



Lily Graison

A Willow Creek Christmas

A Willow Creek Novel

Chapter One

"Hell's fire, woman. Watch where you're going!" Noah yanked on the horse's reins, barely getting the wagon stopped. The idiotic woman who stepped into the road in front of him turned her large blue eyes, wide with alarm, his way, her mouth open as she gasped in fright. She stared at him for long moments then blinked, clutching the shawl around her shoulders tighter before running across the street and disappearing between two buildings.

He watched her go, shook his head in disgust, then got the horse moving again, steering him toward the Willow Creek mercantile. Pulling to a stop alongside the wooden sidewalk, he glanced inside the store. Then grimaced. Packed with customers as usual.

Securing the brake, he hopped to the ground, rounded the wagon and hurried inside the store. He glanced toward the group of school age kids when one said, "Look Alex, Willow Creek's resident monster is out before dark." The sound of their giggles were loud inside the building, and he noticed Holden Avery's daughter, Alexandra, shove an elbow into a boy's stomach. Noah threw them a glare, holding the boy's gaze until the youth paled and made a beeline for the back of the store.

The word monster played on repeat inside Noah's head as he tried to ignore those openly staring at him. They'd heard the kid too, and by the looks on their faces, agreed with the snot-nosed little brat.

As always, he kept his head down, walked to the counter, then waited for Morgan Avery, town marshal in Willow Creek, to conclude his business.

The whispers in the room grew, each uttered breath echoing in Noah's head. They were staring at him, he could feel their gazes like hot pokers in his back. He remembered now why he loathed coming to town.

Morgan turned to leave, spotted him, and stopped. Noah sighed. He'd hoped the man would keep on walking but like the rest of that Avery bunch, they made a habit of thinking he wanted to talk with them.

"Noah. It's good to see you." Morgan pushed the front of his hat up. "How you been faring so far from town by yourself?"

"Fine." Morgan looked as if he were waiting for him to say more but as far as Noah was concerned, he'd answered the marshal's question.

"Do you need any help getting your place ready for winter?"

"Nope."

Morgan smiled. "Anybody ever accuse you of talking too much?"

"No."

"Didn't think so." The marshal shook his head, still grinning, then said his goodbyes, much to Noah's relief.

The dour faced Mrs. Jenkins muttered something under her breath as he approached the counter, then greeted him with a nod of her head as she stared at him over the rim of her glasses. In the two years he'd lived in Willow Creek, he didn't think the woman had ever spoken a word to

him other than to tell him how much money he owed her. Which was fine by him. The less people he had to speak to, the better. He didn't settle here to make friends, anyway.

Noah held out the note he'd scribbled his list on to Mrs. Jenkins. She snatched it from his gloved hand as if he were about to reach out and grab her at any moment, to taint her in some foul way by being this close to him. He held back a sneer of disgust at her actions and looked away as she turned from the counter and proceeded to collect the things he'd requested.

The mercantile was full today. He hadn't been to town in nearly two months and the one day he decided to make the trip, he encountered more people than he'd seen in the past year.

He turned, browsing the tables near the counter, looking at nothing in particular when feminine laughter caught his attention. Against his better judgment, he glanced up.

Holden Avery and a woman he'd never seen before were looking his way. To his surprise, Holden lifted his hand and motioned him over. "Damn," he whispered under his breath before sighing. He should have known Holden Avery was nearby. He'd already seen the man's daughter.

He wasn't sure what it was about those Avery's. They'd lent him a hand more than once since he moved to town, all without him asking a thing from them. He'd refused their help countless times, but they always insisted, doing whatever it took to make his life just a little bit

easier. As much as it irked him, he figured the least they deserved was civility when they spoke to him, even if it galled him to do so.

He crossed the room and stopped a few feet away.

"Noah, I'd like to introduce you to Ms. Grace Kingston. Grace, this is Noah Lloyd." Holden glanced at the woman again and so did Noah. She was pretty with a head full of golden hair nestled under a hat with feather plumes and what looked like a bird's nest on one side. His gaze skated down her figure and back up. He'd seen dresses like the one she was wearing before. A lifetime ago, it seemed, back home in Charleston. He didn't know where she hailed from but she was too fancy for a dusty little town like Willow Creek. This lady was wealthy, her posture alone told him that, and he was sure she was just as snooty and highfalutin as those prissy debutantes he once knew.

She smiled at him and nodded her head ever so slightly. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lloyd."

Noah didn't reply. He stared at her for a few moments before turning his attention back to Holden. The man smiled and shook his head.

"Ms. Kingston is looking for a husband. Seems she ran into a bit of trouble with the one she came out here for."

Noah raised an eyebrow at Holden's quiet statement. Why was he telling him about her problems? His gaze darted in her direction again. She was still smiling at him. An uneasy feeling settled in his gut before he felt a shock go through his system. Surely Holden Avery didn't think

he—the town's most unlikable person—would be interested in taking in this fancy lady. To marry her?

He met the man's eyes, saw the expectant gleam shining back at him, and knew he did. He'd introduced him to Ms. Kingston in hopes of securing a husband for her.

Something dark and ugly reared its head as he stared at the two of them. Fire licked through his veins. His pulse quickened and he narrowed his eyes. "I don't want a wife," he said, his voice rough and scratchy to his own ears. "If you'll excuse me."

He nodded to Ms. Kingston, and turned, making his way back to the counter.

He felt his ears burning the moment Holden's words repeated themselves inside his head. Ms. Kingston is looking for a husband. And Holden asked him? Was Holden teasing him or had he really thought to play match-maker and hook this woman up with him?

He glanced at them out of the corner of his eye. They were talking quietly, laughing at something—probably him—and loathing filled him until his skin felt hot, the side of his face burning, the scar he'd lived with for so long seeming to come to life to remind him no one would look upon him and not be revolted. Especially a lady like Ms. Kingston.

A small voice in the back of his head whispered that she hadn't looked as if she'd been revolted. Maybe she would be okay with the way he looked.

Noah scoffed. She must be damn near desperate then. Either that or more polite than most women by pretending not to notice.

Mrs. Jenkins returned, the boxes of dry goods packed to the top, along with the special order he'd placed months ago. Noah paid her and heaved the first box from the counter and headed for the door without a word. It took three trips to get everything outside, but he breathed a sigh of relief when lifting the last box. It was heavy, the items Mrs. Jenkins put on top making it hard to see over. Knowing her dislike of him, she'd probably done it on purpose.

A squeal from a child distracted his thoughts. He turned his head in time to see one running his way, her blond locks obscuring her face. She ran into him, hitting him in just the right place on the back of his knee causing his leg to give out, the box tipping over and spilling its contents over the wooden sidewalk.

The girl bounced off his leg and ended up on her backside by his feet.

"Watch where you're going," he shouted.

The girl sat up, lifting one arm to fling her hair out of her face. She was young, no more than five or six, he noticed, and was a tiny little thing. Her clothes were threadbare and her face reminded him of a painting he saw once of a plump cheeked cherub. Of course, the cherub in the painting didn't have dirt smeared across its face, nor was its nose running, leaving a snotty trail clean to its lip.

Noah stared down at her, watching her bright-blue eyes widen in alarm before tears started to gather. His own eyes widened then. Hell's fire, she was going to cry. He could tell by the way her face turned pink then red, her eyes filling with more tears as her lip protruded into a pout. The moment she opened her mouth, he braced himself.

She let out a wail loud enough to wake the dead and Noah cringed as he stared at her. He debated on helping her to her feet, or jumping into his wagon and leaving his purchased goods—and her—there on the sidewalk.

He looked down the street, noticed a few people turn to look his way, but saw no one this little urchin could belong to.

She cried hard while fat tears rolled down her cheeks, her wails drawing more attention by the second. Noah hunched his shoulders and reached for her, grabbing the front of her shabby dress and bunching the material in his fist before lifting her to her feet. He heard someone yell, "Sophie," and looked up.

A boy ran onto the sidewalk from between the mercantile and the telegraph office. He was older than the girl by a few years but his clothes were just as shabby. His face was cleaner but not by much. He turned his head and spotted the girl, relief evident on his face.

He ran to where they stood and Noah loosened his grip on the front of her dress. He watched them both, staring at the boy as he wrapped a bony arm around the girl's shoulders and held her awkwardly to his side.

