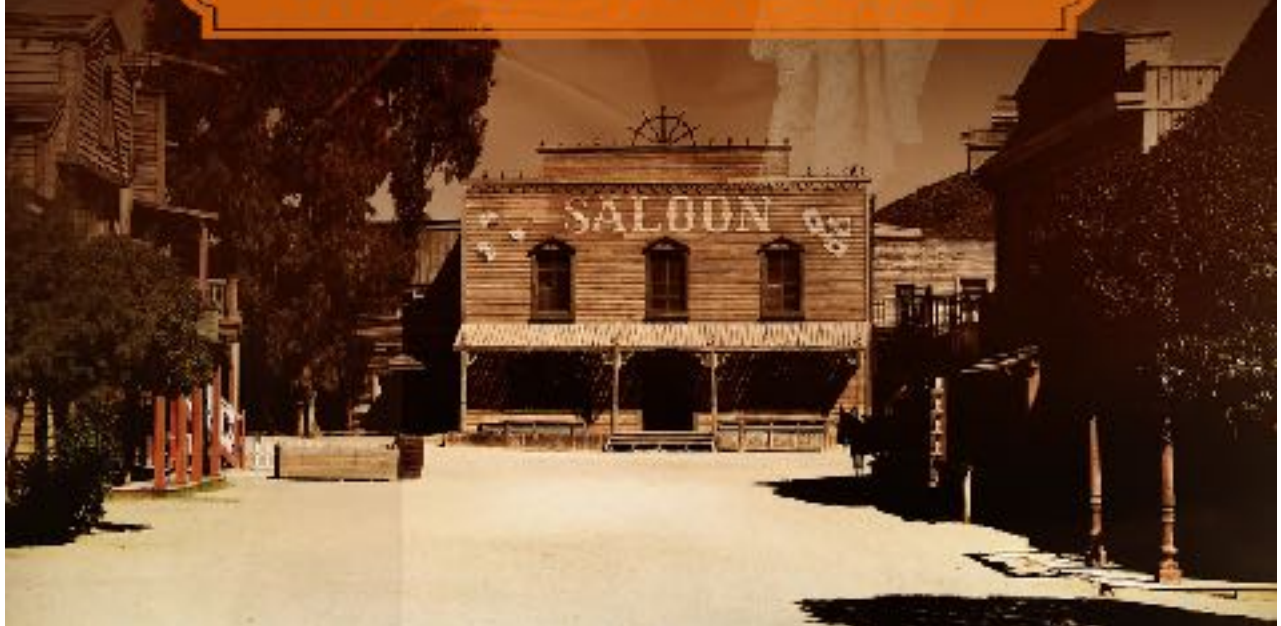




WILLOW
CREEK
BOOK EIGHT

LILLY
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
GRAISON

NIGHTINGALE



Chapter One

Willow Creek, Montana - July, 1884

That old shotgun had hung above the mantel for so long dust fell from the barrel when Ben pulled it down and checked to see if it was loaded. Betsey's heart slammed against her ribcage as she watched him. "What are you doing, Ben?" When he crossed the room without answering, his booted feet hitting the wooden floor at a fast pace, her pulse matched his rapid footsteps. "Ben Atwater, you stop right this minute and tell me what you're doing!"

He spun on her, the look on his face one she'd never seen before. Her good-natured brother had been replaced by a man with vengeance in his eyes. "I'm going to go kill that little bastard, that's what I'm doing."

Her breath caught in her throat, her weak stomach once again souring and as she watched Ben stalk across the yard to his horse, she willed her lunch to stay in place as she chased after him. "Ben, wait." The words, *I'm going to kill him*, rang inside her head until she heard nothing else. When he climbed into the saddle, she screamed, "Ben, stop!"

"Stay here."

“Ben, just listen to me!” Betsey ran across the yard after him, the tears she’d been trying to hold back blurring her vision. When he guided the horse away from the house and took off at a gallop, those tears started to fall. She wiped them away, turned and ran for the small barn behind the house. She saddled her old mare quickly, forcing more tears away and climbed into the saddle long minutes later. “Yah...let’s go Pansy, run!”

She hadn’t pushed the poor horse so fast in years and hated doing it now but she could barely make out Ben on the horizon and leaned down over Pansy’s neck and urged her faster. She knew where he was headed and if the pig-headed mule would have just listened, she could have told him he wasn’t there.

When she finally reached the small farm, Ben was already shouting up a storm. She raced the rest of the way to the house and barely let Pansy stop before she was off her back and running. “Ben!”

