

Indiscreet

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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## Chapter One

She hadn't seen or heard him come in when his big arms closed around her, trapping hers at her sides and ripping the gun completely out of her hand. In fact, she barely heard the bullets clinking into his palm and saw him holster the thing before he maneuvered the chair over to him with just the tip of one booted foot, hooking his heel over it as he yanked her over the knee he'd so conveniently raised.

She had thought she was thoroughly embarrassed at the highly unladylike "oof" that flew out of her mouth as her solar plexus met his unyielding tree trunk of a thigh, but she had no idea then what an ignominious fate he had in store for her after that.

Up went her skirts, to the point that she could see the somewhat frayed hem of her favorite—if well-worn—dress as it draped down over her head, her frilly but even less presentable petticoats soon joining it. She felt sure that he would stop there. It was quite bad enough—quite improper—for him to see her in her bloomers, but surely, he'd stop there.

He was, after all, a gentleman, wasn't he? At least he presented himself as one.

Her heart sank when she felt the drawstring being pulled, then his fingers crooking into the waistband of her bloomers. Of course, she'd been trying to fight him as best she could all along—silently, so that she didn't cause them to be discovered in dishabille by a servant or—Heaven forbid—a member of the family.

Although she wasn't really sure which possibility might be worse.

Down went the dingy grey split crotch bloomers, catching, as they did, on her tightly closed knees, and she knew then that he was looking down at parts of her no man ever had before—that no man—including him—especially him—had the right to see.

He surprised her by pausing then—and whether her cheeks were red hot from her unusual position or from the excruciating embarrassment of it, she wasn't sure, probably a potent combination of the two—but she did know she was seconds from fainting because of it.

That was until his hand landed on her bottom with a crisp crack that was so sharp that it echoed—even throughout the well-appointed, well upholstered room.

The shriek she emitted at that insult to her flesh made her earlier gasp sound quiet. It was so loud, they both fell immediately silent as they heard the tap of Winnie's heels coming down the hall, as well as her timid knock.

"Rissa, is that you? Are you quite all right?"

Clarissa found herself at a complete loss as to what to do in this kind of situation—one which she had absolutely never found herself in before.

"Answer her!" she heard him command her roughly from above, through what sounded like tightly clenched teeth.

"I'm fine, Winnie!" she could barely draw enough breath to warble back.

"You're sure? Only I thought I heard you yelp or something."

"I'm so clumsy—I stubbed my toe. But I'm fine."

There was a slight pause as her sister digested this information. "If I might ask, what are you doing in Doyle's office? He usually keeps his door closed."

"Yes," her captor muttered under his breath. "What *are* you doing in my office?"

She attempted to laugh, but it didn't come out right at all, and she frankly hoped Winnie hadn't heard it. "Oh, just exploring. You know what a nosey body I am. And you did tell me to make myself at home."

Rissa could see her sister's uncomfortable smile in her mind. "So I did. I didn't think you'd take it quite that literally. But do be careful. And lunch is almost on the table."

"I will, Winnie. Thank you. I'll be there in a second."

As she heard her potential savior walk away, Doyle warned, "It's going to be longer than a second. And, unless you'd like her to see you sprawled over my lap with your bloomers at your ankles, then I suggest you keep quiet while I teach you something your parents should have—how to respect a closed door, especially in a house in which you are a guest, at best, and a damned badly behaved one at the worst."

Her parents hadn't believed in spanking their daughters, so Rissa had never found herself in this position before—certainly never on the end of a spanking by someone she barely knew, who so obviously knew exactly what he was doing.

From the very next swat, she knew it was going to be beyond her capabilities to be as quiet as she would need to be to keep from raising Winnie's suspicions again if he continued to spank her—and the "if" was pure wishful thinking on her part. With his strength holding her right where he wanted her and her voluminous skirts hindering her ability to reach back and find anything but more and more fabric, there was no doubt in her mind that she was going to be on the receiving end of whatever duration of punishment he decided to mete out.

She began to cry early on—as quietly as she could, of course—and not because she was playing for sympathy, but because it bloody well hurt! She wouldn't ascribe him the gentlemanly traits of empathy or sympathy—any man who did this to a woman he'd just met couldn't possibly possess either of those fine qualities, in her estimation.

But clenching her teeth together so hard her jaw was aching wasn't doing enough to dampen her outraged—and agonized—responses, so she did the only other thing she could do. She grabbed a handful of her skirt and shoved the material between her teeth, mortified to realize that she'd stumbled on a good solution—it muffled her cries quite efficiently. She shouldn't have had to do so, not that the bully who was busy gleefully, physically chastising her would agree, she was sure.

