn't,” she said, much to Kayla's surprise. “Cord's too honorable for that. He was Hannah's friend, and that's all. But my brother refused to believe that. I suppose it didn't help that Hannah spent as much time with Cord as she could. A lot of people say that she wanted to leave Dalton, which I imagine is probably true. I also think he became so furious with her that he beat her a few times, though no one really knows for sure. What everyone does know for sure, though, is that she left Dalton's ranch in the middle of a terrible rainstorm. Everyone thinks that she was trying to get to Cord's ranch as fast as she could, but with the darkness and rain that night, she never got there. They found her body the next morning at the bottom of a rocky gorge just above Cord's ranch house,” she explained. “Maybe she became confused in the dark, or maybe she was just scared and running from my brother. Either way, she shouldn't have been in that gorge. As Dalton sees it, Hannah was cheating on him, and so he blames Cord for what happened to her, whereas Cord believes that Hannah never would have been in that gorge if she hadn't been running from an abusive husband. They've hated each other ever since then.”

Kayla chewed on her lower lip. She could certainly understand why Cord was so protective of her now. And she could almost guarantee that she knew exactly which gorge Rachel had been talking about.

Rachel made their tea and set the mugs on the table, but didn't sit down right away. Instead, she excused herself and went into the bedroom, only to come back a few minutes later. Taking the chair across from Kayla, she smiled.

“Every bride needs something borrowed on her wedding day, so I thought that perhaps you'd like to wear this,” the other girl said, opening her hand to reveal a beautiful locket on a gold chain.

Kayla reached out to take the necklace, carefully holding it in her hand.
“Rachel, it’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“I wore it on my wedding day, and I want it to bring you and Cord as much luck and happiness as it has Matthew and me,” her friend said.

Kayla smiled, but said nothing. The necklace was beautiful and she would be honored to wear it, especially since it had brought Rachel such good fortune in her marriage. With all the lying she had been doing to Cord, she thought wryly, she would need as much good fortune as she could get.

Chapter Five

When she awoke on her wedding day, Kayla could think only of one thing. By evening, she would be Mrs. Cord Holderness, and she couldn't be happier. Somewhere in between the moment she'd first stepped off the stagecoach, the picnic that day he had taken her riding, and all the spankings he'd given her, Kayla had fallen in love with Cord. And though it probably should have made a difference to her that he would be marrying Abigail Murray today instead of Kayla Mathison, strangely enough, it didn't. She would be Cord's wife in every way that mattered, she told herself. What was in a name, anyway?

After taking a warm bath, Kayla padded barefoot over to the washstand where she brushed her long hair until it shone. She then piled it atop her head in loose curls before slipping into her wedding dress. Surveying her reflection in the full-length mirror, she then left the room to make her way downstairs. Cord was waiting for her in the foyer, and he turned at the sound of her footsteps.

He had dressed for the occasion in dark-colored trousers and a crisp white shirt with a long string tie, over which he wore a matching vest, and Kayla didn't think she'd ever seen him look more handsome. In his hand, he held a bouquet of freshly picked daisies.

Looking at his bride, however, Cord forgot all about the flowers in his hand, and simply stared at her. She was so lovely that it took his breath away, and it was several moments before he could speak.

"You look absolutely beautiful," he said softly.

She smiled, blushing at the compliment. "I'm glad you think so."

Suddenly remembering the flowers in his hand, he held them out for her. "These are for you," he said simply.

“They’re lovely,” she said, reaching out to take them. “Thank you.”

Embarrassed to realize that her hands were trembling, Kayla looked away, only to feel Cord’s fingers beneath her chin. She lifted her head to find him regarding her intently.

“When I put in an order for a mail-order bride, I didn’t expect to fall in love, Abigail,” he said softly. “But then you stepped off that stagecoach, and I fell head over heels for you from the first moment I saw you.”

Kayla caught her breath, unable to believe what she had just heard. “You...you love me?” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

His mouth quirked. “Are you really that surprised, sweetheart?” he asked.

She flushed, Rachel’s words of advice to tell Cord the truth suddenly coming back to her. “I...there’s something I have to tell you...” she began, but her voice trailed off.

“You don’t have to say it; I understand,” he said when she didn’t finish. “I wasn’t expecting you to feel the same way. In time, perhaps, but for now, it’s enough that you’ve agreed to marry me.”

She blinked. “But...that’s just it,” she said quickly, going up on tiptoe to kiss him on the mouth. “I do love you, Cord. I love you so much. It’s just that...”

His brow furrowed. “What is it, Abigail?”

She couldn’t tell him, she realized. She simply couldn’t do it. Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes, and she blinked them back. “I...it’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m just so happy, that’s all.”

Cord looked like he wanted to prompt her further, but after a moment, he

smiled. "Then we'd better get going, before we're late."

So, wearing something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue, and using the name, Abigail Murray, Kayla Mathison married Cord Holderness that afternoon. Most of the town had come out to witness the ceremony, as well as to congratulate her and Cord at the reception held outside in the churchyard afterward. Kayla had been half-afraid that Dalton Jeffries would come to the wedding, and she was relieved when she didn't see him among the guests.

Several of the townsfolk had brought musical instruments with them, and so after the meal, which was a simple menu of roasted chicken, potatoes and vegetables, Cord took Kayla's hand and led her onto the makeshift dance floor. Their guests eagerly joined in, though Kayla barely took notice of the other dancers around them, so captivated was she by her husband.

In fact, she was so caught up in dancing with Cord that she didn't notice Dalton Jeffries standing beside them until he had placed a hand on her husband's shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in?"

Kayla blinked, not sure if she were more startled by the man's question, or his presence at her and Cord's wedding. She looked at her husband nervously. Cord's jaw was clenched, his face an unreadable mask.

Holding onto her hand, Cord protectively pulled her close. "You're not welcome here, Jeffries," he said curtly. "I'll tell you this only one time; get the hell out of here."

In the tense silence that followed, Kayla gripped her husband's hand tighter. She realized then that not only had the music stopped, but that every one of the guests was staring at them, and she prayed that Dalton Jeffries would simply do as Cord had asked and leave.

But Dalton made no move to leave. Instead, he gave Cord a sardonic smirk. “Come on, Holderness; why not share some of your good fortune with the rest of us?”

Dalton Jeffries words were casual enough, but as he spoke, he lazily looked Kayla up and down, leaving no room for doubt as to what he was referring to, and Cord snapped.

With a sound deep in his throat, Cord lunged for Dalton. Crying out in dismay, Kayla desperately gripped her husband’s arm as she tried to hold him back.

“Cord, don’t...” she begged.

Intent on making Dalton pay for his snide comment, Cord ignored her, going for the other man anyway, and Kayla was grateful when Lucas, who had been nearby, stepped in to restrain his boss with a hand on Cord’s shoulder. Cord tried to shake him off, which was when another one of the hands took his other shoulder.

“He’s not worth it, Cord,” Lucas advised, trying to maintain his grip on Cord’s shoulder.

Dalton, for his part, seemed to find the whole thing amusing, and only encouraged Cord to take a punch at him until Rachel stepped between her brother and Cord.

“Dalton, stop it,” she yelled, forcing herself to be heard over his shouted taunts. “Can’t you see that you’re making a fool of yourself?”

Dalton Jeffries didn’t seem to care, however. He took a step forward and would have pushed his sister out of the way had Rachel’s husband, Matthew, and another man that Kayla didn’t recognize not grabbed hold of him from behind.

Terrified that the men holding Cord and Dalton wouldn’t be able to keep the

two men from going at each other for much longer, Kayla hurriedly stepped in front of her husband.

“Cord, please,” she pleaded, lifting her hand to rest it against his cheek, hoping that he would look at her. “This is our wedding day. Please don’t let him spoil it for us. Please.”

Her softly spoken words must have gotten through to him because she felt him relax against the men holding him back, saw his gaze shift from Dalton Jeffries to her. She smiled up at him.

Lucas and the other man must have sensed the tension beginning to disappear from Cord as well because they released their hold on him and took a step back. Glancing warily at Dalton Jeffries, Kayla saw him nod jerkily to the men that had been restraining him. When Matthew and the other man didn’t release him quickly enough, he shrugged off their hold.

Kayla tensed, expecting him to lunge for her husband, but he merely gave her and Cord a contemptuous look.

“Enjoy your happiness while it lasts,” he sneered before turning on his heel.

Dalton Jeffries’ words sent a chill racing up Kayla’s backbone, and she stared at him in stunned silence as he pushed his way through the guests that had been crowded around the dance floor. Wetting her lips nervously, she turned back to Cord to find him watching the other man’s retreating form.

Almost as one, the guests around them began to whisper among themselves, but anything they said was lost to her ears as the small group of musicians began to play again.

“What...what did he mean by that, do you think?” she asked Cord.

Her husband was silent a moment before answering, and when he did, he reached up to gently caress her cheek. “He’s just all talk,” he admitted. “But

like you said, this is our wedding day, and I don't intend to let Jeffries or anyone else spoil it." He grinned suddenly. "If I remember correctly, we were in the middle of a dance, weren't we, sweetheart?"

Kayla allowed him to pull her close, but it was difficult for her to forget Dalton Jeffries words. Despite what Cord had said, he seemed to be finding it difficult to forget them as well because he was tense and preoccupied as they danced. However, by the time they were ready to cut the cake a short time later, both she and Cord had begun to relax.

Kayla would have headed back out onto the dance floor after they had finished their cake, but Cord held onto her hand and pulled her behind a big oak tree.

"I've been waiting to get you alone all day," he said huskily, his mouth against hers. "Do you think anyone will notice if we leave?"

She laughed lightly, as eager to be alone with him as he was with her. "I think it's traditional for me to throw the bouquet before we do."

He kissed her again, his mouth warm and insistent on hers. "Then throw it so that we can get out of here."

