

Tails of the Old West

**By
OTKRomance**

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Dedication

Here's to the American cowboy – the stuff
of romantic (and spanking) fantasies
everywhere. May he never change!

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The Sheriff and the Hellcat

Chapter One

Katie Jennings crept towards the stream leading her mare, Violet, praying he wouldn't hear them. Down the bank a ways, Tristan James had a fire going and was cooking the fish she had watched him catch earlier. Her stomach grumbled as she stood beside a thirsty Violet and fumbled around in her saddle bags for the apple and cheese sandwich she had hastily packed for herself before setting off this afternoon after Tristan.

Violet gave a happy horsey snort into the water and Katie winced. She had to keep her presence from Tristan. He was headed to Hope Town to search for pa, and Katie had an idea where her father was hiding there; she didn't know the way there, and therefore was forced to trail Sheriff James. If she could just track pa down before the lawman, he could get away again. Her heart hurt at the possibility of her pa at the end of a rope, or rotting in jail, as he surely would be if Tristan had his way.

Katie didn't care what anyone said, she refused to believe her father had robbed that bank back in Springwater. He wouldn't do that. Maybe he hadn't been the best of fathers - he disappeared too often for days at a time, and Lord knew he drank too much. He'd been known to gamble away the money they needed for necessities on the homestead, as well. But he was Katie's father, and he wasn't all bad. She knew he couldn't have robbed that bank or shot and killed that teller like they were saying.

Lord, she was exhausted, mentally and physically. It had been an endurance to keep up with Tristan's pace today, and she had been constantly jumpy, nervous that he would somehow figure out that she was following him, even though she was keeping a more than safe distance behind

him. This was the closest she had gotten to him all day, and that was only out of necessity; she had to water Violet and that meant getting close enough to him so as to reach the outermost corner of the stream.

Suddenly, strong, vice-like arms clamped down on her shoulders and a hard voice spoke in her ear, "You're a long way from home, little girl."

Katie's heart stopped beating and for a minute she didn't recognize Tristan James' voice; instead she envisioned a savage Indian or a dirty outlaw, either of which would have attacked and killed her right there. Then, Tristan whirled her around to face him, and her heart started beating again.

"Don't do that!" she snarled, one hand held over her heart, her breath uneven and shallow. "You scared me to death!"

"What are you doing here, Kate?" Tristan's piercing blue gaze narrowed suspiciously at her, his arms folded over his chest. She had a quivery feeling in her stomach and she wondered if maybe she wasn't going to be attacked and killed after all. And why did that suddenly not seem so bad, at least the first part anyway? "You're a long ways from town."

She shrugged and tried to look unconcerned with his obvious suspicions. "It's a free country," she said. "I guess I can pretty much go where ever I like. I'm an adult after all." She glared at him after these words. He had the most obnoxious habit of calling her "little girl," and it made her want to scratch his eyes out. She was twenty years old, after all!

"You're following me, aren't you?" Tristan towered over her petite frame, his hands on his hips. He cursed.

"It's not polite to use that kind of language in front of a lady."

"Don't push it, Kate." Tristan shook a finger at her the way a teacher had once when she was late

turning in an assignment. "Besides, I don't see any *lady* around here, anyway."

She glowered at him, but bit her tongue. She was nervous, and anxious to see what he was going to do now that he knew she was following him.

To her surprise, Tristan grabbed hold of her hand and gave it a tug. "Come on over to the fire. It's damn cold over here."

Katie pulled her hand free and stood her ground. Her eyes flashed. "I don't think it'd be proper for me to go over there with you." She stuck her little nose up as far as it would go.

Tristan grabbed her mare's reins and shrugged. "Fine, but don't come running to me later when the wolves and bears wake you up to be their midnight snack." That said, he turned and walked away, leading her unfaithful mare.

Katie gave out a little huff. He thought he could scare her, but she'd survived worse.

Just then a coyote gave voice to the night and a thousand and one goosebumps exploded onto Katie's back.

She stomped the entire distance to Tristan's camp fire, glaring at him when he looked over one shoulder at her with a smirk on his face. She plopped down in front of the fire; my, it certainly did feel nice. She held her hands up to the leaping red and gold flames and scooted a fraction closer, mindful to keep her skirt away.

She watched as Tristan set his horse's feed bag onto Violet's head and she felt a pang of guilt. She hadn't even thought of bringing the mare a feed bag and food. How had she forgotten something like that? Well, she'd never done this before, after all, she reasoned in her head. But the guilt was still there.

Tristan sat beside her when he finished and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot over the fire. Katie gave him a look fit to drop him in his tracks and was surprised when he laughed at her.

"I'm sorry. Kate, but I've only got the one set of dishes. I just wasn't expecting company tonight."

She stuck her nose back up in the air to show she couldn't care less. Arms folded in front of her, she said, "You may address me as Miss. Jennings, *MR.* James. You are being too familiar calling me Kate."

"I'll call you what I want, Kate. After all you are the one interrupting me, not the other way around. Besides that, we're in the middle of the wilderness, in case you haven't noticed. No one's around to hear my familiar manner of addressing you."

She gave him a withering look and the sound of her stomach growling filled the silence between them. She refused to look in his direction, knowing he would have that annoying grin on his face again.

She was surprised when he stood up and grabbed a cooling frying pan from beside the fire. He placed the remains of the trout dinner in front of her and said, "Might want to eat something before you faint from hunger on me."

There was humor in his eyes and a smile in his voice. Katie wanted to tell him to go to hell with his trout, but the smell was mouth watering and it sounded so much better than a spotted apple and a mushy cheese sandwich. With a brief glance at him, she dug with both hands into the flaky fish before her.

Tristan watched the girl before him as she inhaled the trout. She certainly wasn't a delicate eater. He remembered how his mother and sisters ate, like little birds pecking at their food; Kate Jennings ate like a man, licking her fingers and making little appreciative sounds. He told himself he was ridiculous to be attracted to her, especially when she ate like that. Besides, she was just about the biggest thorn a man could be misfortunate enough to find under his saddle.

The first time Tristan had met *MISS* Jennings, his immediate impression was that she needed a good spanking. She was too mouthy and stuck up

for her own good. And the more interactions he had with her, the more he began to worry he would be the one to finally take her over his knee. That didn't sit especially well with him, considering that he'd never laid a hand on a woman in his life, not even his sisters as they were all growing up. But damn near every time he came in Kate's proximity, his hands fairly itched.

Despite that, he also felt a definite tug of attraction towards the red haired hellcat. She had called him a liar to his face the day he said he had seen her father running from the bank with a pistol in one hand and a big bag of money in the other. And all he'd wanted was to give her bottom a good warming, then take her to his bed for a thorough session fit to wear out the feather mattress. He could imagine just what she'd think of those improper thoughts!

Now, watching her gobble the fish, he wondered just what the hell to do with her. What he should do was take her back to town, but that would cost him two days traveling time, and that could mean missing her old man.

He really didn't have a lot of options besides keeping her with him. He didn't want to chance turning her loose again; there was the possibility of her finding her daddy before he did and then she would warn him off. Besides, Tristan was not the type of man to just leave a woman to her own devices out in the open wilderness; while Kate was adequate to take care of herself in many ways, he was sure she would be better off under his supervision out here where she had no experience.

"What're you staring at me for?" she suddenly snapped and Tristan bit back a chuckle. She had spirit, that was for sure.

"I was just trying to figure out what to do with you."

"Do with me?" she bristled. "You don't have to figure that out, seeing as how I'm a grown woman."

"Look, Kate. I'm tired. I'm sure you are, too. Let's not even start arguing about this. You're traveling with me from here out. If I have to, I'll put you under arrest. I'll tie your hands together and tie you to your horse. I'll do whatever I have to. But you'll stay with me." He returned the glower shooting at him from her bright green eyes and added, "And you'll do what I tell you. Just because you managed to interrupt my search, and most likely slow it down, doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. You understand?"

He could tell there were a bunch of things she wanted to say to him, all of them probably inappropriate for a *lady* to utter. It was almost comical the way her pretty little bow of a mouth worked silently, then finally closed in a firm line. She fairly growled when she spoke. "Fine. Whatever you say."

Tristan nodded. That's good, he thought. But he couldn't help but think he had won that promise from her much too easily.

Katie woke before the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. She lay on the cold, hard ground for a few minutes, carefully keeping her breathing even as though she were still asleep. She'd spent most of the night before awake, trying to ignore the strange sounds of nature at night by coming up with a plan to get herself away from Tristan. She hoped it would work.

After laying there a few more moments, she dared a glance towards the lawman, and saw he was still laying on his bedroll, eyes closed, hands clasped together over his chest. She wasted a few minutes admiring him. He was a handsome man, with his dark hair and those bright blue eyes. He was tall and as broad in the shoulders as a bear. Her mouth fairly watered for him before she caught herself and gave herself a mental shake. What was

wrong with her, for goodness sake? He was the enemy!

Moving as silently, she hoped, as an Indian, Katie crept on all fours towards Sheriff James. His gun nestled in the holster on his hip, beckoning to her. She settled without a single sound on the ground next to him and with a maddening patience, began to draw the pistol slowly from the holster. She had just succeeded in that task, sitting back with a sigh of relief, when Tristan bolted up from the bedroll nearly scaring her to death.

She pointed the pistol at him, desperately ordering her trembling hands to still. "Don't come any closer, Mr. James," she warned. Lord, was that her voice, all wavy and unsure sounding? She bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath, trying to get control of her runaway emotions. "I'll shoot you, I swear it."

Tristan just watched her as calmly as if she were holding out a cup of tea to him. Then before she even realized what had happened, he had reached between them and grabbed back the gun. He tossed it away from where they sat on the ground and before she had a moment to stand and make a run for it, he grabbed hold of one small wrist.

"Apparently you don't understand our arrangement, Kate," he growled. "You're supposed to do what I tell you, and you are most definitely supposed to keep your hands away from my gun."

To her shock, he gave her wrist a yank and she went sprawling forward in a very unladylike manner, then fell abruptly over his hard, lean thighs. "What are you...no!" Her skirt was thrust up over her waist, nearly covering her head in the process. Katie's cheeks flushed a heated red, realizing that this man was seeing her in nothing else but her worn drawers. Her modesty was quickly forgotten, however, when the first spank landed on the seat of said drawers.

She let out a little squealing scream and began to kick and pound at him with her fists. Tristan

kept at her spanking as though she were nothing more than a slightly bothersome fly buzzing around his head.

"I've wanted to do this from the first time I met you," Tristan was saying as he pounded away at her tender bottom. "Lord knows someone should have by now."

Actually, Katie had never been spanked in her life, and she decided then and there that she never wanted to repeat the experience. Tristan was a big man, and his hand was wide and strong. Her bottom felt like someone had lit a match to it. She tried in vain to free herself but his arm was locked around her waist and it was useless. He gave her several more hard swats, enough to bring tears to her eyes that she blinked purposefully away. Then he pushed her off his lap and watched her scramble to her feet, her skirt falling back into place. He looked up at her with a proud grin on his handsome face, then laughed out loud at her when she began to rub her poor bottom through her dress.

"Ooooh! I hate you!" she spat.

"You just worry about behaving yourself, little girl," he called to her as she went to her saddlebags and drew out her hairbrush. She watched him notice the wooden hairbrush and wondered at the strange look that came into his eyes when she produced it.

She decided to ignore him; she crooned to Violet as she brushed the tangles from her hair and wondered how in the world she was going to manage to ride all day in the saddle with her sore behind.

But despite her trampled pride, and despite her well spanked bottom, all Katie kept thinking about was how strong and firm Tristan James' body had felt when she'd been positioned over it. She didn't understand her thoughts, and tried to push them away, reminding herself how much she hated him.

But those memories kept nettling her for the rest of the day.

Chapter Two

Katie thought they would never stop riding that day. Her bottom was so sore, all she wanted was a rest from the constant jostling the seat on the horse gave her. Many times during the day tears pricked her eyes but she refused to shed even one. Tristan may have temporarily subdued her, but she was certainly not about to let him see just how miserable she was.

What was really strange was the way she kept admiring his profile out of the corner of her eye. After what he had done that morning, he ought to be the last man on earth she would find attractive, but that wasn't the case. She had these strange warm feelings in her stomach and she felt all fluttery and nervous with him, but not on account of her session over his lap. It was very confusing and she surely would have been in quite a cantankerous state if she hadn't been so completely exhausted by that evening.

Tristan had said hardly a word the entire day. He was angry, at himself and at Kate. He could tell she was hurting, despite her attempts to hide it. And though he didn't regret spanking her for one minute, he did have a heart. They could have made town that day if he had ridden at his usual pace, but he had slowed down for Katie's sake. He knew she probably didn't even realize that.

When they finally did stop to make camp, Tristan noticed how she practically fell to the ground when she dismounted. Damn fool woman...

"Why don't you see what you can gather for firewood?" he suggested, surprised by how gentle his voice sounded. She looked at him and gave a distracted nod. "I'll go see what I can find for supper."

Katie stood for a few moments after Tristan walked away, closing her eyes and savoring the feeling of the ground under her feet, instead of the unforgiving saddle under her bottom. Then she

pushed herself into motion and began scavenging the area for firewood.

It was a half hour or so later when Tristan returned to find Katie sitting before a slowly burning blaze. She had nodded off, sitting straight up on her rolled up bed roll. He smiled at her and began cleaning the grouse he had shot.

If she wasn't so headstrong and foolhardy, he mused as he worked, he might just find that he could like Miss. Katherine Jennings. She had an easy way of setting off his fuse, though. He still couldn't believe, on one level, that he had actually taken her over his knee that morning. He bet her daddy had never done that; from what he knew of her father's habits, Kate was alone pretty much of the time, and the periods he was home he was too drunk to notice much of the goings on around him. It occurred to him that her daddy might be a mean drunk, but he doubted that since she was so damned loyal to the old man. No, it seemed more to Tristan that the little girl in Katie was still trying to win her father's love. It made the desire to catch the bastard and make him pay for his crime all the more important to Tristan, knowing that he had hurt her by rejecting her.

When Tristan looked up from dressing the birds, he was surprised to see Katie awake and silently watching him. She had a funny look on her face. He gave her a brief smile and then stood to set the grouse on the fire to cook.

They ate in silence and Tristan began to wonder if Kate was ever going to talk to him again. Right after the meal and clean up, she spread out her bed roll and brushed her long auburn hair, then braided it back. He watched her discreetly as she pulled off her over-sized boots, then settled onto the bedroll still in her dress and stockings. He pulled a copy of Gulliver's Travels from his saddle bag, then turned to her.

"Let's get you tucked in," he heard himself say. The next thing he knew he was at her side, tucking

the side of the bedroll around her. When he dared to look in her face she was staring at him in obvious surprise. He touched her cheek gently. "Will it bother you if I read a while by the fire?"

She shook her head. No one had ever tucked Katie into bed, at least not in her memory. It seemed Tristan would give her the first in many things. Why was he being so nice to her? Did he regret spanking her? She doubted that, but it did seem that he maybe felt bad about it.

"What book is it?" she asked. She loved books; her friends had been found in books since her childhood and she could sit and read the afternoon away, journeying from the rundown homestead with all its hard work to glamorous places and rich experiences.

He showed her the cover and she smiled. It was a well thumbed copy.

"Will you... read to me?" She couldn't believe she'd asked him. But the words were already out and it was too late to call them back.

He hesitated only a moment. "Sure."

Tristan settled at the top of Katie's bedroll near her head. As he read aloud, he absently stroked the crown of her head, the hairs soft against his callused fingers. Katie savored the comforting feeling and closed her eyes, falling asleep to the calming sound of Tristan's voice. The last thing she remembered was the warm, feathery touch of his lips on her temple.

She had a vivid dream that night. Her father was standing on the scaffold, the hangman beside him with the noose in hand. She was screaming and trying to get out there to free her father. He was innocent! But someone was holding her back and as she turned to look back, she saw the impassive face of Tristan James.

Kate woke Tristan up with her screams. He went over to her and gently shook her awake.

Without a moment's hesitation, she launched herself into his arms, sobbing and shaking.

"Shhh... it was just a nightmare. It's over, you're okay. Shh..."

Tristan rocked the small woman in his arms and tried to soothe her wracking sobs. She thoroughly saturated the front of his under shirt, then pushed him away and gave his chest a pound with her fist.

"Bastard!" she shouted, apparently forgetting for the moment that such words were unfitting for a lady to hear, much less utter.

"What... ?"

"You were there. They were hanging my father and you were holding me back so I couldn't get up there and help him!"

Tristan let out a world weary sigh. He ran one hand through his already rumped hair. "Katie, you're going to have to face this. Your daddy's going to go on trial for what he did. I hope he doesn't hang, but it's a strong possibility. I wasn't the only person who saw him running from the bank that day..."

"Shut up!" Katie cried. "You're lying. I don't believe you."

Tristan shook his head. He didn't understand this woman. "Why are you so stubborn? Why can't you just face facts and accept the truth?"

"He's my father! I won't believe it! I won't..."

She was crying again and she let Tristan hold her while she sobbed. He felt her sobs in his own heart and wished he could take away her pain. But there wasn't anything he could do.

They slept fitfully through the rest of the night. Tristan stayed on Katie's bedroll with her, alternately her friend and comforter, and her enemy and the cause of her pain. When dawn came, Tristan rose and stirred the fire back to life to make coffee.

An hour or so later he watched Katie as she stirred and slowly came to a sitting position,

wincing. He met her eyes straight on and handed her a cup filled with coffee.

"We'll reach Hope Town about mid afternoon," he told her. "The first stage that comes in, you'll be on your way home."

Chapter Three

Hope Town was a large, busy place and as Tristan and Katie rode through the main street he had to give her father credit. If the tip he had received was true and Mr. Jennings was holed up here, it certainly was a good place for hiding, as big as it was.

Katie's eyes frantically searched the building windows and faces they passed for any sign of her father. She had to find him before Tristan so she could warn him and help him get away. Tristan was determined, despite her refusal to leave, that she be on the first stage coach to pass through on the way back to Springwater. And, judging by the size of Hope Town, they probably had a stage coming through daily with supplies. That meant she didn't have a lot of time.

They stopped at the livery stable and Tristan arranged for the horses to be fed and watered and housed. Tristan asked the man who helped him when the next stage was do in, and he confirmed Katie's fears that one came in daily at around noon. Thankfully, they had missed that day's stage, but that meant she only had a little less than twenty hours to find her father.

"Just how do you expect me to get Violet back home if I'm to leave on a stage?" she demanded as she rubbed the mare's nose one last time before joining Tristan on the sidewalk. She glowered up at him, trying to see his features under his battered hat.

"You'll just have to trust that I'll bring her back with me," he answered. He ignored her pout and strode towards the modest hotel at the end of the street. Katie practically had to run to keep up with him.

Inside the hotel, the furnishings were worn, but everything looked clean and Tristan felt safe in putting Katie up there for the night. When the desk clerk referred to Katie as 'Mrs. James' she

immediately bristled and began to set him straight, but Tristan grabbed hold of her elbow and steered her away before she had a chance.

"That man thinks we're married!" she whispered, enraged.

Tristan shrugged. "What else would you have him think when I only asked for one room?"

She suddenly seemed to understand the clerk's mistake and her eyes turned hard and heated as they neared the door of said room. "Yes, Mr. James," she said, clipping the words out harshly. "Where were you expecting to sleep?"

Tristan was chuckling as he herded her into the room. There was one double bed with a shabby comforter, a tiny set of drawers and a chipped wash bowl. A flimsy changing screen was in one corner and the smallest night stand probably ever made sat beside the bed, just barely supporting the weight of a small lamp.

"Don't you worry, Miss. Jennings. You're virtue is safe with me."

For some reason the way he said that, like she was some awful creature he'd have to be crazy to find attractive, hurt her feelings. She covered that up as best she could by flouncing across the room and opening the saddle bags she had brought with her so she could air out the spare dress she had brought long. The wad of money she had tied together with a piece of blue ribbon fell to her feet and before she had a moment to retrieve it, Tristan had snatched it up instead.

"Give that back," she snapped, reaching for it and seething as he held it up over his head and out of her reach.

"What the hell is this?" He was glowering at her and she pointedly refused to answer him. Instead she went to the bed and sat on the edge, arms crossed. Apparently the question had been rhetorical anyway, because he supplied his own answer - the correct one, too - within the next

moment. "You brought this for your father, didn't you?"

Katie stared straight at him and refused to say a word.

Tristan cursed. "This must be your damn life savings, Kate, and you were going to give it to that bum... "

"Watch what you say, Mr. James," she warned in a tight voice. "He is my father."

Yes, Tristan thought, unfortunately, he is.

What he said was, "Look Katie, he doesn't need this, though I doubt he'd hesitate a minute to take it from you. *He just robbed a bank.*"

"I don't believe that."

Tristan took a deep breath, in and out. The woman was infuriating. Jaw clamped, he handed her back the wad of money, then strode over to the one small window in the room. He was pleased to see that it was painted shut, and that the lock was engaged and rusted permanently so.

"What are you doing?" Katie demanded.

"I'm making sure you'll be safe," he answered. He turned back to her and fixed a hard look on her. "I'm going down to the saloon to see what I can find out about your daddy. You are going to stay here. Take a rest, read for a while." He indicated the copy of Gulliver's Travels that he had brought along with them. "I'll be back for you around supper time so we can eat."

Katie stomped her foot. "No! You can't make me stay here! I want a bath and I want to look for my father. You can't stop me - it's a free country!"

Tristan sighed heavily. Did she ever do anything without arguing? "I'll arrange the bath for you tonight after we eat. And as for looking for your daddy yourself, just forget about it. If it helps, think of yourself as being under house - or hotel - arrest." He leveled his sternest gaze at her. "And if you try any funny business to get out of here, you'll have one very sore bottom for your trip home tomorrow. Do I make myself clear?"

She made a face at him that he damn near smiled at. She might be maddening, but she was also pretty cute. "Yes, Sir, Sheriff James."

He ignored the way she made his title sound like an obscenity. He took the room key with him, tousled her disarrayed hair in a way he knew she would hate, then left the room and locked the door behind him. There was a telling thud from the other side of the door and Tristan hoped she'd thrown his book after him instead of something breakable.

Katie stewed and paced for the next three hours, then started at the sound of the key in the door lock. Tristan entered the room, locked it behind him, and went to his saddle bags for a change of clothes without saying a word to her.

"Well?" Katie demanded, getting her little body right in his path when he would have made for the changing screen. "What happened?"

Tristan gave her a withering look. "I'm not going to tell you anything, little girl." He pushed her out of his path. "If you want to eat, then get out of my way."

Well, he certainly was in a bad mood, Katie thought. She hoped that meant he hadn't been able to find out anything about pa.

When Tristan came back around the changing screen he had on a fresh shirt and pants. He went to the chipped wash basin and splashed tepid water on his face. When he turned back to Katie the dark hair around his collar was curling from the water. He looked exhausted, and for a moment she had the strangest urge to comfort him and convince him to rest. What is wrong with me, she wondered, as they left the confines of the room and started downstairs for dinner.

They ate a quiet supper in the diningroom at the hotel, both of them watchful. It was obvious that Tristan was intent on keeping her access to the town limited to the hotel. But time was running

out, and as she searched out the window, Katie formed a plan that she prayed would work.

Chapter Four

It was a strange experience, bathing in the same room as a man, Katie reflected.

Of course, her bath was set up behind the changing screen, but she had no doubt that Tristan could see just about everything through the flimsy material. She tried to relax her muscles and enjoy the water.

"I suppose you'll be going back out tonight?" she called. She winced at the wavy tremor in her voice.

"As soon as you finish up back there, yes."

Katie bristled. Tristan had insisted on staying with her through her bath, then on emptying the tub and returning it to the hotel himself. Otherwise, he would have had to let the staff come up for it, and that would have meant leaving the door unlocked and trusting Katie. That, of course, was out of the question.

"If I'm holding you up, Sheriff James, please just go ahead with your business. A real gentleman wouldn't insist on staying in the room while a lady bathed anyway."

There was the faint sound of a chuckle from the other side of the screen.

"Well, sweetheart, I never said I was a gentleman, and you certainly are not a lady, so I don't see whereas we need to worry about that."

The use of the word 'sweetheart' made Katie's stomach flutter with butterflies while at the same time his comment about her not being a lady caused her blood to boil. Without any forethought, she sent the sopping wet wash cloth sailing over the changing screen in the general direction of his voice. There was a satisfactory SPLAT when it landed and she suppressed a giggle, hoping it had met square with Tristan's head - which, as luck would have it, it had.

Tristan made a low growling sound, but there was a smile in his voice. "You're lucky I was a sense of humor, Kate," he said. "Else I'd come

around that screen, bend you over the side of that tub, and spank your wet rear end."

His words made her sex twitch. She didn't understand that for a minute. She covered her confusion with bravado. "Even you wouldn't be so uncivilized as that..."

"Don't bet on it."

"...and besides that, you are never going to touch me in that manner again. It's completely inappropriate. You are not my father or my husband - you're not even my friend. And I won't allow you to...to do that again!" There, that was telling him!

This time the laughter coming through the screen was strong and loud. "I have no doubt in my mind that I will spank you again, Kate. And just so you're forewarned, the next time you're over my knee, your drawers will be down around your knees and your skirt up around your waist, so you have the full affect of my hand."

Again her body reacted in ways she didn't understand. She broke into a sweat in the tepid bathwater which suddenly seemed unbearably hot, then sprang up and into the tattered towel awaiting her. She had probably never dressed so quickly in her life as she did that night, so afraid was she that Tristan might carry through his threat.

When she stepped back around the changing screen he was waiting with his broad arms crossed in front of him and a bemused expression on his face. She crossed the room and dug into her saddlebags, determined to ignore him.

"Where is my..."

Her question was cut short and subsequently answered by a soft, teasing rap on her backside through her dress. She jumped a mile in the air despite the gentleness of the touch and flew around at a grinning Tristan, holding her hairbrush in his hand like it belonged there.

"Looking for this?" he asked innocently.

She snatched the proffered object, restraining herself from clawing his eyes out the way she itched to. Yanking the brush through her wet hair, she glared at him as though trying to strike him dead with her gaze alone.

He chuckled and tweaked her nose. "You're mighty cute when you're riled up, you know that, Kate? I never noticed it before."

He left her to retrieve the bath tub and she watched as he drug it across the floor, then left it outside the door for when he left the room. He returned to her for a moment then and said, "Be good and get some sleep. You've a long ride ahead of you tomorrow."

"Will you come back tonight?" She didn't know what had made her ask that question, but it was too late to call it back.

"I'm not sure," he answered, then gave her a delicious grin. "Don't wait up."

Katie watched through the window until she saw Tristan disappear into the town's general store; then she went to work. The sun was setting and she hoped that once she made her escape the darkness would aid her until she could get inside the saloon and find pa.

She smiled as she ripped the bedsheets from the mattress and gathered the towel from her bath. Tristan had searched the saloon to no avail for her father, but he didn't know where to look. She knew that it would only take her a few minutes to locate him. It was just that she had to get out of this room and make her way inside the saloon first.

Katie hoped this would work; she'd read in a dime novel where the heroine had done something similar, but that didn't mean it would work in real life. Regardless, she began ripping the old bedsheets into long lengths, then tied them together in succession. She added the towel to the end, satisfied with her handiwork and ignoring the

niggling bit of guilt she felt about destroying the hotel's property in this way. Tristan would have to pay for the damages, and she told herself that it served him right. If he hadn't insisted on keeping her locked up in the stuffy room by herself, she wouldn't have had to resort to much drastic measures.

When Katie finished with the sheets and towel, she turned her attention to the window. Sure enough, just like the times she had tried before, the window didn't budge under her exertions to pry it open. She sighed and crossed the room to the changing screen. She folded the apparatus up and awkwardly made her way towards the window it.

She hoped this would work. Earlier that day when she was planning her escape, she had tested the flimsy looking screen and was pleasantly surprised to discover it had more substance to it than it appeared to. It would make a clumsy battering ram, but she had to make do with what she had.