Luckily, considering the fact that she could feel her teeth gnashing holes into the threadbare material and that she was quite sure she needed someone to throw a pail of water over her behind to put out the fire he'd set and continued to fan the flames of in it, he stopped not long after that. But when she tried to wrench herself up and off his lap, she found she couldn't move a muscle.

And all it took, apparently, for him to render her immobile was to place his arm across her back.

When he spoke, his voice was very low and gravelly, obviously also trying not to stir Winnie's suspicions again. "If all you'd been doing was exploring my room, Miss Dayton, you would have gotten a thorough scolding, not a spanking. But you were playing with my gun—"

"I wasn't playing with it," she hissed, probably not too smartly. "I know it's not a toy."

"Have you ever handled one before?"

She almost tsked at him and barely managed to keep herself from doing just that, which she knew he would not appreciate in the least and might well result in him starting up again. But she did hiss impatiently back at him, "Of *course* not—I've never even seen one before, which is why I was examining it. I grew up in a civilized city, not the wild West!"

Clarissa knew she should have controlled her temper—or at the very least, her tone of voice. His palm slapping rudely down on her butt again was a reminder she wouldn't soon forget.

"Then you had absolutely no business touching it. My gun has a hair trigger, and you were aiming it at your foot. Do you fancy limping around in front of your classroom, if you ever do manage to get a job?"

His obvious disdain and dislike for her nearly had her weeping again, but she stiffened her resolve against it, not wanting to let him see her doing that as a result of something he'd said. It was bad enough that he'd reduced her to it when he was spanking her, but there was no way she couldn't have. It was that painful.

She didn't know what it was that she'd done to earn his displeasure—she'd only been under his roof for less than a day, and besides now, she'd only ever seen him at dinner, during which he hadn't said more than three words to her, one of which was, "Hello," and the other two were, "Good night," when he'd excused himself from the table immediately after they'd eaten and disappeared into the very room they were in now.

He was gone when she got up the next morning, his brother—her new brother-in-law—explaining that Doyle was a "hands on" rancher who wasn't content to sit behind a desk. He liked to keep an eye on and a hand on what was happening on the ranch around him, as well as business dealings they had around the state and around the country. It seemed that big brother left the desk job—the books—to Isaac, not that he didn't oversee those just as closely, too, probably.

Steeling herself, Clarissa did not respond directly to his question, nor was she willing to debase herself enough to ask him to let her up. "I will not touch any of your guns again, Mr. Caldwell."

"Any gun. I want your word that—unless you're willing to have me teach you how to handle one safely—you won't touch any gun."

Through her own clenched teeth—and without a care as to whether or not he realized that fact, despite the vulnerability and already dilapidated condition of her backside—she answered, "You have my word."

He surprised her then by actively helping her up—holding her still long enough to pull up and quickly retie her bloomers, which were almost literally hanging on around just one of her shoes by a thread, then releasing her and lifting her bodily—as he stood up himself—and setting her down very gently on her feet.

Even then, he wasn't so much as breathing heavily.

As if she was worried that he was going to try to keep her there, in front of him, Rissa immediately removed herself from his reach by several feet and turned her back to him—bravely or perhaps not so—in order to make the necessary adjustments to render herself presentable while she could feel his stare on her back like a physical touch—as well as the burning of her behind in the tight casing of her underwear, which was in such a bad condition that even just the soft swish of her skirts over her bottom caused her breath to catch with every step as it reignited the unbearable sting as if she was being spanked all over again.

When she had gotten her clothing straightened, she moved a bit to her left—although no closer to him—to look at herself in the big, ornately framed mirror that hung over the couch, trying and failing not to react to what she saw there. Her nose was red, her eyes were swollen, and to her consternation, still slowly leaking tears—and these cheeks—like the others, she imagined—were several shades redder than they had been before he'd discovered her, not to mention the fact that multiple strands her always stubborn, recalcitrant red hair were trying to go into business for themselves, determinedly curling out of the matronly bun she wrestled it into every morning.

She quickly made as many repairs as she could, not wanting to completely dismantle her hair-do, but rearranging some of the pins more strategically so that, hopefully, it didn't look like she'd just been put over a man's knee and spanked to within an inch of her life.

It didn't help that she had to constantly wipe away the tears that just seemed to want to keep coming, which just made her want to cry that much more, until the unsuccessful act of trying to suppress them was an unresolved ache in her chest.

Again, she didn't see or hear him come to stand just behind her until he appeared in the mirror with her, holding out what looked like an expensive silk handkerchief. She could see his initials—D.E.C.—had been embroidered in the corner by some fine feminine hand. Not a shred of remorse showed on his carefully blank face, not that that should have surprised her.

Rissa ignored it completely in favor of taking a deep breath and heading towards the door. As her hand turned the brass knob, he said from behind her, "I will hold you to your word, Miss Dayton."

