

Lily Graison



The Gambler



A Willow Creek Book

Chapter One



1870 - Winter - Idaho Territory

He was going to die. Tristan knew it the moment he heard the gun hammer being pulled back. Sweat broke out on his brow. Things were about to get ugly as sin and there wasn't anything he could do about it. Lifting his gaze, he stared at the man across the table. Just his luck he'd find another sore loser.

A glance down at his cards and he wondered if it was worth it. He smiled to himself when he saw his hand. It was. He drummed one finger on the table and reached for his chips, tossed in half of what he had and ignored the whispered comments. Let them think him stupid. He bit his tongue, staring without blinking at the man in front of him and discreetly lowered his left arm, his fingers twitching beside the holster at his hip.

The man grinned at him and leaned back in his seat. "I know what you're doin', boy, and it ain't gonna work."

Tristan didn't say anything. He stared the man in the eye and waited, tuning out the commotion inside the small saloon. The tinny piano-music filled the room with a lively atmosphere and the melody joined the ruckus of laughter, feminine squeals from the girls in their colorful dresses and the occasional shout from someone about to come face to fist with another sore loser.

The game started like any other, with a mix of ranchers, cowpokes and those thinking they were lucky enough to hit it big. Tristan knew they weren't. He'd been playing since he was old enough to hold cards and luck had nothing to do with it.

He knew every nuance the players made, how to read their body language, their facial expressions, and knew when to keep playing and when to fold. This guy, the one across the table from him, had to be the easiest he'd ever read.

His every move was written across his face. His eyes were too bright, he licked his lips anxiously and his gaze kept flicking from his cards to the chips scattered across the table. He had a good hand, whatever it was, but it wasn't as good as his.

He eyed the man again. He was sweating, now. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead and he licked his lips as he studied his cards before glancing at the chips. Tristan looked too. It was enough cash to choke his horse and his insides were a bundle of knots. If he won this hand, it would be his single biggest win, ever.

“All or nothing?” The man looked up with wide eyes. He produced a piece of paper from his shirt pocket, opened it and laid it on top of the chips littering the table. “A piece of property sweeter than a young virgin's tits. You in or out?”

Tristan craned his neck to look at the paper. It was a property deed, one hundred acres of wooded Idaho soil. He had no use for that but the chips under the deed could set him up for a good long time. He looked at his remaining chips. It was an obscene amount of money but it was easy to replace. If he backed out now, he'd look like a coward, and there wasn't an Avery in history who could be tagged with that moniker.

Besides, his hand couldn't be beat.

He pushed the remainder of his chips in and inclined his head. “Show me what you've got, ole' timer.”

The man laughed and slung his cards down on the table. He was holding a straight, just as Tristan thought he was, and he tipped his head forward, acknowledging the hand. He watched the old man laugh, heard the others gathered around the table congratulate him before the man reached for the pile of chips on the table, his arms surrounding the bundle, the chips making a soft tinkling sound as the man started dragging them toward him.

Tristan laid his cards down. “Not so fast, old man.”

The silence that followed caused the hair on the back of Tristan's neck to stand on end. He thumbed the strap holding his pistol in the holster loose and waited, his fingers twitching. When the old man looked up, his face red and splotchy, Tristan saw a vein bulge in his forehead.

“A royal flush?” The man stood, his chair falling backwards to slam into the floor. He looked up, those wide, drunken eyes bloodshot and filled with fury. “You cheatin' little piece of shit!”

He reached for the gun hanging near his hip and Tristan pulled his and leveled the barrel with the man's chest. “Don't do it, old man.” He eyed the furious man across the table and wondered just how far he'd get with his winnings before he was shot in the back. He didn't wait around to find out. The mingled whispers grew in volume as he collected his winnings and cashed out, leaving the saloon at a fast clip.

The street was dark and his booted feet made a loud pop across the wooden sidewalk. The occasional shout echoed across the street from the

many gaming and whorehouses lining both sides of the road and Tristan let his gaze roam in every direction. When the hotel came into view, the relief he felt was almost orgasmic.

It was short lived. He heard someone behind him a moment later, their boots hitting the wooden sidewalk with a soft thump. Tristan laid his left hand on the butt of his pistol. The urge to turn around and look behind him was strong but he resisted.

The alley up ahead was dark with shadows. His heart raced as he quickened his steps, ducking between the buildings. He readjusted his hat, pulled the pistol and waited.

It took only seconds for the drunken man to reach him. When Tristan saw him round the corner, he lashed out, smashing his fist into the side of the man's head. The drunk staggered, fell back into the wooden crates lining the building opposite him and everything seemed to go in slow motion then. The flare of light caused Tristan to blink, the red and blue flash was followed by an ear piercing ringing inside his head as the old man took a shot at him. Tristan reacted without pause, lifting his colt and pulling the trigger.

He didn't miss.

The old man went down, his gurgled breath wheezed out with a bloody cough and Tristan didn't wait around to see if the old man was dead. He turned, stepped back onto the sidewalk and walked quickly to the hotel.

Ten high-stakes games and two deaths in one month. That was enough trouble to last him a lifetime. He glanced behind him, nervously waiting for someone to yell about the shooting and knew he needed to lie low for a while, let his name die on the lips of those he'd bled dry. His mind swirled with possibilities of where he could go. None of them appealed to him. There was only one place he could get as far away from the gambling scene as he needed to.

Home.

He crossed the street, his thoughts on Willow Creek and saw movement in the darkened alley between the hotel and general store. He slowed his steps, laid his left hand on the revolver at his hip and crossed in front of the alley cautiously. He saw nothing and realized he was still nervous. His insides were jumpy and he was seeing things.

Walking quicker, he entered the hotel, jogged up the steps and walked to his room without slowing. Once inside his room, he sighed in relief.

He rubbed his face, felt the grime of sweat on his brow and let out a weary sigh before walking across the room to sit down. He took several long breaths and tried to calm his racing heart. It took longer than it should have

but when he could breathe normally again, the enormity of what he'd just done tore a laugh from him. "Son of a bitch."

