

*The Keeping of
Greg Wilson*

A Romantic Comedy



Ruth Ann Nordin

Montana Grooms

Novella #1

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To Tiffany Davis whose encouragement has been a huge blessing in my life. I'm forever grateful to you!

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Chapter One

Greg Wilson squinted through the pouring rain and waited. Another gun shot rang through the air. Just as he thought. Trouble.

He spurred his horse to action. Riding as fast as he could despite the soggy ground, he relied on the yelling and another gunshot to lead him toward the source of mayhem.

“I won’t go!” A woman’s voice traveled through the air, followed by an ear-piercing scream.

As he neared, the forms became more distinct. A carriage door swung on its hinges, and the driver in front leaned forward in his seat, blood dripping from his mouth. A priest held a young woman back while two men rode their horses along the plain, exchanging shots at each other.

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Halting his horse, he pulled the gun from his holster and yelled, "Halt right there! You're on my property!" He pointed the weapon skyward and let a shot ring clear through the Montana air.

One of the men glanced over his shoulder long enough to give his competitor the chance to shoot him in the arm. The horse neighed as the wounded man turned the reins in Greg's direction. His good arm raised, he pointed his gun at Greg.

Greg pulled his trigger and the bullet hit the target. The man clutched his chest and fell off the horse that continued to run along the open land.

Greg waited to see if the elderly man on the other horse would pose a threat, and when he saw him set his gun down, he relaxed. He slid off his stallion and approached the middle-aged priest who let go of the blond who wore a wedding dress which clung to her nice curves. His eyes grew wide. He recognized her. She was Patricia Dixon. He hadn't seen her since school. Time had been good to her. Very good.

He forced his attention back to the matter at hand. "What's going on?" he asked, keeping his fingers wrapped around the reins so his horse would follow him.

Patricia hugged him. "Thank you! You just saved me from a life of misery."

He pried her off of him.

"You're the answer to my prayers." She held onto his hand, though he tried to shake her off. Spinning to the older man who got off his horse, she said, "I choose him, Pa!"

Ralph Dixon scratched his head before plopping his brown hat back on. "Greg Wilson, it's good to see you again. How long has it been?"

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Irritated, Greg finally succeeded in removing her hand from his and placed his hand in the pocket of his denim pants. “I don't know. A couple of years?”

She squealed. “Oh, he’s so strong and brave. I do want him!” This time she slipped her arm through his and pressed her soft breasts against him.

He hid his annoyance at the spark of desire that traveled through him. Of all times to be interested in a woman! “Look, I demand to know what is going on.” He tried to move away from her, but she stuck to him like glue.

“You’re going to be my husband.” She smiled at him. “The priest is here, and my father will be the witness. We can do it right away.”

“No, we’re not.”

“We have to. If we don’t, then I’ll be forced to marry a man I don’t love. You saved me from having to marry John Meyer. One of his horrible men abducted me and wanted to take me to his home where he planned to marry me.” She closed her eyes and shivered. “That John Meyer is vicious.” She gave him a dimpled smile. “So I am all yours!”

“I’m not marrying you.”

She gasped and tightened her hold on his arm. “If you don’t, then John’s going to come for me.”

“Then marry someone else. I don’t want a wife.”

“Don’t you like the way I look?” She fluttered her thick eyelashes that accentuated her green eyes. Though her long, golden hair hung lifelessly down her back because of the rain, it didn't detract from her appeal. Her smile showed him straight white teeth, and she had the kind of lips that would suit very well if a man chose to kiss her.

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He huffed, unable to believe where his thoughts had drifted. "There's more to a marriage than attraction."

She jumped up and down. "You find me attractive?"

"Get off me." He shook his head and freed himself from her stronghold.

A flicker of panic crossed her face. "But I just turned eighteen. I have to marry someone."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I have some employees that would be more than happy to oblige you." He placed his leather boot in the stirrup, ready to get back on his horse.

"Wait!" She pulled on his leg.

He struggled to maintain his balance but slipped in the mud and fell to the ground, his back hurting. He groaned and did his best to blink past the warm raindrops falling on him.

"I can't marry just anyone." She gripped his shirt collar. "I need someone who owns a ranch, not a hired hand."

"Go to my neighbor, Mitch Grady. He's a widower with a couple of kids. He'll be very happy to help you."

She shook him by the collar. "I don't want him. I want you!"

"Woman, stop it!" He reached for her hands and forced them to her sides.

He cursed his luck on stepping into this quicksand of a situation. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? So what if a man flew through his front yard on his horse as if the devil chased him? He should have minded his own business. Now, he got himself into trouble.

"You sure would be getting her out of a bind if you'd marry her," her father said, helping her up. "I promise that she's a great cook, and she can sew just about anything. Why, she can

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even leave you alone if you object to her presence. She just needs your name on a marriage license.”

She frowned. “No, Pa. I want him to give me children.”

“Honey, I’m trying to help you here.”

“I’m leaving.” Greg stood up, wiped his muddy hands on his pants, and grunted when he realized it did little good since his denims were already filthy.

He returned to his horse when a familiar click caught his attention. Gulping the nervous lump in his throat, he slowly turned to the sight of a Colt 45 pointed at his forehead.

Her pa held the gun steady. “I’m sorry to do this to you, son, but you’re going to marry my daughter whether you want to or not. She’ll make you happy. She’s a good girl.”

“Considering you got a gun pointed at me, I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

She clapped her hands in delight and motioned to the priest. “You heard him, Father Stephen. Marry us!”

He closed his eyes as the priest began to speak, baffled that he woke up that morning, a happy bachelor, only to be faced with marriage. Marriage. He grimaced. So much for happy days. Whether it was the rain or the notion of being tied down, he shivered.

The ceremony, if it could be called that, was over in a matter of minutes. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head toward hers so her lips could press softly against his. He shook off the wave of pleasure that coursed through him and straightened up.

“Now we’re man and wife!”

He clenched his jaw. What was he to do with a helpless female? As soon as her father and the priest were safely off his property, he planned to run down to the courthouse and get an

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annulment. Oh great! It was Saturday. Well, he'd make do until Monday. It wasn't like he had a choice. As lovely and tempting as she appeared, he had no intention of settling down.

"You should get out of the rain," her father said. "Go on and take your bride home."

Gritting his teeth, Greg grudgingly jumped on his horse and helped her get settled in front of him, pretending not to notice how she wiggled against him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest.

He *wasn't* enjoying this!

"Promise me you'll visit," her father called out.

"I will!" She waved to the two men as Greg led the horse to his barn.

When you visit, you'll be returning home because there's no way we're staying married. The thought improved his mood as his horse trudged across the muddy ground. The rain had become a drizzle.

"You own a lot of cattle," she commented, peering over his arm at the well-bred stock of a hundred cattle in the fenced area of his property. "What do you do besides running a ranch?"

"Up to this point, I've managed to stay out of trouble," he dryly replied.

"I tried that too. It wasn't my intention to get married, but my grandpa left the stipulation in his will, and I was stuck. Well, I suppose I could have declined, but then what would I do about my pa? You know, Pa owns a ranch too. There's a neat little stream that cuts through the property. When I was a little girl, I used to imagine if I put my head in the water, I'd find a magical kingdom filled with fun creatures, like mermaids. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a mermaid?"

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Realizing she expected an answer, he said, “No,” hoping the simple reply would prevent anymore conversation. However, she continued.

“Of course not. You’re a man. So that would make you a merman. Have you thought about that one?”

“No, nor do I care to. I’m content with things the way they are.”

“Oh.” She sighed, her body feeling nice and warm against him. “I used to dream about these kinds of things all the time. To be honest, I never stopped dreaming.”

As she rambled on, he tuned her out. He eyed the cattle and the barbed fence, noting that everything seemed to be in order. He led his stallion into the barn where two of his hired hands ran up to him.

“I thought you went out to chase a man with a gun,” his head ranch hand spoke.

“So did I.” He motioned for the hand to help her down and dropped to his feet. “Did you get that leak taken care of in the bunk house?”

