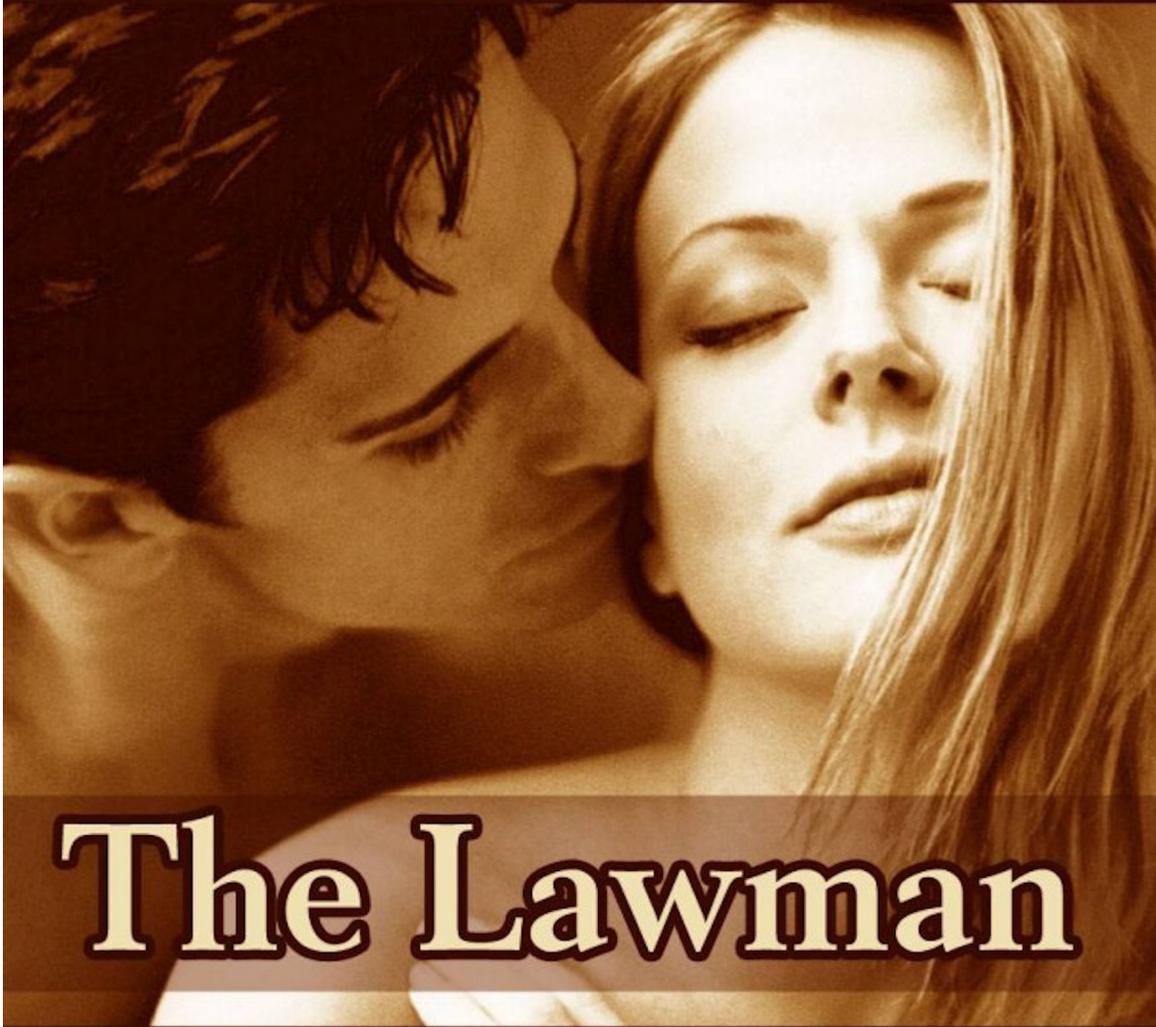


Lily Graison



The Lawman



A Willow Creek Book

Chapter One

Willow Creek, Montana Territory, 1869

Walking into a saloon in broad daylight wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done, but what choice did she have?

Bold red letters scrawled onto a piece of wood hung by the saloon door. "No Ladies Allowed," it read, the rope holding it in place so frayed the entire thing hung at an odd angle. Abigail ignored the warning and approached the building, glancing down the wooden boardwalk in both directions to see if anyone was watching her. No one was. The residents of Willow Creek were hustling about, minding their own business, and she preferred it that way. The less attention she drew to herself, the better off she was. Placing a hand on the swinging door of the saloon she leaned up on her toes and peeked over the top, taking a look inside.

Tables were scattered around the room, most of them covered in green baize. Men sprawled around the gaming tables while a few more stood leaning against the ornate bar that spanned the entire left hand wall. The largest mirror she'd ever seen hung behind it, giving her a glimpse of the back of the room. A piano stood along the far right wall, a man sitting behind it ping-ponging out tinny notes in a lively tune.

A staircase was situated near the piano and a glance up showed a balcony surrounding the main room. A number of doors were seen at the top, all

closed. The sign by her left shoulder wasn't entirely correct, she realized, as she saw the women who lingered at the top of the stairs. There were women inside the Diamond Back Saloon but calling them ladies would have been a stretch. Their bright sateen dresses were more revealing than Abigail's underclothes and that, along with the faded feathers in their hair, gave her the impression of colorful birds. The term "Soiled Dove" came to mind and Abigail knew now where the phrase had surely originated.

The men inside the establishment ranged from dusty cowpokes to those of a more upscale lifestyle. They all shared one common attribute, with their hard liquor in hand and the attention they showed the women lingering around the room. The men inside the Diamond Back hadn't a care in the world, it seemed. Unlike herself. Would she make things worse by venturing inside?

Abigail turned and walked back to the edge of the wooden walkway, looking at what the residents of Willow Creek considered a town. A rickety row of buildings ran on both sides of the muddy road. The Imperial Hotel caught her attention. From the whitewashed walls and colorful curtains, it stood out amongst the other buildings. In a place as small and out of the way as Willow Creek, the hotel was indeed the fanciest thing around. The name suited it. She longed to walk inside the door and find out just how grand it was. Maybe get a room and spend the rest of the evening doing nothing but relaxing in a tub of hot, clean water and eating until her belly wouldn't hold anymore. The remaining funds resting in the bottom of her reticule gave a small "ting" when she bounced it against her leg. She'd be lucky to have enough coins to buy her supper. Glancing at the Stagecoach station, she wondered if the food offered there was cheaper than she knew the hotel's fare would be.

It made little difference. One meal wouldn't solve her problems. The only thing she could do was walk into the saloon and find the only man who could help her, assuming he would.

She turned and straightened her spine, giving the wide saloon doors a brief glance before marching forward. A small push on the swinging doors was all it took to grant her entrance and once she stepped inside to the tobacco juice strewn sawdust floor, she regretted her decision. Every person in the room turned to look at her. The piano music stopped, the clatter of glasses and chitchat came to an abrupt halt. Abigail sucked in a breath, raised her chin and turned to the bar, making her way toward it and ignoring the stares the patrons were giving her.

"You shouldn't be in here." The deep baritone of the bartender slashed at her composure but she ignored him as the music and laughter once again started.

"I'm in need of assistance," she said, adding a smile to try and gain his favor.

"Unless you're looking for a job I can't help ya." He sat the glass in his hand down and draped the towel he'd used to try and clean it with over his shoulder. The ungentlemanly leer he threw at her would have earned any other man a slap across his daring face. She wasn't about to try it with this one. Besides, the last man she'd slapped was still chasing her.

The bartender grinned and gave her another assessing glance. Abigail could tell by the look on his face he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. "We can always use new girls around here." He grinned, his thick mustache curling up as his mouth moved. "I'm sure the boys would make you a rich woman in no time."

Ribald laughter from the men standing at the bar followed his comment and caused Abigail's face to burn hot. She knew her skin had turned blotchy without even looking. It always did when she blushed and his remark caused her entire body to flush hot. "No," she said, the sound coming out a mere squeak. "I'm not looking for work." She swallowed the lump forming in her throat and took another steadying breath. "The stagecoach driver walked in here a few minutes ago. If you could just direct me to him, I'll be on my way."

The bartender was young. Or he appeared to be. The usual signs of a full life hadn't lined his face. His skin was only slightly tanned from the sun, his black hair had very little gray in it, and the sloping mustache hiding all but his bottom lip curved ever so slightly as he grinned down at her. She smiled back, hoping the friendly gesture would help. The way his gaze slid down to her breast let her know otherwise.

"Pete is a might busy at the moment," the bartender told her, leaning down and bracing his arms on the top of the bar. "He's up with Miss Chloe." He nodded to the second floor balcony and Abigail knew what the stagecoach driver, Pete, was doing. "Now, unless you're willing to work upstairs, you best hightail it out of here. Sign says no ladies allowed."

"I see." Taking a glance over her shoulder, Abigail looked around the room again. The piano was tinkling out another tune and the chatter of those inside the saloon returned as the patrons went back to their previous card games. The activity going on upstairs was obvious and the stagecoach driver would be hours in coming back down. Unless she could get someone to go speak with him. She turned back to face the bartender. "Could you send him a message for me, then?"

A ruckus erupted near the door and a group of men ambled in from the street. Abigail knew by the looks of them she shouldn't be inside the saloon.

Saddle bums, by all appearances. The dirt and grime on their clothes would be hard to wash out, if ever. Their stench clouded the air from halfway across the room and their vulgar language was enough to cause her cheeks to burn hot again.