Reaching into his pockets for the money, he grinned when he saw it. The land deed fell out with it and he picked it up, looking it over. One hundred acres. What in the world was he going to do with land in Idaho? He laughed. Life just got sweeter every damn day.

He stared at the deed, his mind rolling over the possibilities before he realized he could sell it. Of course, it could be a worthless piece of land no one would ever want. Might have been why the old man threw it into the pot. He'd have to take a look at it to know.

Staring at the deed, he was taken back to the alley and the old man he'd shot. His joy at winning dimmed. He sighed. Tonight's game was the second that month that had ended in bloodshed. Luckily for him, both times had seen him walking away, but he wasn't fool enough to think it would always be that way. One of these nights, someone would be faster and he'd be dead. Or caught and hung for murdering those stupid enough to pull their gun on him.

He tossed the money, and the deed aside, lay back across the bed and stared up at the ceiling. He felt old all of a sudden. He didn't think being twenty-six would make a person feel like they'd lived half their life already but for some reason, he did. And he still had things to do before he met his maker. He wanted to see his family again. Check on his pa to see if he'd ever gotten better. Travel a bit and meet a nice girl. Maybe settle down someday and have a few babies. He laughed. "Nah."

Sitting up he pulled off his coat and vest, draped them across the foot of the bed and took his boots off. He needed to leave first thing in the morning. The less he saw of this town the better.

He picked up his winnings, his gaze falling on the land deed again. He needed to see that property he now owned, too. He'd find out where it was and swing by on his way out of town. At least he'd have something to show his brothers when he got back home. Lord knew they wouldn't be happy to see him.

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The room was lit in filtered moonlight. Emmaline hurried inside, shutting the door behind her. She waited until her eyes adjusted then turned, faced the bed, and looked at the man lying there. He appeared to be naked, the sheet bunched low around his hips gave her a faint glimpse of a taunt stomach.

His chest and face were bathed in shadow and she stood for long minutes, just staring, before she took a step.

The floor creaked under her feet and she stilled, her gaze searching and finding the face of the sleeping man. He didn't move. She crept closer to the bed, looking at the top of the table next to it. It was empty.

Turning her head, she searched the room, looking for anything he might conceal his belongings in. She spotted it a few moments later. A large carpetbag on the chair by the window. She crossed the room, pulled the flap and peered inside.

The usual traveling accessories were there. Clothes, a shaving kit, a few letters. She dug her hand deeper, searching for his purse and clenched her jaw when she found nothing but a small bottle rattling around in the bottom of the bag.

"Looking for this?"

She froze, her eyes wide as she stared at the wall in front of her. The clicking of a gun hammer being pulled back echoed in the silence a moment later. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat and let go of the bag.

"Turn around. Slowly."

Inhaling a calming breath, she turned, lifting her gaze to his face.

He bared his teeth, the whiteness gleaming in the moonlight shining through the window, and crossed his free arm over his chest. "Please, do tell me what you're doing in my room? More precisely, why you'd be stupid enough to try and rob me?" When she didn't answer, he scowled. "And make it quick. I've little patience this evening."

She glanced at the door before flicking her gaze back to him. He was naked, she noticed. Standing in a stream of moonlight she could see him clearly and the man certainly had nothing to be ashamed of. Her gaze ran over him from his toned thighs to his face. He was watching her and she wondered if she could make it to the door before he could. Or if he'd shoot her for trying.

"I don't have all night, son, so spit it out."

Emmaline bit her lip. He thought she was a boy. She nearly sighed in relief. If she made it out of the hotel, he'd send the sheriff 'round looking for a man, not a woman. She eyed the door again and balled her fist. The small bottle was still in her hand. She clenched her fingers around it, once, and then tossed it to the left. When he looked, she ran.

He yelled, his heavy footfalls smacking the floor as he chased her. She made it to the door, her fingers grappling for the handle seconds before he wrapped his arms around her waist and they both crashed into the floor. "Get off me!" Emmaline kicked, clawed and raised her head, clamping down on his

shoulder with her teeth. He threw his head back and yelled before raising the gun and laid the barrel against her forehead. She froze.

“You move another muscle and I’ll blow your face off.”

Emmaline didn’t even attempt to breathe. She stared up at him, her lungs aching for air, and was dizzy by the time he moved.

He sat up, balled his fist around the front of her shirt and stood, dragging her off the floor before slamming her into the wall. He raised the gun again, leveling it with her face and lifted her until her toes were dangling above the ground. “Let’s try this again,” he said. “Who are you and what are you looking for?”

She was going to be sick. Emmaline swallowed the bile rising into her throat and licked her lips. He was bathed in shadows again but she’d seen him through the saloon windows and knew, those blue eyes were probably dancing with fury. He gave her a small shake and her head bounced off the wall. Emmaline willed herself not to cry as her hands started to shake. “I just want what’s mine.”

He blinked and tilted his head to one side. “And what exactly do I have that belongs to you?”

Emmaline tilted her chin and stared him in the eye. “The land deed. It’s mine and I want it back.”

He stared at her for long moments, the hand he had twisted in the fabric of her shirt loosened before he lowered her back to the ground. When her feet were on the floor, she raised her head up so she could see him. He was tall, the top of her head only reaching his chest.

The gun wavered. He stared down at her, squinting before he took a step back. His gaze roamed her from head to toe before he reached out and jerked the hat off her head. “Son of a bitch.”

Emmaline kept her chin lifted and hardened her gaze as she reached for her braid and flung it over her shoulder.

“You’re a girl?”

“I’m a woman, thank you very much.” She straightened her shirt and met his gaze. “And I’d be obliged if you’d get that gun out of my face.”

He glanced down at the colt, lowered the gun before thinking better of it and raising it again. “Who are you?”

“Where’s the land deed?”

“I’m the one asking questions here. Who are you?”