There were only a handful of unmarried women in Copper Creek, and most of them still in their teens, but Kayla barely had time to see which girl had caught the bouquet of daisies before Cord took her hand and hurried her out to the waiting cart.

"Why, Mr. Holderness, whatever will our guests think?" she asked breathlessly, smiling at him as he lifted her into the cart.

"That I can't wait to take my wife to bed," he told her.

She blushed, looking around to see if anyone had heard. "Cord!"

He laughed. "Well, it's true."

The ride back to the ranch seemed to take longer than usual, and by the time they got there, Kayla was almost trembling with anticipation. Back in New York, she had heard of girls that dreaded their wedding night, but she couldn't wait to make love with her husband.

Since all of the ranch hands were still back in town, Cord had to unharness the horse from the wagon, then give him food and water before they could go inside. Rather than go up to the house while Cord did that, however, Kayla followed him into the barn.

For some reason, her eyes were drawn to the leather strap that Cord had used to spank her with the other day. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure that Cord wasn't watching, she reached out and stroked the supple leather with her fingers. Reaching up, she lifted the strap off the hook and held it in her hands. Her pulse fluttered as she remembered what the strap had felt like against her tender skin.

"Abigail?"

Still holding onto the strap, Kayla whirled around to face her husband. He glanced at the leather strap, but said nothing, merely lifting a brow.

Kayla didn't know what made her do it. Perhaps it was the alcohol in the punch she'd had to drink at the wedding. Or the fact that they were all alone here. Or perhaps she just wanted another spanking. Whatever it was, she didn't question the impulse, but simply gave herself over to it.

Her pulse skipping a beat, she walked over to where Cord stood and handed him the strap without a word. Then, giving him a saucy look over her shoulder as she went, she sidled past him to walk over to the hay bale he'd bent her over the other day and bent over it of her own accord. With a naughty little smile, she slowly lifted her wedding dress to reveal her pantaloons. Had she known she was going to be spanked on her wedding night, she probably

wouldn't have worn them at all, but as she slowly pushed them down, she realized that the act of doing so while Cord watched excited her.

Cord had been hard most of the day, and now, gazing at his beautiful wife's bare ass, all he wanted to do was step up behind her, grab her hips and plunge deep inside her. But the thought of tanning her bottom made him even harder, especially since she obviously wanted it so much.

Doubling the strap in his hand, he let it slap lightly against her left cheek. Despite the fact that it wasn't at all hard, the leather still left a faint pink stain on her skin, and Abigail gasped. A slap to the other cheek resulted in a matching rose-pink marking and a soft sigh that could only be one of pleasure.

Tightening his grip on the leather, he smacked her again, a little harder this time, and she let out a startled, "ooooh!", dancing from one foot to the other.

His mouth quirked. "Too hard?" he asked.

Kayla shook her head and gripped the edge of the hay bale, waiting for strap to smack her again. This time, the leather licked the tender area right below the curve of her cheek, and she moaned as she felt herself getting wetter. Another spank followed, then another and another, until she was sure that her bottom was glowing with color.

Abruptly, the spanking stopped, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Cord undoing the buttons on his pants. With a seductive little giggle, she pushed herself upright and dashed past him toward the barn door. Behind her, she heard Cord's deep-throated chuckle as he ran after her.

Exhilarated from the spanking she'd just received, Kayla picked up her skirts and hurried up to the house. She had just pushed open the door and stepped inside when she felt strong arms wrap around her waist from behind. She laughed delightedly as Cord spun her around in his arms and kissed her. Then with a groan, he swung her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing

and carried her upstairs to their room.

Setting her down on her feet beside the bed, Cord took a moment to study his bride. With her face flushed, her eyes bright, and her lips full from his kisses, she was even more lovely, he thought.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you look in this dress?” he asked, his voice husky.

She smiled. “Yes, but I like hearing you say it anyway.”

He grinned. “And did I also tell you that from the moment I saw you in it that I couldn’t wait to take it off you?”

She blushed, but said nothing, not trusting herself to speak.

“Turn around,” he commanded softly.

Kayla did as he bid, and a moment later, she felt him undoing the tiny buttons on the back of her dress. He gently pushed the dress off her shoulders and down her arms, then over her hips until it was an embroidered pool of fabric at her feet. Clad only in her chemise and petticoat, she turned to face him.

She held her breath, waiting for Cord to undo the laces of her chemise, and was surprised when he reached up to take the pins from her hair instead. The glossy tresses fell to her waist in thick waves, and as they cascaded down her back, he slid his hands in her hair and covered her mouth with his own.

She lifted her arms and hooked them around his neck, melting against him, and she was breathless when he finally lifted his head. He did reach for the laces on her chemise then, and she was surprised to see that his hands were trembling a little. With the laces undone, he gently pushed the material off her shoulders, and then caught his breath as he gazed down at her bare breasts.

“You’re so beautiful,” he told her hoarsely, carefully cupping each rounded sphere in both of his hands.

Kayla gasped as he brushed one turgid peak with his thumb, only to let out a soft moan when he bent his head to take the other nipple in his mouth. Clutching his shoulders, she arched her back, offering herself to him. Happy to oblige, Cord swirled his tongue around her nipple, all the while gently massaging her other breast with his hand. She moaned again.

“Cord,” she breathed, when he lifted his head to gaze down at her a few moments later. “I never imagined that making love would feel this good.”

He gave her a throaty chuckle, his eyes dancing. “And that’s just the beginning, sweetheart.”

And it was.

As he spoke, he undid the button on the back of her petticoat. It fell to the floor on top of her dress, leaving her completely naked.

Kayla felt herself blush right down to her toes under his heated gaze, and she would have looked away had Cord not lifted her chin when she tried to do so. Then, holding her gaze with his own, he slowly began to undress.

She watched, almost breathless with anticipation, as he first loosened the tie around his neck, and then undid the buttons of his shirt. The material parted to reveal tanned skin and a muscular torso, and even though Kayla had seen Cord without his shirt before, the sight of his bare chest had no less of an effect on her, and she caught her breath. She wanted to reach out and touch him, but knew she could never be so bold, and so instead, she watched, transfixed, as his hands went to his belt.

She wet her lips, unaware how arousing the unconscious gesture was, and then caught her breath as he pushed down his trousers to reveal his manhood. She had never seen a naked man before, especially one so well built, and she stared at his hard length in fascination.

Suddenly realizing that she was openly staring at him, she blushed and looked away, but before she could even think what to do next, Cord swept her up in his arms and kissed her. Bare skin touched bare skin from head to toe, but all she could seem to concentrate on was his hard length as it pressed insistently against her hip.

Then Cord was gently lowering her to the bed, and she couldn't think about anything at all, except how good it all felt.

Cord trailed kisses down her neck and over her breasts, paying special attention to her hardened nipples before moving lower. Kayla moaned with pleasure as his mouth found that secret place between her thighs, and then moaned again when she felt his tongue gently dip into her folds and swirl around the sensitive nub he found there.

"Cord..." she breathed, her fingers threading into his hair as pleasure coursed through her.

But what he was doing felt almost too good, she thought. So much so that she wasn't sure if she could take it, and her fingers tightened in his hair. But then she felt the most glorious tingling feeling down there, and suddenly stopping him was the furthest thing from her mind. A pleasure so intense consumed her then that she literally felt dizzy from it, and she cried out.

Cord kept his mouth on her for a moment more before he lifted his head, and when he did it was to find his beautiful bride looking at him with complete and utter wonder in her eyes.

Not able to wait any longer, Cord settled himself between her thighs. Supporting himself with one outstretched arm, he reached down with his free hand to touch her, and almost groaned when he found her silken folds slick with wetness.

Using his hand, he guided himself to the opening of her pussy and rested the head of his hard cock there. It took every ounce of control he had not to thrust

himself deep inside her with one swift motion, but knowing that she had never been with a man before, he was determined to make her first time as painless and as pleasurable as possible.

With that in mind, he began to slowly slide inside, and saw her eyes widen in surprise. She felt so hot and wet and tight around his cock that it took everything in him not to give in to the urge and thrust the rest of the way into her pussy. But somehow, he managed to maintain control, and was rewarded with a moan from Abigail. The sound was nearly enough to send him over the edge right then, and he had to stop and take a deep breath before moving inside her.

Cord's thrusts inside her were slow at first, and Kayla found herself matching his rhythm with her own. She clutched at his shoulders, wanting to pull him closer. He complied, carefully lowering himself on top of her, and she was amazed at how perfect their bodies fit together.

Then Cord's mouth was on hers, and she could no longer think at all. His thrusts were coming faster and harder now, and as they increased, so did her pleasure until she was moaning beneath his kisses and clutching his shoulders. And then, when she thought that the feelings could not get any more intense, they did just that. The rush of sensations coursing through her body threatened to overwhelm her. The only thing keeping her tied to the here and now was the feel of Cord's hard muscles, and the groans that he was making. She felt a deep sense of satisfaction that she was bringing him as much pleasure as he was bringing her.

After, as Kayla lay with her husband's arm protectively wrapped around her, and her head pillowed on his muscular chest, she gazed at Cord's wedding ring on her finger and a smile curved her lips as she fell asleep.

For Kayla, the next two weeks flew by. Even though Cord wasn't going on the upcoming cattle drive down to Kansas City, there was still a lot to do in preparation for it, so he was busy most days. On top of that, there seemed to be more problems with Dalton Jeffries. Cord never said anything to her, but

she knew that more fences had been cut, and that some of the cattle had even been shot. She knew that he was really tense about it, and that he and the ranch hands spent a lot of time patrolling the property. However, even with all this, he still managed to find time in his busy schedule, to spend with her, either finishing up early in the evenings whenever he could, or stealing away with her for a midday ride and a picnic lunch.

They made love at least once a day, sometimes more than once. In their bedroom, on the floor in front of the fireplace, out under the shade of a big tree on a picnic blanket, even in one of the stalls in the barn. Sometimes, as a prelude to their lovemaking, he'd even give her a playful spanking, which only made their joining even more incredible. And each time, Kayla felt herself falling more and more in love with Cord.