The bartender gave a gruff order to, "Git on out of here, missy, and don't come back," before dismissing her. Abigail had no choice but to do as he said. Raising a fuss would only draw more attention to herself and she couldn't afford to make that mistake.

Holding her reticule close to her stomach, she gave him a soft, "Thank you," and made her way to the door as the men came closer. She'd nearly reached her destination when one of the men grabbed her, his arm wrapping around her waist and pulling her feet right off the floor, before he hugged her to him.

"What do we got here?" His foul breath caused Abigail's stomach to heave. He gave her a squeeze, his fingers biting into her ribs.

"Let me go, please." She gasped when his hold on her tightened. He laughed, the men who came in with him doing the same as they looked up toward the balcony. She followed their gaze and saw the women who lingered along the railing.

The arm around her waist pulled her tighter and Abigail's eyes widened when his free hand came to rest on her left breast. She gave a shriek and his laughter echoed inside her head before she stiffened and kicked back with both heels. "Let me go!"

"Woo-wee, I got me a live one, boys!" The men inside the saloon laughed and their hoops and hollers grew as she struggled to get loose. The hand on her breast didn't relent but another kick to his shins was enough to get him to

let go. She dropped to her feet, her face flushed, and her heart racing inside her chest.

He grinned at her. What teeth he did possess were so discolored she grimaced. “There’s been a terrible mistake.” She darted a glance up the stairs again when the man’s friends started toward the second floor.

“Ain’t no mistake.” His gaze ran the length of her body and even though her dress was a modest cut, she felt violated when his leer lingered on her breasts. “I got money and lots of it. I’ll take ya ’til morning. You’ll be lucky to walk by the time I’m through with ya.”

“I don’t think so,” she mumbled. She forced a smile onto her face and straightened her spine. “I was just leaving. I’m sure one of the—ladies upstairs will be more than happy to take your money.”

The man turned his head and looked up toward the balcony. Abigail eased toward the door while he did. She’d nearly made it when he turned back to her. “They’re mighty purdy but I think I’ll keep ya just the same.”

Abigail was mortified. Less than an hour in town and she’d been abandoned by a would-be-husband, left homeless and destitute, and now she was being mistaken for a whore. Could her day get any worse? “I’m afraid you don’t understand. I’m not—” She didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence. The man grabbed her, tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and started for the stairs. She vaguely heard the bartender yell something as the man’s booted feet hit the stairs. “Put me down this instant!” She smacked a fist against his back, kicking her feet as the saloon patrons erupted into ear-splitting laughter. Abigail struck his stomach with a knee and he stumbled, smacking her into the stair railing. A few more wild struggles and he dropped her. Hard.

The impact with the stairs left her dazed but shaking her head cleared her vision. When she glanced at the man, the look on his face wasn't the jovial one she'd seen moments ago. Jumping to her feet, Abigail ran past him and back down the stairs. She was halfway across the room before he caught her.

"Let her go," the bartender said, coming around the side of the bar. "There's girls upstairs more than willing to take your money."

"Don't want them," the man said. "I want this one and I'm gonna have her."

When he reached for her again, Abigail reacted by instinct. She slapped him. The contact with his face stung her hand and the sound rang throughout the room. The laughter grew, the man's face contorted and the rage in his eyes was that of a wild bull. She saw his fist coming toward her, gasped, then ducked. The wild punch landed on the bartender instead and the man shouted out a string of curses before he threw his own fist into the fray, hitting the man back in return.

An exchange of punches caused the bartender to slam into one of the tables and ruined a high stakes poker game. The men around the table cursed, scrambled for the money littering the floor, and were embroiled in their own fight within seconds. The furniture around the room was utilized to add to the pain inflicted by those joining the brawl and the chaos that followed was destructive enough for Abigail to hope she didn't have to pay for it all.

She crawled to the bar amongst the broken glass, chair legs and sawdust and crouched into the corner to watch with frightened eyes. When a man landed within inches of her, she let out a startled shriek, jumped to her feet and ran for the door—and right into the arms of a man entering from the street.

The top of her head barely reached his wide shoulders and the shocked expression on his face wasn't enough to draw her attention from the greenest

eyes she'd ever seen. Framed by long, dark lashes those eyes held a bit of mischief that some wild part of her wanted to explore.

He stared down at her, his hands on her arms tightening just a fraction before he smiled. Someone crashed into her back, knocking them both into the wall. One of the men fighting at their back threw a wild punch. It landed right in the middle of the newcomer's face. The back of his head slammed into the wall, blood sprayed from his nose and his eyes rolled back into his head. When he fell, he dragged her with him.

She landed astraddle his hips, the blood from his nose splattered the front of her dress, ran across his cheek and down over his bearded chin. Sitting up and resting her hands on his chest, Abigail could only stare. That's when she saw it. The shiny silver badge on the front of his vest, the word "Marshal" engraved into it. "Oh no," she breathed out shakily. "What have I done?"

* * *

Morgan felt a weight on his chest and opened his eyes. A woman sat on top of him, her wide, blue eyes staring down at him with shock and a hint of fear. The sight of her breasts so close to his face let him ignore that little fact and concentrate instead on the woman herself. The front of her dress was covered in what looked like blood, a few dots of red sprinkled across her cheeks, and her blond locks tumbled loose from the pins holding it back and left curls to dangle around her face. A glance down the length of his body confirmed what he thought. She was sitting on him, straddling his hips, and the warmth of her pressed so intimately against his groin spread within seconds of the realization.

He moaned and enjoyed the fact he had a warm female on top of him. She wasn't the one he'd come to see but taking another glance at her face, he had to admit she was a pretty little thing. He grinned up at her and relaxed his body, taking in the weight of her. "I usually prefer a bit of privacy and a warm bed but if you have some yearning for people to watch, I might be willing... long as it's one of your female friends doing the watching."

She gasped and scrambled off of him, climbing to her feet while her face splotched red as she blushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble."

Morgan stared up at her, confused by what she said, when the ruckus going on around him finally registered. It was then the pain thumping through his face penetrated his foggy brain. He turned to look around the saloon and seeing the fights reminded him of someone hitting him the moment he walked through the door.

The Diamond Back Saloon was nearly destroyed from what he could see. Only a few tables remained standing, the chairs were scattered from one end of the room to the other and broken glass shined up from the sawdust floor like small diamonds. The only person who seemed unaffected was the piano player who continued to ping out notes as if nothing were happening.

He sat up, a groan escaping as the throbbing in his head increased. He spotted Vernon Wilkes, the bartender, and yelled out to him. "Vernon, what the hell is going on?"

The bartender turned to him and got a beefy fist to the side of his head for the trouble. Morgan let out a curse and crawled to his feet and staggered twice before regaining his balance. When the room stopped spinning, he crossed the space and grabbed the man currently beating the living daylights out of Vernon and tossed him into a group of four more men, all neck deep in

their own fights before helping Vernon to his feet. "What started this?" The bartender grimaced, spit out a mouthful of blood before turning to look toward the door. Morgan followed his gaze. The woman was still there, her frightened eyes wide as she took in the scene.

"That's what started it," Vernon bit out, pointing to her with a bloody hand. "She ain't got no business in here, marshal."

Morgan leveled her with a questioning look. "Stay right there. I'll deal with you in a minute." Turning back to the barroom, he watched the melee for a few minutes while deciding what to do. With the girls upstairs, grabbing his gun and shooting a few rounds into the ceiling to get the men's attention wasn't possible. Breaking them up by hand was the only course of action he knew of. And the most painful. He sighed and straightened his shoulders. "This is going to hurt like hell," he mumbled to himself before throwing himself into the fray.

For the second time that day, someone punched him in the face. He'd be barely recognizable by tomorrow, he figured. The pain already throbbed and his left eye felt a little funny. Swelling shut, he figured. Morgan shouted a curse and swung back, grimacing at the loud cracking pop he heard as the man's nose broke and blood spilled down over his grizzled chin. Two more came at him, grabbing him around the middle and slamming him into the only remaining upright table. They crashed to the floor and it took long seconds for his lungs to refill with air. Crawling to his feet, he grabbed the first man he saw and slung him into the wall. "Stay right there or I'll throw you under the jail!" To his surprise, the man did just that.

It took longer than it should have to get the men to calm down. By the time the last one had found somewhere to sit and cool off, Miss Angelina herself had come downstairs to tend to the wounds of those needing a

woman's gentle touch. She instructed her girls to take care of the men and before the dust had settled, more than half the barroom was headed to the second floor to have some soft, willing woman help soothe their wounded pride.

Everyone but him, that is.

Morgan didn't think there was a spot of flesh on his body that didn't ache. Blood leaked from cuts too numerous to count, his lip was split and his left eye was definitely swelling shut. He turned and looked back toward the bar, the woman who ran into him upon entering the saloon still standing where he told her to. She was against the wall, her bag clutched in her hands tight enough to cause her knuckles to shine white from across the room. When she lifted her head and looked at him, giving him a smile that said everything in the world was perfect, his hellish week caught up with him in a flash.

All he'd wanted since getting back into town was to wash the dust from his throat with the strongest rot-gut whiskey Vernon could offer him and have a tumble with one of the little ladies upstairs. What he got instead was her. The blonde he'd found straddling his lap when he woke up from a fist-induced sleep. He stared at her as she looked around the room. She was pretty but now that she was standing, he could see how small she actually was. A little scrawny for his tastes. He liked his women plump with big breasts and eager appetites for sinful pleasures. The diminutive blonde, who shouldn't have been inside the saloon to begin with according to Vernon, looked tame as a kitten. Too bad, he thought. He would have willingly taken his frustrations out between her thighs but if Vernon said she didn't belong here, then he believed him.