"Sorry, Mister." The boy looked up, his gaunt face ashen. "She got away from me when I wasn't lookin'."

Noah didn't reply, just watched them until a feminine voice caught his attention. The woman who stepped in front of his wagon, and nearly got herself trampled in the process, approached at a fast clip. Their mother, he assumed. He gave her a look from head to toe as she approached them. She wasn't much to look at. Her clothes were tattered, her thin shawl ragged in places, a large hole in the material glared at him from her left shoulder. She turned bright-blue eyes his way and for the first time since leaving Charleston twelve years ago, Noah saw pain in someone else's eyes that nearly matched his own.

She gave him a slight smile, a nervous gesture he was sure, before she leaned down, tucking the children under her arms. "I'm sorry. They didn't mean any harm."

Noah stared at her, his gaze now fixed on her hair. It fell just below her jaw and hung in limp, dirty strands. He wasn't even sure of the color, nor had he ever seen a woman wear her hair so short. He instantly wondered why she did.

He looked back to her face. Her nose had the slightest upturn on the end, her eyes large and luminous, their color the purest cornflower-blue he'd ever seen. Pretty, if he cared to think about it, which he didn't. A quick glance down her body showed her to be waif thin, her clothes hanging off of her small frame. Just like the rags those kids were

wearing, the woman's dress was stained and the stench of unwashed skin polluted the air around them and nearly took his breath.

She turned without another word, ushering the children away, and he watched them slip back between the buildings. Noah waited nearly five minutes—for what he had no idea—before shaking his head and picking everything up from the sidewalk and tossing it back into the box. Securing his goods, he climbed in the wagon and grabbed the reins.

The ride home was bumpy, the wagon jostling over the rutted road. The sky was darkening. It would snow soon. A storm was brewing, he could feel it in his bones.

Reaching his small cabin, he unloaded his provisions, tucked them away in the larder and unhitched his horse from the wagon. He tended the animals, ate a bowl of stew that had been simmering all day, and picked up his leather bound journal from the top of the desk. He unwrapped the special pencils he'd sent away for, found the small container holding the graphite lead to fill his pen and crossed the room to sit in the old rocker he'd found in the barn when he bought the place.

Opening the journal, he flipped through the pages until he found a space near the back and spent the next hour drawing the likeness of Ms. Grace Kingston, the lady Holden Avery had introduced him to in the mercantile. When he was satisfied with the drawing, he wrote her name under her likeness and dated it, blew across the page to remove any graphite dust and thumbed back through all the pages.

Everyone he'd ever encountered in Willow Creek could be found in the pages of his journal, along with the faces of people he'd known a lifetime ago, all of them staring back at him through small scenes of a life he barely remembered living.

Closing the book, he stared into the fire. The occasional crack and pop of the wood the only sounds to be heard other than the wind whistling against the outside walls.

Sighing, Noah folded his arms across his chest, leaned back and set the chair to rocking before glancing up at the clock. He had four full hours before dark. Four hours before he could escape into an oblivion of dreamless sleep.

* * *

Keri tried to soothe Sophie Ann, shushing her as they sat in the grove behind the mercantile. The small bench nestled under crooked, bare tree limbs was dry for once. She wiped Sophie's face and said, "Hush now. Stop your crying, love."

Sophie Ann sniffled, hiccuped once, and wailed again. "I got scared," she cried.

"I told you I'd be right back, now didn't I?"

She nodded. "Aaron said it would be dark soon and I don't want to be here at dark."

"I know, honey," Keri said, smoothing back Sophie's hair. "But it can't be helped. Not this time."

Keri gathered her little girl back into her arms, coddling her despite promising not to do so. She couldn't help it. Not after what they'd had to endure over the last six months. Watching them slowly grow thinner and listening to their grumbling bellies night after night was taking its toll. She wasn't sure how much longer they'd survive on their own—or survive, period—so if coddling them offered some small measure of comfort, she'd do it without a single regret.

Aaron slid in next to them on the bench and Keri blinked away her own tears as she looked at him. She reached out, pushed his hair out of his eyes, then wrapped her arm around his shoulders, drawing him in close to her side. He'd grown up so much in the last few months. The little boy she knew was gone, replaced with a child much wiser than his years. She mourned his lost youth.

Looking up at the sky, the darkening horizon drew a long sigh from her lungs. Regardless of Sophie Ann's outburst, she couldn't sit here holding her until nightfall. She sat Sophie back down on the bench. A simple glance at Aaron, telling him silently to watch his little sister, was all it took for him to nod in acceptance.

"I'll be back," she said, smiling as she reached out to wipe Sophie's face again. "Please stay here. I don't want you wandering around town without me, okay?"

The children nodded their heads at her and Keri turned, heading back toward the buildings. She navigated town with practiced ease, avoided looking at anyone and hoped she blended in. She crossed the street near the stagecoach station, remembering to look and see if anyone was coming down the road this time. Making her way around the building, she and waited for nearly half an hour before the back door opened.

A portly woman with graying hair sat the bucket Keri had been waiting on by the back stoop before giving a shrill whistle and yelling, "Come and get it, dog, before it gets cold." The woman waited a few moments then turned, walked back inside, and closed the door behind her.

Keri waited another five minutes before sneaking over to the back of the building to look inside the bucket. She grimaced at the offering.

Day old stew, clumpy potatoes, and bits of bread swam in congealing grease. Keri's stomach turned, her heart breaking an instant later as tears filled her eyes. As miserable as life had been to them in the last little while, she knew this was the low point. Stealing scraps and slop from discarded buckets of waste meant for a dog to keep them fed.

She reached in with a trembling hand, scooped out a bit with two fingers and brought them to her mouth, tears scalding her throat as she tasted it. It was still warm, just as the woman said. She turned her head to one side, wiped her tears away with a shrug of her shoulder and grabbed the handle on the bucket, lifting it and turning. That's when she

saw him. The dog the woman had called. He was as pitiful a sight as she was.

His brown coat was filthy with dried mud. He looked as emaciated as she felt and Keri sighed when he came to a stop a few feet away. He whined, lowered his head, his floppy ears dangling in his face and Keri felt something inside her break. Tears filled her eyes again and she blinked them away, put one hand under the bucket and dumped a good bit of the old stew onto the ground for the animal. She stared at him, hoped what she'd given him was enough to appease his hunger, and resolutely put him out of her mind. She had to. She had children to worry about. Worrying about the welfare of a dog would do her no good when she couldn't do anything about it anyway.

She sighed and turned, running around the side of the building before anyone saw her. Stopping at the corner of the building, she eyed those on the street. Music from the saloon filled the air and her eye was drawn to it the same as it was every time they ventured to town. She'd been tempted more than once to enter the building but her stomach always rolled at the thought and stopped her. She may not have a choice soon. They couldn't keep going like this and they certainly couldn't walk to California. She needed money and whoring herself out in the saloon may be the only option left.

Pushing the thought away for now, she scanned the street before venturing out of her hiding place. It took a bit of maneuvering to get back to the other side of town without being seen but she walked into the

clearing behind the mercantile a few minutes later to find her children right where she'd left them.

Her heart nearly broke to see their gaunt faces but she smiled at them to hide her sorrow. Setting the bucket on the bench, she blinked away more tears. "It's stew," she said. "There's even a bit of meat in there, I think."

The kids looked into the bucket, their eyes wide and expectant. When they reached in, scooping the stew and potatoes out by the handfuls, Keri nearly suffocated, her throat tight and swelling as more tears threatened to fall. She sucked in large amounts of air, willing herself to be strong for them and sat down as they ate.

It was nearly nightfall when they'd finished. Aaron looked up at her, a frown marring his face. "Are you not going to eat, Ma?"

Keri smiled at him. "No love. You and your sister eat it. There will be more later for me."

When the residents of Willow Creek settled in for the night and the bucket was empty, Keri stood, held a finger to her lips to silence the children and crept to the back door of the mercantile. It opened with little resistance and she peeked over her shoulder, making sure Aaron and Sophie were still on the bench before she snuck inside.

She could hear the woman who ran the store in the upstairs loft talking to someone, and Keri paused when the floorboards under her feet creaked. She listened and held her breath before venturing farther into the room.

As before, she took only what she needed. Two loaves of bread, a jar of preserves, and a small bag of beans. She snuck back out, ran to the bench and gathered Aaron and Sophie, hurrying toward the outskirts of town and praying no one had seen her.