She leaned the edge of the folded screen against the window sill and went to the bed to place the opposite end on top of the mattress. She wrapped her hands in one of Tristan's shirts that she purloined from his saddle bags. Then she returned to the window and took a deep breath.

Grasping the screen in both hands, she took several steps back, then rushed forward into the glass.

The glass held and she flew backward from the impact, falling onto the floor in an embarrassing heap.

Resolved, Katie got right back up, took her place again at the screen and ran forward at the glass. This time it gave way a little bit and some shards fell onto the sidewalk below. Katie sent a silent prayer that there would be no one passing on the sidewalk below her; in the growing darkness outside they'd never see the glass falling from above until it hit them.

Pushing gruesome images of blood and cut flesh from her mind, Katie repeated her business with the make shift battering ram. Three more times she charged at the window before there was finally a big enough hole for her to escape through. Smiling smugly, she used Tristan's shirt for protection and cleared the remaining shards of glass from the pane. Cool night air and the sounds of reverie from the saloon carried into the formerly stuffy hotel room and Katie took a moment to breathe deep.

Turning back to her task, she secured her escape rope to the headboard of the bed. She'd noticed earlier in her boredom that the bed was bolted to the wall and the floor - how anyone could steal a bed she couldn't imagine, but apparently the hotel proprietors were taking no chances. In any regard, the fact helped her cause.

After testing the knot to be sure it was secure, Katie let the rope fall out the window with a gleeful toss. She looked out after it, but in the darkness she couldn't tell how close it came to reaching the ground. Oh well, it had to be fairly close, and she was desperate enough to take her chances.

Hoisting her skirts up around her thighs, Katie climbed up onto the window ledge and, straddling the rope, began her awkward climb down.

Tristan was just walking up to the hotel on his way down to the saloon at the end of the street when he saw the crudely fastened rope fall out of the second story window. He groaned and cursed softly, knowing full well who would be climbing down that rope. How the hell had she gotten that window open?

He stood in the shadows right next to the dangling end of the rope, waiting silently on the broken glass all over the sidewalk. As he suspected, the woman that came sliding down the rope was Kate, her skirt practically up to her waist,

revealing her petticoat and drawers. He was going to kill her!

He nearly laughed out loud when she reached the end of the rope and looked down to see the distance that remained to the ground. She let out a surprised gasp and spouted a couple curses, then took a deep breath, and let go of the rope.

She landed, not in a painful pile on the hard sidewalk as she expected, but in Tristan James' sure, sturdy arms.

"Hello there," he said through clenched teeth.

Chapter Five

They attracted many a look as Tristan carried Kate, fighting him and struggling the entire way, back inside the hotel, through the lobby and up the stairs to the room. He fumbled with the lock while still holding her in his arms, then pushed open the door and plopped her down non-too-gently on the bed.

His blue gaze took in the details of the room in one lightening fast glance: The broken window, changing screen discarded beside it, the naked mattress and the shredded sheets and bath towel tied together, then fastened to the bed with the opposite end thrown out the window. So that's how she'd done it.

Arms crossed over his broad chest, Tristan turned to a very pale Katie. She backed up on the bed, holding her hands out plaintively to him.

"I can explain..."

"Don't bother, I can see what's happened here myself. And let me tell you right now, that all the damages are coming out of that wad of cash you're carrying for your daddy."

Katie had the gall to glare at him and his temper rose. He jerked her to her feet.

"Do you remember what I told you this evening about the next time I had to spank you?"

It had been only a few hours ago, of course she hadn't forgotten. She nodded reluctantly.

"What did I tell you?"

She swallowed. He was going to make her say it out loud? She sighed. "You said you'd take my drawers down this time..."

"So, you were paying attention," he marveled. She closed her eyes as he grabbed her wrist and pulled her over his lap. Up went her skirt and petticoat, as promised, and down came her drawers in one easy motion. Katie's face was red with embarrassment. No man had ever seen her naked, even partially, before.

His hand came down on her upturned bottom and she let out a little "OH" of surprise. It stung so much more without the protection of her drawers. Tristan was far from through with her though, and his spanks rained down on her, one on top of the other. She was kicking and wriggling, trying to escape him, but he restrained her easily by locking his free arm around her back and snuggling her right up to his hard stomach. He never missed his mark, either, to her dismay. His big hand made contact with her little bottom each and every time, making loud clapping sounds that could probably be heard from the street below.

"You will do as I tell you, Kate," he said, punctuating each word with a swat. "Someone could have been hit with the broken glass as it fell to the sidewalk. And you could have hurt yourself climbing out of the window and letting go of that rope like you did."

"What would you care?" she snarled, daring at glare back at him and wincing involuntarily as she watched his hand descend from a height well over his head to connect with her backside. "You... you're HURTING me right now!"

"You've earned this spanking, and more. But just for the record, little girl, I do care about you. Otherwise I wouldn't give a damn if you went jumping out of windows every night."

He finally stopped spanking her. Her bottom was a bright red but he refused to let himself feel any sympathy for her. She stood up awkwardly, sniffing and wiping her eyes. He grasped her shoulders and steered her towards one corner of the room, the one furthest from the open window.

"You're going to stand here," he said, lifting her skirt and petticoat and tucking them into the neckline of her dress to reveal her well spanked fanny, "and think about the danger you put yourself in tonight." He went to the window and pulled the rope back up inside, shaking his head despite himself at her cleverness. He inspected the

changing screen, which was hardly even nicked from her abuse, then used it to close her off from the rest of the room. "I have to go and get the hotel manager so he can take a look at what happened, then we'll see if we can't get another room."

Katie heard his footsteps as he left the room. Apparently he wasn't worried that she would attempt to escape again in her current sore state, and he was right although she entertained the idea for a moment anyway, just to spite him.

His words were running over and over in her head as her bottom gradually cooled in the night air coming in the window. *...just for the record, little girl, I do care about you...* She couldn't imagine why he would; he had to be lying.

Presently she heard the door opening again and the sound of Tristan's voice and that of another man, who, judging by his reaction to the damage in the room, was the hotel manager. Tristan apologized repeatedly and she heard the unmistakable sound of money being counted out. She stomped her foot silently, wondering just how much he was giving of her stash.

A few more words were exchanged, then the door closed behind the manager and Tristan came around the side of the changing screen. She felt his eyes studying her and she wanted to turn around and gouge out his eyes with her fingernails. At the same time, she suddenly wanted to crawl into his arms and bawl her eyes out.

She felt his fingers at the neck of her dress, then the material of her petticoat and skirt as they returned to cover her bottom and legs.

"You may turn around now, Kate."

She did, slowly, and met his gaze, even slower. She crossed her arms in front of her.

"They don't have any other rooms tonight," he said with a sigh. "But he said we can stay in this one. We should be thankful that he isn't throwing us out."

He took her hand and led her back around the screen, handing her her discarded drawers and turning his back when she bent to pull them on. He was acting strangely; a little bit ago he'd been a spanking monster, now he was calm and quiet. He shocked her when he turned back to her and framed her face with his hands, then pressed a brief but electrifying kiss to her mouth.

No one had ever kissed her on the mouth before. She sank onto the mattress in surprise, wincing when she remembered her tender bottom.

Tristan had gone to the window and was trying to stuff one of the pillows into the gaping hole. It succeeded in keeping some of the night chill out, but Katie was still cold - everywhere except her bottom, of course - and she hugged herself as she struggled with her conflicting emotions.

Tristan suggested she lay down and rest, and for once she didn't argue with him. She laid on her tummy on the mattress, wishing for the sheets she had shredded. She was actually shivering.

He lay down beside her and without a word, pulled her into his warm arms.

"Aren't you going back out?" she whispered through chattering teeth.

"No, I'll stay here with you."

"I promise I won't try anything if you leave... I'm sorry... I just want to find my father..."

He gave her shoulder a little squeeze and tightened his embrace. "I understand, sweetheart." And he did; Katie's heart was in the right place and he supposed he might be doing the same things she was if he was in her place. He wouldn't ever tell her so, but he admired her resolve. "Shh... just try to rest, okay?"

Katie nodded against his shoulder and snuggled close to him, ignoring the thoughts in her head about how she shouldn't be laying down with a man unless he was her husband. Although he stood in the way of finding her father and protecting him,

she knew that Tristan James was the best friend she'd ever had. And she trusted him.

When the first rays of sun fell onto Tristan's face the next morning, he was immediately aware of the warm weight of Katie's head on his shoulder. One of her small hands was curled possessively around his middle and when he looked at her she had the most endearing half smile on her face.

He carefully pulled his arm free and put it around her shoulder, pulling her closer. His reward was a pretty sigh of contentment from Kate, and a rock hard arousal in his nether regions. He stifled a groan.

He was getting a soft spot for this girl, and he wasn't especially happy about it. He admired her spunk and conviction, even if she had placed it in the wrong man. He felt guilty, knowing she would eventually have to face up to the truth about her father. Hopefully, once he got her safely on that stage, he'd be able to track down her daddy and then the trial and sentencing could follow. He grimaced, thinking how she would blame him if her father was sentenced to hang.

Katie made a little mewling sound and stretched like a soft kitten against his side. She snuggled closer to him and went back to sleep. He smiled and pressed a kiss on the crown of her head. He was enjoying this too much, especially considering the steel hard tree trunk between his legs that would definitely not be satisfied. Once sleeping beauty woke up and remembered today was the day she was going back to Springwater, this little peace between them would vanish and her old hatred would settle in. He told himself it was better that way; he was a lawyer and didn't have room in his life for a feisty little trouble maker that he had to constantly keep an eye on. But the words he told himself sounded hollow and he had an ache in his

stomach just thinking about how she would react to him when he sent her away.

The stage coach was right on time, and Tristan gave Katie's saddlebags over to the driver. Katie stood on the sidewalk with her arms crossed over her chest, refusing to even look at Tristan.

"I'm not going on that stage," she vowed to the sidewalk. "You can't make me. I'm a free woman, I have a right to stay in this town if I want to."

Tristan took hold of her chin and made her meet his gaze. "I know you don't believe this, but your father is a dangerous man. Your being here and looking for him puts you in danger..."

She gaped at him and started to protest what he was saying, but he put one long finger to her lips and said, "Shh! I'm not going to argue with you about this, Kate. You're going on that stage back to Springwater if I have to hog-tie you and put you on it myself. Clear?"

Her green eyes narrowed and snapped at the same time. "Crystal."

He smiled grimly. He hated this. Why couldn't she have been compliant and reasonable and just do what he told her to? He wanted the easy peace and contentment they had had that morning back.

The comfort of their embrace had ended the moment Katie's eyes opened and she realized she was in the same bed with Tristan. She jumped up like he had suddenly become a pile of hot coals, and she fled across the room. When she'd come back around the changing screen in a fresh dress, her hair pinned back, she'd been as cold to him as ice. He wondered if it was because he'd spanked her again last night, or because she knew he was going to send her back today. Probably a little of both. He told himself he should be glad she was angry again, because it would simplify these conflicting emotions he had about her. If she wouldn't allow him close to her, he didn't have to worry about figuring out what, exactly, he was feeling.

The driver of the stage was calling for the passengers to board. Tristan caught Katie's arm when she would have stepped inside without a word. He turned her to face him, holding her shoulders firmly in his hands.

"I'll bring back your mare," he said. "I know you hate me right now, Kate, but this is the best thing for you. I'm sorry."

She looked like she had a slew of things fighting to be said in her head, but she remained silent. She stomped away from him and boarded the stage coach with such angry energy that it bounced and swayed visibly from the outside.

There was a tight sadness in Tristan's chest and he took several deep breaths to try and release it. He stood there watching the stage drive away, one hand lifted in a farewell that was pointedly ignored.

Chapter Six

There were two other passengers on the stage coach with Katie: a fussy old lady and a portly middle aged man. From the start the other woman began complaining of the dust and heat of the road, while the ugly little man openly stared at Katie's bosom. She gave him her vilest glare and he eventually averted his gaze.

She had to do something! She couldn't just ride away from town without seeing her father. She knew he was there and she even knew how to get in to see him, but Tristan had made sure she hadn't had a chance. She winced as the coach ran over a large hole in the road and her sore bottom bounced on the hard seat. He had really given it to her last night.

What really confused her was the warm feelings she had over the fact that he had been worried she would hurt herself with crawling out the window like that. No one had ever worried about her before, at least not in her memory. And he'd been so nice to snuggle against; she couldn't remember ever snuggling with someone else like that, except maybe her mama when she was a very little girl. He'd made her feel protected and safe, and that was what really had her confused because he was supposed to be the enemy!

She shook herself mentally. She had to stop thinking about Tristan and figure out a way off this stage... She glanced at her traveling companions, the old lady with her delicate, scented handkerchief in front of her nose and the chubby man gazing pointedly out the window.

Inspiration struck at the sight of the slightly green old lady. Katie shot up straight in her seat and rapped hard on the roof of the coach. "Driver! Driver, please stop! I think I'm going to be ill!"

They hadn't gotten far out of town and weren't even yet going at full speed, so the driver didn't have trouble hearing her. Apparently not wanting

to clean up after any accidents, he brought the team of horses to a surprisingly quick stop, and Katie bolted out of the coach, and kept right on running.

She heard the driver and other two passengers wondering after her, but thankfully they didn't try to follow, only settled back in and resumed their ride. Katie was relieved, having half expected that Tristan would have given the driver something extra to insure he got her all the way to Springwater. She smiled smugly, slowing to a walk. Obviously Sheriff James thought he had her under his thumb - ha!

She'd have to do something about her dress, though, if she wanted to avoid Tristan, and if she wanted a chance of getting inside the saloon to find pa. Her mind was whirling with possibilities when she came to the little homestead just outside of town and her dilemma was resolved. Clothes fluttered in the sunshine on wire and there wasn't a soul around. Nervously, Katie took a pair of men's trousers and a shirt from the line, then she hid behind the little chicken coup and exchanged her dress for the other clothes. Her boots, which normally were merely serviceable, looked fine with the men's clothes. Though her borrowed garments were big on her, she thought that could help in her disguise.

Newly garbed, Katie took off towards town again, leaving her dress behind in the dust. As the buildings of town came into view, her nervousness grew. She looked like a man - a small man, but still a man - from her neck down, but she still needed to do something with her long red hair if she wanted to get away with sneaking into the saloon.

Again, the fates were on her side, for as she came to the first building on the sidewalk, a snoozing man leaned against the front of a store, arms crossed in front of him, snoring away his recent drinking binge. On his head was a crumpled, wide brimmed cowboy hat. Katie looked around the deserted street for any possible observers, then

crept up to him, wrinkling her nose at the smell of liquor and unwashed body. Hoping the miscreant didn't have lice, she fingered the hat off his head with the gentle motion of a butterfly, then flew out of sight. She heard him snort once, then the snoring resumed. Hiding in the alleyway between stores, Katie crammed her hair up under the hat, pulling the brim low over her eyes. She spit on her hands and rubbed them in the dirt at her feet, then smeared the dust onto her face. If she could just lower her voice and keep her dainty hands in her pockets, she ought to be able to pass as a young man.

Her heart fluttered as she started back down the street towards the saloon standing at the opposite end.

It was surprisingly easy to find her father; Lucille was just stepping outside the batwing doors of the saloon as Katie came walking up. She hurried to the woman, who regarded her through narrowed eyes for a few moments before she recognized her.

"Katie! What are you doing dressed like that?"

Lucille had been a friend to Katie, as well as her father's favorite whore, for as long as she could remember. It didn't matter to her what Lucille did for her living; her friendship meant more to Katie than just about anything else. She knew if her father had holed up somewhere in Hope Town, it would be with Lucille's help.

"I have to disguise myself!" Katie whispered, looking about her nervously for Tristan. "Lucy, Sheriff James has tracked pa out here and I have to warn him. You know where he is, right?"

A strange look came over Lucille's overly made up face. "I'll tell him, honey," she said quickly.

Katie's eyebrows furrowed. "No! I came all this way - and you have no idea what I've gone through with James. I want to see him."

Lucille considered this for a minute and an unsettling quiver shook itself in Katie's stomach. Why was her friend acting this way?

"All right, but you can't stay long."

Lucille looped her arm through Katie's as if she were a man - which she suddenly remembered she was supposed to be - and led her into the saloon and up the stairs to her room. With every step, Katie expected Tristan to materialize from the shadows of the barroom and stop them. When the door to Lucille's room opened, and they stepped through, she breathed a sigh of relief.

The room appeared empty, until Lucille called out Katie's pa. He emerged from her closet, in stained clothes and reeking of liquor. His red rimmed eyes took in Katie with distaste. He pointed a rusty gun in her direction and Katie knew a moment of fear that Tristan had been right all along about her father. She took off her hat and shook out her mane of red hair, saying brightly, "Hi, pa, it's me!"

His expression didn't change a bit, nor did he lower his gun from his daughter.

Katie exchanged a disappointed look with Lucille. Ignoring her completely, her father raged at his favorite whore. "What the hell are you doing, bring her up here?" Lucille stepped back from him, cringing.

"Pa!" Katie stepped between them and demanded his attention. "Sheriff James is here - looking for you! I tracked him, but he caught on to me. Pa, you have to get out of town before he finds you!"

Her father gave a distracted shake of his whiskered head. "No money left..." he mumbled.

Katie felt like her heart had fallen to the pit of her stomach. *No money left...*

"Did you bring me money?" he snapped, rounding on her and waving his gun menacingly.

"Y-y-y-yes, pa," Katie dug desperately in the pockets of the trousers, then remembered that the

money she had brought with her had been in the pocket of the dress she had discarded back at the homestead when she had purloined the male attire. "Oh, I don't have it on me..."

"Stupid..."

Katie cringed inwardly. She felt like crying. "What happened to the money you had?" she ventured bravely.

"He lost it playing cards," Lucille spoke up. Katie watched in horror as her father swung his fist at Lucille's gaudy face. Because he was so drunk, his balance was off and he missed her, but she still moved closer to the door, glaring at him defiantly the whole way.

"Well, maybe you should just give yourself up to Sheriff James. You're innocent after all..."

Katie's last hopeful sentence died at the look her father gave her and the truth finally hit her completely. Her father had robbed that bank. He had killed that teller. He was staying here with Lucille only because the woman was scared of him and that damn gun he kept flailing around.

"I'll kill James if I see him."

Katie's heart was hammering in her chest. Her voice was shaky when she spoke. "Uh, pa, I can get the money and then you can get away. James'll give up when he can't find you."

Katie's father's gaze was fevered and piercing, and she had the unsettling feeling that he knew her relationship with Tristan wasn't an entirely unfriendly one. "Okay, you get me the money and I'll leave him alone."

Katie nodded. "I'll bring it to you."

"I can't stay here in town if he's around." Her father sounded whiny, for all his bravado where his pistol was concerned. He thought for a minute, then said, "There's a ruined homestead outside of town, roof crashed in. Bring it to me there. Tomorrow morning. I'll sneak out of here tonight."

Katie knew where he meant; she had passed it that day walking back to town. She nodded. "Okay."

Without another word, she crammed her hair back up under the hat, pulled the brim low, and turned away from the father she had so long sought approval from. She exchanged sympathetic looks with Lucille as she opened the door. Her heart was heavy as she left the room.

Katie paused in the shadows at the bottom of the stairs and surveyed the little bar room. She spotted Tristan a moment before she stepped out of the darkness, and her heart beat accelerated. He was standing at the bar with another man beside him, speaking to the bar tender. His companion must have been the local sheriff, if the silver star he wore on his vest and the gun strapped to his thigh meant anything. Katie was relieved for a moment that Tristan had help against her father. She wanted to go running to him that moment so he'd have to deal with her and therefore be out of her father's way. But a second thought occurred to her that if he saw her here, dressed as she was, he'd probably figure out that she'd found pa; then he'd go on his own search, find him, and pa would kill him as he had promised.

Taking a deep breath of the smoke filled air, Katie bent her head as low as her neck would allow and set off briskly across the room towards the bat wing doors. She passed Tristan without incident and felt a moment of brief triumph.

That was when she banged right into the large, smelly belly of the man whose hat she had borrowed, and now wore over her long cinnamon colored hair. Her eyes flew up to meet his red rimmed gaze and she swallowed audibly.

"Hey!" he bellowed, turning every head in the barroom. "That's my hat!" He grabbed the battered brim and yanked it angrily back. Katie's hair fell like so many flame colored ribbons around her

shoulders. There was a collective gasp and one loud bout of cursing in a familiar voice near the bar.

Katie took two running steps before Tristan caught her by the arm and wrenched her back around. He looked like he might kill her where she stood. For a moment he didn't say a word, his rock hard jaw working and bulging and his fingers biting into the soft flesh of her arm.

The man he had been standing with appeared at his side and he was the first to speak. "You know her, Tristan?"

Tristan's answer was a silent, angry jerk of his head.

The sheriff sighed. "You know I'm supposed to arrest her for being in here."

Katie's heart sank. If she was in jail she couldn't get the money to her father and he would be sure to carry out his threat to kill Tristan. She started to protest, but an icy glare from Tristan silenced her.

"Would you let me take her instead?" he asked his companion, speaking through clenched teeth. "I'll take responsibility for her, and you can believe me that she'll keep her little fanny out of here from now on."

The sheriff gave a slow nod. "As long as you keep her in line, all right."

Tristan's eyes were dark and stern on Katie's face. Suddenly jail seemed a safer place than anywhere that he might be. She had a chill when he spoke, "Oh, I'll keep her in line, all right."

He turned suddenly to the drunk Katie had rammed into, who was busily brushing away at his battered cowboy hat as though he was trying to rid it of any female germs it may have acquired while on her head. "She took your hat, fella?"

The drunk gave an offended nod and spoke to the local sheriff. "You oughta arrest her for stealin', Sheriff. She took it right off my head while I was sleepin'."

"I was only borrowing it!" Katie jumped in.

Tristan turned his hard gaze back on her and pushed her in front of him so that she was face to face with the foul smelling man she had offended. "Apologize."

He had to be kidding. But when she stood there a bit too long for Tristan's liking, he gave her a hard swat on her backside and repeated the order.

"I'm sorry, sir," she forced herself to say. "I only meant to borrow your hat, but I apologize to you that you missed it."

The nauseating man gave her one last betrayed look then gave a smug nod. "It's all right, I guess," he said. He looked past her at Tristan and added, "Your wife here needs a couple lessons in how to act like a lady."

Tristan nodded. "She'll have them."

Those three words made Katie's body shake with a chill of dread. She was really in for it now.

Tristan spoke a few quiet words to his counterpart, then claimed possession of Katie's arm again. He led her towards the doors in a silence that was louder than any words could have been.

Chapter Seven

Tristan's hand was tight around Katie's upper arm as he pushed her ahead of him out the door of the saloon. He looked right, then left, seeming so angry that he couldn't think at the moment, then finally took three long strides and thrust her ahead of him into the alleyway between buildings.

She realized with a start that they were on the same side of the building as Lucille's room; in fact, they were directly below the second floor room where her father was hiding. Before she could react to that, however, Tristan had backed her up to the wall and was in her face, nose to nose.

He jammed one long forefinger at her chest for emphasis. "I put you on a stage coach this morning, Katherine."

Katherine! Oh, boy, that was a first. He must really be mad. She swallowed and tried to think of something to say.

"Kate..." he growled the words as a warning. "Start explaining yourself..."

Katie led with bravado, although her stomach was fluttering with nervous butterflies. "What do you think happened? I pretended to be sick and when the driver stopped the stage, I got off and ran back into town."

Tristan closed his eyes for a moment, and she noticed that he drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly before he spoke. "That was dangerous," he commented. Well, at least he wasn't yelling anymore. His piercing blue eyes focused on her and she swallowed hard. "Did you see him?"

"Him, who?"

Tristan's eyes narrowed. "You know who!"

"Oh, pa?" *Okay, Katie, make it sound good.*

"No. He used to have a favorite er - lady friend who worked here, but apparently she'd not here anymore. I couldn't find him."

Tristan's eyes remained narrowed on her and she prayed silently he would believe her. *It's a*

good lie, Lord, she thought. Maybe if he believes it he'll give up and then pa won't have any chance to kill him.

After a few minutes of his scrutiny, Katie snapped, "What would you do in he was your father, Sheriff James? I wouldn't be much of a person, would I, if I could just watch from the sidelines while my father was hung before my eyes."

Again Tristan's eyes closed. He tilted his head back and opened them to stare up at the sky, a muscle twitching in his tan neck. Katie nervously followed his line of vision and watched in horror as the curtain at Lucille's room fluttered back and revealed the whore's overly made up face.

Before she even realized what she was doing, Katie grabbed a hold of Tristan's shoulders and gave him a wrench towards her. His surprised expression, which she caught sight of a brief moment before her lips crashed against his, might have been funny if she wasn't so terrified of what her father would do if he was confronted with the Sheriff.

At first, Tristan stood still as stone, but after a few moments, he gave in to the kiss, slanting his mouth against Katie's and tracing her lips with his tongue. Katie gave a soft sound of pleasure and curled against him, forgetting the situation and circumstances they were muddled in for a few blissful moments.

The respite was all too brief. Suddenly Tristan thrust Katie away from him, and the anger was back in the gaze that seared down on her.

"If you think you can get out of trouble that easily, you are sadly mistaken."

Katie couldn't help it; she stamped her foot. Damn the man! Here she was trying to protect him, and he thought she was only out to save her own skin. She opened her mouth to shout at him, but he laid one finger over her lips.

"I'm warning you - if you say one word to me, I'll bend you over that hitching post over there and

give your bottom a blistering for everyone in town to see."

Katie swallowed her words. She had no doubt in her mind that he would do exactly what he threatened.

Katie and Tristan trudged out to the homestead where Katie had stopped to change her dress for men's clothes. The clothesline was bare, and there was a pretty female voice singing from somewhere inside the house. Tristan told Katie to look for her dress and change while he found the lady of the house and explained what had happened.

Her dress was exactly where she had left it near the chicken coup and her money, thankfully, was still in the pocket. Katie changed quickly and walked back around to the front of the house with the borrowed clothes folded under one arm.

The mistress of the house was clearly befuddled with the notion of a woman borrowing men's clothing, but she was very nice about the whole thing. She accepted the shy apology Katie offered and smiled at her with friendly, kind eyes. Katie heard her telling Tristan to 'go easy on your wife' as they parted.

When Hope Town came back into view Tristan said they needed to make a stop before going back to the hotel. He asked Katie if she had her money still, and after a hopefully unnoticed pause, she told him she had left it in her saddle bags on the stage. He frowned pensively at her, but didn't argue. Instead he said that he would pay for the purchase.

Inside the general store, Tristan took her elbow and led her without a moment's delay to the front of the store where the jewelry and other more costly items were housed in a display case. He gestured to the collection of wooden hairbrushes and told her to pick one out.

Katie gave him a wary look.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "You're going to need a brush for your hair, aren't you?" he reasoned calmly. "Or did you manage to bring that with you, even though you forgot your money?"

The butterflies in Katie's stomach were soaring now and she gulped. He didn't believe her about the money. He probably didn't believe her about anything she'd said. She'd been surprised when he'd gone with her to return the men's clothing, having thought he would want to search the saloon top to bottom; she'd foolishly thought when he hadn't that maybe her story had been convincing enough. Now, she figured he must have had the local sheriff search the saloon. Maybe her father was already caught and in jail...

"Pick one," Tristan said again, interrupting her thoughts. "Now."

She focused her attention on the brushes. They were all beautiful, gleaming wood in different shades. She pointed a shaky finger at one large mahogany colored brush.

Tristan called the shopkeeper over and the purchase was made. They turned back out onto the sidewalk and started towards the hotel.

It wasn't until they reached the doors to the hotel that Katie remembered the previous evening when she'd been searching her saddlebags for her hairbrush and Tristan had patted her behind with it.

She sighed. Well, now she knew why he'd wanted that damn brush so bad.