Crossing the room to where she stood, he stopped inches in front of her. "Who are you?" She didn't answer. Instead, she stared up at him with those

large blue eyes of hers, her jaw held at an arrogant angle. Morgan waited and braced his hands on his hips. And then waited some more. “Well?” he asked, irritated at her silence. “I don’t have all day. Spit it out.”

He saw her throat work as she swallowed. “Abigail. Abigail... uh, Thornton.”

“Well, Abigail Thornton, would you like to explain to me what the hell you’re doing in the saloon?”

She stared at his chest and Morgan followed her gaze. His badge was crooked. When she said, “This has all been a terrible misunderstanding,” he looked back up.

“Is that what you’d call this?” Morgan turned to look at the now destroyed saloon behind him. He crossed his arms over his chest when he turned back to face her, studying her as she stood there unmoving. Her dress wasn’t very revealing but the fabric was a deep green wool with fancy lace trimming around the neck and cuffs. He didn’t know much about women’s fashion but that dress was unlike any he’d seen around Willow Creek. It was too fancy by half. He’d never seen her before either and he knew the stagecoach had come into town. He’d seen it sitting by the station on his way from the jail. She was a newcomer and trouble if he’d ever seen it.

“I would,” she said, her chin lifting a small fraction. “The bartender can tell you that.”

Morgan glanced at Vernon, who had stepped behind the bar and was currently trying to clear the broken glass off the top of it. “Is she right?”

Vernon snorted and gave the woman a sneer. “This is why women aren’t allowed in here, marshal, and you know it! They ain’t nothing but trouble. I told her she couldn’t be in here but did she listen?”

His head was throbbing now and Morgan wanted nothing more than to take to his bed and sleep for a week, with or without the comfort of a willing body next to him. He looked at Abigail again, leaning his head to one side. She was wafer thin but that little dress clung to shapely curves even he couldn't help but notice. Her breasts were full, if not a bit on the small side, but they were high and quite perky. Her hair was falling down around her face and it softened her look a bit and made her appear to be innocent. Almost. His irritation grew the longer she stood there unmoving. She was looking at anything but him and he wasn't getting anywhere questioning her. What was she doing here? Since she seemed unwilling to tell, he figured she was just down on her luck and looking for work. Why else would a woman come into a saloon? His reason for coming inside latched onto that little morsel. "Are you a whore?" he asked, a small part of him hoping she was.

She gasped, her face turning blood red before splotches broke out across her neck. "I most certainly am not!"

"Are you looking to be one?"

Her lips turned bloodless as she pinched them together. The fire in her eyes caused one corner of his mouth to tilt up and her chest heaved as her breaths were huffed out. Definitely not a whore.

"I am a lady," she said, indignant.

Morgan raised one eyebrow. "A lady in a saloon?"

"I was looking for the stagecoach driver if you must know."

"Well, I asked you ten minutes ago what the hell you were doing in here. Why didn't you just say so?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a long sigh. "May I go now?"

"No."

Her head snapped up, those pretty blue eyes widening again. “Why ever not?”

“Well, let’s see.” Morgan lifted a hand and scratched the week’s worth of beard that had grown in while he was on the trail. “There’s the issue of you being inside the bar, for one. The sign outside clearly says, you can’t come in here. There’s also the matter of the fight, the damage to the saloon and let’s not forget the damage done to me.” He pointed to his still throbbing face for emphasis.

“Fine.” She turned toward Vernon and smiled prettily. “Mr. Vernon, I’m very sorry about your establishment. I’ll not come inside again.” When she turned to him, the smile disappeared. “As for you, marshal, I’m sorry for your trouble.”

The woman had the nerve to turn on her heel and stroll out of the saloon with the regal air of a queen. Morgan snorted a laugh at her audacity before following her outside. She was crossing the street and he had to run to catch up with her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She stopped, turned to look at him and blew out a long breath. “Away from the saloon. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Not exactly.” A wagon forced them out of the road and Abigail Thornton dismissed him again as if he wasn’t even standing there. She walked toward the stagecoach station, her booted feet clicking against the wooden sidewalk in rapid little taps. He followed her and grabbed her arm so she couldn’t walk away again. “We’re not through, Mrs. Thornton.”

“It’s Miss,” she said, that little chin of hers lifting again. “And please unhand me.”

He would have laughed the entire mess off if her high-handed demand hadn’t been laced with total contempt. The look in her eyes scalded him to the

bone. He knew he looked like hell. He'd been riding the countryside in pursuit of an outlaw for the past week. He probably stank to high heaven, his beard was scraggly and itched like the dickens and his clothes would have to be burned. Not to mention the damage done to his face after that bar brawl she started. Well, according to Vernon, she did. He'd yet to hear the entire story. Regardless, that still didn't give her the right to treat him like a no-good saddle bum. He was the marshal, damn it, and she'd treat him with the respect he deserved.

Staring down at her, every ache, cut and bruise throbbing and pulsing, he knew she was the reason for it. The ache in his long neglected groin was her fault too. The blood pumping through his veins heated at the defiant look in her eyes and the thought of what to do with her was suddenly clear. "Miss Thornton, you have no idea how happy it makes me to tell you that you're under arrest."

She gasped and jumped back from him, her arm jerking from his grasp. "Under arrest? What for?"

Her outrage soothed some of his aches and Morgan gave her a smug smile before answering her. "We'll start with disturbing the peace and add entering a gentleman's establishment, damage to personal property and careless endangerment of a federal marshal. That should be enough to keep you out of trouble for quite a while. Or at least until the circuit judge gets back into town."

The look on her face would have caused him to laugh if it wouldn't have hurt so damn much. Even a tiny smile hurt. It pulled the edges of his busted lip but he managed a cruel imitation of one just to annoy her.

She straightened her spine, tilted her chin up a notch and exploded. "That is absurd! You can't arrest me for things I had no control over."

Morgan grinned through the pain. "I assure you, I can, Miss Thornton, and I am. Let's go." When he grabbed her arm again and tried to walk her back down the street, she dug in her heels, her free arm latching on to his where he gripped her wrist and tried to shake him off.

"Let me go. This is all a mistake. You can't do this!"

"I won't, I don't care, and I am."

She let out an ear-piercing shriek and struggled like a wild cat before raising her free hand, balling her fingers into a fist and punching at his shoulder. Morgan's abused muscles screamed in agony as she fought him and it took all the control he had not to lash out in return. "Do you want resisting arrest to be added to your list of crimes, Miss Thornton?"

Her eyes widened. "I haven't committed any crime. Now unhand me this instant."

The humor in the situation diminished. Her screams were drawing attention and the local gossips were already hovered around Jenkins Mercantile, hands over their mouths as they gaped at him. He could only imagine what the story would be by the time the whole town found out. Glaring at the people gawking at him, he grabbed Abigail around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder, gritting his teeth through the pain the act caused, before turning and starting for the jail.

Chapter Two

Abigail was too stunned to do more than hang there, upside down, while the marshal carried her to jail. Jail! He was arresting her for what amounted to nothing more than a misunderstanding but the pig-headed man didn't want to hear her side of the story. Not that she'd really tried very hard to tell him. Getting away from him seemed like the best course of action back at the saloon. If she'd only walked faster, she may have avoided this entire embarrassment.

Reaching the jail, Abigail lifted her head and noticed a line of people filling the wooden sidewalk staring at them. She groaned and let her head drop again. The floor of the jail came into view. It was covered in dried mud, much like the marshal's pants and boots, she noticed, and the stench inside the building took her breath.

The marshal stood her on her feet and she glared at him before looking around her. She was inside what was apparently the jail's one and only cell. The barred prison was bare except for a cot that sat under a small, open window. The blanket lying at the foot of the bed was threadbare and filthy. It also contributed greatly to the foul smell in the air. Turning back to face the marshal, Abigail crossed her arms under her breasts. "These accommodations aren't suitable for a woman. You can't keep me here."

He had the gall to laugh at her before walking out of the cell and slamming the door hard enough to make her jump before he locked it behind him. "A jail isn't a hotel, Miss Thornton. You'll get used to it."

She watched him cross the room to a stove in the corner, filling it with wood before starting a fire. He rattled a coffee pot, making as much noise as

possible before abandoning the stove and walking to a small desk sitting by the door. He unhooked the gun belt she just now noticed hanging around his hips, hanging it on the back of the chair. His back was to her and even though he was covered from head to toe in dirt, she had to admit he was an impressive sight.

His shoulders were wide; his waist tapered to slim hips and strong, firm looking thighs. His pants fit snug in places she shouldn't be looking but with a backside like that, it was hard not to stare. Lord knew the men in Atlanta certainly looked nothing like the marshal did. They acted nothing like him either. They had manners. This man did not.

He turned and sat down in the chair, tossed his hat onto the desk and propped his booted feet up on the edge. His hair was dark and in need of barbering. The ends hung nearly to his shoulders. The indentions from his hat caused it to lay slick to his head. For a town marshal, he apparently wasn't too concerned about his personal grooming. Not that she cared.

When he clasped his hands behind his head and stared at her, Abigail raised an eyebrow at him. His returning smile rankled her nerves. The scraggly beard covering his face didn't hide the fact he was probably very attractive. From across the room she could see the mischief in his green eyes. Well, the one that wasn't swollen shut, that is. The purple bruising on his face didn't conceal the warm hue of his tanned skin and looking at his forearms below the cuffs of his rolled up shirt sleeves let her know he spent more hours outdoors than most.