“We sure did,” the other man said.

“Great. Don’t worry about her.” He pointed to the blond standing too close to him as she examined the barn. “She’ll be leaving Monday morning.”

“What?” She spun around, her wet hair almost slapping him in the face.

“You don’t honestly think I’m going to stick with this hair brained scheme of yours and your pa’s, do you? At first daylight, we’ll be heading out to get this travesty annulled.”

“But we can’t. We said our vows in front of the priest.”

“Honey, when it’s at gunpoint, it doesn’t count.”

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His head ranch hand stared at him as if he grew a second head. “You got married?”

“At gunpoint,” he emphasized. “Now, I recommend you two get back to work. I need to get into dry clothes and see about setting up the spare room for this”—he motioned to her—“woman.”

“You mean your wife?”

He shot his hired hand a dirty look.

The two men scurried to put the horse in its stall.

“Come on,” he grumbled, nodding to his house. “We might as well get you dried off.” His boots sank into the soggy ground, preventing him from going as fast as he wanted.

She rushed to keep up with him. “Won’t you give me a chance?”

“Nope.”

She reached for his hand, but he swiftly avoided her and leapt onto the porch’s steps.

He groaned as he approached the back door. As much as he wanted to enter the house and slam the door in her face, common courtesy dictated otherwise, so he opened the door and allowed her through the entrance before he followed her in, sourly noting the gentle sway of her hips as she strolled on by.

She jumped at the slamming of the door. Her shoulders slumped, she said, “I know you’re mad, and you have every right to be.” She took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling as if carefully considering her words. “But I didn’t have a choice.”

“You could have married the widower I mentioned.” He threw his hat on the kitchen table and sauntered to the chair so he could peel the boots off of his feet.

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“I... Well... Maybe you’re right.” She shrugged and undid the top three buttons in the front of her dress. “But I didn’t want him. I wanted you.”

“What are you doing?” He bolted out of the chair and backed away from her.

“Getting out of these wet clothes.”

“You can’t do that in the kitchen.”

She gave him a ‘you’re impossible’ look and set her hands on her hips. “You want me to go outside and do it?”

He shook his head. “Of course not!” As much as he hated to introduce her to any part of his house, he knew it had to be done. “Follow me.”

She obeyed and joined him up the narrow wooden staircase and through a hallway, stopping at the second doorway on their right. Slipping into the sparse bedroom, she turned to him.

“That trunk in the corner has my mother’s old clothes,” he said. “You can take whatever you want, and don’t worry about returning it since she has no use for it anymore.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I know what it’s like to lose a mother.”

“I didn’t say she was dead. She up and left for the east coast once my father died. She never did like it this far out west. Said life out here was too tough and the entertainment was nil.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink. “I’m sorry again. I mean, it’s good that she’s alive, but I’m sorry I assumed she was dead. Although, I’m sure it can’t be easy that she left after losing your pa. I don’t think it’s easy to lose a parent at any age.”

“I’m fine. I think she’s happier, and I’m happy for her,” he quickly assured her, finding it cute that she rambled on.

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“Besides, she left me this ranch and I love my work. I can’t complain about how things turned out.”

“It must be nice to like where you’re at.” She glanced around the room containing a single bed and a large trunk which sat in the corner. “I didn’t want to leave home. My pa always took good care of me. I don’t know what I’d do without him. I suppose I’ll find out.”

He studied her as she opened the trunk and pulled out some clothes. Her shoulders slumped and a frown crossed her face, though he suspected it wasn’t from the fact that the stale clothes were too big and too long for her.

“You didn’t want to get married, did you?” His question floated softly across the room, and he wondered if she even heard it.

Digging out the petticoats from the bottom of the pile of neatly folded clothes, she answered, “I didn’t want to marry John Meyer.”

“Why not?” He crossed his arms and remained in the doorway, aware that the sun began to peek out through the clouds, though the drizzle continued to patter against the bare window. It suddenly occurred to him that the place hadn’t felt much like home since his mother packed the feminine things to haul back to Boston.

She looked at him then, and the grief in her eyes pierced his heart. “Don’t you know who John Meyer is?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t you ever make it to Lewiston?”

“Not since I took over the ranch.”

“John Meyer has a habit of acquiring a good number of prime cattle each year, and it’s doubtful he earned it.”

“Are you saying he steals them?”

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“The rumors haven’t been proven, but my pa knows someone who swore up and down that he lost a good twenty cattle in the middle of the night.”

“Weren’t the hired hands keeping watch?”

“They claim that someone knocked them unconscious. The marshal did an investigation, but nothing came up. About six months later, my pa helped John Meyer move his cattle from one pasture to another and saw John’s branding placed over that rancher’s brand on three of the animals. When the sheriff did another investigation, John was twenty cattle short.”

“So, your pa thinks he got rid of the evidence.”

She shrugged. “All I know is that John made quite a bit of cash from the butchers. I also know my pa wouldn’t lie.”

“Why would he marry you since your pa tried to get him in trouble with the law?”

“My grandpa left me my pa’s ranch, so the man who marries me inherits the land. I can’t let John get his hands on that property.”

He ought to be interested in that ranch, but he had enough so it didn’t appeal to him. “I’ll tell you what. On Monday, after we get this marriage annulled, I’ll introduce you to several men who are prosperous and you can have your pick of which one to marry.”

A frown crossed her pretty face. “You still won’t be my husband?”

“It’s nothing personal. I just don’t have the desire to marry.”

“Busy sowing your wild oats?”

“No. I’m too busy for that kind of thing. In fact, that’s exactly why I’m not looking for a wife. I work from sunup to sundown.”

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“But I won’t get in your way.”

He set his hands on his hips. “Women always get in the way. It’s the way they are.”

She lowered the lid of the trunk and held the bundle of old clothes in her arms. “I won’t get in the way. I’ll be quiet and mind my own business. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“I don’t doubt that you’d try, but sooner or later your natural female tendencies will take over and that’d be the end of it. Now, I’ll leave you alone so we can both get in dry clothes.”

He ignored the stab of guilt and partial regret he felt as he closed the bedroom door so she could have some privacy. Once he stripped off his clingy, soaked clothes and put on a dry cotton plaid shirt and denims, he went to the kitchen to brew some coffee on the cook stove. Staring out the window, he watched his hired hands rush through their chores. He shook his head. He should be out there with them, not making coffee for a...*his* wife. He couldn’t just leave her in the house without something to warm her up. She’d need to warm up after the rain soaked her to the bone.

By the time the coffee was ready, she lumbered down the steps, grabbing a fistful of his mother’s old skirt in her hands so she wouldn’t trip on the hem. She had rolled up her sleeves and tucked in the blouse. Even through the bulky clothes, he detected every feminine curve on her body.

He inwardly groaned. The sooner he got her out of his home, the better. Really, he couldn’t be having a female interrupting his busy life.

“I can make coffee,” she said, looking hopeful. “I can wash dishes and do laundry. I can even make a variety of foods. I can be useful.”

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He hid his grin. “I don’t need a list of your qualifications. I’m sure you’re just as good as any other woman when it comes to doing women things.”

She bit her lower lip as if debating her next course of action. A knock at the door made her jump.

He chuckled. “From the way you assaulted me out there, I didn’t take you for the jumpy type. Relax and have some coffee.” He quickly poured her a cup of the hot liquid before he opened the front door. He didn’t hide his surprise. “Father Stephen, have you come to your senses and decided to annul this marriage?”

The priest ran a hand through his damp hair, looking uneasy. “Actually, I came to give you her grandfather’s will. I’ve heard John Meyer at the confessional, and some of the things he’s done would make your skin crawl. I didn’t want to see her married to him.”

“Did you all arrange it so that she ended up on my property?”

“We asked the coach driver to take us through this route, but it was up to the man upstairs to provide a direct intervention.” The priest motioned to the sky.

Greg decided against telling the priest that the marriage would be dissolved on Monday. The poor man honestly thought he was doing the right thing. “Is there anything else?”