Emmaline stared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m the stepdaughter of the man you killed tonight and I want my damn land deed.”

He gaped at her, whether it was because of her language or her harsh demand, she didn’t know, but he lowered the gun and opened his mouth as if

to speak but shut it with a snap. He scratched the side of his head before his lips formed a thin, angry line. "I won that deed fair and square. I'm sorry about your father but you're not getting the land back."

If she didn't unclench her jaw, she'd break her teeth. Emmaline bit down harder and counted to ten in her head and released the pressure, staring up at him and wishing she'd had the sense enough to conk him over the head with something when she entered the room. "It wasn't his to gamble away. It was mine and I want it back."

"Not going to happen." He crossed his arms over his chest and threw her an infuriating smile. "The game was fair. He offered the deed and he lost. The land is now mine. And you, whoever you are, will just have to accept that."

"I'll have you arrested for murder."

The man laughed. "Go ahead. Tell me your name while you're at it. I'll be needing it when the sheriff gets here to arrest you for attempted robbery."

Emmaline felt so defeated her chest ached with it. What conscience this man had obviously wasn't tortured by the fact he'd killed someone. She'd watched him through the window at the saloon, saw how confident he looked and knew just from a glance he was a professional gambler. There was just something about them. It was in the set of their shoulders, the way they carried themselves. The smug look on their face as if the entire world was theirs for the taking and this man was no different. He towered over her and demanded answers he thought he deserved. He wouldn't get them. She'd die before she told him her name.

Glancing at the door out of the corner of her eye, she made a quick lunge for it but stopped short when he made a move toward her. She kicked out a leg, her knee catching him in the groin. His pained yell echoed off the walls as he lowered both hands to cup his groin while hitting his knees in agony.

Emmaline turned and ran, scrambled for the door handle and was able to get it open moments before he grabbed her ankle. She shrieked, kicked out again and planted the toe of her shoe to the side of his head. When he fell, she ran, racing out the door and down the hall and didn't stop running until she was clear on the other side of town.

She stopped when she reached the tree line and heaved in deep breaths of air, watching the main road. He never came after her. When her heart stopped racing, she turned and started making her way home. She'd have to think of something else. She had to get that land deed back, even if that meant tailing that gambler clean across the country. Her future lay on that land and she wasn't letting it go without a fight.

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Emmaline lifted the shotgun and pulled back the hammer. She sighted in on the stranger riding up the road and waited until she knew he was within hitting distance. She pulled the trigger and grinned when he ducked, his horse dancing underneath him enough to knock him from the saddle to end up sprawled on the ground. He cursed as the horse ran a few feet away and Emmaline sighted on him again and waited.

He stood, dusted off his pants with his hat and turned toward the cabin. One look at him and she knew it was the gambler from last night. Butterflies started dancing in her stomach. What did he want? She waited, watching him take a few steps closer and aimed for a spot by his head and pulled the trigger again. He shouted, ducked and hunkered low to the ground.

“Stop your damn shooting!”

Holding his hands up as if to surrender, Emmaline lowered the barrel an inch. “State your business.”

He straightened and reached into his coat pocket. Emmaline lifted the gun again. “Hang on a minute,” he said. “I’ve got the deed to this property.” He waved it in the air and took a few more steps closer.

Emmaline let him get close enough to see his face. He was handsome and his clothes told her he had enough money to buy the place three times over. His brocade vest was a rich purple in color, shot with gold threads throughout, his black jacket tailored. His hair was blond and cut short, which was unusual for these parts, and she was sure he was up to something. After their encounter last night, him riding out here to give her the deed back was too ridiculous to think. “That’s close enough, mister.”

He stopped, repositioned his hat on his head, and tossed her a smile she was sure was supposed to flatter her. It didn’t.

Glancing down at the paper in his hand for a brief moment, he looked at the cabin and the surrounding forest. “This is the Hunt place, right?” He stared at her, his head tilting just a fraction before his brows lowered. “Are you the girl from last night?”

Emmaline raised the gun again. “Unless you’re here to give me the deed, you’ve no business here. Now either hand it over or go grab that horse and get back on it.”

The man grinned and lifted his hand, the paper he held blowing in the breeze. “Can’t do that, ma’am. According to this piece of paper, you’re standing on my property. If anyone should leave, it would have to be you.”

“I can make you leave.”

He smiled and tucked the deed back into his jacket pocket. "And I'll go get the sheriff and have you hauled out of here like an unwanted squatter."

She huffed out a frustrated breath, glared at him for a full minute and turned, walked back inside the cabin, and slammed the door behind her.

Emmaline placed the gun back on the shelf and walked to the stove, laying her hands over the top to warm them. The old hunk of iron was barely throwing off heat but compared to the brisk wind outside, it felt like heaven.

Her thoughts were a tangle of what ifs. The man outside wouldn't be here if he didn't want the land and her situation had turned from bad to worse. She should have known Harold would eventually ruin them beyond repair and now that he had, knowing she'd been right, it left a bad taste in her mouth.

The rumbling of her stomach echoed in the room and the tears she'd been fighting rolled down her cheeks. She swiped at them angrily, refusing to be beaten, once again, by her idiotic stepfather's choices. He'd been a careless bum his whole life and she'd forgiven him one time too many. Not this time. She'd never forgive him for leaving her homeless. She couldn't.

Hearing the door to the cabin open, she wiped away the rest of the tears and stared at the wall. "I don't recall inviting you in."

"Well, legally, it's my cabin so I don't need your permission. You are officially trespassing and unless we can come to some sort of agreement..."

She whirled and locked eyes with him. "Evicting me already? Such a gentleman. I bet the ladies just fall at your feet with such sweet talk."

He grinned and she tried to ignore the dimple in his cheek or how much younger he looked in the bright light of day. He couldn't have been more than a couple years older than she was. And he was even more handsome up close. His eyes were bluer than they appeared in the saloon and his fancy clothes and fresh barbered look appealed to her. She scowled when she realized she was looking at him as any woman would a man she found attractive and reminded herself he was a lying, cheating, murdering dog. "Get out."