He turned on her, his face red, nostrils flared. A muscle ticked in his jaw and she’d never seen him so furious. “Go home,” he said before turning away.

“He’s not here, Ben.” Noah glanced her way before looking back at her brother. “You can check if you like.”

“He doesn’t need to.” Betsey grabbed Ben’s arm and looked at Noah and Keri Lloyd with regret in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, looking at them both. “I tried to stop him.”

“What’s this all about?” Noah asked.

Ben looked down at her. “You going to tell them or should I?”

Her face flamed. She averted her gaze and tugged on his arm again. “Please, don’t do this,” she whispered. “I’m begging you, Ben.” She stared at the ground between them, the past three months

playing in fast motion through her mind. The joy and heartache so consuming she could barely breathe around it and her queasy stomach rolled again. She looked up, Keri's gaze locked on her face before lowering. Betsey realized her mistake when Keri's eyes widened as she looked at the hand Betsey had laid against her stomach.

"Betsey?"

Keri's soft voice caused that aching pain she felt to turn into humiliation. She averted her gaze and looked up at Ben, tugging on his arm again. "Please, let it go."

"I will not." He looked from Noah to Keri, then back again. "Where is he?"

Noah sighed. "I wish I knew. He took off a month ago. We've not seen or heard from him since."

"Did he know, Betsey?"

Ben's question was directed at her and the lump in her throat kept her from answering. She shook her head and flicked a quick glance to Keri again.

"Know what?" Noah asked, looking from the shotgun Ben held to her tear-streaked face. "What's this all about?"

"This is about Aaron knocking up my baby sister and telling her he didn't want to see her anymore—"

"That's not the way it happened—"

"—And I'm not about to let him get away with treating her like a saloon whore."

"Ben, stop it, please."

"Is this true?" Noah asked.

"Oh, Betsey," Keri's soft-spoken words tearing at her nerves.

Ben pulled his arm from her grasp. "He'll make this right or so help me—"

"What can we do?" Keri asked.

"Please let it go, Ben." Betsey's words were drowned by the suddenly raised voices as everyone tried to speak at once. "That's enough," she said, grabbing Ben's arm again.

"No. He can't treat you like this!"

Everyone seemed to be shouting and the noise, coupled with nausea and her harried nerves cause the last of her composure to crumbled. "Stop it, all of you!" She jerked on Ben's arm so hard he stumbled back a step. "He didn't want me!" The tears were back, choking her as she sobbed. "He didn't want me, Ben. He's gone. Just let it go."

She looked at the three of them, Keri's eyes filling with tears. Betsey turned and ran to Pansy, climbed back into the saddle and took off at a fast clip. The tears came unbidden, and she cried until her heart felt hollow. She'd loved Aaron Hiram for as long as she could remember and he'd used her. He took the love she offered him and gave nothing back and the minute life got too difficult to handle, he left, even as she begged him to stay. She wasn't enough for him. She never had been and as she raced across the prairie, she screamed, "I hate you Aaron Hiram! I hope you never come back!"

Her regret and heartache burned through her body until she was screaming from the pain and she vowed to never let another soul hurt her. She'd lived with the abuse of her drunken father and the taunts of ignorant Willow Creek residents who looked down their nose at her and she'd not live the rest of her life being scorned by anyone. She didn't need them. She didn't need anyone and she

certainly didn't need Aaron Hiram. What he'd left behind was all she needed. She laid a hand to her stomach. She'd give her baby the love she'd desperately wanted her entire life and never received and would not let that man near her again. One broken heart was enough to last her a lifetime and if she never saw Aaron Hiram again, it would be too soon.



Silver Falls, Montana - December 1884

He'd shot a man. The barrel of his gun still smoked, the scent of gunpowder thick in the air, the sound of crying and loud voices ringing in his ears.

The old man lay by his feet, gasping for breath as the front of his shirt bloomed red, his blood leaking from the bullet wound. Aaron stared down at him wondering how he'd ended up here.

A glance to his right showed the Indian girl he'd been talking to, Morning Dove, still crumpled in the street. Her lip was bleeding, fat tears sliding down her face. Two women helped her stand and Aaron didn't miss the grateful look she flashed him before she was led away. He wasn't sure what the look was for, though. Was it because he'd stopped the old coot from beating her senseless in the street or the fact he'd shot him because if his eyes weren't deceiving him, she'd been smiling as she turned away.

A man wearing a badge stepped into his line of sight, the word Marshal hammered out on the top of the shiny star. "Drop the gun."