“No sir. I’ll leave you to your bride.”

Forcing himself not to roll his eyes at the word 'bride', he shut the door and returned to the kitchen where Patty sat at the table, staring at the cup in her hands.

“Aren’t you going to drink it?” He set the neatly folded document on the counter.

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She looked up at him. “Didn’t my sad story about John Meyer do anything to soften you up?”

“Of course it did. That’s why I’m going to introduce you to some men who are looking for wives.”

She frowned. “I don’t want them.”

“You haven’t met them.”

“Nor do I care to. You’re the only one I want.”

He chuckled. “We haven’t seen each other for years. The last time I saw you, you were just a kid.” He motioned to her cup. “Drink up before it gets cold. I’ll be out working.”

Without waiting for a response, he left to help his hired hands.

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Chapter Two

*P*atty groaned and dumped the coffee into the sink. Coffee wasn't what she needed. What she needed was to be married. John Meyer was bad news. If she wasn't married, then he'd force her to marry him. And then he'd take over her father's ranch. She couldn't let that happen. She also couldn't marry just anyone. She wanted to marry someone she loved, and she had been in love with Greg Wilson since grade school.

He was five years older than her though. He probably didn't think of her as anything but a little girl. She peered down at the frumpy clothes hanging on her body. Alright. So in this particular shirt and skirt she looked gross, but she had a good figure. At least she thought so. She wasn't bad looking either. Any man would be thrilled to have her. So why not Greg?

She went to the window and watched him as he made his way to the barn. He was handsome. Incredibly handsome. More so than she remembered. His denims curved his round butt just right. His broad shoulders and slim waist made him appear as if

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he were larger than life. He turned to the house and she ducked, wondering if he caught her staring at him.

Daring a peak outside, she saw one of his hired hands come up to him. From this angle, she had the perfect view of him. Strong jaw, thick dark brown hair under his Stetson, stubble along his jaw. She couldn't see the details of his face from the distance between them, but she had his features memorized ever since she was twelve years old. Bright blue eyes, straight nose, skin darkened from time spent in the sun. How much time had she wasted imagining what his kiss would be like?

And now she may never find out, thanks to his idiocy! She grunted and turned from the window, unable to understand why he didn't agree to stay married to her because of John Meyer. Did he really want to see her wedded to a no good selfish- She gasped and put her hand over her mouth, glancing around the empty kitchen. Silly. No one could read her thoughts. But they lacked the feminine delicacy that men preferred.

Men, after all, wanted ladies. Her friends and parents had told her that often enough. "Stop doing boy things," they'd say. "You'll never find a man if you keep on riding horses bareback, lassoing cattle and shooting guns." So she vowed that she would stop doing those things. Greg would see how *womanly* she could be and fall in love with her. She decided the first thing she would do was make him supper. What more could a man ask for than a woman who knew how to cook? She searched his cabinets and her findings were disappointing, to say the least. He probably ate with the hired hands. She'd go talk to the cook and ask for some decent food. Hopefully, this time, she wouldn't burn it.

She sighed. Did she dare venture out there? With this horrible shirtwaist and skirt on? Nothing against Mrs. Wilson, but she was a bad dresser. Patty might not know much about being a

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woman, but she did know how to match clothes. Shrugging, she decided to brave the laughter and humiliation of wearing a yellow shirt with red flowers sewn on them and a striped pink skirt. Holding up the long skirt, she slipped on her shoes which were still wet and hobbled outside. The rain had stopped. That was nice. But her shoes slipped into the soggy ground. Not so nice.

Holding her head high, she straightened her back and marched to the wooden building that had to be the eating hall. The delicious aromas of freshly baked bread and steaks drifting from the open windows made her mouth water. John Meyer's scumbag employee didn't believe in letting a woman eat before he abducted her. Never mind her hunger. She'd wait. Right now, she had to get the cook on her good side.

Patty had steak and potatoes waiting for Greg when he came in from the field later that day. He entered the kitchen through the back door but refused to look at her. He was probably still moping because her father forced him to marry her. She was sure that once he tasted a home cooked meal, he'd soften up. After all, the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. At least that's what her mother drilled into her.

She motioned to the table and patted the chair. "I made you dinner."

He shrugged. "I already ate."

She gasped. He what?

"Cook made supper. A mighty good one too. I couldn't eat another bite." He patted his stomach as if to emphasize the point. Then he tossed his hat to the hat rack, slipped out of his boots, and headed to the parlor.

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Oh no, he didn't! She charged after him, ready to drag him back to the kitchen table and plop him in front of the plate of hot food. He sat in a chair, kicked his feet up on the ottoman, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. The sunset crossed over his face, and he looked as happy and peaceful as a young boy who didn't have a care in the world.

She got ready to yell at him, to tell him how many hours she spent in a hot and cramped kitchen, slaving away to give him a good meal, but she shut her mouth. Was that really the best approach? She had until Monday before he ran off to the courthouse to annul the marriage. If he did that, then she'd have to marry John. She shivered at the thought. Rolling around in the mud would be preferable to spending the rest of her life with that underhanded rat.

She had to be nice to Greg, even if he was being a big oaf about things. She took a deep breath and pressed her nails into the palms of her hands. The pain took the edge off her urge to scream. A lady didn't raise her voice. And she was a lady. Her parents had raised her right. If she went into a tizzy, acting like a child, Greg would never see that she had grown up. Releasing her breath, she steadied her voice.

"Do you have room for dessert? I made you an apple pie." The cook had told her that apple pie was his one weakness. She peered at him through her lashes, hoping she looked demure and feminine.

"Nope." He didn't even open his eyes.

That did it! She'd teach him a lesson if it was the last thing she did! She stormed over to him, ready to yank him up and give him a good talking to when someone knocked on the door. She paused in mid-stride. She wanted nothing more than to chuck her shoe at his head. It would serve him right for blatantly ignoring

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her, but a second round of knocking at the kitchen door stopped her before she had time to reach for her shoe.

“Someone’s at the door,” Greg said, still reclining in his chair, not bothering to open his eyes.

She grumbled but stomped over to the door and yanked it open. Her anger faded the minute she saw her father. With a quick glance over her shoulder at her stubborn husband, she stepped onto the porch and closed the door, not wishing for the mule to overhear her conversation.

“I brought your clothes,” her father said, holding out a valise to her. He pointed to the large trunk by his feet. When he looked at her, he frowned. “I also wanted to warn you that John Meyer knows his man is dead. He’s doing a search for you.”

Her heart sank. “No.”

“It’s a good thing you’re married.”

She took the valise and pressed it to her chest, suddenly feeling vulnerable. What was she going to do if Greg went to the courthouse on Monday to annul their marriage? She wasn’t one to panic when things got tough, but this wasn’t looking good at all! “He doesn’t want to stay married, Pa.”

The old man blinked in surprise. “Why not?”

She shrugged. “He thinks women get in the way.”

“Nonsense.”

“That’s what he said.” She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the tears to stay where they belonged, off her cheeks. When she felt the urge to sob recede, she opened her eyes and looked at her father’s sympathetic expression. “He’s planning to get an annulment on Monday. I’ve done everything I can to be a good wife. I told him about John Meyer and asked for his protection. I’ve cooked him steak, potatoes, and apple pie, but he refused to

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eat any of it. What else can a man want besides protecting an innocent woman and eating a good meal?"

He gave a loud sigh as he kicked the stick on the porch. His brows furrowed. He stood silent for a few moments before turning his attention back to her. "Here's what you do. Get him to bed."

"But it's daylight." That was the last thing a lady did!

"That doesn't matter. If he consummates the marriage, he can't annul it. Believe me, honey, men can't turn down an offer from a willing woman. Just take your clothes off, and he'll do the rest."

Her face flushed at his boldness, but then she figured that this wasn't the time for modesty. Desperate times called for desperate measures. "Are you sure it'll work?"

"I'm a man, aren't I?"