The fact she found him attractive, as scruffy as he was, galled her. "Are you comfortable now?"

"Absolutely. I can finally put my feet up and I have the best view a man in my position can ask for. A prisoner."

He was enjoying the fact he locked her up. The pig.

Unwilling to let him see how worried she actually was, she turned her back to him and walked to the cot. The smell was worse close up. She gingerly picked up the offending blanket with two fingers and tossed it to the other side of the cell. The mattress underneath was stained with heaven knew what. She shook her head in disgust. "I'll need clean linens, marshal. This bed isn't fit for a dog let alone a human."

"Never heard any complaints before now. Besides, it's cleaner than the floor. Let's not forget this is a jail, Miss Thornton. It isn't set up for your comfort. You'll get no special treatment from me just because you're a—lady."

The way he said lady caused Abigail's irritation to grow and she looked over her shoulder at him. He was still smiling. "Am I to assume my meals will consist of water and bread, then?"

"You can assume what you want."

"Well, in that case," she said, turning to face him and placing both hands on her hips, "I'll assume you're as big an ass as you seem." His smile faltered and Abigail gave him one in return that made her cheeks ache before she sat down on the edge of the cot. She laid her reticule on her lap and stared back at him, unmoving.

The staring contest may have lasted all night if the door hadn't opened minutes later. A man who looked very much like the marshal stepped inside and shut the door behind him, his gaze searching and finding her in the cell. He smiled and shook his head. "Vernon told me you locked up a woman but I had to come see for myself."

"It's nice to see you too, brother."

This new man was everything the marshal wasn't. Clean and freshly barbered with an easy going smile. Abigail watched him take the vacant seat

across from the desk and smiled at him again when he turned to look at her. "You can't keep her locked up, Morgan," he said, not taking his gaze from her. "The townsfolk will have a hissy fit."

"She started a brawl in the saloon, among other things. Once they find out why she's here, they'll understand."

The man snorted a laugh. "I doubt that. I'm sure Edna is on her way over right now to give you a piece of her mind."

"She'll do that regardless of who I have locked up in here." The marshal looked over at her before lowering his feet to the floor and standing. "Come on," he said, gesturing to the door to the other man. "Take a walk with me. I suddenly have a need for some fresh air. It stinks like a week's worth of horse shit in here."

When they started for the door, Abigail rose as well. "Marshal! You can't leave me in here."

"Sure I can," he said, looking over his shoulder at her. "You're locked up, remember? You're not going anywhere." With a parting smile, he left, the door closing behind him.

* * *

Morgan wasn't able to wipe the grin off his face until he stepped off the sidewalk. "Buy me a drink, Holden," he said, slapping his brother on the back. "And tell me what's going on at the ranch since I've been gone."

Holden nodded and they walked in silence until they reached the sidewalk in front of the saloon. "Same as it was when you left. Well, except for Alex's desire to be a horse wrangler now instead of a cowpuncher."

"That didn't last long."

“Her career decisions never last long. Of course, she’s only eight. I hope by the time she’s old enough to marry, she’ll be interested in babies and a home of her own.”

Morgan laughed as they walked inside. “I don’t think Alex even knows she’s a girl.” The barroom had been cleaned, somewhat. There were two tables now standing, both of them propped up with wooden blocks under the wobbly legs. Mismatched chairs were leaning against the wall and the men inside were still there, drinking, cussing and telling lies as usual.

Reaching the long bar, Vernon greeted them both before pouring them a drink, leaving the bottle behind. “So,” Holden said, grinning. “What’s the story with the woman?”

Abigail Thornton’s face came instantly to mind and Morgan fought the urge to smile. “She destroyed the bar.”

Holden shook his head. “One little woman caused all this damage?” He turned to look at what remained of the Diamond Back Saloon. “She must be one hell of a wild cat to break all this shit.”

She was a wild cat, all right. Her claws came out the moment he spoke to her and she hadn’t retracted them yet. The fire in her eyes hadn’t dimmed since then either. The scorn he’d seen in them was directed at him and him alone. “She’s trouble. I’m just making sure she doesn’t give me anymore.”

“And keeping her locked up will accomplish that?”

“It sure will.” Morgan knocked back his drink, turned and refilled his glass.

Holden grunted. “I know it’s been a while, and you’re used to the company of whores, but come on, Morgan, surely you know a lady isn’t going to sit quietly while locked up. The jail stinks, the bedding has been there since

the building was built ten years ago and if she has to survive with nothing but your cooking, she'll be dead in a week."

Morgan glared at his brother. "I'm not going to coddle her."

"Care if I do?" Holden asked, grinning.

The look on Holden's face told Morgan exactly what his brother had in mind. The fact Willow Creek was so isolated left the men to women ratio lopsided. There were more single men in the county than he cared to think about. And once those men realized Abigail Thornton was in town, they'd be flocking to the jail in droves. He wasn't sure why the thought of those men knocking on his door irritated him but it did. He pushed the thought away, swallowed the rest of his drink and turned to Vernon. "What do I owe you, Vern?"

"On the house, marshal. After the week you've had, you deserve it."

"Obliged," he said before turning back to Holden. "I'm going to head home and get cleaned up. Want to meet me at the hotel for supper?"

"Can't do. I promised Alex I'd be home before dark." They walked back outside, stopping to look at the town before Holden said, "I will go grab something decent to eat for your newest prisoner though. It's the neighborly thing to do, after all."

Holden grinned before taking off for the hotel in a jog. Morgan watched him go and disappear inside before looking back at the jail. The squat little building had seen better days and the roof leaked more often than not. Keeping Abigail Thornton locked up was going to be more trouble than he wanted. He could feel it in his bones. Holden was right about one thing. Keeping her locked up would cause a stir. One he didn't want to deal with. He knew he had to let her go come morning but for some reason, the very thought of doing so irritated him.

* * *

Abigail had dozed off while sitting up and was startled awake when the marshal came back. She blinked at him a few times, trying to get her eyes to adjust in the low light of the room and tell her she was seeing what she thought she was.

The man who left hours before had been a complete unkempt mess. This man caused her pulse to race. He'd left his hat behind, his gun still strapped to his lean hips, and he stood by the door staring at her as if he'd never seen her before. He'd washed and replaced his dirty clothes with clean denim trousers and a blue chambray shirt, the cuffs once again rolled up to his elbows. He was clean-shaven and just as she'd suspected, the marshal was a handsome man. Well, once you overlooked the busted lip and swollen eye. Taking in his features, she realized he was much more handsome than his brother, Holden, who had brought her a meal from the hotel. Too bad the marshal's loathsome attitude was so unforgiving.

She'd had a long time to think about her situation once he left and knew, like it or not, she was stuck in Willow Creek. She had no money to buy a ticket for the stagecoach and her pleas to the driver would be useless now. She'd gone as far as she could and she'd have to start planning all over again. The potential husband she'd managed to arrange for was gone. If the marshal let her out of the jail, where would she go? She didn't even have enough money to buy a decent meal, let alone a place to bed down for the night. The filthy mattress under her was better than the cold ground or someone's barn, if she were lucky enough to sneak inside one. That was assuming the marshal let her go.

The reason she'd spent the last four months running caused a nervous shiver to race up her spine. As much as she disliked being locked up, she realized with sudden clarity that being under the marshal's watchful eye was probably the safest option she had. As long as she was his prisoner, she'd be safe. Even if Fletcher found her, he wouldn't be able to do much about it. She hoped.

When the marshal made no attempt to move or speak, she stood. "Well?"

"Well what?"

Abigail rolled her eyes. "Why are you staring at me?"

He tilted his head to one side and the look on his face was one of irritation. "I'm trying to decide what to do with you."

When her heart gave another little jump, Abigail walked to the cell door. If he let her go now, what would she do? Probably die a slow, agonizing death at Fletcher's hands. She shuddered at the thought and knew she only had one option at the moment. She had to make sure he kept her locked up.

She smiled to hide her unease and tried to bait him into keeping her behind bars. "What? You mean you actually have a heart and are going to let me go? How noble of you."

He grinned and rubbed his jaw. Her gaze was drawn to his mouth then and she found herself staring. How could lips that plump spill the venom the marshal had spewed at her over the course of the day?

"I didn't say I was going to let you go."

Abigail tore her gaze from his mouth when he spoke and bit her lip to keep from smiling at what he'd said. As long as she could annoy him enough to keep her locked up until she could figure out what to do, she would at least have a decent meal and a place to sleep. "I'm sure thinking for yourself is a

difficult process, marshal, but do make it quick. I need to use the privy as I've yet been taken to do so."

"There's a pot under the bed. Help yourself."

Abigail looked back at the cot and bent at the waist. Sure enough, there was a pot under the bed, its grimy sides brown with Lord knew what. She straightened and threw him a scalding look. "You can't possibly expect me to use that filthy thing."

He shrugged a shoulder before leaning back against the wall. "I haven't had any other complaints."

"Of course not. Your usual guests are probably all foul creatures as obnoxious as yourself." The amused twinkle in his eyes faded then and Abigail wondered if she'd gone too far. He wasn't a terrible person, or so his brother had said. Holden Avery was the gentleman his brother was not. The marshal, Morgan, Holden had told her, was as cussed as an old mule and from what she'd seen, she knew he was right. Of course, it could all be an act. He was the town marshal, after all. He was supposed to be a man stronger than most, able to protect the citizens of the town. He may be a real pussycat under that hard exterior. Somehow she doubted it. "Well," she said, "while you decide what to do with me, could you find it in that grizzled heart of yours to find me decent linens?"