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the door, his smile widening. "Make me."

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Tristan didn't know a thing about this girl, other than the man he'd shot the night before was her stepfather and she was brave enough to sneak into his room to rob him, but he liked her. She had more gumption than most men

he knew and the fire in her eyes was a welcome change from all the doe-eyed looks women usually gave him.

He looked around the inside of the cabin and was confused. She was fighting to keep this? The cabin was one room, drafty, the light from outside seen through almost every board and the floor was nothing more than hard-packed dirt covered in ratty braided rugs. A small bed was against the right hand wall, the blankets thin and threadbare. A potbelly stove sat in the center of the room, a small shelf beside it housing a few pots and bowls. A small table with one chair took up the left hand wall. Pegs on the walls showed a few articles of clothing and that was it. Nothing else. It was as barren and gloomy as an outhouse. Smelled like one too. And this girl lived here?

Removing his hat, he turned his head to look at her and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I'm really sorry I shot your pa. It all happened so fast. I..."

"He was my stepfather and don't apologize for him." She shifted her weight to one foot and Tristan gave her a good look. She was thin, pale, and the dress she wore should have been used for cleaning rags a long time ago. Her hair was braided, the dark brunette strands hanging all the way to her hips. Her brown eyes were large and seemed too big for her dainty features.

He blinked and focused back on their conversation. "I wasn't. I just hate it happened the way it did."

She shrugged one shoulder. "Bound to happen eventually." She ran her gaze over him from head to toe before looking back up. The look in her eyes hardened and he saw the contempt aimed at him. "So, what is it you want, Mr....?"

"Avery. Tristan Avery."

"Mr. Avery. Why are you here?"

Tristan patted the front of his jacket where she'd seen him tuck the land deed. "I came to see what I'd won. That's all."

She laughed but there wasn't anything humorous in the sound. "You won a hundred acres of trees and soil that won't grow grass." She looked around the cabin and held out her arm in a sweeping motion. "And this fabulous cabin. Congratulations, Mr. Avery. What will you do with it all?"

Her sarcasm was noted but Tristan couldn't really blame her. She'd just been told she no longer owned her property and someone she cared for was dead.

His mind snagged on that last bit as he looked at her and he noticed the dark shadows under her eyes, her dry lips, the shabby clothes and her spindly limbs. This girl had a rough life. It made the money in his pocket feel like a steel rod weighing him down. Something pulled in his chest and guilt rushed

through his system. He'd killed someone she depended on. The knowledge caused his stomach to ache.

What was he to do now? He owned this property outright and a small voice in the back of his mind whispered that she was his responsibility too. He won that position when he killed her stepfather and became the new owner of the land. He'd thought to sell the property but looking at her, he knew he couldn't do it. How could he and sleep at night knowing he'd truly left her homeless?

Damn it all to hell. Why did life always have to sucker-punch him when things were going his way?

Chapter Two



Emmaline knew the exact moment he realized her predicament. She could see it shining in his eyes as he stared at her and something twisted in her gut. The last thing she wanted was someone's guilty conscience taking pity on her. She'd had enough of that to last her a lifetime.

She could see the remorse in his eyes but she wasn't sure what it was for. For her living conditions or because he would leave her homeless when he took the land from her? Or was it because he'd shot Harold?

Tears burned at the back of her eyes as she thought of her stepfather. Her current dilemma was all his fault and the anger that came with it infuriated her. She blinked tears away as her limbs started to tingle, then went numb.

She'd been expecting to hear Harold was dead since she was eight and now twelve years later, she refused to offer a tear in remorse. She felt nothing, really, which bothered her more than knowing she would be homeless soon. Her stepfather was the most irresponsible person she'd ever known. He was a drunk and gambled away every dime he ever made and she'd been the one to suffer for it. Her momma would turn over in her grave if she knew how he'd neglected her.

She looked at Tristan Avery again. He was still by the door, his hat in hand and his fancy clothes clashing with the bleak interior of the cabin. He looked a bit lost, now, much how she felt, and as much as her situation left her in dire need of help, she wasn't about to let go of the land.

Her mind raced, her options few. She turned back to the stove, jostled the door and looked in to see if the piece of wood lying inside was still burning. She smiled when the lie popped into her head and she straightened. "Did he tell you there's money owed on the property?" When she heard no answer, she turned. "He's been gambling away everything we owned to raise the money to save it from the bank. Unless you have a wad of cash in that fancy suit jacket, you don't have anything but a piece of paper in your hand."

He didn't reply and Emmaline's nerves were beginning to rattle. She hadn't eaten since the day before and with Harold now gone, it didn't look as if she'd be eating again anytime soon.

She tilted her chin up a notch. "You got deep pockets, Mr. Avery? 'Cause that's what it's going to take to get the bank to let you keep this place." She looked around the room and snorted a laugh. "Although, from where I'm standing, the bank is the one getting the worst part of the deal. You'd be better off just walking away."

"I can manage on my own." He stared at her, his brows lowering as he studied her. "If I leave, what will you do?"

She shrugged her shoulder. "What I have to." She walked to the bed and picked up the old shawl lying across the footboard and draped it around her shoulders. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've work to do before the sun goes down. With Harold not coming back, I'll have to do his chores as well."

Ignoring him, she walked to the door, leaving him inside, and made her way out back toward the brush pile. She didn't stop when she reached it but kept going, into the woods lining the back of the property, and ran into the shelter of the trees. She dodged low-lying brush, swiping away branches as they clawed at her face and when she stopped, she was panting for breath.

She stared at the entrance of the mine, the opening covered by tree limbs and the brush she'd piled in front of it. She'd been working it for years now and the small amount of gold she had secreted away was enough to take her somewhere nice. But she couldn't leave. Not yet. She knew she was close. Close enough to a larger vein that would make her so rich, people would treat her with the respect she deserved. "I've got to get that deed back."