Since Cord didn't want her riding alone, Kayla spent most of her free time sketching. Taking Cord's suggestion, she had asked Rachel if she would consider selling some of the dresses in the general store on a consignment basis, and the other girl had loved the idea.

As for Cord, he was so happy to hear that she would finally be pursuing her dream that he bought her her own sewing machine. According to Rachel, it should be arriving any day now, and, eager to start making some of the clothes that she had been designing, Kayla couldn't wait for it to finally show up.

Which was why when a knock came on the front door one afternoon, she hurried to answer it thinking it must be Rachel.

It wasn't her blond-haired friend that stood on the doorstep, though, but a tall, slender man with dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses.

Kayla stared at her fiancé, William Delmont, speechless.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" he said. Behind the glasses, his grey eyes were cold, and his voice had a hard edge to it as he spoke.

She swallowed hard. "How...how did you find me?"

His mouth compressed into a thin line. "I received a telegram from a man named Dalton Jeffries," he replied. "It seems that he's a friend of this rancher you've been deceiving all these weeks, and was concerned for the man."

Her blood went cold at the mention of the name. She should have known, she thought bitterly. But how could he have possibly found out the truth?

"You look surprised," William observed, his tone mocking. "What? Did you really think you could pretend forever?" He continued before she could answer. "Not that it matters because I've come to take you home."

Her brow furrowed. "This is my home, William. I'm not leaving."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't be ridiculous! Of course you are," he insisted. "You have responsibilities, Kayla. And we are to be married, in case you've forgotten."

"I'm already married, William, so you've wasted your time coming here, I'm afraid," she said.

To her surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. "Your marriage to this rancher isn't even legal, much less binding, my dear," he told her scathingly. "You married him using a false name, remember? Abigail, something-or-other, wasn't it?"

She frowned. That couldn't be true, she told herself. She and Cord had made vows.

He must have seen her look of disbelief and recognized it for what it was because he laughed again, and there was no mistaking the derision in his voice when he spoke. "You really thought you were married, didn't you? I guess you're not as intelligent as I gave you credit for being." He shrugged.

“No matter. It’s lucky for you that I’m prepared to overlook everything you’ve done, Kayla, including sleeping with this rancher. When we get back to New York, we’ll simply tell anyone who asks that you were off visiting relatives or something, but that now you’ve returned to marry me.”

“I already told you,” she said between clenched teeth. “I’m not going back to New York.”

His brows drew together. “Oh, yes you are. Now, go upstairs and pack your things. There’s a stage that leaves Copper Creek this evening. If we hurry, we can be on it and out of this mud hole of a town in a matter of hours.”

Kayla couldn’t believe his persistence, or his audacity. She had to make William understand that she wasn’t going back to New York with him, and she had to do it quickly, she thought, before Cord came in and found him.

“Abigail?”

Kayla froze at the sound of Cord’s voice. This couldn’t be happening, she told herself. She had worked so hard to make sure that Cord never found out the truth, and now...

“Abigail, who is this man?” Cord asked.

Her heart pounding, she turned to Cord. He had come to stand beside her, and was looking at William warily.

“Well, Kayla?” William demanded. “Are you going to tell him or shall I?”

Cord’s brow furrowed in confusion at her name, and Kayla felt her mouth go dry. She nervously wet her lips, trying to think of what to say, but William spoke before she could do so.

“I’m William Delmont, her fiancé,” he said, straightening his waistcoat and leveling his gaze at Cord.

Cord stared at him in disbelief. "Her what?"

William gave him a smug look. "Her name isn't Abigail, and she isn't your mail-order bride," he said. "Her real name is Kayla Mathison and she ran away, thinking she could renege on her agreement to marry me."

"I never agreed to marry you!" she spat.

William gave her a cold look. "Well, that's neither here nor there, because your father agreed, and that's really all it takes," he told her, and straightened his waistcoat again. "But regardless, I've come to take you home."

Kayla took a protective step closer to Cord. "I told you, I'm not going."

Behind his glasses, his eyes narrowed, but before he could browbeat her with anything else, Cord interjected.

"She's made it clear that she doesn't want to go with you, Delmont, so I suggest you leave," he said coldly.

This time, it was William's turn to stare in disbelief. But he recovered quickly. Lifting his chin, he glared at Kayla. "You're coming with me, if I have to drag you out of here," he said.

As he spoke, William made as if to grab her arm, but Cord moved quicker, shoving the other man back with a hand on his chest.

"She's not going anywhere with you, and if you touch her again, I'll kill you," he told William curtly. "Leave. Now."

For a moment, William simply stared at Cord. "Are you insane?" he asked incredulously. "Didn't you hear a single word I said? She's lied to you from the beginning, and you're not even legally married because of it. I know that you're just a cowpoke, and obviously slow on the uptake, but I would think

that even you could figure this one out.” He drew himself up. “Now, step aside. This woman belongs to me, and I’m taking her with me.”

He made a move to step forward again, but stopped when Cord pulled his pistol halfway out of its holster.

“You’re not from around here, so I’m sure you don’t realize that I could shoot you dead for what you just said, and no one out here would even bat an eye,” Cord told him. “So, leave now, or I’ll send you back to wherever you’re from in a box.”

William’s eyes widened for a moment, and then he looked at Kayla. “Fine,” he said stiffly. “Stay here and play at being his wife, Kayla, but when he throws you out – which he will - I’ll be waiting.”

With that, he smoothed his hair back, straightened his waistcoat yet again, and turned on his heel.

Kayla watched him go, his words ringing in her ears. The house was so silent that she could hear the sound of her own heart beating. Beside her, Cord stood tense and unmoving, and she stole a nervous glance at him.

“So, tell me, Kayla,” he said, his voice hard. “It is Kayla, isn’t it? Or did you give your fiancé a fake name, too?”

She flushed, but didn’t answer.

“Were you ever going to tell me the truth?” he demanded harshly. “Or were you going to let me think you were Abigail for the rest of my life?”

She shook her head, helplessly. “No, I...I tried to tell you, but...” her voice trailed off as tears stung her eyes.

Cord folded his arms across his broad chest and glared down at her. “But what? I’m waiting.”

A tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped at it with her hand. "I know that you're angry, and you have every right to be. But please just let me explain..."

"Why should I listen to anything you have to say when nothing but lies seem to come out of your mouth?" he scoffed.

She blinked in surprise. "That's not true!" she protested. How could he possibly think that she had lied about her love for him? "I lied to you, yes, but..."

"Forget it!" he snapped before she could finish. "I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth."

Turning on his heel, he walked into the kitchen, heading for the back door. For a moment, Kayla simply stared at his retreating form.

"Cord, wait," she pleaded. "Where are you going?"

But he didn't answer, choosing to ignore her instead, and by time she caught up to him, he was already out the door and heading toward the barn.

Kayla stood in the doorway, watching helplessly as he mounted his horse and galloped off. She couldn't have been more hurt if he had slapped her. She had known Cord would be angry when he finally learned the truth, but she had at least thought that he would listen to her.

Tears stung her eyes, and she let them roll down her cheeks unheeded. Perhaps he just needed to cool off, she thought. When he came back, he would be calmer, she told herself, and they would be able to talk things out.

Chapter Six

Kayla didn't know how long Cord had been gone. She supposed that it had only been about thirty minutes since he'd ridden off, but to her it felt like it had been days. She had wanted to ride out after him, but she knew that she would never be able to catch up to him, especially when she didn't even know where he was headed. So, instead she had sat at the table and sobbed.

She had thought that when Cord defended her to William that he had already forgiven her. Or at least been willing to listen to her side of the story. But then when he'd walked out without even giving her a chance to explain, she hadn't known what to think. She had hoped that their love would be enough.

An urgent knock sounded on the front door then, interrupting her reverie, and her brow furrowed as she wondered who it could be. She hesitated, half-afraid that it might be William coming back to browbeat her again now that Cord had left. But when the knocking came again, more frantically this time, she knew that she couldn't very well ignore it, regardless of who the caller was.

Getting to her feet, she went into the foyer to open the door. Rachel stood there, her cheeks flushed with color.

"Kayla, thank God," the other girl exclaimed, rushing past her. "Your fiancé is here, in Copper Creek. Dalton's bragging all over town, telling everyone that he knew you were lying about being Cord's mail-order bride, saying that he tracked down your fiancé, and that..." her voice trailed off as she finally noticed Kayla's tear-streaked face. "He was already here, wasn't he?"

Kayla nodded miserably. "It was terrible. Cord was furious that I'd been lying to him," she said quietly. "We had a big fight, and he left. He wouldn't even let me explain. He just walked out." She shook her head. "I don't even know where he went."

Rachel made an exasperated sound. "He went where all men go when they have a burr up their behind. He went to the saloon to get drunk."

Why hadn't she thought of that? Kayla wondered, and then felt her mouth go dry as another thought suddenly occurred to her. "If he runs into Dalton, there's no telling what he'll do." She grabbed her reticule from the small table in the foyer and started for the door. "I have to go to the saloon."

"I'll go with you," Rachel announced, hurrying after her.

A few minutes later, they were heading for town in Rachel's cart. Kayla fidgeted nervously in her seat, her mind imagining all sorts of things. What if Cord had already run into Dalton at the saloon? A fight between the two men was a foregone conclusion, which would only result in Cord getting thrown into jail, or worse, she thought, remembering how the men out west seemed to have a penchant for solving disputes with a pistol. She shuddered at that thought.

By the time she and Rachel got to town, Kayla was a bundle of nerves, and she almost leaped out of the wagon in her haste to get to Cord. She hurried into the saloon with Rachel at her heels, but when she got there, she was dismayed to find that Cord wasn't among the evening's crowd. Had he already been there and gone back to the ranch? she wondered. Or had Rachel been wrong about Cord going to the saloon in the first place?