He studied her for long minutes, his gaze traveling over the length of her before he pushed away from the wall. When he crossed the room, she backed away from the door. She was stunned when he unlocked it and held it wide. Fear crawled into her throat and she had to swallow a desperate plea to remain in his custody. "What are you doing?"

"I can't leave you in here as much as I'd like to do just that."

Abigail was stunned. She was sure he'd keep her locked up until she was old and gray out of pure spite. "You're letting me go?" she asked, quietly.

He laughed. "Not on your life, sweetheart."

Her relief was fleeting. She stared at him, confused. "Then what are you doing?"

The marshal leaned against the cell door, his shoulder propped against the metal frame. "Half the town knows you're locked up in here and I'm not spending the night in that old chair behind the desk to see that you aren't accosted by those drunks over at the saloon." He smiled and the look in his eyes told her the situation wasn't going to be much better. "I have no option but to take you home with me."

Abigail's heart froze for a brief second before it stuttered into a regular beat again. Take her home? With him! "Excuse me? What do you mean, 'take me home with you?'"

"Just what I said. There's no lock on the jail door."

"So?"

"So, anyone can walk in from the street."

Abigail imagined just that. What if Fletcher managed to find her quicker than she assumed he would and just walked right in, somehow got the cell door open and took her? Worse yet, what if he just shot her the moment he laid eyes on her, no one the wiser until they found her bloody body on the filthy floor come morning. A shudder ran through her and she swallowed the fear the images conjured.

"You all right?"

His voice startled her. Abigail focused her gaze on his face and tried to smile. She failed horribly. "Fine. Why?"

“Because you’re pale as death all of a sudden, that’s why.” He moved toward her and she stepped back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she lied.

She knew he didn’t believe her by the look on his face. She smiled again and hoped this attempt was more convincing. She assumed it was when he finally nodded his head and walked away from the cell. “Grab your bag and let’s go.”

Abigail regarded his retreating back and the situation he was creating. How could she go home with him? Did he mean that literally? “Excuse me, marshal—”

“Morgan.”

“What?”

He turned to face her once he reached his desk. “My name is Morgan.”

“I know that,” she said, blushing. “Your brother told me.”

“Then use it.”

“I don’t think our situation requires such familiar terms, do you?”

He turned down the wick on the lantern by his desk before turning back to face her. “You can call me anything you like, Miss Thornton, but since you’ll be living in my house, I didn’t think what to call me would be your only concern.”

“It isn’t.” The possibility of Fletcher finding her was still fresh on her mind and Abigail realized that if she were safe in the jail, she’d be more safe in the marshal’s home, but that would stir up more trouble than she dared to think about. Finding a husband would be difficult if every man in town knew she’d been locked up. Worse yet, that she’d been incarcerated inside the marshal’s home. She held back a desperate sigh. This was turning into a nightmare. “I

can't stay with you in your home." Unless... Abigail held back a smile. "Unless of course, your wife is there."

"I don't have a wife."

Abigail's concern over finding a husband while staying in the marshal's home was overpowered by the relief that Morgan wasn't married. She wasn't sure why she cared, but she did. She was embarrassed a moment later when she realized she knew the answer. Of all the men in Willow Creek, the one man who could protect her from Fletcher was the marshal.

She hoped since he'd extinguished the lamp he couldn't see the blotchy skin on her neck she knew was there. She felt how heated her face was and knew she was blushing. He was staring at her, a small grin curving his lips. Whether he could see her stained cheeks or not, he knew what she was thinking. She straightened her shoulders and stared him in the eyes. "And that is the exact reason I can't be in your home. My reputation wouldn't survive the scandal."

Morgan leaned a hip against the side of the desk and crossed his arms over his chest. "Your reputation is already shot all to hell. Starting a brawl in the saloon and being arrested for it did that. As for you being in my house, I would bet my salary the townsfolk will think it an unusual act of kindness on my part."

Of course they would, she thought, glumly. Her misery would undoubtedly make him look like a saint. When he stood and told her to grab her bag she sighed and did just that. Regardless of how it looked, she really didn't want to stay in that smelly cell any longer. And she really didn't want to stay inside the jail alone.

Grabbing her reticule she walked out of the cell. "I left a small travel bag at the stagecoach station when I arrived in town."

“I have it back at the house.”

Her eyes widened a bit. “You do?”

He nodded. “Emmett, from over at the station, brought it to me an hour ago.”

“I see.” Looking around the tiny cell once more, Abigail took a deep breath and walked out of the main room. She wasn’t sure what the marshal’s motives were exactly but at the moment she wasn’t going to argue. Being alone in the jail wasn’t her idea of a good time. The moment he’d left with his brother, her anxiety had nearly choked her. She’d been grateful when Holden returned. He’d only brought her something to eat but he’d stayed and talked with her just so she’d have the company.

When she reached the door, the marshal opened it and ushered her out onto the wooden walkway. It wasn’t yet full dark but the sky was an inky blue-black. A few stars could be seen and the moon was playing hide and seek with the clouds. The wind was blowing, causing a slight breeze to dance around the hem of her dress.

The streets were deserted and only a few lights glowed behind the windows of the businesses and homes in town. They turned and started down the walkway away from the center of town and Abigail walked beside Morgan in silence until they reached the end of the street. The house sitting there was nothing like what she expected. Not that she knew much about Marshal Avery but she’d pictured him in some derelict cabin with a few mangy dogs littering the dirt yard. This was anything but. “This is where you live?” she asked, staring up at the two-story home. It was white, from what she could tell, with dark shutters at every window. A long porch ran the length of the house, a swing swaying in the breeze on one end. Flowers dotted the walkway and the grass was as green as any she’d ever seen.

“This is it,” he said, opening the gate that surrounded the property and motioned for her to go through.

Abigail walked up the stone walkway in stunned silence. When they ascended the steps and stopped in front of the door she turned to look at him. “I had no idea a town marshal made so much money as to afford a home like this.”

Morgan laughed and opened the front door. “They don’t.” He ushered her inside with a hand to her lower back. When he closed the door behind him, Abigail tried to see in the darkened interior. She stood where she was until a light flickered to her left. Morgan was there, lighting a lamp, and when the glow illuminated his face, her breath caught. Ass that he was at times, she had to admit, he was quite breathtaking. His long, dark hair and perpetual smirk gave him a roguish look. One she wasn’t immune to, apparently. Her pulse leaped when he turned to face her and she had to suck in a quick breath to fill her lungs with air.

She looked away, giving the house another glance. High gloss hardwood floors, expensive rugs and furniture filled the sitting room Morgan was standing in. The hallway stairs and banister was a finely detailed work of art. The railings carved into intricate designs she’d seen only once before in the home of a banker in Atlanta. She could only imagine what the rest of the house looked like.

When Morgan joined her in the hall with the lamp he’d lit in hand, he indicated the stairs with his arm and she gave him a brief glance before starting up to the second floor. He followed behind her in silence and when she reached the upper landing, he showed her to a room at the end of the hall. It was richly appointed with lace at the windows. The furniture was of dark

wood and the bed the biggest she'd ever seen. A tall screen blocked off one corner of the room and she wondered what was there.

Morgan walked farther into the room and sat the lamp on the table by the bed. "There's clean water and washing clothes behind the screen. Drying clothes and such in the closet by the washroom. That's the last door on the right if you prefer a bath."

"A bath," she said, shocked. "There's a bath in this house?"

He grinned. "There is. It's rarely used but it's there if you feel the need. You'll have to light the boiler to heat the water though. The tank should be full."

Abigail stared at him, wondering who this man really was. She'd never been arrested before but she would bet every possession she owned no prisoner was treated like this. Lacy bedrooms and heated baths in a real tub? Was she dreaming? Was she back in that stinky cell imagining all this? When he crossed the room and stopped in front of her, the scent of sun dried clothes and gun oil filled her senses. The need to touch him, to see if he was real, was strong. She resisted and stared up at him instead.

"Now don't try anything stupid, like sneaking away in the middle of the night. I can track anyone, anywhere, even a little thing like you."

She rolled her eyes. "I wasn't going to run."

"Good. See that you remember that. I can't lock you in the room but if I have to, I can tie you to the bed." He grinned down at her and the look in his eyes told her he was thinking of just that. "On second thought, maybe I should."

"You'll do no such thing," she said, walking around him to lay her reticule on the bed. She turned to look at him and crossed her arms under her breasts.

He grinned at her before walking to the door. “On second thought, if you try to leave, I’ll just make you sleep with me instead.”

Abigail gasped at his parting words and stood staring at the door when he closed it behind him.

Chapter Three

The sun was barely up and after a restless night of tossing and turning, listening for the sound of Abigail's footsteps in the hallway, Morgan didn't feel any more rested than he had when he'd gotten back into town. The decision to keep her in the house with him seemed like a bad idea until the scent of cooking meat filled the air.

He stood and dressed, washed his face and cleaned his teeth before venturing out into the hall and down the back stairs to the kitchen. She was there, an old flour sack tied around her tiny waist as she stood by the stove stirring something. The scent of coffee filled the air, along with real food, and his stomach grumbled in adamant demand to partake in what she offered. When she bent to take something from the oven, her rounded bottom up in the air, his groin demanded he take her. Not that she'd offered. Yet.

"I think this is the first time a prisoner has cooked for me. I may have to reduce your sentence, Abigail."

"That is Miss Thornton, to you, marshal, and I cooked for myself." She turned, a pan of fat fluffy biscuits in her hand and the scent alone caused his stomach to rumble again. "You can fix your own breakfast."