True. She nodded. "I'll do it."

She gave him a hug before she slipped back into the house. A grimace formed on her face when she realized that lazy boy hadn't budged an inch from his chair. Before she dealt with him, she had to take her stuff upstairs, which was what she did. Only she didn't unpack in the spare bedroom. She put all of her things away in his drawers and wardrobe. She had no intention of sleeping in any other bed than this one tonight.

Patty took a deep breath and slipped into Greg's bed. Her naked skin tingled from the cool sheets. The summer nights were cool enough to be comfortable. But comfortable, she wasn't. She didn't know if letting Greg catch a glimpse of her cleavage and leg before he headed back outside worked or not. He hadn't looked

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in her direction. He hadn't even raised an eyebrow. Weren't men supposed to be attracted to those parts of the woman's body? Her mother said it was why women dressed in modest clothes. Well, except for the soiled doves. Hmm.... Maybe he'd been to visit one and already knew what a woman looked like naked. Then would that mean that he wouldn't have cared if she bared some of her flesh? But still, even if he had seen one or two or three or more... She cringed. Better not think of the multiple women he might have enjoyed before she came along. That would be too depressing. She wanted to be the only one on his mind.

That was it. She'd make sure after she was done with him, he'd never give another woman a second thought. He was going to enjoy being married to her whether he liked it or not. Ugg! Where was he anyway? She tensed. He'd better not be heading to the saloon for drinking and whoring. She considered getting dressed and tracking him down. She did know how to shoot a gun. She'd track him down and threaten to shoot his butt if he didn't get home where he belonged. Curse him. He had a wife to think about now! She threw the covers off. As soon as her feet touched the rug by the bed, she heard him calling to his hired hand that they were done for the night. She tiptoed to the window and hid behind the flimsy cloth that served as his curtain.

She shook her head. "He needs a wife. Who else is going to put a nice lacy curtain in this room for him?"

She nudged the cloth aside, being careful to remain out of sight. He was walking to the house. Good. That was good. He was coming home. She wouldn't need to get her gun after all. She returned to the bed and settled into it. She took deep breaths to calm down. Though her mother had told her about this night, her heart was hammering away like crazy. There wasn't anyone else

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she'd rather be with than Greg. She was going to enjoy this. Yes, she was. She gritted her teeth. Clenching the sheets, she told herself that she wasn't afraid. It would be silly to be afraid. Greg would be gentle, right? Of course, he would. She watched the way he took care of the wounded dog when she was thirteen. A man like that had to be gentle and caring, regardless of what he did. Reassured by this logic, she calmed. But only a little bit.

She waited. And waited. She frowned. Where was he? She heard his boots scuffing the hardwood floor in the kitchen. He was in the house. So what was taking him so long? He'd show up soon. She knew he would. After more time passed, she grew sleepy. And before she knew it, she fell asleep.

A man screamed. She woke up with a start and fell out of the bed with a loud thump. The rug did little to cushion her fall. She winced at the ache in her elbow and hip. Someone ran over to her, their heavy feet making the floor vibrate beneath her. A hand grabbed her arm and pulled her up. She gasped when she felt the tip of a cold gun on her neck.

Greg blinked and dragged the intruder over to the stream of moonlight that penetrated the hole in his homemade curtain. Oh crap. This wasn't a no good piece of vermin wanting to slit his throat in his sleep. This was his wife. He quickly pushed the word from his mind. No, she wasn't his wife. A shotgun and a priest didn't make him married. Signed documents could be undone in the courthouse. His gaze swept over her. She was naked. Her pale skin was smooth, tempting him to touch it. Her breasts were firm and bigger than they appeared in his mother's old shirtwaist. She must have pressed them down. Why, he could

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only guess. But the male part of him enjoyed the view too much. Way too much.

He forced his eyes back to hers, and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Trying to stay alive," she squeaked.

He let go of her and set his gun on the stand by his bed.

Despite her apparent shock, she jutted her chin forward and said, "That's what you get for taking so long in coming to consummate this marriage." Her eyebrows furrowed. "What was taking you so long anyway?" She set her hands on her hips and took a deep breath, expanding the view of her bosom.

"Damn," he swore.

He ran over to his bed and grabbed the blanket. If he had to look at her another minute, he was going to go through with her scheme and have his way with her. He could enjoy her. She was made for pleasure. He shook his head. No. He wouldn't give in! This was her plan. She was a conniving one. There was no doubt about it. He couldn't trust her to save his life. He returned to her and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, momentarily mourning the loss of the wonderful view he had moments before.

"Now get to the other bedroom."

She dropped the blanket and crossed her arms under her breasts. "No."

He groaned. A man had to be dead as a doornail to resist her. If women weren't weak creatures, he'd have his way with her this very minute. But they were weak, and he refused to accept her into his life just to watch her leave because she couldn't handle the harsh demands of the land.

"Fine." He grabbed his pillow and stomped to the door. "Then I will."

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She darted in front of him, but he brushed past her, noting softness and curves that caressed his skin. He hastened across the hall and into his parents' old bedroom. He slammed the door and locked it. There. He was safe. Parts of him complained, but he ignored his body and fell on the bed, counting backwards from one hundred to distract himself from the lovely piece of temptation on the other side of the door.

Patty finished cutting the sandwich on the table, grumbling over and over as she worked the knife through the bread. What was Greg's problem anyway? Men had to have sex, right? They needed it. It was like breathing. So why was he giving her such a hard time about it? She had all the parts a woman needed in order to attract a man, and she was pretty. He should have thrown her on the bed and made mad, passionate love to her. Then he would have been all hers. But he didn't!

And to add insult to injury, he hardly glanced in her direction during breakfast! What was his problem? Didn't he notice her?

Now, as he entered the house and hung his hat on the hat rack, she decided to give it another try. She had talked to the cook, and he agreed to refuse to feed Greg. That meant he had to come to her for his meals. And so he came. Not because he wanted to see her but because he didn't want to die of starvation. It wasn't ideal, but she'd take what she could get. It sure beat being a plaything for John Meyer's amusement!

Greg sat at the table, not even looking in her direction.

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She cleared her throat and walked right up to him. She undid a couple of buttons on her dress and bent forward, using a towel to "dry" her sweaty cleavage.

He shrugged, grunted and shifted so his back was to her.

Oh, the audacity! The nerve! Then a horrible thought struck her. What if he was impotent? What if he couldn't do the deed? Did he have an erection last night? She searched her memory, but all she could come up with was an imposing shadow. He'd been right in front of the window, so it was hard to see him at all. Her shoulders drooped. Maybe he couldn't perform.

This thought depressed her. She really had her hopes set on losing her virginity. She wanted to know what it felt like to be one with a man. Then she thought it over. She loved Greg, and if he couldn't do it, then she'd still want to be with him. Alright. So she'd die a virgin. Things could be worse. She could be homeless. She could be a slave. She could be beaten. Or she could be married to John Meyer. Now that thought put her situation in proper perspective.

Feeling better, she decided that she would find another way to convince Greg to stay married to her. She set the sandwich in front of him and gave him a glass of milk. That would teach him she could be useful! After he ate and left, she decided to do his laundry. What more could a man want than a woman who cooked his meals and did his laundry? Sure the tasks were tedious. She'd rather be out riding a horse, but it was time to be a dutiful and loving wife.

She pulled one of his shirts through the winger and wiped the sweat off her forehead. It was hot, and even with the wind blowing in through the open window, she couldn't cool down. So she peeled off her damp clothes and hung them on the hook by the kitchen door. Being in the buff and doing laundry was much

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better, she decided. Halfway through the chore, she got thirsty so she retrieved a cup from the shelf and pumped the lever at the sink until cool water came out. Once she drank the refreshing liquid, she decided to grab a towel and dab the cool water over her hot skin. She felt much better once she cleaned herself up. She knew that *glowing* with sweat was a fact of life, but she still didn't like it.