Determined to find out, she went over to the bar. The bartender, a stocky man with graying hair, was cleaning some shot glasses, and he looked up at her approach. He didn't look surprised to see her, Kayla thought.

"I'm looking for Cord," she said. "Was he here tonight?"

The bartender regarded her in silence for a moment, but then nodded. "He was here," the man said. "He was pretty upset, too, but he didn't want to talk about what was eating him, so I let him be. Dalton Jeffries came over to talk to him about selling his ranch, though, and I'm pretty sure Cord sold it to him."

Kayla stared at the man, sure she hadn't heard correctly. "That can't be," she said quietly, almost as if she were talking to herself. "Cord loves that ranch; he would never sell it."

The bartender shrugged. "Only telling you what I heard." He gestured toward one of the tables with a jerk of his head. "Dalton's still here if you want to ask him yourself."

Kayla turned to see Dalton Jeffries sitting at a nearby table. He was playing cards with some men, but if he noticed her and Rachel standing at the bar, he gave no indication. Anger gripped Kayla as she stared at the man who was at the bottom of this whole thing. Clutching her reticule tightly in her hands, she took a step toward his table only to feel Rachel grip her arm.

"What are you doing?" the other girl demanded softly.

Kayla's gaze never wavered from Dalton. "I'm taking the bartender's advice," she said simply. "I'm going to talk to your brother."

Rachel sighed, but didn't try to stop her, deciding to follow Kayla over to Dalton Jeffries' table instead, and Kayla was glad for her friend's support.

Dalton looked up as they neared the table, and he gave Kayla a mocking grin. "Why, Miss Mathison," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I'd like to say this is a surprise, but it isn't, really, especially not in light of the evening's events."

Kayla wanted to slap that smug look off his arrogant face, but settled for giving him a contemptuous look instead. "The bartender said that he overheard Cord agree to sell you his ranch," she said, her voice dripping with disdain. "You must be so pleased with yourself."

Dalton's grin widened. "Quite," he replied. "Holderness sold it to me not an hour ago. Seems he was fed up with his whole life out here, decided to head somewhere else and start over."

The thought that Cord would not only sell the ranch without even a word to her, but would decide to leave town was so shocking that she almost felt her knees go weak. She was sure that Dalton had been the one to suggest that Cord start over somewhere else, but she bore a lot of the blame, too. She wasn't sure how long she stood there, but she realized that everyone was staring at her. Her chest hurt and her mind was a total blank. It seemed that for the first time in her life, she had no idea what to do. Tears welled in her eyes and she blinked them back. Swallowing hard, she turned to Rachel.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she asked her friend.

Dalton spoke before Rachel could answer. "Why not sit and play a few hands?" he suggested, gesturing to the deck of cards in front of him. "Unlike Holderness, I don't see anything wrong with a woman playing cards. And I'm sure the other men would enjoy your company as much as I would."

Kayla's first instinct was to tell Dalton Jeffries to go to hell, but then another instinct took over – revenge. She may have destroyed everything with Cord - and there was probably nothing she could do about that - but she could do something about Dalton Jeffries. She would play cards with him, and win every penny she could. What money she could win from him probably wouldn't amount to much, but her winning it would take him down a peg or two, at least in her own mind.

"As a matter of fact, I think I will," she said, giving him a fake smile.

Beside her, Rachel's brow furrowed. "Kayla..."

"I know what I'm doing," she said in an aside to her friend. Ignoring Rachel's look of surprise, she pulled out the chair across from Dalton and sat down. She smiled and nodded to the other men at the table, who seemed to be uneasy with the direction their game had suddenly taken. Opening her reticule, she took out the money she'd won from the other poker game she had played and set it on the table in front of her. Along with the money that

Abigail Murray had given her, it should be enough to start with.

With a grin, Dalton picked up the deck of cards and began deal. He probably thought that he had her right where he wanted her, Kayla thought, as she picked up her cards. She could almost see the greed on his face. He thought that if he were charming he would end up getting her just like he had Cord's ranch. But he would be surprised to discover that his charm had no effect on her. And he would be even more surprised when he found out that she was a better poker player than he was.

Unlike when she had played poker at the saloon before, Kayla didn't waste time drawing Dalton in by pretending that she knew little about the game. She was all business this time, and her aggressiveness immediately put Dalton off balance. She challenged him every time he thought he had a good hand, ignoring his banter and forcing him to meet her raises just to stay in the game. She bluffed a few times, but most of the time, the cards just fell right for her, and she began to take the majority of the hands. She also noticed that the other two men at the table were playing into her hand more often than not, never raising unless she did. They were losing some money, too, but they just seemed to like watching Dalton lose even more. She didn't win every hand, of course, but she won more than Dalton did, and after a few hands, her stack of money had more than doubled while his had started to dwindle.

He tried to laugh and make light of it as he reached into his wallet for more money, but no one else at the table was laughing, and she could see that Dalton was becoming uncomfortable. Good, she thought. That was just the way she wanted it. She didn't just want to beat him; she wanted to embarrass him, and a few more good hands would do just that.

Cord stood in the front of the shelves at the general store, staring into space. He felt like he'd been punched in the gut, and the whiskey he'd had to drink at the saloon earlier had done nothing to wash away the pain and confusion he was feeling. The realization of what Abigail – Kayla, he corrected himself harshly – had done to him just wouldn't go away. He had finally given his heart to someone only to find out it had all been a lie.

He still couldn't believe that she had been lying to him the whole time. But he should have realized it, he told himself. There had been something off about her ever since she had gotten to Copper Creek. He was surprised he hadn't seen it. Then again, perhaps he hadn't wanted to, he admitted. He'd been so enthralled with her from the very beginning that he wouldn't have believed the truth if someone had told him. Hell, at first, he hadn't even believed it when the bastard claiming to be her fiancé had told him. Until he had seen the look on her face.

Maybe he should have stayed and listened to her explanation, whatever that was, but he couldn't. It had just been too much to deal with. If it were just Kayla lying, it would be one thing, but the past twenty-four hours had been more than any man should have to take. The corral holding his cattle in preparation for the drive to Kansas City had been sabotaged sometime last night. Now the whole herd - that had taken weeks to gather up - was scattered to the four winds. It would have taken weeks to get them all back together, and that would have put him late getting into Kansas City. He would have lost hundreds of dollars. Then, on top of that, someone had set fire to one of the feed barns on the northern part of the ranch earlier that day. Finding out that his wife wasn't the mail-order bride he had paid for was the last straw. Which was why he supposed he had sold his ranch when Dalton Jeffries had approached him in the saloon. It didn't matter that Jeffries had been behind the corral fences being cut, or the fire at the feed barn, Cord had had enough. And Jeffries had paid him good money, good enough for him to get a new start away from all this pain and frustration. Maybe San Francisco...

"Cord, thank God you're here!"

Cord turned at the sound of Rachel's voice to see her hurrying into the general store. She must have been running because she stopped to take a breath before continuing. "Kayla is at the saloon playing cards with Dalton," she rushed on. "She's going to get herself into trouble. You have to go stop her."

Cord felt his stomach knot. His first impulse was to go down to the saloon, drag her out of there, and put her over his knee for disobeying him again, but then he remembered that she was no longer his wife. He clenched his jaw and returned his attention to what he'd been doing. "She and Jeffries are welcome to each other."

Rachel stared at him in consternation. "You don't mean that!"

He shrugged in an effort to appear nonchalant. "She's not my wife, so what she does no longer concerns me."

Crossing the room to where he stood, Rachel grabbed his arm and turned him to face her. "Cord, didn't you hear me? I know that you're feeling hurt, but you have to get over it and stop feeling sorry for yourself. Kayla is in trouble, and if you don't stop this, it's going to turn ugly."

Cord's hand tightened on the can he was holding, but he didn't say anything. The thought of Kayla even being in the same room with Dalton Jeffries was enough to make his blood boil. That she would be foolish enough to play poker with the man... But things were over between them, and if he went to the saloon and made a scene, it would only confuse the issue, and make it even harder for him to walk away.

Rachel shook her head. "I can't believe that you're being like this," she said. "So, she lied to you about what her name was, Cord, but everything else that passed between you two was the truth. She loves you, and you love the person she is, not the person that wrote those letters to you. In the end, that's all that matters, even if you're too darn mule headed to admit it."

Cord ground his jaw. As much as he might want to deny it, Rachel was right. He did still love Kayla, and he knew he couldn't just leave her to contend with Dalton Jeffries on her own. Swearing under his breath, he thumped the can he'd been holding back down on the shelf and walked out of the general store.

Kayla gazed down at the cards in her hands and carefully schooled her expression. It was the best hand she had had since she'd sat down to play, but she didn't want Dalton Jeffries to know that. Not that he was paying attention to her. Across from her, he frowned briefly at the cards in his hand before his expression once more became unreadable.

He had seemed surprised that she could play poker so well, and told her as much. If the compliment had come from any other man, she would have been flattered, but his tone as he said it was mocking, and that only made besting him even more enjoyable.

Since she had such a good hand, Kayla decided it was time to make Dalton's humiliation complete, and when it came time to bet, she gave him a sweet smile and shoved the entire pile of money that had been sitting in front of her into the center of the table. The crowd of men that had gathered around the table to watch the game began to mutter among themselves, knowing that this was going to be a big hand.

If Dalton was surprised by her bet, he gave no notice of it. Instead he was staring intently at the money. His brow furrowed as his gaze shifted to contemplate the small stack of money in front of him.

"Well, it seems that I don't have enough with me to cover this," he said, looking at her. "But as everyone here knows, I'm good for it."

Kayla almost laughed at the absurdity of the idea, but before she could reply, one of the spectators spoke.

"We don't do things like that out here, Jeffries," the man said gruffly. "Never have, never will. If you wanna bet, you put something in writing for the lady."