Turning to look over her shoulder, she saw the cabin through the trees, its thin ribbon of smoke coming from the stovepipe in the roof. Tristan Avery was still in there as far as she knew and if she was going to keep her land, she'd have to do something drastic. Her livelihood depended on it.

Emmaline started back to the house. Tristan Avery held her future in his hands and she'd be damned if she let him just take it. She'd get her land back even if she had to seduce him to see it done.

Rounding the side of the cabin, she noticed his horse was gone. She sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Damn." Leaning against the rail holding the porch up, she chewed her bottom lip. What would she do now?

Staring at the road, she wondered where he'd gone. She hoped it wasn't to the bank. When they told him the land was clear of debt, he'd know she'd lied and want to know why and she couldn't tell him. If he knew there was gold on the land, he'd want it for himself, and she'd really hate to shoot him. He was much too pretty for that.

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Tristan made his way back to that broken down cabin with more guilt hanging over his head than any man should have to bear. He'd left the cabin shortly after she did and reluctantly went all the way back to town. He talked to a few people in the hotel, asked about the old Hunt place and got an ear full from a man by the name of Jensen Cooper who was in the dining room. He apparently owned the property next to Tristan's newly acquired one hundred acres. When the man asked about her, Emmaline, he'd called her, something in the way the man grinned caused Tristan's hackles to rise.

Jensen Cooper was too interested in her to Tristan's thinking. His eyes held an unhealthy desire that caused Tristan's fingers to clench into his palm as the man went into great detail about Emmaline's life and her habits. He knew too much just to be a friendly neighbor.

His fists tightened just thinking of that dirty old man and the look on his face as he'd talked about that girl.

His gut twisted again. He couldn't throw her out of the cabin, forbid her to be on the land, and live with himself. Nor could he just leave knowing she was out there alone with no one to see to her, especially with Jensen Cooper right next door.

She'd also lied to him about money being owed on the property which led to more questions. Why would she tell him that?

He made his way back up the road, seeing a faint light glow behind the walls of the cabin. The wind was whistling through the trees and he pulled the collar of his coat up to block it.

Stopping in front of the cabin, he dismounted and tied the horse's reins to the post holding the old lean-to roof up.

There wasn't a sound coming from inside. He walked to the door, turned his head and listened. It was eerily quiet and he knocked, the sound echoing in the stillness. He heard a shuffling, the clatter of things being put away before the door handle moved.

The door opened and he wasn't surprised to see the barrel of a shotgun meet him. He smiled and reached up, grabbing the gun barrel and holding it away from his face. "Do you try to shoot everyone who comes out here?"

"No one ever comes out here."

Her eyes were glassy and if he had to guess, he'd say she spent the time he'd been gone crying. That guilt cut a bit deeper but he smiled and forced the gun barrel down. "Can I come in?"

"Why?"

Good question. He'd been asking himself that all evening. "Well, to be honest, I've nowhere else to go."

She laughed and gave him a look that said he was a liar. "Try again, gambler."

Tristan smiled and lifted the bag in his hand. "I bought too much food to travel with and need someone to help me eat it."

Her eyes flashed with something that if Tristan had to put a name on, he'd call desire. Her gaze flickered toward the bag and he saw her throat move as she swallowed. Jensen Cooper was right. This girl rarely ever had a decent meal. "Fried chicken and baked potatoes." He looked down into the bag and inhaled. "I think there's a bit of apple pie in here too."

She opened the door and lowered the gun. Tristan blinked when he got a good look at her. She'd bathed, the evidence in her still damp hair that hung in wavy curls all the way to her hips. Her shift was clean and she smelled of soap and some flower he couldn't place.

When she stepped back from the door and held it open, the light from the single candle on the table caused her figure to outline in perfect detail through her shift. His first assessment of her being small was accurate. She was tiny, bone thin and half starved.

He ignored the fact and walked inside the cabin, shutting the door behind him. The room held a soft warm, glow but that was about it. It was as cold inside as it was out and he wondered how she managed to keep from freezing to death.

The potbelly stove popped, the wood inside cracking, but it couldn't have been more than a piece or two in there. He looked back toward Emmaline and smiled when she crossed her arms over her chest. "I hope you like chicken."

He ignored the conditions she lived in and walked to the spindly table, sitting the bag down. He pulled the food out, saw her out of the corner of his eye and the look on her face was enough to make him want to go to town, find the bastard who was supposed to be her father, and shoot his worthless hide all over again. How could a man leave his daughter to starve without the guilt eating him alive?

Pulling the one chair out, he made a great production of holding it for her. "Madame."

She looked at him wearily but sat, pushing her hair away from her face. He slid the food toward her and looked to the shelf near the stove, grabbing two plates and laying them by her right hand. "How about you serve us up some of that and I'll go grab some firewood for you."

She looked up, a startled look in her eyes. "There isn't any more."

"Any more what?"

"Firewood."

Tristan laughed and shook his head. "You're surrounded by forest on three sides. How can there not be any more wood?"

She shifted in her seat and folded her hands in her lap. "The axe broke earlier this year so I have no way to cut any." She glanced up at him and shrugged one shoulder. "I've picked up every broken branch and twig I can find for a mile around in either direction."

The remorse he'd felt for killing her father changed then to an ugly shade of loathing. What kind of man let his daughter live like this? In a squalid cabin with no food and clothes so tattered they looked like rags. She was left with nothing to even provide for herself and that guilt he'd been trying to ease just grew a little bit more.

"Well, I'll just go see what I can find to heat this place up a bit. You go ahead and start without me."

He left her there in that candlelit room and walked clear to the back wood line before he yelled, cursing a blue streak his momma, rest her soul, would wash his mouth out for. How could anyone be so... He didn't even have a word for what he thought of her father. Stepfather, he reminded himself, but it made little difference. The man was responsible for her until she wed and he hadn't provided for her.