The kitchen door opened and she paused, the wet towel pressed under her left breast. They were married, so she might as well get used to Greg walking in on her when she was naked. She turned to him and called out in a happy greeting, "I'm washing your clothes!"

He just stood there, his jaw hanging open.

She wondered what his problem was this time. When he didn't move, she threw the wet cloth into the sink and walked over to him. Upon closer inspection, she realized he was aroused. There was no hiding a bulge that size in his pants. She set her hands on her hips, now upset because she knew he could indeed perform. He obviously had an interest in her body, and he still rejected her!

The nerve! The horrible, terrible, awful humiliation at being rejected! Well, if he thought she was going to give up, he had another thing coming. Now that she knew she *appealed* to him, she was determined to press through and consummate this marriage.

She wanted to hug him, to press herself against him, but he muttered something and left the house. Her feet stopped right before she hit the closing door. She yelled and stomped her feet on the floor. He couldn't keep doing this. She'd find a way to consummate this marriage if it was the last thing she did!

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Determined, she returned to the laundry and worked on her next plan. Tomorrow was Monday. She had to stall for time. Now that she knew he was attracted enough to her that he could get an erection, she'd make sure to use this fact to her advantage. But first, she had to distract him so he wouldn't go to the courthouse.

Chapter Three

*P*atty was much too tempting. All afternoon Greg hadn't been able to think of anything but her. He groaned and undid the knot he just butchered on his rope. Couldn't a man make a simple lasso without thoughts of his wife plaguing him?

Wife. Who knew that little Patty Dixon turned into such a beautiful woman? He hadn't seen her in years, but he remembered her sweet personality. When she smiled, the sun seemed to shine brighter. There was no doubt about it. She had a good heart.

He winced. He hadn't wanted to be mean to her, but he knew how close he'd come to giving in and agreeing to stay married. Sure, he sympathized with her plight. What man wouldn't? What she needed was a man who was looking for a woman who would stay at home all day to cook his meals, wash his clothes, and warm his bed. Not that those weren't admirable qualities, but that kind of woman just didn't appeal to him.

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. Then he thought of the widower who needed a wife to tend to his kids. That seemed to be the best choice. Mitch was a good man. He'd be grateful to her and treat her well. Then she wouldn't have to worry about John Meyer, and Greg wouldn't have to deal with the

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headache of taking care of a helpless woman. And if anyone qualified as helpless, it was Patty. She even got skittish when she saw a spider crawling under the table during breakfast. She giggled and flirted too. Yep, Mitch would be very happy with her.

Someone cleared his throat.

Greg jerked and turned to the cook. "What is it?"

The bearded man handed him the correspondence. "This came for you."

He opened it and read through the contents. A jolt hit his gut. Matthew Greely thought he could expand his property by taking some of Greg's land? Like that would ever happen! His greedy neighbor wouldn't get away with this. Jumping off the barrel, he stormed to the house.

He flung the kitchen door open and ran up the staircase, his boots echoing off the hardwood steps. Once at the second floor, he reached for the rope dangling from the ceiling and pulled down the ladder. He hastened up to the attic where the trunk sat under a window. He opened it in time to hear a more delicate sound of footsteps behind him.

"What's wrong?"

He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know it was her. His wife. "I got a neighbor who's building a fence on my property."

She knelt next to him as he dug into the junk his mother had collected over the years. "What are you looking for? I'll help you find it."

"It's an old piece of paper. It should be neatly folded."

She nodded, her blond curls bouncing against her shoulders.

He rummaged through two small boxes, but the document wasn't in either one of them.

"Is this it?"

He turned and saw her holding the paper out to him. Noting the proud smile on her face, he accepted it. "It sure is."

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He took a good look at her. Her eyes twinkled and a dimple graced her right cheek. She really was a pretty thing. She didn't need to undress to get a man's attention. He inwardly groaned at the joy the male part of him felt at having her near.

No. He didn't want to be married. The sooner he got her out of his house, the sooner he could think straight.

"Thanks," he said and accepted the document. He unfolded it, and sure enough, there it was. The lines on his property were mapped out so any dunce could see that his neighbor invaded his land.

"What will you do?" she asked, her eyes peering up at him in an adorable fashion.

"I'm going to take Matthew Greely to court. He has no legal right to do this."

She nodded.

He took another good look at her. Was she happy about this? There was a flicker of a smile on her lips. It unnerved him, but before he could dwell on it, she slammed the lid of the trunk and pushed him toward the ladder. Was she hurrying him along?

"You better get packing," she ordered, her hands pressing into his back as she shoved him from behind.

He stumbled away from her. "I can walk without help."

She groaned and crossed her arms. "Then get going! This is urgent. He'll be ready to purchase his new stock tomorrow in Lewiston if you don't get there first."

Something in the way she ordered him to hurry intrigued him. Maybe she wasn't so docile after all.

"Now, go along. I'll pack you a meal for supper while you're riding to Lewiston. You need to pack some clothes and get ready to head on out."

A strange part of him was happy to obey her, though he wasn't sure why. He slid down the ladder and did as she bid.

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It worked! She couldn't believe he actually fell for it. She feared he'd see right through her scheme. But he didn't. And now he was packing to leave. She slipped his sandwich into the sack, silently thanking the cook for playing along with her plan. There was no dispute about property lines, but she needed to get his mind off the annulment, and no amount of cooking, cleaning or feminine charms were working toward that end. So she resorted to this, and it worked!

He ran down the stairs, looking as handsome as he did when she fell in love with him in school. She sighed with pleasure. Oh, that he might take her in his arms and kiss her, that he might find himself caught up in the thrill of loving her. If only she could figure out how to get his interest!

He held a small travel bag. Glancing at the paper in his hand, he said, "Maybe I should talk to Matthew. This might be a misunderstanding."

She gasped, her stomach tensing into tight knots. She'd come too close for him to back out now. "No!" When he shot her a curious look, she cleared her throat. "Here's your meal." She hurled it at him and grabbed his arm. "He won't be home. He'll be in Lewiston. This matter must be handled there."

He tumbled and bumped into her when she stopped to open the screen door. "Sorry," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't worry about me. I don't break." She flung the door open and motioned to his steed. "There you go. The cook's brought you the horse. Hurry along. The longer you wait, the harder it'll be to get things done."

"I guess so."

"It's true. When desperate situations arise, you have to act fast. It's just like shooting a gun. You don't think. You just pull the trigger and be done with it."

"You shoot guns?"

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Did he look repulsed or excited about that? She couldn't tell. His eyebrows were raised, and he stopped to look into her eyes.

She giggled and pressed her hand over her heart, her face warm from revealing a part of herself that he most likely wouldn't approve of. "No. Of course not." She waved her hand and glanced at the bright afternoon sun. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She was a horrible liar, so she'd have to get his mind off the topic. "You'd better go. You're burning daylight talking to me."

He shrugged. "You're right."

She closed her eyes, grateful he left the matter alone. When she opened them, he hopped up into the saddle. He turned his attention to her, as if he wanted to ask a question, so she quickly made a shooing motion with her hands. "You want to get to Lewiston before dark!"

Shrugging again, he nudged the horse in the sides.

She didn't bother to watch as the horse trotted off. Bolting up the stairs, she pulled out the false bottom of the trunk her father gave her. She dug out the male clothes, fake brown mustache, and matching wig. The disguise would hide her true identity. Then she retrieved the chaps, boots, and hat. Finally she pulled out the gun and small box of bullets. Danger lurked out there, and she'd do well to prepare for it. John Meyer would be looking for her, and she had no doubt he'd make a stop in Lewiston on his way to this house. If he recognized her, she had to be ready for him.

Greg sat at the bar, not particularly interested in anything going on around him, but he needed to unwind after the long ride to Lewiston. He'd checked into the local inn, and now he drank a shot of whiskey to settle his nerves. He winced at the burning

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sensation in his gut and set down the shot glass. Taking a deep breath, he rubbed his eyes. Though he was tired, he knew if he plopped down in bed, he'd lay there wide awake. He needed to get his mind off the long ride and the marriage he had to annul.