Tristan had a dinner sent up for Katie and insisted she eat every bite of it. She was nervous, anticipating what she knew would follow, and she had to force the food down her throat.

Tristan had moved into a different room, one with a window that wasn't broken. While she ate, he spoke to the manager of the hotel, who had come up and pounded on the door once he learned that Katie was back in his establishment. She couldn't make out what was being said, but Tristan

must have convinced the man that he had her under control because she was allowed to stay.

After watching over her to be sure she had swallowed every bite of her dinner, Tristan set the plate and utensils aside and sat beside her on the bed. His manner was grim and Katie felt like her heart was wedged into her throat.

To her surprise, he took her hand and ran his thumb over her knuckles as he spoke. "If you're keeping something from me, I want you to tell me what it is. I won't tolerate you lying to me, Katie."

The words were on the tip of her tongue. She heard them in her head, just as if she'd actually said them: *I saw my father, Tristan. He swore he'd kill you if you found him. Please don't go near him. I can tell the local sheriff where to find him in the morning, but you have to promise you'll stay away...*

That would never work, and she knew it. Tristan wouldn't let a low life coward like her father intimidate him. He'd go charging out for pa, and get himself shot and maybe killed in the process. She was certain of it. And despite the mixed feelings she had about Tristan James, she couldn't bare even the thought of him dying.

Tristan was still watching her silently, waiting for an answer. She shook her head and said quietly, "No, there isn't anything I'm keeping from you."

"I hope that's the truth," he said. "Because you're in enough trouble with me already, Kate."

She didn't even have it in her to argue. She just sat there, taking more pleasure in the touch of his hand holding hers than she had in anything else for a very long time.

"I'd like you to tell me why you're in trouble," he said.

She was surprised, but when she looked at him he gave no other instruction or encouragement. She sighed and said, "Well, I was supposed to go home on the stage, but I got off and came back

here instead. I wasted the money you paid for my ticket."

"True," he said when she paused. "But I don't care about the money. *You* are a different matter, however. You could have met up with any number of unsavory creatures, Katie. You're damn lucky, really, that you only have to deal with me and not some sex starved outlaw or scalp hungry Indian."

She swallowed and nodded. She hadn't even thought of those possibilities before now, but as he gave them voice, her stomach churned sickly.

"Why else?"

She pushed aside the gruesome images his words had brought to mind. "I borrowed those clothes and that man's hat..."

"Katie..." he warned, one eyebrow raised in question of her use of the word 'borrowed.'

"Honestly, Tristan, I've never stolen anything in my life. I was going to bring the items back when I was through!"

"All right, all right. Calm down, I believe you."

She snatched her hand out of his grip and crossed her arms over her chest. "Anyway, to finish this little game of yours, I snuck into the saloon and upstairs to look for my father."

"It's illegal for a woman to go into the saloon, you know."

"Yes, I know," she snapped.

"You could be in jail right now. Might not be a bad place for you, really. Keep you out of trouble at least."

"Don't you dare..."

He chuckled at her outrage. "Okay, I won't dare... under one condition."

"What?"

"You do as I say for the rest of this little adventure."

She glowered at him for a moment.

"Welllll?"

"Fine," she snapped. "Whatever you say."

"Good girl." The amusement left his face and his voice turned hard. "Let's get started then."

Chapter Eight

"Get st-started?"

Tristan nodded in response to Katie's nervous question and motioned for her to stand up. "That dress is full of dust and dirt," he remarked. "Take it off and I'll have them wash it when they come up for your dinner tray."

Katie eyed him warily. "But..."

He looked at her with one eyebrow raised. "There is no 'but' to talk about, Kate. Well, except yours, over my lap, for a very well deserved spanking. Now take the dress off, the petticoat too. You won't be needing them."

Katie swallowed hard and turned her back to him. Wondering at herself the entire time, she unbuttoned the dusty dress and took it off, followed by her dirt stained petticoat. She told herself she was only complying with Tristan because the alternative was being out in the Hope Town jail; and if she was in jail, she couldn't get the money to her father and he might go after Tristan.

Tristan took the garments that she handed to him, her eyes on the floor, and a knock sounded at the door as if on cue. She watched him as he gathered her dinner tray and opened the door, just wide enough to speak to the servant and pass the items through. She shivered as she stood there in only her camisole and drawers.

Tristan saw the shiver as he was turning from the door and closing it behind him. "Cold?" he asked, engaging the lock.

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

Tristan moved back to the bed and sat on the edge. "We'll take care of that," he remarked and a fresh shiver shook Katie's shoulders while gooseflesh broke over every inch of her skin. "Katie, please bring me the hairbrush we purchased earlier today."

Glumly, Katie fetched the requested object and brought it to him. She handed it to him and stood at his side, waiting.

He placed two fingers under her chin and forced her to look up at him. "You've done a lot today to deserve a spanking. I'm tempted to give you a spanking for each separate thing: running from the stage, stealing the clothes and hat, sneaking into the saloon. But then I'd have to decide which of those had been worse, and I just can't make up my mind. So I've decided you'll have a long, hard hand spanking, followed by a shorter spanking with the hairbrush." He paused so his words could sink in. "I'm not going to try to send you home again, because it would be foolish to throw my money away twice. I'll keep you with me, even when I'm searching for your father, because I don't trust you to be on your own. As we already agreed, you will do as I tell you, or I will ask Sheriff Adams to set you up in his jail. And to help you remember to behave yourself, and because I will have the added trouble of watching after you until we return to Springwater, you will have a short spanking each morning. Only ten spansks with the hairbrush, but just enough hopefully to keep you behaved."

Katie choked back the arguments that she wanted to shout. He was being deliberately cruel. For a brief moment she wondered if it might not be better to just stay in a jail cell. She didn't even know how much longer they'd be on the trail; how many daily spankings would she have to take?

But she couldn't hide in a jail cell, while her father was loose and Tristan was in danger. It made no sense to want to protect this dominating man who had just promised her a very painful encounter every day for God only knew how long, but that was how she felt anyway.

"Do you understand, Kate?"

Katie nodded her head and met his gaze of her own will. She knew the spankings would hurt, but

at the same time, she trusted Tristan. It was all so strange...

"Okay, well then let's get this over with. Take your drawers off, Katie, and lay over my lap."

With trembling hands and cold fingers, Katie removed her thin drawers and awkwardly draped herself over his knees. He moved one of the pillows for her so that she could rest her head on it.

Tristan adjusted Katie's body so she was snug against his chest, her bottom high in the air. Then, without a word, he slowly began her spanking.

At first it wasn't so bad. Tristan was spanking slowly, and the spansks weren't so hard. He didn't lecture her, because they had already covered the reasons for this. He was silent, determined.

Then suddenly his pace picked up and the swats were harder. Katie gasped as his hand rained down on her bare bottom, side to side in quick succession, the spansks nearly falling down one on top of the other. She quickly lost count of the tally of swats she had begun in her head; he was spanking her too quickly to keep track, and her attention was fixed entirely on the growing sting and heat in her bottom.

Tristan kept the quick, unmerciful spanking up and Katie was soon crying and kicking her legs, wiggling on his lap and trying to deflect his swats. His aim was always perfect however; she tried shielding herself with one hand, only to have her hand smacked, then pinned to the small of her back. The spanking continued...

What seemed like an hour passed before Tristan stopped. Katie sobbed brokenly over his lap and he had enough pity on her to rub her red bottom to help take some of the sting away. He let her cry herself out a few minutes, then he took up the hairbrush.

"We're more than halfway through, Kate," he told her quietly. He was repositioning her so that she lay over only one of his knees one, her legs pinched between his own. "You're very brave." He

let the back of the hairbrush touch her bottom and he circled it on one cheek and then the other. "I think twenty licks with the hairbrush should finish this up proper."

Katie burrowed her head into the pillow and braced herself. Tristan raised the brush up to shoulder level, then let it fall. The first blow made her cry out and jump, but he locked her body to his own and settled in for the remaining nineteen spanks.

Katie felt like her bottom was on fire, and each additional swat from that damn hairbrush felt like it was splitting her skin open. She was kicking her legs ineffectively between Tristan's strong thighs and she cried out loudly with each spank. Her tears had wet through the pillowcase by the time her last lick landed.

Tristan dropped the hairbrush to the floor and tried to soothe the sobbing woman over his lap. He rubbed her back and stroked her long red hair back from her tear stained face. After a few moments he helped her stand and, trying to ignore the guilty feeling in his stomach, framed her face with his hands and wiped away her tears with his thumbs.

New ones quickly replaced them.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead and led her to the corner. "Why don't you stand here a bit and get yourself together?" He handed her her discarded drawers, which she quickly pulled on, hissing as they passed her reddened bottom.

Katie managed to nod, grateful for the small amount of privacy facing the corner allowed.

Tristan settled into the chair by the window and pretended an interest in the street below. His eyes kept drifting back to the well spanked young lady sniffing in the corner. She'd been standing there almost fifteen minutes and she was just now beginning to stop crying and calm down. Tristan knew he'd been hard on her, had made himself be

hard on her, but he didn't think all that crying was on account of her recent rip over his lap. He knew in his gut that there was something she wasn't telling him, and he had a pretty good idea what it was. Could it be that Kate was crying in that corner because she'd found out the truth about her father today?

After studying her back a little while longer, he called out to her. "Katie, you can come out of the corner now, sweetheart."

She hesitated as if she didn't want to move, then slowly turned to face him. Her face was flushed nearly as red as her bottom had been before disappearing under her drawers. He gestured to the bed where he had laid out one of his shirts for her. "You can put on my shirt to sleep in."

She nodded and walked slowly to the bed. She pulled the flannel shirt on over her camisole, and buttoned it up. It reached nearly to her knees and she had to roll the sleeves back to free her hands.

"Katie, would you come sit with me?"

She looked at him for a moment as if thorough haze. Then she nodded and crossed the room. He moved one of the throw pillows to the top of one thigh and she slowly eased herself down onto her sore bottom. He told himself that the wince she made only meant that he had done his job well, and hopefully she would stay out of trouble for a while, but he still felt a pang of regret for how hard he'd been on her.

Once settled on his lap, Katie leaned back and curled against him like a child, tucking her face into his neck and sighing. He held her in silence for a few minutes, rubbing her back absently and enjoying the sweet smell of her hair.

Finally he broke the camaraderie. "Katie, is there something you want to tell me? You can trust me, you know. You can tell me anything."

"No, sir."

He smiled even though he felt like he was failing her. "I'm Tristan to you, not sir."

She nodded and snuggled closer to him. He sighed and decided to let it go. He'd keep a close watch on her, though. He knew there was something she wasn't telling him and he had a feeling it was big.

For the moment, however, he tightened his arms around her and held her until she fell asleep.

Katie woke in the early hours of dawn to find herself on the bed, wrapped in the coverlet. She peeked out from beneath one cautiously raised eyelid and found Tristan asleep beside her, laying on top of the bed clothes. She had a vague memory of him carrying her to bed and tucking her in, after she had fallen asleep on his lap in the chair.

Ever so slowly, she rolled to her side and off the bed, repressing the urge to hiss and shout at the sore bottom she had almost forgotten about in sleep. She pressed her hands to the offended area and rubbed gently as she made her way to the window and peered out.

The sun was just a dot on the horizon and no one, from what she could see, was even stirring. Well, that was good. Hopefully, she could get out to pa with his money, get him on his way, and maybe even be back here before Tristan woke up.

She found her laundered dress and petticoat spread over the back of the chair and was grateful they had already been returned. Otherwise she would have had to borrow something from Tristan's saddlebags.

Katie pulled her clothes and boots on as silently as a mouse, watching Tristan's face the entire time and expecting his eyes to snap open at every moment. She was proud of herself when she had everything on, her money in her hand, and Sheriff James was still snoozing like a baby. He really was kind of cute, and she was tempted to press a kiss on his bristly cheek. But that would be pushing her

luck, surely, so she tiptoed instead to the door, eased it open and slipped outside.

The moment the door had silently closed behind her, Tristan opened his eyes. He shook his head at the doorway she had just snuck out of, and rolled out of bed. Guess it was time to find out what Miss Katie had up her sleeve...

Chapter Nine

Tristan and Daniel Adams had tailed Katie out to the abandoned homestead just outside of town. Katie had had trouble getting her mare going and that had given Tristan a chance to alert Sheriff Adams to the possibility that Katie might lead them right to her father. Now the two lawmen sat astride their mounts in the shadows of a copse of maple trees, watching for Katie's next move.

Tristan was glad he'd been able to get Adams to come along, because he was scared for Katie, and therefore probably not at his best. Even if she had found out the truth about her father, he doubted she understood just how much danger she was really in. His primary concern was to keep her safe, alive. Adams could handle Katie's father.

"You sweet on her?" Adams asked quietly.

'Sweet on her...' God, that made it sound so simple. He smiled and shrugged. "You could say that," he said, and the other sheriff chuckled.

The door to the run down house suddenly opened and none other than Cyril Jennings himself stepped out into the early morning light. Tristan and Daniel both straightened and sat alert and ready.

"You bring me my money?" the old man boomed. He staggered when he walked towards his daughter. Tristan couldn't decide if his being drunk would be a good or bad factor for them.

"Yes, right here, pa." Katie's hellcat voice was barely a whisper with her father and there was an ache in Tristan when he heard it. She held the money to him and he snatched it from her hand.

After counting it quickly, he made a rude sound. "This's it? Where's the rest of it?"

"That's all I have, pa..."

"I know you had more than this hid away!" Katie took a step back from her father, actually cringing and Tristan curled his fists. Daniel held out his hand in a staying motion.

"I had to use some of it getting here," Katie said.

"I won't be able to get far from James with only this!" her father whined.

To Tristan's surprise, Katie said, "He's gone back to Springwater, pa. You just get as far as you can with that and you ought to be fine."

"Lucky for him I didn't see him afore he lit out," Jennings bragged, now that he thought the threat of the Sheriff was gone. "Like I told you, girlie, he'd a been a dead man if I had."

An emotion passed over Katie's face and Tristan's gut tightened. Beside him, Daniel Adams murmured, "Looks like she's a bit sweet on you, too."

The knowledge that Katie was trying to protect him from her father gave Tristan fierce reactions. He couldn't decide which he wanted to do more - kiss the breath out of her, or spank her till she couldn't sit for a month. When he thought of the danger she was in right at that moment, when he was a grown man more than capable of taking care of himself, he tended to lean towards the later course of action.

Tristan's horse chose that moment to shift its weight and a twig snapped rather loudly as a result. Old man Jennings' head shot up and he cursed. Before Tristan had even blinked he had his daughter draped across his body as a shield, his gun suddenly out of its holster and pressed into the soft skin at Katie's neck.

"Shit," Tristan murmured.

"Show yourself!" Jennings hollered. Katie's eyes looked big enough to swallow her face and for once in her life she seemed speechless. Tristan closed his eyes for a moment and sent a rapid prayer to heaven that Katie would come out of this whole thing alive.

Adams was calm and objective, thankfully. "Go on out and confront him. I'll circle around and take him from behind."

Tristan gave a curt nod and slowly walked his horse out of the shade and into the light. He held up his hands as in surrender, even though doing so to such a coward of a man left the taste of bile in his throat.

"Take it easy there, Jennings," he said calmly as his horse ambled closer. "You wouldn't want to go shooting the one good thing in this world that you created."

"Tristan..." Katie's voice was a horrible mewling sound like that of a hurt animal. Her face was a mask of fear and shame when Tristan dared glance at her. He made it a point after that to keep his eyes on her father.

"You love him, don't you?" her father snarled at her, jerking his arm tighter around her neck. "Whore!" He thrust Katie away from him with enough force that she went sprawling across the grass to fall to her knees.

Tristan saw Adams coming up behind Jennings and he didn't even try to draw his gun, though every finger in his hand itched to do just that. Jennings was raving on about how no daughter of his was going to carry a dirty lawman's kids, his gun waving in the air towards Tristan. Adams was just dismounting his horse and almost within range of Jennings, when Katie bounded to her feet, her father fired his gun, and she leapt in front of Tristan's path.

A second shot rang out before the first had stopped echoing and Jennings crumpled in yowling pain from the wound Daniel Adams had brought to his thigh. Tristan flew from the back of his horse to where Katie lay in a heap on the ground.

He grabbed her in a tight hug, cursing her the entire time. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him with a smile in them. "Your language is atrocious, Sheriff James," she scolded.

"My language!" Tristan sat back from her and glared, afraid he might strangle her if he was too close. "Are you all right?" he barked.

Katie looked down at herself, running her hands over her limbs and belly. Something about the simple way she touched herself made Tristan's blood heat. "Yes, I think so. What about you?"

Tristan made a growling sound of frustration. "I am fine, my little protector. Damn, woman, are you crazy?"

She batted her long eyelashes in innocence. "What do you mean?"

Tristan took hold of her upper arms, because otherwise he probably would have wrapped his hands around her neck instead, and gave her a desperate, hard shake. "You could have been killed jumping in front of that gun like that!"

"Oh!" Katie made a gesture meant to be dismissive but Tristan saw, with a perverse sense of pleasure, that her hand was shaking. "Well, here I am, though. Alive and well..."

"We'll see how well you'll be later," he threatened through clenched teeth.

Their reunion was interrupted by Sheriff Adams, who had easily subdued Jennings and handcuffed him. Tristan told him he could put Jennings on his horse, and he would meet him at the jail in town.

"You go on with him now, if you want," Katie suggested hopefully.

"No, ma'am," Tristan answered with feigned politeness. He stood and reached a hand down to help her up. She pointedly ignored his offer and scrambled to her feet of her own accord. Her eyes followed the retreating backs of Sheriff Adams and her father. Tristan couldn't pretend he didn't see the pain she was feeling and he reached out to take her hand. For a moment he thought she'd try to pull away, but she only gave him a curious look, then let him lead her back to where she had left Violet.

He sensed that she wasn't ready to talk yet, so he put her up on the horse and climbed up behind her. He allowed himself a moment to wrap his arms around her sweet little waist and inhale the scent of

her hair. Then he set the mare off in the direction of Hope Town.

Katie was the first to speak. "How'd you find me?"

"I followed you," he said, giving the obvious answer. "I was awake when you got up and left. I had the feeling there was something you weren't telling me, so I was keeping a watch on you, waiting for you to show me what it was."

She was silent a moment, digesting his words. "My father..." she started, then paused when her voice cracked. She ducked her face, even though he couldn't see her anyway. "You were right about my father."

Tristan gave her a warm squeeze and let his head rest against her cheek. "I wish I'd been wrong, honey."

She nodded jerkily, and one of her hands fluttered up to her face. He knew she was crying, and knew just as surely that she didn't want him to comment on it or make a fuss. So, he made due with holding her against him as tight as he dared, and trying to cushion her most likely sore seat by setting her on his lap instead of the hard saddle.

By the time they got back to town, Katie had her emotions under control. She let Tristan help her off of Violet and watched silently as he teetered the mare to the post outside their hotel.

"After I'm finished at the Sheriff's office, I'll get Violet settled back at the livery stable," he promised and Katie nodded absently. Her mind was obviously somewhere else. "We can leave in the morning, okay?" Again, she nodded. "I'll arrange for someone from Adams' office to bring your daddy home." The same nod. Tristan closed the distance between them and pulled Katie into his arms, pressing her full length against his tall frame. His lips came down on hers in a possessive, searing kiss.

Well, that broke her distraction, at least. Being in the dead center of town, she at first gave a little

struggle to protect her reputation, pushing against his chest ineffectively. But when he suckled at her bottom lip, then traced the line between top and bottom with his tongue, she sighed and went limp against him. After a little more encouragement, she opened herself to him and their tongues touched and parted gently, teasingly.

Tristan finally forced himself to pull back from her, afraid he might not be able to do so if they kissed like that much longer. He smiled down at her and winked. "I'm glad you're okay, Kate."

She smiled back at him, then looked shyly away. Tristan chuckled.

"Go on upstairs and wait for me in the room, okay? I'll try not to be too long." Tristan gave Katie's bottom a gentle pat to get her moving, then he turned and started down the boardwalk to the sheriff's office, whistling softly under his breath.

Chapter Ten

The night air was chilly and Katie pulled her jacket tighter around her as she huddled close to the little fire. She shivered and reminded herself that she'd done the right thing by leaving Hope Town on her own while Tristan had been at the Sheriff's office. He had too much control over her, control that she didn't want anyone to have, and setting out alone had been the best thing for her emotional security.

She focused her gaze on the flames of the fire and reprimanded herself as her stomach growled loudly. She'd been so intent on leaving town before Tristan returned that she hadn't taken the time to buy anything to eat. She would be ravenous by the time she got back to Springwater, but she figured she'd live.

Violet gave a whinny suddenly and Katie looked up to follow the horse's gaze. A rider was approaching, moving quickly, a tall, broad shouldered man sitting beautifully silhouetted on the stallion's back. She knew it was Tristan although she couldn't see his face; really, she was surprised it had taken him this long to catch up with her.

She turned her attention back to her fire, pointedly ignoring him as he dismounted, slapping his horse's reins in his palm. When he came to her side, he flung down the hairbrush he had spanked her with only the night before and growled, "You forgot something, little girl."

She refused to let him intimidate her. She wouldn't even look at him, and she could tell that he was about to lose it. He surprised her by plopping down on the ground next to her and taking her hand in silence. He noticed the chill in her skin and spent a few wonderful minutes rubbing first one hand, and then the other, in both of his own until the friction had warmed them.

"I thought you were going to wait for me at the hotel," he finally said.

Katie looked at him; she couldn't keep freezing him out, not when he was being so nice. She opened her mouth, then shut it, several times. She didn't know what to say to him. Her emotions and feelings were such a mess and she didn't have the first clue how to articulate what she was feeling to him. She couldn't explain why she'd left on her own.

Tristan watched her floundering attempts, then sighed, and pulled her into a sideways hug. She tensed at first, but it felt so good to be inside his warm arms, that she gradually let herself relax, then curled into his chest with a sigh of contentment.

"By the way," he said, and there was an unmistakable note of amusement in his voice. "Where were you thinking you were going, anyway? Mexico?"

Katie looked up at him, confused. "What do you mean? I'm going home..."

Tristan chuckled. He paused, studied her face for a moment, then laughed again, harder this time. She frowned. "Honey, you're going the wrong way."

"What! No, I'm not..."

He nodded his head, still grinning. "Yeah, you are. I got lucky when I started off after you, because that man whose hat you 'borrowed' the other day saw you leaving and he pointed me in the right direction."

"I'll have to remember to thank him," Katie griped, folding her arms over her chest. Forget the fact that she would have had some big problems if she'd continued traveling in the wrong direction; Tristan didn't have to get so much amusement out of her blunder.

Her stomach picked that opportune moment to announce another bout of loud protests and Tristan gave her a stern look.

"Didn't you bring anything to eat?"

She shrugged by way of answer and pointedly avoided his gaze.

He stood and went to his horse, rummaged in his saddlebags, all the while grumbling about 'what was he going to do with her?' He returned with some beef jerky and a slightly bruised apple. She accepted the food without a word and tore into the jerky with relish.

While she ate, Tristan relieved his horse of his saddle and set the feedbag over the stallion's ears. He marshaled his patience and thanked God again that Katie was safe, alive, and ready to fight with him as usual, it seemed.

When he finished making his horse comfortable, he added wood to her pitifully small fire, and sat beside her again on the ground.

"One of Adams' men is going to escort your daddy back to Springwater for his trial," he said quietly. He knew she had to be hurting badly over the recent knowledge about her father, but he also figured it was best to let her know what was happening. She'd never ask, that was for sure.

"I don't care," she said.

Tristan's chest was tight as he looked at this beautiful hellcat, sitting as straight as a board on the hard ground and staring into the fire as if the secrets of life were there. He wanted, quite simply, to rip her old man apart limb by limb. What kind of bastard failed his child so miserably?

The words he spoke shocked the hell out of him. "Your father asked me if I'd look after you, make sure you got back safely, and were settled in at home all right." As soon as he finished speaking he knew she saw right through his words, because her back grew even straighter and she took a deep breath as though preparing for a speech. Damn. He'd just wanted to give her something positive concerning her father. He should have known she was too smart to fall for his feeble attempt.

"My father wouldn't ask that, of you or anyone else," she said in a calm voice. She looked at him, straight on. "He's never worried over me a day in his life."

Tristan nodded. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"He isn't all bad, you know," she insisted, turning back to the flames.

Tristan nodded, squeezing her hand. "No, he isn't. He's your father."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while. Eventually Tristan got up and started setting up their bed rolls. Katie moved to hers and curled up into a ball on her side.

Tristan didn't know what to say or do to help her. He knew she needed time to come to terms with this in her own way. He hated being so helpless to ease her hurting. He banked the fire back, and then instinctively lay down beside her instead of on his own bedroll a few feet away. She lay very still and quiet as he pulled her into his arms, her back to his chest. He cradled her silently.

After laying that way a few minutes, he felt her tears on his arm. He didn't speak of them, just pressed a kiss to her forehead and pulled her closer.

"I would like to see you back to Springwater," he said finally, surprised at how hoarse his voice sounded. "I know that you can take care of yourself and all, but I would like to come back with you and make sure you're comfortable at home."

She didn't answer him at first. She waited until her tears had lessened, then took a steadying breath. His heart ached for the proud, strong woman in his arms. Finally, she spoke, "I think I would like you to do that."

"Okay," he said. He gave her another light kiss, and smoothed the hair back from her face. He turned her onto her back and wiped away the tears on her cheeks with his thumbs. She looked so small and sad. He wanted to make her smile. He shook a finger at her, eyes dancing, and said, "And by the

way, missy, that was a nice way you managed to escape your spanking this morning."

She blinked, then a slow smile spread over her face. "Sorry, I had other things to do."

"Well, we'll have to make up for that tomorrow," he pronounced. He felt his heart lighten at the sound of her watery giggle. He bent his head and gave her a brief kiss on the lips.

The following morning, Tristan woke up in the bedroll alone and for a few awful moments he thought Katie had run on him again. Then he smelled coffee and when he looked to his right, saw she was by the fire, sipping a cup. She gave him a small smile.

"Good morning," he said, sitting up and rubbing his face. "That smells good."

She replenished the cup and brought it to him. He took a sip, then handed it back to her. They shared the cup of coffee, waking up to a new day.

When the cup was empty, Katie set it aside. Then she did something so incredible, Tristan was incapable of doing anything at first except sitting there and staring at her. She draped herself right over his lap, her bottom propped up like a present before him. She folded her arms and rested her head on them, waiting.

When he didn't do anything, she gave him a look over one shoulder that was both sly and sexy. "You owe me twenty, I believe," she said. "Ten for yesterday, ten for today."

Tristan forced his mouth closed. "You mean...?"

"Yes, Tristan." Katie looked back over her shoulder at him again.

Well, shit. He was floored. But he fulfilled her request with twenty spanks delivered rapidly to the bottom he deftly bared for the occasion. He was gentler than he had been before, and he allowed his hand to rub the pert little behind laid out for his attentions. Katie yipped and gasped at the sting of

the spansks, but also moaned with pleasure, and Tristan began to get the idea that there was a part of the little vixen that enjoyed this.

When he was finished, he replaced her drawers, lifted her skirt down from her shoulders, and helped her sit up. She pulled a face out of proportion to the mild spanking she'd just received, then grinned at him. He cupped her face in his hands and gave her a long, hard kiss.

Then they set to work on clearing up their camp, and started off to Springwater, side by side on horseback. Tristan marveled over the change in Katie and what had just taken place.

Well, he concluded, grinning over at his traveling companion, if that was the way she liked things, he would be happy to continue to oblige her. Tristan could think of nothing he would like better than to spend the rest of his life loving, fighting, spanking, and making love to Katie Jennings. He wanted to see her grow fat with his babies, and he wanted to hear her voice when he woke up in the morning. He wanted to come home from work to her dinners - even if she turned out to be an awful cook - and he wanted to sit by the fire and read to each other in the evenings. And if the way she had just surrendered control and trust to him meant anything, he might just have a chance to make all of that come true.

