

The unpleasant smell assaulted her first. She'd smelled chicken coops more fragrant, but the acrid order was quickly eclipsed by the sheer size of the unholy mess spread out before her, and for just a moment her knees weakened as she slowly took it all in. Piled up boots, horse blankets, trousers, union suits, and tin plates competed for space with coils of rope, rain slickers and a multitude of other items so unfamiliar she didn't even know their names, let alone their purpose. The windows and walls were dirty, and she had no idea if the floor was carpeted or bare wood. A pointed look behind her showed Yates standing with his arms folded, his face again unreadable. "I see why you need a housekeeper, but someone with kennel experience might be more appropriate."

He stiffened in response, giving her a modicum of satisfaction. She removed the pins from her hat and took it off, but held on to it because there was no clear space to set it down. "Why is all this in here and not in say, a barn?"

"Bunkhouse burned down a year ago. Barns are full of barn implements, so I had the hands move their gear in here."

"So is the new bunkhouse nearly finished."

"Haven't had time to start it." Once again, his eyes offered no discernible reaction.

"I see."

Logan figured in about thirty seconds, she'd be hiking up her fancy skirts and high tailing it back to Sacramento. No way was a city woman like her going to tackle such a mess. He watched as she continued her survey.

"How many hands are in your employ?"

"Six full time." Alanza wasn't going to be pleased when told the housekeeper fled the place like her slips were on fire.

"I'll take the job."

He froze.

"I'd like to get started as soon as possible. May I see the rest of the house?"

It took a few seconds for his brain to move. "What?"

"I said, I'll take the job."

"Why?" This was not going the way he'd assumed.

"I didn't travel all this way just to turn around and go home again, Mr. Yates."

"But -." He snapped his mouth shut.

"Your home is a sty, but it can be righted. Now, will you kindly show me around, please."

The determination in her gaze made him contemplate her silently before grudgingly surrendering. "Kitchen's that way."

They waded through the chaos toward the kitchen. She tripped over a bed frame, and had he not reached out and kept her upright, she would've fallen.

"Thank you," she responded, sounding not at all pleased by the misstep.

For unknown reasons, his irritation rose upon seeing the disapproval on her beautiful face. She was judging him by the chaotic mess, and although she had a right to, he didn't care for it.

The kitchen was no better. A battered armoire leaned against the ancient stove and dilapidated cold box. He seemed to notice for the first time how scarred and beat up everything was.

"And these holes in the cabinets? Moths?"

He shot her a look. "Gunshots."

"Interesting. Were you under attack?"

"No. Horseplay and whiskey."

"I see. Does that stove work?"

"No." And hadn't in over a year.

She exhaled audibly. "What other duties do you anticipate me handling?"

"Cooking and laundry."

“Then I assume you’ll be purchasing a working stove.”

“Yes,” he replied tightly.

“Good.” She made her way over to the cabinets and looked inside at the three chipped plates and two, dented metal tumblers. “I take it you’ve been eating elsewhere.”

“Most of the time, yes.”

“If I’m to cook for you, we’ll need proper china and tableware.”

He watched her take in the dirty windows.

“What other rooms do I need to see?”

“Bathing room. Follow me.”

He escorted her down a hallway that led to the rear of the house. He decided that not only was she bossy, she was bossy and demanding. Proper china indeed.

Judging by all she’d seen so far, were Mariah a less formidable woman she’d already be making plans to return to Philadelphia as quickly as possible. Cleaning this place and putting it into some semblance of order was going to be an undertaking of Herculean proportions. Inside the bathing room now, she glanced around at the large space with its pedestal sink, water closet and huge claw foot tub.

“You have indoor plumbing.”

“Yes.”

After her encounter with the trees she was grateful for that boon. “And that door over there leads where?”

“My bedroom.”

He appeared to be waiting for some kind of reaction from her but she gave him nothing. She pulled off her gloves. “We’ll be sharing this room?”

“For now.”

She wasn't happy with that, but seeing as there was nothing to be done, she set her feelings aside. "Where to next?"

"My study."

As they entered she looked around

"You seem surprised," he observed.

"I am. The book cases actually hold books, as opposed to say, socks and dirty shirts."

It was clear he hadn't appreciated the dig, but she saw no reason for him to be offended by the truth. "And where will my room be? Mrs. Yates said she preferred I live in."

Her room was on the back of the house. It was small and blessedly clear of clutter. The only furnishings were a bed and a chest of drawers. Mariah walked over to a door on the back wall. Easing it open she found it led outside to a small fenced in courtyard that held a small wooden bench. Pleased by that, she closed it again and surveyed her sparsely furnished room. "Would it be possible to have a sitting chair in here, and a lamp?"