The walk back to the shack they'd been calling home was long, the night bitterly cold, but Keri smiled as she clutched her purloined loot. They would be able to eat for a week now thanks to her stolen goods. She looked toward the sky, the moon and stars blotted out by gathering clouds, and she hoped the weather held. If it snowed now, they were as good as dead.

Chapter Two

The chicken coop was void of eggs again. Noah scratched at his beard while staring at the hens. He wasn't sure what was wrong with the critters but he hadn't seen an egg in over a week.

He shut the door to the coop and ventured to the barn. The cow had been milked but she was raising a fuss about something. He looked in on her, figured she just felt like bellowing this morning, and turned to tend his horse. He bridled him but left his saddle on the railing and led him out into the morning air. Clouds filled the sky and Noah looked up, staring at the darkening horizon and knew snow was coming. He could smell it on the breeze.

Taking up the brush, Noah groomed the horse until he shined, rubbed his neck and talked to the animal as if he were a real person. He'd found out pretty early that living alone took its toll if he never spoke, so his animals got a daily dose of stories and history as he'd seen it unfold, retold by an ex-confederate soldier who saw more death and destruction than any one man should have to endure.

He finished up another tale of bloodshed, remembering his old friend Dwight Lytle, when he looked out across the valley. He saw smoke in the distance, lingering near the top of the trees that lined his property. Noah lowered the horse brush and stared at the thin ribbon of smoke. Was something on fire? His heart started racing at the thought.

Turning back to the barn, he raced in, tossed the brush away and grabbed his saddle, making quick work of getting it cinched on the horse. He ran to the cabin, grabbed his gun from the hook above the mantle—only an idiot traveled into the woods without one—and stored the weapon in the scabbard on the saddle before mounting.

The leather creaked under his weight and Noah adjusted his hat and pulled his collar up around his ears when the wind shifted. The first tiny flakes of snow drifted toward him, fluttering by his face as he took up the reins, giving them a small flick to get the horse moving.

The ride across the valley was slow. The snow fluttering in on a wisp of a breeze turned into a downpour within minutes, whiting out the countryside. Noah debated on going back to the cabin but that smoke was still there, black and thick amongst the trees.

He urged the horse forward and realized long moments later the smoke was coming from an old line shack that sat on the edge of his property. The building wasn't fit for anything other than firewood. It used to house cowboys watching over a herd in some long ago past, but Noah hadn't had a use for it. It leaned to one side, the roof sagging in the middle, and he was surprised it was still standing at all.

Dismounting, he tied the horse's reins to a nearby tree, pulled his rifle from the scabbard, and crept quietly toward the building. He could hear voices, a bit of laughter. Someone was in the shack. Squatters. Noah felt his blood race through his veins at the mere thought. His

empty chicken coop came to mind and he knew why there were no eggs. Someone was stealing them. He'd bet his farm on it.

The horse chose that moment to nay and snort, stomping one hoof into the gathering snow. Noah looked back over his shoulder at the animal and scowled, willing him to be quiet.

The noise inside the shack stopped, someone making a shushing noise and Noah's blood pressure soared. He straightened, raised the rifle and aimed it at the door. "I know you're in there! Come on out."

He waited, watching the door, the silence deafening.

The snow slacked off, the flakes once again fluttering in front of him and the clink of small ice pellets began to fall. Noah waited, watching as his breath clouded the air in front of him and grew impatient. "Open up," he yelled, sighting the door with his rifle.

When the door hinges creaked, Noah eyed the opening, waiting. The darkness inside the small shack was disconcerting. He took a step forward, sleet and snow pelting his face. When he was close enough to touch the door, he lifted his leg, kicking it open while readying his rifle.

Startled gasps were followed by fright filled screams and the dirty faces of the street urchins he'd run into in town the day before filled his vision. They were huddled near the crumbling fireplace, the cherub-faced girl staring at him wide-eyed while she sucked on her thumb.

He stepped into the shack, lowering his gun as he stared at them, and narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing on my property?"

When they didn't answer, Noah took two more steps into the shack, his gaze landing on the boy. He met his stare head on and held it, but the slightest flicker to Noah's left side caught his attention moments before he realized someone was behind him. He turned to see the woman brandishing a frying pan, a startled look in her eyes as she lowered her arms, swinging the pan his way.

The metal caught him square in the forehead. He saw bright flashes of light as her face wavered, her large luminous eyes fear-stricken as the world seemed to shift. His knees buckled, his bones jarring as he hit the floor, both knees driving into the wooden floorboards. The woman lifted the frying pan again, holding the weapon above her head as the world tilted on its axis. Noah fell, his head connecting with the floor, her quiet, "I'm so sorry," ringing inside his head as he lost consciousness.

* * *

"Is he dead?"

Keri scowled at Aaron's question. "No, he isn't dead." At least she hoped he wasn't. She glanced back at the man's prone form. He hadn't made so much as a twitch since she'd hit him. She wasn't even sure he was breathing. It was hard to tell with the way he was lying.

Pacing nervously in front of him, Keri nearly chewed her bottom lip raw with worry while stealing glances at him. She recognized him. He was the man from town. The one she'd found Aaron and Sophie standing

with on the sidewalk in front of the mercantile, the one who nearly ran her over in the street.

He'd scared her half to death when she first saw him. Nothing about the man had seemed friendly, his gray eyes cold and angry. Now, seeing him lie lifeless at her feet only intensified that earlier fear. What if she had killed him?

Aaron inched closer, his questions non-stop, and Keri pointed back toward the fireplace and waited until the boy did as she silently asked.

She stared at the man lying near her feet for long moments, then went to her knees in front of him. Sliding his rifle away, she reached out a hand, pushing his scraggly hair away from his face and laid one finger under his nose to see if he was still breathing. He was, thank the Lord.

Staring at his face, Keri's attention was drawn to a nasty scar running from his temple, down past his right eye and disappearing into his scraggly beard. The scar was puckered and white, which told her it was placed there years ago. She raised her hand, tentatively touching the furrowed skin. Whoever stitched it had done a poor job. The edges weren't even and it varied in width as it traveled down the length of his face.

He was a big man, his shoulders wide, and she knew the added bulk wasn't the thick coat he wore. His hands were big, the material of the black gloves he wore straining at the seams. His dark hair hung past his shoulders, the strands unkempt, his full beard long and bushy, and even though he smelled of soap, he looked as filthy as she was.

When he stirred, Keri scrambled to her feet and backed away. He blinked a few times, moaned, raised a hand and laid it against his forehead. Then he looked up at her.

His eyes were so pale gray they looked silver in the low light but it took only seconds for anger to darken his irises like storm clouds, his fury nearly tangible as the air in the room seemed to dissipate. When he moved, laying one hand on the floor in front of him and trying to sit up, she grabbed his rifle and lifted it, her hands shaking as she pointed the barrel in his direction.

It took him long minutes to climb to his feet and Keri's nerves were rattled by the time he stood to his full height in front of her. She swallowed a sudden lump forming in her throat and stared up at him, willing him to not harm them.

He locked eyes with her again, his cold gray stare piercing her where she stood and the gun barrel wavered. She gripped the weapon more securely and took another step back. "Don't move," she said, her voice cracking as she spoke. "I don't want to shoot you, but I will."

His gaze stayed with the gun and Keri was confident he wouldn't try to rush her. She lowered her shoulders a fraction and motioned to the door. "You just get on out of here. I don't want no trouble."

He leaned his head to one side, his hair falling over the scarred side of his face as he narrowed his eyes at her. "This is my land, woman, so you're the one who'll be leaving."

Sophie made the smallest of noises and Keri glanced in her direction. It was a mistake. The man snatched the gun from her hands and had it turned, lifted, and pointed at her in a matter of seconds.

* * *

Noah studied the woman, taking in her bony arms, her short, limp hair, and the gauntness of her face. She was deathly pale, dark circles lay under her eyes like two large bruises and the clothes she wore weren't fit for cleaning rags. He turned his gaze to the children. His earlier assessment of them hadn't changed. They looked only slightly better than their mother did but not by much.

The inside of the shack was bare except for the fireplace. A bundle of twigs lay off to one side, and a small pot sat close to the coals, the aroma of beans filling the air. A half-eaten loaf of bread and a jar of what looked like preserves of some kind lay on the edge of an old blanket that was stretched out in front of the fire. There wasn't anything else. No furniture, no other clothing, nothing.