Morgan grinned and pulled out his chair, sitting down and grabbing the one plate he saw on the table. She gave him a peeved look before placing the biscuits on the table with a thump and turned back to the stove. Scrambled eggs and bacon followed and gravy so thick his mouth watered. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten a home cooked meal in his own house. Never one fixed by a good-looking woman, that's for sure. The spread Abigail

placed before him was fit for a king, to his estimation, and when she grabbed another plate off the sideboard, he filled his own plate.

Neither said a word while they ate. Morgan tucked into his food like a man starved and had seconds, cleaning most of the platters. He'd be ashamed of himself if he hadn't just spent a week surviving off of dried beef jerky and water.

When his stomach was full and his coffee cup filled to the brim again, he leaned back in his chair and watched her eat. Her plate was barely touched. In the soft light coming from the windows, he could see faint purple smudges under her eyes. She looked tired. Worn down, somehow. The reason she was here came back to mind and he leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table and he cupped his hands around his coffee mug. "What were you doing in the saloon?"

She glanced at him and looked back down at her plate again before laying her fork on the table. "I was looking for the stagecoach driver. I told you that yesterday."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why were you looking for Pete?"

She sighed and pushed her plate away, not saying anything for long minutes. When she said, "I was supposed to be married," Morgan nearly choked on his coffee.

"Married? To Pete?" he asked, louder than he intended.

She threw him a look before rolling her eyes. "No. Not him."

"Who?"

"Why does it matter?"

“It doesn’t,” he said, but that wasn’t the complete truth. The thought of her getting married did matter. Somewhat. Why, he didn’t care to think about. Taking a sip from his mug, he let the silence stretch before saying, “Who were you supposed to marry?”

“Flynn Haggard.”

He did choke then. He coughed and sputtered before catching enough air to breathe normally again. She was staring at him, arms folded under her breasts when he’d caught his breath and looked back at her. “Flynn Haggard?” He frowned. “Why in the world would you want to marry him?”

“Why does it matter? He apparently isn’t available to marry me now so it’s a mute point.”

Wasn’t available... Morgan laughed at that statement. Flynn wasn’t available, all right. He knew that for a fact. He’d arrested the man for cattle rustling and personally turned him over to the circuit court judge two weeks ago. The fact Flynn was getting married didn’t surprise him. Most men from town sent off for brides but those same men always let everyone know. Flynn hadn’t said a word. “How did you meet Flynn?”

“I haven’t. The marriage was arranged through the agency. He was supposed to meet me at the stagecoach station. When I asked about him, I was told he was arrested and had been taken to Missoula. That’s when I went to find the stagecoach driver.”

“And started a brawl and nearly got my face permanently disfigured.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” she said, sitting up straight in her chair, her hands clenched into fists. “That awful man who came in thought I was a whore and started... Well, he grabbed me and wouldn’t let me go. When he tossed me over his shoulder and started for the stairs, that’s when everything went wrong.”

Morgan listened to her vivid account of what happened inside the saloon before he arrived. The fight really wasn't her fault but, just like Vernon had said, if she hadn't been in the saloon, none of it would have happened. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Fine. You didn't personally start the brawl but you being inside the saloon did."

She gaped at him, her pretty little mouth open. Thoughts flew at him unbidden at the sight, thoughts that involved them both naked and those lush lips curled around his cock. He blinked and looked away to distract himself. He grabbed his coffee and burnt his tongue when he gulped it down. "So," he said, coughing to clear his throat. "You came to Willow Creek to be married and found your groom gone. What did Pete have to do with all this?"

She sighed. "I was hoping he could take me to the next town."

"He could have done that today."

"I didn't want to stay until today."

She didn't want to stay? Morgan stared at her and imagined how things would have been upon his return if she hadn't been there. He'd have had his liquor, his favorite whore from Miss Angelina's girls and been blessedly content. Well, until this morning, that is. This morning, things would have been the same as they were every week. He'd wake, fix a barely eatable breakfast, walk the town and sit in the jail, staring out the window until he got too restless, and walked the town again. He'd have done that until the sun went down, came home, ate again and gone to bed, or to the saloon to slake his loneliness with one of the girls, and started the same dull routine all over again the next day.

But it hadn't been so dull as that. No, he'd walked into that saloon and got an armful of Abigail Thornton, had his face smashed in, and woke to find her straddling his hips. He held back a smile at that lovely memory. His entire

evening had been so far from the normal he couldn't help but be grateful. Of course, that didn't mean he enjoyed her sharp tongue or her biting remarks. Knowing what had caused her surly attitude, though, he could understand it.

He refilled his coffee mug and topped hers off with what remained. "So what are you going to do now? I mean, once I let you out of jail, that is?" He grinned and watched her face turn red.

Abigail had to wonder if he deliberately tried to provoke her. The way he was smiling led her to believe he did. He enjoyed riling her. Grabbing her plate, she rose from her seat and walked to the counter and the washtubs. "Well, since I won't be marrying Flynn, I'll be looking for a new husband." She turned and offered him a smile. "Is your brother, Holden, married?"

* * *

The expression on his face was priceless. Abigail wanted to laugh but refrained from doing so. He narrowed his eyes at her and pinched his lips tightly together while a slight red tint covered his cheeks. Did Marshal Avery not like the fact she wanted to marry his brother? Or was it the fact she wanted to marry at all? Only one way to find out. "If he is, then I'm sure you can help me find a suitable prospect. You're bound to know every single man in the county."

"I do," he said. "And they're all married."

Liar. Abigail walked back to the table, removing the dirty dishes and carrying them one at a time to the counter. She kept the smile wanting to form at bay and didn't dare look at him. "There isn't an unmarried man in all of Willow Creek?"

He didn't answer for long minutes then finally smiled. "Actually there is. Jarvis McNally is single. He's got a pig farm a couple miles from town. He's been widowed for a few years now. I'm sure he'd take to you if you cooked him meals like the one you cooked for me. Hell, he might even let you sleep in the house if you ask him real nice."

Abigail ignored the "cooking a meal for him" bit and latched on to the other instead. "Sleep in the house?"

He nodded. "He's a bit afraid of women."

"Afraid of..." Abigail shook her head and scowled at him. "If he was married, why would he be afraid of women?"

"You never met Frieda." He shuddered. "Hell, I was afraid of her."

Abigail knew he was joshing her and didn't give in to the temptation of telling him so. Instead, she stood behind her chair and asked, "How old is he? Can he still father children?"

The look on his face changed all of a sudden and something in his eyes let her know what he was thinking. She knew that in that moment, to Morgan Avery, she was standing in his kitchen in nothing but her hairpins. His gaze traveled the length of her, lingering on her breasts and she felt her nipples tighten in response. Maybe the thought of marrying someone in town irked him for other reasons. Yes, because he'd probably rather have you here cooking and warming his bed for him than off doing the same for someone else.

The thought irritated her. Marriage was more than cooking and seeing to a man's needs day and night but the male population didn't see it that way and probably never would. She knew her options were few regardless of her own desires. Either she married someone in this town, and fast, or she'd have to move on. Doing the latter would cause problems as her funds were down to a

few coins. She had no choice but to marry someone before Fletcher found her and she knew he would. She'd barely managed to get away from him in Tucson. Posing as a boy and stowing away on the train were the only things that saved her.

Looking at Marshal Avery, Abigail knew the chances of finding someone who was pleasing to the eye were slim to none. Most men, the ones she knew could protect her, were either work-worn, old or already married. Morgan Avery was neither of those things. He was strongly built, towered over most other men, looked to be in his early thirties and he was a town marshal. He held a position that guaranteed protection and protection is what she needed. When Fletcher found her, she'd need someone to stand up for her and who better than the local lawman? Too bad he didn't seem to like her much. He would have been the perfect candidate for the job. Assuming she could ever get past his bristly attitude.

Sliding back into her seat, she smiled at him. Seeing him so speechless was pleasing in more ways than one. Goading him into thinking naughty things even more so. "Bedding a man would be a more pleasing task if he were nice to look upon. I can't imagine baring my body to someone who is—less than desirable. Is this Mr. McNally young or old?"

Something in Morgan's eyes gave Abigail so much pleasure she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. He looked dazed, his gaze once again resting on her breasts. He sat ramrod straight, his nostrils flaring slightly and looked transfixed on her flesh. He was thinking about this McNally man seeing her naked, she just knew he was. She leaned forward, pushing her breasts up by crossing her arms under them. "Of course, seeing how you're unmarried, I wouldn't have any objections to you taking on the task of marrying me. I'd have no problem crawling naked into your bed, marshal."

He looked up quickly then, shock registering on his face. Her composure broke and she grinned. "Just something to think about," she said. "I'm sure we could reach some arrangement. I've not had a man in ages so please make a decision soon. A woman has needs, too."

Abigail rose and walked back to the sink. She was barely able to concentrate on the dirty dishes for wanting to turn and look at Morgan. She knew he'd be the last person in town to agree to marry her but the look on his face had brought her the first bit of mirth she'd had in longer than she wanted to think about. When he stood and crossed the room to her, leaning close to her back, she sucked in a quiet breath. She hadn't lied when she said a woman had needs. She did. She missed having a man in her bed and having Morgan so close to her sent shivers racing up her spine.

He leaned in, trapping her body against the cabinet by placing both hands on either side of her. She could smell the soap on his skin and buried under what she knew was distinctly him, the faint hint of gun oil. Morgan Avery was every bit the kind of man she'd fancy. Strong, arrogant and just a little bit demanding. Turning her head to look at him, she was taken aback by the smile on his face.