Dalton's mouth tightened, but he couldn't very well dispute the man's words, not when everyone else was nodding in agreement. "How about an IOU for the remaining amount, then? I'd say that I'm about a hundred and fifty dollars short," he said to Kayla. "Is that about right?"

She almost smiled. A hundred and fifty more of his dollars would certainly be right, but before she could answer, another thought came to her. A way to get even better revenge on him. "I'm not really interested in any more of your money; I already have plenty of that. Why not put up the deed to Cord's ranch instead?" she asked, her lips curving into a smile.

For a moment, Dalton just stared at her, and then he burst out laughing. "You must be joking," he said. "Cord's ranch is worth a hundred times more than that."

Kayla's hand tightened ever so slightly on her cards. He was right, of course, but she had been hoping that he had become so flustered that he wouldn't quibble over the details. The thought of getting Cord's ranch back had been a spur of the moment idea, but now that she looked at it from Dalton's point of view, she couldn't imagine why he would make the bet. She was just about to agree to the IOU for a hundred and fifty when he spoke.

"I might consider putting up the ranch if you would be willing to put up something else of equal value on your part," he said smoothly.

Something in the way he said the words made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. "Such as?" she asked.

He gave her an oily smile. "I'll put up Cord's ranch if you agree to spend the night in my bed."

Kayla felt her blood run cold. Her stomach churned just at the thought of Dalton Jeffries touching her; she couldn't imagine having sex with him. And yet, it would be a small price to pay for a chance to get back at Dalton. But what if she lost to him? What would Cord say? Then she decided that it probably didn't matter much anyway. Cord was likely already gone, she told herself miserably.

Taking a deep breath, she drew herself up and forced herself to say the

words that would seal the deal. "Very well."

Dalton chuckled. "Hear that, boys?" he said, raising his voice so that the entire saloon could hear. "If the beautiful Miss Mathison wins, then I give up Cord's ranch. But if I win, she spends the night in my bed."

"Like hell she will!"

Kayla's pulse skipped a beat at the sound of Cord's voice, and she spun around in her chair to see him striding toward their table. Without a word, he took her arm and hauled her out of her seat, then proceeded to drag her across the room to an open space on the floor. Still startled by his presence, she went without protest.

"Are you out of your mind?" Cord demanded, glowering down at her. "I should put you over my knee right here for this little stunt. What the hell are you doing?"

She blushed, glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone had heard the words, but then she realized that Cord had spoken too softly for his voice to carry. She said nothing for a moment, but simply gazed up at him, unable to believe that he was really there. But the strong hands on her shoulders were very real, as was the fierce look Cord was giving her.

Realizing that he was waiting for an answer, she lifted her chin and met that look with one of her own. "I'm getting your ranch back," she told him matter-of-factly.

His jaw clenched. "If you win," he ground out. "If you lose, Jeffries expects you to spend the night with him, and I'll be damned if I'll let you do that."

Kayla caught her breath at the vehemence in his voice. Did she dare let herself hope? she wondered. Could it be possible that Cord still cared for her after all she'd done?

Before she could speak, Dalton Jeffries voice came from across the room. "She already made the bet, Holderness," he said. "She has to honor it."

Kayla felt Cord stiffen, and fear rippled through her. Reaching up, she gently laid her hand against his chest. "Dalton's been losing steadily all evening, Cord," she said softly. "I can beat him."

"Well, I'm not about to take that chance," Cord said. Taking her hand, he led her back to the table and glared down at Dalton Jeffries. "You want something put up that's of equal value to the ranch," he told the other man, "then play for this." As he spoke, he took out a stack of money and tossed it onto the center of the table. "That's what you paid me for the property."

Kayla stared at the money in disbelief. If Dalton won, then Cord would have no ranch and no money to start over anywhere else. If she had any doubt that he still cared for her, it disappeared in that moment.

Seated at the table, Dalton Jeffries seemed to be considering this new bet, and she held her breath. After a moment, he nodded. "All right," he said after a moment, and then looked at her. "Well, what do have?"

The same man who had prompted Dalton to write the IOU before slammed his hand down on the table. "Hold on there folks," he said. "Before anybody goes turning cards over, we need this all done up in writing. I don't want anybody welching on any bets in my saloon."

Paper and pens were brought out, and the bet was quickly written out, and then signed by Dalton, Kayla, and now, Cord.

"So, what do you have?" Dalton asked her again.

With hands that were suddenly trembling, Kayla slowly placed her cards face-up on the table, and waited. Dalton stared at the three kings and two aces in silence for a moment. Then, with a foul expletive, he threw down his cards and pushed back his chair. With an angry glare at her and Cord, he pushed

through the crowd and strode over to the bar. Snickers and laughter followed him, along with congratulations for her and Cord.

Someone reached out and turned over Dalton's cards. Kayla almost got dizzy when she saw what he had been playing. Three queens and two aces. That was almost too close, she thought, sitting down and watching as Cord gathered up the money and IOU from the table. When he turned to her, she simply gazed up at him mutely.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand. "Let's go home. We have a lot of talking to do."

Home. Just that word made her feel warm all over and forget the second part of the sentence. When Cord took her hand, she went with him willingly, only to hesitate once they reached his horse.

"Cord..." she began, but he gently placed his finger to her lips.

"We'll talk when we get back to the ranch," was all he said.

Lifting her onto the horse, Cord swung up behind her and took up the reins. They rode in silence and she rested her head against his chest, content simply to be in his arms.

Back at the ranch, Cord helped her down from the saddle, and then told her to wait for him inside while he saw to his horse. Once in the house, she went straight up to their bedroom, and then waited anxiously for him to join her. He no longer seemed angry with her, she thought. Surely, that was a good sign.

A short while later, she heard the sound of his booted feet on the stairs, and she turned as he stepped into the room and closed the door. Looking at him, everything she had been practicing to say fled her mind, and she nervously smoothed her skirts.

"Cord, I..." she swallowed hard. "I wanted to tell you the truth. I even tried that

day we went on the picnic, and then again on the day of our wedding, but I was afraid.”

He folded his arms and regarded her in silence for a moment. “Go on.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “I met Abigail on the stage coming out here,” she continued. “She told me that she was a mail-order bride, but that she was having second thoughts about marrying you. She said that though you sounded wonderful in your letters, she missed her family and her life back in Boston too much to go through with the marriage.”

His jaw tightened. “And you thought that you’d just conveniently take her place.”

She quickly shook her head. “No,” she said, and then hastily added, “At least not in the beginning.” She saw his eyes narrow, and she took a deep breath. “Since she knew that I would be going through Copper Creek, Abigail asked me if I would tell you that she had changed her mind. I agreed, and I fully intended to tell you when I got off the stage, but then you naturally thought I was Abigail. I couldn’t tell you with the entire town watching, so I let you think that I was Abigail, figuring that I would tell you when we got to your ranch. But you really seemed like a nice man, and I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Besides, I barely had a penny to my name, so I thought that I could hang around here and come up with a few dollars before heading on to San Francisco. So, pretending to be your mail-order bride just seemed easier than telling you the truth.”

He held up his hand. “Hold on a minute,” he said. “San Francisco? Why were you heading to San Francisco?”

She shrugged. “To open a dress shop.”

He frowned. “Does being totally broke and your plan for a dress shop have anything to do with you trying to get into the lock box under the bed?”

She hesitated, wondering if she should hide the part about planning to steal from him, but then decided that there had been too much lying already. "I thought I could get it by playing poker at the saloon. But I had also planned to get into that box under the bed to see if you had any money I could take." His mouth tightened, but she hurried on before he could say anything. "But that was before I fell in love with you. At some point, my dreams of going to San Francisco changed, and all I wanted to do was live here with you on the ranch. I should have told you the truth about everything, but I was too scared to take the chance. Rachel said that I should tell you, but..."

His eyes widened. "Rachel knew about this?"

Kayla nodded. "Yes, but I begged her not to say anything," she told him. "I really did want to tell you, Cord, but I thought that if you learned the truth you wouldn't want anything more to do with me."

He frowned again. "Even after I told you that I'd fallen in love with you?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head. Taking a step closer to him, she looked up at him with imploring green eyes. "After you said that, it became even more important that I not mess everything up. Please say that you can forgive me, Cord," she begged. "Please."

Lifting a hand, he gently tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "I do forgive you, Kayla," he said, bending his head to kiss her gently on the lips. "And I probably should have let you explain your side of the story instead of walking out on you. But that still doesn't excuse the fact that you lied to me."

She lowered her gaze. "I know, and I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

Cord lifted her chin to gaze down at her. "Even so, you should be punished for lying to me, don't you think?"

She blinked, her pulse suddenly racing. "Punished?" she said softly.

He maintained a serious expression. "Indeed," he said, his own voice equally soft. "A long, hard spanking should do it, I think. Bring me your hairbrush, Kayla."

She obeyed without a word, walking across the room to retrieve the brush from the vanity table. When she turned back around, she saw that Cord had taken the straight-backed chair from beneath the desk, and placed it in the center of the room, where he now sat waiting for her. She had already begun to get that tingling sensation between her legs, and he hadn't even started spanking her yet.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly walked over to stand beside the chair and wordlessly handed him the wooden hairbrush. She watched as his hand closed around the brush's handle, waiting in breathless anticipation for him to pull her across his knee. But he didn't. Instead he gazed up at her.

"You know that you deserve a spanking for what you did, don't you, Kayla?" he asked softly.

Just hearing him say the word was enough to arouse her, and she felt herself blush. Mutely, she nodded.

"Then ask me nicely," he commanded.

Her color deepened. It wouldn't be the first time she had "asked" for a spanking, but just the first time she had done so with words, and her voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke.

"Please spank me," she said looking at him from beneath lowered lashes.

Cord felt himself go hard at the words. He should have done this instead of walking out on her earlier, he thought as he gently guided her across his lap. Reaching down, he lifted her skirt and petticoat very slowly, and was just deciding whether to give her a warm-up over her pantaloons or whether to pull them down and start right in on her bare cheeks when frantic shouts

could be heard from outside.