"I'll see what Alanza has in storage."

"Thank you. Now, would you be so kind as to bring in my trunks?"

He left her, and Mariah stepped out into the little courtyard again. By all the cigar butts and cheroot tails littering the ground, she guessed the space was used by him and his men. The area needed cleaning but once that was accomplished the bench would provide a nice spot to catch her breath after a long day, or to work on her drawings. The magnificent view of the mountains and the low border of tall pines was breathtaking. She could hear the men over at the corral but she supposed at night, there's be nothing but echoing silence. Definitely something she would have to get accustomed to.

She heard him return and so stepped back inside. "Thank you. I'd like to begin cleaning up the front parlor first thing in the morning, Will it be possible for you to have everything removed by then?"

"No."

“Why not?”

“I’ve a ranch to run and we’re busy at the moment. You take some time writing up a list of things you think you’ll be needing to do whatever it is you plan to do, and the hands and I will begin moving things in a few days.”

“I already know what I need, Mr. Yates.”

“Then take a few days to get your sea legs under you. I’m sure you’re tired from the long train ride.”

“Don’t you want the house cleared out and cleaned?”

“I do, but on my schedule.”

“Ahh. And if our schedules don’t coincide?”

“We go with mine.”

“You’re determined to lock horns with me?”

“No, you’re determined to lock horn with me, so rest up for now, and when you’re ready we’ll visit my step mother and have some supper.”

“Do you lock horns with her, too?”

“Often.”

Stalemate.

“Let me know when you’re ready, Mrs. Cooper.”

As he left her alone, Mariah wondered if there was a cure for male arrogance. Apparently, she’d traded one tyrant for another, but as she’d noted on the ride over, she had no plans to revert to her formerly spineless self. It was quite obvious that Logan Yates was accustomed to throwing his weight around and bowling people over with it. And yes, the train ride had taken a lot out of her, but this house needed immediate attention if for no other reason than to rid it of the smell which was wafting all the way back to her little room. His assumptions to the contrary, she wasn’t afraid of work and she certainly

wasn't afraid of him. Filled with determination, she changed out of her traveling ensemble and into one of her older blouses and skirts. Once that was done, she tied on an apron, put on her imaginary Queen Calafia crown and went to wage war on his fouled excuse of a home.

Outside, Logan walked over to the corral. Laying down the law to the bossy widow felt good. She worked for him, not the other way around..

Eli Braden was the first to speak up. "Well?"

"Says she's staying, and wants us to start clearing the parlor. Told her I was too busy at the moment. Maybe in a couple of days."

"She as pretty up close as she looked from here?"

The level gaze that greeted the remark made Eli grin. "Guess the answer's yes."

Logan refused to acknowledge that she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. The golden eyes and full mouth had already branded themselves in his mind's eye. "Real bossy."

"She'll need that to handle you."

"She's here to clean the place not order me around."

"You must didn't make that clear enough."

Logan appeared confused by his words, so Eli used his chin to direct his friend to what he was referencing. Logan turned around to see the Widow Cooper dragging a bed frame out of the door. He also saw that she'd changed her clothing and was now wearing a sweeping black skirt and a high necked, long sleeved blouse that fit snugly over her curves. The wire bedframe was twice her size, and her difficulties in maneuvering it were apparent, but she was persistent and soon had it out on the grass. Wiping her hands on her skirt, she walked determinedly back inside.

"Oh, hell," Logan muttered.

His men didn't bother hiding their amusement.

Out of the door she came again, this time, arms loaded with shirts and denims. She dumped them next to the bed frame and sailed back into the house.

.“Once word gets around about her beauty, men will be lined up from here to the Bay to take her off your hands,” Eli quipped.

The last thing Logan wanted was his ranch overrun by a bunch of calf eyed men, but any man loco enough to take her on would regret it because she was obviously too bossy for her own good, and deaf to boot. Hadn't he just explained that he wanted her to wait for him to decide when the house cleaning would begin?

While he and the hands looked, on she kept up her pace. For the next half an hour, the pile of items on the grass grew to include boots, bedding and other items belonging to him and his men. Finally, she stopped and directed those golden eyes, their way. To his surprise she marched over. Pointedly ignoring Logan, she said, “Gentlemen, my name’s Mariah Cooper and I’m the new housekeeper. I’d suggest you come and claim your belongings.”

Logan found this cat eyed woman so unlike any other he’d encountered he wasn’t sure what to do. “And if they don’t?” he asked coolly.

She finally looked his way. “Anything still in the pile come morning, will be kindling for a bonfire.”

Eyes widened.

Logan noticed stripes of what appeared to be blood on her fingers. He thought about her dragging the metal bed frames. “Did you cut yourself?”