He meant to take things slowly, though. Every woman deserved to be romanced, and Tristan intended a very romantic courtship. After everything she had been through, he figured Katie especially deserved to be treated like a princess. Not that he meant to give her completely free reign to do whatever she liked, of course. He planned to spend the rest of his days making sure she had everything she wanted and needed - love, family, laughter, and discipline.

Courting Maggie

Chapter One

Boy, it sure was hot!

Emily O'Donnell sighed heavily and glanced sideways at her Aunt Maggie. She longed for a cold glass of lemonade and gazed past her straight-backed guardian down the road to the dining room at the end of the dusty sidewalk. Even to Emily's six-year-old eyes the building looked like the greatest of desert mirages.

She leaned her heavy wooden sign against the steps of the saloon and poured herself a glass of the now tepid water that Maggie had brought along with them that morning. She sipped it slowly, not really relishing the idea of picking up that sign again.

As she rested, she watched her aunt quietly, wondering at the unbound energy young Maggie O'Donnell showed as she strode back and forth, back and forth, in an endless line in front of the Dog and Horse Saloon. The sign Maggie held was high in the humid summer air, proclaiming the evils of a life of drinking and whoring, the evils of the very establishment they sat before everyday, in an effort to get the business shut down.

Even at her tender age, Emily knew that they wouldn't succeed in getting the saloon shut down. She wished that Aunt Maggie would realize that too. She missed the days when she used to bake pies with Emily at home and they would laugh in the sunshine over a late afternoon swim.

Instead, they now paced in front of the saloon every day, protesting its existence. Aunt Maggie said it was called "picketing" and that it was a perfectly legal way to protest the morality of the saloon and its customers. Emily believed her, but even so they had plenty of trouble from the saloon owner and some of the customers anyway. Not to mention what their picketing was doing to Maggie's relationship with Sheriff Daniel Adams.

Emily knew she should stand by her Aunt, especially knowing Maggie's reasons behind her beliefs, but she couldn't help but look forward to when lessons would start for her in the town schoolhouse in a few days and she wouldn't have to stand outside in the cold or heat, holding a heavy sign in her thin arms.

A pang of guilt struck her as she thought this and she stoically resumed possession of her sign. Her daddy had been killed in a knife fight at this very saloon over one of the ladies of the evening. That was the whole reason Aunt Maggie wanted the place closed down. And Emily knew she should be better support since he'd been her father and all...

But it was hard for the little girl to keep up with Maggie's unflagging energy and conviction. Maybe Maggie took Patrick O'Donnell's death harder than Emily had because Maggie had known him growing up as her older brother while Emily had only known him as a disinterested father who was usually red eyed and surly from too much whisky.

Emily much preferred the Sheriff to her own father, though admitting so was something she never did, not even to herself. The Sheriff was a handsome man, always quick with a smile or a laugh. He tugged on her braids when he said hello and he always had an orange or a piece of candy in his pocket for her. He even had a nickname for her, that no one else used and that she secretly loved – Sunshine (because of her bright blond curls, he said). He was the nicest man she knew and sometimes, when she was really feeling sad or alone, she wished she'd been born with him as her daddy and not Patrick O'Donnell.

Sheriff Adams was courting Aunt Maggie and Emily thought it would be the most wonderful thing in the world if they got married. Then the Sheriff would be her Uncle, and he'd sort of be like a father to her, too, the way Aunt Maggie was sort of like a mother to her. They made a handsome pair, him with his tall, broad shouldered frame and rugged

dark, good looks contrasting to Maggie's lithe, willowy form, fair auburn hair and pale blue eyes. There was a night and day sort of contrast between them that only served to make the spark of attraction between them so much more pronounced. Even little Emily was aware of it, though she was too young, of course, to put a name to it.

Emily thought her aunt was the luckiest girl in Hope Town, maybe even in the whole world, to have the Sheriff courting her, but sometimes Maggie sure didn't seem to think it was so great. Usually that was when the Sheriff gave her a hard time over their picketing. He warned her that it was a dangerous business and that they could get hurt. She countered that if there was that much danger from this place, it only supported her theory that it should be shut down. Emily had heard them arguing more than once over the saloon. Although the Sheriff didn't exactly disagree with them about the dangers of it, he had no power to shut it down. It was a legal business that, unfortunately, brought a lot of money into the town.

Emily was worried that Maggie's stubbornness on the issue and the friction it caused between her and the Sheriff was going to end their courtship. And that really made her sad, because next to her Aunt, the person she liked best in Hope Town was Sheriff Daniel Adams.

"Oh, no." The softly spoken words from Maggie's mouth made Emily stop in her pacing path and turn in the direction of her Aunt's gaze. The Sheriff was striding across the dirt road towards them, his handsome features set in a grim, determined line. And he did not look happy.

"Are you crazy, woman?" Daniel Adams grated when he reached Maggie's side. His gaze bore down on her and he clenched his fist involuntarily as he tried to control his worry and anger. "It's entirely

too hot for the two of you to be out here pacing around with those damn heavy signs on your shoulders! You should be inside, out of this sun!"

Maggie set her sign down and her hands flew to her hips. "You know perfectly well, Sheriff Adams, that we picket this sorry excuse for a business every day -- rain, shine, heat or cold! So why don't you just mind your own business and leave us alone?"

Daniel's eye's darkened and he noted with a brief stab of satisfaction that Miss High and Mighty O'Donnell actually took a tiny step back from him.

"You, Margaret O'Donnell, ARE my business. And I'm just looking after what's mine."

Maggie gritted her teeth and crossed her arms over her chest in a huff.

"You shouldn't be out here in this heat, Maggie," Daniel continued in a more quiet tone. He glanced at Emily and gave her ever-present braid a playful tug before focusing his attention back on her Aunt. "If you won't go inside for your own health, at least do it for the little one here."

"I...I'm okay, Sheriff..." Emily offered halfheartedly.

Daniel smiled at her and tweaked her nose. "You're a trooper, Sunshine, but I was hoping you'd be on my side here." He knew, of course, that she was. Poor kid. As much as he cared for Maggie, it made him angry to the point of distraction when he thought of how she was using Emily's loyalty in her own personal battle with the saloon.

Apparently Maggie heard the truth through Emily's false bravado, for she visibly faltered. "Maybe... maybe you could take Emily with you for the day? I'll just protest by myself today."

Daniel sighed. "It's not any safer for you to be out here in the sun than it is for her, young lady. You could just as easily succumb to the heat."

"Please, Daniel... I have to..."

"No, Maggie. You DON'T have to." He sighed again, unable to tear his gaze away from her

pleading eyes. Maybe if he didn't have to look into those big blue eyes he would find it easier to put his foot down with her. It was only for her own good, after all. But with her looking at him that way, he just didn't know how to say no to her. "Fine. I'll watch Emily for you. But only until noon. Do you hear me? At noon the three of us are going to have lunch at the hotel and then you two are going to go home. Do you understand?"

Apparently Maggie knew she wasn't going to get him to budge again and she nodded her agreement. "Thank you, Daniel," she whispered.

Daniel bit back a smile. He shook a finger at her. "You just remember what I said. Because if you're not at the door to my office at twelve-oh-one, little lady, I'll be back here so fast to turn you over my knee your head will spin. Got me?"

It wasn't the first time he'd threatened to spank her. Sometimes the urge to do it was so strong, his hand literally itched. But so far, he hadn't actually upended her. He wouldn't be surprised if one of these times she pushed him too far, though, and the threat became reality.

Maggie had the good grace to blush at his threat while Emily giggled into her hand at the idea. Maggie looked up at Daniel through lowered lashes and smiled shyly. "Don't worry, Sheriff, that won't be necessary. I'll be there at twelve, I promise."

Daniel nodded curtly and held out a hand to Emily. "Be good," he cautioned Maggie over one shoulder as he led his small charge away from the saloon.

Maggie O'Donnell spent the remainder of her morning pacing in front of the Dog and Horse Saloon, ignoring the menacing glares and verbal jibes of the men who passed by her on their way out after spending the night in one of the rooms above her. Some of the ladies who worked those very rooms peered down at her from behind their

curtained windows, frowning their disapproval at her efforts. Many of them had openly confronted her on occasion, usually in the afternoon after spending their morning catching up on their beauty sleep after a hard night's work. They didn't appreciate the threat that Maggie was to their livelihood. The only one who had never expressed a negative opinion against Maggie's protests was Daisy, the woman that Patrick had fought over the night he had been stabbed to death right outside the doors of the saloon.

In truth, Maggie felt badly for the women who worked above stairs at the saloon. She knew, or at least she hoped, that none of them would do so by choice and she knew enough of hard times to understand that they were only surviving as best they knew how. But even so, her brother had died over one of those women, and the alcohol and gambling he'd indulged in before moving on to her that night hadn't helped him any. Maggie was bound and determined to make sure that no one else in Hope Town had to suffer the same fate. She wanted Patrick's daughter to be able to grow up in a better place.

Maggie's eyes darted across the street towards the Sheriff's office, a smile playing across her face, as she imagined how Daniel must be trying to keep Emily occupied. He really was very kind to the little girl and Maggie knew that Emily just adored him. If things went as planned and she did marry the man, he'd be a very good father figure for her.

And that was really what Emily needed. Maggie knew that Patrick hadn't been a very attentive father to the little girl. It had always surprised her, because he'd been a surrogate father for her when they'd been growing up and their father had passed away when she was only eight. Patrick had practically raised her, and to this day she still saw him as her hero, despite all he'd done in past years to contradict that vision.

She always thought it had all gone downhill for her brother when Emily's mother, Songbird, had died in childbirth. It had been hard for Patrick and Songbird from the very beginning with her being half Indian. But when his true love had died, and left him a baby girl to raise on his own, it had been the last straw. After that, Maggie had watched her brother deteriorate, crawling deeper and deeper into the bottle, and being less and less like the boy she'd worshipped growing up. He'd gambled and spent too much of his time here at the saloon, and upstairs with the ladies of the night.

Memories of Patrick occupied Maggie's mind for most of the morning, until around eleven when John Miles, the bartender and proprietor of the Dog and Horse appeared at the batwing doors, his arms crossed over his stained undershirt, frowning openly at Maggie. She met his red-rimmed eyes unwaveringly, having long since resolved not to let herself be intimidated by the man.

"You here again?" he spat, his dark eyes roaming over her figure in her simple cambric dress. The hardened gaze narrowed and she straightened her back, reminding herself silently that Miles was just a cowardly little man, and certainly no one to be afraid of.

"Yes sir, Mr. Miles. Here I am, just like usual. Here I'll be till I see the man who killed my brother brought in to account for his crime. Good morning to you. I trust you slept well."

"Don't you get smart with me, young lady," Miles snapped. "Where's the kid?"

She hesitated, then wondered why she cared if he knew. "Sheriff Adams thought it best she be out of the sun and so he is watching her for me today." She deliberately left out the little fact that Daniel had also instructed her to be out of the sun at noon.

Miles snorted. "Why couldn't he take you with him?"

"Sheriff Adams knows that I have a mission here and he respects my right to carry it through."

"Yeah, a mission to shut me down!" Miles roared.

"Really, there's no need to shout at me, sir," Maggie scolded quietly, in a tone she knew from past experience simply irritated the barkeep even more. "If you were willing to help me bring my brother's killer to justice, maybe I wouldn't be so sure that this place should be shut down. If I thought you actually cared about your customers' safety...."

"Look, lady, it ain't my fault your no good brother liked to come here and get so blind drunk, he lost all the money he had playing poker. It ain't my fault he got involved in private matters between one of my gals and her gentleman caller. I don't know what happened that night, and I ain't about to go pointing my finger at somebody without knowing what cause he had to take his knife to your brother. And besides that, Miz O'Donnell, like I told you and the Sheriff before, I don't know for sure who it was that Patrick fought with. Daisy had more than one caller that night."

"You're protecting someone," Maggie openly accused. She'd thought it before, but had never actually spoken the words to the man, though she'd hinted it to Daniel before. "And I aim to find out who."

"I already told the Sheriff who Daisy's customers were that night. Daisy's been questioned herself. You got a lot of nerve accusing me of things."

Maggie shrugged. "We'll see, Mr. Miles. Like I've told you before, I WILL find out who killed my brother and then we'll see what your involvement in the whole thing really was."

Miles cursed under his breath. "I don't know why that Sheriff of yours allows you to make a fool outta him like this. If you were my woman, I'd make sure you knew your place and you wouldn't be meddlin' with my job and makin' me a laughing stock."

Maggie glared at the odious man. He'd said similar things to her before, even going so far one

time as to tell her outright that if she were his woman, he'd "knock some sense into her." She shivered inwardly, recalling the cold anger in his eyes that time. She never wanted to show it, but the man scared her.

"I'm not anyone's 'woman,' Mr. Miles," she replied evenly. Thank God, I'm not yours, she added silently. "What I am is the Sheriff's intended. But that doesn't mean that I suddenly don't have the freedom to stand outside on this sidewalk and express my opinion of your establishment."

"Humph. Well, you just watch yourself, Miz O'Donnell. I wouldn't want you to trip on those boards in one of your passes and hurt yourself."

She glared at his veiled threat and let out a held in breath as he turned and walked back inside the barroom.

Maggie sighed, and stopped to rest a moment, taking a drink of the warm water she'd brought along that morning. She wiped her damp brow and nodded at a few of the women passing by on the sidewalk. They carefully averted their eyes from her gaze and moved swiftly past. Maggie gritted her teeth and seethed. Those women were the wives of men who frequented this place and, in Maggie's opinion, they were highly likely to lose their husbands to an incident like Patrick's. Yet they practically ran by her when all she tried to do was be polite. It made her angry.

Newly resolved, Maggie plunked the container of water down and grabbed up her sign. There had hardly been anyone going into the saloon yet that day, as it was still early and not many of the saloon's patrons were ready to imbibe yet. But Maggie had just gotten a new idea of how to make her time on that hot sidewalk count for something.

"This business is a den of sin and danger, and anyone who enters is likely to be killed as my brother Patrick O'Donnell was in a knife fight three months ago over one of the ladies of the evening!" Maggie announced as she stomped across the

sidewalk. Now the women passing by were staring openly at her outburst, then quickly looking away and hurrying down the street, darting anxious looks over their shoulders. "You are doing your husbands and sons and brothers a grave disservice by not standing beside me in picketing this saloon and all that it represents. What will you do when your man is dead? Who will provide for you and your family....?"

Maggie's tirade continued on and she drew the attention of several on lookers as well as the shopkeepers across from the saloon. Miles stood behind the batwing doors listening to her with a dark scowl on his face, then turned abruptly on his heel and walked away. About ten minutes after she had begun, she looked across the street and saw Sheriff Adams standing outside of his office, his arms crossed over his imposingly wide chest, while he frowned across the distance at her.

She faltered for only a minute, before she found her voice again. But butterflies were darting around in her belly suddenly, and she was ever conscious of Daniel's eyes following her as she bellowed her warnings to the town and paced in front of the saloon. When she next dared look across the street at him, she could feel the angry heat of his gaze and she flushed hotly. She swallowed, and it sounded almost like a gulp.

She chided herself for being so nervous. It wasn't noon yet, she wasn't late for their lunch date. And she was only protesting like she always did. Of course, she knew that Daniel didn't approve of her protesting in the first place. He understood her reasons, but he thought it wasn't a safe thing for her to do, considering some of the unsavory characters that frequented the saloon and didn't take too kindly to her trying to shut it down. He also thought it wasn't something that a lady should be concerning her time with.

And from the looks of things, he didn't think it was very ladylike of her to be shouting out a tirade against whoring, drinking, and gambling, either.

She had a sudden, irrational picture in her mind of Daniel striding across the street, and yanking her face down over his lap for the famous spanking he was always threatening to give her. And when she dared a split second glance in his direction again, the picture suddenly didn't seem so irrational – in fact, she had a sinking feeling it had almost been a premonition. She actually shuddered.

But not simply because the idea of being put over Daniel Adam's knee for a hard spanking was frightening and embarrassing. But also because, for some reason she couldn't comprehend, a shiver of excitement stole over her at the idea, as well.

Chapter Two

Maggie was at Daniel's office door at twelve o'clock on the dot. She smiled warmly as Emily jumped up and began an animated recount of all she had done in their time apart, but inside she was cringing at the hard looks she was receiving from the Sheriff.

"...and Billy played go fish with me!" Emily finished.

"How nice of him," Maggie remarked distractedly. She tried to pull herself together mentally, and turned her gaze from her niece's face to Daniel's deputy, Billy Collins. "How's your bride, Billy?"

Billy smiled. He was a young man, a few years younger than Daniel's twenty-eight, and a year or two older than Maggie's own twenty-one. Maggie had always been fond of Billy, and was especially happy that Daniel had hired him recently as a deputy. She knew Daniel had his doubts, based mostly on the fact that Billy was so young, and also very young looking – he was baby-faced, as slim as Maggie herself was, and certainly didn't look like the kind of man a criminal mind would fear. But Maggie had confidence in him and just knew he would prove himself to Daniel, given time. Billy had recently married a sweet girl named Sarah, and Maggie and Daniel had shared their first dance at the wedding.

"She's fine, ma'am. Enjoyin' settin' up our home and helpin' out with the church picnics and such." He nodded towards Emily. "I was tellin' Emily that she'll probably see my Sarah at the schoolhouse in a few days. She'll be helping out the new teacher."

"Really? That's wonderful." Maggie darted a nervous glance at Daniel. "That's very forward thinking of you, Billy, not to mind your wife working. There's not many men like you that wouldn't take exception to that."

He shrugged. "Sarah's a smart woman. I know she'd go crazy sitting at home all day. She won't be working all the time, and once we start a family, she'll have our babies to keep her busy. But I don't have any problem with her helping out till then."

Daniel had settled his hat on his head and now stood beside Maggie. His back was rigid and his eyes were dark and hard when he glanced sideways at her. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"S-sure, if you are."

He nodded. "Be back in an hour or so, Billy."

"Okay, boss. Have a nice afternoon, ladies."

They walked down to the hotel together, with Emily once again chiming away, this time about her upcoming lessons starting at school. Maggie listened to her with half an ear, then nearly jumped out of her skin when Daniel grasped her hand and positioned it deliberately in the crook of his arm. She looked up at him in surprise and he inclined his head ever so slightly to the right. She glanced in that direction and saw John Miles standing out in front of his saloon, his arms crossed over his burly chest, openly watching them as they walked past.

Inside the restaurant at the hotel it was much cooler. Daniel seated both Maggie and Emily before sitting down himself. The tension was so thick between them, Maggie thought she was going to lose her mind. And poor Emily just kept looking back and forth from one adult to the other, trying to keep the flow of conversation going by herself.

They dined on thick cold roast beef sandwiches on buttered bread with potato salad and pickles. The lemonade was cold and sweet. But the meal tasted like ashes to Maggie. She concentrated on eating every bite and avoiding eye contact with the stern faced man who sat across from her.

"I'll stop by this evening after I get off duty," Daniel said after he had paid the bill and they were starting back out into the heat.

"O-okay. I'll save you some supper."

It was something they did often enough. Daniel would come by to see her and eat dinner. Sometimes he got there early enough to tuck Emily into bed. But this time, Maggie knew it was for more than that. Daniel was really upset with her about her tirade in front of the saloon. The only reason he wasn't already pestering her about it was because Emily was there. They both knew how upset the little girl got when they argued. So, he was going to come back tonight after she was asleep, and then he'd give Maggie the talking-to he had planned. At least, Maggie hoped that was ALL he planned to give her.

"Thanks." He once again placed her arm through his elbow, then held Emily's hand on the other side. He whistled a bit and Maggie felt his tension relax as he walked them to the little house they inhabited at the end of the street two blocks down.

When they reached the house, he tweaked Emily's nose and she giggled. "Draw me a new picture for my office, okay, Sunshine?" he asked. "I get tired of looking at the ugly mugs on all those wanted posters."

"Kay!"

Maggie watched her niece scamper inside with a sinking stomach. She turned slowly to look at Daniel and swallowed hard.

"And you, Maggie O'Donnell, had better keep your tail end in this house for the rest of the day. You're in enough trouble with me as it is for that show you put on this morning...."

"Daniel, it wasn't a show! I..."

"I don't want to hear it. We'll talk about it later, when Emily's in bed. I don't want her upset. But don't test me on this, Maggie. You don't want me to find you anywhere this afternoon but right inside this house, where you belong."

Humph! Where she BELONGED? She was tempted to disobey him for that comment alone.

But good sense overrode that emotion. Well, good sense, and the thing he'd said about her being

in trouble with him already. She didn't think she was in enough trouble to get spanked – he'd said he'd spank her if she didn't come in at twelve, not if she started hollering her complaints against the saloon while she picketed. But still, she didn't think she ought to push him any further.

"I'll see you tonight, Daniel," she said. "You'll find me here, nowhere else. I promise."

"Good girl. See you then."

Maggie stood on her doorstep and watched the tall, broad shouldered man walk away. What was she going to do tonight? How was she going to talk her way out of this one?

Daniel left the Sheriff's office in the capable hands of his night duty deputies at seven that evening and closed the door behind him with a weary sigh. It was going to be a long night.

As he started down the walk in the direction of Maggie's house, he happened to glance across the street and saw Hope Town's Mayor, Jacob Atkins, as he ducked his tall frame under the ceiling of the entrance to the Dog and Horse Saloon. Atkins glanced back over his shoulder sneakily, as if he actually thought that he was getting away with something when everyone in town knew that their Mayor wasn't exactly the model citizen.

Atkins always left a bad taste in Daniel's mouth, and not just because the man liked his whiskey and his women. There were all kinds of rumors about him and about how he had been elected. Daniel wasn't sure which of them, if any, were true; but he trusted his own instincts, which had always said there was something really dark about Atkins. Daniel didn't trust him a bit.

Thoughts of his upcoming confrontation with Maggie pushed aside those of Atkins. Daniel didn't want to fight with her, but she'd gone too far today. If she wasn't careful she was going to get herself hurt. For all her talk about how dangerous the

saloon and its patrons were, she didn't seem to understand that the danger extended itself to her and little Emily.

He intended to make sure she understood tonight. No more nonsense. If she was going to marry him, she had to learn that she had to curb her tongue and caution her actions sometimes. He knew she was not going to take kindly to being told what to do.

The house was warmly lit when Daniel reached it and Maggie was standing on the little porch, watching for him. Just as if she already was his wife, waiting for him to come in from work to the meal she'd prepared.

He climbed the steps to join her, unable to resist giving her a smile and a brief kiss on her forehead. She looked so uncertain of herself and of him, so worried. He wanted to take her in his arms and reassure her that she had no reason to worry. But he resisted the urge to comfort her, at least for now, until he'd laid down the law about her behavior today.

"Hope you're hungry," Maggie piped as she led the way into the house and down a hallway to the kitchen. "I had more time than usual on my hands since I was home this afternoon." She took a covered plate from the warming oven and removed the top to reveal chicken and dumplings smothered in gravy, and fresh green beans. After setting that on the table, she retrieved a second dish from the oven, this one housing a homemade cherry pie, minus two thick slices.

"Mmm-hmmm," Daniel nodded in approval, grinning widely. He chucked her under the chin and teased, "These are my favorites, you know."

Maggie blushed and turned quickly to grab a cup and the remaining coffee from the stovetop. When she turned back to him with his drink, she admitted, "Well, I figured it couldn't hurt..."

He laughed at that, and she blushed brighter.

"Maggie, we have to talk about this morning," he said a few moments later, his laughter gone.

"I know. But, please sit down and eat first while it's still hot. And maybe let me tell my side of things first, okay?"

"Okay." Daniel sighed. He settled himself in the chair and tucked into his meal, looking up expectantly at Maggie to begin.

She faltered at first, then started. "I guess you heard me protesting today, and I know you're not happy about it. I can't just let this go on like it has been, though, Daniel. Every day that goes by the man that killed my brother is out there, with more time to get away from justice, if he hasn't already! Miles won't tell us anything helpful, nor will that Daisy girl – and I KNOW they know something! I can't just sit around and wait for this guy to be caught! I have to DO something because if I don't no one else will!"

Daniel's eyebrows rose at that, but he kept to his promise and didn't say anything. He took another bite of chicken and stared at her, though, and Maggie knew she hadn't said the right thing.

"I don't mean that the way it sounded," she said quickly. "I don't blame you because you haven't found Patrick's killer. I know you've been trying. But I just feel like I have to try, too."

He was finished with the dinner by this point and was about to put his fork into the pie.

"Can you understand that, Daniel?" Maggie asked.

He studied her a few minutes, before slowly nodding his head. "Yes, I can understand it, I guess," he conceded. He pinned her with a stern look. "But you're going to have to get over it."

"Get over it? What do you mean?"

"I mean that today was your last performance. No more picketing, no more shouting to the people on the streets, no more pacing with your signs in the heat."

Maggie's eyes narrowed at the man across from her at the table, calmly eating the pie she'd baked while he dictated her actions to her like she was a child. Who did he think he was, anyway?

"Are you telling me I can't picket the saloon anymore?" she asked, just for clarity.

He looked up at her and their eyes clashed with fire. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

She laughed. This was crazy! "You can't tell me that! It's a free country, Daniel! I can picket if I want to!"

He shrugged. "You can picket, but you can't disturb the peace, and that's what I saw you doing today. And I'm telling you, if you do it again, I'm going to have to arrest you..."

"ARREST ME?!!!"

"...and spank you."

"WHAT?"

He was so calm about the whole thing. She wanted to smack him.

"You heard me. Don't shout so, you'll wake up Emily."

Maggie gnashed her teeth and shot daggers with her eyes as Daniel finished off his pie and drained the coffee. He favored her with a grin when he was done and stood up to clear his dishes away himself.

"Mighty fine meal you made there tonight, Maggie," he said.

"Humph!" Maggie crossed her arms over her chest and pouted openly, refusing to look at him.

"Come on, walk me out. I've got an early shift tomorrow and I think I'd best leave you be for the night so you can cool off." He took her hand and pulled her out of the chair, tugging her along behind him as he made for the front door.

Outside the moon was out and it was dark and quiet in the street. Daniel pulled Maggie against him, clasping his hands together behind her back.

"You know I'm doing this for your own good, right, Maggie? Yours and Emily's. What you did today was dangerous and foolish. All you have to do

is anger the wrong person and you could end up right next to your brother in the town cemetery. And I don't want that to happen. Now, do you?"

She swallowed hard, blinking back tears at the tenderness behind his words. She knew he was trying to protect her, she understood that. But at the same time, she also knew she wouldn't obey his orders.

"I know," she whispered. "But..."

He shook his head sadly and bent to give her lips a soft kiss. "No buts. You obey me or you'll be sorry you didn't."

She bristled at his tone. Happy to grasp onto the anger instead of the sentiment she was uncomfortable with, she snapped, "Is that what I have to look forward to as your wife? A lifetime of obeying your every command?"

The corners of his mouth twitched, but he didn't laugh. "When it comes to obeying rules about your safety and Emily's, yes. That is exactly what I'll expect of you when you're my wife."

"Humph! Well, maybe I shouldn't marry you then...."

A dark shadow clouded his bright blue eyes and the corners of his mouth now turned down in a hard frown. He stared at her like that for a few heart-stopping minutes during which she wished she hadn't gone so far with her foolish words. She hadn't meant them anyway, and obviously she'd hurt him with them....

And suddenly, before she even had time to realize what was happening, he shifted her body against him, tucked her under one of his arms and delivered a dozen or so hard, open-palm swats to her skirted bottom. He held her tight and easy in his strong arms, despite her struggles to wiggle free.

It was over in a flash, though she yelped and jumped and danced in his arms for all she was worth, unable to believe the sting his hand imparted to her covered behind. When he released her, she

stood before him, agape, rubbing her bottom, and unable to think of a single thing to say or do.