Cursing under his breath, he searched the dark for anything he could find to burn, his mind tumbling over what he could do to help this girl. She obviously needed a husband. Someone who could provide for her, protect her and see that she had everything she needed to survive. He wasn't sure what role her stepfather had played in her life but surely the man had been of some use? Glancing back at the cabin and seeing light from the candle shining through the walls, he knew it couldn't have been much.

He stumbled across a pile of branches Emmaline had pulled from the forest, most too big to cut without an axe but found a few he was able to break with his foot. Most were still too large to fit inside the stove and he was left with nothing but scraps of bark, twigs and more than one splinter. He cursed again.

Picking up what he knew would fit into the stove, he bundled it and started back to the cabin. That's when he noticed it. Snow. It pelted his face

like little ice daggers and he stopped, looked up, and laughed. "Damn it all to hell." The guilt burned like acid in his gut and he swallowed to try and ease the sensation before continuing back to the cabin.

Once inside, he shoved the wood into the stove, straightened, dusted off his hands and clothes and turned to the table. Emmaline was still there, her plate holding nothing but one single chicken bone. A small leg bone to be exact. The rest of the food sitting untouched. "You not hungry?"

She glanced up at him and shrugged one shoulder.

Eyeing the food, Tristan crossed the space, piled most of what was there onto her plate and took what was left. "There's no way I can eat all that after what I had for lunch so what you can't eat, you can save for later."

Her hand shook as she reached for another piece of the chicken and Tristan had to look away. If he had to watch someone as starved as her eat the only meal she'd had in Lord knows how long, he'd have to hit something and there wasn't anything around to hit except the cabin wall and as rickety as the place was, he didn't know if it would stand the abuse.

He walked around the cabin, his plate in hand, and inspected the walls, feeling the draft seep through the cracks and tried not to shiver. The place was cold and musty and wasn't much bigger than the chicken coops back on his family's ranch.

Turning to look at Emmaline, he saw her eating, tucking into the food and licking the juice and chicken grease from her fingers. He smiled. "It's good?"

She turned her head to him, her cheeks puffed out with a mouthful and nodded.

He let her eat in peace, nibbled on his own and tried to think of a way to help her. He knew he couldn't in all good conscience leave for home and forget she was here. In a way, with him winning the land, he won the responsibility of her too. The money he'd won in the game would be enough to see her through the winter but what happened when the money ran out? And with her stepfather gone, who would protect her from men like Jensen Cooper?

When he'd eaten all he could stand, he sat his plate down on the table. Emmaline was still eating and he wondered if she'd make herself sick eating so much. She glanced at him again before pushing her plate away.

"Get full?" he asked.

"More than full." She pushed away from the table and walked to the stove and the bucket of water she had sitting on top of it. She washed her hands and face, drying them on a bit of cloth that looked like an old flour sack. When she turned back to him, he saw the gratitude shining in her eyes. Her

lips tightened into a thin line before she looked away from him. "As much as it kills me to say it, thank you."

He grinned. "You're welcome, Emmaline."

Her gaze snapped back to him, startled. "How did you know my name?"
"Jensen Cooper told me."

The color drained from her face before he saw her throat move as she swallowed. "What else he tell you about me?"

Tristan stared at her and the look on her face told him Jensen Cooper had stories to tell about this girl and he probably wouldn't like what they were. She started to blush, her cheeks turning bright pink before she turned and grabbed one of the blankets from the bed, wrapping herself up in it. "Nothing," he said, answering her question. "Just asked what you'd do now that I owned the property."

She didn't comment, choosing to clear away the mess on the table instead. When she walked out to toss the scraps, Tristan leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

The question of what to do with her was still fresh in his mind. He couldn't leave her. The way she'd just devoured that cold chicken and day old potatoes told him she didn't eat on a regular basis and if she lost any more weight, she'd be blown over by the next strong wind.

His gaze landed on the articles of clothing hanging from pegs on the wall. Her dresses were rags, the blankets on the bed little more than thin, useless drying cloths and like it or not, she was his responsibility. His conscience wouldn't let him see her as anything else.

But what did he do with her? She needed a husband but would anyone in town be willing to marry her? Looking at the cabin he doubted it. The land was worth more than anything sitting on it but would that be enough to entice someone to marry her? She wasn't ugly but if he had to choose, she wouldn't have been his first choice. She was too thin, had nothing to offer in the way of assets and from what he'd seen, she was downright ornery when she wanted to be. That shotgun that met him when he first arrived told him that.

No, she probably wouldn't be anyone else's first choice for marriage either. It's probably why she wasn't already married.

So, what did he do with her? A small voice in the back of his mind told him to put her somewhere he knew she'd be safe. A place where a woman was a woman, regardless of what they looked like or had to offer in marriage and there wasn't but one place he knew of that would guarantee him of that.

When she stepped back inside, closing the door behind her and shook off the snow from her hair, he straightened and made up his mind. He'd take her home with him, put her up in the hotel in Willow Creek until one of the

men in town came calling for her. It wouldn't take long either. The women to men ratio in Willow Creek was severely lopsided. There were a number of men there who would take her. Well, there had been when he left. He didn't think it would be much different now. And if no one did want her, then the townsfolk would see to her if she ever got in trouble, of that he had little doubt.

* * * *

“Pack what belongings you have. I’ll be taking you home with me come first light.”

Emmaline’s eyes widened and she turned to look at Tristan. He was standing near the stove, a pleased look on his face. “Excuse me?”

“I said pack your belongings.”

Since the moment she’d stepped back inside the cabin earlier that day, she’d been sick with fear. Fear of what she’d do if he didn’t give the land deed back. Fear of how she’d survive with no roof over her head if he tossed her out on her rear.

She knew she couldn’t sit by idly and let him dictate her life so she’d spent the rest of the day cleaning up, washing her hair and her best dress with the intentions of walking to town and finding him, seducing him into at least letting her keep the land but realized as her hair was drying that she didn’t even know if he was still in town. Besides, it was a five-mile walk, which was quite a distance to go to take a gamble on finding him.