From her position draped over Cord's knee, Kayla tensed and lifted her head. "What was that?" she asked, craning her neck to look over her shoulder at him.

He helped her to stand. "I'll go check it out," he said, handing her the hairbrush. "Stay here."

Kayla watched him go, and chewed on her lower lip as shouts came again. Hurrying to the window to see what the shouting was all about, she was shocked to see flames rising up from the barn.

Despite Cord's warning, she ran from the room and headed for the steps. With the barn on fire, the horses were in danger, and she was not about to wait inside the house when she could be helping lead the animals to safety.

Outside, however, it was mayhem as Cord and the ranch hands tried to save the horses while at the same time trying to put out the blaze. Not only that, but she could have sworn that she heard gunshots coming from behind the barn. She stood for a moment, looking frantically for Cord in the darkness, and she spotted him highlighted by the flames coming from the barn. She was about to go help him when a man on horseback galloped from around the back of the barn. At first, she thought the man was one of the ranch hands, and was shocked when she saw him aiming a pistol at Cord.

"Cord, behind you!" she shouted.

She didn't know how Cord managed to hear her over the confusion, but he turned in time to pull his own gun and fire several times at the man. The stranger slid slowly from the saddle as the horse kept on running past Cord.

Kayla almost stopped breathing; she had never seen a man get shot before. She couldn't stop staring at him, but when she lifted her gaze, she saw Cord running toward her, his face darkened with a mixture of anger and concern.

She knew she was going to be in trouble for disobeying him again, but before Cord could reach her, someone shouted his name, and he turned back to the barn.

Kayla would have gone to him when all of a sudden, the sound of hoof beats came pounding from behind her. She turned, but barely had time to glimpse the horse and rider bearing down on her before a strong arm scooped her off the ground and threw her face down over the saddle.

She gasped as she recognized Dalton Jeffries, and would have raised her fists to strike him if she could have reached him, but the pressure of his hand on her back kept her in place.

“Let me go!” she shouted. She pushed against the horse, to no avail. “Cord!” she yelled. “Cord, help me!”

At her cry, Cord turned, and she could see the shock on his face when he realized what was happening. She was so focused on Cord running toward her that she didn’t understand why he suddenly stopped until she heard the sound of a pistol going off over her head.

Cord’s hand flew to his head, and she could see blood beginning to flow before he dropped to the ground, motionless.

Kayla screamed, fighting to free herself from Dalton, but the man only tightened his hold on her as he screamed at the other men attacking the ranch to finish up and follow him. With the sound of gunfire increasing, Dalton turned his horse around and kicked the animal into a gallop. From her position draped over the horse, Kayla could only stare through the tears in her eyes as Cord’s still form receded behind them.

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Kayla and the Rancher

Chapter Seven

By Paige Tyler

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Kayla stared out the cabin's small, dirty window, unseeing. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. Cord was dead. Dalton Jeffries had killed him. And then ridden off with her, bringing her to this small cabin, where he had dragged her inside and tied her to a chair. That had been last night, and she hadn't seen him since.

She still couldn't believe that Cord was really gone. She had spent the night trying to convince herself that everything that had happened had just been a bad dream. In the morning, she had told herself, she would wake up beside Cord. She would feel his arms go around her, feel his well-muscled body press up against hers as he made love to her, feel his mouth linger sweetly on hers before he left to go work out on the ranch.

But she didn't wake up beside Cord that morning, and she never would again, thanks to that bastard, Dalton Jeffries. Her eyes welled with fresh tears.

She supposed that she had been foolish to think that Dalton would simply give up on his plan to get Cord's ranch. If anything, the fact that she and Cord had won it back from him in a poker game had probably only provoked him into doing something more violent.

But surely, he couldn't expect to get away with murdering Cord. The hands had to have seen Dalton's face, knew he was the one that had shot Cord and grabbed her. The sheriff must have men out looking for them, she thought. But then she remembered what Cord had said about the sheriff being in

Dalton's pocket, and any hope of him being arrested quickly evaporated.

If she wanted to make sure that Dalton Jeffries paid for what he had done, then she would have to see to it herself. But how?

Kayla looked around the cabin. It was small with only two rooms - the main room where she sat tied to a chair, and a tiny bedroom in the back. The dirt-smudged window let in little light, but she was able to make out a wood stove in one corner. Next to it, a metal fire poker stood resting against the wall. Her gaze locked on it, and an insane idea suddenly flooded her mind.

She could hide behind the door, poker in hand, she thought, and then when Dalton Jeffries came in she could hit him with it. But she couldn't do anything unless she got herself untied. Looking down at her wrists, she gave her bonds an experimental tug. The ropes had been tied tightly, she saw, and getting loose would take some work. But she would do it; she owed Cord that much.

Chewing on her lower lip, she threw a quick glance at the door, and was just about to set to work at trying to wiggle free when she heard Dalton Jeffries' voice from outside the cabin.

Kayla's mouth went dry and she gripped the arms of the chair, her heart hammering in her chest as she stared at the door. Tied to the chair like she was, she could do no more than wait for him to come in.

In the bright sunshine that came streaming through the door when it opened, Dalton Jeffries' frame was nothing but a silhouette in the doorway for a moment before he stepped into the cabin and closed the door behind him. He looked even more arrogant and self-assured than he had when she'd seen him before, if that were possible.

Coming to stand in front of where she sat, he folded his arms across his chest and grinned down at her. "I trust you weren't too uncomfortable here. I meant to come back sooner, but there were things that needed my attention."

She glared up at him contemptuously. "Oh, yes. I'm sure that attacking poor defenseless ranchers and their families takes a lot of hard work."

His lip curled. "Don't act so self-righteous," he sneered. "If you hadn't come into the saloon and cheated me out of what was rightfully mine, then none of this would have been necessary. Holderness would be alive now if you had just left well enough alone."

At his words, Kayla opened her mouth to retort, but tears suddenly clogged her throat and she could only swallow hard instead. In front of her, Dalton just chuckled.

"What...what are you going to do with me?" she finally asked.

He shrugged. "That all depends on you," he told her. "If you play your card right, then I might keep you around. You wanted to marry somebody; why not me?"

She stared at him in disbelief. "You must be out of your mind. I would never marry you!" she spat.

He smirked. "Why not? Cord certainly isn't around anymore. And besides, I'm sure I'm a better fit for you than Cord ever was."

The thought of marrying Dalton turned her stomach. "Your former wife didn't seem to think so," she retorted, well aware that she was provoking him, and not caring if she did.

His face darkened. "What do you know about Hannah?"

Kayla met his gaze unflinchingly. "I know that she preferred Cord to you, and that you beat her because of it," she said. "I also know that she killed herself trying to get away from you."

"That's a lie!" he roared, lifting his hand to slap her hard across the face.

The blow snapped her head to the side, and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out as stinging pain covered her entire cheek. Fighting back tears, she glared up at him.

“You’re not even half the man Cord was,” she sneered.

He stiffened, and she braced herself, thinking that he was going to hit her again. But instead, he reached out and, gripping a handful of her hair, cruelly jerked her head back. Pain so intense ripped through her scalp that she couldn’t stifle her cry of protest.

“Whether you marry me or not makes no difference to me, you little bitch,” he growled. “But I’m going to take what I want from you anyway.”

Fear gripped Kayla, but whatever Dalton would have done next would remain a mystery because just then someone pounded on the cabin’s door.

Dalton swore under his breath. “I’m busy!” he yelled over his shoulder.

“I gotta talk to you, Boss,” a voice said. “It’s important.”

Dalton hesitated, his hand tightening in her hair for a moment before he released her. “We’ll finish this later,” he told her.

She sat there trembling, watching as he turned on his heel and stormed from the cabin. There was no doubt in her mind that Dalton would have raped her. If they hadn’t been interrupted...

She had to get loose before he came back, she thought frantically, pulling desperately at the ropes that held her to the chair.

Outside, Dalton was talking to the man that had knocked on the door. “What the hell is so important that you had to drag me out here?” he demanded angrily, his voice so loud that she had no trouble hearing their words through

the partially closed door.

“It’s Cord Holderness,” the other man said. “He ain’t dead.”

Kayla halted her frenzied jerking on the ropes, her brow furrowing. Could she possibly have heard right?

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dalton was saying. “I shot him myself.”

There was a grunt from the other man. “I know, Boss, but I saw him in town, I tell you.”

Kayla felt her heart begin to race. She could hardly believe it! Cord was alive!

Outside, Dalton let out a foul expletive, and she held her breath, waiting for him to barge into the cabin again. But to her surprise, the voices outside receded. She wondered if perhaps Dalton had left, but after listening carefully, she realized that she could still hear his voice among the other mens.

She regarded the ropes around her wrists with renewed purpose. No longer was making Dalton pay for what he had done important to her. What was important now was escaping from Dalton so that she could get to Cord. But she would have to work fast, she realized. Dalton could come back at any time.

With thoughts of Cord in her mind, she determinedly went to work on freeing herself.

Cord had come to a few hours after he had gotten shot to find himself lying on a bed in the doctor’s office. His head had hurt like hell, and most of what had happened had been a blur at the time, but he’d remembered enough to know that Dalton Jeffries had attacked the ranch, tried to kill him, and then kidnapped Kayla.

He would have gone looking for her right then, but when he had tried to get

out of bed, his knees had buckled under him, and he probably would have fallen if Lucas hadn't been there to grab him. The bullet had just grazed his temple, but he still had a concussion, the doc had told him, which meant that there was no way he was going to be able to get out of bed. The doctor was obviously right, but that hadn't stopped him from trying anyway. He had agreed to rest only when Lucas had assured him that he would take several of the hands and go searching for Kayla, starting at Dalton's ranch first. He had demanded that Lucas drag that good-for-nothing sheriff out to the Jeffries' place with him, but had been dismayed when he learned the sheriff had been one of the men that had been raiding the ranch the night before. When Cord had asked how Lucas knew that, the foreman told him that the sheriff's body had been found among the dead and injured after Cord had been shot. Regardless, there would be no help from the law.