Daniel was visibly trying to rein in his temper. He took a deep breath and shook a finger in her face. "There's plenty more where that came from, so DON'T be pushing me, Maggie. I won't hesitate to give you what you seem to always be asking me for. I won't allow you to push me away so you can have your way, and I won't let you put yourself in danger anymore. So you think real hard on that tonight and hopefully tomorrow you'll find a way to keep yourself out of trouble."

He cupped her face and kissed her then, and despite the warmth in her bottom and the anger she felt towards him for putting it there, Maggie responded to his kiss with her usual fervor, more than her usual ardor, in fact. When he pulled back from her he grinned down at her arrogantly and chuckled when she blushed and quickly looked away.

As he turned and walked back towards town, Daniel wondered if maybe spanking Maggie on a regular basis wouldn't be such a bad idea. She'd always kissed him back, but never with quite as much enthusiasm as she'd just shown now, though he didn't think she was even aware of it.

Hmmm, now that was something to think on....

Chapter Three

Maggie tossed and turned that night, trying to make up her mind what to do. Part of her wanted to give in to Daniel's demands and simply step aside and let him do his job. She really did love him, and she didn't want to put any more strain on their relationship than there already was.

But, another part of her longed to do the exact opposite and march right over to the saloon first thing in the morning to defy him, simply for the satisfaction of doing so. It galled her that he felt he had the right to dictate her actions to her; and the spanking he'd given her under the pale moonlight still hurt her pride long after the sting had faded from her bottom. On some level, she hadn't really believed he'd carry through on his threats to spank her. Now that he had, it seemed almost imperative to her independence that she show him in the morning that he didn't make her decisions for her.

She fell into a troubled sleep somewhere around three a.m., and woke up around seven with a headache. She groaned at the cheery light streaming into her room and slowly levered herself out of bed. Emily was up already, and from the look on the child's face it was obvious that she harbored great hopes that she and her aunt would be spending the day doing something different from picketing. Maggie felt a deep twinge of guilt as she kissed her niece good morning. Emily was just a child and Maggie had been driving her so hard.... She made up her mind then and there, that she would no longer ask the little girl to stand and picket with her.

The decision that followed that in the next moment was that she wouldn't picket either. At least for today. She didn't really feel well, anyway. And for all the anger she felt towards Daniel for the high handed way he'd treated her last night, she did love him. She'd let things cool down some before she went back to her protesting.

Emily was elated when her aunt suggested, over a big breakfast of eggs, grits and warm toasted bread, that they make a trip into town to buy some material to make Emily a new dress or two for school. There wasn't a lot of money for extras like that, and having something new instead of a church hand down was an exciting prospect for the little girl. Maggie was pleased by her excitement and drew out the bills from her small stash of savings in the cookie jar by the stove.

The fresh air and cooler morning temperature helped ease Maggie's headache as she and Emily walked into town. Her stomach did a funny series of flip flops the closer they got to the Sheriff's office, and she realized that she was nervous to see Daniel again after what had happened last night. She blushed at the memory of being tucked so closely against his hard, strong body. The feel of his granite hand landing on her soft, round bottom made her skin there crawl in memory. She was grateful when they finally passed by the building and saw that his horse was not tethered outside, meaning he was away on business for the moment. Emily grumbled in disappointment under her breath at the same discovery, unaware of her aunt's relief.

The general store was surprisingly busy for such an early hour. Many of the housewives that milled the aisles looked openly surprised when they glanced up from their shopping and saw the notorious Maggie O'Donnell amongst them, instead of outside on the sidewalk in front of the Dog and Horse, sign in hand, as she had been for the past three months. No one said a word to her, however, and Maggie turned her attention to her niece, ignoring the women that she considered traitors to her cause.

"Which ones do you like?" Maggie asked, fingering several of the bolts of fabrics laid out.

"You mean I can choose?" Emily asked, smiling.

"Of course. You're old enough to choose the ones you like."

"Oh, thank you!" Emily's eyes were alit as she ran her small hands over the different colors. It took her a little while, but she finally decided on a pale yellow cotton and a white with sky blue flowers gaily strewn across it. Maggie called the shopkeeper, Mr. Evens, over and asked for lengths of the two bolts.

While they waited for their order, Maggie picked out some lace and buttons to go with the material.

Sarah Collins came up to them with a big smile, and started talking to Emily about school starting up soon. Sarah was the one woman in Hope Town who didn't treat Maggie like she had the plague, and Maggie liked the young woman very much. She was a tiny little thing, a bit on the round side, with an angelic face and the sweetest temperament; Maggie couldn't think of a single time she'd ever heard her say a bad thing about anyone. It would have been impossible not to like her.

Sarah was heading up a group of children with the new teacher and a few of the mothers that afternoon on a swimming trek to the lake and she invited Emily and Maggie along. Emily was excited by the idea, but Maggie was wary. She wasn't interested in receiving the cold shoulder from the other women there, even with Sarah in attendance on her side. She gave her permission for Emily to go along, and excused herself with the reasoning that she had to get started on these new dresses for Emily. She hoped that the other children would be kinder to her niece than they had been in the past. It had been hard for Emily to make friends because of the well known actions of her aunt, as well as for the fact that they knew, despite her light skin and blond hair, that she was part Indian.

It was while they were paying for their purchases and having them wrapped in brown paper that Hope Town's Mayor, Jacob Atkins, approached her with a smug, condescending look on his gristly face. Maggie grimaced inwardly; she disliked the Mayor almost as much as she knew Daniel did.

"Well, now, lookey here," he crowed, gesturing to her parcels as the storekeeper placed them in the center of a sheet of brown paper. "Looks like that man of yours finally set his foot down with you and has got you doing proper women's work instead of pacing the sidewalks and shouting your lungs off."

Maggie shot the odious man a look of contempt. "What's the matter, Mayor?" she asked sweetly. "Afraid I'll succeed and get the saloon shut down? Then what would you do with all your time, I wonder?"

Atkins' face flushed and he bristled visibly at her words. Maggie smiled to herself at the success of her jibe. Everyone in town knew of the Mayor's well-established forays in the saloon, but for some reason he insisted on believing that it was still a secret from everyone except those within the walls of the bar.

"The Dog and Horse is a legitimate, profit turning business, Miss. O'Donnell. You have no hope in getting it shut down, despite all your tirades."

"I wouldn't care to see it shut down, sir," she answered back calmly, "if I could just get some cooperation in finding the man who murdered my brother there. I would think that, as Mayor, you would want to see that killer brought to justice as well, for the safety of the town."

Atkins looked her assessing up and down, his beady little eyes narrow, but not missing a thing. The way he looked at her made Maggie's stomach queasy and she was aware of Emily inching closer to her. She put a reassuring arm around the girl's shoulders, hoping that she wasn't visibly shaking.

"Don't you go telling me how I should be doing my job, girl," he growled at her in a low tone. "Seems to me if you've got a bone to pick with anybody about finding your brother's killer, it ought to be with that Sheriff of yours. It's his job to bring criminals to justice in this town. Maybe you ought to turn your attention to pestering him, before someone takes exception to the things you've been

saying about the saloon and decides to shut up your big mouth for good."

Maggie gaped openly at him as he turned on his heel and strode angrily away from her. Had the Mayor just threatened her?

She glanced at the shopkeeper to gauge his reaction, but he was carefully avoiding her eyes. Emily was looking up at Maggie questioningly. She didn't have any answers, though, only questions. She gave the child a sad smile and her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, hoping it would be enough for the time being.

After lunch that afternoon, Sarah came and collected Emily for the swim outing. Maggie hoped her niece wouldn't be disappointed; she'd grown especially excited as the morning had worn on.

Maggie worked at cutting the pieces for the new dresses, trying to keep her mind away from the nagging memory of her encounter that morning with the Mayor. His attitude really galled her.

She was sleepy from her restless night, and the increasing heat of the afternoon only made her fatigue worse. Eventually, she set aside her material and scissors and stretched out on her bed. She fell asleep almost immediately, though the rest was not calming by any means.

Maggie dreamed that her brother was alive again, only this time he was the brother she'd known and idolized, not the embittered man he'd been when he'd died. One minute he was playing with Emily and Maggie in the cool waters at the river, splashing at them and rocking Emily back and forth in his arms while she shrieked and giggled at the threat of being thrown into the water. The next minute, the sunny summer day had fallen to a dark, gloomy night, and Maggie watched as Patrick stumbled out of the batwing doors of the Dog and Horse saloon. He was obviously drunk, and he was calling to someone, though what he was saying and

who he was saying it to Maggie was unable to tell from her limited view in the dream. But the expression on his face grew more aggravated and his gestures got wilder. Then from out of no where a fist flew at her brother's face, connecting with his jaw, and throwing him backwards onto the dusty ground. Blood poured from his nose as he blinked once, twice, and squinted as he tried to focus on his attacker. A knife came into Maggie's line of vision, though she still could not see who held it. Then, as if she stood on the sidewalk as a bystander, Maggie watched Patrick being stabbed to death by the unseen assailant until he lay still on the ground.

There was a piercing scream then, the first sound in the dream since the scene had changed to night. It was a woman's scream, and suddenly Daisy came running into the picture, kneeling beside the body of Maggie's fallen brother, cradling his head in her lap and sobbing. A few moments later, two large hands wrenched the whore to her feet from behind and she was dragged away.

Maggie woke with a hard start, her heart racing and her body slick with sweat. The bedspread was mussed from all the struggling she'd done in her sleep. She sat up in bewilderment and fear, trying to get a handle on what she'd seen, and trying to fill in what she hadn't.

Finally, after trying for nearly ten minutes to envision more of the assailant she'd only caught slim glimpses of, Maggie resolutely got to her feet and started for the front door. Maybe the dream meant nothing, but she wouldn't rest until she'd explored it completely. And that meant going and talking to Daisy, face to face.

Twenty minutes later, Maggie nervously peered over the top of the batwing doors at the entrance to the Dog and Horse, scanning the dimly lit interior for signs of the little blond named Daisy. As it was mid afternoon, the early drinkers were inside and

some of the ladies had already come downstairs to start to cuddle up to the customers. But so far, Maggie hadn't spotted Daisy among them.

She was drawing quite a few looks, however, from the men inside who noticed her poking her nose over the doors and looking around. One of them finally motioned to John Miles, who was behind the bar, and Maggie swallowed back on her fear as the burly man gave a visible sigh and ambled over in her direction with a frown.

"What the hell are you doin' now?" he wanted to know.

"I'm here to speak with Daisy," Maggie boldly told him. "Please send for her."

Miles' bushy eyebrows rose at her demand. "Daisy's still upstairs sleeping. She ain't due down here till five, and when she does come down here, she's going to be workin' not talkin' to you. So you just run along now."

Maggie's eyes narrowed at his dismissal. He turned away from her and started back towards the bar. What was wrong with all the men in this town that they thought a woman should just sit on the sidelines and never ask a question, or even think of involving herself in something that wasn't cooking, cleaning or rearing children? The blood in Maggie's veins boiled with her Irish temper.

Before she was even really aware of what she was doing – and the enormity of it – she had flung the doors inward and crashed through them in pursuit of John Miles, her finger pointed angrily at the offensive man and her face contorted in anger.

"Just a damn minute, Miles! You can't just tell me to leave and actually think I'm going to do it! I told you I want to talk to Daisy and you are going to march yourself up those stairs and fetch her down here so that I can do just that!"

Miles turned so fast to look at her it was amazing he didn't hurt his neck. His eyes bulged at the audacity of the woman before him, the only woman in his saloon who didn't work for him. He

blinked at her in obvious shock, not having expected even her to go so far.

Finally he stammered, "I-I-It's illegal for a woman to be in this saloon, Miz O'Donnell. I t-t-think you'd better leave."

Maggie got right up in Miles' face and stood on her tiptoes so that she was nearly nose to nose. "I'm not leaving until I talk to Daisy!" she shouted.

"MAGGIE!"

Maggie jumped at the thundering sound of Daniel's voice and she peeked over her shoulder to see him standing just inside the doorway, his hands on his lean hips and the fiercest expression on his handsome face. Maggie cringed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, woman?"

Maggie forced a steadying breath of air into her lungs, straightened her back and met her fiancé's gaze straight on. "I'm here to speak with Daisy. I asked Mr. Miles to summon her, but he refused."

"So you just barged in here on your own?"

Maggie blinked. "Well, yes, I followed him in...."

Daniel shook his head in obvious disbelief, then glanced around at their avidly watching audience. "It's illegal for you to be in here, Maggie," he told her quietly.

"I know," Maggie admitted. She had known, but the knowledge hadn't been any match for her temper a few moments ago.

"Well, then, you also know that I have to arrest you."

"WHAT!?"

There was a spattering of laughter and elbowing among the patrons of the barroom and Miles smiled smugly behind her.

Daniel took a step towards her and held out his hand. "Come along now, Maggie. I don't want to have to handcuff you."

Maggie slapped at his extended hand and backed away a step, then two, then three. It wasn't long before she was running from her fiancé, up the

set of stairs leading to the second floor, which was the only way she could think to go. Laughter followed them up the stairs as Daniel gave chase and then finally snagged a handful of her skirt in one hand and twisted her around in his arms, stopping her flight.

"That's enough, Maggie," he growled, staring down into her eyes. She could feel his heart beating and the hot energy of his anger as he pressed her against his body.

"I only want to talk to Daisy," she tried one last time, stomping one foot in frustration. She glanced around her, hoping that she might see the woman peeking out of the door of her bedroom to see what all the commotion was over. But no such luck. All she got for her words was a rough shake from Daniel.

"I don't know what's gotten into you, young lady, but I'm going to find out." Daniel started moving towards the stairs, pulling her along in tow, but she dug her heels in and twisted her arm free. He cursed as he turned once more and chased her down the hallway.

This time when he caught her, he didn't take any chances on losing her again. He turned her around, grabbed her around the back of the knees, and flung her up over one shoulder.

"Hey! Let me go!" Maggie screamed, kicking and flailing about over his shoulder as he strode with deadly purpose down the stairs and through the barroom full of amused customers. Sunlight fell over them as he walked out onto the sidewalk and across the street, easily handling the shrieking woman who beat his back with her balled fists and called him every dirty name she had ever heard in her lifetime.

"You're making a scene, Maggie," he told her. His voice was so quiet and calm it was surprising that she could even hear him over all the noise she was making. His hand sliced up through the air and

cracked across her backside twice when she responded by calling him a son of a bitch.

"You can call ME anything you like, lady, but you'd best be leaving my mother out of it," he warned.

At the door to the Sheriff's office, a shocked looking Billy Collins was standing outside, holding the door open for his boss and watching, as most of the town was, as the scene unfolded. Daniel nodded his thanks to the young man as he walked through the door, then turned to him and said, "Open the cell, please, Bill."

"WHAT!?" Maggie shouted, twisting around over Daniel's shoulder to watch as Billy followed the order and swung the metal, barred door open on its well-oiled hinges. "No! Daniel, you can't do this! Put me down!" But to her horror, Daniel simply walked through the open door, carting her with him of course, and asked Billy to close the door behind them.

Only when they were inside the locked cell did he finally set her on her feet. Lightheaded from hanging upside down, Maggie swayed a bit and grudgingly accepted Daniel's steadying hand.

"Billy, just leave those keys there on the floor outside the cell," Daniel instructed. He had unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and was rolling them up to his elbows as he spoke. "And if you don't mind, I need some time alone to talk to my intended here."

Billy looked sheepish and he glanced apologetically at Maggie. "Sure, boss. I'll just stand outside till you give me the word to come back in."

"Good man. Thanks."

Daniel waited till his deputy had left the room before he turned to Maggie and pinned her with the hardest look she'd ever faced from him, or from anyone for that matter.

"Now then, Margaret Anne. Let's start with one simple question. What did I tell you would happen the next time you went near that saloon and made a scene?"

Chapter Four

"Maggie. I asked you a question."

Maggie made a face at Daniel and folded her arms over her chest. She hesitated a moment more, receiving a warning look from her intended, before sighing and finally answering. "You said you'd spank me."

"That's right." Daniel studied her quietly for a moment while she squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze. "Did you think I was bluffing, Maggie? Even after last night?"

Maggie flushed at the mention of last night and the memories that rushed through her mind. "I...I...don't know, Daniel..."

"Well," he drawled, finishing the rolling of his shirtsleeves now, "I KNOW that I'm going to spank you. Just like I promised you. I think it's long past due. And you seem to need some reassurance from me that I don't make idle promises." He sat down on the edge of the bunk and crooked one long, tan finger at her. "Now, come here."

Maggie stared at him a moment before slowly shaking her head at him. He didn't actually expect her to simply walk over there and place herself over his lap for punishment, did he? She couldn't do that!

"Margaret, if I have to come and get you, it will be worse..."

She frowned at him. "Daniel, come on. I'm not a child, and you can't just spank me like one! I'm a grown woman!"

Daniel shook his head. "You act like a child, Maggie, far too often. But regardless, darlin', you should know that in my opinion, you won't ever get too big for a spanking. Not as long as I am your husband."

She put her nose in the air at him and sniffed in disdain. "You're NOT my husband."

He chuckled. "No, not yet, but soon I will be, won't I?"

"I wouldn't be so sure of yourself if I were you," Maggie said, though she couldn't look him in the eye when she spoke. "I don't know why I should agree to marry you if all you're going to do for the rest of our lives is spank me all the time."

Daniel laughed again. "You know damn well that's not all that I'm going to be doing, Margaret Anne. Now get your rear end over here, you're making my hand itch...."

Maggie backed away from him, looking about her futilely for an escape, but of course there was none.

Daniel just continued to sit and wait her out, watching her with an openly amused expression on his handsome face. "You're in a locked cell, sweetheart," he reminded her – as if she'd forgotten! "You're not going anywhere except over my knee for a good tanning, so you may as well come on over here so we can get started."

A part of Maggie knew the dignified thing to do would be to give in and submit herself to Daniel's punishment. But something in her just couldn't make her legs move in that direction, and instead she found herself turning and running to the door of the cell, where she yanked and clawed at the bars, screaming for help and desperate to escape her fate.

There was a resigned sigh from behind her, and a moment later Maggie felt Daniel's hands on her hips. He banded his arm around her middle from behind and lifted her bodily off her feet, carrying her back to the cot while she kicked and struggled wildly in the air. He flipped her face down over his knee and immediately clamped her churning legs between his own to try to stay her flailing.

"No! Don't you dare!" Maggie was shouting, bucking her body and rocking from side to side, anything she could think of to dislodge herself from this position.

"Maggie, calm down," Daniel said calmly. He managed to hitch her skirt up to her waist despite

her struggles and she started cursing him as he searched under her for the ties to her drawers. "Maggie, you'd best stop fighting me. It will only make things worse if you keep struggling."

"You have no right to do this!" she shrieked. "Let me go, Daniel, right this minute!!"

Daniel's patience was growing thin as he continued to search for the ties and tried to keep hold of the jumping bean over his knee. Finally he gave up on the ties, took a fist full of her drawers at the waist and gave the soft muslin a hard yank. The resulting sound of ripping material was almost as satisfying to Daniel as the sight of Maggie's small, shapely, creamy skinned bottom peaking up at him from beneath the ripped undergarment.

Maggie twisted her head about to see what he'd done and let out a scream of outrage. "You beast!" she exclaimed, trying to shield her naked backside with her hand. Daniel gripped her wrist and, smiling all the while, pinned her hand to the small of her back. He pushed aside what remained of the ruined drawers, and pulled his arm back high above his head in preparation for her first smack.

"Daniel, please, I'm begging you, don't do this!!"
SMACK!

"Ow! That hurt!"

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!!

"Daniel, stop! Ouch! Ow! You're hurting me!"

"It's SMACK! supposed SMACK! to SMACK! hurt!!" Daniel's hand was a blur in the air as he brought it up and down on Maggie's unprotected backside, turning the creamy flesh to pink and then a darker red. He peppered her skin with hard, open palmed swats that echoed in the confines of the small Sheriff's office and had her hollering to beat the band. Daniel hoped that she wasn't loud enough that she was drawing a crowd outside, then remembered that Billy was outside the door to chase away any nosy townspeople.

"I specifically told you not to go back to the saloon, didn't I, Maggie?" Daniel demanded as he fired away at her reddening bottom.

"Yeeesss," Maggie hissed in answer and pain. She was hanging onto his booted ankle and no longer kicking and fighting as her strength was leaving her with the intensity of the spanking. She stoically fought back tears, sniffing pitifully as he continued with the lesson.

"Yet, back you went." SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! "And then you went INSIDE!!" CRACK! CRACK! "You know that's illegal!"

"Oh, Ow! Daniel! Please, stop! Oh, please...." Maggie pleaded. "I... I just wanted to talk to Daisy, and Miles wouldn't get her for me when I asked.... I have to talk to her and see Ow! Oh... I just want to find out what she knows about Patrick's death."

Daniel paused in his work, and rubbed Maggie's sore backside. "I already questioned Daisy," he reminded her. "She doesn't know anything."

"I know you talked to her..."

"Are you saying you don't think I'm doing my job with Patrick's murder case?" Daniel demanded angrily.

"No! Daniel, I swear it's nothing like that." Maggie strained to twist around to look him in the eye. It proved too difficult to do, being draped over his lap and all, and she flopped back into her hated position with a heavy sigh. "I had this... dream. It was very real, though. And ... and Daisy was there, in the dream, and she saw who killed Patrick. I just wanted to talk to her, and see if maybe she knows more than she said she did."

Maggie waited, bracing herself for Daniel to make fun of her for racing into town to confront Daisy on the flimsy basis of a dream. But he didn't say anything about that. He was quiet for a long time, though. What he finally said was, "If you wanted to talk to her, then you should have come to me and I would have arranged it for you. Assuming that she was willing to talk to you. What

you should not have done, especially after I told you to stay away from the saloon, was to go running in there and demand to see her." He gave her an especially hard smack centered over the lower part of her bottom cheeks and Maggie let out a yelp. "Understand?"

"Yes, Daniel. You're right. I'm sorry."

"You're in over your head with all the noise you've made about Patrick's murder," Daniel scolded further, punctuating his words with crisp swats. "You've been lucky so far that whoever did kill him hasn't come after you, just to get you to shut up."

Maggie accepted these final spanks with a fatigued grace, limply laying over Daniel's lap and jumping at each impact of his hand on her bottom. She just plain didn't have any more fight in her, and Daniel realized that she was nearing her limit, and that the lesson had, hopefully, finally sunken in.

"I want a promise from you that you will go home tomorrow and keep your nose out of this case. Trust me and my men to find Patrick's killer. I won't let you down. But I can't find the man responsible if I am constantly looking over my shoulder, watching out for you."

Maggie sniffled, laying her head on Daniel's knee. He had finally stopped spanking her, but the heat in her bottom was like an inferno and the sting was still pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

"I'm waiting for your promise, Margaret," Daniel prompted a few moments later. "You're not getting up from my lap until I have it."

"I... I promise. I'll be good. I'll stay out of your way."

Daniel helped Maggie to stand and she quickly arranged her skirt in the back over her reddened seat. She was unprepared when he tugged her to sit on his knee, however, and he couldn't help smiling at the grimace she made when her tender backside met unexpectedly with his hard thigh.

Daniel enfolded her in his arms and pressed a kiss on her forehead. He brushed her hair back from her face and turned her face to his with a hand on her chin. "I'm going to hold you to that promise, Maggie. So don't go getting any ideas, hear me?"

She nodded, blushing under his stern gaze.

"I think that now you know I mean business when I tell you I will spank you. And you can bet on it that I won't hesitate to give you another licking if you go back on your word."

Maggie lowered her eyes, and nodded again.

"Look at me," Daniel gently reprimanded. When he had her reluctant gaze, he smiled and gave her a kiss on the lips, brief but sweet and promising. "Do you know why I spanked you, Maggie?"

She shrugged one shoulder, finding it so hard to sit on his lap – the lap she'd just been bare bottomed over – and talk about this intimate topic with him. The only other thing she could think of that would be more embarrassing would be if they were talking about sex.

"You spanked me because I disobeyed you," she finally said when Daniel kept looking at her, waiting for an answer. "And you're afraid if I keep pushing things at the saloon I'm going to get hurt."

Daniel nodded, looking at her thoughtfully for a few moments after she spoke. Then he smiled and cuddled her to him again. "That's all true, but there's another reason I spanked you, Maggie. And I think it's important you realize what it is. I love you, sweetheart. I love you more than anything. And loving you means a lot. It means that I'm going to laugh, and play, and work with you, and it means that I'm going to listen to your problems and try to help you when I can. It means that when you're scared or sick or hurt I'm going to hold you and take care of you and wish that I could make it all go away. It means I'm going to make love to you every chance I get, and worry over our babies with you when they come along. I'm going to grow old with

you and sit on the porch in the evenings with you watching the sun go down.

"But, it also means that when you need it, Maggie, I'm going to scold you and I'm going to spank you. If you put yourself or Emily in danger, if you do something unsafe, or if you deliberately defy me on something important, like today, I will spank you until I think you have learned your lesson. To me, that's part of loving you. I wouldn't do it if I didn't love you. I hope you can understand that, and accept it. Of course, if you don't want to be spanked the solution is very simple – just behave yourself and I won't have any reason to do it."

He studied her quietly and waited for her response. Maggie didn't know what to say. A part of her was elated by the things he'd said – or at least, most of the things he'd said. She knew that there weren't many men out there who so openly expressed their love and she knew she was lucky to have one of them. But at the same time it was hard to just set aside her independent nature and, in a nutshell, say 'ok, here I am, punish me as you see fit.'

Of course, she also knew that a husband disciplining his wife was accepted, and expected, throughout their society. Daniel's idea of spanking her was really a much more gentle way of chastisement, considering the bruises she'd seen some of the local women sporting when they had a row with their husbands. She knew that Daniel would never beat her like that, never really hurt her in a lasting way. What small hurt he did give her, through a spanking like what she'd just received, would be temporary, and done out of love and concern for her safety and well being.

"Well, what do you say?" Daniel finally asked her when she'd been quiet for some time. He petted her long hair back from her face and kissed her forehead. "Do you still love me?"

She nodded shyly, after only a second of hesitation. "Yes, I still love you," she whispered,

sighing with pleasure when he pulled her into a tight hug. "I'm sorry, Daniel. Please forgive me."

"Of course, I forgive you." Daniel rubbed her back and patted her bottom gently as he set her back from him. He looked at her with a sad smile. "But unfortunately, you do still have to spend the night here tonight."

"What? In jail?"

Daniel nodded. "Unfortunately. The law says one night in jail for a woman entering the saloon. A woman that doesn't work there, that is," he amended with a chuckle.

"I... How... I can't spend the night here!" Maggie exclaimed.

Daniel fixed her with that stern look of his again. "You can, and you will. It's the law, and you will abide by it as everyone else does in this town. I won't have people angry with me and gunning after you because I let you off easy just because you're my fiancée."

"But... but what about Emily?"

"I'll collect Emily and I'm sure that Billy and Sarah won't mind taking her for the night."

Maggie looked like she might start to cry.

"Hey, it's only for one night," Daniel said gently, cuddling her against his chest again. "You'll be fine. It'll be over before you know it and you'll be back home again with Emily."

"Will you stay here with me?" she asked in a small voice.

"I'm not on duty tonight, honey," he denied her gently, wincing inwardly at the hurt look on her face. "You'll be sleeping anyway, I'm sure. Especially after that hard spanking I just gave you."

She sniffled and buried her face in his shoulder. Daniel held her tightly against him for a while, willing some of his strength to her and silently praying for the will to remain away from her for the night himself. He knew in his head that spending the night here alone would probably do Maggie a lot of good, considering that she'd have uninterrupted

time to think about what she'd done to land herself there, and what she had to do to prevent it from happening again. But in his heart, Daniel felt guilty for leaving her when she was scared.

Finally, after reassuring her that he would be there first thing in the morning, and telling her he loved her, Daniel left Maggie in the single cell in the Sheriff's office with Billy, and he set off for the lake to see Emily.

Chapter Five

When Daniel reached the lake, he knew immediately that the news of Maggie's arrest had already reached the group there. There was much talking behind hands and many of the children were laughing loudly and reenacting their own versions of what had happened. He cursed softly as he dismounted and looked around for Emily.