The woman made a small move and he turned his head to her. She froze and stared at him, her gaze flicking to the side of his face and he knew she was staring at that damnable scar. Heat surged through his body, embarrassment and anger filling him until he thought he'd burst from the need to scream at her. To tell her to stop staring at him like he was something foul. His pulse raced and every taunt he'd endured over

the last decade assaulted him again with that one small glance. He met her gaze and lowered his head a fraction. "Get out."

Her eyes widened, her mouth opening as if to speak but she closed it with a snap. She glanced toward her children before meeting his hardened gaze again. "Please," she whispered. "We've nowhere else to go."

"And I care, why?"

She flinched, her eyes turning glassy. For a split second, the notion of letting her stay entered his mind but common sense prevailed a moment later. "Get your things and go," he said. "You've taken advantage of me enough as it is." He stared at all of them in turn before asking, "You been taking my eggs?"

The woman took a small step toward the kids and the boy sent an angry glare in Noah's direction. He lifted his chin, defiance shining in his eyes. "Them chickens barely lay any eggs," the kid said. "I've only taken four all week."

Just as Noah suspected. He knew his hens were still laying.

Turning to the door, Noah opened it and stood there staring at them. "There's other farms nearby. Go steal their eggs."

He watched them gather their few belongings, the little girl starting to sniffle, her eyes filling with tears, and Noah tried to ignore the voice in the back of his mind screaming what a miserable bastard he was. What sort of man would throw a defenseless woman and two youngins out into the cold?

One who didn't give two shits about anything anymore, that's what kind.

The threesome left the shack and headed deeper into the woods. Noah watched them until they were out of sight, his conscious nearly eating him alive as a silent battle went on inside his head.

He looked around the shack again, saw the pitiful fire still burning and crossed the room, disturbing the few coals still burning with the toe of his boot. When he was sure it wouldn't blaze—not that there was anything there to continue to burn—he left, pulling the door closed behind him, stored his rifle back in the scabbard and climbed into the saddle.

The ride back to his cabin was filled with a war of words inside his head. He was near deaf by the time the barn came into view. His back burned as if the woman's accusing glare was scorching his flesh and he clenched his jaw, trying to push her image from his mind.

Her gaunt face wouldn't leave.

Regardless of how hard he tried, those tired, soulless eyes of hers were still there, haunting him, begging him to let them stay.

"Damn it all to hell," he muttered, finally pulling on the horse's reins to get the animal to stop.

Snow was still falling, the fluttering flakes hitting his face and sticking to his beard. He lifted a hand, brushed most of it away and turned his head, looking back over his shoulder toward the woods.

Where had they gone? There was nothing out there, regardless of what he'd told them. Nothing but trees and the creek. No shelter from the wind or the snow. They'd be dead by morning if they had to sleep on the ground.

A barrage of hateful words filled his head, all of them directed at himself, and he realized in that moment, all the taunts he'd heard since the war ended were coming true. He really was a monster. He'd just turned a woman and two helpless little ones out into the cold.

Only a monster would be so heartless.

Chapter Three

Keri heard the horse's heavy footfalls hitting the frozen ground seconds before she saw him. His misty figure slowly came into focus and she stopped, staring into the clearing, watching horse and rider with her heart in her throat. She ushered the children behind a large tree and waited, her blood rushing past her ears as she straightened her spine, trying not to look as terrified as she felt.

The man's anger was still evident, his eyes cold and menacing. He stopped, the horse dancing underneath him, and their gazes locked. He said nothing for long moments and Keri held her breath as she watched him. He was a terrifying sight. The black stallion he rode was powerful, his snorts crystallizing the air in front of him. She glanced back at the man astride the beast. The look on his face told her he'd rather be a hundred different places than sitting in front of her and she wondered what he wanted. Wondered if he'd come back for payment of those eggs Aaron had taken. At least he didn't know about the milk his cow had given up for them.

"What's your name?"

Keri was jarred from her silent musing by his question. He had a distinct Southern accent she hadn't paid much attention to back in the cabin but the drawl was unmistakable. She wondered why he was in Montana but dismissed the thought when he shifted, one eyebrow lifting

as he waited on her to answer his question. "Keri," she said, clearing her throat when her voice cracked. "Keri Hiram." He looked to her left and she saw Aaron out of the corner of her eye. He'd walked out from behind the tree. She frowned at him for not staying hidden, then said, "That's my boy, Aaron. He's ten."

"And the little one?"

"Sophie Ann is five." When she locked eyes with him again, it was all she could do to keep the tears from stealing her words. "Please." The word came out as a faint whisper. "That shack is the only thing keeping us alive at the moment. We'll surely die out here in the open."

He studied her for long moments, his gaze never faltering. Keri held her breath, willed him to see their precarious situation and hoped he showed them this one small mercy.

"Where's your man?"

Her heart thumped against her rib cage. "Dead." Keri swallowed to dislodge the knot forming in her throat. "He was thrown from a horse. We've been alone since spring."

"You've no other family to take you in?"

Sophie chose that moment to make her presence known. "Uncle Robert was mean to us."

Her soft spoken statement cut Keri like a knife, her gut wrenching as she looked over at her. "Hush, Sophie Ann."

The man stared at them for what seemed like an eternity before shifting in the saddle. Keri could tell he was reconsidering his earlier

command for them to leave but she wasn't sure why. His gaze swept over her again from head to toe and fear coiled in her stomach. Would he be like every other man she'd encountered over the past few months? Expecting payment for his generosity by having a quick tumble with her between his bed sheets?

Her eyes burned, tears filling her vision until he became blurry and she bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Could no one help them without expecting something in return?

He sighed, his gaze flicking over the three of them before landing on her again. "You can stay as long as the snow falls. The moment it clears, leave." He turned the horse and rode away as fast as the beast would carry him in the snow.

Keri watched his retreating form in stunned silence until he disappeared, his image lost in the snowfall. He hadn't asked for anything. He offered her no lewd remarks or looks. Hadn't requested payment of any kind from her. The tears pooling in her eyes slipped past her eyelashes. She wiped them away and smiled down at Aaron and Sophie. "Let's go," she said. "For whatever reason, he's changed his mind."

They trudged back to the shack, laying their things inside and spent the next half hour picking up twigs and logs small enough to carry. The snow was still falling and Keri wasn't sure how long the storm would last. If it stayed like this, the fluttering snowflakes falling in soft wisps, they'd be all right.

Getting another fire going took longer than she would have liked and by the time a small blaze sparked, her hands were near frozen. She added more twigs, squeezed in a small log, and ushered the kids in closer.

They spent the rest of the evening nibbling on bread and the cold beans still sitting next to the fireplace and Keri listened to Aaron tell Sophie a story until her mind started to wander. The vision of the man on his black stallion filled her mind's eye. He was nothing like the angels she'd heard stories of but he was nothing less than angelic. His face was full of hard lines, the scar making him look cold and dangerous, but his mercy on them left no room for doubt in her mind. Actions always spoke louder than words and even though his were harsh and biting, Keri knew that under all that unkempt hair, a kind soul still lived.

* * *

By nightfall, snow and sleet pelted the cabin until the sound nearly drove Noah out of his mind. He paced the small space he called home and stopped every so often to stare out the darkened window into the blackness that lay beyond the glass.

He lifted his hands, laying them on either side of the small window, and stared in the direction that that old line shack stood. His thoughts hadn't strayed far from the woman and kids since he'd returned home

and now that the storm had picked up into what could be nothing more than a blizzard, worry started to creep in.

Had the roof of the shack caved in yet? Would it? How long would those beans and that loaf of bread last them? Was the threadbare blanket he saw on the floor by the fire all they had to keep them warm? Did they find enough firewood?

"Damn it," he muttered as he lowered his head, his mind looping around question after question.

He turned away from the window and looked around his cabin. It was nothing special but it was warm, the walls sound. The small lean-to kitchen was functional, his larder filled with food enough to feed a small army of people all winter and the cedar chest at the foot of his bed held more blankets than he'd ever use.

All the comforts a man needed were at his fingertips. He'd not starve regardless of how long the storm lasted. He'd be warm, cozy even, and knowing it caused guilt to eat away at him until his throat was raw, loathing choking him where he stood.