After his foreman had left, Cord had tried to fight sleep, but gave in to it almost immediately. He didn't awaken until well after sunrise, and then it was to learn that Lucas hadn't been able to find Kayla anywhere. Jeffries hadn't been at his ranch, the foreman had told him, and no one there seemed to know where he was.

Swearing under his breath, Cord grabbed his hat and lurched to his feet again. He still saw black spots and he felt like he was going to throw up any minute, but at least he could stand on his own two feet. He waved off the doctor's concerned expression and headed for the front door, Lucas following close at his heels.

"What are you planning to do?" the foreman asked as they stepped into the bright sunlight.

Cord's mouth tightened. "I'm going to talk to Rachel," he said, heading across the street. "Hopefully, she might know where her brother is."

The blond girl hurried over to him the moment he entered the general store, a worried look on her pretty face. "Have you found her, yet?"

Cord shook his head. “Have you any idea where Dalton could have taken her?”

Rachel shook her head. “I thought he would be at his ranch.”

“Are you sure there’s not somewhere else he might go?” Cord pressed. “Someplace that few people know about.”

She started to shake her head, but then her brow furrowed. “I might,” she said slowly. “There’s an old cabin on the north end of Dalton’s ranch. It was our father’s, but it’s been deserted for years. It’s the only place I can think of.” She swallowed hard. “You have to find her Cord. There’s no telling what my brother will do to her.”

Cord wished that she hadn’t said that, even though it was in the same thing he’d been thinking. His mouth tightened as he turned to Lucas. “Get some men and meet me up there.”

The other man frowned. “Jeffries won’t be alone, Cord. You should wait until we can ride out with you.”

Cord shook his head. “I’ve already waited long enough, dammit,” he said tersely as he headed for the front door. “Like Rachel said – there’s no telling what Jeffries will do. I may already be too late.”

Cord felt his stomach churn even as he said the words, and images of what Dalton Jeffries could be doing to Kayla even now came to mind unbidden, and he knew without a doubt that he would kill Jeffries if the man so much as touched her.

Kayla bit her lip to stifle a cry of pain as the rope bit into her tender skin as she struggled to work her wrist out from under it. Just a little bit more, she thought as she slowly wriggled her right hand beneath the ropes, and she would...have...it!

Yes!

Her fingers tingled as blood rushed back into her hand, and she couldn't help the small giggle of glee that escaped her lips as she went to work on the other wrist. That one was much easier to untie now that she could use her other hand, and she was free within seconds. Rubbing each of her wrists in turn, she got to her feet and looked around the small cabin. She had thought that the only way out of there would be the door, and she was relieved to find a shuttered window on the back wall of the bedroom. Ignoring the stiffness in her limbs, she walked around the chair and hurried over to it.

Prudence took over from that point, however, as she reminded herself that Dalton and his men could be anywhere outside the cabin. With that in mind, she slowly opened the shutter and carefully peered outside.

To her relief, no one seemed to be around. But that didn't mean that Dalton or his men weren't somewhere nearby, which meant that she still had to use caution.

Since the window was too high for her to climb out of easily, she first had to move an old crate in front of it so that she use it as a step. Gripping the window's edge, she awkwardly climbed through the opening to land in a heap on the thick grass outside the cabin.

Unable to believe that she had actually made it this far, she stood for a moment, expecting Dalton Jeffries to come around the corner and pounce on her. But he didn't, and she suddenly realized that the longer she stood there, the better her chances were of being discovered.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly edged along the wall of the cabin and peered around the corner. She could hear the low murmur of voices coming from somewhere, but couldn't see anyone. She could see the horses in the makeshift corral, though, and she just hoped that the men wouldn't be able to see her before she got to the animals.

Nervously chewing on her lower lip, she slowly made her way over to where the horses stood. They snorted and stamped as she came near, and she jerked her head toward the front of the cabin, fearing that Dalton and his men would come running, but they didn't. She chose the horse that was closest to her and took hold of its reins, climbing into the saddle. Nudging the animal with her heels, she turned the horse around and galloped out of the corral and away from the cabin.

Her escape did not go unnoticed, however, and she heard shouting behind her almost immediately as Dalton and his men realized what was happening. Throwing a quick look over her shoulder, she saw that they had mounted the remaining horses and were now chasing her.

She refused to let herself panic. She had a pretty good head start on them, so all she had to do was keep ahead of them. With that in mind, Kayla leaned over her horse's neck and urged her mount faster. Without knowing where she was, she really had no idea where she was going, but she suspected that Dalton would have taken her to his ranch, so she kept the sun on her right and headed south, hoping that she would get to Cord's ranch or someplace she recognized before they caught up with her.

The sooner the better, she thought, glancing over her shoulder again. Her pursuers had cut into her lead faster than she would have thought they could. They were still a ways back, but gaining on her. She kicked her horse harder and rode as fast as she could. After a few minutes, she looked back again, and almost cried out as she realized that not only had she not increased her lead, but that they were even closer to her. If she didn't reach safety quickly, then they would almost certainly catch up with her in a few more minutes.

Then suddenly, she saw something that she recognized! The gorge that she had almost ridden down the day Cord had taken her on a picnic. That meant she was already on Cord's property, she realized with relief. But another quick look over her shoulder told her that Dalton wasn't about to give up the chase simply because she was on the ranch.

Which meant that she had to get to the ranch house and to Cord as quickly as possible. And that meant riding down the gorge.

With Cord's warning echoing in her ears, Kayla gripped the reins tighter and rode straight for the gorge that had killed Dalton's wife.

The quickest way to Jeffries' ranch was across Cord's own, and he was just racing across the valley between the two when he saw a horse and rider at the top of the gorge. He frowned, not recognizing the rider at first, but then he saw long hair whipping in the wind and the rider's petite form, and he knew it could only be Kayla.

For a moment, he couldn't breathe. She was going to try to ride down the gorge, he realized. The little idiot! he thought. What the hell was she thinking? When he got his hands on her, he was going to put her over his knee and paddle her bottom so hard that she wouldn't be able to sit for days! After he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, of course.

Cord's heart was in his throat as he watched Kayla maneuver her horse down the rocky slope of the gorge. He couldn't understand it. She was riding way too fast, almost out of control. Then he saw why. She had no choice but to move quickly as two men followed her immediately into the gorge, one of them firing at her with a pistol.

Cord kicked his horse as hard as he could toward the bottom of the gorge, but he knew it was hopeless. He could never make it there in time to help her. She would either fall and kill herself just as Hannah had done, or the men following her would shoot her.

Rocks were flying down the slope all around Kayla, and for a moment, Cord couldn't help but admire her riding skills. The gorge was so steep that her horse was almost sitting on its haunches to stay in control, but Kayla kept the animal moving.

The men who had been pursuing her were apparently not as skilled. Both of

their horses lost their footing, and the men were lost in the sliding rock before they were halfway down the slope. Seeing how their bodies were battered by the flying rocks, Cord could only hold his breath and pray that the same didn't happen to her.

With a final leap over a large boulder, Kayla reached the bottom, heading directly toward Cord. He reined in his horse and dismounted just as Kayla reached him, and she slid from the saddle to run into his arms. Tears ran down her cheeks, and though she tried to make them stop as she clung to the man she loved, she couldn't seem to. The events of the past twenty-four hours were suddenly just too much for her.

"Cord, I...I thought you were dead," she said, the words muffled against his chest.

His arms tightened around her and she felt him press a kiss to the top of her head. "I know, sweetheart. I know. Did he hurt you?"

Kayla knew exactly whom Cord was talking about, and she shook her head. "No, he didn't have time," she said. She didn't add anything else. All she wanted to do was to stay in Cord's arms forever, but then the thought of Dalton Jeffries intruded, and she took a step back to look up at Cord.

"Dalton and some of his men were chasing me." She looked around wildly, but didn't see him anywhere. "I don't know where he is..."

Cord's jaw clenched for a moment, but then his expression softened as he gently brushed her hair back from her face. "I know, sweetheart, but you're with me, now. I won't let Jeffries hurt you." He glanced over her shoulder, frowning for a moment before turning his attention back to her. "Come on. Let's get you home."

He took her arm, leading her to where their horses stood, but before either of them could mount, a gunshot echoed through the valley. Startled, Kayla jumped, instinctively taking a step closer to Cord, only to see him grimacing.

Her mouth went dry as she saw blood running down his arm.

“Cord...?” she began, but he shook his head.

“It’s nothing. Keep going, get to the horses,” he told her.

He would have gotten both of them on their horses and out of the open, but the animals had gotten so spooked by the gunshot that they had taken off. With no choice but to face Jeffries, he drew his pistol and turned to face the man, shoving Kayla behind him as he did so.

Instead of riding down the gorge like his men, Dalton Jeffries must have ridden around, and was now bearing down on him and Kayla. Behind him, Cord could feel her trembling as he lifted his pistol. Though Dalton’s bullet had only grazed him, it still made it difficult to hold his arm out straight, and it trembled as he aimed at Jeffries.

“Cord...” Kayla said nervously as Jeffries continued to draw nearer, firing continuously.

Cord didn’t answer. Unlike Jeffries, he was waiting until his target got closer; when he shot, he wanted it to count. Grinding his jaw, he released the breath he had been holding and slowly squeezed the trigger. His aim was true and Dalton Jeffries fell from his horse to tumble to the ground.

Behind him, Cord heard Kayla’s soft sob of relief, and he turned to wrap his good arm around her.

“It’s over, sweetheart,” he said softly against her hair. “It’s all over.”