“No.”

Bossy and a liar. “Let me see your hands.”

“Mr. Yates, I suggest you let me worry about my hands. You should be more concerned with getting the lumber for the new bunkhouse you need to build.”

Tamping down his rising temper, he repeated softly and slowly, "Let me see your hands."

Her tightly set face and raised chin challenged him as if she equaled him in both height and weight.

"Show me your hands before I take you over my knee and paddle your fancy little behind."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, I'd dare," he promised.

The ranch hands eagerly watched the exchange as if the boss and the little lady were acting out a play on the stage.

"Once again, you are no gentleman," she tossed back.

"So you keep reminding me. Show me your hands."

Gold eyes flaring, she presented her blood stained palms.

He took hold of first one wrist and then the other. "Fool woman. Eli, go and get me something to clean up these cuts."

While he hurried off, she pulled her hands free. "I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself."

"Was it going to be before or after the bonfire?"

Her face said she hadn't cared for that dig.

"You trying to get lock jaw?" he demanded quietly

Mariah had no idea what lock jaw was, but decided it had to be something he'd made up, until he explained, "You get it from rust in your blood. One of the symptoms is your jaws lock up, which for you might be just the ticket, but many people die from it."

She stared.

The man Eli returned with a small brown pharmacy bottle and some gauze. She reached out to take them only to have Yates take possession of the items first. "Hold out your palms."

"I'm perfectly capable – "

“Yeah, I know. Hold out your hands.”

Mariah huffed. Dealing with him was putting her dangerously close to a full blown case of apoplexy, but the challenge in his eyes made her remember his promise to paddle her so called fancy little behind. That he’d actually carry out the outrageous threat wasn’t something she wanted to chance, nor did she want it to be witnessed by his employees, so she thrust out her palms.

He poured a bit of the bottle’s liquid content onto a piece of the gauze and to her surprise went about the task gently. But whatever was in the bottle stung more than the cuts themselves. “What is that?”

“Witch hazel.”

The irony of that was inescapable, but she held still and let him finish. Eli next handed her a small white tube. The paste inside was gently rubbed on the cuts. Mariah tried to ignore the way her senses fluttered in response to Yates’s soft touched ministrations, and to the dark eyes probing her own.

“Where’d you get all these calluses?” he questioned quietly. The slow slide of his thumb over the toughened skin at the base of her fingers sent her senses into a silent swoon.

“Chopping wood and pumping water since the age of nine.”

“For who?”

“My mother. Are you done?” She needed him to release her so she could shake off her disturbing reaction. His touch and nearness were affecting her like no man before and she didn’t know the reason for it or how to douse the odd sensations. He however seemed to be still mulling over her reply. She assumed her callused hands didn’t jibe with his view of whoever he thought her to be, but she let him think what he wanted because she doubted he’d believe the truth even if she hit him over the head with it.

He unrolled a length of the gauze, wound it around her cut palms and tied the ends closed.

“Now, stop hauling stuff outside until you heal.”

“No. You hired me to do a job, bandaged hands or not.” ”

“I don’t know how things are done in Philadelphia, but here, we don’t work our women until their hands bleed.”

“These little cuts aren’t going to make me bleed to death, Mr. Yates. Surely the women here are made of sterner stuff than that.”

Logan wondered if she’d ever met an argument she didn’t like. The sassy firecracker mouth probably drove her late husband to drink, and it made him wonder if she brought that fire to the marriage bed. He glanced Eli’s way and found his partner smiling as if he’d read Logan’s mind. “Go back in the house and wait for me. We’ll ride over and have dinner with my stepmother in a few minutes ”

“Do women usually ask, how high, whenever you say, jump, Mr. Yates?”

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. When he opened them she was standing there blazing in all her golden, cat eyed glory. Having had just about enough of her for the moment, he placed his hands on her waist and slowly lifted her up to eye level. “You ever use that mouth for something besides sassing?”

Then he kissed her, and apparently caught her off so guard, that for just the briefest of moments, she softened, and he tasted the sweetness of her lips. Then her mouth clamped shut like a sprung bear trap, and she went stiff as a board. Thinking he’d bested her, he set her down on her feet. He was feeling pretty superior until she dragged her bandaged hand across her lips like she’d just been kissed by a goat and kicked him hard in his bad knee. Pain spread up his leg and he howled, “Shit!” The explosion of agony had him cursing a blue streak while hopping around like a pegged legged sailor doing a jig.

Eli and the men laughed so hard they almost fell down, She on the other hand, looking angry enough to spit, spun around and stormed back the way she’d come.

Logan was still cursing, and Eli and the hands were still laughing when she disappeared inside the house.