She refused to dignify his warning with any kind of an answer and, instead, settled for walking determinedly through the door, swinging it wide open in preparation for slamming it closed. She managed somehow to stop herself halfway through the motion and closed it behind her with a deathly quiet click, when what she really wanted to do was to let it fly closed on its hinges at such a velocity that it would knock the pictures clean off his walls. But she wasn't about to give him another excuse to spank her.

Winnie, of course, commented on how she looked as if she'd been crying as soon as she saw her, and Rissa confessed that she had been—that she'd stubbed her toe just that hard, and that was why she hadn't come out immediately—she'd been examining her foot to make sure she hadn't broken a toe.

Lies didn't come easily to her, though, especially not to her sister, and in her mind, she attributed her sins directly to Doyle Caldwell and nowhere else. He was the reason she had to make excuses for her appearance, and she would never forgive him for it.

Those feelings of anger and resentment were only heightened when, upon entering the dining room, she caught sight of the chairs and remembered that they were straight backed, hard wood, with no cushioning on the seat. She was not looking forward to having to sit down at all, much less on such an uncomfortable chair and for the length of a formal luncheon. But there was no hope for it.

And dinner tonight would be even worse, she realized. They may have been in the middle of nowhere, but there were some traditions—inherited from their very English mother, she assumed—that the brothers had seen fit to continue, and more formal eating habits—with certain modifications—were one of them.

She was so busy fuming that it caught her unawares when she slid gingerly down onto her seat and happened to look down to see the clear, wet impression of her own teeth on the hem of her dress, hastily tucking it under the table and hoping, firstly, that it dried before anyone else noticed it and, secondly, that it proved discreetly repairable.

For his part, Doyle let her go—having seen her smartly change her mind mid-childish tantrum and decide to close the door in a manner that was almost abnormally quiet, but which made him turn back towards his desk with an amused smile he was glad she couldn't see and that he wished he wasn't wearing.

It wasn't quite noon yet. He hadn't heard the ranch cook, Smarty, jangling the triangle that signaled nearby hands that it was time for lunch, as well as the family's, who ate at the same time. This was something his mother had instituted long ago by sheer necessity. She would have

preferred to have eaten at one or so, but she'd learned early on in her marriage to his father that, if she insisted on that more civilized hour as she had tried to when they were first married, then she would spend her time being interrupted constantly, since the men were working when her husband, Maurice, wasn't. And they would no more have gone ahead and done something without his okay than they would now without his eldest son's.

He didn't let the time stop him from pouring himself a stiff, strong whiskey from the beautiful crystal decanter that lived on the credenza behind his desk and mulled the situation over further. Not that he regretted what he'd done in the least.

He hadn't expected to find her in his office, and he certainly hadn't expected to find her with one of his guns in her hands. His heart had been in his throat the entire time he'd been crossing the room, but he could tell that she didn't hear him—the legacy of having been a pretty good hunter and trapper as a boy—and he'd hoped to a God he no longer believed in that he could get to her before he startled her into or all on her own she ended up doing something that was accidentally very stupid—and potentially very lethal, either to herself or to him or to someone who caught a stray bullet.

Doyle admitted to himself that he probably shouldn't have spanked her, but he'd given in to a very primitive impulse to impress upon her the severity of what she'd been doing. His brother, Isaac, would probably have just yelled at her some, but Isaac had always been much more of an actual gentleman than he was. Isaac had come along just at a time when the family was beginning to make some money, and, as the youngest, he'd had the benefit of a lot more civilizing influences than he'd had as the eldest.

Two black brows drew together. While he'd been involved in the process, he hadn't had the chance—the inclination or the ability really—to notice the state her attire was in, but now that he was playing the scene back in his mind, he realized that every piece of her clothing that he'd touched had been not only out of date, but barely decent to wear—her bloomers in particular. He could probably have had the same exact effect if he'd spanked her over them, but he'd always been a firm believer that spankings were best administered on the bare. Especially those given to women.

Petite, red haired women were of particular interest, he was somewhat alarmed to realize. But that was a fact that was rudely driven home to him once he had her over his knee and was only reinforced from that point on, especially when he found himself staring down at those beautiful, rounded, pale—for the moment—cheeks of hers. He apparently had enough gentlemanly impulses that he'd adjusted himself so that the evidence of his carnal desires wasn't poking at her, not that he thought she'd know enough to notice that—besides, she was too busy trying to wiggle her way off his lap in the most enticing manner imaginable.

Which only made hiding his problematic condition that much harder, although he had felt compelled to continue to try to do so, with limited success. Sometimes, size wasn't the blessing it was heralded as.