The wind whistled against the walls again and he walked to the door, opening it. A blast of icy air chilled him to the bone, sleet and snow stinging his face. The night was so dark he could see nothing past the door frame.

He shut the door, bolted it from the inside, and walked back to the rocker that sat facing the fire. Hours ticked by, thoughts muddled inside

his head until he couldn't stand the torment a moment longer before he readied himself for bed.

Laying his head down, he closed his eyes, exhausted, his conscience filled with worry he shouldn't have for those squatters in his line shack until everything went blessedly quiet as sleep claimed him.

It seemed as if he'd only shut the world off when he heard the rooster crow. He blinked against the light flooding the room and wondered how he'd slept so soundly with all that had plagued him the evening before.

He crawled from the bed, dressed and ventured outside. The snow was still falling but the rope he'd thought to tie between the barn and the cabin was still there and he followed it, pushing the doors to the barn open when he reached it and spent the next hour tending his animals. It wasn't until he'd finished that he bridled the horse, sat the saddle on his back and cinched it tight that he went back into the house, pulled those extra blankets from the chest at the foot of his bed and carried them back outside.

The trip across the valley toward the trees was long and hard, the horse doing his best to walk in the deepening snow. When the line shack came into view long minutes later, Noah was relieved to see the roof still in place but just as he'd suspected, it sagged in the middle, the snow lying on top too heavy for the old rafters to handle.

He dismounted, grabbed the blankets and walked into the shack without knocking. The woman, Keri, she'd said her name was, sat by the

fire, only a single flame burning around a pile of twigs in the crumbling fireplace, her arms wrapped around her small frame. She looked up, startled.

The children were still sleeping. They were wrapped around each other, the threadbare blanket he'd seen the day before tucked underneath them until they were both cocooned in a small, warm roll.

The air inside the shack was frigid, his breath frosting the air in front of him and his earlier plan, to leave the blankets, was shot all to hell the moment he saw the woman shiver. They couldn't stay here. The blankets would do very little with the temperature still dropping, not to mention the condition of the roof. Another day of heavy snowfall and they'd be buried alive.

He bit back a curse and clenched his jaw, staring at her gaunt face before sighing. "Get your things," he said. "You can't stay here."

She stood, her eyes wide, and he was once again startled by how thin she was. How unhealthy the pallor of her skin appeared, her eyes sunken and hollow.

"But I thought..." She blinked up at him, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks before he saw her swallow. "You said we could stay until the snow stopped."

"Well that was before I knew a blizzard was rolling in!" She jumped at the tone and harshness of his voice, her little ones stirring in their blanket. He ignored her reaction, not caring if he scared her. He did most

people and was used to the looks by now, used to the way others shied away from him.

But when Noah looked into her eyes, he noticed the absence of fear and disgust when she looked at him. She wasn't turning away in revulsion. She met his gaze head on, held it. How long had it been since a woman looked at him and didn't turn away or stare at that damn scar? He couldn't even remember. His chest tightened until he found it hard to breathe. He glanced up at the roof and motioned to it with a hand. "The roof is sagging. Another day and it'll cave in on you."

The breath left her lungs in an audible gush when she saw the deep swag in the middle of the roof.

Noah glanced at her sleeping kids. "Get them up. You can't stay here." When her frightened eyes met and locked with his, he regretted speaking without explaining first. "I'm taking you back to my cabin until the storm breaks." It took only seconds for the expression on her face to change. In a blink of an eye, she looked miserable. Did the prospect of staying with him disgust her so much? Noah felt the loathing he'd lived with so long return in a flash, the anger he harbored with life in general scalding his throat to the point he could barely swallow.

He narrowed his eyes. "Stay then, I couldn't care less what happens to you, but when you're buried alive don't expect me to dig you out." He tossed the blankets he'd brought to the floor and turned, hurried across the room and reached out to grab the door handle. He hadn't heard her

follow him but she grabbed his hand to stop him from leaving. He jumped, startled she'd touched him, and took a step away from her.

"Please, don't go."

Noah looked over at her, the misery he'd seen on her face still present. She licked her lips, the small pink tip of her tongue darted out and his heart thumped in his chest at the sight. Her lips were full and pink, but dry and cracked. She wasn't the least bit appealing but he couldn't help his thoughts going places they shouldn't have all because she'd touched him. Looked at him without flinching.

"I have no money to pay you."

Her softly spoken words snapped him back to the present. She straightened her spine, met his gaze head on. Her cornflower-blue eyes were large, luminous, and quite possibly the prettiest color he'd ever seen. "I didn't ask you for any money," he said, snapping out of his daze. That look filled her eyes again. Misery and.... shame. With nothing but the clothes on her back, the woman apparently still had her pride. He realized she wasn't refusing his charity. She just felt ill at ease doing it. He tilted his head, his hair falling over the scarred side of his face.

"There are other ways to pay me back if you feel so inclined."

She closed her eyes, her shoulders lifting as she inhaled a large breath. She nodded, opening her eyes back up as resignation washed over her face. "Very well then."

As she woke the children, he busied himself putting out the fire. When the kids turned sleepy eyes his way, he looked at them both as

they stood there bundled up in the blankets he'd brought. He met their gazes briefly, then looked to the woman. "Are you ready?" he asked. She nodded her head in reply. "All right, then. Let's go."

Chapter Four

To Keri's utter amazement, he'd placed her and the children on the horse and walked by their side, slogging through the nearly knee high snow while guiding the horse back to his cabin.

What sort of man required payment from a woman by having her whore herself out to him but still behaved like a perfect gentleman? She glanced down at him and shook her head. She didn't understand him.

She'd hoped to never be in a position to stoop so low again but the frigid night she'd spent by a single flame, listening to her children's teeth chattering, changed that. She couldn't bare it. Couldn't watch them starve or freeze to death and do nothing to prevent it. If she had to bare herself to this harsh, angry man and let him slake his desire, then so be it. She'd do so three times a day if she had to.

It was late afternoon before his place came into view and Keri held Sophie to her just a little bit tighter. His small farm looked similar to the old home she had shared with John. The memories of his death, and the aftermath of his passing assaulted her, the terror she'd felt before one desperate act on her part had gone so wrong nearly stealing her breath.

She blinked and pushed the thought out of her mind. It did no good to dwell on the past.

The man led the horse to the cabin and reached for Aaron then Sophie, lifting them before setting them on the ground. When he turned

to her, Keri could tell he was as uncomfortable touching her as she was at having him do it. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her as if she weighed less than air and set her feet on the ground, taking two steps back once he did.

He nodded to the cabin door. "Go on inside. I need to take care of the horse, then I'll be in."

Keri waited until he shut the barn door behind him before opening the door to his cabin. She ushered the children in before going in herself, pushing the door shut behind her.

It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the low light and she blinked rapidly until everything came into focus. The cabin consisted of a bed and a single rocking chair facing the fireplace. A large trunk sat at the foot of the bed, its latch open. Articles of clothing hung from pegs nailed into the wall by the bed. A lean-to kitchen was situated on the right of the door. She craned her neck to look inside. A stove and a small table with two chairs lined one wall, a sink on the other. Shelves lining the wall held plates, cups and more food than Keri had ever seen. Bags of dry good, jars of preserves and canned meats, baskets and bins filled to capacity left her in awe. This man had enough food to feed half the town.

The moment she thought of him, the door opened and she turned, grabbing Aaron and Sophie by the shoulders and pulled them next to her. The man hung his hat on a peg by the door then removed his coat,

hanging it as well. When he turned to face them, he looked more uncomfortable than Keri felt.

He took up most of the space by the door. He stood at a height much taller than most. He looked strongly built and healthy. The beard covering his face was scraggly and much too long and it hid his features well. The white puckered scar on his face was probably why he wore it so unkempt and his hair didn't look as if it had been combed in some time. He looked...wild. Untamed.

Clearing his throat, he glanced around the room. "The cabin's not much but there's plenty to eat."

Sophie turned and looked up at her. "Can we eat now?"

Keri shushed her and looked back up at the man. He gave her a flickering glance, then crossed the room, added a few logs to the fire and had a good blaze going by the time he stood and faced her again.

For reasons she didn't understand, her heart started pounding. He was on the other side of the room but his presence seemed to suck all the air from the small space. She blinked, met his gaze, and ignored her pounding heart. "Are you sure about this arrangement?" He raised his hand to scratch at his beard and Keri noticed he hadn't taken off his gloves. She puzzled over the fact until he spoke.