Sarah Collins came up to him, her dark brown hair flying behind her in tangles as she ran to greet him.

"Daniel!" she exclaimed, her innocent eyes wide. "Is it true? You arrested Maggie?"

Daniel nodded reluctantly. "Unfortunately, yes, it is."

Sarah covered her mouth in an expression of horror. It might have even looked comical if Daniel wasn't in such a foul mood.

"Where's Emily? I've come to collect her, and I was going to ask if you and Billy might be able to keep her for the night. Maggie will be out of jail in the morning."

"Of course, we'd be happy to help out," Sarah agreed readily. "I'm afraid I don't know where Emily is right now, though. Some of the other children were teasing her about Maggie, and while we were calming things down, she disappeared. I've been looking for her, but I can't seem to find her."

Daniel ground his teeth together.

"Okay, you go in that direction, I'll go in this one."

Sarah nodded and set off away from him.

Daniel passed by the curious, open-mouthed children in an angry stride, ignoring the impulses he felt to take a switch to their nasty little backsides for the way they'd made Emily feel. He plunged into the woods behind the clearing that surrounded the pond, and began calling the little girl's name.

He must have been calling for her some twenty minutes or so, and was just about to turn back and

check in with Sarah, in the hopes that she had found her, when he nearly stumbled over her. She was sitting with her back against a tree, her knees drawn up and her face buried in them. Daniel sighed with relief as he squatted down and ran a gentle hand down the silky hair that fell around her face.

"Emily, honey...."

The little girl looked up at him, her sweet heart shaped face the picture of sadness. Seeing that it was him, Emily launched herself into his arms, nearly knocking him over in the process.

"Shh, it's all right, Sunshine," he soothed, holding her tight as her tears fell anew, soaking his shirt. He awkwardly maneuvered her so that he could sit with her on the woodsy floor and he rocked her in his arms until she had calmed down some.

"Did you a-a-arrest Aunt Maggie?" Emily finally asked, once her sobs had subsided to occasional hiccups.

Daniel sighed. He made himself meet her eyes. "Yes, sweetheart. I had to. She went into the saloon today and that's illegal. She has to spend the night there, so tonight you'll be staying with Mr. and Mrs. Collins. But she will only be in jail for tonight and then she will be back home with you."

Emily cuddled against his shoulder and sniffled. "The o-other kids were s-saying that, but I didn't want to believe them. I said they were l-liars. And then when they wouldn't shut up, I went away."

Daniel rubbed her small, warm back. "I'm sorry that they were mean to you about it, honey. But you must promise me not to ever run off like that again. No one knew where you'd gone and we've been very worried about you."

"I'm sorry. I... I don't want you to worry about me...."

Daniel kissed her forehead and smiled. "I will always worry about you and your Aunt Maggie. I love you both. Just promise me you won't do anything to make me worry even more."

Emily smiled. "I promise."

"All right then." Daniel stood and offered her his hand. "What do you say we start back now? Mrs. Collins was pretty concerned about you, too."

"Okay." Emily took his hand and followed him, walking in his larger footprints to keep on the same path. "Daniel?"

"Yes?"

"Could.... Could I maybe stay with you tonight, instead of Mr. and Mrs. Collins?"

Daniel was surprised by the question. He didn't really have a place for her to sleep in the room he rented at the boarding house. But she was looking at him so hopefully. And when he took too long in considering, she looked away, her lip quivering, and quickly said, "N-never mind. It's okay..."

"No, I... Well, there's just not room at my place for us both. But.... Well, I guess I could stay at the house with you." It wouldn't be improper, since Maggie would not be there. And besides, with all the scandal Maggie had surrounded herself with, even if it was seen as improper, what could it really hurt now?

"Okay!" Emily sang. Daniel was pleased to see some of her sunshine returning.

Daniel stopped with Emily at the hotel restaurant and they shared an early supper together. Everyone in the dining room had their eyes on them as they ate and Daniel felt badly for the little girl, who was obviously bothered by all the negative attention.

At one point, Emily turned to an openly curious onlooker at a close table and demanded, "What're you lookin' at?"

Daniel bit back a laugh. When the offended patron looked to him to chastise Emily, he simply couldn't do it. He was sick and tired of all the people in the town himself. He shrugged and said, "What ARE you looking at?" He let his hard gaze travel the

room, touching on each table. It seemed no one wanted to cross the Sheriff for, one by one, the curious looks turned away from their table.

When Daniel looked back at Emily, she was smiling at him. "Thanks."

He winked at her and told her to finish her peas. She made a face, but scooped up a mouthful anyway.

As Daniel was paying their bill, Mayor Atkins came in the door and, spotting him, grinned obnoxiously. Daniel groaned inwardly as the odious man approached.

"Well there, Sheriff. I saw you made a fine arrest today. 'Bout time, if you ask me...."

"Mr. Atkins..."

"Yessir, that little hellion's been nothing but trouble to this town all along. She's been just asking for you to lock her up, with all that protestin', and then today, marching into the saloon all high and mighty like that! Just who the hell does she think she is?!"

Daniel's hands clenched involuntarily at his sides. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Emily was bracing herself for a fight, too.

"Atkins, you ought to watch what you say. I am planning to marry Miss. O'Donnell, you know. And Emily here is Maggie's niece. Neither one of us is interested in listening to you slander her character."

Atkins gave out a snort of laughter. "Character! Ha! She's got as much character as a common wh—"

Daniel's hand shot out as fast as lightning and fisted itself in the front collar of Atkins' shirt. The fat man's face turned red quickly as Daniel cut off his air supply.

"Listen to me, you maggot. I don't know what you've got against Maggie, but you're making me damn suspicious." Daniel gave Atkins a rough shake before releasing his hold. The Mayor gasped loudly for air and rubbed his sore neck with one hand. "You might want to shut your trap before I really

take offense at the things you say." He narrowed his eyes on the Mayor. "Because I promise you, if you're involved in any way in Patrick's death, I will find out about it. And then it will be YOU in jail, Mr. Mayor. Just remember that."

Daniel turned deliberately away from Atkins and placed an order for a plate of Maggie's favorite dinner items to be delivered to her at the jail in a half hour. He paid both bills, took Emily's hand, and pushed past the still gasping Mayor.

In the dwindling sunshine outside on the street, Daniel gave Emily's braid a tug. She was pretty quiet, all of a sudden. She surprised him by bumping her head glumly against his side.

"You okay?" he asked, putting an arm around her little shoulders. She nodded, but didn't say anything else. Daniel shrugged mentally. He supposed she had a right to be a little quiet and sad; it had been a trying day for her, for all of them.

Emily knew that Daniel could tell she was upset. He kept making silly jokes and trying to get her to smile. It wasn't working, though. All Emily felt like doing was crying.

They'd come back to the house that Maggie and Emily shared after supper and the Sheriff had brought in their big washtub and filled it with tepid water so she could take a bath. She'd gotten pretty muddy when she'd ventured out into the woods by herself earlier, and for once she didn't even complain about taking a bath. The cool water at the end of the warm day actually felt sort of good.

Afterwards, when she was dry and dressed in a long white nightgown, Daniel carefully tugged a brush through her tangled hair, then haphazardly rebraided the long curling waves. It wasn't straight or very neat looking when Emily checked it in the mirror, but she thought it was nice of him to help her anyway. Besides, she was only going to go to sleep.

She was a little surprised when Daniel grabbed hold of her and sat her on his lap. He tipped her chin up so she had to look at him – something she'd been carefully avoiding – and said, "Now, then. I want to know where all my sunshine went. What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Emily shrugged one shoulder.

"You remember what I said about Maggie only being gone for one night, right? This time tomorrow she'll be right here with you instead of me."

"I know," Emily assured him. She leaned her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat.

Daniel was quiet for a time. He stroked the soft hair at the top of Emily's head and she closed her eyes.

"Did the Mayor upset you?" he guessed after a bit.

"I don't like him," Emily admitted.

"Me neither." Daniel glanced down at her. "But I promise you, he won't hurt you or your aunt. I won't let him."

"I know."

Daniel smiled. "Okay." He nudged her so that she sat up straight. He poked at her ribs. "I could tickle you till you tell me what's wrong," he suggested.

Emily's lower lip trembled.

"Oh, Em." Daniel hugged her to him hard. "Honey, please talk to me."

Emily's tears fell unchecked, absorbing into Daniel's shirt. In a very small voice, she finally said, "I... I hate her."

Daniel went very still for a moment, then sat back slowly. "Who? Maggie?"

Emily nodded slowly. The look he was giving her made her think of the time she'd overheard him threaten to spank Aunt Maggie. Emily wondered if he was going to spank her now. He looked mad enough to.

"Emily O'Donnell!" he scolded and she winced at his harsh tone. "That's a horrible thing to say! I don't want to ever hear you say something like that again!"

Emily lowered her eyes as fresh tears filled them. "I don't really hate her," she amended. "I just wish she'd be like she used to...."

Daniel's gaze softened and he ran one hand through his thick hair. "You shouldn't say things like that, especially if you don't really mean them, young lady," he told her. "Imagine how sad Maggie would be if she'd overheard you say that." He tipped her chin up again. "Words can be very hurtful, Emily. You know that from experience, I think. So use them carefully."

Emily nodded, her face flushed scarlet. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Daniel stroked her cheek with his thumb. "You should know, Sunshine, that Maggie promised me today that she will stay away from the saloon and stop getting herself into trouble all the time."

"She's said that before," Emily reminded him.

Daniel nodded. "True. But this time, you and I are going to work together and make sure she keeps her promise. Deal?"

Emily smiled crookedly. "Deal."

Daniel chuckled when she stuck out her hand to shake. He chose instead to take her proffered hand and kiss the top, setting her off in giggles that were a balm to his worried soul.

"Okay, I think it's almost your bedtime," he said, setting her off his lap onto her feet and swatting her bottom playfully. "Why don't you go brush your teeth and I'll meet you in your room."

Emily ran to obey. She loved bedtime when Daniel was over to tuck her in. He always told the best bedtime stories, ones he made up himself, instead of ones from a book like Aunt Maggie told.

As always, once she was snuggled into bed, her favorite teddy bear tucked under one arm, Daniel

sitting beside her, he asked her if –she- wanted to tell the story to –him- tonight.

"You always say that!" she complained.

Daniel shrugged and gave his usual answer: "Just thought it would tucker you out faster that way."

Emily giggled and rolled her eyes. Maybe one day she would tell him her story, about how the Sheriff married the town troublemaker and they had a bunch of kids with a girl like Emily as the oldest. Maybe one day, but not tonight when things were so tentative between her aunt and the Sheriff. "No, I want to hear your story!" she insisted.

"O-kay," he agreed with feigned reluctance.

And so Emily drifted off to sleep, listening to the sound of her hero's voice.

Once Daniel got the little one to sleep, he was restless as to what to do with himself. He was too keyed up to sleep and his thoughts were full of Maggie, especially now that he had reassured Emily and taken care of her needs for the night. He wandered from room to room, wishing she was there with him, even if they were only arguing.

He was actually glad in a way that he'd wound up staying with the kid himself instead of leaving her with Sarah and Billy. It was about the only thing that kept him from riding out to the station to check on Maggie.

He told himself he was being silly. Maggie was a big girl and could survive one night in a jail cell. His place was always kept clean, unlike other cells he'd seen. She should be relatively comfortable. He'd sent her over a fine dinner, with all her favorites. And in less than twelve hours she'd be a free woman again.

Still, guilt gnawed at his heart. He remembered how scared and small she'd looked when he'd closed the cell door behind him. Her eyes had pleaded

silently the words she was too proud to say: *Don't leave me!*

Everything in that little house reminded Daniel of Maggie. He finally gave up all hope of finding a neutral room and walked determinedly into the bedroom he knew belonged to her. It was sparsely furnished, as was the rest of the house. Her two spare dresses hung on pegs on the wall along with a shabby shawl and a faded bonnet. Just for something to do, he folded one of the dresses and set it aside to take to her in the morning so she could change if she wanted to. As an after thought, he grabbed the large, wooden hairbrush from her dresser and wrapped that inside the dress. He had a niggling twinge of a thought when he hefted the brush in his hand, and made a mental note that it might just come in handy one day.

Finally, he gave himself up completely to his distraction by lying down on Maggie's bed. The pillow smelled like her and Daniel hugged it to him as he closed his eyes and hoped for some sleep.

Chapter Six

As Daniel walked hand in hand with Emily the following morning towards the Sheriff's office, they could hear Maggie hollering already from the inside.

"Let me out! Damn you!"

Daniel cringed at the shrillness of her voice and gave Emily's hand a reassuring squeeze when she sighed quietly beside him.

He saw Billy Collins approaching and paused to wait for him. He didn't exactly want Emily to see Maggie in the jail cell, and he wanted to have one final chat with his errant bride-to-be as well. Thankfully, Emily was more than happy to stay with Billy for a few minutes, and Billy seemed to understand Daniel's motives.

Daniel's night deputy, George Sims, was literally cowering behind the Sheriff's desk when he came through the office door. Maggie was in the middle of a loud tirade, blistering the man's ears with threats of what she meant to do to him for keeping her in that cell past her just sentence.

Upon seeing Daniel, George's face relaxed visibly. "Thank God you're here, boss," he said. "She's been at me since sun up to turn her lose."

Daniel noted with some satisfaction that when he turned to Maggie, she retreated a step from him and a faint tinge of color spotted her cheeks. He imagined she must still be feeling the effects of his hand on her backside from yesterday's lesson, though obviously not enough after the way he'd just witnessed her treating George.

Daniel folded his arms over his chest to add to the stern expression on his face, and stared at Maggie. "You've been giving my man here a hard time, young lady?"

The spots of red in Maggie's cheeks multiplied, though her eyes snapped with an angry fire.

"I was supposed to spend one night in jail," she defended herself staunchly. "Last time I checked, night ends with morning, Sheriff. And, if you check

out the window, I'm sure you'll see morning has broken!"

Daniel had to give her credit, she had some guts. "That's all true, Miss. O'Donnell, but George was only following my instructions not to release you until I came in this morning."

Maggie stomped one foot in her agitation. "So, here YOU are, Sheriff! Release me, dammit!"

Daniel shook his head. "Apologize to George first."

Maggie was so angry with Daniel, it was a wonder she wasn't cross-eyed yet. She glared at him and ground out through clenched teeth, "I will NOT apologize!"

Daniel shrugged. "Then you'll just sit in that cell until you do." And he turned his back on her and crossed to his desk where he sat down and began to fill out a sheet of paper.

Deputy George was obviously at a loss for what he should do. But he certainly knew better than to speak or act against his boss's word. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, shooting uncertain glances from Daniel to Maggie and back again. In the meantime, Maggie paced and fumed in her cell and Daniel wrote busily away at nothing while trying to fight a grin.

Finally, when Maggie thought she'd surely die if she had to spend one more suffocating second cooped up in that tight little space, she wheeled around, grasped the bars of the cell and snapped, "Okay, fine. I'm sorry, all right? I apologize for being so rude to you, George. I understand you were only doing your job." Her gaze swung then to Daniel and the frantic, trapped look she gave him made his stomach turn. He was out of his chair and on his way towards the cell door before she even asked, "Now, PLEASE, can you let me out of here?"

Looking almost as relieved as Maggie felt, George headed out, his shift over. The second the door swung open to the cell, Maggie plunged through it and headed right after the night deputy.

"Wait a second there," Daniel said, just managing to snatch a handful of her skirt as she charged past him in a bid for freedom. She turned unhappily back around and glowered at him.

"What?!" she growled

Daniel glared at her tone. "Come here," he said darkly.

Maggie didn't like *his* tone either. She eyed the door and hesitated, wondering what her chances were for escape.

"Don't even try it, young lady."

Maggie sighed and resigningly turned back to her fiancé. She trudged over to him with a pout.

"What?" she asked, this time much more politely.

Daniel gripped her upper arm in his hand and turned her towards his desk, which was as usual, neat as a pin and nearly bare. "I think you need a lesson before you leave. To help you remember that promise you made to me yesterday about behaving yourself."

"No! You already spanked me!"

Daniel clucked his tongue at her. He was standing so closely to her she could hardly breathe. He set the dress and hairbrush he had brought for her on the corner of his desk. "I spanked you for your behavior yesterday. Now I want to address this morning's behavior and give you some incentive to behave yourself today."

"What are you going to do, spank me every day so I 'behave'?" Maggie asked, incredulous.

He shrugged. "If I have to."

She sputtered angrily.

"Bend over my desk, Maggie, and pull up your skirt in the back for me," he told her, as if he was asking her to pass the potatoes at the supper table.

"No!" She stomped her foot and glared at him. It was bad enough he meant to spank her again already, but she'd be damned if she would take part in it so willingly!

"Do as I say, missy. Or would you like to have a ripped dress to match your drawers from last night?"

She huffed and glowered at him, her arms folded over her chest. She tested him a minute more, than hastily grabbed hold of the hem of her dress when he started to move for it himself. Blushing heatedly, she pulled the skirt up to her waist. Daniel couldn't help but chuckle softly when he saw that she still had her torn drawers on from the night before.

"Good girl," Daniel praised softly, huskily. At the same time Maggie's blood heated at the sexy timber in his voice, she also wanted to slug him. "Now bend over my desk, honey, and grab hold of the other side."

What choice did she have? She wasn't going to get out of here until she did what he asked. With a sigh, she bent her body across the width of his desk, turning her backside up for his attentions.

Daniel patted her bottom approvingly. Then he pushed the tattered remains of her undergarment aside, and scooted her forward even more, propping her bottom up still higher in the air. Maggie's face flamed with shame at the thought of what picture must be greeting her fiancé; in this position, none of her charms were hidden from his eyes.

He patted her cheeks again, making her feel so very bare and exposed. Then he moved to her right side, took a firm hold of her waist with one arm banded around her middle, and set off her spanking with a resounding SMACK! that fairly echoed in the small office.

Maggie yelped and squirmed under his firm hand. He only gave her a dozen swats, but each was hard and focused low on her bottom. When he was finished, her bottom was already fiery red and warm to the touch.

When she reached back to rub her seat, he gently swatted her hand away. "Oh, no, you don't.

You're going to feel every minute of this spanking, young lady."

She sighed. "Well, can I at least stand up?" she grumbled.

"Who said I was finished with you already?"

"Daniel!"

He chuckled and patted her bare cheeks again. She was beginning to hate that little gesture – it was rather patronizing, in a way.

"You'll learn, Maggie, that you get up when I say I'm finished with you. Now hush up so I can finish this spanking."

To her horror, he was reaching for her hairbrush. She squirmed and protested as he grabbed the heavy wood brush, pleading with him not to use it on her.

"Shh," he consoled, holding her easily in place over the desk even while gently rubbing her back as a way to calm her some. "Only a dozen more with the brush and we'll be done. It won't kill you, I promise. I think it'll do you some good, in fact."

Before she had time to react to that ludicrous announcement, that awful thing fell against her skin with a CRACK! that stung bad enough to make her jump. He didn't give her pause to even take in another breath before landing a twin swat to her opposite bottom cheek.

"OW!" Maggie hollered, stamping her feet in time with each smack. "Daniel! Stooopp!"

Daniel turned a deaf ear to her complaints, firing away the remaining ten smacks with the same determination as the first two. He concentrated once again on her sit spot, and used the brush in a sort of two-for-one manner, tapping lightly on the spot he was aiming for, then cracking it full force for each count. And so it went for Maggie, tap-CRACK, tap-CRACK, through all ten.

When he finally stopped, he set the brush back on the desk and stood back to assess her battered backside. When she moved to stand up, he tsked her and spanked her once with his hand. "Not until I

say so, young lady," he reminded her. With a groan, she bent back over to hug the desk once more.

It seemed like he studied her bare fanny forever, and it was all Maggie could do not to squirm or run from his gaze. And all the while, the strangest thing was happening to her.... She felt all achy and damp in her woman's place and... well, her nipples were hard as stones where they were pressed up against her fiancé's desk.

Finally, she felt his hand again on her bottom, this time stroking the sore skin. "I think that should do it," Daniel said, and his voice sounded strained. He patted her again, though this time it was a proprietary kind of pat that Maggie didn't mind at all... in fact, she kind of liked it, for some reason. "You can stand up now, darlin'."

She did, hurriedly dropping her skirt back into place. She could hardly even look Daniel in the eye, wondering if he knew her secret, if he noticed her erect nipples. Wondering why she felt that way after a spanking....

But he apparently didn't notice. He took a seat behind his desk and motioned to a chair across from him. "Have a seat. I want to talk to you a minute before you go."

She glanced at the straight backed, hard wooden chair he'd indicated with distaste. "No thanks. I'll stand."

Daniel couldn't hide the chuckle that rumbled from his chest at that. Which of course only angered Maggie all the more. "You want to talk, Sheriff, do it! Because in another minute, I'm out that door!"

Daniel sighed. "Obviously you need some time to cool off...."

"You try sitting in a tiny, cramped little jail cell all night long on a sore bottom..." She blushed to the roots of her hair as that personal part of her anatomy was brought up, even though she'd been the one to do it. "And then the next morning, when all you want is a nice bath and your own soft bed,

you get another spanking! See how much you like it, Daniel!!"

"Okay. You didn't like it, then behave yourself from now on and you'll never have to experience it again," Daniel said.

Maggie sniffled and folded her arms over her breasts defensively. "Is that all you had to say?"

"No, actually. I wanted to tell you that Emily had a tough day yesterday. The kids were really teasing her about you, Maggie. She was pretty upset by the whole thing. If you hadn't already promised me to behave yourself, I'd really be on you to do it now. That little girl's been through enough already."

Maggie looked guilty. "I agree. Don't worry about me. I will behave myself, even if only to make sure I don't embarrass her any further."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that." Daniel tipped Maggie's chin up with one finger. "Still mad at me?"

There was a softening in her eyes. Then she looked away from his gaze for a moment and found the strength somewhere – maybe by glancing at that hated jail cell again, or at his desk for that matter – to adamantly answer, "Yes!"

Daniel sighed. "Well, you'll get over it," he figured out loud. Maggie allowed him to press a kiss onto her forehead. Then he turned her around and gave her a swat towards the door. "Have a good day, Maggie."

Maggie snatched her dress and hairbrush off the desk and stomped angrily away from him, glancing back over her shoulder once to see the irritating man simply going about his work as if he hadn't a care in the world. Humph! Men!

Maggie threw herself into housework and finishing the dresses she had started to make for Emily. The little girl would be starting school in two days and Maggie wanted her to have the dresses to wear then. She wanted to make up, at least in part,

to her niece for all the embarrassment she had caused her.

Emily played by herself in the front yard while her aunt worked. Patrick had hung a swing from one of the sturdy tree limbs a long time ago, when Maggie had been just a girl, and Emily sat sadly on the swing for most of the day. Maggie felt badly for her, but didn't know what to say to ease her troubles, especially since she herself was the cause of them. So instead she vowed not to add to them anymore.

When she finished the dresses, Maggie set to work tending her small garden. The sunshine on her face and the warm earth in her hands felt heavenly after being locked in that jail cell for the night. Just recalling it, she felt a coil of fear tighten in her belly. She'd been positive that the walls had been closing in on her at times, that she couldn't breathe, that she would surely die in that cramped space, alone and scared. It had been horrible.

Daniel's reaction had been hurtful, the way he'd been amused by her demands to be set free of that cell. It certainly hadn't been funny to her at all!

And then to spank her again after he finally did let her out!

She sat back for a breather from her work and winced at the throb of memory in her bottom. She still couldn't quite believe he'd pulled her over his lap and spanked her bare backside the way he'd threatened to for so long. Then that morning, using her own hairbrush to paddle her again! But of course, she had the torn drawers and the sore bottom as proof that he had done those things. She blushed as red as a beet every time she remembered it and recalled the hard press of his body beneath her own, the wide, warm spread of his hand as it crashed down on her upturned, vulnerable flesh. He was a brute to have done that to her, she had decided. But somehow having decided that didn't help her stay angry with him very long afterwards. On the contrary, she'd all but

fallen into his arms for comfort, which he had provided quite happily. She also didn't understand why she spent so much time thinking about the spanking itself; she hadn't enjoyed it, certainly. It literally haunted her thoughts, more so than could simply be explained by the lingering soreness in her cheeks or by her anger at his high-handedness. Why would she want to dwell on something like that? It truly made no sense at all.

Oh, and then there were the strange, erotic dreams she'd had after he'd spanked her that night. Dreams involving kissing and groping, where she saw Daniel's hands on her breasts, between her thighs, and on the reddened skin of her backside, stroking every inch of her body while she... well, while she moaned. And cried out in pleasure. Those dreams –really- made no sense to her. Being an innocent, Maggie didn't know much in the ways of men and women and what they did together behind closed bedroom doors. The dreams she had had been mostly vivid flashes of images that Maggie couldn't understand or put together, but she was sure they –had- to be wrong. And when she woke from them, she had a heavy, damp ache in her womb, as if Daniel –really- had touched her there as in the dream. Just like the achy, warm feeling she'd had that morning after he'd spanked her over the desk.

She was actually beginning to worry that the events in her dreams were the imaginings of a demented, sick mind. What would Daniel think of her on their wedding night, if he knew of those dreams, she often worried. The only way she could calm her fears was to tell herself the dreams were only a product of the stressful, fitful sleep she'd gotten that night.

Maggie made herself put the dreams and those confusing emotions out of her mind and determined to keep her distance from Daniel, showing her displeasure with him that way. He'd be sorry soon and come to apologize!

Or so she thought.

But the next two nights, he didn't come. Not even for supper as he so often did. Of course, he hadn't told her he would be by – had actually said something instead about giving her time to cool off. But he'd never stayed away this long before. Not even last winter when Maggie had had the flu and was stuck in bed as sick as a dog. Despite accepted rules of propriety, Daniel had strode into her bedroom with tea and soup from the hotel restaurant and kept her company for a while with a deck of cards and his pleasant personality. When she had tired, he'd taken Emily with him into town so she could get some uninterrupted rest. She smiled now at the memory, wishing he'd come striding into the house this time as well.

The morning of Emily's first day of school, she wore the pale yellow dress that Maggie had made for her and brushed her long hair to a careful shine. Maggie could tell she was taking pains with her appearance and sent a silent prayer that her niece would not be snubbed once again by her peers.

Maggie walked her into town, but stopped when Emily did about a block away from the school. She smiled with understanding when her niece turned a questioning gaze on her.

"Why don't you go on on your own?" Maggie suggested so that Emily didn't have to feel awkward in asking.

"Thanks."

Maggie watched her walk a few steps away, before calling out to her. When Emily turned back and waited, she said, "You look beautiful today. Don't let anyone get you down or push you around. Kids can be cruel sometimes. But they forget, too."

Emily nodded and turned to continue on her way. Maggie hoped she was right in what she'd advised her niece.

When Daniel still hadn't made an appearance at the house two days later, Maggie walked determinedly into town that afternoon, planning to go to see him after meeting Emily after school. As it turned out, she didn't have to seek him out after all, because he was talking with Emily outside the schoolhouse when Maggie came walking down the street.

It wasn't the first time, certainly, that she'd seen Daniel joking and talking with Emily. She'd witnessed the way he easily brought a smile to the child's face before and she'd seen the love the little girl had for him in her eyes many times in the past. But that afternoon, for whatever reason, it hit her harder than it ever had before. And Maggie knew then, better than ever, that she, herself, was hopelessly in love with Daniel Adams. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she hadn't seen him for a few days and had really missed him. Or maybe she simply recognized the look on Emily's face as a mirror of her own feelings for the man.

In either case, the realization sent a storm of butterflies aloft in her stomach as she approached. And she was eternally grateful to Emily for turning and saying the first hello, so that she didn't have to.

"Hi, Aunt Maggie!" her niece fairly chirped. She looked happier than Maggie had seen her since the ill-fated swimming day and she knew she had Daniel to thank for it.