Aaron did as told and took a step away from it when the marshal bent to pick it up.

The old man was bellowing like a dying cow and those on the street looking on were huddled in small clusters. The marshal spoke quietly to a man helping the fella he shot off the ground, then turned to face him.

"Let's you and me go over to the jail and have a little talk."

Aaron inhaled a deep breath and headed across town. This would only add to the problems that had been weighing heavy on his shoulders over the last several months. He'd made so many mistakes over the past year, it was no wonder things like this kept happening. He was convinced some cosmic force was getting even with him for the way he'd been treating people in his life as of late and it had every right to. Lord knew he had a lot to atone for.

A sign by the door of the marshal's office read Josiah Lincoln, Marshal. The office was one big room with a single barred cell along the back wall. A desk sat on the right with two chairs in front of it, a pot-bellied stove on the left-hand wall. The small space smelled of coffee and gun oil and there were only two windows which let in very little light.

"Have a seat."

Aaron pulled one of the chairs away from the desk and sat down as instructed.

The marshal took his time rounding the desk. He put Aaron's pistol in one of the drawers and blew out a breath as he sat down across from him, the width of the scarred wood separating them. He

removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, then met his gaze. "What happened?"

Good question. Aaron wasn't sure where to start. "Old man pulled a gun on me. My bullet hit what I was aiming for, his didn't."

"And why did he pull a gun on you?"

Another good question. "Well, close as I can figure, he didn't want me talking to Morning Dove."

"What were you talking about?"

"Nothing in particular. She caught me staring at her so I apologized. It's not every day a man sees an Indian and lives to tell about it."

"No, guess not." The marshal rubbed his chin, the rasp of a shadow beard loud in the stillness. "And Walter figures into this how?"

"Is Walter the old man?"

"Yes."

Aaron nodded. "He came barreling down the sidewalk toward us and the girl flinched before he even reached her side. The moment he got close enough, he grabbed her arm and jerked her toward him hard enough her feet flew out from under her. She started babbling about how we were just talking and trying to pick herself up and the old man slung her against the side of the mercantile. When she tried to grab his arm, he hit her."

He clenched his jaw as the scene flashed back inside his head. He'd lost count of how many times he'd seen his uncle hit his ma or how many times he'd wanted to kill him for it and seeing that old man take a fist to that girl made something inside him snap. "He punched her in the face three times. That last one was hard enough

her head snapped back and hit the wall loud enough her eyes rolled in her head a bit and I just—“ He clenched his fists and looked out the window into the darkened street. “I jumped him. We rolled into the street, tussled a bit, and I gave him a few punches to the head to let him know how it felt. When I saw Morning Dove standing beside us, I stood up and turned to see if she was all right. The old man got to his feet and when I looked his way, he pulled a gun and pointed it at me. I did the same. Luckily for me, his shot went wild.”

The door opened and a man he hadn't seen before nodded his head at him, then looked at the Marshal. “Everyone I talked to that saw what happened said Walter pulled his gun on him.”

The marshal flicked a quick glance his way and looked back toward the door. “How is Morning Dove?”

“The same as she always is. Fretting over Walter and wringing her hands.” The man blew out a breath. “Her face is pretty bruised up. Doc Tibbens said he'd look after her when he was finished with Walter.”

“Is it serious?”

“No. The bullet caught him in the shoulder but he's making a fuss loud enough to make a person think he was riddled with bullets.”

“Not surprised.” The marshal turned back to face him. “You're not from around here.”

It wasn't a question. “No, sir. I'm from Willow Creek. I'm just passing through.”

“So you'll be leaving, then?”

“Had planned on cutting out first thing in the morning unless you mean to keep me.”

The marshal eyed him for long moments. He glanced at the man still standing by the door, then back at him before reaching into the desk drawer. He laid Aaron's gun on the old battered desktop and slid it across to him. "I trust you to not shoot anyone else. Anymore trouble out of you and I'll throw you in that cell and let you rot."

Aaron grabbed his gun and tucked it back into his hip holster, then stood. "Wouldn't think of it, Marshal." He tipped his hat to him, did the same with the fellow by the door and left before either of them could call him back.

The streets were quiet now, full dark cloaking the valley. He walked the wooden boardwalk that ran along the crooked row of buildings in town to the end of the street, to the two-story house with a sign that read, "Mabel's Boarding House," in bright red letters near the front gate.