An hour later, Cord and Kayla were back home. Lucas and a group of men, many of the ranch hands among them, had met up with them as they were on their way back. Kayla had listened as Cord explained what had happened at the gorge, and had been relieved when the forman said that he would take care of things. All she had wanted to do was go home and be with Cord.

Now, as she looked at the bandage encircling his upper arm, she frowned slightly. "Are you sure that you shouldn't have the doctor look at that?" she asked.

He gave her a lopsided grin as he pulled her into his arms. "I'm fine," he said. "Anyway, having the doc take a look at it would mean going into town, and all I want to do is be alone with you," he added, kissing her gently on the mouth.

Unwilling to argue with that, she rested her hands on the smooth muscles of his bare chest and parted her lips under his. When he lifted his head a moment later, she saw that he was regarding her intently.

"You know," he said, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "I believe that we were in the middle of something when we were interrupted last night, weren't we sweetheart?"

Kayla's brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, and then her eyes widened in surprise. He couldn't possibly be referring to the spanking, could he?

"Cord..."

His mouth quirked again. "If I remember correctly, you over my knee and waiting to be spanked with your hairbrush, weren't you?"

Kayla blushed as she felt a familiar tingle between her legs. "But your arm..." she protested as he gently took her hand and led her over to the straight-backed chair that was still sitting in the center of the bedroom.

"Is fine," he told her as he sat down, and then smilingly added, "Besides, a little exercise will be good for it."

Though Kayla smiled at their light banter, her pulse fluttered as Cord gently guided her over his lap. She had taken the pins out of her hair when they had come in, and it fell over her shoulder in thick waves to skim the floor as she

placed her hands down to balance herself. She had also taken off her dress when they'd come in, and so wore only her undergarments. She caught her breath as Cord slowly lifted her petticoat to reveal her pantaloons, which he wasted no time in pulling down. With her bottom bared to his gaze, she began to get even more aroused, and she waited breathlessly for him to begin.

He didn't begin right away, however, but gently caressed her bare cheeks with his hand, and she moaned softly.

"So, tell me, Kayla," he said as he continued to rub her bottom. "What exactly are you being spanked for?"

She didn't answer right away. Though he had certainly admonished her before when he had spanked her, this particular type of scolding was new to their relationship, and she realized that she liked it.

"Well, Kayla?" Cord prompted, giving her bottom a sharp smack with his hand.

The spank stung, and she gave a little yelp. "For lying to you," she said in a small voice.

"Most especially that," he agreed. "And what else?"

She thought a moment. "For playing cards at the saloon?" That shouldn't really count, she decided, especially since she had gotten his ranch back for him. She didn't mention that to him, though, not when it was way more fun to be spanked for her misdeeds instead.

"Mm-hmm. What else?"

He had started to caress her bottom again, and the feel of his hand on her bare skin was making it difficult to concentrate. "I...I don't know," she stammered.

“What about your plan to steal from me?” he reminded her.

She craned her neck to look over her shoulder at him in surprise. “But I didn’t really go through with it,” she protested.

“But you did consider it, and so you should still be spanked for it,” he told her matter-of-factly. “What else?”

Her brow furrowed as she gazed down at the floor. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“No?” he said. “Well, I can think of one or two. Like coming outside last night when I specifically told you not to.”

“I was only trying to help,” she said rebelliously.

“Instead, you got yourself kidnapped,” he said. “Which brings me to your next transgression. Riding down that gorge after I told you how dangerous it was.”

The memory of her headlong flight down the steep canyon was almost enough to make her shudder, but that didn’t stop her from defending herself. “But I thought that if I didn’t, then Dalton and his men would catch up to me.”

He said nothing for a moment, as if considering her point, but then she felt his shoulder lift in a shrug. “Possibly,” he agreed. “But that still doesn’t excuse the fact that you put yourself in that position because you refused to listen to what I told you to do.”

Kayla made a face, but said nothing.

“So, let’s see,” Cord continued. “All in all, I think you’ve earned yourself a good hard spanking. Several of them, actually. Don’t you?”

She squirmed in his lap at the image his words brought to mind. “I suppose you’re right, but not too hard,” she pleaded.

Above her, Cord's mouth quirked. "No harder than you deserve," he assured her. "And certainly no harder than you enjoy."

His words almost made her moan. How could she get so aroused from a few simple words? she wondered. But before she could contemplate that thought further, Cord began spanking her.

The spansks were light at first, love pats designed to warm up her bottom for the real spanking that was to come, she was sure. Cord's hand smacked her right cheek for awhile, and then went to her left, before alternating left, right, left, right until her bottom felt warm and tingly all over. Kayla "ooohed!" and "ohhhed!" with each slap, wiggling against him, which only seemed to arouse him, judging from the hardenss she felt pressing against her.

Deciding that he had warmed Kayla up enough, Cord reached for the hairbrush, but then thought better of it, at least for the moment. Instead, he rested his hand lightly on her rosy bottom. Her skin was warm and soft, and he almost groaned as he caressed her smooth cheeks. Perhaps stopping to rub her bottom hadn't been a prudent idea, he thought, but even as he questioned his actions, his hand moved lower to delve into the silken folds of her pussy. She was already incredibly wet and ready for him, and it took everything in him not to forget all about her spanking, and pick her up and carry her over to the bed instead. The only thing that stopped him was knowing how much wetter and hotter she would be if he spanked her even more.

From her position draped over his lap, Kayla moaned with pleasure as he slowly slid his finger inside her wetness. As much as she enjoyed being spanked, she found herself hoping that Cord would decide she had been punished enough and make love to her instead. But then she felt the sharp sting of the hairbrush on her bottom, and she knew that the spanking would only make their lovemaking that much more incredible.

The brush came down on her other cheek, and she let out a squeal of protest

as she squirmed on his lap. “Owwww! Cord, not so hard!” she protested.

She could almost imagine his mouth quirking as he answered. “It’s supposed to sting, sweetheart. You’re being punished, after all. Remember?”

She certainly did remember, but it didn’t feel like she was being punished at all. The brush actually wasn’t unpleasant in the least. It’s just that she knew that if he continued to spank her with it, she might orgasm before they even started making love and she really wanted to save that for him. He paused, rubbing the back of the brush against her upturned bottom. The wood felt cool on her hot skin, and she sighed with pleasure.

“This,” he said, smacking her defenseless bottom again, “is for coming outside last night after I told you not to.” He brought the brush down, alternating from the right cheek to the left, careful to give both the attention he so obviously thought they deserved. “You really should do as you’re told, you know. And this,” he told her as he smacked her again, a little harder this time, “is for riding down the gorge.”

“Owwww!” she said, arching up against him.

He pushed her back down with a firm hand. “However,” he said, bringing the hairbrush down again. “As you pointed out, you had little choice but to go that way, so we’ll skip to the part about your stealing from me. That should get you a good dozen or so good spanks.”

Kayla opened her mouth to protest, but could only gasp as Cord proceeded to deliver the spanks. Hard and fast, they made her squirm and let out little cries of protest every time the brush connected with her bare skin.

Cord, however, must have decided that she needed a respite, because he stopped to gently caress her bottom in between. She moaned as she felt herself get even wetter, and was just wondering if he would slide his hand down to finger her clitoris when she felt the brush once again on her already-tender bottom.

“This next set is for playing cards in the saloon,” Cord told her as he lifted the hairbrush. “Which is something you are never, ever, to do again. Do you understand me?”

He punctuated each word with a sharp smack, and watched with approval as her beautiful ass turned an even prettier shade of red. He was already rock hard as it was, though, and having her wiggle around on his arousal was almost too much. And he still hadn't even spanked her for lying to him yet!

Deciding it was time to remedy that, he pressed down more firmly on her back with his hand and took aim with the hairbrush. “I think it's time to address your lying, don't you, Kayla?” he asked her softly.

She made a soft sound that could have been one of protest, though he couldn't be sure. There was no mistaking her reaction to the hard spanking he began giving her, however. She cried out, squirming and kicking her legs so much that he had to wrap his arm around her waist just to keep her in place.

Kayla's bottom was so hot that it felt like she had just sat on the stove, and yet she wouldn't have asked him to stop for anything! The tingling between her legs was equally intense, and she thought that any second she would come just from the spanking. Just a few more fierce spanks and she'd be there...

But instead Cord threw down the hairbrush, picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed.

“I think your spanking is over with for now,” he said huskily. “But we'll get back to it right after take care of another urgent matter.”

Kayla didn't protest. Instead, she began to frantically unhook the fastenings on her chemise as she watched Cord undo his belt.

An hour later, she and Cord lay entwined in each other's arms, both drowsy

from their lovemaking. Her bottom still had a warm glow to it and her lips curved into a smile at the thought of the spanking he had given her. She couldn't wait for him to do it again.

Beside her, Cord propped himself up on an elbow to gaze down at her. Reaching out, he smoothed a stray piece of hair back from her face. "I love you, Kayla Mathison, do you know that?"

For a moment, Kayla said nothing, but simply gazed up at him. Then, suddenly, her eyes welled with tears.

Cord frowned. "Kayla?"

She shook her head, smiling up at him as she wiped a tear from her cheek. "Before you found out who I was, I thought that I wouldn't care if you called me Abigail for the rest of our lives," she said softly. "But now, hearing you say my real name...hearing you say that you love me..."

He lowered his head to kiss her gently on the mouth. "I've always loved you, Kayla."

His words made her feel warm all over, and she reached up to caress his face. "I want us to get married again, Cord."

His brow furrowed. "We're already married, sweetheart."

She shook her head. "You married the woman you thought I was," she said. "I want you to marry the real me this time."

His mouth quirked. "In that case, then yes, Kayla, I would be honored to marry you...again. But first, we have to get back to that spanking we didn't finish. We should start our married life with a clean slate."

And so, wearing the wedding dress she had made, carrying a bouquet of fresh daisies, and using her real name this time, Kayla Mathison married Cord

Holderness all over again. And this time, the only secret between them was why she had such a hard time sitting down during the reception.

The End