"Hi, sweetie. How was school?"

"Okay. The Sheriff just stopped over to say hi." The little girl seemed to take special notice then of the strain between the adults, and she suddenly cast her eyes aside until they snagged nearby on Sarah Collins, who stood just outside the schoolhouse doors saying goodbye to the students. "Oh! I almost forgot – I have to ask Mrs. Collins something!" And off she went, leaving Daniel and Maggie in awkward silence.

Maggie was a bit surprised when Daniel took her hand. She looked hesitantly up into his face, not

really sure what she'd find there. He was smiling gently at her and she suddenly felt like crying.

"You.... You haven't been by for a couple days," she said around the frog that had climbed into her throat.

He shrugged. "I wanted to stop by, but I figured you needed a little more time to cool off."

She nodded. "Oh." She couldn't think of anything else to say to him.

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked. He was grinning at her in such a way that it would have been impossible to say yes to his question, yet there was a vulnerability in his eyes, as well.

"No. Are you still angry with me?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Never was. Just worried."

She blushed when he chuckled then, and stepped forward to cup her cheek and kiss her mouth, right there in the middle of the street where only the other day he had carried her caveman-style to his jail, smacking her backside the entire way.

They were both too caught up in their happy reunion to notice Emily's thrilled gaze from the schoolhouse steps, where she had lingered after Mrs. Collins had gone back inside. Or to see a pair of much less friendly eyes, narrowed with hatred, watching from one of the windows in the upstairs of the saloon.

Chapter Seven

The hate-filled eyes slowly fell away from the lovebirds reuniting on the street below. The man who stood at the window in the upstairs room at the Dog and Horse Saloon turned at the low moan of pain behind him.

The whore, Daisy, lay in the middle of the rumpled bed, writhing in discomfort as she woke. His hard eyes roamed over her still naked body, noting with pleasure and pride all the places he had marked her. Just seeing the purplish bruising of her skin, the chafed rawness at her delicate wrists, the red imprint of his fingers where he had smacked her face not just once, but three times in a row, made his blood thicken with excitement. He'd been rough with Daisy, as usual, that afternoon, and he'd thoroughly enjoyed every minute of his abuse.

She whimpered pathetically now and shielded her eyes from the light with her arm. He snorted. Lazy bitch. God, he hated women. Not a more disgusting, laughable creature walked the Earth, in his opinion. Only useful for one thing....

Daisy woke with a start to a hard, searing pinch to her already tender, chapped nipple. She didn't have to open her eyes to know who her tormentor was. She groaned and willed her eyes to open, though, then immediately closed them again when she saw the demented, cruel face straining over her, the fevered eyes wild with pleasure and lust as he tortured her body further and kicked her legs apart.

"Look at me, bitch," he demanded harshly, and though bile surged into the back of Daisy's throat, she made herself obey him. She knew from past experience that if she didn't, it would only go that much worse for her.

He laughed at her as he hurt her, reveling in her pain and in the cries he cruelly wrought. "You're all

mine now, Daisy," he told her as he pumped violently inside of her, watching with a grin as she winced with each hard thrust. "No one can protect you from me anymore..."

She knew he was right. She faced that truth every day of her life when she woke up in the morning. But he never failed to remind her of it anyway, and somehow that made it worse, hearing him boast about it.

"And even if anyone did try to protect you, it wouldn't last for long. I'd get rid of them the same way I did that Patrick O'Donnell when he stuck his nose in our business...."

Patrick....

Daisy's eyes fluttered closed involuntarily at the mention of his name. He'd stood up for her when he'd discovered she'd been hurt. He'd fought to protect her, and had ultimately given his life in doing so. And she was still so terrified she couldn't even tell the Sheriff who it was that had killed him.

The man sweating over her slapped her hard when her eyes remained closed for too long. "You'll look at me, bitch, when I fuck you," he rasped. She heard the dangerous anger in his voice and prayed he wouldn't hurt her further. She willed herself to respond to him the way he liked, showing her pain and knowing that he got off on it.

Daisy endured somehow, as she always did.

But as he labored over her, it wasn't her overly made-up, too doll-like features that he saw. Instead the image in his mind was of the Sheriff's headstrong lady, Miss. Maggie O'Donnell. And his hands grew rougher and rougher on Daisy's soft skin....

When he finally left her later that evening, Daisy was sore and red eyed from crying. After he'd been gone for fifteen minutes or so, Lucille, one of the older whores came into Daisy's room with sympathetic eyes and a tray of food.

"Oh dear," Lucille remarked, clucking maternally at Daisy's bruises and the small cut she now sported by her bottom lip. "Sit up, darlin' and let me clean that cut for you."

Daisy liked Lucille a lot. She was so kind and she always checked on her after he'd been by. Daisy hadn't had long with her own mother, who had died when she was only four, but she'd always longed for one. Though the aging whore was an unlikely candidate, she was the closest thing to a mother that Daisy had ever really known.

After Lucille had cleaned Daisy up and sat with her for her meal, then helped her settle back into bed, she eyed her sternly.

"I'm tellin' Miles you're not working anymore tonight. And you, missy, are going to pay the Sheriff a visit first thing in the morning!" When Daisy began to protest, Lucille held up one hand to stop her. "Don't even start! I've heard it all before and I'm tellin' you, I don't care! If you don't go and tell him, I'll go myself! This has gone on long enough. I know you're scared of the man, but you owe it to yourself and to Patrick to put him where he belongs."

Daisy blinked back tears and nodded. Lucille squeezed her hand.

"Rest up, kid. I'll come by in the morning and I'll go with you to see the Sheriff."

After walking Emily to school, Maggie turned and strolled across the street towards the Sheriff's office, a basket of Daniel's favorite blueberry muffins with crumb topping slung over one arm.

She hadn't felt this happy or relaxed in a long time, not since before Patrick had been killed. After making up with Daniel yesterday, he had come over for supper and afterwards they had sat together on the front steps, looking up at the stars and talking about the future; about Daniel possibly leaving sheriffing behind so that he could work the fields

that had run wild behind the house. Maggie loved that idea, as she had often worried how she'd ever cope with being married to a man with such a dangerous occupation. Daniel had spoken of his wishes for a large family, which had made Maggie blush even as his words warmed her heart. He didn't want to be away all the time with his work, he'd told her; he wanted to be present to be a real part of his children's lives.

They'd parted late, well past any decent hour for an unchaperoned, unwed couple, and Maggie had felt a certain wicked thrill at the blatant naughtiness of their improper behavior. She'd giggled nervously, and with not just a little uncertain excitement, when Daniel had teased, "If I hadn't enjoyed the evening so much, I might have been inclined to teach you a lesson or two over my knee about entertaining fellows past decent hours." When she'd blushed and looked away, he'd laughed and chucked her chin playfully until she looked back at him. "But since it was me you were entertaining, and since I am a gentleman, I suppose I'll let you get away with it... -this- time." And while she'd stood there staring up into his warm eyes, imagining about -next- time, he'd cupped her face between his hands and seared her lips with a branding kiss.

Maggie had woken that morning with a head full of scenes from erotic dreams that she didn't fully understand, and with the memory of that kiss still on her lips. She'd tasted it, savored it, as she'd hummed to herself and recalled vivid images from her dreams, outwardly going about the mundane chore of making breakfast while inside she was fevered with her awakening sexuality. She'd mixed up the muffins for Daniel with a glazed expression in her eyes and a flush on her cheeks as her innocent mind attempted to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together.

Now, as she made her way towards the Sheriff's office, Maggie realized that for the first time in months, she'd woken and started the day without

one thought of Patrick, or the mystery of his killer. She'd simply been too happily distracted by other thoughts. A twinge of guilt struck her just as she lifted her gaze across the few remaining feet to the front door of Daniel's office.

And there, just opening the door and stepping inside, out of place in the early morning sunshine in their garish, brightly colored saloon dresses, were Daisy and Lucille from the Dog and Horse.

For a moment Maggie was so surprised, she stopped in her tracks and nearly dropped her basket. What were they doing going to see Daniel? One hardly ever saw any of the ladies of the saloon up before noon, let alone out and about!

A niggling feeling in the pit of Maggie's stomach told her what they were doing in visiting Daniel. Somehow she knew it had to be linked to Patrick's death. Although she hadn't pushed Daniel to let her question Daisy herself, Maggie still believed the girl knew more than she was telling, maybe even who the killer was.

After casting a few cursory glances around to make sure no one saw her, Maggie picked up her skirt and sprinted to the side of the building. She hunkered down below the open window behind Daniel's desk, careful to squat low enough on the ground that no one inside would see even a hair on her head, should the wind stir. And there, in the bright, promising sunshine of a new day, Maggie learned the truth of her brother's untimely death.

It was Daniel's voice that she heard first. "That's quite a shiner you've got there, Daisy. One of your callers get a bit rough with you last night?"

Curiosity got the better of Maggie and she dared a peek over the window sill then, nearly giving herself away with a gasp when she saw the black eye the pretty whore sported. Even through all her carefully applied layers of makeup, it was clearly visible, as was the cut along her bottom lip.

"Yes, sir," Daisy answered meekly. She was hardly looking at the Sheriff, staring instead at her

hands. All eyes in the room were fixed on her though, including Maggie's. Remembering herself suddenly, she quickly ducked back down behind the window.

"It that why you're here to see me?"

There was a pause. Then a different voice, that which belonged to Lucille, Maggie supposed, for she had never spoken to the other woman though she'd seen her before, encouraged Daisy gruffly. "Go on, girl. You've got to tell him."

After another pause, during which Maggie had to fight her impatience and the urge to rush inside Daniel's' office and demand answers, there came the mysterious reply: "It is and it isn't."

Outside in the dirt, Maggie stomped on foot in her frustration.

"What is, but isn't?" Daniel pressed. Maggie knew some satisfaction, at least, in the exasperation she heard in his voice.

"I'm here to tell what I know about Patrick O'Donnell's death," Daisy suddenly gushed. Maggie sucked in a painful gasp of air, then held her breath, waiting. "The man who beat me up last night is the man that killed Patrick."

"And who would that be?" Daniel asked.

"Mayor Atkins."

Maggie's head shot up over the height of the window at that. Thankfully all attention in the room was still focused on Daisy and no one saw her shocked, agape face hovering over the windowsill behind them all.

As she hunched back beneath the window, Maggie strained to hear the rest, which was now falling rapidly from the girl's lips:

"Patrick was always my favorite caller. He was kind and gentle and he always asked for me, extra special, over any of the other girls. Mayor Atkins always asks for me, too, though. And it wasn't long before Patrick's appointment fell after one of the Mayor's and that's how he found out how Mayor Atkins enjoys hurting us girls. The night he was

killed, Patrick was protecting me. He actually pulled Atkins off me and they'd gone outside to fight. But Atkins pulled his knife when Patrick had his back turned and he didn't even have a chance at a fair fight...."

Maggie's throat clogged with tears as she listened to the ones entwined with Daisy's words. Her brother had died trying to help the girl. The dream she'd had *had* been a vision of sorts of the night he'd died.

Bile rose in her throat, then, too, as she realized that a fight like that had to have been loud and witnessed, even if it had been in the middle of the night. People had been covering for the Mayor all along, John Miles at the top of the list. Although, she supposed she couldn't blame them based on what they'd seen and were most likely afraid would happen to them if they went to the Sheriff with what they knew.

She was aware of noise inside Daniel's office, of Daisy's sobs and of Lucille comforting her.

Then she heard Daniel's voice, speaking to Billy. "I'm going to go pay Atkins a visit. You stay here and keep an eye out for him in case he comes into town and I miss him along the way. Don't let him in the saloon or anywhere near Daisy. Between the two of us, I want that bastard in my jail cell before the day's out."

A few moments later, Daniel was striding out of the Sheriff's office. He swung onto his horse and took off down the main street at a gallop.

Maggie's heart was in her throat as she watched him ride away. She couldn't believe he actually thought to apprehend Atkins alone! The man was a cold-blooded killer. Of course, Daniel was armed, but she didn't trust Fate alone to see to his safety.

After only a brief hesitation, Maggie sprinted around to the front of the building. She released the tether on Billy's horse and clambered awkwardly up into the saddle. Her petticoat and calves were showing a bit, but she didn't care. With an

apologetic glance at the Sheriff's office, she kicked the horse off into a canter, barely managing to keep her seat.

It didn't occur to her until she had stopped back home to retrieve Patrick's old hunting rifle that she had promised Daniel and Emily that she would stay out of trouble. She grimaced as she recalled that promise, the harsh thudding of her bottom on the saddle a reminder of what had happened to her the last time she'd defied her fiancé. She grimaced as she recalled it, coming up quickly on the outskirts of Atkin's property. It was certainly too late now, she thought. And besides, what good was that promise going to be to any of them, should Atkins get the upper hand on Daniel and he need her help?

She saw the two men up ahead, in a cleared patch of lawn in front of the Mayor's house. Daniel was still astride his horse, and he had his gun drawn on Atkins. He was saying something to him that Maggie couldn't hear, but he certainly looked like he had the situation well in hand. She began to draw back on the horse's reins, thinking she'd sit in the trees and watch him make his arrest, only stepping in if he needed her. No sense in earning herself another spanking if it wasn't necessary.

But that's when it all went wrong. She tried to stop that horse, she really did. But she'd been riding him so hard and her experience was so limited on horseback. The fool animal rode right into the center of things, -then- stopped, right between the two men facing off against one another.

For a split second, all Maggie saw were the amazed, angry eyes of her fiancé. She didn't even have a moment to remember to reach for the rifle before a hard, ungiving arm banded around her middle and dragged her off the horse.

The cold tip of Atkins' knife – the same knife that had likely killed her brother – appeared as if by magic at the base of Maggie's throat as she looked up into his fearsome, cruelly smiling face.

And Maggie O'Donnell knew true terror for the first time in her life when the Mayor told Daniel to dismount and hand over his gun, and the Sheriff regretfully obeyed.

Chapter Eight

Billy Collins held the door open for Daisy and Lucille before leading the way down the steps outside the station. It had been over two hours since Daniel had left to go to Mayor Atkins' home and he should have returned by now. Billy wasn't about to wait around any longer and risk his boss getting hurt.

But first he had to make sure the ladies were safe, and that would mean getting them back to the saloon and extracting cooperation from Miles. Billy was prepared to take Daisy and Lucille to his own home, if necessary. He knew Miles had failed to protect Daisy from Atkins in the past, and he had also likely known the truth about Patrick's murder. If Billy had to, he'd set the women up at his place and leave his shotgun with them for protection. He had a feeling the older woman, Lucille, knew her way around a gun.

His purposeful stride halted abruptly at the bottom of the steps; the stop was so sudden that both ladies following behind him nearly collided with his back. For a moment he stared, dumbfounded, at the hitching post in front of the Sheriff's office where just that morning he had left his mount. The horse, a gentle but efficient little stallion, was gone.

While the ladies exchanged curious looks about his stricken expression, Billy looked up first one side of the street and then down the other. But as far as he could tell there was no sign of his horse.

He went closer to the hitching rail, motioning for the ladies to stay up on the sidewalk beneath the shade of the doorway to the office where one could hardly make out who they were from a distance. There were tracks in the dirt, easy ones that Billy could follow. And then he noticed the basket sitting off by itself beneath the window along the sidewall of the station. It looked familiar to him and when he looked inside he knew why. Maggie O'Donnell had made those same muffins as a gift to him and Sarah

when they had married. The basket must have been the second in a set because their muffins had been given in an identical one.

Billy cursed softly, slapping his hat against his thigh as he snatched up the basket and rejoined Daisy and Lucille. He supposed he knew who his horse thief was, then.

"Everything all right, deputy?" Lucille ventured.

Before Billy had a chance to answer her, a man and woman - both riding astride - rode up to the station. Squinting against the sun's glare, Billy looked up at their faces, both of which seemed familiar. The man grinned in recognition as he dismounted, then moved to help his companion.

"Billy Collins!" he said. "Last time I was through here you were still a gawky kid chasing after Adams. Looks like you finally hounded him into giving you a deputy job!"

Now that he could see the fellow up close, Billy recognized the couple immediately.

"Tristan!" He pumped the other man's hand enthusiastically and chuckled as Tristan's wife, Katie, made a loud exclamation of happy surprise upon seeing her old friend, Lucille, standing nearby.

Tristan James and Katie Jennings had come through Hopetown a couple years back looking for Katie's father who was running from the law and hiding out there by force with his favorite whore, Lucille. Despite the fact that the two had started out on opposite sides, Billy knew from the updates he received from Daniel that in the years since, the couple had actually married.

While the women chattered happily beside them, Billy urgently apprised Tristan of what was going on and his worries over Daniel and Maggie. Tristan was also concerned and decided immediately to ride out with Billy to lend a hand.

He interrupted his wife's animated conversation to briefly explain what was going on. Though Katie looked worried, she bravely accepted her husband's shotgun and promised to stay at the station with

the ladies herself. Billy felt a lot better knowing that Daisy would have Katie and Lucille to protect her, instead of relying on John Miles.

Billy purloined a second gun for Tristan to take and mounted himself on the horse Katie had ridden. Tristan waited only long enough to see the ladies back inside and admonish his wife to be careful, before leading his horse off at a gallop alongside Billy.

Maggie had never seen Daniel look so angry before. His hard gaze bore into her face as Atkins secured her hands behind her back with painfully tightened ropes. She looked away guiltily, knowing all too well that had it not been for her interference, Daniel would be well on his way back into town by then, with Atkins in tow.

Instead the Mayor had just finished tying Daniel's hands and feet to a chair against one wall of the interior of the cabin. Maggie herself was tied in a standing position to one of the posts of the bed. Daniel's chair faced her and Atkins soon explained to them why he had arranged them that way.

"I've had my eye on you for a while now, missy," he told Maggie as he roughly kneaded a breast, making her wince. "Imagine my surprise at you riding right into my lap. I couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried. I can have my way with you..." he wound his hand into the hair at the nape of her neck and tugged hard enough to make her gasp "...while Danny boy watches." He laughed darkly, shooting a triumphant glance over his shoulder at the Sheriff. "How's that sound to you, Sheriff?"

Daniel's face was a mask of cold fury. "If you hurt her, Atkins, I won't bother to arrest you and bring you in for a fair trial. I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"No, you won't, boy," Atkins growled, still twisting cruelly at Maggie's nipples. "As soon as I'm finished fucking your bitch, I'll kill you both."

"You won't get that far. By now my men are wondering what's holding me up from bringing you in..." Daniel's eyes slid slightly to Maggie's face and she flushed at the blatant look of promising retribution in his eyes. "It won't be long before they come looking for me."

"I'll kill them, too," Atkins mumbled, raking his teeth along the line of Maggie's neck that he exposed by pulling her head back by her hair.

Daniel shook his head, wincing as he heard his fiancée cry out in pain when Atkins bite down on her ear lobe. He jumped a bit in his chair, nearly going mad by the fact that she was being hurt and he was helpless to put a stop to it because he was tied up. "Damn, but you are one STUPID stubborn son of a bitch!" He exploded, hoping to divert Atkins' attention. It worked; the Mayor wheeled away from Maggie and crossed the short space to Daniel's side in two strides. "You think you can actually take on three or four armed men, MY MEN, all by yourself, and best them? You? You had to stab Patrick in the back to win that fight, didn't you?"

Atkins' answer to that was a hard punch in Daniel's stomach. The Sheriff groaned, hearing Maggie shrieking, "No! Don't you dare hurt him!"

He raised his eyes and gave her his best 'boy-are-you-gonna-get-it-when-I-get-you-home' look. Damn that woman! Didn't she realize he was trying to create a diversion here, delay Atkins from raping her and maybe help would come in time to save them?

Daniel turned his eyes back to Atkins who stood before him with clenched fists, waiting. "Little coward like you," Daniel taunted. "You beat up on helpless woman for fun, you tie me up so I can't even defend myself. What makes you think any of those skills are going to help you stand ten seconds against any of my men?"

Atkins' face was turning red and he hammered a few more hard punches into Daniel's ribs and gut,

then knocked his head back with a jab to his left jaw.

"Daniel Adams!" Maggie screamed. Despite the throbbing pain in his temples, Daniel grinned at her scolding tone. That sure was funny, hearing -her-scold -him-, for once. She'd figured it out, then, had she? "You stop this right now!!"

Atkins was oblivious to her comments. He smashed his fist into the other side of Daniel's jaw and said, "I'm doing well enough against you now, ain't I, Sheriff?"

"Like I said, Mayor. You untie me and give me a fair chance, and then maybe we'll see what you're really made of."

A fresh barrage of punches hit Daniel for that barb. He'd hoped Atkins might be moved to untie him for a chance at proving himself, but he supposed he should have known better than to guess that.

"You stupid ass!" He heard Maggie shout and the floorboards shook with a mighty stamp of her foot. "Keep your fool mouth shut!"

Daniel looked up at her, his eyes twinkling at the proud, defiant, angry sight of her. Her firm body was tight and erect, her breasts thrust forward since her hands had been bound behind her back. She looked mad enough to tear Atkins apart limb by limb with her fingernails, and still have anger enough to spare for him. But there was a softness in her eyes, a pleading and a regret there and he knew she felt guilty for coming here, and was worried sick that he was going to get hurt badly. Aw, Maggie, sweetheart, he thought. I love you, too.

What he said was, "I'll remember that later, brat, when I have you over my lap."

It was designed to snap her out of those negative thoughts and it did just that. The fire returned to her eyes and Daniel's grin broadened.

"There isn't going to be any later for you two," Atkins vowed. And his fist plunged up into Daniel's

stomach again, then slammed down across his skull.

Daniel's neck went limp and his head hung down against his chest. And it stayed there.

Atkins turned away from Daniel and ran his eyes menacingly over Maggie's body. He reached out and grappled one breast hard with one hand while the other grabbed her skirt and jerked it upwards.

A second later he was doubled over in pain, holding his crotch with both hands from where Maggie had just kneed him. He spat curses at her between sputtering coughs and delivered a hard cuff to her cheek.

"You little bitch..."

"What's the matter? Did a little woman hurt you, big guy?" Maggie taunted, even though she knew it wasn't wise to push the man. She was still tied up, after all, and the slap he'd just delivered to her cheek stung like crazy.

But apparently, Atkins was in too much pain to further hurt her, for now, anyway. "I'll fix you later, missy," he promised. "I wanted Adams to have to watch anyway."

He stumbled out of the room, still holding his crotch and cursing Maggie under his breath. Maggie watched him depart with wide eyes, hardly able to believe he'd left her alone. The second she heard the door open and close on the cabin, she frantically went to work trying to free her hands.

"Daniel!" she whispered harshly, hoping to rouse him awake. She stomped her foot and pulled fiercely at her restraints.

"Save your struggles for later on, brat," Daniel whispered. Maggie was so surprised to hear his voice and see him looking at her, she gasped. "You'll want your strength later to fight me when I blister your butt."

"You're conscious!" she whispered accusingly. "You were just faking it, weren't you?" She stamped one foot again, this time in anger instead of frustration.

"Well, I guess I don't have to ask if you're okay after that slap," Daniel remarked dryly, watching her face grow more animated by the moment as her ire increased.

"You scared me, damn it!" Maggie complained.

Daniel chuckled wryly, shaking his head at her. "-I- scared -you-. That's rich, even from you, Maggie."

Despite her anger and the dangerous undertone in Daniel's voice, Maggie found herself admiring the play of his muscles beneath his shirt as they rippled and shifted while he strained to break his bonds. When she glanced up into his eyes, she found he had been watching her watching him and he grinned, making her blush.

Deliberately, he misinterpreted that blush. "You ought to blush, little girl," he growled quietly. "If it wasn't for you riding in here like a city dandy on a green mount, I'd have your brother's killer in my jail cell by now."

Maggie closed her eyes briefly. "I know. It was stupid..."

"It was foolish and dangerous and unnecessary. Not to mention defiant." Daniel's eyes blazed across the brief distance between them and Maggie wished he would stop looking at her like that. "What happened to your promise to stay out of this case?"

"I...I overheard what Daisy told you at the station and I... well, I was worried when you came up here alone. I know I had promised to stay out of trouble, but I only thought to come up here in case you needed help. And then I couldn't get that damn horse to stop..."

"You obviously had no control over him at all," Daniel remarked. "You could have fallen off him and gotten hurt very badly, you know."

Maggie nodded. "I didn't think of that at the time, though," she admitted. She paused then, her lower lip trembling. "I was only worried for your safety, Daniel. My heart was in the right place."

His eyes caressed her face gently for a moment; there was a sort of begrudging understanding in his gaze and Maggie felt a surge of hope - for a moment, at least. Then he said, "Sometimes I think the only 'right place' for you, darlin', is over my knee."

Maggie gave out with a rather unladylike snort. "Will you stop talking about spanking me all the time?" she complained.

"Right now, it's about the only comforting thought I have," he groused.

Before she had a moment to respond to that, they heard a voice outside the cabin, and Daniel shushed any words she might have thought to say. It was a man's voice, one Daniel recognized; it brought a broad smile to his lips as he listened to the polite inquiry for directions to town.

While Maggie listened to the brief conversation outside with growing confusion, Daniel winked at her. That was the only way she knew things were all right when the scuffle began, and then the three gunshots ran out.

A few moments later a man strode into the cabin and came right over to untie her. He exchanged friendly hellos with Daniel, clasping hands in friendship once he had unbound Daniel's wrists.

"Who's this?" Maggie demanded and the handsome, tall man chuckled.

"This," Daniel explained with exaggerated patience, "is a good friend of mine, Tristan James. He's the Sheriff over in Springwater and I had wired him with a request for some help in finding Patrick's murderer." He turned his gaze to his friend then, and added, "From the sounds of things out there, I'd say you've already caught him."

Tristan nodded. "Actually, I just distracted him until Billy could get behind him. But the bastard fired at us when we tried to arrest him and I had no choice but to defend myself. I'm afraid he's dead."

"No loss there," Daniel mumbled. He watched Maggie closely. Her face was unreadable, but she had already started for the door. "Maggie, wait, you don't want to see that..." he began, but he couldn't catch up to her in time.

"She reminds me of Katie already," Tristan teased. Daniel only groaned.

Mayor Atkins lay in a sticky pool of his own blood under the hot late summer sun; Billy looked up in surprise at Maggie's appearance, then scolded her gently about seeing such a gristly thing.

"Don't waste your breath, kid," Daniel advised. He studied his fiancée quietly as she stood stock still over the man who had killed her brother. She didn't seem able to stop staring at him. Daniel swept her hair back from her face and gave the long tresses a gentle tug. It succeeded in getting her eyes to jump from the dead body to Daniel's face, at least. He took her hand then and pulled her along beside him towards his horse.

She was still in something of a daze, but Maggie didn't miss the gleam in Daniel's eye. They were safe now, Atkins was dead, her brother's murder was solved. And now Daniel was free to deal with her. She swallowed hard as he lifted her up into his saddle, clucking disapprovingly at how her ankles and calves showed when she sat astride. She found her voice and squeaked, "I can ride Billy's horse back..."

"Oh, no, you can't," Daniel told her. He swung up into the saddle behind her and added, "In fact, I ought to let Billy paddle you himself for taking his horse without his permission."

Maggie blushed scarlet at his announcement of her impending punishment, and exclaimed, "You wouldn't dare!" Behind her, Daniel had to hide a grin. At least he'd broken that lost, scared little girl daze she'd been in a moment ago.

"I -would- dare," he assured her, winking at Tristan as he mounted beside them. "What do you say, Billy? You want a go at her?"

Billy smiled gently at Maggie and shook his head. "Nah, Boss. I have a feeling you're gonna go hard enough on her for the both of us."

Maggie turned her head to stick out her tongue at Daniel and he chuckled. He rested one hand possessively on her hip as he took the lead, wanting to keep her gaze away from the dead body draped over the back of Tristan's saddle.

Just to ensure that her thoughts were as far from the grisly image of death as they could be, he gave her something else to think about as they ambled down the road, their bodies rubbing deliciously together.