He blew out a shaky breath as the day's events filled his head again. Most of it had been pleasant and took his mind off things weighing heavy on him for months now. Meeting Morning Dove had distracted him enough he'd forgotten his troubles but as usual, more came chasing on its heels. His life was one catastrophe after another as of late. He was beginning to think the universe had it in for him. Luckily others had seen what happened or he'd still be sitting in that jail right now, probably in the small cell he'd seen along the back wall of the building.

His ma always told him curiosity killed the cat and now he believed her. An innocent conversation with an Indian girl nearly cost him everything. His thoughts went back to Morning Dove and the strange look she'd given him as she was led away. Had he seen her smile? The thought would puzzle him from here on out because

he wasn't about to search her out to ask. Wherever she was, he hoped she stayed there. He had enough problems in his life without heaping on more. His ma's angry words, Noah's disapproving gaze, and the broken look on Betsey's face when he left her standing underneath the willow trees that grew along the bank of the creek would haunt him forever.

He'd tried to outrun all his problems but woke too many nights with the image of Betsey standing under those trees, raindrops mingling with the tears falling down her face, and he always woke with a hollow ache in the center of his chest. He'd left a mess back in Willow Creek and the longer he ran from it, the worse the festering wound in his heart would grow. He'd disappointed so many people in his life and he had to fix it. His twenty-second birthday was coming up and it was high time he started acting like a man and stop running. It was time to go home.

Thoughts on how to fix all the wrong's he'd done filled his head until he reached the gate outside the boarding house. He'd returned too late. Mabel had told him she locked up promptly at seven and if he wasn't there, he'd have to sleep in the street. He'd hoped she'd been joking but the windows were all dark except for a single glowing pane at the back of the house. He stared at that light wondering if Mabel would answer the door if he knocked long enough and had opened the gate and stepped onto the rock walkway to the porch when he heard someone calling his name. He turned and saw a shadowy figure hurrying his way. When they were close enough to see clearly, he sighed.

Morning Dove offered him a tiny smile as she stopped on the other side of the gate. Her buckskin dress hung to her knees,

matching trousers covered her legs, and her boots looked well worn. Her hair was a silky fall of thick, straight strands that fell down her back clean to her waist and it was so black it had looked blue when he'd first saw her standing out by the mercantile.

He nodded his head to her in way of greeting. Her face was bruised, her lip twice the size it should be but it was the look in her eyes that puzzled him. She looked almost—happy.

“I would thank you,” she said, her soft voice holding a melodic, musical cadence that still surprised him.

“No need.”

“You are wrong, Aaron Hiram. Not many have ever stopped Walter when he felt need to punish me and I thank you.” She shifted on her feet and looked behind her, back down the street. When she faced him again she asked, “Will you be staying in Silver Falls?”

“No, I’m leaving in the morning.” The moon wasn’t bright enough to see much but he didn’t miss the brightness in her eyes at his words.

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, then took a step closer to him. “I would ask a favor of you”

“What kind of favor?”

“One I will repay to you tenfold.”

Chapter Two

Willow Creek, Montana - May, 1885

Miranda Talbert was Willow Creek's oldest living spinster. She was thirty-two years old, tall, had a trim figure, and was pretty in a mousey kind of way. She was also head over heels in love with Dr. Evan Reid, who barely knew she existed. Miranda tried to act indifferent to him but everyone in town knew. Everyone, that is, but Evan Reid. Miranda was also a kind soul and would help anyone in need, which is what brought Betsey to her door once again.

Betsey had wished most of her life she wouldn't end up like Miranda but at the ripe old age of nineteen, she's changed her mind. After the pain the men in her life seemed to dole out, she was perfectly happy taking the title of town spinster. If Miranda could do it and survive, she would too. "You're sure this is all right, Miranda?"

"I'm positive, Betsey" Miranda beamed. "Don't worry about a thing."

Betsey watched her turn back to the house, the door slowly easing shut and told herself everything would be fine. She hurried down the steps in front of the house Miranda shared with her mother and headed across town, hurrying past those who chose to dally on the wooden sidewalk. The evening sky was painted in shades of purple,

orange and red and cast the town in soft light. If she could have her way, she'd be at home, rocking on that old chair on the porch, watching the day give way to night but one rarely got what they wanted, especially her.

Music from the saloon filtered into the street as she neared it. The two-story building was the most popular establishment in town and unfortunately, the only place hiring. Taking a job there had raised more than one eyebrow and she'd had to listen to Ben rant and rave about it for a solid week. She let him say what he wanted and sighed in relief when he stopped yelling at her. End of the day, it didn't matter if he liked it or not. The money he made at the Avery Ranch was barely enough to support them and if Ben ever took a wife, where would that leave her? She had to have a means to support herself and if working the saloon was what she had to do, then so be it.

She stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and waited for the wagons ambling down the street to pass before she stepped down and hurried across the rutted dirt road. Horses and wagons filled the street, the noise of multiple voices and music filling the air. It was week's end and every cowpoke and ranch hand for miles around were slowly making their way into town and she hoped they'd brought their money with them.

This side of the street was more congested than the other, the sidewalk filled with people. She stopped, waited for a group to pass and looked across the road as she waited. That's when she saw him. The noise around her faded until she heard nothing but the blood rushing past her ear drums.

She'd prayed nightly Aaron Hiram never came back home but there he was, sauntering into town as if he didn't have a care in the world. He stopped by the hotel and the crowd parted in such a way she had a clear shot of him as he dismounted his horse—and helped the girl he'd been riding with to the ground. She stared at them both, her heart racing so fast she felt dizzy. It wasn't until someone touched her arm that she was able to look away.

“Are you all right?”

Keri Lloyd was petite with spiraling blonde curls and was among a very short list of woman in town who had never looked down her nose at her. Keri'd had her share of hardships just like she had. They were a lot alike. The fact she was Aaron's mother made it difficult to like her though. How could she like Keri so much when she was supposed to hate her son?

Betsey swallowed to moisten her dry throat and nodded her head. “Yes, I'm fine.”

Keri didn't look at if she believed her. “Are you sure? You're entirely too pale. You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“I have.” She glanced across the street. “Aaron's back,” she said, then looked at Keri. “Did you know?”

The look on the woman's face said no, she didn't. “This is the first I've seen of him.” She gave her a hesitant smile and hurried to the edge of the sidewalk. Betsey grabbed her arm.

“Keri—don't tell him.” She'd had this discussion with Keri so many times, she was tired of it but she stared at the woman and willed her to agree.

“Betsey...”

“Please, Keri. I'm begging you. I'll do it myself.”

Keri didn't look as if she believed her. "Do you promise?"

"Yes." And that wasn't a lie. She would tell him—with her last breath on this earth. "I promise, I'll tell him."

Keri stared at her for long minutes then nodded her head and smiled. "All right. I'll leave it to you to let him know, then. I'll let Noah, Sophie and Nathaniel know not to say anything to him."

She said her goodbyes and hurried across the street and Betsey watched her every step of the way. When she reached Aaron's side and embraced him in a hug so tight his face turned red, she took a step back and hoped she blended into the crowd.

He looked leaner than he had last time she'd seen him. His hair bleached a shade more blonde by the sun and the woman Aaron had helped down from the back of his horse still stood by his side. Her clothes were made of buckskin and she wore trousers. Her hair was long and black and even though she couldn't see her face, it was hard to miss the fact she was an Indian and seeing her with Aaron made her heart hurt.

He'd been gone eleven months, two weeks and three days and the pain was as raw as it had been when he left her under the willow trees by the creek crying. She gave him one last look and turned away. She wouldn't dwell on him being back regardless of how much her heart begged her to do so. She'd vowed to hate him until she died and that's exactly what she was going to do. If luck was on her side, he was just passing through—him and his Indian girl.

As she tried to ignore the fact there was a woman with Aaron, she bumped into three people and she realized she couldn't see. Her vision was blurred to the point she was looking at the world through a distorted haze of tears. She stepped out of the line of foot-traffic

and into the small alleyway between the buildings, blinding tears spilling from her eyes faster than she could wipe them away. It took near to ten minutes to compose herself, her silent chant of, "He left you and now you hate him," still ringing in her ears as she started stepped back onto the sidewalk and headed toward the saloon.

The place was packed as usual for a Friday night. Smoke filled the air and made it hard to breathe. She hurried across the sawdust-strewn floor and ducked around the corner and down the dark hallway that lead to the small kitchen at the back of the building. The stale scent of dust, mold, whiskey and sweat lingered in the air. The space was sparse as always. A few boxes lined the walls, a broom stood neglected in one corner and a single, round table took up most of the room, every chair sitting around it filled.