"I wouldn't have wasted my morning bringing you back with me if I wasn't sure."

He sounded angry again. Keri glanced away from his disgruntled face. He really was an ill-tempered man. "You live alone?"

"Yes."

Turning back to face him, she met his gaze. "What shall we call you?"

He said nothing for long moments, the silence becoming unbearable before he finally said, "I'm Noah Lloyd."

Keri stared at him, wondering how he expected her to repay him in such a small space. She looked at Aaron and gave him a smile. "Take Sophie by the fire so she can get warm."

Aaron took Sophie's hand and led her away. Mr. Lloyd crossed the room again, closer to where she stood but still too far away for her to talk to him without the kids hearing.

She took a tentative step toward him, then another, his suspicious eyes narrowing the closer she got. When Keri was sure Aaron and Sophie Ann were out of hearing range, she wondered how to word what needed to be said.

A simple glance at his face and her confidence wavered. Could she really do this again? A small voice in the back of her mind whispered that she didn't have a choice.

Not able to meet his eyes, she chose to stare at his chest instead. "Not that I'm ungrateful for your generosity, but your cabin doesn't offer much in the way of privacy, Mr. Lloyd."

He glanced across the room, his brow scrunching as if thinking. "I can hang a blanket by the bed. It isn't much but it'll have to do."

Keri's stomach rolled. Did he expect her to spread her legs with her children in the same room with her? "When?" The word came out as a soft, breathy whisper.

"When what?"

She finally met his eyes. "When would you like payment for your hospitality?"

He stared at her for long minutes, confusion clouding his face. When it cleared, dread settled like a stone in her stomach.

"In the morning will be fine."

Keri sighed and glanced back at Aaron and Sophie. They were still by the fire, chatting softly. "If it's all the same to you, Mr. Lloyd, I'd just as soon get it over with." She glanced into the lean-to kitchen and nodded to it with her head. "In there. Aaron will keep Sophie occupied."

The confusion she'd seen on his face returned, only this time it didn't clear. He stared at her, his eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Her face heated until she knew her skin reflected her embarrassment. She lifted her hands, clenched the collar of her shirt in her fingers, and glanced at his face. "For your payment," she said, her voice pitched low so Aaron and Sophie wouldn't hear. "I'd rather not prolong it. It will only make me more uncomfortable."

The confusion on his face grew. If he was waiting on her to say it point blank, he'd be waiting all night. His eyes suddenly cleared, then widened, before his cheeks darkened to a blistering red. He opened his

mouth but closed it with a snap before turning and walking into the kitchen. Keri sighed, told Aaron and Sophie Ann to stay put, and followed him.

He stood facing the stove, his arms down by his side. He was clenching and unclenching his gloved fists. She watched him for long minutes before crossing the room. She hesitated when she reached him but sucked in a calming breath and stepped around him. His eyes were closed, small lines bracketing them and causing the scar to pucker more. She pondered his odd behavior. Had he changed his mind? Was he reconsidering the payment?

The strain on his face never lifted. She reached up and laid her palm to his chest. He flinched as if she'd shot him, his eyes snapping open to stare at her. "Have you changed your mind, Mr. Lloyd?"

His jaw clenched, his gaze boring into her as his face once again reddened. "What exactly are you offering me as payment, Mrs. Hiram?"

It was her turn to blush. "Well, myself..." The words came out as a strained croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Anything you'd like, Mr. Lloyd. There's not much I haven't already had to do, so nothing you ask for will shock me."

* * *

The moment the words were out of her mouth, all the blood in Noah's body drained into his lower extremities. His heart pounded, and

even though the woman was bone thin and dirty, he pictured her naked, her limbs long and silky smooth as they wrapped around his hips. Her full pink lips on his skin, her body warm and wet and welcoming.

He sucked in a breath and willed his growing erection away as his neck and face heated, embarrassment burning until he couldn't breathe past it. Her hand still rested on his chest and he backed up to break the contact. "There's been some confusion, Mrs. Hiram. I don't want you in my bed."

Relief washed over her face, the strained lines bracketing her mouth vanishing quickly before another emotion all together flashed across her features. The scared, timid glint in her eyes changed in an instant, her blue eyes filling with hurt and embarrassment. She looked away, her head lowering a fraction. "I'm sorry. I assumed..." Her cheeks turned red, misery clouding her eyes again as she reached up to grab the high collar of her dress as if to hold the garment closed. "I'm afraid I misunderstood you. Others always wanted..." Her eyes closed briefly before she shook her head.

She didn't have to say what the others wanted from her and Noah was glad she didn't speak it aloud. He stared at her, visions of her climbing into someone's bed just so she could feed her children sickened him and his earlier thoughts of her naked and wanting him caused his stomach to churn, acid boiling inside his gut until he thought he'd be sick. Of course she didn't want him. Why would she?

His gaze swept her small frame again and he knew he shouldn't have brought her to the house. The townsfolk would talk when they found out. And they would find out. Nothing was a secret for long in Willow Creek. Once they knew, the rumors would fly unchecked. The homeless widow taking up with the town monster. He cringed just thinking about what they'd all say.

He pushed the thought out of his head, cleared his throat and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I only meant for you to do the cooking while you're here," he said, steering the conversation back to neutral ground. "It isn't necessary but if you wish to repay me, something other than beans and venison stew would be nice."

Her cheeks were still red but she lifted her gaze, met his own and nodded her head. "Is there anything in particular you'd like?"

The vision of her naked filled his mind again and he shook his head to dispel it. "No. Anything you'd like to cook is fine." She nodded her head and glanced around the small kitchen. He looked as well.

"Your provisions are enough to feed a small army, Mr. Lloyd."

"I don't like going to town," he said, taking in the shelves and bins of food he'd stockpiled. "I've enough to last all winter." He faced her again and inhaled a large breath. "There's stew there on the stove behind you. Bowls on the shelf over the sink. I'll go rig up that blanket around the bed while you feed those kids." He walked away but stopped when he reached the doorway. "There's hot water in the reservoir on the stove if you'd like to clean up." She nodded and he walked back into the main

room. The kids talked quietly as they sat by the fire but looked up at him when he crossed the room. He ignored them, reached into the chest at the foot of the bed and dug out a few more blankets.

The woman called the kids, all three of them disappearing into the kitchen and Noah let out the pent up breath he'd been holding. What the hell was he doing? He avoided people as if they had the plague, didn't offer to speak to anyone he encountered, and tried his best to not be seen. So why did he invite this woman and her kids into his home? What had he been thinking?

The wind rattled the window and he glanced out at the darkening sky. He didn't know how long the storm would last but the moment the roads were passable, he'd take them into town and forget he'd ever seen them. They could be someone else's problem.

Soft laughter drifted into the room from the kitchen. He looked toward the doorway, imagining them around his small table and for some unexplainable reason, his heart gave a mighty thump at the noise. For the first time since moving to Willow Creek, his small cabin wasn't quiet. He barely heard the ticking of the clock on the mantel or the wood in the fireplace popping as it burnt. Childish giggles filled the air and he was loath to admit how nice it sounded.

A lifetime of regrets conjured images of a life he barely remembered living, his future changed in one tragic moment that still haunted him. He shook his head to clear the images and looked to the

ceiling, wondering how he would secure the blankets, and ignored those gleeful sounds filling his home.

Chapter Five

It was the first time she'd been full in months. Watching Aaron and Sophie eat, hearing them laugh and knowing they'd be warm when they drifted off to sleep caused the back of Keri's eyes to burn, her throat to clog and ache as tears threatened to fall. She pushed them away. She had no reason for useless emotions now. Not tonight. They were fed, warm, and for the first time since running from their previous nightmare, she felt safe.

Noah Lloyd was anything but friendly. His manner was gruff, his eyes hard and distrusting, but she knew they'd be okay here. After her embarrassing mistake in thinking he wanted her in his bed as payment, she could barely fathom the thought of looking him in the eye again. She wasn't sure who was more mortified by the proposition, him or her.

She pushed the thought away, glanced back down at Aaron and Sophie and smiled as they blinked sleepily at their bowls. Their bellies were full and both of them looked ready to fall asleep where they sat.