"Anytime you fancy crawling into my bed, Miss Thornton, feel more than welcome to do so. Hell, I'll marry you myself if that's what it takes. I've done worse things in life and a rash decision usually ends up working out in the long run. Crawling between your thighs every night would be no burden whatsoever."

Abigail was stunned when he leaned closer and she felt the proof of his claim stabbing at her backside. He was aroused and the look on his face confused her. Was he serious about the marriage? When he leaned toward her, angling his head to kiss her, she realized he must have been.

The kiss shocked her for more reasons than one. What she thought would be a light teasing play of lips turned out to be so soul stealing, she had to grip the cabinet edge to keep from falling. Morgan Avery kissed like his world was ending. He devoured with a single mindedness, his tongue forced into her mouth to dominate and claim possession.

His arms banded around her waist, his body flush against her back and at the odd angle, Abigail couldn't seem to get close enough. She tried to turn but he pulled away, her bottom lip caught between his teeth for a brief second before he let go of her.

Dazed, she watched him turn and walk out of the room, his footsteps creaking on the stairs moments later. What the hell had just happened? Did his kiss promise things she'd only half-heartedly meant?

Raising a hand to her lips, Abigail thought back over their conversation. Had she said something to make him think she was asking to marry him? She'd said it all with a smile, a teasing lilt to her voice. Surely he knew that. The thought of marrying him filled her head then and she realized the thought wasn't a burden. She hadn't been lying about crawling into his bed. Sure he was an ass at times but he was pleasing to look at. Even as scruffy as he was the first time she'd seen him, she'd been attracted to him. She could only imagine what he looked like stripped bare. A pleasant shudder wracked her body then and she turned back to the dishes. She had time to think on that later. For all she knew, he'd been teasing her back. There was little use in getting worked up over something that wouldn't happen anyway. Of course, just because she didn't marry the marshal didn't mean she couldn't slake her desire for him. No one ever accused her of being an angel. She could seduce the opposite sex along with the best of them and with Morgan Avery, the

desire to be just a little bit wanton was a pleasing prospect. He'd have no aversion to it. He'd already said as much.

She smiled as she began cleaning up the breakfast dishes. Maybe tonight she'd see how far she could push him. The worse that would happen would be him turning her down and she didn't see that happening. He'd admitted to wanting her and losing herself for a while in his arms wouldn't change anything. Fletcher was still after her, she was still without a husband, and Morgan Avery was still her only protector. Besides, if she were going to die soon, she might as well enjoy her last days. Morgan Avery was sure to make them enjoyable. A man that virile couldn't help but make them so.

Chapter Four

The walk to the jail was less than enjoyable. Abigail's playful mood from breakfast had vanished in the knowledge Morgan was going to lock her back up. He'd seriously thought after leaving her in the kitchen earlier to just let her go but a small voice in the back of his head told him that would be a mistake.

Her eagerness to marry had been his first clue something wasn't quite right with her. She seemed willing to marry just about anyone, himself included, which threw off all sorts of warning bells. He didn't know why he thought so, but Miss Thornton was hiding something. She seemed almost desperate at times and that was when he decided to keep her with him instead of letting her go. Of course, telling her he was keeping her in jail hadn't gone over very well.

Getting her out of the house had been easy. He just told her to follow him and she had. When she asked where they were going and he told her to jail, she'd exploded into a ranting rage. When they stopped in front of the jail and he opened the door for her, the look on her face should have killed him where he stood. In an instant, she turned hostile. Her composure snapped and the biting, clawing hellcat from the day before returned. "I'll be back as soon as I can, Abigail, now stop fighting me."

She kicked him for his trouble when he guided her to the cell. "You are a loathsome creature, Morgan Avery! There's no wonder you're still single. I can't imagine any woman in her right mind would want to marry you."

He grinned and slammed the cell door shut with a clang. "You do, if I heard you correctly this morning. In fact, judging that kiss, you were ready to jump into my bed that very instant. Now be a good girl and..." He looked

around the cell before shrugging. "Just sit tight. I'll be back soon and we'll talk about this wedding you're so determined to have."

"Let me out of here, Morgan! I haven't done anything to deserve to be in here and you know it."

"We'll talk about it later, dear." He grinned at her before righting his hat and walking to the door and out onto the sidewalk. Her shouts could be heard all the way through town and he ignored them as he neared the livery stable. Saddling his horse, he made quick work of it and headed for the ranch.

The valley leading out of town gave a clear view all the way to the mountains in the distance. He paid little attention to the budding life spring usually brought with it. His mind was too cluttered with thoughts of Abigail.

When he reached the ranch, riding under the metal arched entrance at the gate, he inhaled a deep breath. Fresh grass, horses and wood smoke reminded him of a childhood spent roaming the pastures and learning how to wrangle horses. Seeing the ranch house, with its blue shuttered windows and bright flowers dotted along the walkway brought thoughts of his mother to mind. It was also a reminder of his father's declining health since her passing. That was the main reason he stayed in town. The memories were less painful if he didn't have a daily reminder of them.

Riding toward the barn, he grinned as he watched Alex, his eight-year-old niece, in the corral trying to lasso a pony. He jumped from his horse, handing off the reins to one of the hired hands before walking to the fence. "You've got to get closer than that, sweet pea."

Alex turned to look at him and her face lit up. She grinned, dropped the lasso and ran to the fence. "What you doing all the way out here?" she asked. "Pa said you had yer hands full with some cat in town."

Morgan laughed. "I do but I can always spare a minute for my favorite niece."

She rolled her eyes and shimmied through the corral fencing. "I'm yer only niece."

Alex was also the only girl he'd ever known that didn't realize she was one. She hated all things lacy, preferring trousers and a good sturdy horse to dresses and dolls. The old hat she wore was battered and worn, a relic from his youth. It had been handed down to his little brother, Tristan, until he'd outgrown it and stored it in the attic until Alex found it, preferring it to the fancy dress hat she'd gotten as a birthday present. Morgan tipped the front of the hat up so he could see her face and rubbed at a dirty spot on her cheek. "Still my favorite all the same," he told her. When she grinned at him, he turned toward the house. "Where's your pa at? I need to speak to him."

"He's in the house with grandpa."

When she frowned, Morgan knew something had happened. "What was it this time?"

Alex shrugged her small shoulders. "Don't rightly know. Grandpa was going on all morning about somebody named Buck and saying he's gonna kill him. Pa was upset and sent me outside. I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em since."

Morgan left her there by the corral with a kiss on the cheek and a promise to come back and help her with the lasso and headed for the house. When he reached the porch, Holden walked out the front door. "For god's sake, Morgan, don't even speak to the man. It took me damn near two hours to calm him down."

"That bad, huh?"

Holden nodded and ushered him back down the steps. He looked toward the corral, smiling at Alex before turning his attention to him. "So, what brings

you way out here? And please tell me you didn't leave that woman locked up in the jail."

Morgan sighed, lifted his hat and ran a hand through his hair before placing it back on his head. He looked over at Holden and thought of lying to him. He grinned instead. "Actually, I did. Can't let her just walk around town. I did arrest her if you remember."

"I remember. I'm just not sure why you did."

Morgan was trying to figure that one out himself. At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do but now that he looked back on it, he knew he'd just done it because she'd annoyed him and ruined his day. Sure the saloon was destroyed but hell, it looked like that once a month anyway. Someone was always starting a brawl in there. The last time, Ben Crowley and his crew had done it. They'd all spent a night in jail to sleep off their drunk and he released them the next day. It was what he'd planned on doing with Abigail so why was she still locked in that tiny cell?

If he knew the answer to that, he wouldn't even be out here. Her asking if Holden was unmarried started him thinking things he shouldn't have. At the time, he'd been shocked, then put out she'd asked about his brother first as a possible husband and not himself. Not that getting married was on his list of priorities. It hadn't been in years, but it still stung a bit knowing his brother was preferred over him. Then Abigail had thrown him for a loop and propositioned him instead, going so far as to saying she wanted to crawl into his bed. The visual of her doing just that, butt ass naked, had left him aching to have her. He knew she was just pulling his leg, he could see the mischief in her eyes when she said it, and playing along had gained him a boon. A kiss. One he regretted ending so soon. The woman was as sweet as she looked. He'd grown hard and eager for her then and knew if he'd let it go on much longer, he

would have had her bent over the table with her skirt over her head while feasting on her flesh like she was his personal dessert.

The look on her face after kissing him confused him though. She wasn't angry like he thought she'd be which led him to think maybe he'd read her wrong. That maybe she hadn't been teasing him about marriage after all. And he'd gone and said he would.

He looked back over at Holden, raised a hand and scratched his chin. "I think I might have agreed to marry her this morning."

Holden said nothing. Just stood there staring at him for long moments before he started laughing. A few of the ranch hands looked their way, even Alex stopped what she was doing to see what was going on. When Holden finally stopped hee-hawing, Morgan was scowling at him. "It ain't that damn funny."

"Oh, but it is." Holden rubbed his eyes, grinning widely. "Miss Angelina over at the saloon will go out of business if you stop calling on her girls. That is assuming having a wife at home is enough to keep you occupied."

Morgan hadn't even thought of that. He laughed and shook his head. "Don't guess many women would want their husbands spending much time in the rooms above the saloon. Guess I could always get out of it that way."

Holden turned to face him, one eyebrow raised. "Get out of it? You can't be serious."

"Why the hell wouldn't I be?" Morgan started across the yard, heading back to the corral where Alex was trying to lasso her pony. Holden followed. "Would you give up a harem full of women for the same one every damn night?"