When the dinner bell rang, he shook his head physically, trying to clear those highly improper images from his head—Miss Dayton arching up with each smack, bottom flesh wobbling and instantly turning a becoming shade of crimson, legs kicking as much as they could while she valiantly tried to keep them together, although he'd noticed that she'd managed to dislodge the underwear that had been helping her do so almost completely within less than ten slaps, so it was her own strength of will and strong sense of modesty that had kept those knees clamped together.



Downing the rest of his drink in one big gulp, he rose and headed for the door, his last thought—as he caught his reflection in the mirror and remembered the sight of her fiddling with her hair—was that he wondered if all of her red hair was on her head.

Of course, she was the first person he saw when he entered the dining room, her eyes skittering nervously away from his as his brother and her sister joined them after kissing affectionately, as if they hadn't just seen each other at breakfast.

He didn't know why the fact that those two were so blatantly in love irked him so, but it did. If he thought it wouldn't be terribly curmudgeonly of him, he might have said something to Isaac about their displays of physical affection and—worse—much worse—their cooing at each other every chance they got. He'd thought it might abate considerably once they were well and properly married, but he hadn't seen any staunching of the annoying behavior in the least—in fact, it was probably worse now than it ever had been.

Isaac seated his wife, kissing the top of her head before taking his own chair across the table from her. Clarissa sat next to her sister on the other side—about as far away from him as she could get and glad of it, he imagined—and he was where he belonged—where his father had sat—at the head of it.

The worst thing in the world happened right off when Isaac frowned fiercely, saying, "Clarissa, is anything the matter? You look as if you've been crying."

Rissa opened her mouth to repeat the fabrication she'd come up with for her sister when Winnie did it for her, even reaching over to pat her hand soothingly as she did so—and reciting it much more convincingly than she ever could have.

Isaac, of course, was effusively sympathetic. "You should have Doyle take a look at it. He has quite a bit of medical knowledge, having grown up on the ranch when it was much wilder around here than it is now. Why, when Mother and Father first came here, there wasn't a town for miles and miles around. Now, we have Riverview just a few miles away."

"Surely, there's a doctor there," Rissa blurted out, wishing instantly that she hadn't.

"There's an old sawbones—he's a doctor, a vet and a dentist all in one, and not very good at any of them. Besides, he'd charge you money," Isaac informed the women. "I'm sure Doyle would be only too happy to do anything he could to help you feel better."

"Somehow, I doubt that, since he was the cause," she muttered very quickly and quietly under her breath, but apparently not softly enough.

"What did you say?" Doyle himself prompted with just the barest hint of a smile on his face.

"I said I wouldn't want to put you out like that," Rissa came up with quickly, lifting her head as if she was going to look at him, but her eyes never quite made it to his face.

Doyle's smile only got brighter at her verbal dancing. "Isaac is correct, of course. I'd be glad to assist in any way I can. Perhaps the application of some lotion might help?"

The other two at the table were surprised at his unusual suggestion, so they didn't see Clarissa frowning fiercely at Doyle.

Isaac chuckled. "A lotion? For what might be a broken toe?"

"Sometimes, a salve helps in these situations—reduces the swelling and the pain," Doyle drawled, thoroughly enjoying the young woman's discomfort as they both knew he was speaking about something else entirely.

"I'll be fine, I think, thank you. My shoes are so tight that they're holding everything quite steady, and that'll keep the inflammation down, too. Besides, there's not much anyone can do if it is broken."

"That's true," Winnie agreed, launching into a tale about the time she'd done much the same thing, and Rissa was finally able to relax and eat a little of her lunch. But she could still feel his eyes on her, and the memory of what he'd seen of her and done to her was too fresh in her mind for her to be able to get much of it down, despite how delicious it was.

So, hating herself for the coward that she was, she nonetheless pulled her napkin from her lap not long after the meal had begun and put it on the table next to her almost untouched dinner and stood—which relieved the considerable discomfort of sitting, too. "I'm afraid I'm not feeling very well at the moment—nothing to do with my foot." She smiled wanly. "Just still tired and a bit unsettled from the trip, I guess. If you'll excuse me, I believe I'll go up to my room and lie down."

The two men rose immediately when she did, as did Winnie, and, as she moved away from the table, Rissa's eyes caught the men's faces. Isaac looked genuinely concerned. Doyle looked as if he was suppressing the urge to smile, blast him.

"Can I help with anything? Bring you up a tray later?" Winnie asked solicitously.

But Rissa was almost at the stairs in the big foyer already. "No, thank you, sister. I just want to nap for a while. But thank you."

Upstairs, behind the closed door, stretched out—on her tummy—on the luxuriously big bed with the gorgeous blue silk comforter, Rissa gave way to the tears she'd been holding back all that time, cursing the name Doyle Caldwell into her pillow until she fell asleep of exhaustion, moments later.