His marriage. It was almost a shame, wasn't it? If she wasn't the typical soft-spoken and helpless female, then she just might prove to be interesting. Well, more than interesting. She'd be downright perfect. His mother had been too soft for the ranch. He didn't care to deal with another female he'd have to coddle and soothe while he was trying to do his work. He needed someone who could hold her own, someone who wouldn't run off when things got tough. It wasn't an easy life for a woman.

"Another shot?" the bartender asked.

He shook his head. "I'm done." He paid the chubby man and stretched, the muscles in his back and legs relaxing. He made his way over to a poker table. He hadn't played cards in a good three years. A good card game might be just the thing to tire his mind enough so he could sleep. "Looking for a fourth player?" he asked the group of three men after they finished a game.

The scruffy looking bald man rubbed his large belly and nodded to the coins in the center of the table that one of the men gathered to his side of the table. "You got money?"

"Sure do." Greg dug into his pocket and pulled out some coins.

"Looks good. Sit and ante up."

He did and collected the five cards the man next to him dealt him. Two aces, a deuce, a nine and a jack. Not bad. He might win this round.

"So," the potbellied man began, "do you live in town?"

"I own a ranch west of here."

"Really?"

He threw in a coin and tossed three cards. "Yep."

The man spit the tobacco juice into the cup next to him. "I hear some fine ranches are in that area."

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"Yep." He collected three new cards. A king, a three, and a five. Maybe the aces would be enough. "It's a fine piece of Montana."

"So I hear." He nodded to Greg's cards. "What you want to do?"

Greg tossed a coin into the center of the table.

The man next to him folded while the other one threw in a coin.

The leader of the group grinned and added two coins. "I was thinking of owning a ranch out there."

Greg nodded, not finding the discussion particularly interesting, but it beat the silence from the others at the table. He tossed in another coin. It could be that the leader had three of a kind. It'd be highly unlikely he'd have a flush or a straight. Still, two aces weren't bad.

The other man folded.

The leader raised an eyebrow. "You're either a good bluffer or you have a good hand." He set his cards down. The man had two jacks.

Greg set the two aces down.

"Beginner's luck."

"Maybe." Greg smiled and retrieved his winnings. "Want to play another game and find out?"

The man spit again. "Wouldn't hurt none."

This time it was Greg's turn to shuffle the cards. A man sat at the bar and ordered a glass of water. Greg thought that was odd, so he glanced over his shoulder and saw the stranger's profile. He frowned. There was something familiar about the brunette that leaned forward so his elbows rested on the bar. His cotton blue shirt, brown vest and denims looked alright with his brown boots and brown hat, but still...he was odd.

"Going to keep shuffling or going to play?" the leader asked, amusement in his voice. "Of course, if you'd rather join one of the girls..."

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Greg's gaze passed from the oddly familiar man to the soiled dove hanging onto one of the men sitting further down the bar. He shook his head. "No. I came to drink and play."

"Suit yourself." The man shrugged. "I don't mind a little lovin' after winning."

Greg handed out the cards.

"You ever hear of the Dixons?" the man asked.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled. "Dixon?" As in Patty Dixon?

"Ralph Dixon. He owns a ranch in the area."

Though Greg looked at his cards, his mind didn't process what they were. Something was wrong. He lowered his head, angling the tip of his Stetson enough so that he could watch the man across from him without being obvious. The man chewed the tobacco in his mouth. His eyes remained on the cards in his hands, and his fingers caressed the left card. He then shuffled another card to settle next to it.

A pair. Greg didn't have to see the cards to know that the two he placed together were good ones. He forced his attention to his own cards and threw all but the king down. His gaze shifted to the other two men who discarded their cards. He picked up the deck and handed out new cards to each player.

"Do you know Ralph Dixon?" the man asked, snatching three new cards.

"I know of him and his daughter," Greg admitted, monitoring the slight sneer that flickered across the man's features at the mention of Patty.

"Yes. A fine young woman. A *very fine* woman."

Greg took a deep breath to settle his nerves so he wouldn't leap out of the chair and punch the scrubby jerk. He knew exactly what the man meant. He forced his voice to remain steady. "You know her?"

"Know her? I'm going to marry her."

The man next to Greg snorted. "If you can find her."

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The man glowered at him.

Greg folded his cards and looked at the three men. "What did she do? Disappear?"

"No. Just married some rancher to avoid marrying me," the man said, throwing in two coins. His fingers tapped three cards, signaling his three of a kind. "I'm not worried." He spit into his cup before looking directly at him. "Marriages can be dissolved."

Greg's muscles tensed, his hand moving to his gun. So this was John Meyer. He wondered if John knew his identity.

John leaned forward and grinned as if Greg was his prey. "I'm going to own that ranch you know. Her grandfather lost a gambling bet to me twenty years ago. He didn't have the funds to pay me, so I bargained with him. In his will, he promised me his land."

Greg forced his face to remain expressionless. He didn't like the way the man sneered.

Leaning back in his wooden chair, John laid down his cards.

Just as Greg thought. John had three of a kind. Three sixes.

His friends grumbled and threw their cards down.

John gathered the coins and picked up the cards to shuffle. "Little did I know he'd stipulate that whoever married her got the ranch. 'Course, I can't kill him now. He's already dead. That doesn't mean I can't come after the happy groom though, or dispose of the daughter...once I get through with her."

The two men snickered.

Greg let go of the gun and accepted the five cards. Now he understood why Patty married him the way she did. Sure, she'd told him John Meyer was a bad man, but until then, he didn't realize just how bad he was. He couldn't blame the poor girl for doing everything she did to avoid marriage to the horrible man.

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Looking down at the cards, he noted the two fours and two deuces. He removed the ace and asked for another card.

John chucked three cards. The other two men tossed their cards too. Greg didn't notice any unusual body language that gave away any good hands. John dealt the new cards out, and Greg picked his up. A deuce. He glanced at John again who rubbed a couple of his cards.

He decided it was time to right some things with this creep. "I'll call." He tossed in a coin.

One of the men folded, and another one put in his coin. John called and then raised another coin.

Greg added two coins.

The man next to him groaned and folded.

John's eyes met his. "You're sure of yourself."

He raised an eyebrow. "I have nothing to worry about. Do you?"

"Nope. But then, I'll be alive come sundown tomorrow." Then he tossed in a coin. "You ready to show me what you got or do you want to raise?"

John had to know who he was talking to. The warning in his words hung heavy in the air. Greg put his cards down.

John swore and threw his cards on the table. "And here I thought you were bluffing."

Greg collected the coins and stood up. "Thanks for a good game, gentlemen."

He chuckled. "Nighty night, boy."

John wouldn't shoot him in a bar, not in front of everyone else. At least, Greg didn't think so. The man was sleazy, but he seemed careful about it. Still, Greg would have to watch his back.

Determined to play dumb, Greg turned to leave, only to bump into the odd man sitting at the bar. As soon as he met the young man's eyes, he knew exactly who it was. Patty. What was she doing dressed in men's clothes and following him? Then another question popped in his head. What if she and John were

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in this together? He ignored the impulse to look over his shoulder at John, to see if their eyes would meet. It was better if he didn't give his suspicions away, just in case.

"Excuse me, sir."

She lowered her eyes and said, "No problem," in a low voice. Had he not recognized her, he would have mistaken her for a man. She did a good job.

Greg tipped his hat and lumbered out of there. He took a deep breath and shoved the coins into his pocket, all too aware of his shaky hands. This wasn't good. Either Patty told him the truth or he was a sitting duck. And he had the feeling, he'd find out soon enough.

Chapter Four

The next morning, Patty adjusted her fake mustache and vest before she followed Greg out of the inn. She had rented the room next to his so she could keep an eye on him. When she realized he strode toward the lawyer's office, she tensed. She hadn't realized he was going to start a lawsuit over the property dispute, but there he was and she had to do something. If she could distract him long enough to slip into the lawyer's office, she might be able to talk the lawyer into leaving for ten minutes. Her eyes scanned the busy street until she found a boy who was probably twelve. She beckoned him forward.