Betsey had never judged anyone. She had no right to. Her life certainly wasn't worth bragging about. Growing up, she'd been the only daughter of the town drunk. The girl who wore hand me down clothes, rarely bathed, and depended on her brother for every bite of food she put into her mouth. Her worthless pa was now dead but she still depended on Ben and probably always would in some form but looking at the women sitting around the table in this small kitchen, she counted every blessing she had and thanked every deity known to man for what little she had. She knew everyone had hardships and the things life handed you either made you stronger or killed you slowly and these women were strangling on their misfortune.

Ruby, one of the older woman working the upstairs rooms, greeted her with her usual head to toe glance. The woman was as wide as she was tall. Her large breasts all but spilled from her dress and Betsey tried to ignore her dark nipples peeking through the lace

of her bodice. Her face was pockmarked, her bulbous nose red, the small veins and broken capillaries harsh against the paleness of her face. Her hair was also the most garish shade of red she'd ever seen. It bordered on orange and the wiry texture made it stick out on all sides but she was the closest Betsey had to a friend in here. Ruby mothered her more often than not and even though she'd never tell another living soul, she liked her more than she was willing to say.

"What's wrong, dumplin'? You look like your favorite dog done died."

Betsey pushed her hair behind one ear and laid her basket down. "Nothing worth mentioning."

"You been crying?"

Betsey wiped underneath her eyes and blinked to moisten them. "The smoke is irritating. I'm not used to it yet."

Ruby didn't look as if she believed her. "Well, if you ever do have a problem needs dealing with, you be sure to tell ole' Ruby and if I can't fix it, I know a man who can take care of any problem you have whether it's illegal or not."

She was grinning when Betsey looked back over at her and the smile hid nothing. She may have mentioned her friend in a casual manner but she had no doubt Ruby had such a friend. With the sort of men who walked into this saloon, it wouldn't surprise her at all if there wasn't a gun-for-hire sitting out there amongst the patrons at the card tables at this very moment.

"You don't have money troubles, do you? I done told ya with your looks, you'd be rich in no time if you came upstairs."

Sylvie, a woman with hair as black as night—and a soul to match it—shot a sneer in her direction. "As if we need another woman in

here taking what little these dirty bums can afford.” She inhaled deeply from the cigar she was smoking, blowing a puff of gray smoke into the air before looking at her in a sideways manner. “You just stick to what you know, songbird, and we’ll get along just fine.”

Ruby pulled her shoulders back and stood to her full height, the animosity between the two palpable. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, Sylvie. It just makes you look all the more desperate.”

Someone snorted a laugh. “If my tits hung as low as Sylvie’s, I’d be a jealous bitch, too.”

Laughter filled the room, the girls around the table cackling as Sylvie pushed back from the table, shoved it out of her way and yelled, “Fuck you, Opal. Like you’re such a prize.”

Opal laughed boisterously then yelled, “I am. Hell, my tits have seen more action than those deflated water sacks you’ve been carrying around do. They’ve seen more cock than your worn out old snatch ever will, too.”

Ruby grabbed Betsey’s arm and pulled her into the hall and away from the fight that was minutes away from taking place, Opal's grinning face the last thing she saw as she was led out of the room.

The laughter, shouts of anger, and ribald teasing faded as they headed toward the saloon and disappeared completely when they stepped around the corner.

“Don't pay them no mind, Betsey. You know Sylvie’s just looking for a fight and she don’t care who it is she picks it with.”

“I know.”

Ruby tugged on her arm until she turned to head to look at her. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Betsey sighed. Even if she poured her heart out to Ruby, her situation would still be the same so what was the point on lingering over it? She smiled, shook her head and said, "I'm just tired and stressed, that's all. I'll be fine once I have something to occupy my time."

"Well, go on with you, then. There's enough rowdy cowboys out there to make you forget every trouble you have." She gave her a small nudge toward the bar. "You just be sure to let ole Ruby know if you need a *friend* with specialized skills."

Betsey watched her walk away before turning to face the bar. Vernon looked her way, ran his gaze down her simple homespun dress and shook his head before pushing a tray of drinks at her. "Take these over to table three before starting, Betsey. We've got a rowdy crowd tonight." He gave her another look from head to toe. "And you've got to wear something other than those unflattering frocks you've been wearing in here. These men won't give you a second look wearing that."

She sighed. He's asked her three times to wear one of those low cut, short dresses the girls upstairs wore and as much as she hated the idea, she wasn't sure she could put it off much longer. She grabbed the tray of drinks and headed into the mass of sweaty bodies filling every space inside the building and dreaded every step she took.

End of Excerpt

Nightingale

Lily Graison

Nightingale releases Aug 7th and is available for pre-order. Find links at <https://lilygraison.com/nightingale>