Holden grinned. "Actually, yeah, I would."

The fact Holden had been married at one time escaped him most days. His brother's marriage to Maggie had been so brief it was hard to recall what she'd even looked like. Looking at Alex usually reminded him, though. She had her mother's blond hair and dainty features. She was small and fair skinned and he hoped like hell she wasn't prone to sickness like her mother had been. Losing Maggie had been hard on them all, especially Holden. Taking care of a newborn was a daunting task for a house full of men but they'd done it. It was probably why the girl had an aversion to all things—girly.

"You're not still thinking about Cecilia, are you? Because you can't judge all women by that one. Marriage isn't as difficult as she made it out to be."

At the mention of her name, Morgan felt his stomach clench in remembered anguish. He tried not to think of her most days. It's why he spent as little time as possible in the fancy house he'd had built in town. It was for her, after all. Shaking his head, he threw Holden a heated glare. "I hadn't thought of her at all before now so thanks for the reminder."

"Sorry," Holden said. He turned, braced his back against the fence and crossed his arms over his chest. "So, tell me what happened. How did marriage come about with your prisoner and why aren't you jumping at the chance?"

Morgan told him how the conversation started, omitting the part where Abigail asked if Holden were single. "I thought she was teasing me but now I get the impression she wasn't."

"And you've told her you would?"

He nodded his head. "Pretty much."

Holden laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Not sure what to tell you, Morgan, other than to take advantage of it. There's worse things to be saddled with than a willing woman in your bed every night. If it were me, I'd already have ridden half the country trying to find the circuit preacher."

Morgan blew out a breath and pushed the rim of his hat up. Talking to Holden hadn't brought him any closer to an answer than he had before riding out to the ranch. He wasn't even sure why he cared. Telling Abigail he wasn't serious about marrying her would be easy but for some reason, a little part of him didn't really want to do it. Probably the part that got tired of paying for sex and eating cold, bland meals by himself. Having a woman at home waiting on him would be nice. The thought used to cheer him up but ever since Cecilia, it only brought home the fact that having a woman was more trouble than they were worth and he was sure Abigail Thornton would be too.

* * *

Abigail had paced the length of her tiny cell until her feet ached. She'd cursed Morgan Avery's name in every fashion she knew how and plotted ways to get even with him for taking advantage of her. She'd cooked a meal for him that even her grandmamma would have been proud of, treated him to a salacious reminder that she was a woman in need of a man and kissed him back as hungrily as he'd kissed her. And what had the ornery old goat done? Locked her back up in this stinking little hovel of a jail cell and—left her there!

She'd yelled until her throat was hoarse and been the subject of more than one person sticking their head inside the jailhouse to stare at her. A few venomous words had them all retreating. She was furious at the townsfolk of Willow Creek as well. How could they leave her, a woman, inside the building alone without even batting an eye? What sort of people were in this town anyway?

The door opened again and Abigail turned, ready to let fly another vicious tirade at the man who stuck his head in to gawk at her but stilled her tongue

when a heavy set woman with graying hair walked in. The woman smiled, repositioned the basket that was hanging from her arm by the handle, and pushed the door open wide. “Good afternoon to ya.”

Abigail tried to smile but failed miserably. The woman didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy dragging the chair sitting in front of the desk across the room and toward the jail cell.

When she had the chair where she wanted it, she stood, placed the basket on top and stuck her hand through the bars. “I’m Edna Pierce and let me say, Morgan Avery should be ashamed of himself locking you up in here.”

The smile Abigail graced the woman with was genuine, then. Someone else in this town thought the marshal was a vile creature, too. Abigail liked her already. “Pleasure to meet you,” she said, taking the woman’s hand. “Abigail Thornton.”

Edna clucked her tongue, shaking her head before scrunching up her nose. “This place is as horrible as always. It smells of filth and isn’t a fit place for a woman.” She turned, grabbed the basket and slid back the checkered linen lying on top. An assortment of food lay inside. Chicken and biscuits, an apple, and a few slices of cheese. It was enough to cause Abigail’s stomach to growl. It had been hours since breakfast and she hadn’t eaten much then.

Taking the basket when it was offered, Abigail sat on the edge of the cot and tucked into the food as Edna sat down on the chair. The woman started talking immediately and Abigail only half listened. The goings on in town really didn’t interest her. It didn’t take long to realize Edna Pierce was the town busy-body and local gossip.

The woman talked nonstop for twenty minutes about nonsensical things but Abigail perked up when she heard Morgan’s name mentioned and raised her head. Edna had a disapproving look on her face. “He’s not fit for much

more than sitting in this jail," she was saying. "Why, the way he carries on..." Edna shook her head, making that clucking sound with her tongue. She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "He spends almost every night over at the saloon. The way I hear it, he knows more about those... women, they keep upstairs than anyone else in town." Edna raised her eyebrows in an exaggerated manner. "He's not very particular, they say."

Edna went into great detail about Morgan's social life, particularly his fondness of the whores above the saloon. He spent more time in their beds than he did his own, apparently. When Abigail asked why, Edna brightened and straightened her back. "Oh, most people think it's because of Miss Cecilia."

The mention of another woman drew Abigail's attention fully. She wiped her hands on the checked linen and sat the basket on the floor by her feet. "Who is Cecilia?"

"Oh, she was the marshal's fiancée. He built that house for her, you know. Spent every dime he had getting it all fixed up. Sent off for store bought furniture, too. I haven't seen the inside but I hear it's the grandest home in all of Willow Creek."

Abigail blinked at Edna and opened her mouth to say the house was nice but the woman talked right over her.

"She was a pretty little thing, that Cecilia. A little uppity if you ask me, but most people with money usually are." Edna sniffed as if she were slighted and continued. "The way I hear it, once Miss Cecilia saw how small and rugged Willow Creek was, she was so offended Morgan would even consider making her live here, she cried all the way back to Missoula and straight to the arms of her father's business associate. She's living out in San Francisco last I heard."

The conversation lasted for another hour and Abigail was yawning by the time Edna got around to telling her about Morgan's three brothers. Apparently

one of them, Colton, was an outlaw wanted in four states and dangerous to boot. He was the twin to Holden, whom she'd met. The youngest, Tristan, also had a tarnished reputation. A gambler by trade who didn't know how to turn down a card game if his life depended on it and their father was just this side of crazy ever since their mamma passed.

When Edna stopped talking, Abigail focused her attention back on her. "He hasn't done anything... unseemly since he locked you up has he?"

Abigail grinned. "Not really."

Edna's eyes widened. "Oh, do tell."

The fact this woman would probably tell everything Abigail said to her to every person who would listen didn't cross her mind until it was too late. When she told Edna Morgan had taken her home with him last night, the woman looked so scandalized, she rose from her seat, hand to her chest, and gasped until her face turned blue.

"Took you home with him! Whatever for?" Edna jumped to conclusions and was in a tizzy within moments. She was mumbling to herself, wringing her hands and talking about having Morgan booted out of his position as town marshal. Normally, Abigail wouldn't have cared but since she'd had time to cool off, her ire at Morgan wasn't as severe as it had been. Hearing this woman spout off about having Morgan lose his job, however, was her fault entirely.

She stood, walked to the cell door and reached through, trying to get Edna's attention. "Don't worry, Edna. He was a perfect gentleman, I can assure you."

Edna stopped pacing and turned to look at her. "Are you sure?"

Abigail smiled and nodded her head, laughing to try and lighten the mood. "Yes. I used one of the spare bedrooms. He didn't want me to have to sleep here in the cell on that old cot."

“Oh.” Edna actually looked disappointed for a moment before she scoffed. “Well, I’m surprised. Morgan hasn’t ever been overly kind to anyone, especially me. He’s a horrible, vile, wretched man. Why, I think he purposely tries to annoy me most days.”

He probably does. Abigail kept that comment to herself and smiled. “He was nothing but kind, Edna, so don’t go worrying about how I was treated. Why, when he found out my husband to be wasn’t here to greet me he said he’d marry me!” The moment the words were out of her mouth, Abigail regretted them. She didn’t know why she said it other than to dispel Edna’s aggravation at Morgan, but when Edna looked at her, she could see a change come over the woman. It was like watching the sun burst through the clouds and brighten a once gloomy day. Edna perked right up, smiling before clasping her hands together. “See, I knew the marshal was a kind and decent man. I’ve been telling everyone in town that he is and no one will believe me. Why, you just wait until they hear of this! They’ll all see.”

Edna left in a swirl of petticoats, pulling the door to the jail closed behind her. Abigail wasn’t sure exactly what happened, or what changed Edna’s mind where Morgan was concerned, but trying to figure it all out would do her no good anyway. She was still locked up, Morgan was still not letting her go and she really had to use the privy. She glanced at the pot under the small bed and grimaced. “I really do hate you, Morgan Avery.”

The moment she said his name, he opened the door to the jail house and walked in. He had the audacity to smile at her and her temper flared at the smug look on his face. “It’s about time. Do you have any idea how hellish my day has been?”

“Not really but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.” He approached the cell, removed the key in his pocket and unlocked the door.

“Are you finally going to let me go?”

He grinned and held the door open for her. “Nope. You’re coming home with me.”

“What ever for?”

The look on his face promised things that made her insides quiver. She hesitated before stepping out of the cell, staring him in the eye as she stopped in front of him. She raised an eyebrow, sucked in a breath large enough her breasts rubbed against his chest. “Have you come to some accord about our arrangement, then?”

End of Excerpt

THE LAWMAN is available at all retail outlets for FREE. Find download links at lilygraison.com