He seemed hesitant but came when she showed him a coin. "What'd ya want, mister?"

"I need you to tell that man over there that you lost a dog and need his help finding it," she said in a low voice. She watched as Greg paused by a newspaper stand. Turning to the boy, she added, "All I need is a minute. I'll give you this as payment." She held out a coin.

He crossed his arms and wrinkled his nose. "I'm not a little kid. I'm almost a man. I'm not going to need help finding a dog."

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She groaned. Of all the boys around, she had to pick the one who wanted to be an adult. "Alright. Then tell him your pa's wagon wheel broke, and he needs help putting on a new one."

He agreed to her terms, snatched the coin, and ran over to Greg. He did a good job of pretending the situation was urgent, and she saw Greg examine his surroundings, so she hid behind a pickle barrel that stood in front of the general store. She breathed a sigh of relief when he followed the boy.

Part one of her plan was done. Now came for the second part. She ran to the lawyer's office, flung the door open, and hurried to the man's desk.

The thin man dropped his law book.

She pounded the desk. "She needs you! It's urgent."

"Ethel's in labor?"

That worked. "Yes! She's asking for you. You have to get there right away!"

He jumped out of his chair and charged to the door. She grabbed a paper clip that rested next to a stack of papers and followed him to the door. She tucked the paper clip into her pocket and waited outside the small building as he locked the door. He didn't even look back as he ran down the street.

Glancing around, she confirmed that Greg was still out of sight and no one paid her any mind. Good. She knelt down and worked the lock until the door opened. Then she shut the door behind her and sat behind the desk, hoping she looked like a lawyer. She threw the used paper clip into the trash can and cleared her throat. Picking up the book, she pretended to be interested in its contents. Remembering her hat, she quickly took it off her head and placed it on top of the neatly stacked papers. She ran her fingers through the brown wig and tested it. It should stay on her scalp. Good. Everything was going according to plan.

The door opened and she took her time in looking up, as if she were bored but distinguished. At least, she thought a lawyer

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might *think* he was distinguished. She lifted her nose in the air and spoke in a deep voice, "May I help you?"

Greg stared at her, as if trying to determine something.

She fought the urge to squirm in her chair. Did he know *who* she was? "Sir, may I help you?"

His gaze shifted around the small room.

Her heart thumped loudly in her chest. He didn't know. He couldn't know! No one ever saw through her disguise when she had to pretend to be a man so she wouldn't get swindled out of a deal.

When he stepped forward, she nearly jumped out of her skin. Reprimanding herself for acting skittish, she motioned to the seat in front of the desk. "Have a seat and state your business."

"Alright." He plopped in the chair and placed his feet up on the desk.

"Sir, you are in a lawyer's office, not a bar. Show some respect." She pushed on his boots, but his feet didn't budge. "Sir?"

"Matthew's not trying to overstep the property lines, is he?"

The question froze her in place. He knew! But how?

Before she could speak, the click of a gun silenced her. She clamped her lips shut, her focus on the Colt 45 aimed in her direction. Hmm... This wasn't what she planned. She tapped her fingers on the desk as she debated a way out of this predicament.

"I'm not a fool, Patty."

She raised her eyebrows but didn't reply. He wouldn't actually shoot her. He wasn't a man known for killing people, not like John Meyer who took a fiendish delight in murder. But the man sitting across from her with the steel glint in his eye did mean business, and he meant to let her have it. That much, she knew.

"The game is up," he said. "I saw you at the bar last night. Interesting it should be the same bar that John Meyer was in."

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"I followed you there," she admitted. "You chose the bar, not me."

The corner of his lip curved up. "Clever comeback. But I know you're in this with him."

Her jaw dropped. "No, I'm not! I married you to avoid marrying him." Was Greg really stupid enough to believe she'd marry him just so John Meyer would come after him?

"It's simple, isn't it? You marry me, get my ranch upon my death, and you get your father's ranch too. And all thanks to John."

Fine. So he was *that* stupid. She rolled her eyes and threw the book on the desk. Leaning forward with her elbows resting on the desk, she said, "If I married you and you died, I wouldn't need John to get both ranches. And in case you haven't noticed, John is disgusting. I wouldn't go near him if my life depended on it."

His brows furrowed as if he considered her words. "Then why are you here, dressed as a man?"

Again, she marveled at his inability to put the pieces together. She shook her head and sighed. "Because I don't want an annulment. You may find this hard to believe, but I want to be with you. I've wanted to be with you ever since we were kids. But you were too busy with the ranch to notice me. I still don't understand why you're so opposed to me."

"Nice try. But I wasn't born yesterday. You and John are in this together. I know it."

"You don't know anything!"

"You have no right to take that tone with me."

"I wouldn't use this tone if you'd stop acting like an idiot."

He lurched forward and set his feet on the floor. "The annulment goes through today. I won't have you or John trying to kill me so you can get more land."

"No!" She stood up and ran to the door to prevent him from leaving the office. "I forbid you to leave! I will not have my

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father's ranch or my body given over to that piece of cow manure."

He stopped in front of her and gave her a curious look. "Did you just talk like a man?"

She huffed and placed her hands on her hips. "I look like one. I might as well talk like one too."

As he reached for the doorknob, she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him. He stumbled back, but she held on, even as he tried to pry her off of him. She parted her lips and thrust her tongue through his tight mouth. She heard that these types of kisses made it hard for men to resist, but he did a surprisingly good job of it. He turned his head away and shuddered.

"That's not how you kiss a man."

Still clinging to him, she wrapped her legs around his waist, lest he manage to untangle her arms from around his neck. "I'd be a good wife if you'd just let me. I guarantee with plenty of practice, I could master the art of kissing. Give me a chance to prove it."

"That'll be the day," he muttered as he stepped back and fell over the chair.

They flew through the air, but she reinforced her hold on him. She'd fallen off of horses, so this was no different. She braced for the impact and grunted when his back hit the hard floor.

He groaned. "My back." His head hit the leg of the desk. "My head!"

Her knees hurt, but she wouldn't let that dissuade her. She had him exactly where she wanted him. A couple of minutes. Her mother told her that any man could finish the deed in that time, and she wasn't going to let him leave until the deal was done. She reached down to unbutton his pants.

"Get off me!"

Ruth Ann Nordin

He sat up, but she clung to him so he ended up rolling on top of her.

The door opened and a man gasped.

Startled, they stilled and turned their attention to the door.

The lawyer's face grew red, and he clenched his hands at his sides. "I don't know what you two gentlemen are doing here, but you must leave at once or I'll get the marshal!"

She let go of Greg who bolted to his feet. He threw his Stetson on and gave her a dirty look before storming out of the office.

Grumbling, she got to her feet, adjusted her wig and retrieved her hat. "Some men are hard to please," she muttered under her breath as she hurried out of the office. She saw Greg. He turned down a street and she ran after him. A feeling of dread welled in the pit of her stomach when she realized he was going straight to the courthouse.

A gunshot pierced the air. Alarmed, she dodged behind a wagon.

Greg lurched to the ground and rolled, inhaling the rise of dust from the street. He spit out the dirt and made a quick scan of his surroundings. The bullet grazed his arm, but he wasn't bleeding. John and his cronies. It had to be them. He'd let his struggling emotions over Patty cloud his mind. He grabbed his gun and shot one of the scummy men who clutched his stomach and fell from the roof of the bank. His body made a loud thud onto the ground. Several women screamed and ran from the corpse while the men braced for a fight.

But the fight wasn't with the other men. It was between Greg, John, another man, and maybe Patty. He wasn't sure if she wanted him dead or not. The woman puzzled him. Now wasn't the time to think about it, however. He leapt up and hastened to the horse water trough. He wished he had a better hiding place,

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but with John and his friend out there, somewhere, he didn't risk running into a building.