Worried, she’d nearly chewed her fingernails off wondering what to do and then... there he was. Standing at her door looking as fancy and rich as he had earlier and carrying a bag of food big enough to feed her for a month.

And now he was offering to take her away, to take her home with him like some fairy tale prince. She turned her back to him so he couldn’t see the shock registered on her face. “You’re not staying in Idaho?”

“No. Why would I?”

Emmaline bit her lip, worrying it with her teeth. What did she do now? She couldn’t leave. This was her home. Her gold mine was here. Her future. But what would she do if he left?

Her stepfather never had much money but he did come home once a month and bring her a few provisions. With him now gone, she had no one and no way to get food. No way except through Jensen Cooper. Her stomach rolled just thinking about him. She’d starve first before she stooped that low again.

She turned and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. She didn't know much about Tristan Avery but she knew he had money. Enough to buy the tools she needed. Enough to fill her cupboard. She just needed to get the deed back from him and fill her pockets with some of the money he had.

But he wasn't staying. He was leaving and that left her with very few options. His command for her to pack rattled inside her head. He wanted her to come along with him and she knew, she'd have no choice but to follow.

At least until she could get her hands on that deed and his money.

Turning back to face him, she tilted her head to one side. "Where's home?"

"Willow Creek, Montana."

Montana? What in the world would she do in Montana? "And why would I want to go there?" Emmaline kept her facial expression neutral while her mind worked furiously trying to figure out how she'd make it all the way back home alone.

She stared at him, her gaze devouring his form from head to toe. Tristan Avery was handsome, rich and probably owned a large house with hired house servants cooking and cleaning for him. For a fleeting moment, a small voice in the back of her head whispered to her seductively, begged her to pack her bag and see if he'd leave tonight instead of tomorrow and spend the rest of her days with her feet propped up while ordering people around. The rational side of her brain balked, dug its heels into the floor and refused to budge.

What did she do? She inhaled a deep breath, her thoughts playing tug of war with her desires and she was nearly exhausted by the time she realized Tristan was talking to her. She blinked and focused her eyes on his face.

"You can't possibly want to stay here."

"Why not?"

He laughed and looked around the room. "I've seen outhouses in better condition than this cabin."

Emmaline scowled at him. "I'm sure you have."

"I didn't mean anything by that." He ran his fingers through his hair and grinned at her, that dimple in his cheek showing itself again. "Look, I can't leave you here and I have to get out of this territory, which means you have to go with me. Circumstances as they are, I'm responsible for you."

He was responsible for her? She didn't notice it at first but the longer she looked at him, the clearer things became. It was in his eyes, the pity and remorse shining back at her evident once she looked hard enough. He felt guilty. For killing Harold or stealing her land? Did it matter? Either way, she had him right where she needed him. Sure, traveling to Montana would be an

inconvenience but he obviously wasn't going to just hand over the deed and his money.

Her options were few and she listed them all in her head, none of them appealing. She had no choice. Not really. Her only option was to go, to play along and let him think he was her protective benefactor and wait until the right moment to steal the deed back.

She looked around the room. There wasn't much there even worth taking but she bent down and pulled the old carpet bag out from under her bed, filling it with what little she had. She thought of her gold tucked into a small crevice in the mine and wondered if she had enough time to go fetch it. She glanced over her shoulder at Tristan. How would she collect it without him knowing? She couldn't. She'd have to leave it until she came back.

The bag felt empty when she turned to face him but figured he'd want to travel light. "I don't have much," she said, shrugging one shoulder. "Nothing worth taking with me, that is."

He smiled at her and she realized, as she looked at him in that filtered light from the candle, that in another life, she would have probably fancied him. He was handsome, so sure of himself, with a smile bright enough to charm the bloomers off girls far and wide. Hers too apparently as her initial plan had been to seduce him.

As they stood the length of the cabin apart and stared at one another, Emmaline wondered if he would want compensation for his trouble. She'd yet to meet a man who didn't. Hell, even that old codger Jensen Cooper wanted payment for those grubby vegetables she was taking from his garden and his price was always too high when he caught her stealing from him. The memory caused the food she'd eaten to sour on her stomach and she tore her gaze from Tristan and went back to riffling through her bag.

She heard him move about the room and wondered if him taking care of her was done out of pity or if he wanted something else. His fancy clothes may have separated him from most of the men she knew but he was still a man. They didn't do anything without some sort of reimbursement and sex was usually their preferred form of payment where she was concerned.

Her mind wandered. She'd done things she'd never told another living soul about, just to see she didn't starve, and if Tristan wanted payment for taking her out of her current hell, and for giving her that deed back, she'd pay him with the only thing she had. She'd do it with a smile on her face and a song in her heart every night if she had to. Besides, seducing him had been her original plan anyway. She didn't need to coerce him into giving the deed back. She only had to make him think she was grateful. To get him to let his guard down and he'd do what she wanted.

Turning, she pushed her hair over her shoulder and noticed his gaze fall to her breasts. It was then she realized she was still in her shift, the threadbare material probably showing him every inch of her naked flesh underneath. She wondered if he found her attractive. She was skinny and her breasts were on the small side. Most men liked curves and plump hips, full, high breasts and long legs. She had none of those things but it didn't stop him from looking nor did it stop the drowsy look in his eyes, the slightest head tilt as he took her in.

She held back a smile. Men. Show them a naked woman and their brains stopped functioning. Flash a little skin and they usually did exactly what you needed them to. And right now, she needed Tristan Avery to let his guard down so she could get her hands on that land deed.

Hoping she had enough of what a man like him looked for in a woman to entice him, she lifted her chin a notch, trying to look more confident. "Will you be staying the night?" He lifted his head, his eyes a bit too bright. "Or will you just come back tomorrow to get me?"

He looked toward the door and she thought then he'd be leaving but when he faced her and smiled, her pulse leaped.

"Not sure leaving would be a good idea." He glanced at her breasts again. "Hard to say how much it'll snow. Be easier to just leave from here."