"Watch out, young lady. Or you'll be likely to ride back to town slung face down over the front of my saddle while I switch your backside for you." When Maggie glanced nervously over her shoulder at him this time, he chucked her chin playfully and added, "And you -know- that I would."

Chapter Nine

When they got back into town, Tristan and Billy rode on to the Sheriff's station, while Daniel escorted Maggie home. He helped her dismount and walked her to the front door in thoughtful silence while she glanced apprehensively at his face, waiting.

He took both her hands in his when they reached her door and looked at her. Finally he spoke, with quiet conviction and authority. "I want you to go on inside and make yourself something for lunch. After you eat, go upstairs to your room and wait for me. Please take off your dress and shoes, but leave on your drawers and camisole. You won't be needing your clothes later anyway."

Maggie nodded meekly, swallowing hard.

"I'll be along just as soon as everything's taken care of in town and I have had a chance to calm down." He looked her in the eye for a few serious moments, making her heart beat accelerate. "Right now, Maggie, I'm too damn angry to deal with you and I don't want to really hurt you, so I'm going to take some time before I come back to get a hold of my emotions. Otherwise I would not make you wait, because I know it will be hard on you. But I know it will be better for you to endure that than having to face my anger right now."

Again, Maggie nodded. She couldn't think of anything to say, because he was right – as usual.

"I'll stop by the school and ask Sarah to watch Emily till I can come back later this afternoon for her."

"Thank you."

Daniel nodded. He gestured then towards the house with one hand, and turned on his heel to return to his horse.

Maggie went inside and watched him ride away in a cloud of dust. She felt so sad and empty inside, watching him go.

Finally, after standing at the front room window staring at nothing for a few minutes, Maggie resolutely turned away and went into the kitchen. Though she had no appetite at all, she forced herself to choke down a slice of bread and butter along with a glass of lemonade, because Daniel had told her to. She was determined to obey him, tonight at least, after all the trouble she had already caused. Maybe if she showed him she could be good, and that she accepted her punishment gracefully, maybe then there'd still be hope for their future together.

The next step in obeying Daniel was to go upstairs and take off her outer articles of clothing in preparation for her upcoming spanking. That proved to be a more difficult task than lunch had been and she found herself blushing furiously as she hesitantly unbuttoned the simple cotton dress, as if Daniel were still there in the house with her. She managed to finally strip down to just her muslin drawers (which suddenly felt entirely too lightweight and thin!) and her lace trimmed camisole. She hugged her arms and paced the room, wondering how much longer she was going to be waiting. It already seemed like he'd been gone an eternity.

Eventually the pacing and uncertainty wore too thin and Maggie wandered across the hall to the bedroom which had been Patrick's when he was alive. The room was in the front of the house, facing the street, and from the large window seat there, Maggie could watch for Daniel's approach.

As Maggie sat on the window seat, she remembered countless other times she had done just that, while Patrick was getting ready to go out, or shaving in the basin set out beneath the mirror on one wall. Her older brother had never seemed to mind her constant chatter as she told him of her day at school or the pond. She wondered what had happened to that big brother, the protector she had always run to in the middle of the night when thunderstorms frightened her out of her bed or

when a bad dream had woke her. The feeling of sadness settled further over Maggie's heart as she sat there, looking around that room, remembering other times. Even if they had found Patrick's killer, and even though he had gotten what he deserved, in her opinion, anyway, that still wasn't going to bring her brother back.

The sound of a horse's whinny woke Maggie from her reminiscing thoughts and drew her gaze below in time to see Daniel tethering his horse outside her fence. She watched him stride into the yard, looking much less angry than he had the last time she'd seen him. Yet he still had a determined set to his features and his stride was certainly purposeful as he approached the willow tree in her front yard.

With an eerie calm, Maggie continued to watch as her fiancé took out a pocketknife and cut down a switch from that tree. He tested it in the air a few times, whistling it back and forth, then smacked it against his open palm. Apparently it met his requirements, for he next set to removing the leaves and striping the bark from it as well.

There was a little voice in the back of Maggie's head telling her to run for her own protection. At the very least, she could try to hide – hiding under Patrick's bed had worked often enough for her when she was a child. But a more reasonable voice spoke louder, reminding her of her resolve to accept Daniel's punishment gracefully, and there was certainly no grace in running away and hiding. Her heart added its own two cents worth, by quietly scolding that Daniel would no sooner hurt her (in any lasting manner, at least) than he would Emily.

And so it was that Daniel found his fiancée waiting quietly for him in Patrick's old bedroom; her eyes darted nervously from his face to the switch in his hand, and back again. But she did not move, or beg or make excuses for herself. Instead she simply looked up at him with her heart in her eyes,

vulnerable and sweet and sad, and said, feeling stupid and foolish, "Hi."

Daniel set the switch that burned like a brand in his hand down on the bed and crossed to take his fiancée into his arms. "Hi, yourself," he said softly, resting his chin gently on the top of her silky head as she nuzzled closely to him.

He sighed. This was not going to be easy.

Maggie had not been far from his thoughts in the time he'd been in town. It had been all he could do to make sure things were settled at the station, that Atkins' body was properly taken care and that John Miles was brought in for questioning about aiding the cover up of Patrick's murder, before he had rushed back to her. At least the time had helped him calm down and, though he was still very emotional about what she had done, he felt he had those emotions under control.

But even now, they betrayed him a little as he spoke, his voice husky. "I'm so glad you're all right, Maggie. I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you." As a kindness, he didn't elaborate on the 'somethings' that could have happened to her. They both knew what Atkins had meant to do.

Maggie shuddered in his arms and tightened her hold around his neck. He held her in quiet solace for a while, hoping to lend her some of his strength. It was when she sniffled daintily that he first realized she was crying.

That really shocked him, because he realized then that he had never seen her cry before. Not when Patrick had died, not while they were being held captive at Atkins' place, not even when he had spanked her.

He drew his head back and wiped her cheeks with his thumbs.

"I love you, Maggie," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say to make her feel better.

"I love you, too," she choked out. Her eyes closed briefly before she continued, "I'm sorry, Daniel. I'm sorry I'm so much trouble and I'm sorry I scared you and almost got us killed. I... I want to show you that I can be good and ... and not be a problem to you anymore...."

"Shh, Maggie, you are not a problem to me!"

"No, I am. I... I want you to... I want to show you that I can accept your.... That I can submit to your ..."

Daniel had to smile at the way she was faltering. He knew what she was trying to say, and could have even finished the sentence for her but she was already blushing furiously. He didn't really want to embarrass her any further. This was going to be hard enough as it was.

He kissed her forehead lightly and squeezed her hand. "I understand, sweetheart. Come on, you can just show me now and we'll get it over with."

Maggie watched him with wide eyes as he sat on the bed. He moved the switch aside, and watched her, waiting. When she hesitated, he patted his knee gently, as if inviting her to take a seat.

She shuffled over to his side and surprised him by unbuttoning her drawers herself and pushing them down till they pooled around her knees. She was still crying silently, the tears tracking down her cheeks and dropping off her chin, as she climbed awkwardly over his lap.

Daniel praised her softly as he helped position her. He moved a pillow for her so she could rest her head, and he brushed the hair back from her face, thinking absently that if he had occasion to spank Maggie again, he should ask her to braid all that hair back beforehand.

"Ready?" he finally asked.

"Ready," she whispered.

Maggie sobbed throughout the entire spanking over Daniel's lap. He didn't hear her at first, but she grew louder as her time increased and as her

bottom grew redder. The sounds of her tears tore at Daniel's heart but he made himself be tough on her.

"When you make me a promise, Margaret Anne, I expect you to keep it!" he told her as he smacked her backside. "You are not to eavesdrop on private conversations, especially ones that occur in my office!" Maggie wailed under his ministrations. "You are not to take someone else's property without permission!" He renewed his efforts now, having nearly forgotten about Maggie taking Billy's horse. "You could have really gotten hurt trying to ride that animal!"

Maggie lay limp and miserable over Daniel's lap, jumping in response to each hard swat, but not begging or pleading for him to stop. She had promised herself that she would accept his punishment graciously and even if it killed her, she meant to do so.

When he finally stopped spanking her, her backside was hot and crimson. There were a few small bruises forming from where the edges of his fingers had landed several times. He smoothed a hand over her burnt skin and tried to find peace with the emotions warring inside him.

Should he stop here?

He hadn't planned to. He hadn't brought that switch up here with him for nothing, after all. He'd planned to use it, and well, too.

But he hadn't planned on finding Maggie in such a state either. He didn't want to over do it. And she had taken the spanking so well, already.

He sighed and gave her a little pat. "Stand up, honey," he encouraged, helping her a moment later as she collected herself and stood shyly before him. He stood as well and once again gathered her hair away from her eyes and wiped the tears from her eyes. "You are doing very well," he said, giving her a smile. "I'm very proud of you."

She was blushing and wouldn't look at him for more than a few seconds. He caught her chin in his hand and held her eyes as he told her, "We're

almost finished, too. I just want to make sure you have a lesson about putting yourself in danger, the way you did today with running into the middle of the fray with Atkins."

"It was an accident," she said feebly.

Daniel gave her a hard look, suddenly glad he hadn't decided after all to forego this session with the switch. "Maybe the horse getting out of your control was an accident, young lady, but you shouldn't have been there at all. You knew that it was dangerous just to go up there, otherwise you wouldn't have stopped first to grab Patrick's old gun, right?"

"Right," Maggie admitted reluctantly. Her eyes had found the switch where it lay in waiting on the bed and she was crying again. She looked up at Daniel and took what seemed like a fortifying breath.

"Come on over here, and bend over," Daniel instructed her, pleased with how she followed his lead and bent at the waist over the bed, her hands supporting her on the mattress. He patted her back and bottom affectionately as he picked up the switch and tested it in the air. Maggie's buttocks clenched in anticipation at the whistling sound it produced.

"Because you've been so good about taking your spanking," Daniel said, "I'm only going to give you twenty with the switch. Just enough hopefully to help you remember to stay out of danger the next time a situation comes up like the one today. I want you to think of this switching every time you look out at that tree in the yard, and I want it to remind you of how much I love you and want you to be safe."

"Okay," Maggie whispered in a shaky, scared little voice.

Daniel didn't make her wait. He brought the thin switch across her cheeks hard, leaving a red hot line across her bottom that made her screech and lifted her up onto her toes. He waited while she resumed

her position, then settled his hand on the small of her back for support and gave her the second stroke.

Again she screamed and jumped, a twin line of hot fire marring her skin. Daniel winced as he watched her throughout the switching, but he made himself lay each lick on with the same amount of weight and the same conviction.

Midway he paused and rubbed the raised flesh for her, giving her a breather as he praised her on her bravery. Then he settled into the last ten and met with his first resistance when she put her hands back on the twelfth stroke.

"Maggie, move your hands," he said.

She stomped her feet and sobbed. "Pllleeeaseee!"

"Honey, move your hands or I'm going to start over."

She hesitated only a moment longer before taking him at his word and moving her hands.

"Good girl," he said.

He made the last eight licks lighter than the rest, knowing how close she was to her limit. Finally it was all over and he threw the switch with all his might into the corner of the room.

Maggie was still in position, crying over the bed. She hardly seemed to notice as Daniel drew her drawers up over her hips and fastened them closed, though she did wince as the material passed over her bottom. He picked her up like an infant and sat her gingerly on her hip on his lap, where he cuddled her against his chest and told her how proud he was of her. She smiled a little at that, through her tears.

Daniel wished she would stop crying. But he knew all those tears weren't just because of the spanking. Something had broken in Maggie today and the emotions she had pent up for months now were finally being released. He held her while she sobbed and told her in a charged voice, "I'm sorry, Maggie. I wish I could bring him back."

It was some time before he calmed her down. Finally, he encouraged her to close her eyes and she was too exhausted to argue. But when he tried to move away and give her a pillow for better comfort, she fussed like a child and clung more desperately to him than before. Delayed guilt got to him and he gave in to her silent plea for him to stay, cuddling her close to him and thinking about tomorrow and the plans he had set in motion that afternoon. Maggie curled trustingly in his embrace, and he smiled wryly, wondering what she would think when he told her the news. She'd be surprised, that much was for sure.

He settled in and let her make a pillow out of his chest and the crook of his neck, while his arms became her blanket. She fell asleep that way, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

But then again, maybe it was.

When Maggie awoke, she was alone in the bed. She stretched and rolled over onto her back, wincing and hissing softly when her tender bottom made contact with the mattress beneath her. She stared up at the ceiling for a few moments, thinking of the cathartic release of emotions she had experienced in this room today, and thinking of her dead brother.

She addressed the room silently, thinking, "Goodbye, Patrick. I'll miss you."

A few moments later as she was about to get out of bed, Daniel shouldered his way into the room, a tray in his hands. "Hello, sleepyhead," he teased gently, settling the tray on the nightstand and lighting a lamp to chase away the gathering shadows.

"Hi," Maggie answered, feeling shy. "What you got there?" The food smelled good.

"Some supper for you." Daniel helped her arrange several pillows behind her, then laid the tray across her lap. There was a tall glass of milk,

and a plate of toast with butter beside scrambled eggs, mixed with ham and potatoes.

It was then that she noticed the lacerations on his wrists from where the ropes had earlier cut into his skin when he'd tried to free his hands at Atkins' home. Maggie grasped his hands just before he could pull away and gasped.

"It's okay, Maggie," he insisted, looking embarrassed. "It looks worse than it is, really."

But Maggie was ignoring him. In fact, she looked near tears again as she gently caressed the abraded skin and then tenderly pressed her lips to the angry red lines. Daniel sighed and allowed her ministrations, though he did softly admonish her, "Please don't cry."

She sniffled loudly and sat up straighter as if to scoff at that idea, and he nearly laughed at her. What a brat she could be! Her lips had moved to include his palm and fingertips in their wake, and he shuddered in the beginnings of arousal, even as he marveled over the idea of her showering kisses on the hands that had so recently orchestrated her spanking.

He finally had to stop her, or face real discomfort from his growing arousal. "Come on, sweetie. I'm fine, really. Eat up before your supper gets cold."

"Looks good," Maggie commented, releasing his hands and digging in with relish as she realized how hungry she was.

"It was. Not bad, anyway. I ate while you slept. I figured you could use the extra rest." Daniel watched her eat with pleasure.

"I think I like this idea of getting fed in bed," Maggie joked.

Daniel grinned, hearing a double meaning in her words that her innocent mind would never have intended. "Well don't get used to it, sweetheart. This is only because I thought you'd be too sore to sit at the kitchen table tonight. Tomorrow's going to

be a busy day and I expect you to be up and out of that bed first thing in the morning."

Her brow furrowed. "Why? What's going on tomorrow?"

He grinned. "We're getting married."

Maggie nearly choked on her food. Daniel chuckled and thumped her back as she coughed.

"You okay, honey?"

"Y-yes. Did you say married?"

"Mmm-hmmm. And about time, too, don't you think?"

One of her eyebrows rose at his arrogant tone. A little devil in her goaded her on and she said, "And what if I say no?"

"I don't think you'll do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm sure your little bottom's sore enough already."

Her jaw dropped for a moment. "Are you saying you'd spank me again, if I refused to marry you?"

"I'm telling you I'd blister you raw if you refused me again," he said simply, as if that was a perfectly understandable reaction. He leveled a serious glare on her and Maggie realized with a chill that he was not playing with her, not in the least. "How long have I been courting you, Margaret Anne?"

She swallowed. "I don't know.... A year?"

"At least. Long enough by now to marry you. And, by God, that's what I mean to do tomorrow, young lady. And you're not going to put me off, so don't start."

"Okay," she said, then giggled at the startled expression that crossed his handsome face. He looked fiercely angry with her again at the giggle, then grinned himself.

"Come here, you," he growled, grasping her hair gently at the nape of her neck and tugging her towards him for a searing kiss.

That evening, after Daniel had brought the child home, then left for his own bed, Maggie answered a hundred and one questions from Emily about the adventures of the day past and the mysteries of the day to come. She finally fell into bed, exhausted by the little interrogation, but too excited for tomorrow to sleep right away.

She tossed and turned, her mind full of frightful images from what had happened at the Mayor's home that day. She forced herself to push those thoughts aside and think of the future, and her wedding tomorrow. She had no idea what to expect, including what she would be wearing, but Daniel had said not to worry about any details, because he had seen to everything, with some help their friends. In the morning, she was just to be up and expecting visitors to come with everything she would need.

Unfortunately, thoughts of her marriage turned into worries about her wedding night, and Maggie soon realized it was going to be a long night. She sighed miserably, glad in a way that she would soon know the mysteries of the marriage act, and hoping that she would not shame herself with Daniel when the time came to learn about it.

Chapter Ten

The following morning, a knock sounded at Maggie's door just after nine. When she opened it, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Sarah Collins and another young woman stood on the other side.

"Good morning, Maggie!" Sarah practically sang. "What a glorious day for a wedding!"

Actually, Maggie thought it was a great day to go straight back to bed, so tired was she. But she forced a smile on her face and invited the ladies inside.

"Maggie, this is Katie James. She's Tristan's wife."

This time Maggie's smile was genuine when she turned it on Katie. "Your husband helped save my life yesterday. Thank you."

Katie smiled back. "I'm just glad we stopped by in time to help. And in time to share this day with you."

The ladies chatted over a cup of coffee while Emily ate her oatmeal and milk. When Maggie eased herself down onto the hard wood chair at the kitchen table, Sarah and Katie exchanged a look of concern.

"Are you alright?" Sarah asked gently. "That savage Atkins didn't hurt you, did he?"

Even though Maggie was shaking her head, she was still wincing a bit. Katie noticed how she fidgeted on the hard wood seat and recognized the aftereffects of a spanking. She'd certainly had enough first hand experience to know the signs when she saw them.

"If I had run after Tristan the way you followed Daniel yesterday, my bottom would have been toasted, too," she offered in sympathy.

Maggie made a bit of a face, while Emily nearly dropped her spoon as she put the meaning of the statement together with her aunt's obvious discomfort. Sarah looked stunned for a moment, then said, "Are you saying Daniel spanked you?"

Now Maggie was blushing and Katie giggled. "Of course he did. Look at her!"

Sarah stared now at Katie. "And Tristan spansks you?"

"Always has, always will." Katie laughed again at Sarah's shocked expression, then said to Maggie, "She's too much of a goody-goody. I bet she's never even been threatened with a spanking!"

"Billy would never.... He's a gentleman! That's barbaric....!"

Now both Maggie and Katie laughed. "Tell Daniel that," Maggie suggested.

"Not that he'd listen," Katie added.

After laughing some more over their men, and finishing with breakfast, Sarah and Katie showed Maggie the packages they had brought with them. Wrapped in the plain brown paper from the general store in town was the prettiest sprigged white cotton dress that Maggie had ever seen. It had tiny white flowers lined around the neck and lace trim at the hem and wrists.

"Daniel saw that and wanted it for you," Sarah said when Maggie looked up at her with questioning eyes. "I think it should fit you."

Beneath the dress was a pair of high button shoes, the kind that Maggie had never had the occasion to wear or the extra money to buy. There was also a new set of soft muslin curtain drawers, white hose and a white camisole edged in eyelet. Everything looked like it would fit her.

"Daniel asked us to help him find the undergarments," Katie offered.

"It's all so beautiful," Maggie said, still fingering the fine fabrics.

In a second, smaller bundle was a new dress for Emily to wear. It was made of pale pink cotton with a white lace collar and pearly white buttons down the front, and the little girl fell in love with the confection the moment she saw it.

"Did Daniel pick this out for me?" she asked.

"He sure did," Sarah assured her. "If you're going to be the flower girl in the wedding, you need to have an appropriate dress, right?"

Emily's smile could have lit up a dark night as she held the dress up to herself and twirled around. The three women chuckled at her obvious excitement, then turned to the matter of getting ready for the wedding.

It didn't take long, with Katie and Sarah's help, before both Maggie and Emily were dressed. They sat patiently while Katie pulled Emily's long hair back into a French braid, then wound it atop her head with two white ribbons peeking through. Sarah arranged Maggie's tresses into a fancy chignon, allowing a few teasing curls to frame her face. A couple small daisies were pinned into the upswept hair as the final touch.

"Well, you're almost set, I think," Sarah said, looking at her charges critically, then checking the timepiece she had pinned to her bodice. "And we're almost out of time, too."

"The dress is something new," Katie said, "And your bouquet has blue flowers in it." She found the clutch of wildflowers and held them out to Maggie with a smile. "I have this necklace that you can borrow..." She reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a slim gold necklace, from which a tiny heart dangled. "My husband gave it to me on our wedding day, so it had a story of love behind it."

"Thank you," Maggie whispered, a bit overcome by Katie's generosity when she had just met the woman. She tried to compose her emotions as the other woman fastened the necklace around her neck.

"And I have it on good word that you will receive something old during the ceremony, so I guess you're covered on that tradition."

Maggie nodded distractedly. She hugged both women warmly and thanked them for their help.

"Are you nervous?" Katie asked.

"A little." Maggie couldn't find the words to tell her friends that she was much more worried about what to expect tonight than she was about the actual wedding.

"Well, don't be. Daniel is a good man, both Sarah and I can testify to that. Even if he does spank you, it's just because he loves you!"

They giggled over that and some of the tension eased from Maggie.

Not ten minutes later, Katie's husband, Tristan, arrived driving a wagon to take the women and Emily to the church in town. They climbed carefully into the bed of the wagon and sat on sacks of flour that had been draped with clean cloths, mindful not to get dirt on their new dresses.

When they arrived at the church, Maggie was relieved to see that it was not crowded with people. When they got inside the small foyer area, and Tristan went in ahead of them to announce their arrival, it was quiet. She was glad Daniel had kept the gathering small.

Katie and Sarah gave her one last hug before going in to sit down. Emily gave her aunt a hug as well, and whispered to her how great this all was. Maggie smiled, knowing how happy this day must be for her niece who had loved Daniel like a father for so long.

When they heard the music start, Maggie drew in a deep breath and watched Emily precede her into the church, tossing flower petals along the aisle as she walked. After a brief pause, Maggie started to follow her.

She saw the guests first, confirming her earlier relief that Daniel had kept the gathering small. Only his deputies, their wives, Katie and Tristan James, and the preacher and his wife were present. Everyone was standing and watching her approach. Her eyes fell to Emily's back, and she concentrated on following her niece as a way to keep her nerves at bay. But when Emily reached the front of the aisle that play was blown; when the child began to

move to the side towards a pew, Daniel grabbed her hand and stayed her by his side instead.

It was then that Maggie looked up into his eyes, and her heartbeat accelerated about tenfold. He gave her an approving once over with his eyes and a slow, sexy grin that made her blush. In another five steps she had reached him and he immediately took hold of her hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze and winked openly at her.

The ceremony passed in a blur to Maggie, who was caught up in the realization that she was marrying this man, who she loved, but who would never hesitate to discipline her, hard, when he thought it necessary. It was a hard thing to bring herself to reconcile, and even though she didn't think, a single time, of turning and walking away from him, it was an internal struggle even as she stood there and listened to the preacher.

Then something happened that made her stop obsessing about Daniel's belief in spanking. He surprised everyone in the room by making vows not just to Maggie, but to Emily too. He turned to the child, and got down on one knee before her, then promised to protect, love, and cherish her for all of her days. He asked no promises from Emily in return, sealing his own vows with a kiss on the child's cheek.

The wide smile Emily sported afterwards tugged at Maggie's heart and she looked up at her soon-to-be-husband with a new understanding of him and of her love for him. Suddenly the fact that her future, and probably Emily's as well, would hold spankings from the man seemed much less important than the fact that the future simply included him -- because he was so special and so wonderful, and it would be surely a much less colorful world without him in it to share it all.

Maggie smiled like the woman in love that she was throughout the entire rest of the ceremony, all her worries forgotten. Even her concerns about that evening had retreated to the back of her mind, at

least for the moment. All she cared about was the promises Daniel made to her, and the ones she made to him. And she didn't even think twice when she promised to "obey."

After the ceremony when their guests all started down to the hotel dining room where they would share a celebration meal, Maggie and Daniel hung back a bit and lingered in the churchyard.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her slowly, sending delicious shivers through her. She giggled nervously when he ran his hands up and down her shoulders in response to the sudden chills.

"You're not cold, are you, darlin'?" he teased. "Cause I know lots of ways to warm you up...."

"No, thanks," she whispered, blushing furiously. "I'm just fine. Right as rain."

Daniel's expression turned serious for a moment as he gently patted her skirted bottom. "How are you feeling?"

She knew what he was getting at. "Sore. But also too happy to care."

He smiled and drew her further into his arms.

"Besides," she teased, "Katie promised to fetch me her spanking pillow from their room at the hotel so I have a soft seat at the meal!"

Daniel's eyebrows rose. "What is a spanking pillow?" he queried.

"Apparently Tristan lets Katie use it after she's been spanked and has to ride the following day."

"What a softie that Tristan is!" Daniel joked. He wagged a finger in his new wife's face. "I'll be a nice guy today, Mrs. Adams, and let you use that pillow. But don't you go thinking it'll become a habit! I expect you to feel the full effects of my spankings, and that includes the sore seat after the fact!"

"Yes, sir." Maggie agreed with severe formality. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome."

They cuddled a bit longer under the shady maple tree, thinking of the day. Maggie admired the ring Daniel had given her which had belonged to his mother and had been the "something old" Katie had referred to earlier. She thanked him for the beautiful dresses he had chosen for her and Emily and he told her he had never seen a woman more beautiful than when he'd looked up that aisle and seen her walking towards him.

They whispered between themselves and talked a bit of the night to come. Maggie admitted she felt nervous and was worried that she would disappoint him.

Daniel scolded her softly. "I know you are an innocent, Maggie. Don't be afraid. I'll be gentle and we'll go slow. I'll teach you what you need to know."

"I'm just mixed up about it, is all," Maggie whispered, shamefaced. "I have all these confusing emotions about it.... I've...I've even had dreams about it, a couple times before.... After you spanked me.... And I don't understand...."

Daniel couldn't help but smile at her quandary. Her body and its healthy reactions were still a mystery to her and he looked forward to helping her discover herself in that physical sense. He wasn't surprised that the spankings had brought about erotic thoughts in her mind, either. He'd certainly had similar thoughts himself after spanking her... plus he remembered that kiss she'd given him under the moonlight that first time he'd swatted her. No, that was no surprise at all.

For now, he kissed her forehead and rubbed her back reassuringly. "Don't worry about a thing, sweetheart. I promise you that nothing you could do or say will make me ashamed of you. I only want to please you. I will help you to feel comfortable and then slowly you'll come to understand everything that it so confusing to you now."

He was so easy to believe. She felt so much better now for having told him.

A movement to the right caught her eye and when she turned her head she saw that they were being spied on... Emily had been watching their whispered conversation from behind the front wall of the church. Maggie nudged her husband and pointed in her niece's direction.

"Humph!" Daniel said. "Looks like snooping runs in your family!"

After giving Maggie an affectionate swat to her backside, he turned and ran towards Emily, playfully growling at her. He caught her up in his arms easily and swung her about in the air as she giggled.

When he finally put her down, she hugged him round the middle fiercely and Daniel petted her soft hair with his large hand. His eyes met Maggie's across the churchyard and he winked at her.

"Daniel?" Emily said.

"What, Sunshine?"

"Remember how you used to ask me to tell the bedtime story?"

He grinned and nodded. "Yeah?"

"This is how mine would end."

He chuckled. "Mine, too, sweetheart," he agreed, tugging on her braid and putting out an arm to hug Maggie as she joined them. "Except today isn't the ending. It's just the beginning...."

Emily looked up at her Aunt and Uncle, smiling happily. Despite everything, it had finally worked out... and she couldn't wait to see what the future would hold for her and her family.

But, she reminded herself, she'd have to remember to be a good girl. If Daniel had spanked her aunt, he probably wouldn't hesitate to spank her, too!

She glanced back up at him as they started down the street towards the hotel. Well, she figured, she could live with that.....