Silence hung in the air. He licked his lips and squinted in the sunlight for any traces of the two scumbags. Finally, he caught one. The skinny man stuck his gun around the building across the street so Greg shot first. The man dropped the gun and held onto his wrist, cursing.

Now that left John. Greg examined the buildings across from him for any trace of John, but he couldn't find him. *Come on. Where is he? He can't just disappear!*

A footstep came up from behind him. His body tensed. *Smart man.* Greg swung around and shot John in the shoulder. John shot the gun out of his hand. Then someone else fired a gun and shot John in the back. John's eyes grew wide and blood dribbled out of his mouth as he fell face down in the street.

Greg stared at the woman, who'd been behind John, in amazement. Patty, dressed as a man, had just shot the creep. She stood, legs set apart, gun in hand, and dust swirling around her boots. She shot John and she didn't even blink. She didn't faint. She didn't even tremble. Her hands remained steady on the gun as she dared anyone else to come forward. No one did. The men backed off. One by one, they turned around and returned to their business along the street.

Wow! She was hot. This woman—his wife!—was no whimpering female. She was bold and strong and sassy. He wanted her. There was no way he'd let this fearless woman go! He jumped to his feet and brushed the dust off his pants. He couldn't come right out and kiss her. That would give her identity away.

She placed her gun back in the holster.

He walked over to her. "I thought you couldn't shoot a gun."

Shrugging, she replied, "I might have fudged a little. Ladies don't go around shooting vermin."

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Sweetheart, I’m not looking for a lady. I’m looking for a woman who can handle ranch living. From what I just saw, you’re perfect.”

Her eyes lit up. “Really?”

Grinning, he nodded.

She stepped forward, ready to embrace him, but he held his hand up.

“I think that can wait until we get to the room. Care to have a honeymoon?”

She clapped her hands. “Let’s go!”

After they talked with the marshal about John Meyer, they went to Greg’s room at the inn. Patty’s excitement made her giddy. He came to his senses, and now he’d be hers for life! “You’ll let me help round up cattle, won’t you?” she asked, wanting to be sure he could accept her as she was.

He slipped the key into the lock and stared at her in awe. “You can do that?”

“Pa says I’m one of the best.” Not that she took much stock in bragging, but he might as well know exactly what she could do.

He turned the knob and led her into the room. “Girl, you get sexier every time you talk.”

She set her hands on her hips as he closed the door. “I’m not a girl. I’m a woman.”

A grin crossed his face. “I’m well aware of that. I saw you naked, remember?”

Though she still wore clothes, the way his gaze swept down her body made her shiver in delight.

“Did you bring a dress?”

“I did. It’s in my room. You want me to get it?” If it’d help motivate him, she’d change her outfit.

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He stopped her before she could leave the room. “No. We’ll wait until we have to eat. Right now, I believe our wedding night is overdue.”

She giggled. Giggling? When did she ever giggle? It was a ladylike thing to do, she realized. Maybe parts of her would be more feminine with him in her life. It certainly wasn’t a bad thing, as long as she could keep doing what she loved on the ranch.

Before she could give it another thought, he took off her hat, wig, and mustache and tossed them to the floor. Then he removed the pins from her hair so that her curls fell around her shoulders. “I like you better this way.”

She smirked. “What? The mustache doesn’t suit me?”

“You’re a real spitfire, aren’t you?”

By the gleam in his eye, she realized he liked that. “Are you going to keep talking or can we get down to business?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. His lips touched hers with a feathery kiss, and she responded to him, enjoying the sensation. Groaning, he deepened the kiss. Her body tingled the moment his lips parted and traced her bottom lip. She eagerly invited him into her mouth and marveled that a kiss could be so intoxicating.

“Now that’s how you kiss a man,” he whispered as his hands went lower and cupped her bottom. “You know, pants aren’t that bad on you.”

She would have giggled again if his breath on the nape of her neck didn’t make her skin tingle in sensual delight.

They removed each other’s clothing, taking their time to explore each other. He caressed her breasts, his hands gentle just as she knew he’d be. Her nipples hardened as his fingers brushed them. She had no idea that her breasts could be such a great source of pleasure, but she figured he’d show her how wonderful it was that she was a woman. He leaned forward, letting his tongue trace her nipples. She groaned and ran her fingers through his silky hair.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Standing back up, he carried her to the bed and set her down, treating her as if she were fragile. She liked that. It was nice to have someone tenderly touch and kiss her. She pulled him in for another kiss, this time seeking the taste of him. Her legs wrapped loosely around his waist. She was exposed to him. Wide open and receptive. It left her feeling vulnerable but powerful at the same time.

He moaned into her neck. His hands drifted again to her breasts, cupping their softness. His tongue teased her earlobe, making her body tingle again. Everything he did pleased her senses, arousing her all the more. He slid a hand down her stomach and further down. She tightened her hold on his arms, eager for him to assuage the ache intensifying between her legs. His fingers played with her opening, his fingers promising her pleasure. She shifted against him. This was better than she imagined.

He slid a finger into her and she gasped. Oh this was heavenly. Who knew it could be like this? He slid in a second finger. The male part of him throbbed against her thigh, indicating his eagerness for her. And yet, she knew that he held off on his pleasure for her sake. He stroked her with his fingers. She whimpered and grabbed his arms. He slid in a third finger, and she shivered with the urgency for more. He kissed her while his fingers played in her, bringing forth an onslaught of sensations that tingled through her.

He removed his fingers from her, and she protested.

"I'm going to enter you," he whispered in a husky voice.

He knelt in front of her and lifted her hips. As soon as he penetrated her, she closed her eyes, relishing the feel of him. It was a little tight but nothing she couldn't handle. He slid into her, filling the void his fingers had left. She clenched around him, encouraging him to go deeper. He pulled out, almost completely, and then slid back into her. His movements started slow, allowing

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her to savor the act of being one with him. Her body readily accepted him. She was made for him, and he was made for her.

She groaned again and shifted against him so she took him fully into her. Supporting his weight on one arm, he brought his hand back to the feminine curls that hid her womanhood. His fingers caressed her until he found her sensitive nub.

She gasped when he touched it. Her body tingled and she felt herself clenching his erection. "Don't stop," she pleaded. This was much better than she thought it would be. He had excellent fingers. Fingers that teased and caressed. Fingers that brought flickers of sensual delight through her entire body.

His thrusting was slow and deliberate, giving her time to build the mounting tension between her legs. All the while, he played with her nub, teasing, beckoning, and encouraging her to join him. Her body screamed for her to keep going.

"Keep going," she encouraged.

He continued his attention to her and she moved her hips in rhythm to him. Higher she went, and her skin begged for more. When she reached the peak, she let out a cry of pleasure. Amazing. This was nothing short of amazing. She arched her back, taking in the full pleasure of the moment.

He lowered his body on top of hers, careful not to crush her, and kissed her. She pulled him closer to her, and he moved inside her. One thrust. Two thrusts. And the third brought him over the edge. Arching his back, he grunted and spilled his seed into her.

She watched him in a mixture of fascination and joy. She wanted to please him, and knowing she had made her feel complete. She could definitely get used to doing this for the rest of her life.

He settled on top of her, holding her tightly to him. "We're going to do this a lot," he whispered in her ear. He kissed her again, this kiss less demanding. When he ended it, he added, "I love you, Patty."

Ruth Ann Nordin

She ran her hand across his back, her movements seeming slower than normal in her state of bliss. Her limbs were heavy. Sleep was ready to overtake her, but she smiled. He loved her! He'd made love to her and confessed his love. Her heart burst with the immense joy coursing through her. After wanting him for so long, he was finally hers.

"I love you too," she replied.

The future spanned before them. A future filled with children, with laughter, with lovemaking. Tons of lovemaking. She smiled and buried her face in the nape of his neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of his skin. Yes, she could definitely get used to this.

Montana Grooms

Novella #2



A simple trip to town gives Mitch Grady more than he bargained for. He didn't just come back with grocery items. He came back with a woman who has no memory of who she is or how she ended up in Lewiston, Montana.



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