Emmaline nodded. He was interested, bony thing that she was. Just proved her theory. All men thought with their cock and a naked woman, or half naked, in her case, was all it took to grab their attention.

She sat the carpetbag on the floor and reached for the ties holding her shift together and pulled the ribbon, the material parting. The shift fell from her shoulders and when it pooled at her feet, Tristan's eyes widened. "Do you prefer to be on top or bottom?"

Chapter Three



Tristan wasn't sure why Emmaline just stripped naked in front of him but when she crossed the room, all that flesh displayed just for him, his cock jerked to life and begged him to take her.

The lone candle in the room bathed her in a warm orange glow that caressed her limbs, highlighted the curve of her breasts and made her curves look more rounded than he knew they were.

She reached for the buttons on his vest, unhooking them before starting in on his shirt and it wasn't until she was pushing it over his shoulders that he snapped out of the daze he was in. He blinked and grabbed her hands. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She pulled his shirt and vest down his arms, trapping his hands in the mounds of material. "I'm undressing you."

Tugging at the material, she finally got it off and tossed the clothing to the table behind him before reaching for the waistband of his trousers. He grabbed her hands before she could unhook them, staring down at her in disbelief.

Not once since realizing what a predicament he'd left her in had his thoughts strayed to anything resembling him taking her to his bed but now that she was standing in front of him wearing nothing but a determined look on her face, he had to admit, the thought wasn't unappealing.

She was thinner than the women he usually chose but in no way a complete disappointment. Her hips had a gentle flair to them, her waist was tiny and her breasts... Lord, they were almost perfect. They were just the right size to fit into his palm, her nipples a dark rosy pink and turned up ever so slightly, begging to be sucked. He swallowed and tried to will away his erection as his fingers twitched with wanting to touch her.

"I think there's been a little misunderstanding, Emmaline."

Looking up at him through her lashes, those big brown eyes glistening in the filtered light, she smiled. "That bulge in your pants tells me otherwise."

Tristan took a step away from her, which only made the situation worse. He could see her from head to toe now, her shapely thighs leading to that thatch of hair covering her womanly treasures and damn it all his cock was throbbing by the time he raised his head and looked her in the eyes. "Am I correct to assume you're trying to seduce me?"

She laughed, the sound a tinkling vibration in the room that caused his balls to ache. "Seduce you? I'm just thanking you for all your trouble. Figured I might as well get it over with but if you'd rather wait, I'm fine with that too."

Thank him? For what? He stared at her, noticing the longer he did, that her cheeks were turning pink. She raised her arms to cover her breasts a moment later and when she lifted her chin, her brows lowering a fraction, he realized his refusal probably looked like he didn't want her and he knew enough about women to know, when offended, they made your life hell.

He smiled and inhaled a deep breath to calm his raging need. "I don't want you to thank me, Emmaline." He glanced down at her again, mentally berating himself for doing so. "Not like this. I don't need sexual favors from you, nor do I want them. I'm helping you because I want to."

Her face flamed bright red, her brows lowering until she looked ready to stab him before turning on her heel, giving him an enticing view of her backside. She picked up her shift, sliding it over her head, and was covered in an instant.

Without another word, she crawled into the bed, turned her back to him, and pulled the blankets to her ears.

He'd have to be a complete idiot to not realize he'd just offended her gravely and he cursed himself for a fool. Especially when he glanced around the room and realized there was nowhere for him to sleep. Nowhere but the floor.

"If you've got another of those blankets, I can make a pallet here in front of the stove."

She grabbed one of the blankets covering her, pulled and tugged until it came loose from the others, and tossed it over her shoulder and into the floor.

Tristan picked it up, crossed the room and sat down at the table to remove his boots. He looked to the stove and the rug lying in front of it. A stab of longing hit him when he remembered the warm comfortable bed he'd slept in the night before at the hotel and he glanced over at Emmaline. He should have just taken her when she offered. At least he would have been able to share the bed with her. Now all he had was the cold, hard ground and it left a lot to be desired.

Standing, he crossed to the stove, a trickle of heat filling the air around it and sat, pulled the shabby blanket to his chin, and lay back. He instantly

regretted it. The draft near the floor was enough to cause a chill to creep into his trousers and within minutes, he debated putting his shirt back on. He wouldn't get a bit of sleep like this. He'd have to travel a full day, sleep deprived, with a waif of a girl to look after.

He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the situation and long minutes passed before a small noise registered. A soft clicking that stopped ever so often then started back up again.

Turning to look about the room, he traced the sound to behind him, to the bed where Emmaline slept. Concentrating on the noise, he realized that it was her teeth chattering.

The bed was next to the wall and he'd inspected the old cabin enough to know the cracks between the boards let in enough cold air she might as well be sleeping outside.

His thin blanket would probably do her more good than him and he sat up, thinking to put his coat back on and just make the best of it. When he stood and reached the bedside, he realized the best way to keep them both from freezing was to climb into that bed with her. It wasn't as if she hadn't already offered to share it with him.

Draping the blanket across her, she turned as he grabbed the edge of the blankets and plopped down with her, her wide eyes fixed on him until he settled and laid his head down. She looked over her shoulder and met his gaze briefly before lying back down without a word.

In no time, his body started to warm, and hers too, and when the languid, drowsy feelings sleep brought with it hit him, he smiled at how small and soft she was. Lying next to her felt good.

He shifted closer, bent his knees to the line of hers and was spooning, one arm rising to wrap around her tiny waist. He could smell the soap in her hair when he shifted his head, the faint feminine scent of some flowery fragrance on her skin. The heat from her body, that enticing smell of a woman so close caused his mind to wander. To imagine feeling her soft curves molded against him flesh to flesh and that throbbing erection just wouldn't go away. It ached and begged him to lift her shift and find a nice, warm place to settle in for the night.

He ignored the ache, tried to think of anything except Emmaline and hoped like hell she didn't move. If she moved her hips an inch, he'd have to chop his own cock off or just take her.

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