Grabbing a large bowl from the shelf above the sink, she filled it with warm water from the stove reservoir, found a washcloth and took her time cleaning the kids as thoroughly as she could without dunking them in a tub of water. She cleaned her own face, unbuttoned her shirtwaist and wiped off as much sweat and grime as she could and felt almost clean by the time she was finished.

Pouring out the water, she ushered Aaron and Sophie back into the main room. Blankets surrounded the bed. Noah Lloyd's shadow could be seen behind them but it was still enough privacy she didn't feel as if she was intruding too much. When he stepped around the blankets and saw them, he stopped, stared at her until she felt uncomfortable again, and cleared his throat, then crossed the room to the fireplace.

"The blankets should hold," he said, nodding toward the small bit of privacy in the room. "You and the children can take the bed."

"That isn't necessary," Keri said. "We're intruding enough as it is without taking your bed. Sleeping in front of the fire is quite fine."

His eyes narrowed as he shook his head. "It's not fine with me. Take the bed." His gruff command seemed to be his final word. He turned his back to them, sitting down in the rocker by the fire and started to remove his boots, effectively putting the argument to rest.

Keri stared at the back of his head for long moments, then guided Aaron and Sophie toward the bed, pulling the blankets aside, and stepping behind them. There were two long sleeve shirts and a long sleep shirt lying on the coverlet. For all his hateful ways, Noah Lloyd did have a bit of compassion in him. Keri smiled while looking at the garments. The thought of putting on something clean caused a shiver to race up her spine. She'd been wearing the same dress for months now.

Undressing Aaron and Sophie, she covered them with Mr. Lloyd's shirts, rolling up the sleeves so they fit somewhat better. She pulled down the blankets, listened as Aaron and Sophie giggled as they crawled

onto the mattress and waited until they'd settled before turning her back to them and removing her dress.

The sleep shirt Noah laid out for her felt smooth against her skin when she slipped it on. It fell nearly to her feet. Lifting her arm, she inhaled the scent of soap on the sleeve of the shirt and smiled. Clean clothing seemed like such a luxury now after living in the same garments for so long.

She looked toward the blankets hung for privacy, her thoughts on the gruff man who had taken them in. A few cooked meals seemed like such a small thing for what he was doing for them. He'd invited them into his home, fed them, and given up his bed.

The wind still whistled past the small cabin and as Keri listened to the wall boards pop and crack around her, she knew he'd done more than filled their bellies and given them a warm place to sleep. He'd probably saved their life. Another night in that cold, drafty shack would have been the end of them. No, a few cooked meals would never be enough to repay him but if that's what he wanted in return, she'd feed him like he was one of her own.

* * *

The morning air was biting cold. Noah pulled up the collar of his coat, ducked his head and slogged through the snow to the barn, guided by the rope he'd tied to the door from the cabin.

Once inside, the animals stirred. The cow shifted in her stall, her neck stretching as she eyed him. He grabbed the bucket and stool, entered her pen and ran his hand over her head before setting the stool down to milk her. He was reaching under her when the barn door creaked open. Lifting his head, he tried to see over the railing, wondering if the wind had caught the door or if the woman had followed him out. She was still behind the curtain when he left the cabin and he couldn't think of one reason why she'd follow him.

Shaking his head when he heard nothing else, he went back to milking the cow, his thoughts on the woman. Images of her from the night before flashed inside his mind's eye. He saw her shadowy figure behind those blankets as she'd undressed, each curve and dip visible until he was sure he could sketch her without looking. Skinny as she was, her hips flared enticingly, the curve of her breasts high. It took everything in him to turn away, to settle in that old rocker knowing she was in his bed. He'd been so unsettled by the thought, he'd had half a mind of getting up and sleeping in the hay loft. If it hadn't been so cold, he would have.

He blinked the images away when the shuffle of feet caught his attention. He whipped his head to the left, startled to see the boy standing there watching him. His neck and face burned when he realized he'd been having such thoughts about the woman while her young son was but inches away. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice harsh.

The boy seemed unfazed by his tone. "Came to help."

Noah raised an eyebrow. "Help do what?"

The kid shrugged. "Whatever you need me to do." He walked fully into the stall and leaned back against the rail. "Uncle Robert used to make me and Sophie Ann milk the cow every morning." The kid swiped a hand across his nose. "He'd make us clean up after the horses too and gather up all the eggs."

"Yeah, well, I don't need your help." Noah's voice held every ounce of irritation he felt. He turned back to the cow and continued milking her, knowing the peace and quiet he found in the barn was lost as long as the kid hang around.

He hadn't had a moment's peace since finding them in the line shack, his thoughts a constant jumble of worries for that skinny woman and her kids. If he wouldn't have to walk the entire way, he'd load them up and take them into town before the sun set. Hopefully the snow would stop falling soon. If it kept up much longer, he'd be stuck with them for the rest of the week.

It was times like this he wished he had a sled or another horse. He avoided people for a reason and seeing the kid out of the corner of his eye, he knew even this refuge was now gone. He should have never brought them back to the house.

Glancing back over at him, Noah heaved a breath. "Why are you still here?"

The boy actually smiled at him. "My ma said you was as grumpy as a bee-stung mule."

Noah narrowed his eyes. "She's right. I am. Now, go away." He didn't think the kid was going to listen but he eventually turned and left. When silence filled the barn again, he shook his head.

The woman thought he was grumpy, did she? He snorted a laugh. Grumpy was an understatement to how he felt most days. It was only bearable because he didn't have to see anyone. That changed the instant he let his conscience convince him that he needed to play the hero and rescue that waif of a woman and her gangly kids.

He scowled in disgust at his actions and finished milking the cow and stood, replacing the stool to the corner and setting the milk bucket aside. He fed the horse, made his way to the chicken coop and gathered up what eggs the hens had laid and returned to the barn, staring at nothing in particular, wondering what he was to do with himself now.

On any other day, he would have gone inside, fixed his breakfast and spent the morning with his drawings or reading until lunch. Those options were now gone with his unwanted houseguests taking up residence. He repositioned his hat. Grabbing the milk bucket and the eggs, he turned to the barn door. It opened before he reached it, the kid sticking his head back inside.

"My ma wanted me to tell you that your breakfast is ready."

The kid smiled and ducked back out of the barn, the door swinging as the wind caught it and smacked it against the frame a few times. Noah shook his head and crossed the rest of the barn, stepping outside and securing the door before venturing toward the house.

Wood smoke curled from the chimney and the smell of cooked meat filled the air as he reached the door. He hesitated a few moments, standing there in the cold as snow drifted along the collar of his coat. He could hear nothing from inside and stood there long enough his ears started burning from the cold.

He sighed. He was stalling. Purposely not wanting to go inside. Not wanting to face the woman again. He closed his eyes, turned his head left, then right, trying to get the kink out of his neck before opening his eyes. He couldn't avoid the house all day, every day. He had to face them eventually, converse with them on occasion. He might as well get it over with.

Reaching for the door, he opened it and walked inside.

* * *

Keri set Sophie and Aaron's plates down in front of them as they nestled in close to the fireplace. She handed them each a spoon as the door to the cabin opened. She stood and looked toward Noah as he came inside. He set the things in his hands down, removed his coat and hat, and bent to retrieve the bucket and basket by his feet and walked into the kitchen without a word. "You two eat quietly," she said, glancing at Aaron and Sophie before turning away.

She followed Noah into the kitchen and hesitated near the doorway. He was at the sink, his back to her. Entering the room fully, Keri

approached the table, picked up an empty plate, and started filling it. Placing the plate at one of the empty chairs at the table, Keri glanced over her shoulder. Noah was staring at her. She averted her gaze and moved away from the table, picking up the remaining plate and serving herself.

Waking that morning dry and warm had left her a bit disoriented. She'd slept the entire night through, not waking once. She'd puzzled over the fact when she woke, listening to Noah move about the room before the sound of the door opening, and a cold blast of air, filtered in behind the blankets he'd hung for their privacy. She'd crawled from bed, dressed in the same grubby clothes she'd been wearing for nearly two months now and entered the kitchen, took stock of what sort of foodstuff he had, and planned a menu for breakfast.

She'd be embarrassed to admit she'd cooked with her own selfish wants foremost in her mind. She hadn't eaten decent food in so long, her mouth practically watered as she took stock of all the choices before her. Eggs with onions and bacon, biscuits and gravy and fresh butter from the larder had her mouth watering the entire time she cooked. Now, as she watched Noah take a seat and look at the fare she'd fixed, she wondered if she should have thought more of what he would have liked, not herself.

He started eating without a word and Keri finished filling her own plate. The small table in the kitchen only held two chairs, which was why she'd seated Aaron and Sophie in the other room, but now as she

stared at that remaining chair, she wondered if Noah would want her company.

They'd not spoken to each other more than they needed to and from the looks of him, he didn't seem like the sort to want a dining companion. He glanced up as if he'd heard her thoughts. His eyes were still cold, unfriendly, and she lowered her gaze.

No, he definitely didn't want her company. She skirted around him and walked back into the main room to eat by the fire..

Chapter Six

Noah dropped his fork, listening to it clank against his plate as he stared at the wall in front of him. He ground his back teeth together, anger swelling so thick inside him he nearly choked. He heard the soft whispers coming from the other room and it took everything in him not to go in there and...

And what? Force her to sit with him? Make her take the only remaining chair at the table and talk to him?

He sighed and tried to run a hand through his hair, his fingers snagging on the tangled strands. He realized how absurd his thoughts were. There wasn't a reason for the woman to want to join him. Why would she? He'd been nothing but surly since clapping eyes on the trio. He'd thrown scowls in their direction every time one of them caught his eye, thought endlessly of ways to make the trip into town despite the snow and had actually contemplated sleeping in the barn.

They'd disrupted his life, caused him concern for their well being when he otherwise wouldn't have given two shits less and now, having that slip of a woman pass him over for her snot-nosed kids caused something deep in his gut to ache and burn.

He raised his still gloved hand, scrubbed at the scar on his face and stared down at the half-eaten food on his plate. From the looks of it, she'd spent a good deal of time cooking. He couldn't remember the last

time he had fresh biscuits. They were flaky and still warm, butter dripping off the tops of them and the gravy was thick, just the way he liked it. He sighed, shaking his head before picking his fork back up.

He finished his breakfast then stood to wash his plate. The sink was sitting full of dishes already. The notion of washing them for her swamped his thoughts but he dismissed it as quickly as it came. He wasn't catering to her. Why should he? She couldn't even grace him with her presence while she ate his food. Anger coursed through his veins again. He shoved his plate into the sink with the others, crossed the room and stepped through the kitchen doorway.

She looked up at him when he stepped fully into the room. The fire behind her bathed her skin in golden light. The dark circles he'd seen under her eyes the day before didn't look as dark today and her complexion was more pink than pasty white.

He blinked and turned toward the door, putting her out of his mind. Reaching for his coat, he slipped it back on, not really knowing what he was to do outside. The animals were all taken care of but sitting inside with her and those kids...

He couldn't do it. Couldn't pretend he was okay sharing his home with them. Given the choice, that woman would have turned her back and avoided looking at him the same as everyone else did. The only reason she didn't now was because she needed the comfort of his home, the warmth it provided and the food he'd been storing since late summer.

Jamming his hat onto his head, he grabbed the door handle but froze when she said, "Mr. Lloyd, please wait a moment."

Noah stared at the door, the sound of her skirts swishing as she crossed the room. She stopped right behind him. He could feel the weight of her presence and he clamped his jaw. She said nothing for long moments but finally cleared her throat.

"Would you happen to have a tub large enough for bathing?"

No sooner had the last word whispered past her lips did the vision of her standing in his home, naked, while water slid over her limbs filled his mind's eye. He closed his eyes, trying to rid himself of the images but they seemed to multiply as the seconds ticked on.

The curve of her breasts he'd seen the night before through the blankets filled his head. He wondered of their size, the fullness of them. Were her nipples soft pink or brown? He gritted his teeth and conjured images of the war, dispelling her as quickly as she came to him. "I have one in the barn." His voice cracked as he spoke and he cleared his throat. "I'll bring it in for you." He left, slamming the door behind him.

Trudging through the snow, he entered the barn, stood in the cold, chilly air and breathed deeply, trying, but failing, not to imagine Keri Hiram naked.

Shaking his head, he opened his eyes, glanced toward the tub and sighed. "You've been too long without a woman." Crossing the room, he grabbed the tub, hefted it onto his shoulder and started back toward the house determined not to think of her again.

* * *

It took some time but Keri managed to get a blanket hung in the kitchen doorway so she'd be able to bathe in private. Aaron was scrubbed clean and already by the fire in the oversized shirt he'd worn to bed, his filthy clothes soaking in the sink and Sophie Ann was splashing in the tub, her giggles filling the room.

Keri kneeled by the tub, washed Sophie's hair, scrubbed the dirt from behind her ears and the rest of her small body, and smiled at her now pink cheeks. "There," she said. "All done." She stood, held the same drying cloth she'd dried Aaron with and waited for Sophie to stand.

Dressing her in the night shirt, she sent her into the other room. She set Sophie Ann's dress into the soapy water and undressed herself, tossing her own clothes in, and sighed as she finally sank into the water.

It was pure bliss. The water was barely warm, not to mention dirty after bathing Aaron and Sophie, but Keri didn't mind. It was a bath, the first she'd had in months. She scrubbed and rinsed her hair until it was squeaky clean, washed her body, then lathered up and washed again, not stopping until she felt like a whole person, then leaned back, draping her arms over the side of the tub, stretched out her legs, and closed her eyes.

When Noah had brought the tub in, Keri had been surprised at the size of the thing. She'd imagined squatting in a small, round, half-barrel like the one she'd had back home, trying her best to bathe away the dirt

on her body but what Noah had produced was nearly a full size bathtub big enough to lounge in. Big enough for a man the size of Noah, she reflected.

Thinking of him, she sighed again. She wasn't sure why, but she got the distinct impression he was surly and rude on purpose. It was no secret he rarely spoke and when he did, he was short and quick to say whatever it was he had to say. He rarely, if ever, made eye contact with her and more often than not, his head was tilted to one side, his hair lying flush against the scarred side of his face. She didn't think it was a conscious act, either. Probably something he'd done so long, he didn't even realize he still did it.

Her thoughts drifted to that scar, wondering how it had been made and why. She wasn't even entirely sure that was his only one. She'd yet to see him remove his gloves. He went so far as to eat with them on and to say it was a peculiar act was an understatement. Everything about him was peculiar, if you really looked hard enough. The amount of food he had stored was just this side of odd. He'd said he didn't like going into town as way of explanation and she had no reason not to believe him but it was still strange behavior.

Of course, she had her own unusual faults she supposed. Everyone did to some degree, but since the snow was still falling, it looked as if they'd be stuck with Noah Lloyd for some time yet. Not that she minded. Sure he seemed a bit cussed but she wasn't about to complain. She was

warm, fed and oddly, felt protected in this small cabin with a man who seemed more likely to grunt an answer than speak one.

There was no hint of a woman anywhere in the cabin. Not one lacy curtain or doily. The air smelled of gun oil, horse hay and man. If Noah Lloyd had a woman friend, she didn't frequent his home often.

Keri fluffed her drying hair, the ringlet curls she'd grown to hate over the years bouncing back to life now that her hair wasn't coated in dirt and grime. Taking a glance down the line of her body, she ran a hand over her flat stomach. Her hip bones protruded a bit and her skin looked pale and unhealthy. She'd given up many meals so Aaron and Sophie could eat. She didn't regret doing so but her body had suffered from it. Where she was once soft and plump, she was now thin, her bones seen through her withering flesh. Her breasts were smaller, the fatty tissue that used to fill them out vanishing along with the rest of her. They barely filled her palm now.

Would Noah find someone as skinny as her attractive? Would any man, for that matter? With John gone, and the struggle to make it to San Francisco getting harder by the day, the thought of taking another husband looked more attractive now than ever. Did Noah Lloyd want a wife? One who was skin and bones and had less hair than he did? Doubtful. She'd be lucky if any man wanted her the way she looked.

Hearing the door to the cabin open, Keri stood, grabbed the small drying cloth and wrapped it around her body. She lifted a leg to step out

of the tub and jumped, startled, when Noah bellowed, "What do you think you're doing?" loud enough to bounce off the rafters.

Sophie Ann screamed and Keri nearly fell as she jumped from the tub and ran toward the curtained doorway, bursting into the other room to see Noah reach down, grab Sophie by the front of her gown and lift her body off the ground, fury etched into every line on his face.

End Excerpt

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